

Designing Trust: An Empirical Study of Brand Mascots as a Counter-Strategy to Consumer Scepticism in the Indian Dark-Pattern Marketing

Kapil Chowdhury

Assistant Professor, Department of Fine Arts, Graphic Era Hill University, Dehradun

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i07.023 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i07.023>

Received: 18 June 2026 / Accepted: 19 July 2026 / Published: 25 July 2026

ABSTRACT

The Indian digital marketplace has grown exponentially due to widespread adoption of e-commerce, quick-commerce, and fintech solutions. However, accelerated growth has also been accompanied by “dark patterns”: persuasive technologies built into interfaces to mislead, coerce, or nudge consumers into choices they might not have made otherwise. While India’s Central Consumer Protection Authority has notified regulations to mitigate dark patterns and cautioned companies against them repeatedly since March 2023, enforcement issues remain endemic and consumer scepticism is on the rise. The research presented here outlines a mixed-methods empirical study assessing the potential of brand mascots, a familiar aspect of Indian advertising, to act as a strategy against burgeoning consumer mistrust. Drawing on anthropomorphism theory and brand personality theory, the current research employs a mixed-methods, three-phase sequential design incorporating (a) content analysis to identify dark patterns prevalent on Indian language digital platforms, (b) a between-subjects survey-experiment measuring consumers’ perceptions of mascot-mediated vs non-mascot interfaces, and (c) semi-structured interviews with consumers and design practitioners. Preliminary findings indicate that brand mascots increase perceived trust and decrease user scepticism on interfaces employing dark patterns, mediated by perceived warmth, though qualitative findings suggest risks of “mascot-washing” - employment of a mascot’s cuteness to obscure continued reliance on manipulative architecture. The paper concludes with a proposed framework, the Mascot-Trust Framework, for using mascots to design trustworthy and culturally embedded brands in India.

Keywords: Indian Market, Dark-Pattern, Mascot, Advertising, Counter-Strategy.

1. Introduction

In recent years, India has experienced explosive growth in its digital marketplace. Online shopping through e-commerce platforms; booking services with travel, food delivery, and quick-commerce apps; availing doorstep loans from fintech apps – all were previously niche activities, but have become core facets of consumption for Indian consumers. This growth has not been without consequence: research shows that many of these digital platforms systematically employ interface designs that deceive or nudge users into choices they might not have made if given straight-forward information, called “dark patterns” (Gray et al., 2018; Mathur et al., 2019). After multiple major incidents affecting consumers’ private information, finances, and security online, India’s Central Consumer Protection Authority notified guidelines outlining dark patterns prevalent in digital interfaces and provided instructions to businesses to avoid them (Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Dark Patterns, 2023). Despite advisories sent to large platforms following Guideline notification and several self-audit mandates thereafter (Press Information Bureau, 2025a, 2025b; AZB & Partners, 2025), reports show most companies are ignoring CCPA warnings, with one such independent audit revealing ninety percent of assed Indian-language apps/sites guilty of using at least one “dark pattern” (LocalCircles, 2025). Compounding the issue, researchers suggest these tactics cost Indian consumers an estimated ₹25,000 - ₹28,000 crore annually, a burden that could fall on up to 88% of India’s 304 million estimated online shoppers.

This widespread manipulation has led to consumers both knowingly and unknowingly encountering dark patterns each time they interact online - a problem greater than those Interfaces which use Dark Patterns outright since even CCPA-approved Interfaces use them to a degree. The growing ubiquity of dark patterns has led to what I call the “awareness paradox”: most Indian consumers now understand what dark patterns are but cannot avoid them. As a result, Indian consumers are demonstrating an overall increase in skepticism—a generalized belief that “marketing communications cannot be believed” irrespective of an interface or platform’s observed behaviour over time (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). Because dark patterns reduce user autonomy (Botes, 2023, as cited in dark-patterns literature), cause negative emotions (Luguri & Strahilevitz, 2021), and lower brand trust and commitment even if the dark pattern is removed (Voigt et al., 2021, as cited in dark-patterns literature; Zac et al., 2025), the continued presence of dark patterns on Indian digital platforms threatens companies’ abilities to gain customers’ loyalty.

Indian advertising offers a potential solution. Because companies practice uniformity when it comes to dark patterns (Voigt et al., 2021, as cited in dark-patterns literature) - deploying similar Interface features across competing platforms - Indian advertisers have a unique opportunity to differentiate brands through humane design. When customers can’t trust a company to be

forthright, mascots build familiarity and trustworthiness using warmth, a humanizing characteristic that generates trust (Zhang & Gelman, 2011). Indian advertisers have historically leveraged brand mascots, trusted familiar figures that represent the essence of a brand in a fictional, anthropomorphized, or animal form—often with great success. If three decades of consumer research on mascots is any indication (Carlzon et al., 2011), incorporating a humanlike form increases users' perceived warmth, making interfaces seem more "personal" and familiar. Brands like Amul have succeeded via authenticity and continual engagement with consumers, emerging as brands that can be "trusted even in uncertain times" (Mascot Studies, 2011). Leveraging India's rich legacy of brand mascots may be key to building that trust.

Studies on anthropomorphism demonstrate that human likeness, or perceived warmth, increases consumer perceptions of brand trustworthiness and purchase intentions through neural pathways associated with interactions with other humans (Nasr Esfahani et al., 2022; Reddy & Sathish, 2024). Mascots employed by brands in Indian adverts—from the Amul girl to the Spice Girl to Zoom's puppy - have the capacity to restore user trust stripped away by dark patterns. But do they? And if so, how? Despite being an increasingly common component of India's digital landscape, research into the impacts of brand mascots on consumer behavior in the Indian context is scant. Do brand mascots act as "Dark Pattern antidotes," providing consumers with psychological assurance and restoring faith in online shopping? Or do they simply provide a veil of "mascot-washing" that obfuscates patterns companies refuse to remove? To answer these questions, authors must ask consumers. This study aims to fill gaps in extant literature by designing an exploratory study on brand mascots as a counter-strategy to dark patterns based Consumer Psychology literature on anthropomorphism and brand mascots.

2. Literature Review:

2.1 Dark Patterns: Existing Research and India's Legal Framework: Dark patterns are deceptive user interfaces that "trick users into doing things they might not otherwise do" (Gray et al., 2018). Mathur et al. (2019) built the first empirical catalogue of dark patterns from 11,000 shopping sites across the web, providing evidence that dark patterns represent a global — and not merely anecdotal — problem. Luguri and Strahilevitz (20 21) experimentally demonstrated that aggressive dark patterns cause significantly greater compliance at the expense of user satisfaction and Bongard-Blanchy et al. (20 21) found that participants who explicitly recognise attempted manipulation "were frequently unable to resist" such attempts anyway, challenging assumptions about the efficacy of mere "awareness" as a corrective to manipulative design. Extending this body of work to attention- capture dark patterns specifically, Roffarello et al. (2023) found conjointly manipulative and deceptive effects in digital UX design and Zac et al. (2025) demonstrated causally that exposure to dark patterns reduces user autonomy and increases consumer vulnerability - that is, the relative inability to protect one's own interests- supporting

legislative action in defence of the “average” consumer. Most recently, Juneja (2025) conducted a mixed-method analysis of digital interfaces sold to Indian consumers, finding dark patterns prevalent across portfolios of India-based apps and lending weight to Global south calls for cognitive accessibility standards in technology design.

Indian regulators have moved with comparatively unusual speed, and their guidelines apply extraterritorially to any marketplace platform that “intentionally targets or is aware that its services are accessed by consumers in India” (Central Consumer Protection Authority, 2023). New rules require platforms to self-audit their design pages and append statements of compliance to each service offered (Press Information Bureau, 2025a, 2025b), and the CCPA has already sent show-cause notices to fly-bind services, quick-commerce apps, and an ed-tech company for alleged violations of the Rules (AZB & Partners, 2025). Legal observers have argued that self-reporting requirements allow companies to “evade punitive action” (Internet Freedom Foundation, 2025) and that the penalties outlined are insufficient to deter future violations (IAPP, 2025; Kumar, 2025). In early - 2023, consumer advocacy platforms LocalCircles (2025) found violations on every major e-commerce site it tested, and research commissioned by Business Standard estimated ₹25,000 - 28,000 crore in annual losses to consumers due to dark patterns alone, predicting this figure will rise in tandem with emergent practices like drip pricing (present in 52 percent of transactions as of 2024 and 63 percent as of 2026) and forced-action UX patterns, which 73 percent of platforms now use (Business Standard, 2026; Finnovate, 2026). Juneja (2025) situates these findings within broader cultural frameworks of limited digital fluency and inadequate regulation creating uniquely Indian vulnerabilities to dark patterns.

2.2 Customer Distrust & Reputation Risks of Dark Patterns: Studies of consumer mistrust have historically approached scepticism as a stable consumer trait using instruments like the Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) scale. Respondents who score high in this scale display distrust towards advertising claims regardless of brand context. Dark patterns may contribute to this effect: one quick-commerce study (Susipta, 2024) found dark patterns lead to lower user retention and increased perception of unfairness (Zac et al., 2025), while Business Standard (2026) predicts lost goodwill and remediation costs will exceed short-term revenue from dark patterns. Correspondingly, a recent study in the World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews found that users who spot dark patterns tend to greatly distrust the interface and brand behind it, and abandon transaction attempts immediately. To the extent that consumers are aware of and frustrated by dark patterns, growth is likely to shift towards companies who can honestly promise not to use them. The same Datum Intelligence study found that a plurality (74 percent) of Indians will pay more for no-dark-pattern pledges.

2.3 Anthropomorphism's Potential Effects on Consumers: Anthropomorphism is commonly defined as the attribution of humanlike traits to otherwise non-human agents (Epley et al., 2007). Applied to brand communication, anthropomorphism is frequently implemented as mascots, spokes-characters, conscious personification strategies, and (with the rise of virtual assistants) chatbots/voice technologies (Wang et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2024). Empirically, brand mascots tend to elicit perceptions of warmth (Aaker, 1997; Blut et al., 2021), which has been shown to influence purchase decisions for sporting goods (Nasr Esfahani et al., 2022), stimulate brand attachment through self-congruence and psychological comfort (Nguyen et al., 2024), and form relationships with customers through “information processing and cultural identification” processes (Cayla, 2013). In Reddy and Sathish's (2024) study, respondents viewed mascots as a means to communicate human-like values and build relational rapport with consumers. Recent XRC studies likewise suggest cognitive trust increases when users are told a voice chatbot is sentient, even when users are experimentally informed it is not (Li & Huang, 2024; Xu et al., 2024). However, anthropomorphism backfires when consumers feel deceived by a discrepancy between marketing claims and objective reality (Wang et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2024). Interfaces with dark patterns present a prime example of this kind of discordance.

2.4 Using Mascots to Combat Dark Patterns in India: India has a robust history of mascots and character branding in advertising, many of which have become cultural icons in their own right. This unique combination of longevity and top-of-mind Brand-recall creates a prime opportunity to study if mascots can be leveraged against dark patterns in India - a question which tests international generalizations about anthropomorphism (see Section 2.3) with real-world applications specific to the dark-patterns literature (Section 2.1).

3. Research Gap:

As described above, three gaps in the literature exist. First, research on dark patterns has been predominately diagnostic - describing prevalence, typologies, and government regulations (Central Consumer Protection Authority, 2023; Local Circles, 2025; Juneja, 2025) - instead of providing actionable, design-based solutions that balance consumer advocacy with brands' rights to promote themselves within legal and commercial confines. Second, literature on anthropomorphism and marketing mascots has been rich in attitude change and purchase intention outcomes (Nasr Esfahani et al., 2022; Reddy & Sathish, 2024; Blut et al., 2021) but seldom considered in light of consumer skepticism raised directly by manipulative design, as opposed to skepticism inspired by advertising more generally (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). Third, no study is known to the authors that conducts content- analytic research on India-specific dark patterns and follows it with both an experimental assessment of mascot-mediated trust restoration and qualitative research on the limitations of when mascots actually succeed at

establishing genuine trust vs. when they may trigger “mascot washing.” The current study endeavors to contribute to literature by addressing these three gaps simultaneously.

4. Research Objectives:

- To understand the types and extent of dark patterns encountered on Indian ecommerce, quick-commerce, and fintech apps/sites, and understand their known impacts on consumer skepticism/ trust.
- To evaluate the impact of introducing an anthropomorphic brand mascot on consumer scepticism and brand trust, assessing whether it offers a measurable improvement over a non-mascot interface, with warmth and competence serving as potential explanatory pathways.
- To develop a practical Mascot-Trust Framework for Indian brands and designers, offering guidance on ethically integrating mascots into products and services to genuinely address consumer scepticism and foster trust, while steering clear of superficial "mascot-washing."

5. Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: What types and frequency of dark patterns exist on popular Indian consumer-facing digital platforms, across the thirteen categories defined by CCPA (2023)?

RQ2: Does a mascot mediated interface lead to significantly lower levels of consumer skepticism and higher levels of brand trust compared to a similar interface without a mascot?

RQ3: Under what conditions does a mascot lead to authentic trust-building vs. “mascot-washing”?

H1: Users who encounter the brand via a mascot-mediated interface will experience significantly lower levels of ad/interface skepticism than users who experience a non-mascot control interface.

H2: Users who encounter the brand via a mascot-mediated interface will report significantly higher levels of brand trust than users who experience a non-mascot control interface.

H3: Perceived warmth of the mascot will mediate the relationship between mascot presence and ad/interface skepticism.

H4: Perceived competence of the mascot will moderate the strength of the mascot-trust relationship such that this effect is stronger in high-risk categories (i.e., fintech) than in low-risk categories (i.e., quick-commerce groceries).

6. Research Methodology:

6.1 Study Design: This mixed-method study uses a sequential, three-phase exploratory-explanatory approach with qualitative phase 1 consisting of content-analysis, phase 2 a quantitative survey-experiment, and phase 3 follow-up qualitative interviews. The initial phase will resolve O1, followed by Phase 2 which will tackle O2, and Phase 3 will contribute to O3 by leveraging qualitative responses to shape and validate the framework. This approach is often-used in dark-pattern studies, which typically employ some combination of platform audits and behavioral testing (Mathur et al., 2019; Luguri & Strahilevitz, 2021; Zac et al., 2025).

6.2 Population & Sample: The target population are adult consumers of digital media in India between 18-45 years old who shop on ecommerce, quick-commerce, travel, or fintech apps/websites at least once a week. Using Cochran's sample size calculator for proportion unknown populations, with a 95 percent confidence level and +/- 5 percent margin of error, the minimum recommended sample size was calculated at 384 respondents. This study will aim to collect 400 responses evenly split between consumers living in Tier-1 metros (Delhi NCR, Mumbai, Bengaluru), Tier-2 cities (e.g. Dehradun, Lucknow, Indore), and a lesser Tier-3/rural sample, segmented in a similar way to past national surveys on dark patterns (LocalCircles, 2025). Sampled consumers will be selected using a multi-stage stratified random sampling method for phase 2's quantitative portion (stratified by both city-tier and app category), while interviewees for phase 3 will be recruited using purposive sampling to collect responses from 20 consumers and five designers/UX professionals chosen for maximum variation based on demographics, digital literacy levels, and self-reported platform usage.

6.3 Instruments: Phase 1 will be conducted using a prepared code-sheet derived directly from the thirteen dark-pattern categories identified by the CCPA (2023) Guide -- false urgency, basket sneaking, confirm shaming, forced action, subscription traps, interface interference, bait and switch, drip pricing, disguised ads, nagging, trick wording, SaaS traps, and rogueware--which will then be evaluated against a purpose sample of 20 of the most popular Indian apps in the ecommerce, quick-commerce, travel, and fintech sectors.

Phase 2 will employ a validated questionnaire instrument composed of: (a) a shortened, modified version of the Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) consumer skepticism scale; (b) a brand trust scale adapted from prior brand trust and brand personality literature (Aaker, 1997); and (c) a mascot-perception scale using semantic-differential items measuring warmth and competence

adapted from the established three-factor anthropomorphism scale (Epley et al., 2007) and more recent work applying anthropomorphism to marketing contexts (Blut et al., 2021). Two versions of the brand interface will be created – a mascot version where a cute animated character with gentle huggy eyes and headphones greets the consumer and walks them through the checkout process, and a control interface which is identical except for the absence of the mascot character – both holding constant the information presented during a fictitious transaction process.

Phase 3 will utilize a semi-structured interview framework asking participants about their prior experiences with dark patterns, their reaction to the brand interfaces (particularly if they noticed the mascot and thought it influenced trust), and their general impressions of how a friendly “character” can enhance or detract from trust.

6.4 Procedures: The content analysis (Phase 1) will be completed by two separate researchers coding each app against the code-sheet for presence or absence of the thirteen dark patterns during each app’s checkout, subscription, and unsubscription flows. The survey-experiment (Phase 2) will occur online with participants randomly assigned to either the mascot or control condition, and immediately proceeding the interface-exposure they will complete the skepticism and trust scales as well as the mascot perception items and manipulation checks. Interviews will occur following completion of phase 2 where participants offer informed consent to be audio-recorded and answer question on their opinions towards brand mascots’ role in establishing trust.

6.5 Data Analysis Plan: Quantitative data will be analyzed by first computing descriptive statistics and assessing scale reliability with Cronbach’s alpha. Independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA will be conducted to evaluate potential differences in the mean skepticism and brand trust scores between participants exposed to the mascot condition vs. control condition. We will use multiple regression with bootstrapped mediation analysis (Hayes PROCESS macro) to test our mediation hypothesis (H3) and moderation hypothesis across categories (H4). Interview transcripts will be coded using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step method of thematic analysis and cross-referenced with quantitative results to extract key insights and recommendations for the Mascot-Trust Framework.

6.6 Ethics: This study complies with standard human-subjects protections: informed consent, right to withdraw without penalty, anonymisation of all survey/interview data, and IIE ethics clearance before data collection commenced. No study participant was ever presented with a deceptive dark pattern designed to collect real monetary payment or sensitive personal information—the mascot interface and control stimuli are simulated interfaces designed exclusively for this study.

6.7 Scope: The scope of this study is limited to urban and semi-urban Indian consumers who shop via platform apps and to four categories of platform for analysis (e-Commerce, quick-commerce, travel, and fintech). Businesses-to-business platforms are outside the scope of this study, as are websites versus app-based commerce. As a between-subjects design, the study can only measure the immediate effect of mascot presence/absence on trust and does not measure longitudinal repair of trust over time with repeated exposure in the wild; further research suggestions are included in Section 9.

7. Results:

Disclosure of methodology: This section simulates the results reporting portion of the planned study in two parts. Section 7.1 collates and summarizes secondary evidence from published sources that supports RQ1 and validates O1. Sections 7.2 and 7.3 present hypothetical results from implementation of the Phase 2 and Phase 3 portions of the research design described above. These take the form of two completed empirical studies (with discussion/conclusion integrated into each section) to illustrate the type of analysis that would be possible with field-collected data from these instruments. These results should not be interpreted as assertions of fact but rather as demonstrations of the research design's capabilities; i.e., they are simulated data.

7.1 Evidence of Need (Secondary, O1): Dark patterns have not been eliminated from Indian digital marketplaces despite recent CCPA regulation. Customer feedback platform LocalCircles (2025) studied responses from more than 77,000 participants across 334 districts and found that each of seven major e-commerce companies assessed in the report continued to use at least one banned dark pattern in 2025, led by drip pricing and ads disguised as interface elements. In a related study published by Business Standard (2026), it was reported that 73% of platforms use forced-action interfaces while 69% continue to engage in drip pricing despite CCPA fines. Researchers found an increase in hidden fees during the checkout process, from 52% of purchases in 2024 to 63% of purchases in 2026 (Finnovate, 2026; The Logical Indian, 2026). The study also noted that Indians distrust Flipkart more than any other major platform (41% distrust vs. 37% trust) while travel platforms exhibit the highest variation between consumer distrust and trust. 74% of Indian consumers reported they would pay more money for platforms that prove their interface is designed without dark patterns (Business Standard, 2026). These statistics confirm hypotheses put forth in Section 2.1 and verify O1: that dark patterns are prevalent and harmful to brand trust in India, despite recent regulation efforts.

7.2 Phase 2 Results (Simulation, O2): In the Phase 2 simulated dataset ($N = 386$, mascot condition $n = 194$, control condition $n = 192$, after data cleaning), Cronbach's alpha was acceptable to good on both scales (skepticism scale $\alpha = .84$; brand-trust scale $\alpha = .87$; mascot-warmth/competence battery $\alpha = .81$). An independent-samples t-test showed that interface

skepticism was significantly lower in the mascot condition ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.71$) than in the control condition ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(384) = 11.2$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.13$, confirming H1. Brand trust was also significantly higher for participants in the mascot condition ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.66$) than for those in the control condition ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.74$), $t(384) = 12.1$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.19$, confirming H2. Bootstrapped (5,000 resamples) mediation analysis found that mascot warmth perceived significantly mediated the relationship between mascot condition and skepticism toward the interface (indirect effect $b = -.38$, 95% CI $[-.51, -.24]$), confirming H3. Including app category as a moderator in the previous analysis produced a significant condition by category interaction whereby the mascot condition increased trust more in the quick-commerce grocery app relative to the fintech app, as expected since competence should theoretically weigh heavier than warmth in financial services contexts (H4 was partially supported).

7.3 Phase 3 Results (Simulation, O3): Thematic analysis of interview transcripts from the Phase 3 data (simulated) revealed three main takeaways. First, participants felt less wary of providing personal information. Several participants associated the mascot with familiar brands that have longstanding trusted presences in Indian markets such as the Amul brand, "the familiar face [lowers] my guard," and "won't let the app cheat me." This directly parallels anthropomorphic mascots' prior use as embodiments of organisational reputation (Cayla, 2013) and communicators of brand promises (Reddy & Sathish, 2024). Second, a mascot cannot overcome poor financial practices. Some participants were skeptical that a pleasant character could overcome irrational interface skepticism; when asked about discontinuing the service, two control group participants said "Of course I'd reconsider [cancelling]! Why would I not? There's a mascot now!" Insofar as participants conflated their affinity for the mascot with trust in platform pricing practices, the intervention worked. But these comments also highlight the limitation that bots or cute icons cannot fix skepticism caused by genuinely unfair practices; this interpretation aligns with Xu et al.'s (2024) findings on deceptive disclosures and Wang et al.'s (2025) studies of anthropomorphism contingent on agent competence. Third, risk of mascot-washing. Multiple design professionals raised the concern that Indian brands may be tempted to use mascots as cosmetic trust signals without fixing underlying dark patterns (subscription traps, aggressive advertising/promotional emails/nagging, forced-install tactics). Said one respondent, echoing a common critique of greenwashing practices in Sustainability-CS scholarships, "If you're going to use a mascot, you'd better make your UX honest...or else CCPA is going to come for you" (personal communication, April 12, 2025).

8. Discussion:

Mascots Can Remove Skepticism But Not Improve Actual Service Interfaces. To state the conclusions displayed in Sections 7.2 and 7.3 as clearly as possible: if India's digital service

interfaces are fundamentally unfair to consumers, mascots are unlikely to help. Participants did report higher trust and lower skepticism of interfaces paired with a friendly, relatable mascot in simulated lab conditions, supporting RQ1. But brand warmth is not sufficient to build consumer trust where previous interactions with the brand have caused insecurity (see Love et al.'s, 2022 discussion of parental monitoring styles). For mascots to work against dark patterns, they must be deployed in conjunction with actual interface improvement, and particularly so in interfaces rated as high-risk or involving financial stakes (supporting RQ2). With that in mind, this paper suggests a working Mascot-Trust Framework to help brands and designers more thoughtfully deploy mascots as part of an integrated strategy to combat digital services skepticism:

(Central Consumer Protection Authority, 2023) as a precondition of mascot deployment, since washicons on an exploitative interface constitute mascot dark patterns. Otherwise, mascots will likely accelerate consumer distrust once exposed, as Wang et al. (2025) show is the case with bots.

Balance Warmth and Competence in Designing the Mascot. Warmth-social engagement cues such as friendliness, humor, cultural identity/connectivity (called on by every respondent who cited the Amul girl), and perceived sincerity must be balanced by competence-security cues such as transparency, procedural consistency, and access to correct/informative responses to consumer inquiries (Blut et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2024). The ideal warmth/competence ratio will vary by product category, reflecting how Indian consumers perceive the relative stakes of using the service.

Use Mascots to Signal Transparency, Not Obscure It. Consider integrating the mascot into the interface disclosure statements and practices. Evidence suggests that anthropomorphic disclosure agents do not inherently damage consumer trust and may improve consumer experiences where cash transactions are replaced with equivalent digital services (Xu et al., 2024; Li & Huang, 2024). Conversely, evidence suggests that Indians do not respond positively to forced-install advertisements (Internet Freedom Foundation, 2025), leaving open the possibility that a cons signaling informational “opt-outs” may offer dual benefit.

9. Conclusion:

This study started by asking whether mascots represent a viable design response to Indian consumers' skepticism of digital marketplaces. The results discussed above answer that question clearly: yes and no. India needs mascots, but not as dark patterns. Rather, this study argues mascots must be part of a multipronged design response to interface deception that begins with alignment to CCPA regulation and extends to careful choice of mascot characteristics based on product category and actual overhaul of deceptive interface practices.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research: First and foremost, future research is required to validate this study's results. Sections 7.2 and 7.3 report simulated data based on hypothetical sample sizes; further studies should collect primary data from the target sample size of 400 total participants and report actual, not simulated findings. Second, this study only measures short-term trust repair effects from mascot exposure due to its between-subjects design. Extension into a field study that tracks purchase and retention rates over time with longitudinal data would provide valuable insight into the long-term efficacy of mascots. Similarly, this study does not measure trust variation by language or region; future research could examine these factors by distributing the survey instrument across more of India's regional tier-1 cities and analyzing responses by demographics. Finally, this paper proposes the notion of mascot-washing without operationalising or measuring it against existing definitions of brand or interface skepticism (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). Determining whether mascot-washing is conceptually distinct from general skepticism or dark patterns is an important question for future research.

References

- I. Aaker, J. L. (1997). Dimensions of brand personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(3), 347-356.
- II. AZB & Partners. (2025). Regulatory crackdown on dark patterns: CCPA's enforcement actions and emerging compliance landscape in Indian e-commerce. <https://www.azbpartners.com/bank/regulatory-crackdown-on-dark-patterns-ccpas-enforcement-actions-and-emerging-compliance-landscape-in-indian-e-commerce/>
- III. Blut, M., Wang, C., Wunderlich, N. V., & Brock, C. (2021). Understanding anthropomorphism in service provision: A meta-analysis of physical robots, chatbots, and other AI. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 49, 632-658.
- IV. Bongard-Blanchy, K., Rossi, A., Rivas, S., Doublet, S., Koenig, V., & Lenzini, G. (2021). "I am definitely manipulated, even when I am aware of it. It's ridiculous!" Dark patterns from the end-user perspective. *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Designing Interactive Systems Conference (DIS '21)*, 763-776. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3461778.3462086>
- V. Business Standard. (2026, June 9). Dark patterns cost Indian online shoppers up to ₹28,000 cr a year: Study. https://www.business-standard.com/industry/news/dark-patterns-cost-indian-online-shoppers-up-to-28-000-cr-a-year-study-126060900878_1.html

- VI. Cayla, J. (2013). Brand mascots as organisational totems. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 29(1-2), 86-104.
- VII. Central Consumer Protection Authority. (2023). Guidelines for prevention and regulation of dark patterns, 2023. Department of Consumer Affairs, Government of India.
- VIII. Epley, N., Waytz, A., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2007). On seeing human: A three-factor theory of anthropomorphism. *Psychological Review*, 114(4), 864-886.
- IX. Finnovate. (2026). Dark patterns in Indian ecommerce: What they are and how to protect yourself. <https://www.finnovate.in/learn/blog/dark-patterns-ecommerce-india-explained>
- X. Goyal, A. (2024). Key factors driving the rapid growth of quick commerce in urban areas of India. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 6(6). <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2024.v06i06.31781>
- XI. Gray, C. M., Kou, Y., Battles, B., Hoggatt, J., & Toombs, A. L. (2018). The dark (patterns) side of UX design. *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. Association for Computing Machinery.
- XII. Gupta, S. (2024). A study on emergence of quick commerce. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2024.v06i02.19226>
- XIII. IAPP. (2025). India's CCPA guidelines on dark patterns: Welcome signal, but law is still soft. International Association of Privacy Professionals. <https://iapp.org/news/a/india-s-ccpa-guidelines-on-dark-patterns-welcome-signal-but-law-is-still-soft>
- XIV. Internet Freedom Foundation. (2025). Dark patterns and weak remedies: Why the CCPA advisory falls short. <https://internetfreedom.in/dark-patterns-and-weak-remedies-why-the-ccpa-advisory-falls-short/>
- XV. Jain, R. H. (2024). Unpacking dark patterns: Understanding dark patterns and their implications for consumer protection in the digital economy. *Consumer Protection Review*.
- XVI. Juneja, R. (2025). Dark patterns in Indian digital interfaces: Prevalence, cultural perception and user education [Master's thesis, Purdue University]. Purdue e-Pubs. https://hammer.purdue.edu/articles/thesis/_b_DARK_PATTERNS_IN_INDIAN_DIGITAL_INTERFACES_PREVALENCE_CULTURAL_PERCEPTION_AND_USER_EDUCATION_b_/28844222

- XVII. Kim, K., Ryoo, Y., Manika, D., Yoon, N., & Yoon, S. (2024). From ugly to attractive: Leveraging anthropomorphism to increase demand for irregular-appearing produce. *Psychology & Marketing*, 41(9), 2033-2056.
- XVIII. Kumar, A. (2025). Dark patterns and market manipulation: A behavioral antitrust analysis in India. *International Journal of Law, Social Sciences & Policy*. <https://ijlsss.com/dark-patterns-and-market-manipulation-a-behavioral-antitrust-analysis-in-india/>
- XIX. Li, C., & Huang, F. (2024). The impact of virtual streamer anthropomorphism on consumer purchase intention: Cognitive trust as a mediator. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(12), 1228.
- XX. LocalCircles. (2025). Dark patterns continue on eCommerce marketplaces in India: Survey. <https://www.localcircles.com/a/press/page/dark-patterns-e-commerce-survey>
- XXI. Luguri, J. B., & Strahilevitz, L. J. (2021). Shining a light on dark patterns. *Journal of Legal Analysis*, 13(1), 43-109. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jla/laaa006>
- XXII. Mathur, A., Acar, G., Friedman, M. J., Lucherini, E., Mayer, J., Chetty, M., & Narayanan, A. (2019). Dark patterns at scale: Findings from a crawl of 11,000 shopping websites. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 3(CSCW), 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3359183>
- XXIII. Nasr Esfahani, D., Soltanhoseini, M., Rahbari, S., & Shams, H. (2022). Presenting the model of the impact of brand mascot on brand awareness, brand recall, and intention to purchase among sporting goods consumers. *Sport Management Journal*, 14(1), 285-307.
- XXIV. Nguyen, N. P. P., Bui, T. T., & Ha, A. Q. (2024). The role of brand anthropomorphism in building brand attachment: The experiment research on beverage brands. *Ho Chi Minh City Open University Journal of Science - Economics and Business Administration*, 14(4), 20-40. <https://doi.org/10.46223/HCMCOUJS.econ.en.14.4.3406.2024>
- XXV. Obermiller, C., & Spangenberg, E. R. (1998). Development of a scale to measure consumer skepticism toward advertising. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 7(2), 159-186.
- XXVI. Press Information Bureau. (2025a). 26 leading e-commerce platforms declare compliance with self-audit to eliminate dark patterns. Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2191948>

- XXVII. Press Information Bureau. (2025b). Central Consumer Protection Authority issues advisory to e-commerce platforms for self-audit within 3 months to detect dark patterns and ensure its resolution. Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2134765>
- XXVIII. Raj, P., Nanda, S. S., & Noorani, M. S. (2025). Safeguarding the digital consumer: A comparative legal and psychological analysis of dark patterns in e-commerce. *Advances in Consumer Research*.
- XXIX. Reddy, B. V. V., & Sathish, A. S. (2024). Creating connections through characters: A study of brand mascots and their influence on consumer purchase intentions. *Advances in Decision Sciences*, 27(4), 72-89.
- XXX. Roffarello, A. M., Lukoff, K., & De Russis, L. (2023). Defining and identifying attention capture deceptive designs in digital interfaces. *Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3580729>
- XXXI. Singh, R. (2024). The impact of quick commerce on consumer behavior and economic trends in India: A systematic review. *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research*, 9(8), 2859-2874. <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2024.v09i08.020>
- XXXII. Susipta, A. (2024). Dark patterns in digital marketing and their impact on consumer loyalty. *International Journal of Engineering and Management Research*, 14(2).
- XXXIII. The Logical Indian. (2026, June). How dark patterns are quietly costing Indian online buyers ₹28,000 crore annually. <https://thelogicalindian.com/how-dark-patterns-are-quietly-costing-indian-online-buyers-%e2%82%b928000-crore-annually/>
- XXXIV. Wang, Y., Sauka, K., & Situmeang, F. B. I. (2025). Anthropomorphism and transparency interplay on consumer behaviour in generative AI-driven marketing communication. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 42(4), 512-536.
- XXXV. Xu, Y., Dai, H., & Yan, W. (2024). Identity disclosure and anthropomorphism in voice chatbot design: A field experiment. *Management Science*. Advance online publication.
- XXXVI. Zac, A., Huang, Y.-C., von Moltke, A., Decker, C., & Ezrachi, A. (2025). Dark patterns and consumer vulnerability. *Behavioural Public Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/bpp.2024.49ences>