

Significance of Ethics in Contemporary Media Advertisements: An Empirical Study with Reference to Sivasagar District, Assam

Dr. Mridusmita Das,

Assistant Professor,
School of Entrepreneurship & Management,
Assam Rajiv Gandhi University of Cooperative Management, Sivasagar, India.

ABSTRACT

The key to a successful advertising campaign lies on the usage of the accurate advertising appeal in accordance to the ethical norms of the society. Moral values in a campaign pave the way for wide acceptance and understanding of a concept which guides the journey of victory of a brand in the market. Considering five (5) case based advertisements and with the use of impact scores, this study revolves in understanding the significance of ethics in the journey of designing, conversing and acceptance of contemporary advertisements in the market. The study revealed that in order to attain the ladder of success, advertisements needs to be ethical and socially acceptable and there exists a direct linkage of the usage of appeals and viewers' acceptance of the campaigns as far as the lens of ethics is considered.

Keywords: Ethics, Moral values, Advertisements, Rational thinkers, Advertising appeal.

INTRODUCTION:

“Never write an advertisement which you wouldn't want your family to read. You wouldn't tell lies to your own wife. Don't tell them to mine”¹

By David Ogilvy

Morality; the synonym of ethics is an inseparable aspect in the world of advertising. Advertisements are always judged by the spectators; on their truthfulness, messages responsive to its social context and upholding human dignity. Advertisements with a great deal of exaggeration may create a wrong impression among the viewers' making it offensive and misleading to the society.

The advertising agencies design the advertisements with an objective to keep hold of the audiences' attention by making use of appeals like aesthetic visualization, escapades, tinge of romance or comedy or passion in the words of expression; in relation to the advertised product, service or idea. But in the process of communicating the entire concept to the audiences' door, a perfect mix of ethics and morality by the creative heads' assists in gaining more popularity and acceptance in the market.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Akhter.W, Abassi.A.S. & Umar.S (2011) in their study revealed that cultural norms and values of a society play an important role in shaping the attitudes of people. Thus, extra care should be taken while marketing male and female related products as well as using advertising appeals as significant differences was found in the perceptions of male and female consumers towards products and advertising appeals.

“Morals are beliefs or principles that individuals hold concerning what is right and what is wrong. Ethics are moral principles that serve as guidelines for both individuals and organizations. Marketing and marketing communications activities are affected by ethical and moral concerns. Ethical issues are present in advertising

¹ Source: <https://www.ventureharbour.com/great-quotes-advertising-marketing-experts/> Accessed on 10/01/2018

decisions and actions.” (Clow and Baack, 2013).

Singh.J & Sandhu.N (2011) in their study attempted to provide suggestive measures in framing contemporary advertisements with the flavor of ethical considerations in order to ensure that it is fair to the society in which it is aired. The study has suggested that where religion is concerned its use in ads is advocated to reacquaint the masses with basic values. Mathenge.G.D (2013) studied the key ethical issues in marketing and advertising management in Kenya. The main intent of this research was to empirically assess hindrances to efficient marketing and product communication management in Kenya. Additionally, Nagamani.M & Asha.S. (2014) in their study has identified the codes and various guidelines as laid down by The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) and has also studied the decisions given by ASCI on the unethical views and complaints for some selected advertisements in December 2013.

Though advertising agencies take care of the ethical element in designing the advertisements, at times usage of common themes like sexuality and social acceptance in their advertisements is widely visible. The decision on whether an advertisement is offensive or non-offensive is often judged by the audience, by the amount of ethical content in the same. As a result, even if the agencies are free to display the advertisements through any advertising medium, certain products do exist, which require tasteful advertising and effective marketing programs. For instance, “Feminine hygiene products, condoms, and other personal adult products may be featured in practically any medium. It is the responsibility of the marketing professional to select media that are appropriate as well as create ads that will not be offensive.” (Clow and Baack, 2013)

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

The area of advertising has often been criticized by various critics such as “One common complaint is that advertisements cause people to buy more than they can afford. Another criticism is that advertising increases the costs of goods and services.” (Clow and Baack, 2013) The field of advertising already possesses immense criticisms, and addition to it, conformity of the advertisements to the ethical standards of the culture and society is a burning area of debate in the current scenario. It has always been a perception or argument that, advertisements not conforming to social culture are considered unethical by the society. Advertisements showing vulgarity, nudity, stunts, fake claims, missing statutory warnings, etc. are not considered in accordance to the societal norms and thus the communication content through such campaigns are not positively accepted, which in turn inversely affects the promotional strategies of the organizations.

Thus, it instigated the researcher to put an attempt to understand the advertising agencies perspective in designing advertisements of some selected products and to identify the viewers’ understanding & belief towards the ethical content of such advertisements and also from the perspective of gender. The researcher made an attempt to put forward certain necessary suggestions relating to ethical content in designing advertisements by the advertising agencies which would help them in attaining an optimistic approach from the viewers’ towards such ad concepts.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The objectives of the study are:

- To understand the advertising agencies perspective in designing the two selected case based advertisements.
 - Upon understanding the objectives behind the two case based advertisements, three other brands of advertisements have been selected, where usage of appeals like vulgarity, nudity, fake claims, etc. has been apparent.
- To identify the viewers’ understanding & belief towards the concepts used in the selected five cases based advertisements with reference to moral values and principles.
- To observe the viewers’ acceptance level towards the concepts in relation to the moral values and principles, used in the selected five cases based advertisements from the perspective of gender.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

For the study, the researcher adopted the through Judgemental sampling method and has restricted the selection of two (2) contemporary advertisements in the form of two (2) cases from a marketing website, specifically ‘campaignindia.in’. At first, the objectives and the aims behind designing these two advertisements by the respective agencies have been pulled out.

With these two (2) cases into consideration, the researcher has considered three (3) other brands. The rationality behind these five (5) advertisements has been identified by considering the responses of few rational thinkers from the selected study area, i.e., Sivasagar town of Assam. Rational thinkers think logically, are sensible,

educated and reasonable. They formulate judgments' which are free from the effect of emotions and thus understand the significance of ethics and its values from a broader point of view. For the study, the faculties of the educational institutions of the study area has been considered as rational thinkers and thus a structured questionnaire based on the five (5) cases, has been served to the respondents. The sample size has been limited to 30 respondents, of which 15 no.s were male and the remaining 15 were female.

The researcher thus made an attempt to study the existence of communication barrier, if any, between the audience and the advertising agencies, in relation to the ethical perspective of such advertisements and as such, the Customer satisfaction Impact (CSI) Index has been considered. Primarily, the CSI methodology was used by various other researchers like George (2012)², Bharadwaj (2013)³, Gogoi (2013)⁴ and Islam (2015)⁵. These researchers have made use of the customer satisfaction index in the studies as laid down by the American Marketing Association⁶. The American Marketing Association used this technique with the help of 10 points Likert's Scale. The scale was confined to 5 points in the study conducted by George. Likewise for this current study, the responses of each Statement were measured through Impact index with 5 points Likert scale. The formula for Impact Index is as below:

a. $\text{Impact Index} = (\text{Weighted Score} / \text{Maximum Score}) * 100$

b. $\text{Weighted Score} = w_1 * n_1 + w_2 * n_2 + \dots + w_5 * n_5$

where,

➤ w_1 to w_5 = weightage given to each responses per statement ranging from 1 to 5. The highest being 5 and 1 being the lowest.

➤ n_1 to n_5 = no. of respondents responding to a statement with respective weightage

c. $\text{Maximum Score} = \text{Highest rate} * N$

where,

➤ N = Total no. of respondents

The results from the questionnaire were presented in percentage. The scale of Impact Index that was taken into consideration is as follows:

Table 1: Impact Score Range

Range (%)	Impact with Respect to the Statement
0-25	No Impact
25-50	Some Impact
50-75	Moderate Impact
75-100	High Impact

Source: Author's work

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION:

Objective 1: Understanding the advertising agencies perspective in designing the two selected case based advertisements

Case 1: Idea 3G

"The advertisement made use of celebrity 'Abhishek Bacchan'⁷ where as per the concept; Idea's 3G service committed to help in population control. In the TVC created by Lowe Lintas, Bachchan's character says that India's population growth is caused by the fact that everytime the electricity goes, people don't have anything else to do for entertainment, and hence end up having sex. Now, with Idea 3G, both the men and the women have something to keep them engrossed with their mobile phones at all times. The film ends with Bachchan's friend sarcastically asking him, "And what about your baby?" He replies sheepishly, "Before 3G."⁸

Commenting on the TVC, Sashi Shankar, chief marketing officer, Idea Cellular, said, "Idea brand campaigns have always celebrated champion ideas which have the power to change the society and the way we live. This

² George D., (2012) A Study on the satisfaction level of Autorikshow Passengers with special reference to Thrissur Town, Mirror, Vol (2), Issue 1, 77-86.

³ Bharadwaj S.G., (2013) Brand Preferences of Consumers on Health Supplements with special reference to Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Sivasagar Districts, M.Phil dissertation, Dibrugarh University, 23-24.

⁴ Gogoi P, (2013) A Study on the Customer Relationship Management practices of select Automobiles dealers with special reference to Sivasagar and Dibrugarh district, M.Phil dissertation, Dibrugarh University, 21-22.

⁵ Islam S.S., (2015) Impact of Tourism on the Socio-Economic environment: Case studies of Kohora and Bagori ranges under the Kaziranga National Park, PhD. Thesis, Dibrugarh University, 70-71.

⁶ Bryant B.E and Fornell C., (2005), American Customer Satisfaction Index, Methodology Report.

⁷ Bollywood Celebrity

⁸ Source: <http://www.campaignindia.in/video/idea-says-use-3g-control-population-in-its-new-tvc/414628> Accessed on 12/01/2018

time, the champion idea is 3G which has a strong entertainment appeal, and has been designed to resonate with the larger audience, on a critical subject looming the country. On the other hand, it also promotes some of our 3G based mobile applications. We have planned a 360 degree communication program to promote the campaign and drive awareness.”⁹ Thus, the depiction of a socially relevant theme has been the main objective of the advertisement. And as a result the concept has been depicted by using visuals from the adult forefront and through a very forward approach; where consideration of the viewers’ age of all category, culture and values of the society were kept minimum.

Case 2: Bajaj Pulsar

“The film displays three riders on their Pulsar 200NS bikes where voiceover states, “You have never seen an engine like this, so you have not seen stuff like this.” The bikers go on to perform dangerous stunts against the backdrop of the roller coaster and other rides. The stunts performed by the riders showcases the ‘precision performance’ of the bikes. At the end of the film, the voice over signs off saying, “The revolutionary new Pulsar 200 NS with the world’s first four valve triple spark DTS engine. Pulsar. India’s No.1 sports bike.””¹⁰

This campaign has been designed by Ogilvy and Mather where the main aim has been to focus on the technology, performance and design of Pulsar, making it more distinct in the market. The concept itself bestowed Pulsar with a strong and bold personality with an impressive attitude by displaying unusual stunts and adventure. Upon understanding the objectives behind these two case based advertisements, three other brands of advertisements have been selected where usage of appeals like vulgarity, nudity, fake claims, etc. has been apparent. These three brands of advertisements are; Whisper Ultra, Engage Deodorant and Fair & Lovely.

Objective 2: Identifying the viewers’ understanding & belief towards the concepts used in the selected five cases based advertisements with reference to moral values and principles.

Table 2: Impact Scores Regarding Viewers’ Understanding & Belief Towards the Concepts used in the Selected Five Cases Based Advertisements with Reference to Moral Values and Principles

Statements	Case 1: Idea 3G	Case 2: Bajaj Pulsar	Case 3: Whisper Ultra	Case 4: Engage Deodorant	Case 5: Fair & Lovely
	Impact score (%)	Impact score (%)	Impact score (%)	Impact Score (%)	Impact Score (%)
1. This advertisement is in tune with the ethical values of the Indian society	50	35	65	36	59
2. This ad will not adversely impact the Indian society	55	39	64	34	59
3. This advertisement is ethical as it doesn’t make any false claims or judgments	57	43	69	39	49
4. This ad is interesting and can be openly viewed	51	55	55	34	77
5. This advertisement is very informative and reveals the key points of the product	58	52	62	47	55
6. The ad message and the flow helps in learning the benefits of the product or the concept	59	59	69	47	56

Source: Author’s work

Case 1: Idea 3G

From the above table, it has been apparent that the rational thinkers of Sivasagar town were moderately impacted by the concept behind the advertisement. The impact scores for all the statements were in the mid-range of the Impact Index pyramid which signifies that the idea behind this campaign were moderately ethical from the viewpoint of the audience of the study area. As per the viewers’, the depiction of the concept did possessed an adverse impact on the minds of the Indian people, however; the moderate level of ethical content in the campaign didn’t made false claims or judgments about the performance of the displayed brand. Even though the advertisement possessed a minimum amount of vulgarity or off-scenes, the same can be viewed

⁹Source:<http://www.campaignindia.in/video/idea-says-use-3g-control-population-in-its-new-tvc/414628> Accessed on 12/01/2018

¹⁰Source:<http://www.campaignindia.in/video/bajaj-pulsar-200ns-underlines-precision-performance/418592> Accessed on 12/01/2018

openly with any kind of audience irrespective of age, gender and caste; as the campaign was somewhat informative and revealed the features of the brand. Thus the viewers' were of the opinion that the flow of the concept depicted the product attributes and benefits in an understandable manner.

Case 2: Bajaj Pulsar

The impact scores for this campaign, showed a mixed response from the viewers of the study area. The viewers were of the opinion that the selected campaign had a little impact on the society in relation to ethics, as the tinge of moral principles in accordance with the values of the Indian society was less in the campaign. The advertising message and the depiction of the concept had a possibility of adversely impacting the minds of the society, as the usage of adventure appeal superseded the product attribute. The practice of displaying false claims or judgments in the campaign made it less ethical in the eyes of the viewers. Though less ethical, the advertisement was moderately interesting to watch openly with every kind of viewers, and the flow of the ad message highlighted the product features and attributes in an acceptable manner.

Case 3: Whisper Ultra

Discussions on feminine hygiene products have always been considered a taboo in the Indian society. It's only off late, that this taboo is gradually being diluted and people within the Indian culture have started discussing on this major issue in an open platform. While considering this particular brand for the study, it has been observed that the viewers' might not highly accept the campaigns on female hygiene products; but they were also not highly pessimistic towards display of such campaigns. The viewers of the study area moderately accepted the campaign and thus acknowledged the ethical perspective, the advertising message, flow of the concept and the element of appeal in a comprehensive way.

Case 4: Engage Deodorant

Most deodorant advertisements make use of sex appeals in their campaigns. But it has been observed that the Indian society is hesitant in accepting this appeal. The impact scores revealed that the viewers of the study area, found the campaign to be unethical and non-conforming to the societal culture and values. According to them, the usage of sex, vulgarity and off scenes in an advertisement dilutes the product features and attributes which should actually be the significant element in a campaign. These kinds of advertisements are neither informative nor interesting to watch as it creates hesitation while watching, whenever young ones are around.

Case 5: Fair & Lovely

A mixed response has been observed in case of this brand among the viewers of the study area. On one hand, the viewers found the campaign to be interesting and open to watch and on the other hand, they disclosed the advertisement to be unethical, making fake and false claims of beautifying people by making them fair on applying the displayed product. The advertisement was moderately accepted, as far as conformity of the ad concept to the Indian culture and society was considered. The campaign was informational and transparent in displaying the product benefits making the ad flow an appealing one.

Objective 3: Observing the viewers' acceptance level towards the concepts in relation to the moral values and principles, used in the selected five cases based advertisements from the perspective of gender.

Table 3: Impact Scores Regarding Viewers' Acceptance Level Towards the Concepts in Relation to the Moral Values and Principles, Used in the Selected Five Cases Based Advertisements from the Perspective of Gender

Case No.	Cases	Gender	
		Impact score % (Female)	Impact score % (Male)
1	Idea 3G	56	55
2	Bajaj Pulsar	51	46
3	Whisper Ultra	63	65
4	Engage Deodorant	42	38
5	Fair & Lovely	57	61

Source: Author's work

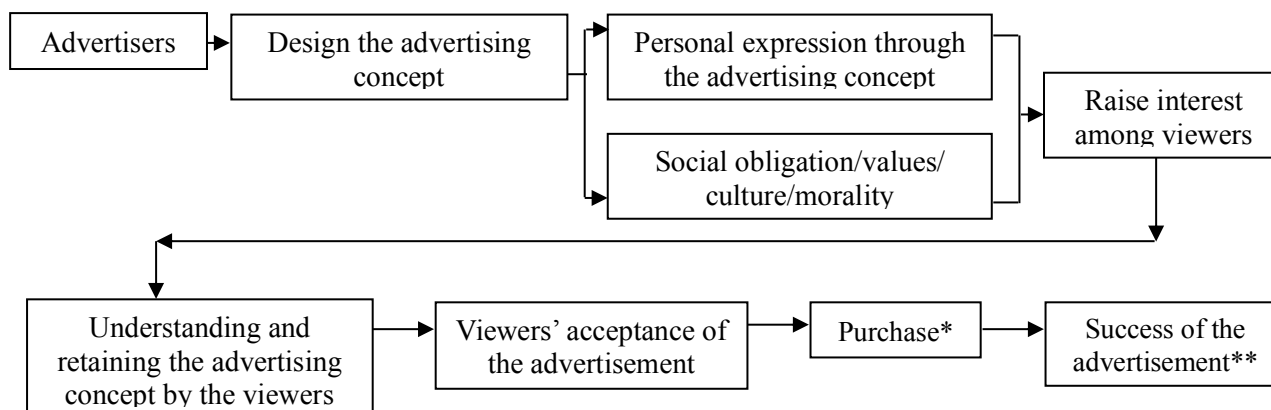
From the above table, it has been observed that the female viewers of the study area had a moderate attitude towards four (4) cases and the male viewers were moderate towards three (3) cases under consideration. The

moderate responses from the female rational viewers of the study area regarding the brands Idea 3G, Bajaj Pulsar, Whisper Ultra and Fair & Lovely revealed that, they were fairly inclined to advertisements depicting appeals like; stunts, discussions on feminine hygiene & cosmetic products and a mix of humour with adult jokes. The same opinion may be seen in case of the male rational viewers of the study area. However unlike the female viewers, the male viewers were not too inclined to advertisements with stunts. As far as the sex appeal is considered, both the gender was hesitant in viewing these kind campaigns openly and either in front of the younger ones or the old aged ones. They showed discomfort towards such advertisements and considered them as unethical to the societal culture and norms of the study area. In addition, advertisements with clear depiction of statutory warnings are an additional urge from the view of rational thinkers. Decency with clear & consistent advertising message has been socially considered a successful advertisement by the selected viewers under the study area.

CONCLUSION:

Advertisers do make use of various advertising appeals in order to cater the viewers' attention. But at times, these appeals may or may not be in conformity to the society, its culture, values and norms to which the campaigns are targeted. Thus from the outcome of the five (5) cases under consideration in the study, the researcher has identified an ethical model which can be followed by the advertisers in designing advertisements and in gaining popularity in the market.

Figure 1: Ethical Model for the Advertisers in Designing Advertisements



Source: Author's work

* In the current study, the word "Purchase" refers to procuring and getting hold of the advertising concepts.

** In the current study, the word "Success of the advertisement" refers that, in relation to the ethical perspective of an advertisement, a successful advertisement is one where communication barrier doesn't exist between the audience and the advertising agencies.

From the above figure, it can be interpreted that, to maintain retentivity of the advertising concept and the brand name among the audience, there should always be a balance between the personal expressions delivered through the glint of campaigns and social obligation, whenever the ethical aspects of an advertisement are considered. The fit between the social values and the scenes behind an advertisement should be in accordance to the communication behind an advertisement and thus in its success. It is because, retentivity leads to curiosity which eventually leads to urge for purchase and in the usage of a particular brand. The ultimate objective of a campaign is always to create awareness, raise the interest, lift the desire and boost the action in the form of purchase. And unless purchase of an advertised brand is evident, a campaign is never considered successful. Thus in order to attain the ladder of success, advertisements needs to be ethical and socially acceptable and there exists a direct linkage of the usage of appeals and viewers' acceptance of the campaigns as far as the lens of ethics is considered.

REFERENCES:

- Akhter, W., Abassi, A.S, Umar, S. (2011). Ethical issues in Advertising in Pakistan: An Islamic Perspective, *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 13(3) ISSN: 1818-4952, 444-452.
- Bharadwaj, S.G. (2013). *Brand Preferences of Consumers on Health Supplements with special reference to Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Sivasagar Districts*. M.Phil dissertation, Dibrugarh University, 23-24.
- Bryant, B.E and Fornell, C. (2005). *American Customer Satisfaction Index*. Methodology Report.

- Clow, E.K., Baack D. (2013). *Integrated Advertising, Promotion and Marketing Communications*. Pearson Education, Inc, Fourth Edition, London.
- George, D. (2012). A Study on the satisfaction level of Autorikshow Passengers with special reference to Thrissur Town, *Mirror*, Vol (2), Issue 1, 77-86.
- Gogoi, P. (2013). *A Study on the Customer Relationship Management practices of select Automobiles dealers with special reference to Sivasagar and Dibrugarh district*. M.Phil dissertation, Dibrugarh University, 21-22.
- Gunnels, G. (2014). Analyzing Unethical Advertisements and Examining Ethical Business Practices, *Business Ethics Paper Competition*.
- Islam, S.S. (2015). *Impact of Tourism on the Socio-Economic environment: Case studies of Kohora and Bagori ranges under the Kaziranga National Park*. PhD. Thesis, Dibrugarh University, 70-71.
- Kothari, C.R. (2012). *Research Methodology Methods and Techniques*. New Age International Publishers, Second Revised Edition, New Delhi.
- Kotler, P., Keller, K.L., Koshy, A., Jha, M. (2012). *Marketing Management, A South Asian Perspective*. Pearson Education, Inc., 14e, Bangalore.
- Mathenge, G.D. (2013). Ethical issues in Advertising and Marketing: An Empirical Analysis of the Hindrances to Efficient Marketing and Product Communication Management in Kenya, *European Journal of Business and Innovation Research*, Vol (1), No.4, 9-19.
- Nagamani, M., Asha, S. (2014). Advertising Ethics- An Indian Perspective, *Indian Journal of Applied Research*, ISSN 2249-555X, Volume (4), Issue 5, 1-4.
- Singh, J., Sandhu, N. (2011). Building Ethical Considerations into Advertising Practices- An Indian Society, *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, Vol (2), No. 18, 291-301.
