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## Issues of Morality in Indian Television Advertisements

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the ethical and moral issues involved in modern day TV advertising. The paper begins with a general overview of why businesses need to be morally and socially responsible and how business houses can incorporate the people element in all its policies and procedures. The paper takes a complete tour starting from a general overview of marketing mix, goes through the concept of promotion in organizations and finally reaches to television advertising and the ethical issues involved therein.

**Key Words:** Advertisement, Gender bias, Morality, Surrogate, Television

### Introduction

Advertising is one of the most important communication tools that help a firm to motivate and persuade the target customers to buy its products. Advertising simply means a paid form of non-personal communication that a company sends across to customers through various channels like print and electronic. The main objective of advertising is to create or increase demand for the company's product/service. Increased demand automatically attracts more customers which means higher sales and hence higher profits for the company, which is the life blood for the survival of any organization (profit making organization).

There seems to be a direct relationship between the advertising dollars used and the dollars earned as profit (except for failed advertisements which may result in decrease in sales and profits for the firm). The sad reality about profit dollars is that the more you have, the more you want. Money is said to be an exception to the law of diminishing marginal utility. And because of this reason sometimes some companies tend to indulge in some unethical practices like deliberate misrepresentations and purposeful miscommunications. Such malpractices may generate profits for the company for some time but it jeopardizes the fundamental element that binds the customers with

a company i.e., the trust. As Emily Newman says in her article *Effects of unethical Behavior on Business* " Among the strongest pillars of any business relationship now, is trust, and customers prefer doing business with companies that have a reputation for being honest and transparent in their dealings. Research has shown that the effects of unethical behavior on business are many and detrimental to a company and one incident that contradicts a customer's belief in the company is often enough to destroy their trust. *"Trust takes years to build, seconds to break, and forever to repair."*-

## Objectives

1. To understand the importance of ethics and morality in advertising.
2. To analyze the various unethical practices that companies may resort to, in their advertisements.
3. To help viewers critically watch and analyze advertisements, rather than being just silent viewers.

## Literature Review

American Marketing Association (AMA) defined "Advertising is any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services by an identified sponsor" (Bovee, 1992, p. 7) defined "Advertising is the non-personal communication of information usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature about products, services or ideas by identified sponsors through the various media."

Businesses are interesting in making money and advertising helps a great deal to sell products, but it can be just as harmful. Advertising is a form of communication that attempts to influence customers to purchase or consume more of a particular product or service. Every major medium is used to deliver these messages, including radio, television, magazines, newspapers, Internet and billboards. In terms of ethical standards, advertising has been rated the lowest on 14 ethical dimensions in the functional areas of business (Burnett and Pettijohn, 2003).

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with human conduct more specifically the behavior of individuals in society. Ethics examines the rational justification for our moral

judgments. It studies what is morally right or wrong, just or unjust. Ethics are the set of principles, rules, standard and values that guide actions and create a sense of responsible behavior. The advertisers have to be especially careful to act ethically at all times, taking extra care when advertising to children, advertising potentially harmful products and using psychological tactics to stimulate demand. However, there are companies that neglect their ethical responsibility by continually producing and airing unethical advertisements (Polonsky and Hyman, 2007). The ethical issues in advertising apply to companies globally and all consumers. The consumers should not be misled about the products or services that are being promoted. Advertising should be designed to conform to the laws of the country and should not offend against morality, decency and religious susceptibilities of the people. Such type of advertisements is termed as ethical advertisements which contributes to a good corporate reputation, heighten morale and, thus, increases the business for the advertised product.

Serious consequences can result from the failure to follow ethical and honest procedure when dealing with the public. The final blame must rest with the public relation or advertising arm of any organization. They are the final filter through which information and facts flow out to the public. They are alone responsible for the accurate and honest reporting of information.

Advertising is often critiqued for not respecting rules of ethics both in the process of advertisement design and in the way it influences society. The main concern of advertisers as representatives of companies that seek profit making is to increase sales, win new clients, increase the demand for the product they want to be presented in as nice and colorful advertisement as possible. They pretend that their product is the best, has unique qualities, better than their competitor's, it has a better cost and brings much more benefits.

That is the reason why the great challenge in advertising is to create sales efficient and at the same time moral and true advertising messages.

According to Sasu. Constantin, Pravăț. Geanina Constanța, Luca. Florin Alexandru, Ethics in advertising can be seen as a set of moral principles that govern both communication between the seller and the buyer, and also the advertising business.

The benefits of advertising are obvious, as are the benefits of a few elements that are not consistent with ethical standards. It is believed that ethical advertising is a type of advertising that does not lie,

promote forgery and lies within limits of decency. As a general rule, the principles of moral order should be also applied to the controversial field of advertising. Human freedom has one purpose: authentic moral response. All information or persuasion attempts must respect human freedom in order to be moral. From the moral perspective, good advertising is an advertising that seeks to determine people to choose and act rationally; bad advertising tries to determine people to do bad things, turns them to destructive actions for themselves and for the community (Sasu, Pravat & Luca, 2015). According to Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1997, advertising should function using the following three moral principles:

**1. Respect for truth**

- The public should never be deceived
- False advertising should never be used
- Truth should never be altered by implying illusory elements or withholding relevant facts
- An “exaggerated advertising” is acceptable if it is consistent with the practice of rhetoric and symbolism, recognized and accepted. People believe that a certain rhetorical exaggeration or symbolism is implied in advertising, and this could be illegal by the recognized or accepted practice

**2. Respect for human dignity**

The content of advertising and its impact must respect human dignity. Exhortations are not allowed to concupiscence, vanity, envy, greed, and techniques that manipulate and exploit human weakness should be avoided. Advertising must not offend the dignity, nor through content - through what is advertised, or the way in which advertising is disseminated, or by the impact it has on the audience.

Special care should be given to vulnerable groups: children, young people, and the elderly, culturally disadvantaged communities.

**3. Respect for social responsibility:**

Advertising generally has a negative image, being frequently associated with ruthlessness. It is viewed as a form of persuasion that exploits human weaknesses, carelessness or lack of knowledge and also uses peoples’ lack of media, economic and even civic culture.

Beltramini (2003) describes the ethics of advertising as the last oxymoron due to harsh criticism brought to advertising practices. Rotzoll and Christians (1980) showed in their study that most respondents, industry professionals, encountered ethical problems at the workplace and most responses pointed out to a real interest for doing everything correctly.

## Discussion

The modern day customers especially the generation X and millennials and post millennials, are a totally educated, realized and a smart bunch of people where corporates and business houses have very little scope to play around.

There has been a complete paradigm shift in all management practices and policies. Companies have become more socially responsible and rightly so because it is the only way to survive in a market that is characterized by a *highly informed customers* and *cut throat competition*.

It is due to these two characteristics of the market, that the age old adage that “Customer is the king”, is no more just a cliché, but is a rule that firms need to stick to. You simply cannot take the customer very lightly.

With so much of online as well as off line information available, the customers can evaluate, analyze, compare and understand any product they may need. In most of the cases especially in consumer durables and specialty products the customer comes so prepared to the store that sometimes he knows more about the product than the sales man does. A salesman can no longer blandish a customer into a deal if he is not very strong in his field of operation.

With a highly intense competition prevailing in the market a customer has many options to choose from. The customer has realized that, if a firm does not care for me, I have ten more firms waiting in the queue to take care of me.

In a market like this, where every company is fighting tooth and nail with each other for the dollar in the customers’ pocket, every operation, every policy and every strategy of the business house has to be customer oriented. Companies should recruit, hire, train and develop their personnel not just to coax the customer into a sale, but to treat them with care and respect and to foster good relations with them. The marketing departments of the firms should try to orient all P’s (Product, Price, Place, and Promotion) of marketing mix towards the satisfaction and delight of the customers. In other words, companies should produce the products with no compromise in the quality of raw materials, should be environment friendly, and should comply with all standards of quality.

Companies need to adopt fair pricing strategies to sell the products in the market and avoid defrauding the consumers or the competitors to earn heavy profits. Finally, companies should not resort to unethical, immoral, illegal ways of product promotions while promoting their product with the target customers. Companies need to be sensitive towards the values, culture, and religion of the place where they are carrying out the promotions.

According to **Philip Kotler**, “Promotion includes all the activities the company undertakes to communicate and promote its products to the target market.”

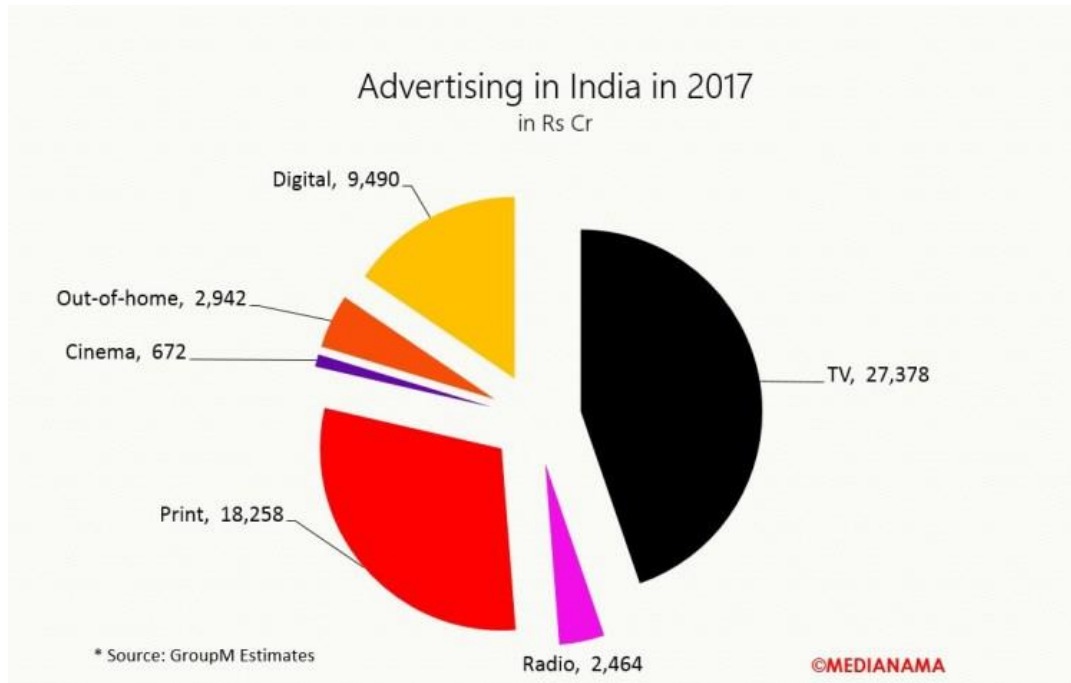
According to **W.J.Stanton**, “Promotion is the element in an organization’s marketing mix that serves to inform, persuade and remind the market of the organization or its products.”

A firm may use any combination of the following tools for promotion.

<b>1. Advertising</b>	Any paid form of non-personal communication of ideas, products and services by an identified sponsor
<b>2. Sales Promotion</b>	Short term direct inducements to encourage sales of products and services
<b>3. Publicity</b>	Non-personal stimulation of demand for a product/service or business organization as a whole by putting commercially significant news in media to create a favorable image.
<b>4. Personal selling</b>	Interacting orally with the customer in the form of sales presentations and demonstrations
<b>5. Public Relations</b>	Engaging in public relations and community services to develop a favorable image of the organization in the eyes of public

Whichever tool the company uses, ethical promotion requires that the tool should be honest, truthful, sincere, sensitive, authentic and respectful to the customer as well as the community.

Although advertising can be done through a number of media, television advertising still seems to dominate the major part of the total pie of Indian advertising as can be clearly seen from the figure given below.



Source: Nikhil Pahwa, Feb. 15 2017 Advertising in India in 2017, in 18 Charts, Medianama

Television (TV) advertising means getting an advertisement aired on a local, national or international TV channel.

The advantages of advertising on TV include:

1. Television has a better reach than many other advertising media both in urban as well as rural areas.
2. Television advertising creates better customer attention, involvement and memory as it involves customer's more than one senses i.e., sight and sound.
3. Television advertising allows the use of different emotional and rational themes and appeals, leading to better acceptance of the Ad in the market, hence better acceptability and hence better results.
4. Television advertisements allow better penetration into the market by wisely choosing the channel, program and timing of the advertisement. E.g., children can be reached by airing an advertisement on a cartoon channel on a Sunday morning.

The benefits of TV advertising are so promising that companies sometimes violate and compromise on morality and ethics.

Advertisers should consider the following moral issues while advertising on television.

### **1. Advertising to children.**

Children tend to be more gullible in nature than adults, in the sense that they believe whatever is told or shown to them. Companies usually manipulate children and use them to influence family purchase decisions. Advertising being a mass type of communication in nature does not differentiate between the rich and the poor. The same advertisement is shown to the children whose families can afford a product and to those that cannot, thereby dividing children into classes like have and have not. This may result into some kids landing up in inferiority complexes, which is very harmful to them both psychologically as well as physiologically.

A report prepared by APA (American psychological association) task force on advertising and children reviewed research addressing two important types of questions regarding the effects of advertising on children. First, does advertising affect children's commercial recall and product preferences? Second, does exposure to advertising result in consumption of products that are inimical to the health and well-being of children?

Research on children's commercial recall and product preferences confirms that advertising typically achieves its intended effects. A variety of studies using differing methodologies find that children recall content from the ads to which they've been exposed. Product preference has been shown to occur with as little as a single commercial exposure and to strengthen with repeated exposures. Most importantly, studies have shown that product preferences affect children's product purchase requests and that these requests do influence parents' purchasing decisions.

The more fundamental concern regarding the effects of advertising on children relates to questions of potential harm resulting from exposure. A variety of research findings are relevant to this issue. Several studies, for example, have found that parent-child conflicts occur commonly when parents deny their children's product purchase requests that were precipitated by advertising. Considerable research has examined advertising's cumulative effect on children's eating habits. Studies have documented that a high percentage of advertisements targeting children feature candy, fast foods, and snacks and that exposure to such advertising increases consumption of these products. While consumption of non-nutritious foods per se may not be harmful, overconsumption of these products, particularly to the exclusion of healthier food, is linked to obesity and poorer health. Several studies



have found strong associations between increases in advertising for non-nutritious foods and rates of childhood obesity.

A variety of studies have found a substantial relationship between children's viewing of tobacco and alcohol ads and positive attitudes toward consumption of such products. Children find many such commercials attractive and consequently have high brand awareness of such products and positive attitudes toward them.

## **2. Exploitation of the sentiment of nationalism:**

Companies even fan our emotions and sentiments of nationalism and patriotism to push their products off the retail shelves. Well , selling a deodorant or an adhesive glue, and achieving a company's profit/ sales objective using cross border indo Pakistan interaction and hence straining the relationship between people of the two countries , does not look very moral and ethical.

The point here is that there is nothing wrong in glorifying your national heroes, national symbols, or your nation even. Moral issue arises when you glorify your own heroes and symbols and defame those of the other nation. No company should be allowed to manipulate this kind of sentiment and earn profits at the cost of human relations and brotherhood.

## **3. Deception , Misrepresentation and puffery**

Deceptive advertising means when Companies fiddle with or manipulate words, language, colors, graphics and product facts, in such a way that turns the whole advertising message confusing and misleading. Any claim in an advertisement that is not true or is misleading is said to be deceptive. Deceptive advertising may include commercials that claim to contain a particular component or ingredient, when it actually does not. Deceptive advertising also includes ads that deliberately conceal information that may be relevant for the customer for making the purchase decision. An advertisement is considered to be deceptive if it makes the exposed people hold a false belief about the product/service or the organization.

Getting a message delivered to people through a person wearing a white coat misleads the people to think as if it is prescribed by a medical practitioner. Misrepresentations and deceptions are quite obvious in before and after pics of cosmetics and weight loss medicines. Most of the fast food products don't actually look as appealing in reality as they are shown in advertisements.

A very commonly used method in advertising is inflating or puffing up a message to make it look what it actually is not. This is known as puffery. Puffery usually makes use of subjective statements which cannot be objectively measured, proved or calculated. Advertisement Statements like “it makes me feel special”, “It will make you do anything” we make better burgers”, “this will make you famous” etc., are all examples of puffery. All these statements are subjective and no reasonable and logical person will take them as facts.

#### **4. Gender biases.**

A whopping 85 percent of female respondents confirmed that they are offended by stereotypical depictions of their gender, according to a joint study done by J. Walter Thompson (a New York based Advertising Agency) and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. Although a lot of work is done on gender equality at almost all strata of the society, be it parents, schools, or government, but gender bias or gender stereotype still seem to dominate most of our TV commercials.

TV advertisements usually characterize women with adjectives like sensitive, weak, beautiful, talkative, and emotional. We rarely come across advertisements that show women as strong, tough, confident, or better drivers.

Companies have always been using females for pain relieving ointments, selfie cameras, anti-ageing creams, and skin whitening creams. On the other hand, men have always been endorsing sports products, bikes and cars, and even construction material like cement and steel. Most of the advertisements will show women cooking in the kitchen, preparing kids for the school, washing clothes and doing make-up in front of the mirror. While, men will be shown driving cars on rough terrains, presiding board meetings, playing sports and pulling off difficult adventures like river crossing, and bungee jumping.

Gender bias can also be seen in the number of times each gender appears in the commercials. Men appear in ads four times more than women and have seven times more speaking roles, according to new research from J. Walter Thompson and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media that was revealed during a panel at Cannes.

## 5. Sexual Objectification of men and women:

Objectification is the act of degrading a man or a woman to the status of a mere object, and treating them as just a commodity with no regard to their feelings, emotions personality or dignity. A sub-type of objectification is the sexual objectification, which means treating men/ women as commodities or objects of sexual desire. To objectify someone sexually or sexual objectification occurs, “whenever a woman’s body ,body parts, or sexual functions are separated out from her person ,reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (Bartky, 1990, p.35; adopted by Fredrickson And Roberts,1997)

Both men and women are objectified in advertisements but men are objectified in less number of advertisements than women plus the consequences of male objectification are not so serious. Men are less likely to face problems like acid attacks, teasing, rapes and other types of sexual violence. On the other hand, when women are objectified there is always a possibility of some kind of sexual violence.

Emma Rooney in her article *The Effects of Sexual Objectification on Women's Mental Health* says that “Women frequently face sexual objectification in daily interpersonal interactions and through the active and passive consumption of multimedia. These two main avenues of exposure create a continuous stream of sexually objectifying experiences and images (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Miles-McLean et al., 2015). Interpersonal sexual objectification occurs in the forms of unwanted body evaluation and sexual advances (Kozee et al., 2007; Miles-McLean et al., 2015). Developed by Kozee et al. (2007), the Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale (ISOS) measures the extent of individuals’ sexually objectifying encounters. The ISOS qualifies behaviors like catcalling and whistling, sexually insinuating stares, leering, and inappropriate sexual comments made about a woman’s body as unwanted forms of body evaluation (Kozee et al., 2007). Research shows that this type of sexual objectification is more often perpetrated by strangers than acquaintances (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; MacMillan, Nierobisz, & Welsh, 2000), and often takes place in public spaces (Macmillan et al., 2000). The ISOS qualifies behaviors like touching, fondling, or pinching someone inappropriately against her will, degrading sexual gestures, and sexual harassment or coercion as unwanted sexual advances (Gelfand, Fitzgerald & Drasgow, 1995; Kozee et al., 2007). Some of these behaviors are now commonly referred to as micro aggressions, which Nadal and Haynes (2012) define as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities

(often unconscious and unintentional) that communicate hostile, derogatory, or invalidating messages” (p. 89).

The experience of sexual objectification is not limited to interpersonal interactions with strangers or acquaintances. Most media outlets create further scenarios that expose women to sexual objectification, especially considering that more women than men are depicted in the media in a sexually objectifying manner (Szymanski et al., 2011). Advertisements, television shows, movies, music videos, printed media, and pornography all rampantly depict sexually objectifying images of women. Additionally, they often include characters who engage in sexually objectifying behaviors and include camera shots that place viewers in a sexually objectifying point of view (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Szymanski et al., 2011). Media’s vast reach ensures that women and girls of all ages, socio-cultural backgrounds, and geographical locations are affected by these images (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2009; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Szymanski et al., 2011)”.

## **6. Surrogate advertising**

Surrogate advertising is an indirect, covert or disguised advertising technique to promote products for which a normal, direct promotion is not allowed either legally or morally. Surrogate advertising is when the an advertisement for one product is actually promoting some other product hidden within it .In India this type of advertising is usually used for liquor and tobacco as any kind of direct print or electronic advertising is legally banned for such products.

Deepa Nathwani an Asstt. Prof. at MUCC Pune says that this type of advertising uses a product of a fairly close category, as: club soda, or mineral water in case of alcohol, or products of a completely different category, for example music CDs or playing cards to hammer the brand name into the heads of consumers. The banned product (alcohol or cigarettes) may not be projected directly to consumers but rather masked under another product under the same brand name, so that whenever there is mention of that brand, people start associating it with its main product (that is alcohol or cigarette .Surrogation can also happen by sponsoring movies, sports events and award ceremonies.

### **Conclusion:**

A legitimate advertising is one of the important pillars for the growth and success of any profit making organization. Proper advertising increases the consumption of the products and hence, increases sales for the company. Advertising also increases the walk- in footfall in a store, it helps in the introduction of new products into the market, it helps to retain the existing customers and acquire new ones, helps in building goodwill for the company and serves as a support function for the sales team and so on.

In India TV advertising is the most dominant of all advertising media majorly because of its reach and its ability to dramatize things through synchronization of sound, sight, motion, and animation. Indian television has a wide range of channels and programs for everyone, and these programs and commercials are being watched by almost everyone in the family. TV is a part and parcel of Indian families, and that is what puts a lot of responsibility on the companies to be socially responsible in their advertisements.

Television not only influences our purchase behavior, but also shapes our value system, thought processes and attitudes. That is why companies need to be careful and regulatory bodies need to be strict and stringent in monitoring the TV commercials. Companies should not be allowed to lie, cheat or misrepresent facts in their advertisements. Further companies should be sensitive enough to not to maltreat any gender, race, religion or nation.

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