

Ethical Contents of Lifestyle Advertising: The Indian Perspective

*M. K. Padhy

ABSTRACT

Research about unethical advertising has been conducted mainly in western countries. Little is known about consumer's perceptions of unethical lifestyle advertising in an Indian context, especially offensive advertising on the web. This study conducted in Berhampur, Orissa, aims at identifying the types of web advertising considered unethical and its possible effects on consumer's will and identification of the offensive products and services advertised on the web. It was found that the consumers were most sensitive to advertisements that contained nudity or had a sexist content. Perceptions of offensiveness and effects on purchasing behaviour were clearly related to demographic variables such as age, educational status and gender. However, interviewees were least tolerant of unethical advertisements on the web.

INTRODUCTION:

In order to draw audience attention to a product or service advertisement, there has been an increased use of controversial advertising in recent years (Matthews 1997). The retention value of distinctive advertising may be large for a target audience, but the effect may be positive or negative. There have been many cases where the society have felt so offended by the advertisements that the advertisers either withdraw the advertisement or diluted or altered the offending content. In some cases negative responses from the readers and viewers forced the media to stop accepting the advertising; sometimes people boycotted the company and its products (Tilles 1998). For example Tuffs shoe advertisement by Milind Suman & Madhu Saphre was severely protested by the people and finally its advertisement was banned. A Denim after shave lotion advertisement presented by a film icon alongwith a celebrity model is protested by the 'Mahila Jagaran Manch' and finally ceased.

Western research on offensive lifestyle advertising is extensive with the foundation work

done by Aaker, 1998 and Barnes and Dotson 2000. But in the Indian context, research in this is limited and research relating specifically to offensive advertising on the web is non-existent. Using the random sample survey methods this study examines what products/services and appeals consumers feel unethical in web advertising, the consumers' tolerance of offensive web advertising relative to other media and how unethical web advertising affects the buying behaviour of the consumers.

UNETHICAL LIFE STYLE APPEALS: THE MANNER OF ADVERTISING

If an advertisement is found to be offensive, it does not just depend on the product and for the service itself but also on the type of appeal and the manner of presentation. Objections include use of sex or fear & silliness of presentation (Greyser 1992). Such emotions can lead to irritation. Sexuality in lifestyle advertising creates high attention value but sometimes excessively offensive advertisement will generate a physiological arousal response and corresponding negative cognition especially towards those advertisements that adopt sexual appeals or nudity.

POTENTIAL EFFECTS ON PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR:

Experiencing offensive lifestyle advertisements may negatively affect consumers buying decision. Ford (2002) hypothesized a model to examine female response to portrayal of offensive sex roles in advertising. The model suggested that potentially offensive advertisements damage company image and adversely affect the purchase intention of the consumer. Once the customer feels uneasy or has a negative impression of the advertisement, he or she might not buy the products by associating the advertisements and the product of the company.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

This research entreats as to explore how Indian consumers perceive potentially offensive advertising on the web and how for it affects their purchase decision. Specifically this research paper addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the products and services that consumers find offensive in lifestyle advertising?
2. What are the lifestyle appeals consumers feel are offensive in web advertising?
3. What is the degree of tolerance to offensive web advertisements compared with offensive advertisements in traditional media (Television, Radio, Magazines & News papers etc.)
4. What are the perceived effects of offensive lifestyle advertising on purchase intention?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Sampling Technique:

The web users in Berhampur city constituted the universe of the study and a representative sample of 300 respondents were selected by generating random numbers on computer. The respondents were interviewed on the basis of a questionnaire. Out of 300 selected persons

only 252 could be interviewed. There were 130 males and 122 females divided among three different age groups (16-29, 30-40 and over 40) and two educational groups (tertiary and non-tertiary). To reach a higher percentage of internet users the interviewers were intercepted near cyber cafes in Berhampur. All interviewers were local citizens.

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGNS:

The questionnaire contained four sections. The first section comprised of a list of potentially offensive lifestyle products advertised on the web. The second section of the questionnaire suggested seven reasons for an advertisement to be considered offensive on the web. In the third section ten kinds of media including the web were listed to determine the different levels of tolerance of offensive advertisements in different media. The fourth section comprised of four statements concerning the consequences of offensive web advertising on consumer buying intentions. Interviewers were asked to indicate their degree of personal offence on a six-point likert scale where 1=not at all offensive and 6=extremely offensive. Mean values are calculated on the basis of arithmetic mean and standard deviation for more accuracy and proper distinction.

THE IMPACT OF UNETHICAL WEB ADVERTISING ON PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR:

Interviewees were asked to indicate how unethical web advertising might affect their purchase intentions. According to first statements: when two companies offer the same products with similar benefits, I will not buy from the one using an advertisement via the web which I find offensive. The results show the over all mean value of this statements is higher (mean =4.29) than the other statements.

For the second statements: If a new product is introduced with advertisement via the web that I find offensive, I might not make a purchase even if it offers me benefits which I find attractive Interviewees were quite unlikely (mean=3.90) to

buy the products with offensive advertisement on the web.

For the third statement: If the products or services that I use adopt an advertising campaign

via the web which I find offensive, I will discontinue using it. Interviewees were somewhat likely (mean=3.73) to refuse the usage of products/services using offensive web advertising.

TABLE - 1

POTENTIALLY OFFENSIVE PRODUCTS/SERVICES IN WEB ADVERTISING

Products/Services	Total	Gender		Education		Age Group		
		Male	Female	Tertiary	Non-Tertiary	16-91	30-40	Over 40
	N=252	N=130	N=122	N=120	N=132	N=90	N=82	N=80
Chat-line services	3.45	3.28	3.61	3.53	3.37	3.40	3.53	3.14
Sexual disease prevention	3.11	3.10	3.13	3.38	2.87	3.18	2.98	3.19
Dating services	3.10	3.02	3.18	3.11	3.10	3.00	3.28	3.03
Male undergarments	3.01	2.88	3.15	3.02	3.01	2.96	2.99	3.09
Alcoholic drinks	2.93	2.73	3.13	2.87	2.98	2.86	2.86	3.06
Hair replacement products	2.97	2.93	3.02	3.05	2.90	3.03	2.91	2.98
Feminine contraceptives	3.25	3.23	3.27	3.32	3.18	3.30	3.13	3.31
Feminine undergarments	3.14	3.11	3.18	3.34	3.29	3.38	3.30	3.28
Feminine hygiene products	3.32	3.30	3.34	3.40	3.25	3.36	3.33	3.28
Condoms	3.32	3.45	3.18	3.34	3.29	3.38	3.30	3.28
Gambling	3.62	3.60	3.64	3.67	3.58	3.49	3.45	3.93
Pharmaceuticals	2.99	2.98	3.00	3.04	2.95	3.06	2.96	3.20
Weight loss products	3.08	2.96	3.19	3.03	3.12	3.06	2.96	3.20
Funeral services	3.19	3.28	3.10	3.25	3.13	3.15	2.86	3.56

Notes: Significant at PC 0.05, 1 = not unethical and 6 = extremely unethical

Source: Padhy, M. K., Ph.D. Thesis, 2005.

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

The most offensive products/services to be advertised on the web was gambling and the least offensive products/services was alcohol. The most offensive web advertising appeal is the one that used nudity. The least offensive web advertising appeal

is one using sexual connotations. Advertisers should try to downplay those offensive elements including 'sexist themes', nudity and indecent language if they do not want to offend the public. Comparing the overall offensiveness were offended more by appeal than by the product or service itself. With respect to

gender, gambling is the most offensive product/service to be advertised for both males and females. Females feel more offended by web advertising using a 'sexist theme' or 'nudity'. Generally in terms of educational status, interviewees with a tertiary level education are more offended by potentially offensive products/services and appeals than interviewees without a tertiary level education.

Elder people (+40 yrs) group is more offended by both the matter and manner of web advertising than the other two groups. Demographic groups aside, generally interviewees are critical of offensive web advertising. But interviewees are more likely to accept offensive advertising if it is in men's or women's magazines. This may be because these media are more targeted and therefore their content is more suited to their audience.

Looking at the effect of offensive advertising on purchase intention the over-40 age groups showed a higher likelihood of boycotting a company using offensive advertising on the web than the other age groups. In addition, if compared to the other two groups, the interviewees aged 40 or above held a relatively conservative view about buying products with offensive advertising on the web and since the switching cost is low in terms of information searching, advertisers whose competitors offer close substitutes should minimize the adoption of offensive advertising on the web and since whose competitors offer close substitutes should minimize the adoption of offensive advertising on the web in order to avoid offending customers who might look elsewhere for a similar product.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Conventional wisdom in the advertising industry holds that a certain amount of irritation or so-called creativity enhances the effectiveness of advertising. However this study has shown that for certain demographic groups offensive advertising on the web may be negatively perceived to the extent

that it adversely affects their purchase behaviour. More crucially, this study has shown that consumers are least tolerant of offensive advertising on the web as compared to other media.

The above conclusions, however should be tempered by the recognition of two limitations in this research. First, the small sample may affect the generalisability of the results. Second, this study relates to the examination of the offensive advertising on the web which is only one part of the Internet. Other components of the Internet may look at developing and testing a reliable and valid scale for measuring consumer perceptions of offensive advertising on the internet and elsewhere.

Limitations aside, this study provides valuable information for advertisers to know what products and appeals cause offensive advertising on the web, the sensitivity of consumers to offensive web advertising relating to offensive advertising in other media and how the offensiveness of the advertising on the web affects customers purchase behaviour.

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