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Social Media Advertising and Public Awareness: Touching the LGBT Chord!

By G.S. Chauhan¹ and Tanu Shukla²

Abstract

Advertising is a form of persuasive communication with an audience. It is a promotional tool that helps in selling new ideas, products, and services through print, electronic and digital media. Advertising as one of the most influential components of mass communication is also strongly associated with social issues. In recent times, social media has acquired massive influence, providing an attractive and universal platform to every domain of businesses. Social Media has become an instrument to accelerate the process of change where it promotes social awareness and advertising in the society. As advertising mirrors the society, it strongly captures the changing social mores and reflects them through various media. Currently, we see social issues like pollution, corruption, feticide, single parenting, and LGBT equality reverberate in social media. Under the existing circumstances, communicating social messages through advertising makes the brand more purposeful, memorable and emotional for consumers. This study examines the effects of social media on consumers with respect to an advertising campaign by Myntra, one of the India's leading e-commerce fashion platforms. The advertising touched the LGBT chord, emphasizing how the modern Indian woman can voice herself, create her identity and have her own space in the society. The digital campaign titled 'Bold Is Beautiful' was launched to promote Myntra's apparel brand Anouk with three woman-centric issues around which the society is not very comfortable- homosexuality, single-parenting and the joy of staying single. This article focuses on research around an advertisement highlighting homosexuality, titled 'the visit'. According to the survey, the brands perceive making such advertisements a necessary step towards maintaining a healthy public image. A survey was distributed to management students of a premier educational institution, pursuing their Masters of Business Administration (MBA). The results indicated that a majority agreed that if these issues were addressed more openly, then it would create a sense of boldness and power among the LGBT community. They believe that advertisements portraying social issues should expand beyond typical advertisements of products to promote social change in the mindset of society towards these issues, in order to eradicate narrow-minded thought processes. The advertisements contribute toward achieving freedom of sexuality in society.

Keywords: LGBT rights, advertisements, social media, India

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Introduction

LGBT rights and the contemporary situation in India

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people face ample problems in India which are not faced by non-LGBT people. They are looked down upon by other people. Sexual activity between two people of the same sex is considered illegal and punishable by law in our country. According to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, homosexual intercourse is a criminal offense. Indian youth is following the West in public proclamations of their sexuality. This is creating ideological conflicts in the society because homosexuality is still an extremely tabooed discussion to have in India. Recognizing transgendered individuals as a third gender is possibly the first step taken towards eradication of this taboo, however, little progress has been made in this regard. Many in India consider homosexuality to be contrary to Indian culture and do not want decriminalization of Section 377 and consider homosexuality is against science and nature. It is viewed as a bad addiction and such group of people in India makes an attempt to cure it through medicine and yoga, assuming that if relationships between homosexuals are allowed in our country then it would lead to an increase in the number of people suffering from HIV/AIDS. On the other hand, several NGOs such as the NAZ Foundation are fighting for the rights of LGBT people. In December 2015, a bill was introduced in Parliament for the decriminalization of Section 377, but it was rejected. In April 2015, a bill was passed in the Council of State guaranteeing legal aid, pension, reservation in jobs and education for transgender people. The government intends to provide the same benefits to them which are enjoyed by the scheduled tribes and scheduled caste people. This research explores the effects and impact that advertisements have on the general community. Standing within the constraints of the current scenario, the paper discusses how advertisements drawn on the theme of LGBT rights is affecting the brand.

Advertisements are created to gain the attention of viewers to market their products. Advertisements popularize a product and attract consumers, be it shampoo, a website or a government policy. There are many social platforms which can be used for advertisements including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Millions are spent each year on the advertisements. If the public likes the advertisement, then there are resulting sales. Advertisements may also reveal negative or a positive perspectives on an issue. If advertisements are used to convey social messages, then the messages will have a wide viewership. Brands such as Dove (beauty brand), Anouk (apparel brand) are examples of those that take on social messages for their viewers. These advertisements project a new point of view on a social issue along with advertising the product. They have proven to be a huge driving force for changing the thought process of people for the good. Sometimes advertisements share a popular take on an issue while at others they portray an unpopular position. However, most of the times it has garnered a positive response from the public. If these advertisements are given a bigger platform so that it can target a larger audience, then it will have a greater impact on the society.

LGBT rights and human rights

There is an inequality between rights which non-LGBT people enjoy and the rights possessed by LGBT people. Non-LGBT people can adopt children, have an open social life and can pursue a career of their choice. LGBT individuals face difficulty in adoption because many are concerned with the moral values which they believe homosexuals would inculcate in children.

LGBT people are ridiculed wherever they go. They are socially humiliated for their choice of partners. They also face problems while pursuing a career of their choice, since people claim that they do not want to be around homosexuals driving them to be closeted individuals who are socially unable to reveal their sexual orientations. They cannot marry the individuals of their choice in India. People consider them to be mentally ill and claim they choose this way of life. Nonetheless, changes are gradually being made in our country. People are acknowledging the rights of LGBT people slowly but it will still require a lot of time and effort for LGBT people to have the same rights which every human being is supposed to have in India and on the planet.

Social Issues and Advertisements

There are many social issues in our country which find media attention. Advertisers are very quick to realize the power of championing social issues through their brands and they ride the social wave to give the public some serious food for thought. Such ads address various burning social issues like ‘Save the Girl Child’, ‘Lead India (a television initiative launched on India’s 60th Independence Day by The Times of India Group in search of a new bold leader for India)’, ‘Respect the National Anthem’, ‘Clean and Corruption Free India’ to name a few. The motive behind these social advertising campaigns is to make people aware of their duties towards society and in return, create a favorable image as ‘responsible’ and ‘genuine’ brands for a lasting relationship with consumers. Single women, single parenting, LGBT issue are some of the issues raised recently through social media. Similarly, single parenting is also looked down upon. People don’t think a single mother or a single father can raise a child well. Because there are so many brands in the marketplace selling similar products, advertisers weave social messages into their ads, such as gender equality, feminism, corruption, and racism. Besides projecting the brand distinctly into the minds of social media users, it also portrays itself as a strong and bold brand which augurs well especially with the younger generation who have a greater footprint on social media. Ads can affect the consciousness of their audience and have the potential to change the way they think about society. Comparatively, social ads are better liked and followed in India than humor and sexual appeal.

About the study

In India, media is instrumental in bringing about social awareness. Everything significant that happens around the country is broadcasted through media within minutes of its occurrence. This study was undertaken to analyze the effects of social media on consumer psychology. To do so, advertisements based on LGBT issues were chosen through. Anouk brand’s *Bold is Beautiful-The visit* was chosen in particular for analyzing the reaction of people towards the subject. It features a lesbian couple who are waiting for one of the young woman’s parents to arrive for a visit. “The ad features two beautiful Indian young women, one more traditional with long hair applying make-up, the other with shorter hair wearing long pants, yet both are sexualized, highlighting the nature of the relationship. The couple is planning to tell the parents about their relationship (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ef27m5ocK6Q>). Once in a while, someone comes along and tries to challenge the established social norms in innovative ways. Anouk’s campaign is an example of using bold social marketing while promoting its own brand which goes in sync with its tagline, ‘Bold is beautiful. Today, advertising can make a difference only when advertising targets peoples’ mindsets.

The objectives of this article are as follows:

- To examine the effect of social media on consumers with respect to this specific LGBT advertisement, supportive of sexual rights;
- To analyze the effect of advertisements on the brand image of the product advertised;
- To study the effects of the advertisement on the revenue generated by the sale of the product advertised;
- To investigate the impact of social media on social advertisements such as “The Visit”.

Methodology

In order to study the effects of social media on the consumer population, an online survey (in English) was conducted based on the advertising campaign by Myntra, one of the India’s leading e-commerce fashion platforms, Anouk, titled ‘The Visit’ based on LGBT issues, and responses were recorded. A batch of sixty-three students in Business Administration (MBA) from one of the premier technical institutions in India were chosen through purposive sampling as the population, out of which a total of fifty-five students were considered as a sample in the study. Being students of General Management, they are exposed to the contemporary trends in the industry regarding advertisements and their impact, and are well-situated to judge its impact on the community. Belonging to an age group from twenty-two to twenty-six, they are likely to be from the more progressive and open-minded segment of the population and tend to have greater exposure to social media and thereby these kinds of ads. This study is confined to the students of the General Management stream and has a limitation of generalization to the wider population.

Questions in the survey were based on the dimensions as follows:

- Extent of awareness
- Social message
- Brand image
- Revenue generation
- Social media

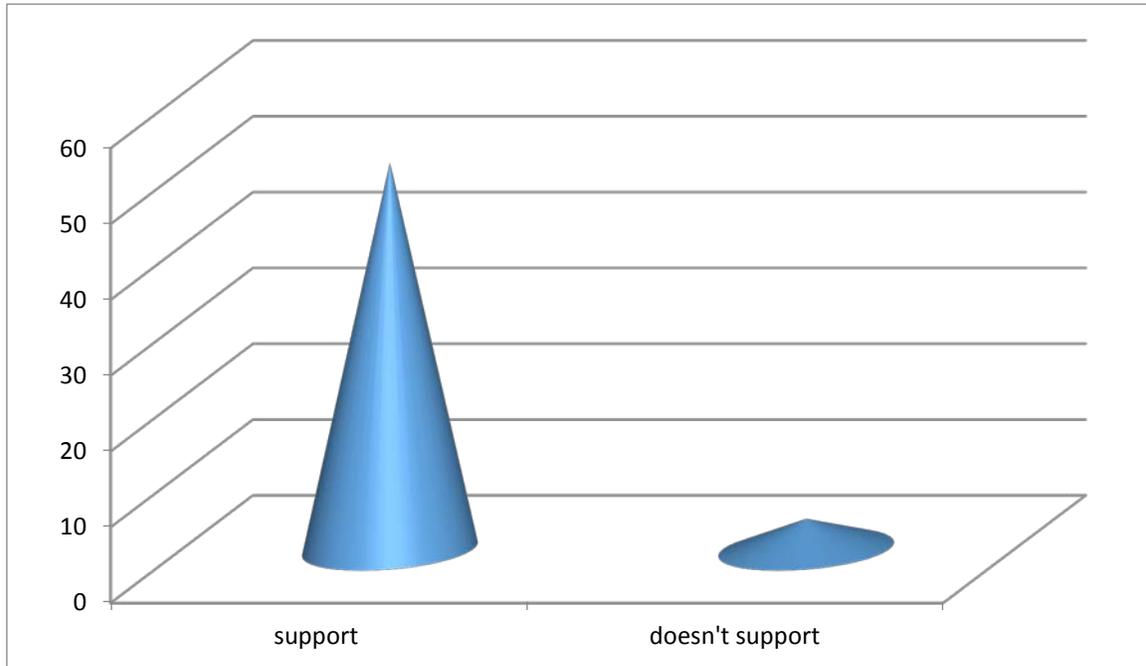
Analysis and Discussion

Analysis was completed on the basis of dimensions settled for the study as follows:

Extent of awareness

It is important to examine to what extent people were aware of the LGBT community and the recent escalation of the issues they face, leading to its salience a discussion topic. Toward this end, we asked the following questions:

- Whether people support the LGBT community or not?
- Whether such advertisements encourage discussion about the issue among their friend/family circles or not?

Figure 1: Perspectives on LGBT issues

The majority of the people who took the survey supported the LGBT community. However, they had not come across such advertisements very often. They agreed that if advertisements like these were made then that would encourage discussion among their family and friends.

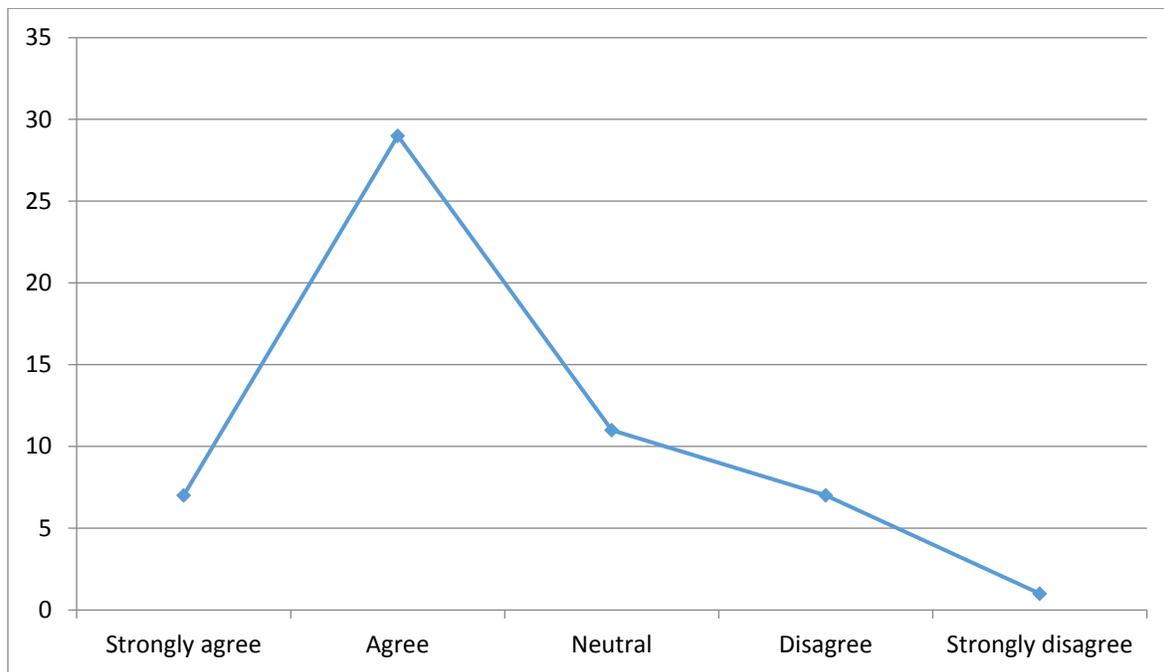
Social message advertised

One of the important objectives was to examine the effect of social media on consumer the population with respect to the LGBT advertisements. A series of questions were asked regarding the social message of the ad:

- Whether the advertisements' treatment of the issue reflects useful critical thinking on the issue or not?
- Whether such advertisements propagate stereotypical views on the issue or not?
- Whether the advertisement's popularity would help people address the issue more openly or not?
- Whether the use of such a serious issue as a marketing tool seems unethical at times or not?
- Whether these advertisements give a feeling of boldness/power and encourage viewers to fight for/ think about the issue or not?

The result of the objective is represented as follows:

Figure 2: Social Acceptance of advertisement representing LGBT issues



People agreed that the advertisement's treatment of the issue reflects valuable critical thinking on the issue. According to respondents, the way in which the issue was addressed by the producers projected a fresh take on the issue. They thought that some of the views conveyed in the ad were stereotypical in nature and sometimes they were not. They agreed that the popularity of the ad would help people address LGBT-related issues more openly and would also give people a feeling of boldness and power to come and fight for the LGBT rights openly. An article by Nettelhorst, Brannon & Jeter (2014) analyses the effect of the content of the advertisement on viewers; if the advertisement addresses a topic and showcases a point of view which is accepted, then people tend to like the product advertised and the advertisement too. The article, therefore, supports the conclusion that most of the people agreed with the message conveyed through the advertisement because their personal choices coincided with the view projected in the advertisement. Respondents claimed that these advertisements motivate people because they accept the point of view projected contained in the ad.

The study focused on the effects of advertisements on people and whether the message conveyed is acceptable to the viewers and whether or not it influences their thought process. In this regard, Mitchell (1986) analyzed the effect of advertisements, which contain good visual and verbal components, on the people and brand. If the message conveyed through the advertisement is clear, then it is easier for the public to understand the message and as a result has a positive influence on the brand image and the sale of the product of that brand. The result of the survey indicated that the effect of a positive point of view on a topic also results in a positive view of the brand, whereas if ads show a negative attitude towards a topic or approaches the topic in a way people do not approve of, then the brand is affected negatively. Hence, the study concludes that the content of an advertisement and the point of view depicted has a strong influence on that brand.

Effect on brand image

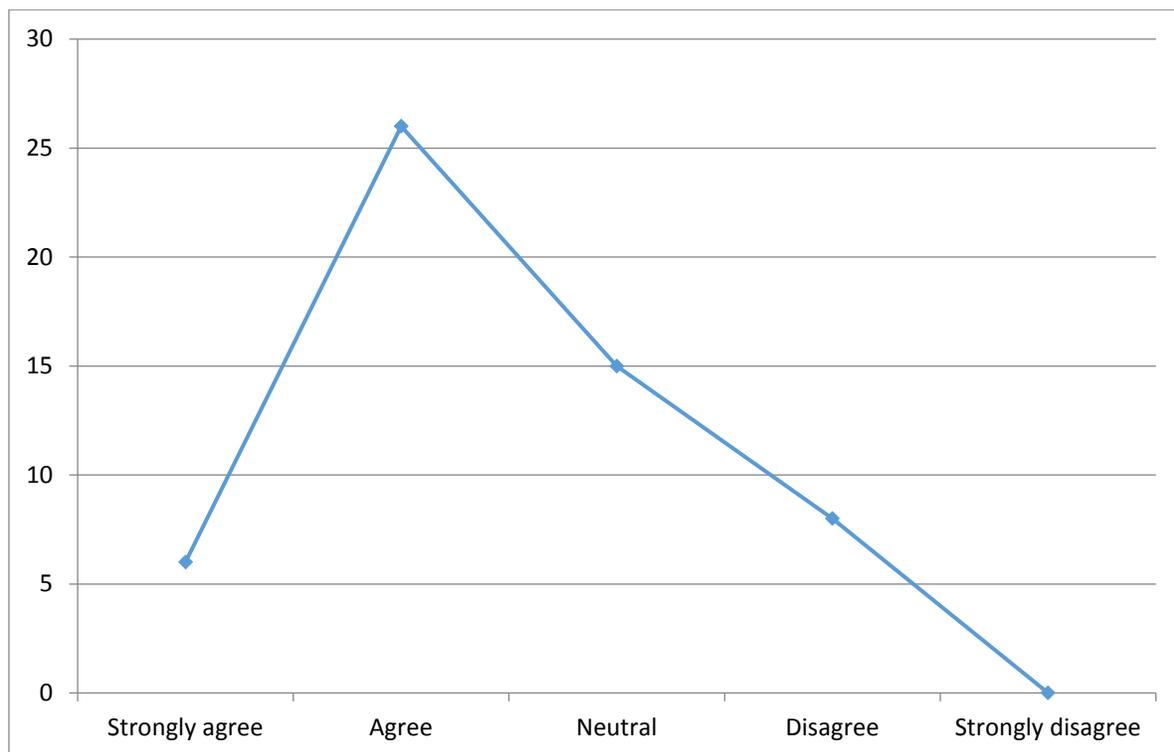
As a social advertising campaign, “The Visit” promoted LGBT acceptance to enhance its reputation and distinguish it from its competition. The next objective was to analyze the effect of the advertisement on the social advertisement like LGBT.

Five questions under the objective brand image help in answering this objective. The questions asked were:

- Whether a series of advertisements based upon a single social issue create an association between the brand and the social issue in their mind or not?
- Whether these advertisements prove to be helpful to the organizations fighting for these issues or not?
- Whether brands perceive making such advertisements as a necessary step towards maintaining a healthy public image or not?
- Whether the cause is lost behind the brand image in such advertisements or not?
- Do you believe that if the advertisement shows an unpopular take on a social issue it creates a negative impression of the brand in your mind?

The result of the objective is discussed as follows:

Figure 3: Effect on brand image by ad content



Maintaining a healthy brand image is a very important step for a company. An association is formed in consumers' minds between the brand and the social issue, if the makers create a series of advertisements based on a single social issue. Whenever advertisements are created around the social issue selected, the ad ensures that the issue is not lost behind the brand advertised. If the

advertisement shows a negative take on the issue and is not accepted by viewers, then that may affect the attitude of viewers themselves towards the brand. In some cases, people may even try to boycott the entire brand itself.

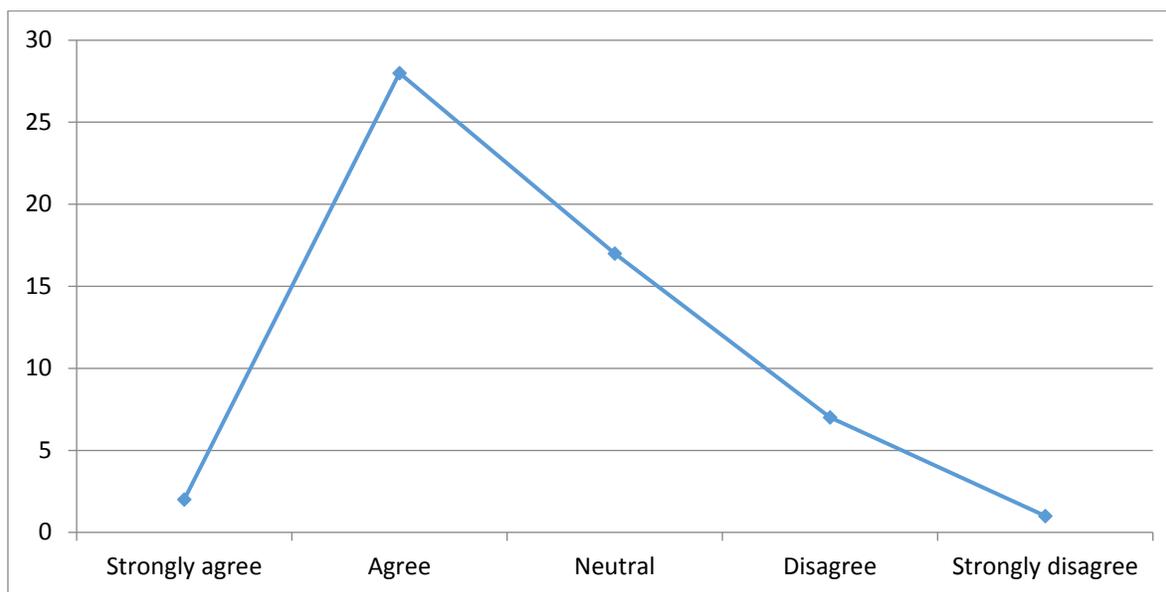
Creators of advertisements should always try to create advertisements keeping in mind the views of the public in general. The advertisement may also result in positive influence towards the brand image of the product if the viewers support the ad's take on the social issue. Sometimes if people like the advertisement, they link it to the brand in their mind and always prefer that brand over the others which also act as a major point in maintaining a healthy brand image. Mitchell (1986) supports this finding. In his study, he focuses on the effect of the content of the advertisement on the brand image.

Effect on revenue generation

The next objective was the effect of the advertisement on the revenue generated by the sale of the product advertised. The two questions regarding revenue generation were as follows:

- Whether the social issue tackled by the advertisement is positively associated with the brand's product or not?
- Whether the advertisements portraying social issues are more popular than the regular advertisements of the brand or not?

Figure 4: Impact of content of the advertisement on revenue generation



The brand image has a huge impact on revenue generation. If a positive brand image is maintained, then sales of the product advertised will increase along with revenue. It can also influence revenue generation negatively, if viewers are not pleased with the advertisement. In such a case, they may avoid the product leading to a drop in sales.

The advertisements portraying social issues gain popularity more easily than the regular advertisements of the brand if it is able to strike a chord with the targeted population. Thus, products advertised alongside some social issue also help in increasing the sales and hence contribute to revenue generation. Schivinski & Dabrowski (2016) support this result by showing

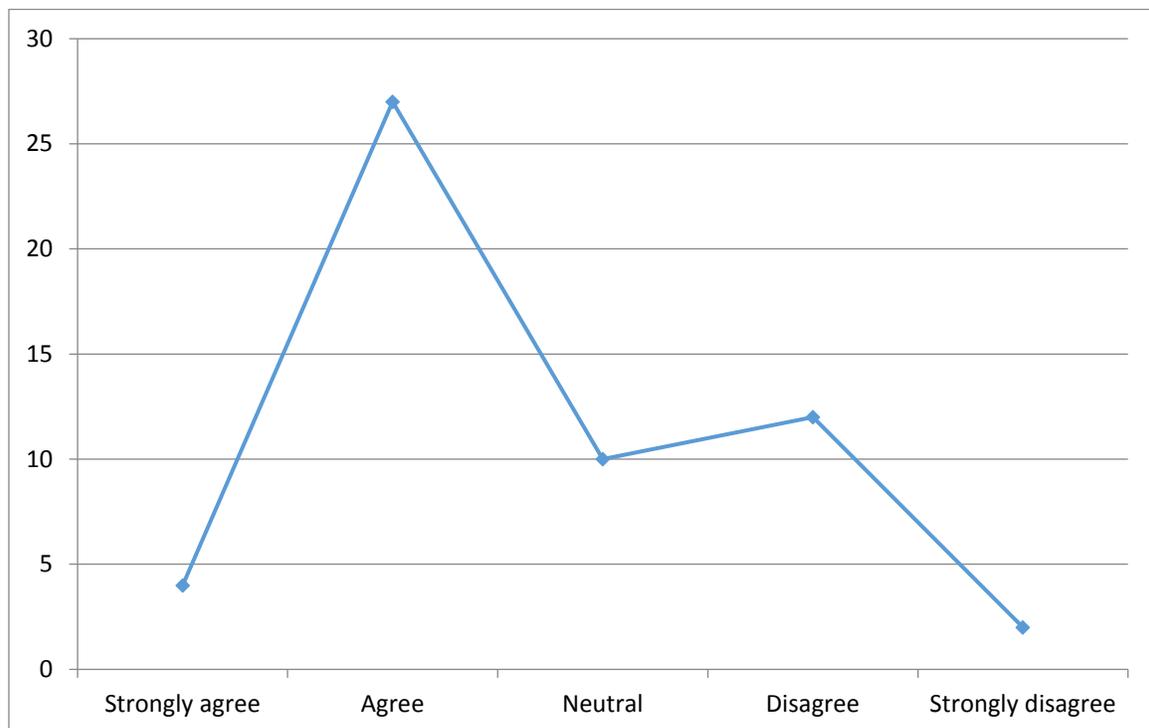
that if there is a personal interaction between the user and the brand representative and if it has a positive impact on the sales of the product advertised, it also has a positive influence on the revenue generated.

Influence of social media

The final objective was to evaluate the effect of the social media platform on the advertisement. The two questions under the dimension social media are as follows:

- Whether the advertisers wish to connect to the larger community across the nation or not?
- Whether the Indian audience is comfortable having such message in mainstream media or not?

Figure 5: Social media platform effect on the advertisement



The results are as follows: if the advertisement is broadcasted on a bigger platform it would reach a larger number of people than if it is broadcasted on a medium which has a smaller number of viewers. The platform has a huge impact on the reach of the advertisement. However, some responses show that Indian viewers are still not comfortable in having advertisements based on these social issues to be there.

People still hesitate to discuss topics like LGBT issues openly without any hesitation. Gomillion & Giuliano (2011) examined the effect of media role models on lesbian, gay and bisexual people. The study conducted in the paper highlighted that if a popular person or a person whom people admire is gay or openly supports people who are gay then that instills a sense of pride and inspiration and motivates people to acknowledge their own sexuality. According to the

results of the studies, this helps people with their own self-realization and motivates them to come out openly about their sexuality.

Though the advertisers wish to connect to the larger community, the people are still not ready to have such advertisements in mainstream media. Peitz & Valletti (2008) support this result. They discussed the difference in advertising in pay-tv and free-to-air and conclude that if viewers strongly dislike advertisements, the advertising intensity is greater under free-to-air television as it has a broader reach than pay-tv. An advertisement's campaign on such unconventional themes like sexuality may generate more visibility about the brands and help audience build sensitivity to such issues. Therefore, the content of advertisements is of massive importance and has a strong influence on that brand. Although not everyone is influenced by ads, studies reveal that women were relatively more influenced by the content of the advertisement than men. Schivinski & Dabrowski (2016) examined the effect of social media communication through a survey. They sought to identify if social media influences viewers when media personality in the advertisement is personally associated with the cause highlighted by the ad. The study found that this personal connection influences viewers' acceptance of the point of view presented by the advertisers. Moreover, positive affect may increase sales, whereas negative effect may decrease them.

Conclusion

According to the findings of our study, the majority of the students from the MBA community support the LGBT community and perceive that advertisements which are based on social messages help them address the issue more openly. They concur that the ad instills a sense of boldness and power and encourages them to accept their sexuality openly and lead a normal life with pride. They believe that advertisements portraying a social issue should be made more frequently than the regular advertisements of the product as these are more popular also it helps in changing the mindset of the society in general towards these issues.

Viewers create associations between products advertised and brands. If an advertisement portrays an unpopular perspective, then it affects the brand in the eyes of viewers and the sale of their products. Nonetheless, the study also shows that ads have the potential to change hearts and minds; thus, in order to have a greater impact, advertisements promoting various change messages should be given a broader platform to reach a large number of people to transform social ills. By bringing LGBT identity and equality into the limelight, this ad—and potentially others—help viewers to focus on a sensitive issue and work for the betterment of the society.

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