

How “Offensive” is Offensive? A Closer Look at Controversial Advertisements

De Souza Etain Iwona¹, Dr Suparna Naresh²

¹Scholar, CHRIST (Deemed To Be University), Bangalore, India

²Associate Professor, CHRIST (Deemed To Be University), Bangalore, India

Abstract

We live in a world inundated with messages. Messages that seek to promote products varied and eclectic in their feel and purpose. With capitalism holding court in most societies, it is no surprise therefore for corporate enterprises to take to advertising their products with great verve. The advertisements while attention-grabbing are also unfortunately often considered questionable. With competition rife among advertisers to capture consumer attention for a slice of the advertising pie, advertising messages are becoming increasingly risqué and frequently downright offensive. There is growing concern over lowering standards in advertisements. Be it excessive sexual content, discrimination on grounds of gender or propagating regressive philosophies, advertisements are sadly being noticed for wrong reasons. The present paper seeks to explore the idea of offensiveness in advertisements through an analysis of advertising content. Further, a focused group discussion adds the audience perspective on the issue as well. Straddled by Uses and Gratification Theory, Social Responsibility theory & Self Construal Theory, the present study attempts to answer questions related to reasons for people finding advertisements offensive and the falling standards of media platforms with regard to social responsibility. It is never too late to question “How ‘Offensive’ is offensive”?

Key Terms- Offensiveness, Advertising standards, Questionable content, Social responsibility, Consumer taste

Related theme: Media and society

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The world of advertising

We are constantly surrounded by messages. Messages that seek to promote brands and products make their way towards us through the means of advertising. Advertising plays a humongous role in integrating consumers with the market. We are constantly bombarded by hundreds of advertisements that make their way to us through different mediums. Be it through the traditional morning newspapers, the large hoardings that we read while in traffic or the through digital advertising, with their catchy jingles and impressionable catchphrases. From the traditional usage of signs and symbols to the shift to an electronic medium, organizations have come a long way in improving their promotional strategies and create awareness about their brand and build consumer loyalty. (Ali, 2015)

Advertising being medium oriented has progressed along with technology and industrialisation. Over time, advertising has become more refined and technical due to the advancement of technology, be it on the television or over the internet. (Arora, 2019)

By making the product known to the masses, advertising acts as an incentive to the businessmen. Not only does it assure business but it also simplifies it. Providing the consumer with knowledge about the product, advertisements build in the consumer a desire to obtain the product. Advertising in itself is business with its main goal being to attract and provide advice to the consumers.

1.2 Advertisements as influencers

Advertising has a strong impact on consumers buying behaviour. It helps build up and strengthen the brand image. The stronger the brand image the easier it becomes for the companies to fight off their competitors. Consumers place their faith in well-established brands and tend to buy products from that brand itself. (Ehsan, Mudasar, & Kashif, 2013)

Advertising thus plays an important part in being an influencer in the lives of the people. It plays a major role in shaping the thought process of society and inevitably influences the behaviour of the consumers. Researchers (Sandra, Dalia, & Valdas, 2008) stated that the psychology of the consumer plays a major role in attracting and posing an effect upon the consumer. The more realistic the illustrations and the more the cognitive and emotional appeal, the higher will be the chance of having an impact upon the consumer.

To grab a hold of their audience's attention advertisers, lean on powerful influencers such as celebrities. Celebrity attachment plays a major role in convincing a consumer to buy the product. Consumers tend to form a bias towards the product that their favourite celebrity endorses making that product their first choice. Thus, the more loved the celebrity the higher the chance of success. (Hassan, 2015)

1.3 The question of standards

Not only does it act as an important tool for businesses to market their product, but advertising also acts as a guide to the consumers and helps them pick out the right goods and services for them. However, due to the growing competition and in an attempt to boost their sales, businesses often engage in sending out deceptive and misleading information. This impairs public confidence in advertising. (Verma, 2006)

According to researchers (Coutinho de Arruda & Leme de Arruda, 1999) limited knowledge about ethics has resulted in a limited ethical perspective for advertising of products and services. The research article goes on further to state that ethical limits for advertising have been restricted to the legislation of each country and little or no attention has been given to the consumer's beliefs and values when referencing to the consumer market.

Even though consumers look for accurate and truthful advertisements, or for basic knowledge about the product, advertisers still reach for the exaggerated route to promote their brand. Though advertisements are designed to be informers, the empowered advertisers aim to leave an imprint in the mind of their consumers to win over their competitors and this often leads to misleading advertisements. (Warne, 1962)

However, advertisements have helped broaden the perspectives of the masses. They have had their negative and positive impacts. Even though some advertisements that have a western structure have not been acceptable and resented by the consumers, it has helped the people become more open-minded and receptive to ideas on a global level. (JAIN, 2015)

This research article focuses on the offensiveness of controversial advertising and how people perceive them. We identify three reasons that resulted in a difference in opinion when speaking of the offensiveness of controversial advertisements; A cultural perspective, a gender-related perspective and an age-related perspective.

2.0 Review of Literature.

2.1 Definition of Advertising

Advertising is persuasive in nature. A form of promotional marketing, advertising is a median between the sellers and their customers intended to persuade them to purchase the item. (V, 2013) A means to familiarize the customers with the product advertisers aim at making an impact on the minds of its views subconsciously creating a brand impact. Advertisements are creative in nature and inform the buyer of the uses and benefits of the product inducing them to buy it. (Durmaz, 2011)

2.2 History and evolution of Advertising

One of the earliest forms of advertising existed in Ancient Egypt scribed over rolls of papyrus promoting the slave trade. From then to now advertising and mass media have boomed. The rise in capitalism and industrialization paved a way to the advertising world we see today. With the rise in urbanization, expansion of transport and communication advancements growth in the advertising sector was seen which firmly rooted advertising in all economic and cultural foundations (Morales, 2012).

During the middle ages, (Morales, 2012) said that along with 'painted announces', street callers started making an appearance reaching out to the wide range of illiterate masses. Much after the establishment of the Gutenberg press in 1438, the first paper advertisement appeared in London in 1625. Once technology advanced in 1900, mass production of goods was in full swing and manufacturers desired to reach a larger audience. With technological advancements, newspapers started becoming cheaper and holding a higher number of pages with bigger advertisements. As the population doubled and the industrial revolution started to pick its pace from 1870 to 1900 new modes of communication developed like the typewriter and telegraph, increasing the communication capabilities and reducing illiteracy. (Morales, 2012)

According to (Richards, Daugherty, & Logan, 2009) in the aim to increase financial aid, advertising found its foundation in journalism. The power of persuasion was realized during World war I, where the medium interacted with the masses about the progress of the war and the sale of war bonds. (Morales, 2012). With the emergence of the radio, advertisers primarily became sponsors and instilled a sense of community with their broadcast of “soap operas” and other drama entertainment (Richards, Daugherty, & Logan, 2009).

The growth of television in the late 1940s drastically changed the form of advertisements with advertisers shifting from radio programming to shorter tv segments accepting the higher costs in order to reach and increase their profits (Richards, Daugherty, & Logan, 2009). As the 60s rolled in TV advertisements witnessed a creative revolution with Advertisements becoming more graphic and minimal. However, the industry grew predominately white male dominant and started to portray women in subservient roles. (Morales, 2012)

2.3 Problems and issues in advertisement

2.3.1 Legal laws

The advertiser is expected to follow the set of codes and rules laid down. The laws are divided into governing laws for the media, laws protecting the society and consumer and industry-specific laws. The law prohibiting the advertisement for cigarettes and alcohol was passed under the industry-specific law in 2003. To keep the advertisements in check a non-statutory body called the Advertising standards council of India (ASCI) was founded. The regulation of advertisements in India is a self- regulation system. The ASCI adopted the Code for Self-Regulation in Advertising which applies to all advertisements read, heard or viewed in India even if they are published abroad. (Limaye & Pande, 2014)

2.3.2 Ethics

Ethics are defined as a person's moral choice between things he ought to do or not to do. Ethics requires a person or organization to choose between what is right (ethical) and what is wrong (unethical). This choice largely falls back on one's faith, belief, morals and their background (Ashraf, et al., 2016)

In addition to hurting the sentiments of the audience, being truthful and honest is extremely vital when advertising a product, especially a health-related product. Over digital and print mediums we see a number of advertisements for weight loss pills, pills for hair growth, etc. Dishonest and promotion of products without a medical background check may result in harm to the customers. (Singh & Sandhu, 2011)

There are various types of unethical advertisements; surrogate advertising, unverified claims, women stereotype, comparative advertising and using of children in advertising.

- i) Surrogate advertising refers to advertising a product under the pretense of another product. Example: Kingfisher after the liquor brand started advertising for music CDs and packaged drinking water.
- ii) Unverified claims are advertisements that promote a certain product under false promises like Kellogg's special K which guarantees weight loss.
- iii) Stereotypical advertisements use a stereotype to sell their products, e.g. using a housewife to sell products from detergents to cooking advertisements.
- iv) When one company promotes its product against another you get comparative advertising. Detergent advertisements often use this technique in a subtle but prominent manner.
- v) Children are used in advertisements to form an emotional connection to the advertisement. Some advertisements like those for baby products are relevant for the use of children but many times detergent advertisements and other such ads bring in children unnecessarily. (Munjhal, 2016)

2.4 Exploring the concept of offensiveness in Ads

As competition increases in the market, every advertiser looks to leave a lasting impression on the mind of their audience. Adopting Shock advertising is a risky business as the advertisement could make or break that product. It falls on the shoulders of the advertisers to determine who would get offended by the advertisement and the reason for the offence. This becomes a tough affair once the merchandise itself is termed as "controversial" like tampons, condoms, and contraceptive pills. (Waller, 2004)

According to (Skorupa, 2014) through the AIDA model developed by Edward Kellogg Strong Jr. in 1925 advertising affects the buyer through four stages; attention, interest, desire, action. She continues to state that according to (Clow & Baack, 2012) in their book there are varied ways used by advertisers to capture the eye of the audience to infiltrate their subconscious with the message they want to deliver. These tactics are referred to as appeals and there are seven of them namely; fear, music, sex, rationality, humor, emotions and scarcity.

(Waller, 2004) states that in his previous analysis with Fam and Erdogan separated controversial advertisements into four groups; sex/gender-related products, social/political groups, addictive products, and health care products. He goes on to quote (Barnes & Dotson, 2013) in their study who defined controversial advertisements as offensive products and offensive execution. (Phau & Prendergast, 2001) stated that products like cigarettes, alcohol, condoms, feminine contraceptives and female hygiene products were deemed controversial and their advertisements offended the audience in terms of sexual meanings, nudity, cultural sensitivity, sexist images, etc. (Waller, 2004)

3.1 Research Methodology

Research is a process of investigation that aims to seek complete knowledge and understanding of a particular topic or situation. Research is used to answer the questions of the researcher and in order to do so has a particular methodology that the researcher follows. This methodology helps in collecting data that thereby solve the questions that were being asked and opens the doors to further investigation.

The methodology comprises quantitative and qualitative research.

3.1.1 Quantitative Analysis

Research may either take up one of the types of research or both. Quantitative analysis is also deemed as scientific analysis as it is empirical in behavior. Comprising numbers and statistics this form of analysis is conducted via surveys, questionnaires, etc. Quantitative analysis is often adopted as it is unbiased and objective. The collection, as well as its analysis, occurs in a logical and systematic way. These features leave very little room for error and is a solid foundation for the researcher to rely on.

3.1.2 Qualitative Analysis

Is the method of collection and interpretation of data that is non-numerical and is usually used in social science research. This method of data helps in understanding social life in terms of people or places. Qualitative analysis is mainly focussed on three main things; individuals. Language and communication and culture and society. Bearing the word “quality”, qualitative

research focuses on the “why” of the issue rather than on the “what”. Qualitative analysis concentrates on the intricacies of situations and tries to understand it from a micro-perspective, unlike quantitative analysis which draws its results on a much larger scale.

Qualitative analysis is conducted through a number of ways:

- i. *Direct Observation*: Through direct observation method the researcher usually observes the behaviours and attitudes of people without interfering or interacting with them. He observes the behaviours of the people as they go on about their daily lives.
- ii. *In-depth interviews*: Through this method, the researcher asks questions to his designated participants mostly in person however he/she may resort to other mediums such as the e-mail or the telephone in situations which require a large number of participants or simply due to other difficulties.
- iii. *Focus group discussions*: Used mostly to understand trends and events that occur in a specific community, a researcher collects a group (sometimes more than one) of 5-15 members and through conversations records and collects data through the participants’ opinions. While conducting a focus group discussion the researcher is very observant and records even semiotic gestures of the participants.
- iv. *Content analysis*: in this method researchers observe analyse aspects of social life by observing words, art, languages, music, film and so on. They study the content and try to understand the ways that words and images are used to pass a message, the content of the piece draws out interpretations to answer various questions and qualms on social life and culture.

Qualitative analysis helps in gaining in-depth knowledge of attitudes, behaviours, social processes that help in generating an understanding of a social scenario. Moreover, qualitative analysis provides the researcher with a degree of flexibility that provides a higher chance of adaptability and can easily be conducted in a budget-friendly manner.

3.1.3 Primary data

The data obtained by the researcher himself comprises primary data. It is the original data that is collected first hand by the researcher himself.

There are various methods to collect primary data some of which include:

- i) Interview method:
- ii) Surveys and questionnaires:
- iii) Content analysis:
- iv) Focus group discussion:

For this research, the primary data will be collected using content analysis and a focus group discussion.

3.1.4 Secondary data

Secondary data is obtained through previous research articles, books, and other literature. Secondary data is freely accessible and acts as the foundation for the present research. Through secondary data the researcher gets up-to-date with the research already conducted in the field of study and figures out the gaps that he can bridge using his research. It also gives the researcher a direction on the methodologies previously conducted and upon this can he build his own route that he would like to take. It also informs him about the various limitations that have occurred in previous researches.

3.2 Methods adopted in the research

3.2.1 Content analysis

The present research uses a qualitative approach involving a content analysis and a focus group discussion. Controversial advertising is read upon through already published pieces of literature and the content of controversial deemed advertisements is analysed. Through a content analysis, advertisements portraying controversial stances are carefully analysed. Each of the advertisements chosen corresponded to sexism, racial discrimination and body shaming.

3.2.2 Focus group discussion

Following this, a focus group is done with a group of 12 individuals between the ages of 21 to 40. A focus group discussion is a qualitative approach used to acquire an in-depth knowledge of a social issue. This method focuses on the individual's opinions, experiences, and knowledge. A person's opinions are dependent on external and internal factors. The internal factors include the person's age, beliefs, and gender which helps mould their cognition. However, in social situations and surrounded by peers a person's opinion gets affected by external factors such as culture, others' opinions and the information they obtain from their surroundings. Through a focus group discussion, it becomes easy to identify and understand a person's stand on a particular subject.

A focus group discussion involves a moderator who based on the research objectives puts together a list of questions that are then put forward to the participants. For the discussion in this research, the participants will be shown 4 controversial advertisements from each category and then asked a few questions. The discussion will last for a period of 1.5 hours.

3.3 Theories used

3.3.1 User gratification theory

This study draws strength from the user gratification theory put forward by Blumer and McQuail. It states that the viewer turns to the media to satisfy their needs and in turn the effect the media has on its viewers. This theory states that media is used by the people for a number of reasons be it to acquire knowledge, satisfy their emotional needs, gain credibility and ensure

their status, mode of socialization and even at times to relieve their stress. Advertisers lean into this theory in order to gain customers' interests in the brands or products they advertise. For example, Kinder joy pays utmost attention to the toys they give with their chocolates in order to grab the attention of their young viewers, who to gain the toy pressurize their parents into buying the chocolate.

3.3.2 Social Responsibility theory.

The present research is also grounded in the social responsibility theory that was written by the authors Siebert and Peterson. According to this theory, the media must act responsibly with regard to the information that they place before the audience. Many times, advertisers fail to do so. Aiming to bear a lasting impression, advertisers put out advertisements that are sexist, racist and insensitive. For example, Wild stone deodorants that have time and again been flagged down for being extremely sexist and sexual. (Naresh & Muthuthodiyil, 2019)

3.3.3 Self Construal Theory

Theorists Markus and Kitayama proposed this theory to explain the differences in cognition and emotion in terms of culture. It states that people in individualistic societies develop self-construals that make them perceive themselves as separate from the rest. This kind of culture is mostly seen in Western countries like America. Indian culture is more of a collectivistic culture which according to the theory states that people from collectivistic cultures tend to perceive themselves in connection to the others around them thus developing interdependent self-construals. People with interdependent self-construals are more empathetic and provide more social information in social contexts. (Chingching, Lee, & Liu-Thompkins, 2019)

3.4 Timeline

A period of 4 months from November 2019 to February 2020.

3.5 Objective of the study

The objective of this study aims to explore the concept of the offensiveness of controversial advertisements and to determine the reasons an advertisement is deemed offensive.

3.5 Research Questions

The research seeks to answer the following questions- How is advertising deemed offensive? What is the role of culture in people's understanding of 'offensive'? and Why are advertisements deemed offensive?

4.0 Discussion and analysis

4.1 Content Analysis of Advertisements

4.1.1 *Fair and Lovely*

This advertisement targets college-going women who face insecurity and discrimination due to their dusky skin tones. The product, as well as the advertisement, promotes the idea that fairer skin will not only help boost your confidence but also grab the attention of everyone else. And here lies the problem. Though trying to advertise the idea of confidence, they are indirectly stating that to be someone and to be recognized you must be fair, for in fairness lies beauty. The advertisement shows the auditions for a performance by college going girls. Though the lead actress of the ad is good at what she auditions for, a fairer toned girl is given the lead performance while the lead is asked to do a narration from the side. It is then the friend of this girl approaches her and asks her as to why she is given such an insignificant part even though she is so talented. To which the lead actress shrugs in an accepting manner and states that it's only fair due to her "dark" skin tone to which she compares to a new moon night. The friend then gives her a fair and lovely tube and asks her to use it for 30 days. It is then shown that on the day of the performance the lead though narrating from the side is radiating and everyone from the audience has their attention upon her rather than on the people on stage.

The advertisement thus glorifies the notion that to obtain an important role you must be fair and beautiful. Its metaphoric depiction of showing her fair and radiating and then showing the moon, states that now she is as pretty as the moon.

Though this was what seemed as Fair and Lovely's first attempt to portray their propaganda from a different perspective other than the usual romantic scenario, they resulted in doing an injustice to every dusky toned actress that has carved a niche for herself on the silver screen. The product in itself is controversial but it has obtained an audience for years only brings to the fore the beauty standards that have been set by the society and the world of media itself. Though the advertisement is offensive in its own way the audience accepts it for it is the situation they face around them. Thus, until the beauty standards and stereotyping on the basis of one's skin tone are done away with, advertisements such as these will continue to thrive in the market.

4.1.2 *Wild Stone Body Talc for men*

Wild Stone widely known for its eroticized sexist deodorant advertisements laid their foundation upon this very sexist advertisement. The advertisement begins with a man getting ready to work, while a narration begins with an offensive south Indian accent. The advertisement portrays feminine characteristics in a derogatory manner. Having long hair, going to a salon and even crying is portrayed as a loss of masculinity. The background has a pinkish hue with a man wrapped in a towel dancing in the midst of falling rose petals. The scene then shifts to a woman looking and laughing while the main actor falls into a bed full of

rose petals in a silk nightgown. It then shifts back to the first shot with the main actor horrified and drops the woman talc and catches the Wild Stone talc. The concluding scene shows the man exhibiting feminine attributes as wrong and concludes with the quote “Be a man use Wild Stone talc” with the main actor suddenly having a woman on his arm.

There are so many things wrong with the advertisement. South Indian accents have for time immemorial been used in advertisements as well as in Bollywood movies to depict a funny character. It is not only offensive to the south Indian culture but is also spoken in a way that is devoid of accuracy. The second offensive part of the advertisement is the portrayal of toxic masculinity. Boys from small are taught not to cry as it is compared to what a “girl” does. A notion that is completely unjust to both the genders. Crying is a natural thing but when attributed to a woman it is referred to as a sign of weakness. The advertisement has also got the feminine characteristics of a woman wrong. It has portrayed a stereotypical concept of women owning silk nightgowns and falling into beds filled with rose petals. The powder box is also shown to be pink in color.

The most absurd part of the advertisement is the notion that it is funny. The ad is not only sexist but extremely discriminative. But one must also realize though this ad was extremely popular in its time, it doesn't stand a chance to be shown over the media in the current year. The rise of feminism and the stand against discrimination has alerted advertisers to think twice before putting forward extremely sexist ads like these, however, though the level of sexism in advertisements has dropped down considerably, there are a number of advertisements that are still sexist in nature. These ads range from cooking oil ads to deodorant ads that are all depicted with a subtle hint of sexism. (Naresh & Muthuthodiyil, 2019)

4.1.3 Manforce Jasmine Condoms

Manforce advertisements have time and again come under the offensive radar. This advertisement has a duration of 2 minutes and 4 seconds and revolves around a woman trying to seduce her husband who has just come back from work. The advertisement has Sunny Leone decked in a beautiful red saree and ornaments waiting for her husband to return home. The room is also shown decorated as the husband is shown to be surprised looking around the room. While the soundtrack plays in the background Sunny Leone starts to seduce her husband by taking off the pieces of her jewelry and dropping her dupatta. The prime focus is on her every action and only shows repeated shots of her husband ogling at her. The advertisement shows a majority of close up shots of her body while her husband fondles her with a number of scenes focussed upon her chest. Towards the end of the TVC, the frame gets blurry to reveal that Manforce condoms have released a jasmine flavor with the tagline “Get Naughty.”

Other than portraying strong sexual intimacy the advertisement also objectifies women and portrays them in a very submissive light. Though a number of women are independent, office going individuals, the advertisement shows only the man returning home from work while the woman is seen to have spent most of her time decorating the room and herself to provide him

with pleasure. The lady in this advertisement is portrayed as an object of pleasure whose sole purpose is seen to be in the pleasure obtained by her husband.

This particular TVC faced a lot of flak especially in Goa by the Ranarangini, a small wing of Hindu Janajagruiti Samaj where they demanded the government to ban posters of the product as well as the actress and to stop allowing it to be shown on screen. They put in the petition requesting the condom advertisement along with other condom ads which have images of women to be pulled down with the reason being “to save the embarrassment of women and protect their dignity”.¹

Condoms are the primary go-to for birth control, but due to advertisements such as these, the government has restricted the showcasing of condom advertisements between 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. Condom advertisements such as these portray the fun aspect of sex and portray the condom has a pleasure enhancer rather than for its main cause; unplanned pregnancy and STDs. Various advertisements in the past have helped spread this awareness however as competition between condom brands grew, the advertisements focus more on eroticism and sexual intimacy.

4.1.4 Dollar Club Big Boss innerwear

A number of advertisements hire actors to create a lasting impression of the brand. Akshay Kumar has been the iconic face of the brand for quite a while. Being “the action hero” most of his ads contain some sort of action sequence. The advertisement begins with robbers wearing joker masks violently entering a bank and start taking hostages and money. While a robber is threatening an employee, he is felt up by a stick of a supposedly blind main actor (Akshay Kumar) asking for directions to a bus stop. The robber roughly pushes the lead character roughly exposing his innerwear, to which the actor replies with “big mistake” and starts to violently beat up the group of robbers. The scene ends with the robbers captured and the actor exiting while he notices women looking wantingly at him and he nods towards her and in a very burlesque manner says “Button Khula Hai Apka”(Your button is open).

A number of things cross one’s mind while watching the advertisement. The main thing being the unnecessary use of violence for an advertisement that is trying to sell innerwear. Not only does it create an idea that the innerwear brings along heroism, but it also portrays something such as a bank robber by armed convicts in a light-hearted manner. The bank in the advertisement, as well as the robber entering scenes, are similar to a Hollywood movie set up however the ending scene showcases the actor speaking in a very rude and abject manner to a woman, putting Indian culture in a very bad light. The advertisement also promotes sexism in a manner of the actor who is clearly walking around with his innerwear in full display having a problem with a woman’s top button being open. The tone used by the actor speaking to the woman is also in a very disrespectful manner.

Violence in advertisements results in what advertisers deem to be a “shock appeal” which helps the advertisers create a lasting impression of the advertisement and product in the viewers’ mind (Tim Jones, 2013). Violent advertisements such as those whose brand ambassadors are

renowned actors having a large young fan base play an influential role in developing in them an idea that resorting to violence is heroism. According to psychologist Bandura “children are greatly influenced by the media - they learn by observing, imitating and adopting behaviours.” Thus developing aggressive behaviour.

4.2 Analysis of the Focus Group Discussion

4.2.1 *Fair and Lovely*

While the participants watched the advertisements, they largely took it in a light-hearted way while smiling and stating that they remembered the ad. Some participants stated the advertisement was ignorant and exaggerated. When questioned in regard to the offensiveness of the advertisement, the participants replied in negation. They believed that the ad did not offend but raised questions about the society and the beauty standards in it that has resulted in the making of such a product. However, two of the participants recounted how more than 10 years ago, fair and lovely was used by every girl they knew. Every woman carried along with her a tube of fair and lovely. Three of the participants spoke about how the brand focuses its target audience to insecure women who believe being beautiful will help them be confident. It was then that one of the participants stated that fair and lovely solidified the notion that to be confident a woman needs to be fair and beautiful.

With regard to offensiveness one of the participants from the older age margin, recounted the fair and lovely ads back in the late 90s and early 2000s where she believed that the ads were much more offensive saying that, “They showed this really dark woman, to a point you could see they painted her black and after using fair and lovely she would become fair probably washing the paint off.” She continued to add that this was accepted by everyone in the society including the men resulting in products like “fair and handsome” to hit the market. However, due to the changing mindset in society, no one will accept ads like this at face value anymore. Everyone questions everything.

Two of the participants believed that the idea of fair and beautiful has existed for centuries, where one of the participants attribute this belief to the colonisation and its colonisers. Whereas the other participant speaks about how for centuries statues of gods and goddesses have always been romanticised and portrayed as beautiful.

The participants also believed that the ad was not offensive but creative in its own way. “How else is one supposed to advertise for such a product” was one person’s statement to the ad. Another participant believed that fair and lovely took quite a different path for this particular advertisement diverging from the normal romantic setting and focussed on the interrelation of beauty and confidence. To this, another participant believed that taking that setting for the advertisement was somewhat ingenious as one tends to wish they look beautiful on stage to feel more confident.

However, in conclusion, participants stated that it is of common belief that people tend to believe what they see on Television and ads as such have a great impact on the minds of the younger generation who start to differentiate people on the basis of skin tone.

4.2.2 Wild Stone Body Talc for men

While the participants watched the advertisement there were a number of reactions that arose. The participants first began by laughing but as the advertisement proceeded a number of them shifted about in their seats while a few voiced out how offensive and exaggerated the advertisement was. A number of them exchanged glances while a few raised their eyebrows and looked skeptically at the advertisement. When asked about the offensiveness of the advertisement all the participants were very eager to say that they found the advertisement not only offensive but ignorant and demeaning. The first participant claimed that the advertisement was the most offensive thing he had seen and was clearly mocking feminism. Another participant added to that comment stating that the advertisement was so offensive that it was revolting to watch. She believed that it completely negated everyone's fight for equality and it had an unnecessary sexual undertone to it. Adding to the two opinions on one of the participants claimed that it is ads like these that disrupt society. He along with another participant believed that ads like these appeal to only a specific population in our country and cannot be impactful to anyone else.

Another participant picked on the accent used in the running background narration. She felt that the accent was the most offensive and her opinion was supported by another participant who believed that the accent was demeaning to south Indians. She along with another participant believed that the advertisement got both the gender characteristics completely wrong. One of the female participants was offended by the way women were portrayed in the advertisement, and picking up on this, two other participants pointed out how the concept of associating women with the colour pink is overly exerted throughout the advertisement. A participant claimed she midway completely lost track of what the advertisement was about because she felt that how it was depicted, was an extreme action to promote talcum powder. One of the previous participants said that the advertisement marketed masculinity rather than the powder.

Keeping in mind the economy and the marketing world, one of the participants believed that just like brands fair and lovely appealed to the consumers, this brand tried to do the same. He did not find it offensive because when this advertisement came out it actually worked, and the company is only looking for a way to increase its sales. Another participant agrees with him and says that ads like these are purposely made this way in order to give society something to talk about. One of the other participants agreed with her and stated that ads are sometimes deliberately made controversial to create a strong and lasting impression in a person's mind.

The participants believed that the fact that we are getting offended by the ad today shows how society has changed in its mindset. However, one of the male participants took her up on that and stated that though we have come to a time where we critically view something shown to

us, we still behave as hypocrites whenever an accent like this is portrayed as the funny character in a movie or when one of the funny characters is gay.

4.2.3 Manforce Jasmine Flavour condoms

While the advertisement played the participants seemed uncomfortable and occasionally asked how long the advertisement was for. When asked about the offensiveness of the advertisement one of the participants said that she did not find it offensive but it was a good thing that Manforce puts its brand name at the corner of the advertisement so that parents could shift through the advertisement if children were present in the room. She also spoke about other advertisements giving an example of a beverage advertisement that had unnecessary sexual connotations which raised questions that are difficult to answer in a child's mind. A number of participants felt that the ad gave unnecessary attention to details such as jewellery to increase the duration of the advertisement, while one participant stated that even though the ad was this long, it wasn't broadcasted completely. Only snippets are shown on television.

This discussion brought out the difference in perceptions of the two genders. While the female participants believed the advertisement could be shown in a better manner and could concentrate on the use of the condom rather than the act, the male participants did not find anything offensive in the advertisement and believed that it was not necessary for condom advertisements to always show informative ads and that how and why a condom is used is an established fact in the country. This opinion was greatly opposed by a number of the female participants, where one participant recounted an incident that shed light on how low sex education in India is, and how people from rural areas, who want to take up birth control are unaware of how to do so. One of the other male participants recounted that there used to be awareness advertisements about the existence of condoms but never on how or when they were used. Hence ads like this help give a better idea.

Though a majority of the participants did not find the advertisement offensive, one female participant pointed out that the advertisement was centred around the male gaze and only on the actress's body. To this, a male participant pointed out that this was done because the main target audience for the advertisement was men. Another participant added to this point by stating that the advertisement was not offensive but its purpose was to leave a lasting impression on the consumer's mind. One of the male participants said that creating an impression as such and constantly having the brand's name on the screen, helps the consumer remember the brand better. He added that even though condoms are freely available it's still uncomfortable for a man to go up and purchase one at a crowded pharmacy. So, to quicken the embarrassing ordeal they usually ask for the first brand of condoms that pop into their mind. It is in this situation that Manforce's marketing style is the most effective.

One of the participants stated that the advertisement could have been shown in a better manner. When children come across advertisements like this instead of asking the elders, they try to

understand it over the internet, leading them to sites they shouldn't be seeing. Another participant believed that condom ads do not always have to be sexual but can have a bit of humour in them too. That is also a way an advertisement can be remembered. She continued to add that advertisements like these establish wrong expectations in the young viewers. Girls think that in order for men to notice or like them they must dress and act like the lead actress, while men look at condoms as a way to enhance pleasure rather than for birth control and hygiene.

The other point a number of female participants brought to the fore is how the advertisement shows the woman trying to do her best to seduce her husband and the fact that it shows only the man returning back from work while his wife waits at home for him. They also stated the advertisement where the woman is seducing her husband would be less controversial if the advertisement was for a female condom. To this point, one of the participants pointed out the fact that these ads are always male-centric, even when it comes to advertisements that are for other types of birth control like I-pill. It always shows the woman alone and worrying and there is no sight of the man. This to an extent raises a number of questions.

In the context of objectifying women, one of the male participants believed that the actress's consent to do an ad like this shows that the advertisement does not objectify women. However, ending this discussion everyone believed that though it was not overly offensive, it could have been shot in a better manner.

4.2.4 Dollar Club Big Boss innerwear.

This particular advertisement received a number of varied reactions. Participants were majorly shocked and indifferent about the ad. They passed a few comments on how unnecessary the advertisement was and towards the end expressed disgust and strong disapproval of its ending. The participants were very eager to share their opinions about this ad where one of the participants started off stating that the ad was offensive due to its use of violence and especially due to the unnecessary use of the ending remark. To this, another participant added that the remark was highly degrading to the woman that it was said to. The first participant continued to add that media is extremely powerful in creating an impact on a person's mind. Advertisements like this and even movies like Kabir Singh instil a wrong idea of behaviour in young impressionable minds. Younger generations tend to follow whatever their favourite star does on screen and this could be dangerous. To justify this point another participant recounted how children have dressed up as their superheroes and performed dangerous stunts.

Another participant felt the advertisement was offensive due to it being extremely graphic in nature. She added that violence is found everywhere around children now, be it video games and even cartoons. Thus, having ads like these is just worsening the issue. She also felt that the use of violence to sell an undergarment was unnecessary. One of the participants believed that this ad shows conning and beating up people as humorous and acceptable. A few of the participants believed that the ad did not serve its purpose in marketing the product. It mostly focused on the actor who was wearing it. One of the participants stated that maybe instead of

using violence the ad could have had a humorous stance to it and depicted why men should use the innerwear.

In reference to the violence, one of the participants did not find it offensive as she felt it was done to monopolize on the actor. “They were going with the message that if you use the inner garment you can be as cool as the actor” she continued. Another participant agreed with this opinion and stated that big brands that can afford actors like him do not care about promoting their product itself. There have been smaller brands that hired TV soap actors to advertise their innerwear and showed a decent humorous ad. Therefore, the bigger the brand the less they care about how much sense the advertisement makes as long as it sells. To this, another participant said that the ad defeats its purpose to sell its inner garment because if you remove the actor nothing makes sense. Also, no one wears a banyan with a jacket and goes to the bank. Everything about this advertisement was irrational.

All of the participants found the ending scene, where the actor passes a remark to a woman extremely offensive. One of the participants said that the ad is very sexist in nature. She said “if a woman replaced the lead male and fought off the robbers with her innerwear showing the society would be the first to criticise it. However, it is for some reason okay for a man to do so”. A few other participants agreed with this statement where one participant stated that it is completely absurd for the actor to have a problem with a woman’s button being open when he’s roaming around with all of his open. There was another participant who was alright with the scene saying the button open refers to an old-time notion wherein movies used to show a button popping when someone is shown to be aroused. He felt the way it was depicted was the only sensible way to go. To this, another participant clarified that he did not have the problem with the woman having her button open but was disgusted by the tone that the actor used.

One of the female participants stated that she found every ad to be extremely sleazy with a woman always being portrayed as sexual objects. She continued to add that the tone used by the actor was highly degrading. To which another participant spoke in support of the actor and stated that this was a subtle promotion of a film that was released around the same time. This notion was not accepted by the very first participant who stated that the actor knows how to say a dialogue and the context attached to it.

Thus, in the context of the offensiveness of the advertisement, a majority of the participants found the advertisement offensive because of the remark, while few of the participants had an issue with the use of violence and a couple of them had no problem with the advertisement.

5.0 Conclusions and Results.

Overall, from the study one can see a development in the mindset of the people in what they deem to be offensive. Advertisements that have been considered as normal and humorous in the past were found to be offensive in the present day. From watching advertisements to critically analysing and questioning the content put forward to them, people have understood the power of the media and have stopped accepting the content put forward by the media at

face value. They have started to be aware of social issues such as sexism, racial discrimination and have started to notice these in the advertisements they watch. The concept of feminism has started to find ground in the present generation with them applying feminist concepts to what they watch. Controversial products have been noticed to put forward fewer offensive advertisements in comparison to uncontroversial products like talc and innerwear. Through the analysis of advertising content one can see that over time due to the consumers donning on a critical lens advertiser and advertisements have become less offensive and there has been significant improvement in their quality as well. The study also brought to light the importance of a person's cultural set-up in the role of advertisers making controversial ads and the consumers deeming the ad as controversial. Not every advertisement was found offensive, though certainly found a disagreement between the participants. Taking the condom advertisements there was a significant difference in how the male and the female participants viewed the advertisement. This goes to show that other than a person's cultural make-up variables such as age and gender play a vital role.

6.0 Limitations

The aim of the study was to understand the level of offensiveness a person feels towards a controversial advertisement. The conclusion was deduced using content analysis and a single focus group discussion. Though the research questions were met in the present study there were a few limitations. One of the limitations that occurred was that the focus group was conducted with people, mostly residing in one geographical area. Secondly, the advertisements were strictly rooted in Indian advertising thus giving scope in further research on the subject from a global perspective.

Bibliography

- Ali, H. (2015). Effects of TV Advertisement on Consumer Buying Behaviour:. *International Journal of Innovation and Applied Studies*, 608-614.
- Arora, D. M. (2019). Impact of Advertising on Indian Society to Improve Awareness with Special Reference to Social Advertisement. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research*, 81-86.
- Ashraf, G., Younus, R., Aimenshafi, Khan, Z., Waseem, I., & Samin, T. (2016). Ethical Dilemmas of Advertising. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary and Scientific Emerging Research Vol 4 No 2*.
- Barnes, J., & Dotson, M. (2013). An Exploratory Investigation into the Nature of Offensive Television Advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 61-69.
- Chingching, C., Lee, W.-N., & Liu-Thompkins, Y. (2019). Advertising in Asia: Theories and Implications for Practice. *Journal of Advertising*, 417-436.

- Clow, K., & Baack, D. (2012). *Integrated Advertising, Promotion, and Marketing Communications, 6th Edition*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Coutinho de Arruda, M. C., & Leme de Arruda, M. (1999). Ethical Standards in Advertising: A Worldwide Perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 159-169.
- Durmaz, D. Y. (2011). A Theoretical Approach to the concept of advertising in Marketing. *IJER*.
- Ehsan, M. M., Mudasar, G. M., & Kashif, I. H. (2013). Impact of Brand Image and Advertisement on Consumer Buying Behavior. *World Applied Sciences Journal* , 117-122.
- Hassan, A. (2015). Effects of TV Advertisement on Consumer Buying Behaviour. *International Journal of Innovation and Applied Studies*, 608-614.
- JAIN, S. (2015). ADVERTISEMENT CULTURE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SOCIETY. *International Journal of Management and Applied Science*, 74-76.
- Limaye, S., & Pande, D. (2014). The Indian advertising – How effective is the regulatory mechanism. *Journal of Indian Management Research and Practice*.
- Morales, L. D. (2012). THE HISTORY OF ADVERTISING. 1-15.
- Munjal, N. (2016). A STUDY ON ETHICAL ISSUES IN ADVERTISING AND ANALYZING DIFFERENT. *Ecoforum*, 1-6.
- Naresh, S., & Muthuthodiyil, S. (2019). Sexism in contemporary advertising. *International Journal of Advanced Scientific Research and Management, Volume 4 Issue 4,* 260-266.
- Phau, I., & Prendergast, G. (2001). Offensive Advertising: A View From Singapore. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 71-90.
- Richards, J., Daugherty, T., & Logan, K. (2009). ADVERTISING HISTORY. *Encyclopedia of Journalism*, 1- 15.
- Sandra, J., Dalia, S., & Valdas, N. (2008). The Psychological Impact of Advertising on the Customer Behavior. *Communications of the IBIMA*, 50-55.
- Singh, D. J., & Sandhu, N. (2011). Building Ethical Considerations into Advertising Practices – An Indian Study. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 291-301.
- Skorupa, P. (2014). Shocking contents in social and commercial advertising. *Creativity Studies*, 69-81.
- Tim Jones, P. H. (2013). Violence in Advertising : A Multilayered Content Analysis. *Journal of Advertising*, 11-36.

V, S. (2013). A study on the influence and impact of advertising to Consumer purchase motive among student teachers. *Journal of research and method in education*, 1-5.

Verma, D. (2006). ADVERTISING AND THE LAW. *Journal of the Indian Law Institute*, 257-270.

Waller, D. (2004). What factors make controversial advertisements offensive? A preliminary study.

Warne, C. E. (1962). Advertising. A Critic's View. *Journal of Marketing*, 10-14.

1. <https://www.india.com/buzz/sunny-leones-latest-condom-ad-creates-controversy-go-womens-commission-asks-for-manforce-jasmine-commercial-to-be-removed-1886741/>

Appendix

Age	Name	Occupation	Email-id
26	Sandeep Doifode	Teacher	barryalannnn@gmail.com
23	Malavika Silveira	Teacher	malavikasilveira@gmail.com
27	Sylvester Joy Dawson	Music Teacher	sylvesterjoydawson@gmail.com
27	Lisha D'souza	Teacher	lishadsouza946@gmail.com
22	Jeanne Cotta	Student	anna.jen1697@gmail.com
33	Aaron Luis	Bartender	Aaronluis2913@gmail.com
24	Naomi Pulamte	Trainer	pulamtenaomi@gmail.com
21	Dhanaraj Naik	Student	Naik.dhanaraj@gmail.com
39	Komal K.	Employed	
40	Laveena Dias	Housewife	Its_lave@rediffmail.com
23	Ashis Acharya	Stand up comedian	Acharya60@gmail.com
22	Lester D'souza	Musician	lesterarti17@gmail.com