



A Study on Misleading Television Advertisements in the FMCG Sector: Regulatory Gaps and Public Awareness

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Abstract

This research investigates the growing concern of misleading television advertisements in India's fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, with a regional focus on Ghaziabad. Television remains a dominant medium for advertising, and FMCG brands frequently use persuasive tactics to attract consumers. However, a substantial number of these advertisements are found to contain exaggerated, unverified, or false claims, which mislead viewers and influence their purchasing behavior. Such practices not only affect consumer trust but also pose ethical and legal challenges to the advertising ecosystem.

The study aims to understand the extent of public exposure to such advertisements and their ability to distinguish between genuine and deceptive content. It also critically examines the effectiveness of existing regulatory frameworks, including the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) guidelines, the Consumer Protection Act (2019), and other media regulatory mechanisms in curbing misleading advertisements. Despite these frameworks, the study finds that public awareness of complaint mechanisms remains alarmingly low, and regulatory enforcement is inconsistent.

A mixed-method research design was employed, combining quantitative data from surveys of Ghaziabad residents with qualitative insights from existing secondary data and literature. The survey results highlight a significant gap in consumer awareness, particularly regarding the right to report and challenge misleading advertisements. Many respondents were unaware of the role of ASCI or the procedures for filing complaints against false claims made in TV commercials.

The findings underscore the urgent need for stronger implementation of advertising standards, stricter penalties for violators, and public education campaigns to empower consumers. Recommendations include making ASCI rulings legally binding, promoting media literacy, and establishing user-friendly platforms for lodging complaints.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on ethical advertising and consumer rights by offering practical suggestions to bridge the gap between regulation and public understanding.

Keywords: Misleading Advertisements, FMCG, Consumer Awareness, Regulatory Gaps

Introduction

In India, television is one of the most significant and extensively used forms of mass communication.. With its deep penetration across both urban and semi-urban populations, it serves as a key platform for advertising, particularly in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector. Television ads actively push products such over-the-counter drugs, soaps, shampoos, health beverages, and snacks.

These ads are often designed to appeal emotionally, visually, and socially, shaping consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions.

As television advertising becomes more competitive and crowded, the line between creative persuasion and deliberate misinformation often gets blurred. Many FMCG brands resort to exaggerated claims, manipulated statistics, unverified endorsements, or pseudoscientific language to position their products



as superior. For example, health drinks claiming to boost immunity or fairness creams promising drastic transformation in skin tone within days are commonplace. These practices not only mislead the audience but also pose risks to public health, encourage unrealistic expectations, and contribute to a broader culture of misinformation.

The consequences of misleading advertisements extend beyond individual consumer deception—they erode trust in the advertising industry, reduce the credibility of media channels, and highlight critical ethical lapses in corporate communication. Guidelines and sanctions for deceptive advertising have been published by regulatory organizations including the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, and the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI). Additionally, the Consumer Protection Act (2019) has introduced stricter provisions for false or misleading advertisements. However, the enforcement and public visibility of these regulations remain inadequate.

This research focuses on the FMCG advertising landscape in Ghaziabad, a rapidly growing urban region in the National Capital Region (NCR). The study explores how frequently consumers in Ghaziabad encounter misleading TV advertisements and how aware they are of their rights and redressal mechanisms. It further evaluates the effectiveness of existing regulatory frameworks and identifies the gaps between policy formulation and on-ground enforcement.

A key concern addressed in this study is the low level of consumer literacy about advertising ethics and complaint procedures. Many consumers are unaware that they can report misleading advertisements to ASCI or pursue legal redress under the Consumer Protection Act. This lack of awareness, combined with weak enforcement, allows unethical advertising practices to persist with minimal consequences.

By adopting a mixed-method research design—including primary data from surveys and secondary analysis from existing literature and policy documents—this study aims to provide a detailed

understanding of the issue. It also seeks to offer practical recommendations for improving public awareness, strengthening regulatory oversight, and encouraging responsible advertising practices in the FMCG sector.

In an age where consumer rights and truthful communication should be foundational to business ethics, this study contributes to the ongoing dialogue about transparency, accountability, and protection in advertising. The findings can help inform both policymakers and consumers about the urgent need to curb misleading advertising practices and restore integrity in media messaging.

Review of Literature

Misleading television advertising in the FMCG sector has become an area of growing academic and regulatory concern in India. This section reviews relevant literature from scholarly works, regulatory bodies, and research studies to explore three central themes: misleading advertising practices, consumer awareness, and regulatory frameworks.

1. Misleading Advertising in FMCG

Bhatia (2020) defines misleading advertising as any form of promotional communication that deliberately deceives consumers through exaggerated claims, false comparisons, or misinformation, especially in the FMCG sector where competition is intense. The study emphasized that advertisements for beauty and health-related products are the most vulnerable to making unsubstantiated claims.

Kumar and Reddy (2019) conducted a content analysis of prime-time television advertisements and found that over 65% of FMCG commercials contained exaggerated or unverifiable claims. Their findings suggested that a significant portion of such ads influenced impulsive buying behavior, particularly among younger audiences.

Gupta and Das (2021) investigated the role of emotional appeals and deceptive imagery in FMCG advertising. They noted that misleading content is often camouflaged with scientific jargon or celebrity endorsements, making it harder for consumers to distinguish fact from fiction.



2. Impact on Consumer Behavior and Awareness

Verma and Srivastava (2020) studied urban consumer responses to deceptive advertisements and found that only 25% of respondents could clearly identify a misleading ad. Despite their education levels, many respondents lacked knowledge about their consumer rights or the procedure for lodging complaints.

A nationwide consumer study by Consumer VOICE (2021), a Delhi-based NGO, revealed that 7 out of 10 consumers had been influenced at least once by misleading ads, and less than 10% were aware of the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) or its complaint mechanism. The study concluded that public education on consumer rights was urgently needed.

Mukherjee (2018) explored the psychological impact of misleading advertising on consumer trust and found a direct correlation between repeated exposure to exaggerated claims and declining confidence in brands and media platforms. The study urged brands to adopt ethical self-regulation to rebuild public trust.

3. Regulatory Framework and Effectiveness

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI, 2023) annually publishes reports on the number of complaints received and resolved regarding misleading ads. Their data indicates that the FMCG sector consistently ranks among the top three industries with the highest number of violations, but compliance remains voluntary, limiting their enforcement capability.

The Consumer Protection Act, 2019, introduced stricter clauses to penalize false and misleading advertisements, including monetary fines and jail terms for repeat offenders (Ministry of Consumer Affairs, 2020). However, Mehta (2021) criticized the implementation of these provisions, highlighting issues such as delayed legal procedures, poor awareness, and lack of coordination between regulatory agencies.

Kapoor (2022) examined the role of statutory and self-regulatory bodies in addressing advertising malpractices. The research found that ASCI and

government watchdogs often work in silos, with overlapping jurisdictions and insufficient follow-up on complaints.

According to FSSAI (2022), food-related advertisements, especially those involving immunity boosters and health drinks, are frequently non-compliant with safety norms. The authority has issued multiple advisories against misleading health claims, particularly in children's products, but enforcement and public communication remain weak.

A media analysis by Joshi and Patel (2020) focused on television advertising trends during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found a sharp increase in ads promoting hygiene, nutrition, and immunity, many of which made questionable claims. The authors urged for a more proactive role from broadcasters in screening content before it airs.

4. Regulatory Insights from FSSAI and ASCI

The **Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI)** has been proactive in issuing regulations concerning food advertising. In its 2022 advisory on health and nutrition claims, FSSAI warned companies against making unsubstantiated promises, especially regarding immunity, growth, or disease prevention—claims often seen in products like health drinks, cereals, and packaged snacks. FSSAI also called for mandatory scientific substantiation of all health-related claims and has penalized several FMCG brands for violating these norms (FSSAI, 2022).

Similarly, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), a self-regulatory body, plays a central role in monitoring and resolving complaints related to misleading advertisements. According to its Annual Complaints Report 2022–23, nearly 48% of all complaints received pertained to the FMCG sector, particularly food and personal care items. The ASCI report identified recurring issues such as exaggerated product efficacy, pseudo-scientific visuals, and misuse of testimonials or disclaimers (ASCI, 2023). However, since ASCI's authority is voluntary and not legally binding, its recommendations are not always implemented, leading to repeat violations by major brands.



5. NGO Findings on Consumer Awareness

A 2021 study by Consumer VOICE, a Delhi-based NGO, focused on urban consumers' perception of misleading advertising. The report found that a majority of respondents (around 72%) had encountered misleading TV ads, but less than 12% knew how to report them. The study emphasized the lack of public education regarding consumer rights and the existence of bodies like ASCI or the National Consumer Helpline. Furthermore, the report criticized the leniency shown towards habitual offenders and advocated for stronger legal backing for regulatory bodies.

6. Case Studies: Horlicks, Fair & Lovely, and Maggi

Several prominent FMCG brands in India have been at the center of controversies involving misleading advertisements:

Horlicks: In 2018, Horlicks aired ads claiming that its product led to "taller and stronger" children. The National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) questioned the scientific basis of these claims. Following complaints, ASCI ruled that the advertisement was misleading and directed it to be withdrawn or modified (ASCI, 2018).

Fair & Lovely (now Glow & Lovely): This fairness cream brand has long faced criticism for promoting discriminatory beauty standards and making unrealistic promises about skin complexion. Civil society groups, journalists, and researchers have repeatedly called out its advertisements for being both misleading and socially regressive. While ASCI has raised concerns over the messaging, sustained public outcry led to Unilever rebranding the product in 2020 to reflect a more inclusive image, though concerns about the implicit messaging still remain (The Hindu, 2020).

Maggi Ban Case (Nestlé India): Perhaps the most widely reported case, the 2015 ban on Maggi noodles by the FSSAI involved allegations of misleading labeling and unsafe lead content. Nestlé advertised Maggi as "healthy" and "safe," but tests conducted by state laboratories found lead levels beyond permissible limits. The FSSAI ordered an

immediate ban, leading to a nationwide recall. Though Nestlé later returned to the market after clearance from independent labs, the episode remains a landmark example of regulatory intervention in misleading FMCG advertising (The Economic Times, 2015).

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the level of consumer exposure to FMCG television advertisements and its influence on their purchase decisions and brand perception.
- To identify the most commonly perceived misleading claims in FMCG advertisements and assess their impact on consumer trust.
- To evaluate consumer awareness regarding advertising regulatory bodies and its role in addressing misleading or exaggerated claims.

Research Question

- To what extent are consumers exposed to FMCG television advertisements, and how does this influence their perception and behavior?
- What are the common types of misleading content perceived in FMCG advertisements, and how do they affect consumer trust?
- How aware are consumers about regulatory bodies monitoring advertising, and how does this awareness impact their response to misleading advertisements?

Research Methodology

The study employs a mixed-method research design, integrating both primary data collection through surveys and secondary data analysis from existing literature, official reports, and regulatory documents.

Research Area

- **Location:** Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh
- **Population:** Urban and semi-urban television viewers aged 18–60

Primary Data

- **Method:** Structured questionnaire

- **Sample Size:** 150 respondents
- **Sampling Technique:** Convenience and purposive sampling
- **Tools for Analysis:** Frequency tables, percentage analysis

Secondary Data

- Previous research papers
- Government and NGO reports (FSSAI, ASCI)
- Media articles and case studies (e.g., Horlicks, Fair & Lovely, Maggi ban)

Data Interpretation and Analysis

Table no 1 showing The age-wise distribution of the 150 respondents in the study and reveals that the majority belonged to the younger age groups, with 32% in the 18–25 range and 42% in the 26–35 range, together accounting for 74% of the sample. This indicates a strong representation of youth and early-career individuals. Just 9.33% of respondents were over 50, compared to 16.67% in the 36–50 age range. This skew towards younger participants suggests that the study findings may be more reflective of the perceptions, behaviors, or preferences of a relatively younger demographic, which should be considered when analyzing and generalizing the results.

Age Group	Respondent	%
18–25	48	32
26–35	63	42
36–50	25	16.67
Above 50	14	9.33
Total	150	100

(Table No 1)

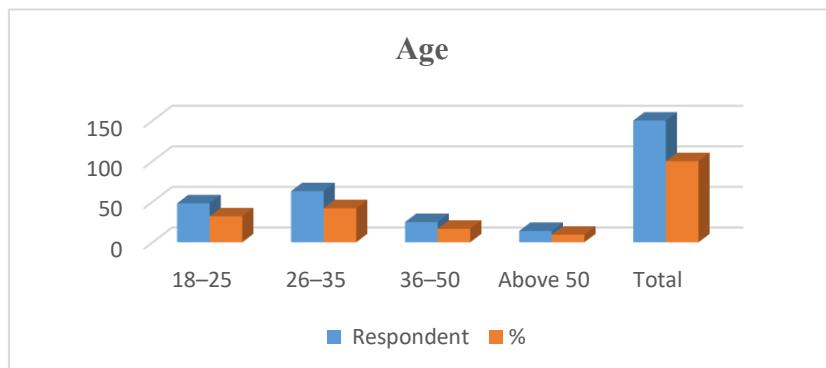


Table No. 2 presents the gender-wise distribution of the respondents, showing that out of 150 participants, **98 (65.33%) were male** and **52 (34.66%) were female**. This indicates a significant gender imbalance in the sample, with males being more than double the number of females. The

remaining 34.66% of respondents are unaccounted for in the gender data, which suggests either missing responses or the inclusion of other gender identities not specified in the table. This uneven representation may influence the study outcomes and should be taken into account while interpreting gender-based findings.

Gender	Respondent	%
Male	98	65.33
Female	52	34.66
Total	150	100

(Table No 2)

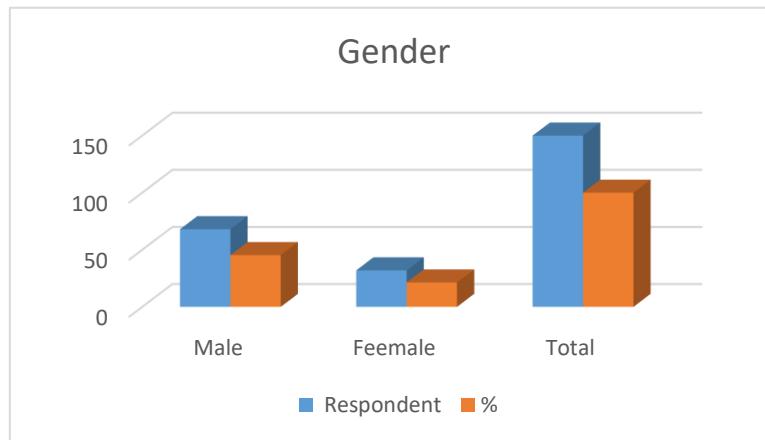


Table No. 3 highlights the educational qualifications of the 150 respondents, showing that the majority were well-educated, with **43.33% being graduates** and **30% holding postgraduate degrees or higher**. Additionally, **18.67% had completed 12th grade**, while only **8% had education below the 12th level**. This indicates that over 73% of the participants

possessed at least a graduate-level education, suggesting that the study predominantly reflects the views and understanding of a comparatively educated population. This educational profile may influence the depth and nature of the responses and should be considered when analyzing the study's outcomes.

Educational Qualification	Respondent	%
Below 12th	12	8
12th Pass	28	18.67
Graduate	65	43.33
Postgraduate and above	45	30
Total	150	100

(Table No 3)

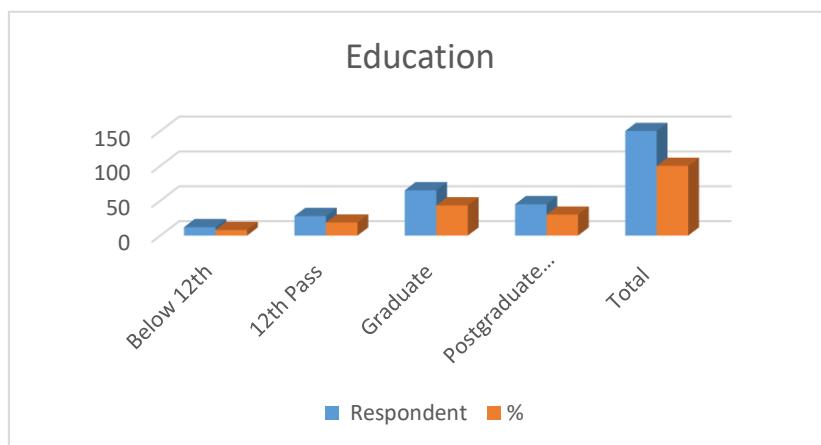
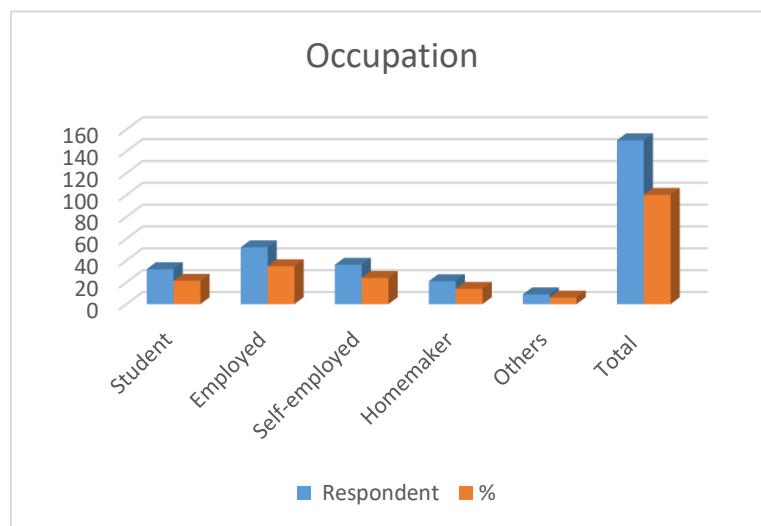


Table No. 4 presents the occupational distribution of the 150 respondents, indicating that the largest segment, **34.67%**, were **employed**, followed by **24%** **self-employed**, and **21.33%** **students**. Additionally, **14%** identified as **homemakers**, while **6%** fell under the '**Others**' category. This occupational diversity reflects a broad

representation across different work and life roles, with a notable share of working professionals and entrepreneurs. The presence of students and homemakers also adds a range of perspectives, making the dataset more inclusive of various socio-economic backgrounds, which can influence the interpretation of the study's findings.

Occupation	Respondent	%
Student	32	21.33
Employed	52	34.67
Self-employed	36	24
Homemaker	21	14
Others	9	6
Total	150	100

(Table No 4)



1. *How often do you watch television advertisements related to FMCG products (soaps, food, cosmetics, etc.)?*

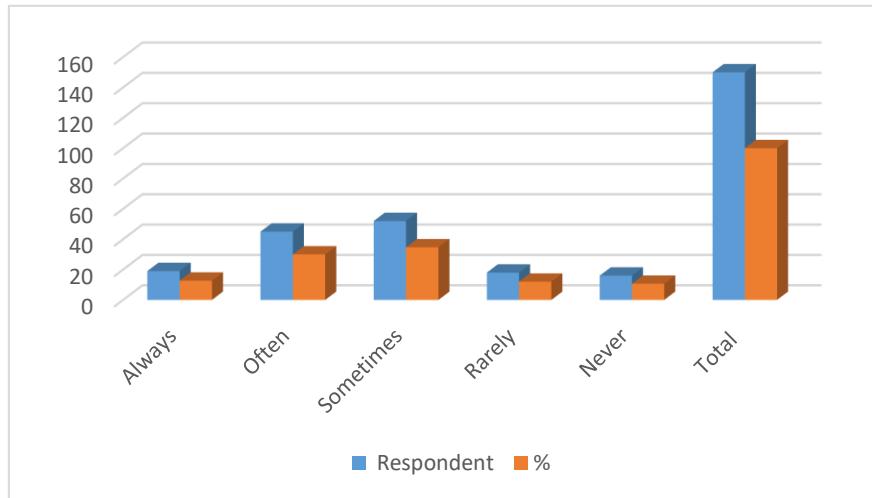
Table No. 5 illustrates the responses to the question, "*How often do you watch television advertisements related to FMCG products (soaps, food, cosmetics, etc.)?*" among 150 participants. The highest proportion, **34.67%**, reported watching such advertisements **sometimes**, while **30%** stated they watch them **often**, and **12.67%** said **always**. On the other hand, **12%** of respondents claimed they **rarely**

watch these ads, and **10.67%** stated they **never** do. This data suggests that a majority of the respondents—over 77%—engage with FMCG television advertisements at least occasionally, indicating a moderate to high level of exposure among the audience, which could play a significant role in shaping their purchasing preferences and brand awareness.

Response	Respondent	%
Always	19	12.67
Often	45	30

Sometimes	52	34.67
Rarely	18	12
Never	16	10.67
Total	150	100

(Table No 5)



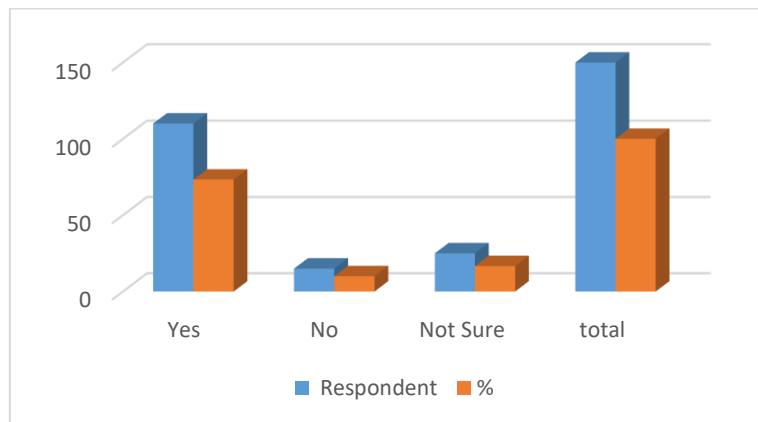
2. *Have you ever come across an FMCG TV advertisement that you felt was misleading or exaggerated?*

Table No. 6 presents the responses to the question, “*Have you ever come across an FMCG TV advertisement that you felt was misleading or exaggerated?*” Out of 150 respondents, a significant majority—**110** (73.33%)—answered **Yes**, indicating that most viewers have encountered advertisements they perceive as misleading or

exaggerated. In contrast, only **10%** responded **No**, while **16.67%** were **Not Sure**. This suggests a prevalent skepticism among consumers regarding the authenticity and credibility of FMCG television advertisements, highlighting a potential gap between advertised claims and actual consumer experiences, which may affect brand trust and consumer behavior.

Response	Respondent	%
Yes	110	73.33
No	15	10
Not Sure	25	16.67
Total	150	100

(Table No 6)



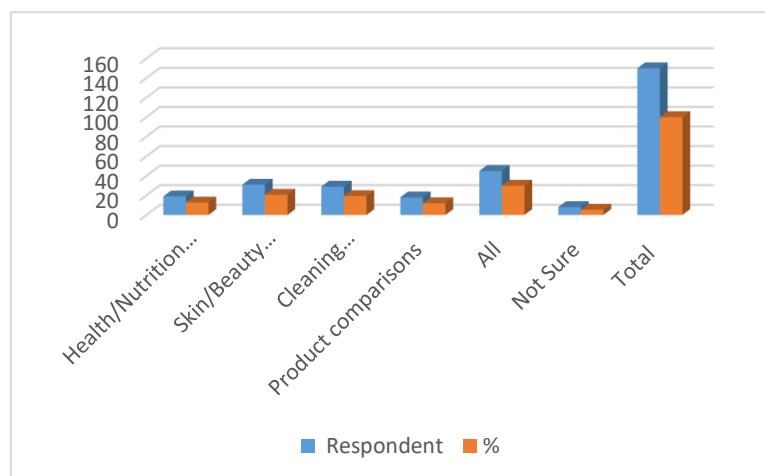
3. Which type of misleading claims do you most often notice in FMCG advertisements?

Table No. 7 presents the responses to the question, “Which type of misleading claims do you most often notice in FMCG advertisements?” Among the 150 respondents, the largest segment—30%—indicated that they notice **all types** of misleading claims, suggesting a broad skepticism toward various promotional tactics. Specifically, **20.67%** pointed out **skin/beauty improvement claims**, followed closely by **19.33%** who identified **cleaning**

effectiveness, and **12.67%** who mentioned **health/nutrition benefits**. Additionally, **12%** highlighted **product comparisons** as misleading, while **5.33%** were **not sure**. These findings reflect that exaggerated or unsupported claims in multiple domains of FMCG advertising are commonly perceived, particularly in areas related to personal care and health, potentially affecting consumer trust and decision-making.

Response	Respondent	%
Health/Nutrition benefits	19	12.67
Skin/Beauty improvements	31	20.67
Cleaning effectiveness	29	19.33
Product comparisons	18	12
All	45	30
Not Sure	8	5.33
Total	150	100

(Table No 7)



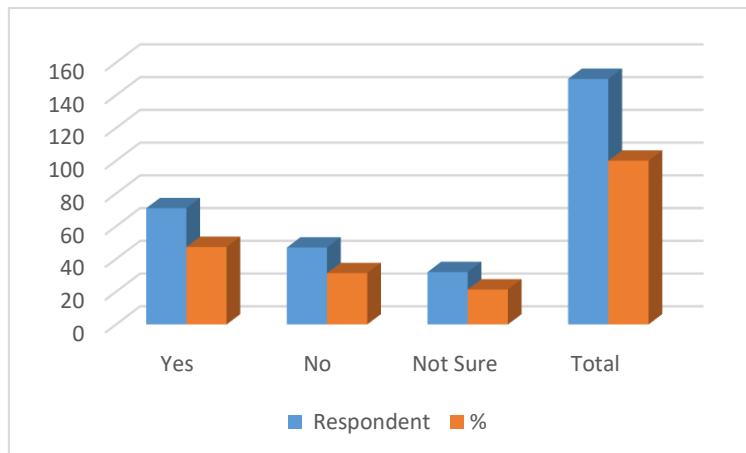
4. Do you trust the claims made in television advertisements for FMCG products?

Table No. 8 displays the responses to the question, “Do you trust the claims made in television advertisements for FMCG products?” Out of 150 respondents, **47.33%** answered **Yes**, indicating that nearly half of the participants have a level of trust in the advertised claims. However, a significant portion—**31.33%**—responded **No**, expressing

distrust, while **21.33%** were **Not Sure**, reflecting uncertainty or mixed perceptions. This distribution suggests a divided audience, where trust in FMCG television advertisements is not absolute and is influenced by factors such as personal experience, brand credibility, and possibly exposure to misleading or exaggerated claims, as indicated in earlier responses.

Response	Respondent	%
Yes	71	47.33
No	47	31.33
Not Sure	32	21.33
Total	150	100

(Table No 8)



5. Are you aware of any regulatory body (like ASCI or Consumer Forum) that monitors misleading advertisements?

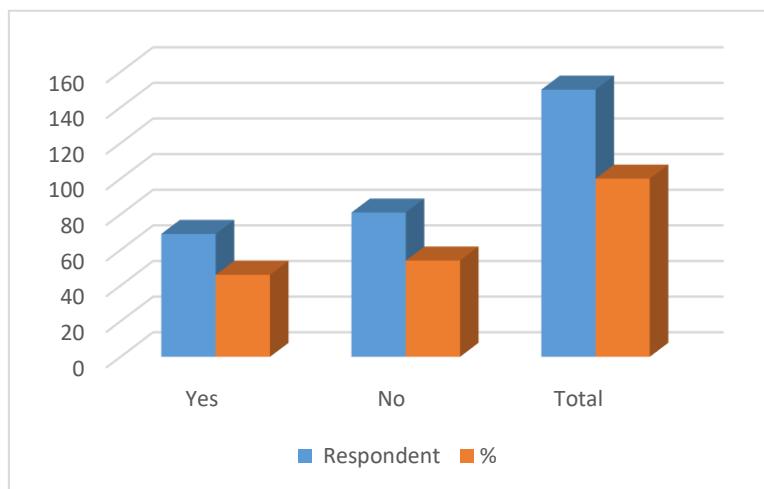
Table No. 9 presents the responses to the question, “Are you aware of any regulatory body (like ASCI or Consumer Forum) that monitors misleading advertisements?” Among the 150 respondents, **54%** answered **No**, indicating that a majority of participants are **unaware** of such regulatory bodies. In contrast, **46%** responded **Yes**, showing a moderate level of awareness. This lack of

widespread knowledge about institutions like the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) or Consumer Forums suggests a gap in consumer education regarding their rights and the mechanisms available to address misleading advertisements, which may hinder effective accountability and consumer protection in the FMCG advertising space.

Response	Respondent	%
Yes	69	46
No	81	54

Total	150	100
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(Table No 9)



Findings

The study reveals several important insights regarding public exposure, perception, and awareness of misleading television advertisements in the FMCG (Fast-Moving Consumer Goods) sector:

1. Exposure to FMCG Advertisements: A majority of respondents (77%) reported watching FMCG television advertisements at least occasionally, with 30% watching them often and 12.67% always. This suggests a moderate to high level of exposure to such content, making television a significant medium for consumer influence in the FMCG sector.

2. Perception of Misleading Content: A substantial 73.33% of respondents admitted to encountering FMCG TV advertisements they perceived as misleading or exaggerated. This demonstrates the general distrust among consumers regarding the veracity of advertising promises.

3. Types of Misleading Claims: When asked about the nature of misleading content, 30% of respondents believed that all types of claims are often exaggerated.

4. Consumer Trust in Advertisements: While 47.33% of respondents expressed trust in FMCG advertisements, a considerable number either did not trust them (31.33%) or were not sure (21.33%). This

split in perception points toward a credibility challenge for FMCG brands, likely influenced by past experiences with misleading claims.

5. Awareness of Regulatory Bodies: A significant finding is that 54% of respondents were unaware of any regulatory body such as the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) or Consumer Forums that monitor advertising content. Only 46% claimed awareness, indicating a knowledge gap regarding consumer rights and available redressal mechanisms.

Conclusion

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that while FMCG television advertisements enjoy high visibility among consumers, there exists a serious trust deficit due to the widespread perception of misleading or exaggerated claims. The most affected categories appear to be personal care, cleaning, and health-related products. This situation is further aggravated by a lack of public awareness about regulatory bodies such as ASCI, which are meant to protect consumers from deceptive advertising practices.

The study highlights a critical need to strengthen consumer education and promote awareness regarding advertising regulations and complaint mechanisms. Simultaneously, it underscores the necessity for stricter enforcement and greater accountability within the FMCG advertising



landscape. Addressing these regulatory and informational gaps is essential for restoring consumer trust and ensuring ethical marketing practices in the industry.

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