

Advertising on Social Issues Influence Brand Image: A Study on Select Indian Companies

Iti Verma*, Avani**

ABSTRACT

Today, advertising is becoming one of the most important tools not only to promote brands but also to spread awareness about social issues among the masses. Nowadays, marketing managers mainly focus on understanding the mindset of their target audience, as consumers prefer brands they can relate to. The societal marketing aims to pursue both earning revenues and improving society. Coming up with such innovative advertisements that are simple and convincing is what the brands are aiming for. Brands want to advertise themselves in a way that leaves a lasting impression in the minds of consumers. However, oftentimes difficulty arises when people immediately question or raise objections to the ads whenever they sense something unethical or inappropriate. There is a very thin line between being relevant and being controversial. Therefore, the present study focuses on some brands that use advertising techniques to inform the masses about the social ills that are prevalent in society and how these advertisements affect the brand's public image.

Keywords: Advertising, Brands, Cause Marketing, India, Social Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Humans are heterogeneous; their thoughts and opinions are bound to change with time. How they react and respond in a situation may change frequently. The job of a marketing manager, thus, is to create new and innovative ideas that fulfil the organisation's purpose and are widely accepted in society. One such way of creating a place in the minds of the target audience is by advertising brands using social messages in order to establish a connection with the common man.

In the world of information, people have become more informed about the practises that have been adopted by businesses that were once hidden. They believed that businesses must play a pivotal role in addressing social ills. The concept of societal marketing is continually gaining prominence and has made it necessary for businesses to ensure that their operations have a positive impact on society, the environment and the economy. Socially responsible advertising is an amalgamation of both profit and societal benefits through advertising campaigns. Undoubtedly, "advertising is actually building

connections with consumers as its claws reach every home and heart" (Das & Mishra, 2020). Advertising primarily aims to inform, persuade and remind existing as well as potential consumers about the products and services. Advertising is a kind of long-term investment. Its main motive is to increase sales volume through market penetration, improve product image, build brand loyalty and fight competition in terms of differentiating the product from its competitors.

It is true that brands tend to have the power to bridge the gap between wide sections of society. However, oftentimes difficulty arises when people immediately question or raise objections to the ads whenever they sense them being unethical or inappropriate. The fear of ending up in a controversy is what makes brands not take the risk of talking about sensitive issues. Most often, we find news flashes about how a brand has hurt the sentiments of a section of society through its advertisement or landed up in a controversy, but only a few of us think as to why that particular brand took the risk of speaking up or advertising on such a delicate issue.

* Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Gargi College, Delhi University, Delhi, India.
Email: iti.verma@gargi.du.ac.in

** Student, B.Com, Department of Commerce, Gargi College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India. Email: avani2109@gmail.com

India is one of the most diverse countries in the world, and diversity brings with it difficulties in achieving harmony in group settings. Like other countries, India also faces various problems, be they social, economic or political. Corporates use advertising as a tool to create awareness on the social issues prevailing in India, such as environmental health, women's safety, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) exploitation, racial injustice, caste system, drug addiction, human trafficking and of course, overpopulation, with the objective of bringing about a change in society and thus building a strong brand image in the eyes of the public to finally transform it into brand equity.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To discuss the initiatives taken by Indian brands to spread awareness on social issues.
- To analyse the impact of socially responsible advertising on a brand's public image.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is conceptual in nature. The current study is entirely based on the secondary data available data. An in-depth analysis of various articles, e-books, company websites, search engines, archives and organisational reports that are available on the internet has been done to understand the relevance of social issues ads on a company's corporate image.

Key Initiatives Taken by Brands to Spread Awareness on Social Issues

Advertising has become an indispensable element for the existence of companies in the market. In our economic system, money can buy almost everything (though it is sometimes misunderstood as if it can buy happiness). Money has the power to satisfy human needs and wants, which is why everyone is busy selling their products or services and sometimes even themselves. Some brands use manipulative techniques wherein they compare a person's not-so-good ordinary life with their ideal life, which includes their product or service. However, we cannot ignore another side of the coin, wherein other

brands address the already existing problems in society. They know consumers want brands to be sensitive and supportive, which is why brands focus on appealing to their audiences emotionally to generate interest. Thus, most brands have now started to take a stand on moral and social issues. Addressing social issues does not always arise because the producer's motive is to fulfil his social obligation. What motivates him to do so is to build a strong connection with the customers in order to achieve brand loyalty and, hence, expansion of their customer base, profitability and sales turnover.

The list of companies who have/had delivered bold social messages with a humane touch through ads across the country are as follows:

Ariel Matic

Ariel takes the initiative to break the stereotype that only women are meant to do household chores. With the help of the #ShareTheLoad advertisement, it successfully implants its message that boys must also understand and lend a helping hand. Like they said, "Raise boys the way you raise girls" (Kelaskar, 2020). The brand promotes equality in household chores.

Dove India

Over the past 50 years, the brand has encouraged women to view beauty as a source of confidence, and not anxiety. The ad asked why there is only one standard to judge the beauty of women in a country. The brand's campaign #Let's Break the Rules of Beauty has gained huge success all over the world (Jain, 2021).

Avon India

Avon India's #PayAttention campaign aims to create awareness and spread education about breast cancer, an unspoken truth in the life of a woman. In its campaign, it provides the knowledge and understanding required to conduct self-tests. Divided into four stages; learning, engaging, associate and partner, the campaign successfully spread the word on breast cancer and became one of the trending hashtags in the country (Avon, 2018).

Sabyasachi

Sabyasachi is well known for its traditional wear and jewellery. Recently, it posted a photo on social media where a woman was seen wearing a 'mangalsutra' in a bold and intimate look. The ad was considered indecent and objectionable, and hence, it faced massive criticism thereafter for hurting sentiments and humiliating traditional jewellery (Lifestyle Desk, 2021).

Snapdeal

According to Wikipedia, nearly 12,000–50,000 women and children are trafficked in the country annually as a part of the sex trade. Let alone child beggars and prostitutes. Snapdeal joined hands with the "Save the Children" foundation to create awareness and raise funds to stop child trafficking. In its campaign 'KIDS NOT FOR SALE,' the brand highlighted children who are sold for prostitution, drugged for organ trafficking, forced to beg around the city, kidnapped and sold (Dogra, 2018).

Durex and Manforce

The #Metoo movement is a social movement against sexual abuse and harassment where people publicise allegations of sex crimes. The movement has brought about such a drastic transformation in society that these days brands have started talking about sexual harassment, physical abuse, consent and many other sensitive issues (Mansuri, 2018). One such initiative was taken up by popular brands, namely Durex and Manforce. Durex, in its social media post, said, 'Before you even think about it, get CONSENT' and used the hashtag #TimesUp to create social awareness (Mansuri, 2018). In fact, Manforce has also published a post on its social media platforms that read, "Dear men, mend your ways!" (Mansuri, 2018). The brand also launched another creative, "Don't think twice about speaking up against evil #MeToo" (Mansuri, 2018).

Lenovo India

Every child is taught that good marks are the only way to get into a good college. In this competitive world, everyone wants to shine. In between all of this, a child gets stuck and feels pressured all the time. The Lenovo

#GetThemBelief ad spreads awareness about how it is okay to be ordinary and appreciating children for their achievements and improvements (Kelaskar, 2020).

India Gate

As a part of tradition, Indian society drizzles rice on newly-wed couples as a token of their blessings. This makes up about "110 million pounds of rice waste each year" (Jain, 2021). In its campaign #IndiaDegaAshirvad, the brand encourages people to get a special pack of rice that the brand has made for such purpose in a more prudent manner because every grain matters to make Hunger Free India (Jain, 2021).

Godrej Properties

Increasing air pollution causes a lot of health problems and is becoming an issue of concern. Godrej Properties launched a seven-day campaign in order to curb pollution and help everyone fight against this grave issue, and hence starting the #BreatheEasy campaign to improve India's Air Quality Index (AQI) which was as follows:

Day 1: Cycle to work.

Day 2: Pool a ride for fuel conservation.

Day 3: Drive within the speed limit to save energy.

Day 4: Open your windows to get rid of toxic gases from gas cookers.

Day 5: Stop burning plastic to eliminate the emission of hazardous gases.

Day 6: Afforestation to increase oxygen levels and

Day 7: Light up diyas to get rid of impure air.

The campaign ensured that the following measures improve air quality 10 times better than the air otherwise (Sachdeva, 2018).

WhatsApp

To put an end to sharing rumours/false information that leads to various social problems like violence, community prejudice, racial hatred, etc., WhatsApp requests its

users through the television commercial ‘Share Joy, Not Rumors.’ The brand has requested that its users stop falling prey to scams and spam by blocking or exiting groups and also avoid forwarding the rumours (Jain, 2021).

Midea Group

The brand is one of the largest manufacturers of consumer appliances. To promote its campaign #SalutetheHomemaker, the company has decided to broadcast an ad in which a housemaker is often asked what she did all day long. However, we fail to understand that if she decides to do nothing, home won’t be home anymore. This ad by Midea incredibly tells people to think before they ask a housewife what she does the whole day (Kelaskar, 2020).

Association of Mutual Funds (AMF)

To spread financial literacy among the people, The Association of Mutual Funds in India launched the campaign, #MutualFundsSahiHai explaining how investing in such funds can provide good benefits in return. The ads seem to have an honest voice of advice, which is why they attracted a lot of viewers (Jain, 2021).

Mankind Pharma

Prega News is one of the best-selling products of Mankind Pharma. The brand launched a video campaign #GoodNewsIsGenderFree on International Mother’s Day. The ad was based on the social cause of gender inequality that has been prevailing in India for many years. The company tells the people that family members should pray for the good health of both the baby and mother during the pregnancy instead of having a mindset to get a boy child (Gupta, 2022).

Truecaller

Truecaller launched a video campaign titled, ‘Shabd,’ which was based on the crime that destroys the peacefulness of the victim’s mind, that is, stalking. The video tells women that it is not okay to be quiet and encourages them to take stringent action against stalkers (Gupta, 2022).

Nestle

Nestle, a consumer goods’ brand, has partnered with a non-profit organisation in order to provide quality education to Indian girls who belong to disadvantaged sections of society. The video launched a campaign #EducateTheGirlChild (Gupta, 2022).

ANALYSE THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL ADS ON BRAND IMAGE

There is always a risk in promoting a brand with ads on social issues as it could either make or destroy a brand’s image. Brand image is the “perception of the brand in the minds of the customers” (Kaemingk, 2019). Customers form an image in their minds based on their interactions and experience with the brand. It is a simple phenomenon brands should show their consumers that they are precious to them, reach them and have conversation rather than just monologue messages, and ultimately, brands will be going to win that section of the market whose consumers prefer buying from socially responsible companies. However, if brands do not provide positive outcomes that people can see, consumers will forget the brand just as brands forget their commitments.

It is not just about launching a social awareness campaign; brands need to put in the effort and years it demands to foster it. A brand becomes successful only when it learns to advertise both for-profit and social good. It’s about contributing to a higher purpose and does not mean playing safe (Scheybani, 2015). Brands need to speak about the unspoken and severe issues and create tangible change. When a brand advertises something of value, it teaches its viewers its essence. It gives them a chance to reflect and change the way they think. It enables them to accept change, broaden their mindsets, know about the reality of how different categories are discriminated against and exploited, realise how their activities in the name of ‘civilization’ are harming their own Earth, and experience a whole new world. Thus, we can say that value-based advertising has a positive impact on public perception when it is done ethically.

For instance, Nihar Naturals Shanti Amla Hair Oil enables women to actively contribute to progress as part of the profits of the brand go towards children’s education. The

brand has partnered with CRY to sponsor 19 projects across India and has provided education to more than 1,13,294 children in the first two years (Marico, 2021). The commendable appreciation by the consumers can be witnessed through the “increasing rate of revenue from operations, which was 6,333.09 crores in 2018 to 7,315 crores in 2020 to 8,048 crores in 2021” (Marico, 2021). It shows that people can sense the progress of a brand and appreciate it in terms of willingness to pay more when they feel that their contribution is going to a good cause. Similarly, Avon India generated “PR value worth US \$206.7 million with a media expenditure of just US \$2.5K through its offline campaign” (Avon, 2018). In fact, the brand owned the highest share of voice (SOV) as compared to its competitors. Another brand, Sabyasachi, aims through its ads to encourage inclusivity and empowerment. However, after the posting of this creative on social media platforms, people started showing their hatred using hashtags such as #Sabyasachi_Insults_HinduCulture and #BoycottSabyasachi (Lifestyle Desk, 2021). The brand has decided to withdraw the ad due to the ultimatum received from the Home Minister of Madhya Pradesh, failing which could result in statutory action (Deccan Chronicle, 2022).

The striking down of Article 377 normalised the colours of love in India. However, brands are still afraid to talk about the queer community. This is where the problem lies brands show that they support the LGBT+ community, but their policies still favour the binary. Nowhere do these ads discuss harassment and discrimination against them in the workplace. Both identities of caste and sexuality are exploited. For instance, Okcupid, a dating site (it did not allow multiple gender identities on its app. After facing backlash, it modified its options, including an ‘others’). Thus, we can conclude that a few brands address social issues just during pride months, that is, when it is an ongoing hot topic, and disappear later (Patnaik, 2021). It shows that consumers demand the presence of visible inclusivity in spaces. When they don’t find enough results, all they do is shift to another product, and nowadays they express their opinions through various social media platforms. Unlike Okcupid, Dabur has made India’s Karvachauth ad show same-sex couples and was forced to withdraw its creative after facing extensive backlash from right-wing groups. Dabur had responded to the social media backlash in a separate statement,

saying, “Dabur and Fem as a brand strive for diversity, inclusion and equality, and we proudly support these values in our organization and within our communities. It was unintentional, and we apologize” (Deccan Chronicle, 2022). Backlashes on social media are not only common for Indian brands but must be experienced by foreign brands as well. We are all aware of the famous soft drink brand Coca-Cola. In its campaign titled ‘Love is Love,’ promoting LGBT+ tolerance in Hungary, it advertised pictures of same-sex couples and the slogan ‘Zero Sugar, Zero Prejudice.’ However, a few politicians called for boycotting the company. “This unhealthy Coca-Cola encourages young people to take a wrong direction, which they would not take on their own” (Jovanovic, 2019).

Every brand thinks the way their consumers think. A conservative consumer would not appreciate change, whereas millennials demand brands step up against stereotypes. Let us take the example of Fabindia’s controversial Diwali ad. As a result, it had to withdraw its ad. This also led to a “decline in 25% domestic sales whereas it’s overseas operations decreased by 35%” (Sharma, 2021). A few consumers believe that it is high time that we actually adopt a secular society and stop using religions to fight (let go of your insensitivity). According to them, the brand tried to unite the two religions and asked people to enjoy the festival with everyone, no matter which religion they belong to. On the other hand, a section of consumers accused the advertisement of disrespecting the Hindu festival (Sharma, 2021).

According to the United Nations, it is projected that nearly 690 million people across the globe are starving, and it is like a hard nut to crack for the world to achieve the sustainable development goal, that is, Zero Hunger by 2030 (UN, 2015). If we talk about India, around 195 million people are malnourished, and to fight this social ill, India Gate has launched a campaign, and within 10 days, it has served 3,200 meals for the less fortunate people with the objective of encouraging the minimisation of rice wastage (Jain, 2021). The brand has received huge appreciation from consumers for its initiative. Another Indian brand, Mahindra Group, launched eye-catching creative to promote the conservation of the environment and, somewhere, showed the importance of the transition from linear to circular economy (Mahindra, 2019). Again, this initiative is a step towards achieving sustainable development goals.

After an intensive analysis, we can say ‘consumers are the real rulers.’ They have the power to create and destroy a brand. Not all ads get a positive response, but still they try, try to bring a change, try to initiate a movement for good, try to fulfil their social obligation, try to become the voice of their voiceless consumers, try to fulfil their consumers’ demands by taking meaningful actions, try to give a chance to reflect, and try to not just give empty solidarity.

CONCLUSION

Advertising has a strong influence on youngsters and the growing generation. This is also one of the reasons brands take up social issues. Every one of us is constantly surrounded by ads, and some of them influence our behaviour too. Consumers stick to brands that care about them and move away from those who fake it. Nielsen’s global report, which surveyed 30,000 consumers in 60 countries, also found that 66% of consumers are willing to pay more for a product from a brand that demonstrates social commitment. Not only this, even employees want their work to contribute to positive social change (Bright, 2020). Therefore, brands now need to invest more in empowering their consumers and giving them values in order to achieve long-term prosperity, market expansion and growth. Consistency can only come when companies build an emotional and impactful connection with their consumers (beyond the exchange of products for money). Companies need to provide consumers with the confidence to do more with their lives through their brands. Manipulating people by using their emotions to maximum advantage ought to come to an end. It may bring short term growth but can hinder companies’ performance in long-term.

Suggestions

A little bit of care and showing that each and every one out there is important to us can really make the audience happy. Trying to become socially responsible by creating conversations around shared values is all that is required.

A brand can survive only if its purpose goes beyond just earning profit. It needs to be inclusive, diverse and contribute to society and the environment.

A brand that does not talk about climate change, scarcity, pollution, harassment, inclusivity and other social, moral and environmental issues would suffer in terms of missing out on a large market, including millennials and Gen Z.

Market research is required so as to know what the audience seeks and then speak up, keeping in mind their accepting and resisting power. Hence, it will help companies move towards a more adaptive system where people accept changes slowly but surely.

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