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

By Iwona DeSouza¹, Suparna Naresh²

Abstract

We live in a world inundated with messages that seek to promote products varied and eclectic in their feel and purpose. Capitalism has rooted itself in many societies; corporate enterprises enthusiastically advertise their products around the world. Over the years we have had countless advertisements bombard us through our TV sets, newspapers, billboards and now through our smartphones. While attention-grabbing, these advertisements are unfortunately often considered questionable. Rising competition among advertisers for consumer attention has led to the production of advertisements that are increasingly risqué and frequently downright offensive. There have been growing concerns about the increasingly low standards of advertisements. Be it excessive sexual content, discrimination on grounds of gender, or propagating regressive philosophies, advertisements seek attention for the wrong reasons. While some advertisements were once downright discriminative towards the female population, things seem to have gradually gotten better over the past few years. However, that is not to say that stereotyping and sexism have been wholly eradicated from advertising; these issues are still prevalent today. Though some consumers watch advertisements through a critical lense and critique unethical advertisements, many offensive and discriminative advertisements have still become widely known and popular among viewers. The present paper seeks to explore the idea of offensiveness in advertisements through an analysis of advertising content on the basis of gender discrimination and stereotypical portrayals of gender. Further, a focused group discussion adds audience perspective to the issue as well. Straddled by Uses and Gratification Theory, Social Responsibility Theory, and Self-Constraint Theory, this study attempts to explore the concept of the offensiveness of controversial advertisements and to determine the reasons why an advertisement is deemed offensive. It is never too late to question “How ‘Offensive’ is offensive?”

Keywords: Offense, Advertising Standards, Gender Discrimination, Focus Group Discussion

Introduction

The World of Advertising

Advertising brings consumers into the market. We are constantly bombarded by hundreds of advertisements that make their way to us through different mediums. From traditional signs and symbols, to the shift to an electronic medium, organizations have come a long way in improving their promotional strategies to create awareness about their brand and build consumer loyalty. (Ali,

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2015) By making the product known to the masses, advertising acts as an incentive to entrepreneurs. They build a desire for products by providing the consumer with knowledge about the product.

Advertisements as influencers

Advertising has a strong impact on consumers' buying behaviours and strengthens 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 become loyal consumers. (Ehsan, Mudasar, & Kashif, 2013)

Advertising plays a major role in shaping the thought process of a society and inevitably influences consumer behavior. The more realistic the illustrations and higher cognitive and emotional appeal, the greater the chance there is of having an impact on the consumer. To capture their audience's attention advertisers hire powerful influencers such as celebrities. 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)

The Question of Standards

Due to growing competition, in an attempt to boost their sales, businesses often send out deceptive and misleading information. This impairs the public's confidence in advertising. (Verma, 2006) Researchers Coutinho and Leme de Arruda³ believe that, limited knowledge about ethics has resulted in a limited ethical perspective for advertising of products and services. Even though consumers look for accurate and honest advertisements or basic knowledge about the product, advertisers still exaggerate to promote their brand. (Warne, 1962)

This research article focuses on the offensiveness of controversial advertising and how people perceive them. We identify three perspectives that impacted variations in opinions about the offensiveness of controversial advertisements: cultural, gender-related, and age-related.

Review of Literature

Definition of Advertising

Advertising is persuasive in nature. A form of promotional marketing, advertising is the median between sellers and customers, intended to persuade them to purchase the item. (V, 2013) As a means to familiarize the customers with the product, advertisements aim at making an impact on the minds of its viewers and subconsciously create a brand impact.

History and Evolution of Advertising

A rise in capitalism and industrialization paved the way to the advertising world we see today. With the rise in urbanization, expansion of transportation, and communication growth in the advertising sector, advertising became firmly rooted in all economic and cultural foundations. In the middle ages there was a rise in street collers who reached out to illiterate masses. The first paper advertisement appeared in London in 1625. As technology advanced, newspapers became cheaper and held a higher number of pages with bigger advertisements. As the industrial revolution picked up its pace, the population grew and new

³Coutinho de Arruda, M. C., & Leme de Arruda, M. (1999). Ethical Standards in Advertising: A Worldwide Perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 159-169.

modes of communication developed. Inventions such as the typewriter and the telegraph increased the ability to communicate and helped reduce illiteracy. (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. The growth of television in the late 1940s drastically changed the form of advertisements. (Richards, Daugherty, & Logan, 2009) TV advertisements in the 1960s became more graphic and minimal. The industry became dominated by white males and women began to appear in mostly subservient roles. (Morales, 2012)

Problems and Issues of Legality in Advertisements

The advertiser is expected to follow a set of codes and rules that are laid out. The laws are divided into governing laws for the media, laws protecting the society and consumer, and industry-specific laws. The law that prohibited the advertisement for cigarettes and alcohol was passed under an industry-specific law in 2003 in India. To keep the advertisements in check a non-statutory body called the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) was founded. Advertising in India has 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)

Ethics

Ethics are defined as a person’s moral choice between things that are right and wrong. This choice largely falls back on one’s faith, beliefs, morals, and background. (Ashraf, et al., 2016) We see a number of advertisements for weight loss and hair loss etc. in digital and print mediums. Dishonest promotion of products without a medical background may result in harm to customers. (Singh & Sandhu, 2011) There are various types of unethical advertisements: surrogate advertising, unverified claims, stereotyping of women, comparative advertising, and using children in advertising.

- i) Surrogate advertising refers to advertising a product under the pretence of another product E. g. Liquor companies advertising packaged water.
- ii) Unverified claims are advertisements that promote a certain product under false promises E. g. Weight loss pills.
- iii) Stereotyping E.g. Stereotyping of women into housewives to sell products like detergents and cooking oils.
- iv) When one company promotes its product against another you get comparative advertising. E. g. Detergent advertisements
- v) Children are often used in advertisements to build an emotional connection. While it is relevant to use children to advertise baby products and products for children (eg, Toys, bath products etc) several other advertisements bring in children unnecessarily e. g. Detergent ads. (Munjal, 2016)

Exploring the Concept of Offensiveness in Advertisements

Through the AIDA model developed by Edward Kellogg Strong Jr. in 1925, advertising affects the buyer through four stages: attention, interest, desire, and action. The researcher draws reference to Clow & Baack⁴ who state in their book that there are various ways advertisers capture

⁴ Clow, K., & Baack, D. (2012). *Integrated Advertising, Promotion, and Marketing Communications, 6th Edition*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

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: fear, music, sex, rationality, humour, emotions, and scarcity. (Skorupa, 2014)

Waller stated that 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. In the study he goes on to quote Barnes and Dotson⁵ defined controversial advertisements as offensive products and offensive execution.

Referencing the study done by Phau and Pandergast⁶, Waller 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)

Research Methodology

This research includes a mixed method approach of both qualitative and quantitative data. *Data was collected using content analysis and a focus group discussion.*

Methods Adopted in the Research

Content analysis

The present research uses a qualitative approach involving content analysis and a focus group discussion. Through a content analysis, advertisements portraying controversial stances are carefully analysed. Each of the advertisements corresponded to sexism, racial discrimination, and body shaming and were chosen on the basis of a visual and textual analysis.

Focus Group Discussion

Following this, a focus group was made of a group of 12 individuals between the ages of 21 and 40. A focus group discussion is a qualitative approach used to acquire an in-depth knowledge of a social issue. This method is based on individual 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 when surrounded by peers, a person's opinion gets affected by factors such as culture, others' opinions, and information they obtain from their surroundings. For the discussion in this research, the participants were shown 4 controversial advertisements from each category and then asked a few questions. The discussion lasted for a period of 1.5 hours.

Theories

User Gratification Theory

Blumer and Mcquail's User gratification theory states that people use media for a number of reasons, whether it be to acquire knowledge, satisfy their emotional needs, gain credibility and ensure their status, as a mode of socialization, or to relieve their stress. Advertisers lean into this

⁵ Barnes, J., & Dotson, M. (2013). An Exploratory Investigation into the Nature of Offensive Television Advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 61-69.

⁶Phau, I., & Prendergast, G. (2001). Offensive Advertising: A View From Singapore. *Journal of Promotional Management*, 71-90.

theory in order to gain customer-interest in the brands or products they advertise. For example, Kinder Joy pays utmost attention to the toys they give with their chocolates to grab the attention of their young viewers, who, to gain the toy, pressure their parents into buying the chocolate.

Social Responsibility Theory.

The present research is also grounded in Siebert and Peterson's Social Responsibility Theory. According to this theory, the media must act responsibly with regard to the information that they place before an 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 have time and again been flagged for being extremely sexist and sexual. (Naresh & Muthuthodiyil, 2019)

Self-Construal Theory

Theorists Markus and Kitayama proposed this theory to explain 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 others. This kind of culture is mostly seen in Western countries like America. Indian culture is more of a collectivistic culture. 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 information in social contexts. (Chingching, Lee, & Liu-Thompkins, 2019)

Timeline

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

Objective of the study

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

Research Questions

The research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How is advertising deemed offensive?
2. What is the role of culture in people's understanding of offensive?
3. Why are advertisements deemed offensive?

Discussion and Analysis: *Content Analysis of Advertisements*

Fair and Lovely

This advertisement targets college women who face insecurity and discrimination due to their dark-skinned tones. The product, as well as the advertisement, promotes the idea that fairer skin will not only help boost your confidence but also grab everyone's attention. And here lies the problem. While trying to advertise the idea of confidence, they have indirectly stated that to be recognised or seen one must be fair, for in fairness lies beauty. The advertisement starts with an audition scene. Though the protagonist is good at what she auditions for, a fairer skin toned girl is given the lead performance while the protagonist is asked to narrate from the side-lines. She is then approached by a friend who asks her why she was given such an insignificant part even though

she is so talented. To this the protagonist shrugs in an accepting manner and states that it's only right due to her "dark" skin tone 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 protagonist narrating from the side-lines is radiating and the audience has their attention on her instead of the main performance.

The advertisement, thus, emphasizes the notion that to be recognised, one must be fair; only fair is beautiful. Even though Fair and Lovely attempted to sell their product from a different perspective other than the usual romantic scenario, they resulted in doing an injustice to every dark-skinned actress that has carved a niche for herself on the silver screen. The product in itself is controversial, but the fact that it has had an audience for years showcases the beauty standards that have been set by society and the world of media itself. Though the advertisement is offensive, the audience accepts it due to the situation they find themselves in. 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.

Wildstone Body Talc for men

Wildstone, known for its eroticized sexist deodorant advertisements, laid their foundation with this extremely sexist advertisement. The advertisement begins with a man getting ready to work, interrupted by a narration in an accent offensive to South Indians. The advertisement portrays men with feminine characteristics in a derogative 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 amid 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 he drops the woman talc and catches the Wildstone talc. The concluding scene shows the man denouncing feminine attributes and he concludes with the quote "Be a man use Wildstone talc" and he suddenly has a woman on his arm.

The advertisement raised several red flags. Comedic characters in advertisements and Bollywood movies are often portrayed with South Indian accents. This is offensive to South Indian culture, and the accents in these advertisements are also extremely inaccurate. This advertisement also portrays toxic masculinity. Boys as children are taught not to cry because it is "what a girl does", a notion that is completely unjust to both the genders. Crying is natural, but when attributed to a man it is regarded as a sign of weakness. This advertisement also stereotypes women, depicting them owning silk nightgowns and things that are pink and flowery.

The advertisement was intended to be funny, but it is sexist and discriminatory. This brings to the fore the concept of overt and covert sexism. To understand the terms better one must consider the change in the manner that sexist jokes are made today. Back in the early 2000s advertisements such as the Manforce Body Talc for men put forward sexist jokes in an unapologetic manner leading to the depiction of overt sexism. One must also realize that while this advertisement was extremely popular in the early 2000s, it would never be shown in the media today. The rise of feminism and the stand against discrimination has made advertisers cautious about putting forward extremely sexist ads like these, however, though the level of sexism in advertisements has dropped considerably, there are a number of advertisements that are still sexist. This has led to a depiction of covert sexism, where even though advertisers have become vigilant over the content they put before an audience there is still a lingering concept of sexism that is overlooked by the major

population. These advertisements range from cooking oil ads to deodorant ads that are all depicted with a subtle hint of sexism. (Naresh & Muthuthodiyil, 2019)

Manforce Jasmine Condoms

Manforce advertisements have been criticized extensively for their offensiveness. This specific, 2 minute 4 seconds advertisement revolves around a woman trying to seduce her husband who has just returned from work. The woman is dressed in a beautiful red saree and other ornaments. The decorated room surprises the husband. A soundtrack plays in the background while the actress starts to seduce her husband by taking off her jewellery and undressing. The camera focuses on each of her actions; the viewer sees repeated shots of her husband staring at her. The advertisement shows a majority of close-up shots of her body with several scenes focused upon her breasts. Towards the end of the advertisement, the frame becomes blurry and reveals the Manforce tag line “Get Naughty.”

This extremely sexualized ad objectifies women and portrays them as submissive. Though a number of women in society are independent, working individuals, the advertisement shows the man returning home from work while the woman has spent most of her time decorating the room and herself for his pleasure; the woman’s sole purpose is to be an object of pleasure for her husband. It is also important to note that the actress chosen for this role was well-known for her early pornographic career.

This particular advertisement received a lot of backlash especially in Goa where people demanded that the government ban posters of the product and stop airing it on screen “to save the embarrassment of women and protect their dignity”. Condoms are one of the most popular forms of birth control, but due to advertisements like these, the government has restricted the airing of condom advertisements to between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. Condom advertisements portray the fun aspect of sex and the condom as a pleasure enhancer rather than a contraceptive. Various advertisements in the past have helped spread this awareness, however as competition between condom brands grow, the advertisements focus more on eroticism and sexual intimacy.

Dollar Club Innerwear

Several advertisers hire actors to create a lasting impression of the brand. Popular Indian actor Akshay Kumar has been the iconic face of this brand for quite a while. As a well-known “action hero”, most of his advertisements contain some sort of action sequence. The advertisement begins with mask-wearing robbers violently entering a bank, taking hostages and money. While a robber is threatening an employee, he feels the stick of a supposedly blind man (Akshay Kumar) asking for directions to a bus stop. The robber roughly pushes the lead character, exposing his innerwear, to which the actor replies with “big mistake” and starts to beat the group of robbers. The scene ends with the robbers captured and the actor exiting while he notices a woman looking desirably at him. 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 this advertisement. The unnecessary use of violence for an advertisement that is trying to sell innerwear is one of the primary things to note. Not only does it create an idea that the innerwear brings along heroism, but it also portrays something such as bank robbery by armed convicts in a light-hearted manner. The ending scene showcasing the actor speaking in a rude and abject manner to a woman depicts Indian culture in a bad light. The advertisement also promotes sexism as the actor who is walking around with his

innerwear on full display has a problem with a woman's button being open. The actor uses a disrespectful tone while speaking to the woman.

Violence in advertisements have what advertisers call a "shock appeal" which helps create a lasting impression of the advertisement and product in the viewers' mind (Tim Jones, 2013). Violent advertisements like these, whose brand ambassadors are renowned actors with a large young fan base can give these fans the idea that resorting to violence is heroic. According to psychologist Bandura "children are greatly influenced by media- they learn by observing, imitating and adopting behaviours." Because of this, violent advertisements could lead impressionable minds to develop aggressive behaviour.

Analysis of the Focus Group Discussion

Fair and Lovely

The participants who watched the advertisements largely had nostalgic impressions, smiling and stating that they remembered the advertisement. Some participants stated the advertisement was ignorant and exaggerated. When questioned in regard to the offensiveness of the advertisement, the participants replies were contradictory. They believed that the advertisement was not offensive, but they raised questions about society, and how beauty standards have led to the creation of this type of product. Two of the participants recounted that more than 10 years ago, Fair and Lovely was used by every girl they knew. They said that every woman carried a tube of Fair and Lovely. Three of the participants spoke about how the brand targets 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 beautiful and confident a woman needs to be fair.

When it comes to offensiveness, one of the participants from the older age margin recalled the Fair and Lovely advertisements from the late 1990s and early 2000s. She believed that the advertisements were much more offensive, saying "They showed this really dark woman, to a point where you could see that they painted her black and after using Fair and Lovely she would become fair by 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 changing mindsets in society, no one will accept advertisements like this at face value anymore.

Two of the participants believed that the idea of fair and beautiful has existed for centuries, where one of the participants attributed this belief to colonisation. Another participant spoke about how, for centuries, statues of gods and goddesses have always been romanticised and portrayed as beautiful.

The participants also believed that the advertisement was not offensive but creative in its own way. "How else is one supposed to advertise for such a product?" was one person's reaction to the advertisement. Another participant believed that Fair and Lovely took quite a different path for this particular advertisement, diverging from the normal romantic setting and focused 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 people tend to believe what they see on television and in advertisements, so ads like these can have a great impact on the minds of the younger generation who start to differentiate people based on skin tone.

Wildstone Body Talc for Men

The participants first began laughing at this advertisement, but as it continued a number of them shifted about in their seats while a few voiced how offensive and exaggerated the advertisement was. A number of them exchanged glances, while a few raised their eyebrows and looked sceptically at the advertisement. When asked about the offensiveness of the advertisement all participants were 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 that it was clearly mocking feminism. Another participant added to that comment, stating that the advertisement was so offensive that it was repulsive to watch. She believed that it completely negated everyone's fight for equality and it had an unnecessary sexual undertone to it. Adding to these two opinions, one of the participants claimed that it is advertisements like these that disrupt society. He along with another participant believed that advertisements like these appeal to only a specific population in our country and cannot be impressionable for anyone else.

Another participant criticized the accent used in the running background narration. She felt that the accent was extremely 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 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 that she completely lost track of what the advertisement was about midway because it was such an outlandish and off-topic way to promote a talcum powder. One of the previous participants said that the advertisement marketed toxic masculinity rather than the powder.

With the economy and the marketing world in mind, one of the participants believed that in the same way brands like Fair and Lovely appeal to consumers, this brand tried to do the same. He did not find it offensive because when this advertisement came out it was successful, and the company is only looking for a way to increase its sales. Another participant agreed with him and said that advertisements like these are purposely made this way to give society something to talk about. One of the other participants agreed with her and stated that advertisements 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 advertisement today shows how society has changed in its mind-set. 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.

Manforce Jasmine Flavour Condoms

While the advertisement played, the participants seemed uncomfortable and occasionally asked how long the advertisement was. When asked about the offensiveness of the advertisement, one of the participants said that she did not find it offensive but said that it was a good thing that Manforce puts its brand name in the corner of the advertisement so that parents can change the channel if children are present. 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 advertisement gave unnecessary attention to detail such as jewellery to increase the duration of the advertisement,

while one participant stated that, even though the advertisement was this long, it was not broadcasted completely. Only snippets are shown on television.

This discussion showcased the differences 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; they stated that condom use is well understood in the country, so further explanation is unnecessary. This opinion was greatly opposed by a number of the female participants; one female participant recounted an incident that shed light on how poor sex education in India is, and how people from rural areas especially do not know how to properly use contraceptive methods. One of the other male participants stated that there used to be advertisements about the existence of condoms, but there were never any that showed how or when they should be used. Hence advertisements like this help give viewers 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, 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 such as this, and constantly having the brand's name on the screen, helps the consumer remember the brand better. He added that even though condoms are widely available it's still uncomfortable for a man to go and purchase one at a crowded pharmacy. So to shorten 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 elders they try to understand what they are seeing through searching the internet, leading them to inappropriate sites. Another participant believed that condom ads do not always have to be sexual but can have a bit of humour in them too; this is also a way an advertisement can be remembered. She continued to add that advertisements like these establish wrong expectations in 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 or STD prevention.

The other point a number of female participants brought up is that the advertisement shows the woman trying to do her best to seduce her husband, while the man simply returns home from work to his wife. They also stated that an advertisement where the woman is seducing her husband would be less controversial if it was advertising a female condom. To this point, one of the participants pointed out the fact that these advertisements 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 worrying with no man in sight. This raises a number of questions.

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

Dollar Club Innerwear

This particular advertisement received varied reactions. Participants were both shocked and indifferent. They made comments on how unnecessary the advertisement was, and expressed disgust and strong disapproval of its ending. The participants were very eager to share their opinions about this advertisement. One of the participants stated that the advertisement was offensive due to its use of violence and especially due to the unnecessary final remark. Another participant added that the remark was highly degrading to the woman it was spoken to. The first participant continued, stating that media is extremely powerful and can create a lasting impact on a viewer's mind. Younger generations tend to imitate their favorite stars, so this sort of advertisement could be dangerous. To support this point, another participant recounted how children have dressed up as their favorite superheroes and performed dangerous stunts.

Another participant felt the advertisement was offensive because of how graphic it was. She added that violence is common in children's programs today, whether it be video games or cartoons. Thus, having advertisements like these is contributing to this issue. She also felt that the use of violence to sell an inner garment was unnecessary. One of the participants believed that this advertisement shows conning and beating up people as humorous and acceptable. A few of the participants believed that the advertisement 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 advertisements could have had a humorous stance to it and depicted why men should use the innerwear through a comedic lense.

In reference to the violence, one of the participants said that they 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". Another participant agreed with this opinion and stated that big brands that can afford actors like him do not care about promoting the product itself. There have been smaller brands that hired TV soap actors to advertise their innerwear, but these proved more comedic. The bigger the brand, the less they care about how much sense the advertisement makes, as long as it sells the product. To this, another participant said that the advertisement defeats its purpose to sell its inner garment because if you remove the actor nothing makes sense. Also, they stated, no one wears a 'banyan' (innerwear) with a jacket and goes to the bank. Everything about this advertisement was irrational.

All of the participants found the end scene, where the actor passes a remark to a woman, extremely offensive. One of the participants said that the advertisement is very sexist. 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 the statement; one participant stated that is completely absurd for the actor to have a problem with a woman's button being open while he is roaming around with his innerwear on display. Another participant did not take issue with the scene, and said, 'the button open' refers to an old-time notion where movies used to show a button popping when someone is aroused. He said that the way it was depicted was the only sensible way to portray it. To this, another participant clarified that he did not have a 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 advertisement to portray women as sexual objects. She stated that the tone used by the actor was highly degrading. 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 was aware of the connotations of what he said, so he should be held

responsible. The majority of the participants found the advertisement offensive because of this 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 at all.

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 were considered normal and humorous in the past were found to be offensive today. Watching advertisements through a critical lens has led people to understand the power of the media, and so they have stopped accepting the content they see at face value. They have become more aware of social issues such as sexism and racial discrimination and have started to notice these in the advertisements they watch. Feminism has grown in popularity; the present generation often applies feminist concepts to the media they watch. Controversial products have begun to create fewer offensive advertisements compared to uncontroversial products like talc and innerwear. Through the analysis of advertising content one can see that over time, due to consumers donning a critical lens, 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 both viewer and advertiser's cultural background in the production and consumption of advertisements. Not every advertisement was found offensive by viewers; there was a good amount of disagreement between participants. Taking the condom advertisement for example: there was a significant difference in how male and female participants viewed the advertisement. This goes to show that other than a person's cultural background, variables such as age and gender also play a vital role.

Limitations

The aim of this study was to analyse variations in personal offense to controversial advertisements. The conclusion was found 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 residing in a common geographical area. Secondly, the advertisements were deeply rooted in Indian advertising; further research on this subject would benefit from taking other global perspectives into consideration.

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