

Shock Advertising and its Impact on the Younger Generation

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Abstract—Shock advertising as a form of communication has been used by several marketers over the years. The main benefit of Shock Advertising is that it instantly grasps the viewers' attention by shocking or surprising them. United Colors of Benetton was one of the pioneers of shock advertising on a global level and since then many organizations have followed suit. As a concept, shock advertising has not been used or studied in a widespread way in India owing to a more conservative mindset and multiple sensitivities of different communities. Keeping this in mind, this paper tries to understand the effectiveness and perception of shock advertising in Bangalore with a special focus on the youth. The data for this research was collected by means of survey of 245 respondents. Using the data, this paper aims to analyse in what manner the perception towards shock advertising changes with gender, use of sexual appeals and the type of product or service advertised.

Keywords: Shock, advertising, perception

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 About shock advertisements

Shock advertising is that kind of advertising which is meant to startle audiences by violating norms and portraying what is usually not portrayed. Such advertisements use varying shock appeals such as guilt, shame, fear, disgust or other negative emotions to portray a message. It is meant to shock the audience and immediately attract their attention to the message at hand. The subject matter of these advertisements usually prompts controversy by the use of profanity, racist, nudity and sexual appeals. Shock advertisements were first introduced by United Colors of Benetton and since then they have set the platform for many other brands to follow suit. Oliviero Toscani was the mind behind the shock advertisements of Benetton who believed that there aren't any shocking images but the reality is itself shocking.

Perception of shock advertisements also vary from country to country depending on the culture. For instance what is considered acceptable in USA may be considered offensive in India. In conservative cultures especially those such as Asian societies are easily offended, therefore marketers need to pay close attention to what message they are portraying and where.

Shock advertising is like a two edged sword because it can work in the benefit of a brand as well as affect it negatively. Many have claimed that shock advertisements have resulted in increased brand recall and higher sales while others have stated that it caused consumers to switch to other brands because they were disturbed by the images shown.

1.2 Impact of Shock on the audience

The most important benefit of shock advertisements is the fact that it enhances brand recall. When people look at a shock advertisement they are immediately caught off guard and their attention is diverted to the advertisement. Shock advertising can have a significant impact on the consumer's mind if the message is appropriate and suits the target audience. For this very reason it is essential that marketers conduct proper research before using shock appeals because if the message is not clearly portrayed then it can be detrimental to the brand/product/company advertised. A negative outcome of shock advertising lately has been that advertisers have been using it so repeatedly that it is losing its impact. For instance anti-smoking advertisements are losing effect because they have been portraying the exact same message every single time. To remain relevant it is highly essential for advertisers to innovate and touch the right nerve to have the maximum impact and indeed shock the audience.

Shock advertising is therefore a risky zone to enter unless advertisers are absolutely clear about what they want to portray and have analysed and understood their target audience with respect to their age, gender and cultural context because all of this adds up to the overall success or failure of the shock advertisement.

1.3 India and Shock Advertising

Advertisers using shock advertising campaigns try to portray the unthinkable to create strong emotions in the minds of people. Not all marketers choose this path because it is one with a lot of risks and unless they are willing to face controversies they shouldn't try it. In India especially only a handful of marketers have even tried to use shock advertising such as Tuff shoes and their campaign with Milind Soman.

One of the most prominent brands that has braved the path of shock advertising in India has been 'Fastrack'. From the very beginning they have chosen to be different and not follow norms. They are a youth focussed brand and believe that Gen Y is ready to accept shock appeals and are not conservative. Every campaign of theirs has been controversial, such as 'Move On', 'Sorry for what', and 'Come out of the Closet'. They were even bold enough to portray homosexuality in one of their Television advertisements which was unthinkable in a country like India where homosexuality is illegal. Fastrack never wanted to do anything ordinary which can clearly be seen through their advertising campaigns. Following their lead lately another brand by the name 'Anouk' has taken the step forward to show bold advertising campaigns breaking norms and creating controversies. It is high time for India to have more liberal ideologies and brands such as Fastrack and Anouk are indeed setting the stage for this.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Shock advertisements can at times be detrimental to the brand that is being advertised. Many people even take offense after seeing such advertisements. A research was conducted by surveying 150 students, ages ranging from 18 to 40. The main agenda of this research was to understand why people considered shock advertisements offensive. The research showed that some of the key factors that were offensive in these advertisements were that such ads showed a racist image, sexist image, unnecessary stereotyping of people, violence, and indecent language. Overall, this study has showed that although many considered such elements offensive they perceived it as acceptable for some products/cause/service while unacceptable for other products. [13]

Ethics forms an element of advertising because what is displayed in the visuals can impact society because it is made available to large audiences. This is the primary reason why many raise an eyebrow to provocative or shock elements included in advertisements. A study was conducted on a small sample in Australia to find out the participant's opinions regarding acceptability of the use of distressing images and shock tactics in commercials as well as social media advertisements. The general opinion was that of disgust and belief that such elements must only be used when absolutely fitting else it would negatively affect the brand image. It is also important to note that the research found that there was a rising need to establish relevant bodies to look over the content of such advertisements before their release. This is of utmost importance and must be looked into by all advertisers so that they are ethical even when incorporating shock tactics to broadcast a loud and clear image. [5]

Shock advertising was first used by Benetton in the latter half of 1980s. Since then the trend has caught up among many brands and advertisers because they have realised the usefulness of it. A research was conducted on around 200

students in some Canadian universities to analyse impact of provocative appeals in advertisements. The research was based on initial empirical investigations to prove that provocation works as an effective strategy. The research was conducted in three stages; first by understanding the history of shock advertising, second to identify elements of shock advertising and third to review several articles on the topic. The main agenda of the article was to differentiate provocative appeals from sexual appeals because the latter is only a part of provocation. The research was quite informative but could have been more in depth if primary data had been collected. [12]

Using shock appeals is said to increase the impact of advertisements. For this very reason many advertisers use sexual appeals in their advertisers be it cause based or consumer goods. The perception of these images is said to vary between men and women while some say the opinions are the same. A research was conducted to understand the difference in reaction between men and women towards sexual images in advertisements. The study conducted by means of experiments on a group of students. The hypotheses for the study was said to be that women are more negative towards sexual images. The results however showed that perception of the images simply depends on personal attitudes towards certain elements, therefore based on affective behaviour a person may or may not perceive sexual images irrespective of their gender. This is useful for marketers because it helps them understand that they need to understand their target market on the basis of attitude and behaviour to understand what shock elements will work. [8]

Advertisements based on fear, shock and guilt are commonly used in social marketing to build a hype. Most people consider such advertisements as unethical and not fit to be viewed. Many complaints have also been filed against different campaigns due to their unethicity. With reference to this a study was conducted to analyse the ethical aspect of shock advertisements. It was observed that most complaints were based on use of excessive violence, racial discrimination, portrayal of nudity and profanity used. Due to these elements many were offended which negatively impacted the brands that used such elements in their advertisements. It was observed that people rarely complained about shock elements in cause-related advertising because they found it acceptable in those cases. An important conclusion of this study was that people are very sensitive to ethical conduct portrayed in advertisements and therefore marketers must carefully make note of whether or not they are following the prescribed ethical code. (Jones & Hall, 2006)

Understanding the relationship between shock advertising and its impact on consumer's mind is very important to recognize what kinds of advertisements are appealing to audiences. Özlem Sandıkcı conducted a research by understanding various paradoxes to justify the point that the impact of shock advertising entirely depends on the social background of the

consumer viewing the advertisement. The author inferred that more so than not people consider the negative impact of shock advertising. In my opinion a primary research should have been conducted on the subject instead of concluding from other similar articles in order to give a clearer picture of the relation between shock ads and people's beliefs. [7]

Many advertisements of various brands at times add an element of shock to it in order to retaliate to a competitor's advertising campaign. Advertisers believe that the shock element makes it easier to draw the attention of the target audience because the advertisement is more edgy. A research was conducted to study the same in Netherlands by comparing major consumer product categories and their advertising campaigns against their competitors. It was observed that most often the retaliation was against competitors pricing strategy and to come across as more viable advertisers chose to incorporate an element of shock. A limitation to this study was that only the top three brands in each category were studied whilst the smaller brands could have also been studied to give the research a well-rounded approach and given more substantial responses. [11]

The goal of every advertiser is to make a campaign that has a long lasting impact on the minds of consumers. To understand what elements have such an impact on consumers a research was conducted to study all the history relevant to shock advertising. Through the research it was identified that advertising has three main goals- social, communicative and economic goals. The research identified that to enhance the appeal of advertisements marketers can use different elements involving humour, fear, sex, emotions etc. The paper further elaborates the meaning of shock advertising to understand whether it disgusts, irritates or actually grabs audience attention and increase recall. [10]

Visual elements play a crucial role in cause related advertising. Advertisers try to portray loud messages to make a dramatic impact. Such appeals usually work in advertisements for anti-smoking campaigns, AIDS awareness, road safety campaigns and the likes. A research was conducted in India by studying twelve participants through focus group discussions to understand their reactions towards certain social campaign advertisements. The key areas studied were audience response, attention, congruence and perception towards cause based advertising. The advertisements shown seemed to have the desired impact on the participants because they became more aware about the message portrayed in the print advertisements. The study concluded that the visual appeal was effective in sending out a loud and clear message to consumers. The major limitation of this study was that a very small sample was taken which means that the conclusion cannot be generalised. [9]

2.2 Research gap

Various articles have been written about shock advertising over the years and each article is enlightening in its own way.

Most articles have studied the various elements of shock advertising and which elements are said to have the most impact. In all the studies conducted it was found that there is a dearth in research with respect to India and the Indian perception of shock advertising. This is an important concept to be studied especially when India is an emerging country. The fact that a few companies like Fastrack are gaining a strong foothold in the shock advertising world through their different campaigns is reason enough to study how effective it is in the country. Also, India being a more conservative society bound by customs and traditions makes it even more fascinating to conduct a research on shock advertising that spreads the unconventional message. Shock advertising will indeed make a mark in the Indian context too as and when the country becomes more liberal in their ideologies. Therefore in the current scenario it is highly beneficial to conduct a research based on shock advertising in order to understand the opinion of Indians with respect to the citizens of Bangalore and especially distinguish the views of men and women as well as to try and understand whether shock advertisements used in cause related marketing is effective or not.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Objectives:

- To analyse the influence of shock advertisements on the minds of Indian consumers
- To study the effectiveness of shock advertising
- To find out gender role and perception towards shock advertisements

3.2 Scope of the study:

The scope of the study is to understand how effective shock advertising is in the Indian context. A concept like shock advertising which is still in the developing stages in India requires in depth research to find out in what manner it can be implemented such that it is considered acceptable by the target audience. This research will also help in understanding whether gender has a role to play in the perception of such advertisements or not, and whether results obtained through this research will vary drastically from the various studies conducted in different parts of the world.

3.3 Hypothesis:

H₁: Sexual images attract attention in advertisements because it is considered shocking

H₂: Shock advertisements are perceived as less provocative by men than by women

3.4 Population study:

A sample of 245 persons was collected from different parts of Bangalore between the age group of 18-60, with more focus on the youth.

3.4 Method of data collection

The data was collected from primary sources by sending out questionnaires online. The questionnaire was created using the Qualtrics platform. The questionnaire has questions relevant to shock advertising including several pages for the recipients to get a better understanding of shock advertisements. The variables used in the survey were based on variables used by David. S Waller to conduct a similar study.

3.5 Limitation:

The limitations of the study were as follows:

- To identify an appropriate sample to target and choose as the population for the study.
- Owing to the fact that shock advertisements are not easily accepted in society it was slightly difficult to persuade people to participate in the survey
- To identify appropriate variables for the study specific to the objectives
- Lack of resources to conduct a more in depth research among a larger population size

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The research is aimed at studying various elements relevant to the area of shock advertising including awareness of shock advertising, opinions regarding various shock advertisements, views about sexual appeals in shock advertisements and whether shock elements are more acceptable in cause related advertising when compared to regular consumer products or not.

Sexual images do not attract attention in advertisements because it is considered shocking

H₁- Sexual images attract attention in advertisements because it is considered shocking .

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Perce nt	N	Perce nt	N	Perce nt
Q9_a_Feel_AdIsShocking Q11_SexualImages_Attract Attention	24 5	99.6 %	1	0.4%	24 6	100.0 %

Figure 1: Case processing summary Hypothesis

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	38.763 ^a	16	.001
Likelihood Ratio	42.427	16	.000

a. 10 cells (40.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.09. Table 2.Chi square Hypothesis 1

Symmetric Measures

	Value	Approx. Sig.
Phi Nominal by Nominal Cramer's V	.398	.001
	.199	.001
N of Valid Cases	245	

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.
b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Table 3 Symmetric measures Hypothesis 1

To test the hypothesis Chi square, Cramer's V and cross tabulation were used. The questions used to prove this were- whether sexual images attract attention in advertisements and whether respondents consider a sexual image as shocking. The results show that there is a relation because p value of Pearson Chi Square is 0.001 which is significant at confidence interval of 95%. The Cramer's V value of 0.199 also shows moderate level of association. This clearly proves the alternate hypothesis that sexual images attract attention in advertisements because it is considered shocking. This means sexual images can be used in advertisements to capture attention but care must be taken that the image doesn't make a negative impact and a clear message is portrayed.

5. FINDINGS

The findings of this research are as follows:

- Out of the 245 respondents 143 of them were male and 102 were female
- 46% of the respondents were between the age group of 18-24
- 73% of the respondents were unaware of the concept of shock advertising
- 33% of the respondents said that they neither agree nor disagree with the fact that shock advertisements are ethical and acceptable to society
- Most of the respondents said that it took them a significant amount of effort to associate the product with a particular shock advertisement that was shown
- The respondents were of the opinion that the headline and the product being shown in a shock advertisement are most important to draw a viewer's attention
- There was a mixed opinion regarding acceptability of nudity shown in images
- When shown a partially nude picture of a woman in a shock advertisement most respondents were of the opinion that it was definitely shocking but they didn't really consider it obscene or disgusting

- Most respondents were of the opinion that in a shock advertisement it is most difficult to identify what exactly is being advertised
- 43% of the respondents agreed to the fact that sexual images result in gaining more attention of the viewers
- 54% of the respondents were of the view that violence being shown in cause related advertisements are acceptable as long as it is suitable to the cause
- Most of the respondents were of the opinion that the more shock advertisements they see the less shocking it becomes and they turn indifferent towards them

6. CONCLUSION

Advertisements have always been an essential form for businesses and organizations to communicate with the public regarding various products, services, issues and causes. Shock advertisements have especially been intriguing because it startles the audience and makes them immediately notice what is being advertised. Shock advertisements use a wide range of appeals to achieve this such as fear, disgust, and sexual appeals .etc.

This paper attempts to understand the perception of shock advertisements with respect to a small population from Bangalore. The results of the survey conducted show that very few people are even aware of the concept of shock advertising even though they may have seen such advertisements in the past. It was also observed that viewers generally feel that when brands use shock advertisements they focus so much on the shock appeal that the idea of the product that is being advertised is lost. Unlike popular belief that India being a conservative society most respondents were actually open about the idea of using shock appeals and believed that it attracted their attention. In terms of shock advertisements used for cause-related issues the respondents were of the opinion that it is acceptable to use shock appeals if it was relevant to the cause.

With these findings it can be concluded that India too at least with respect to Bangalore is open to the idea of seeing the unobvious or such things as shock appeals in advertisements. Advertisers need to take note of this and work towards conducting more such research and then developing shock advertisements since they have such a high impact factor.

Scope for further study:

With the rising changes in the advertising world and concepts like shock advertising on the rise, there is a definite need to do more research about shock advertising. With respect to India especially where research regarding shock advertising has been so minimal it is more important that researchers pay more attention to this concept. There is definitely a need to understand how audiences perceive shock advertisements and whether they consider it acceptable and with respect to what

kind of products and services. Only with more research will advertisers be able to understand whether or not to use shock appeals and how it will impact with brand recall. The area of shock advertising is very interesting to understand whether people are ready to face reality and see images as it is or they still prefer seeing painted images of reality. Scope for study in this area is limitless and important for marketers to realise the usefulness of shock appeals and the impact it has on the consumer.

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