

Consumer Perception of Ethical Issues in Advertising
– A Study Across Different Age Groups in Kolkata

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Abstract

Advertising has often been criticized for disrespecting the ethical values of the society. The present study tries to find out whether any significant difference in opinion exists among consumers belonging to different age groups regarding certain ethical issues in advertising. Data was collected with the help of a structured questionnaire using convenience sampling method in Kolkata and Chi-Square test was used to analyse the data. The study reveals that people across different age groups are sensitive to the ethical issues in advertising and condemn such practices. The advertisers can use the results to design messages that will ensure better acceptance among customers across age groups.

Keywords: Advertising, ethics, unethical advertising, age.

1. Introduction

Advertising plays an important role in the existence of every business. In today's world of competition, no company can ignore the importance of advertising to reach its target customers. Advertising not only enables the marketers to reach out to their target market but also benefits the consumers in several ways by creating awareness, providing knowledge about the product or service and developing preference for the same. It not only informs but also at times entertains the audience with its variety of appeals and execution techniques.

In spite of playing such useful roles in the society, advertising has often been criticized on several grounds. It has invited severe public criticism on the grounds that it violates the social, moral and ethical codes of conduct. In today's society, advertising has a

great impact on the people and the way they understand the world around them, live their lives, and perceive other people. At a time when incidents of women abuse are at a rise in different parts of the country, the contribution that certain advertisements generated by local, national and multinational companies are making to the society is highly questionable. Erotic advertisements showing men and women in insufficient clothes, use of indecent language and portrayal of women as mere commodities or sex objects are some of the common issues in present day advertising. Even young children are constantly targeted at by the companies with the objective of selling their products. The impact of irresponsible and unethical advertisement practices prevalent in the consumer environment can prove to be disastrous for the society. This article attempts to explore the perception of consumers belonging to different age groups regarding four ethical issues in advertising that have often caused irritation in the public mind. These issues are: advertisements directed at children, advertising of controversial products, use of strong sexual appeals in advertisements and surrogate advertising.

2. Literature Review

Since ethics in advertising is a controversial topic, there has been considerable research in this area.

Arruda and Arruda (1999) observe that there is lack of an ethical perspective “in advertising campaigns for products, services or ideas because of a limited conceptual knowledge of ethics”.

J.J. Boddewyn (1994) in his article expressed concern over the increasing number of indecent advertisements in many countries. His study assessed the “worldwide magnitude” of the problem and also provided suggestions to the advertising practitioners on how to deal with the issue.

Chan K. et al. (2007) draw attention to the fact that it is difficult for the consumers with different cultural and social backgrounds to accept global advertising campaigns.

Many empirical studies have indicated that advertisers should consider the social and cultural values of the targeted consumers while designing advertisements to attract their attention (Waller and Fam 2000, Fam and Waller 2003, Waller et al. 2005).

Ethical issues considered for the study:

Advertising to children: Advertising has been accused of causing serious health problems such as childhood obesity (Bakir and Vitell, 2010) when the children crave for junk food, candies, sweetened cereals, unhealthy snacks, soft drinks seen in advertisements.

Nairn and Fine (2008) addressed the issue – “When is it fair to advertise to children?”. Their study tried to find out the age at which children are able to understand the persuasive intention of the marketers and evaluate advertisements. Their research points out that all children, young or old, are vulnerable to advertising and can be easily influenced by advertisement messages.

Advertising of controversial products: Belch and Belch (1996) comment that the advertising of products like contraceptives and personal hygiene products are offensive. Fam and Waller (2003) conducted their study on students of four different Asian countries. Emphasizing on the value system of Asian countries the authors opined that as the Asian markets are flooded by foreign advertisements and media, Asians have a great opportunity of being exposed to offensive advertisements.

Aaker and Bruzzone (1985) in their study found that the commercials of feminine hygiene products and women’s undergarments caused maximum irritation among the viewers due to the nature of the product.

Use of sex appeal in advertising: Cohan (2001) points out that advertisers use the female body to attract the attention of viewers to a product or service and thus induce them to make a purchase and boost company sales.

The study by Henthorne and LaTour (1995) indicated that the use of high levels of erotic contents in advertisements is not culturally tolerable to the viewers and they do not consider them as morally correct. The viewers develop negative feelings towards the advertisement and the brand.

Surrogate advertising: Consumption of tobacco and alcohol causes serious damage to health. Advertisements of these products are thus prohibited in the country. To attract the attention of consumers towards their products, the manufacturers bypass the restriction imposed on the advertisements through surrogate advertising. Considerable debate always revolves around surrogate advertising as the products which are injurious to health are indirectly promoted through different techniques adopted by the sellers. A study by Singh and Sandhu (2011) points out that surrogate advertisements for such products “encourage the masses to experiment with them and enhances their consumption”.

3. Objective of study

The objective of the study is to understand whether any significant difference in opinion exists among the consumers of different age groups regarding their perception of some of the ethical issues related to advertising viz. advertising to children,

advertising of controversial products use of sex appeal in advertising and surrogate advertising.

4. Research Methodology

The study is based on primary data collected from the field of study using a structured questionnaire. Published sources served as secondary sources of information. The study is a cross sectional and hypothesis testing study. Questionnaires were distributed physically as well as by mail to people all over the city of Kolkata applying convenience sampling method. 532 completely filled up questionnaires were used for the study.

The questionnaire designed for the study consisted of two parts. Part A of the questionnaire sought information about the respondents' demographic details. Part B of the questionnaire consisted of 31 statements about different ethical issues in advertising. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 - 'strongly disagree' to 5 - 'strongly agree' was used to gather information about the perception of the respondents regarding the ethical issues. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was tested with the help of Cronbach's Alpha (0.865). Data was analysed with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (version 20). Chi-square test was used for testing of hypotheses which is shown in the following section.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

Table 1 presents the gender and age group of the respondents considered for the study.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

	No. of respondents	Percentage
GENDER		
Male	239	44.9
Female	293	55.1
Total	532	100.0
AGE		
18 - 30	205	38.5
31 - 45	160	30.1
46 - 60	97	18.2
Above 60	70	13.2
Total	532	100.0

Tests of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

H0: There is no significant difference in opinion among the respondents of different age groups that advertising to children is unethical as children are unable to understand the company’s intention to sell.

H1: There is significant difference in opinion among the respondents of different age groups that advertising to children is unethical as children are unable to understand the company’s intention to sell.

Cross tabulation results and chi-square test are shown in tables 2 and 2.1 below.

Table 2: Cross Tabulation for ‘Advertising to children is unethical as children are unable to understand the company’s intention to sell’ by Age

Advertising to children is unethical as children are unable to understand the company’s intention to sell.		Age Groups				Total
		18 – 30	31 – 45	46 – 60	Above 60	
	Strongly Disagree	3.9%	1.3%	1.0%	2.9%	2.4%
	Disagree	21.0%	19.4%	12.4%	4.3%	16.7%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	15.6%	11.9%	10.3%	8.6%	12.6%
	Agree	42.4%	43.1%	44.3%	38.6%	42.5%
	Strongly Agree	17.1%	24.4%	32.0%	45.7%	25.8%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 2 shows that 59.5 % of the respondents belonging to the age group 18 – 30, 67.5% of the respondents belonging to the age group 31 – 45, 76.3% of the respondents belonging to the age group 46 – 60, and 84.3 % of the respondents in the ‘above 60’ age group agreed or strongly agreed that advertising to children is unethical as children are unable to understand the company’s intention to sell.

Table 2.1: Test of Significance of Association of ‘Advertising to children is unethical as children are unable to understand the company’s intention to sell’ with Age

	Value	df	p Value
Pearson Chi-Square	35.609	12	<0.001

The p-value indicated in Table 2.1 is less than the level of significance (0.05), so the null hypothesis is rejected and alternative hypothesis is accepted. Thus, it can be said that there is significant difference in opinion among the respondents of different age groups regarding the statement.

Hypothesis 2

H₀: There is no significant difference in opinion among the respondents of different age groups that using strong sexual appeals in advertisements is unethical.

H₁: There is significant difference in opinion among the respondents of different age groups that using strong sexual appeals in advertisements is unethical.

Cross tabulation results and chi-square test are shown in tables 3 and 3.1 below.

Table 3: Cross Tabulation for ‘It is unethical to use strong sexual appeals in advertisements’ by Age

		Age Groups				Total
		18 – 30	31 – 45	46 – 60	Above 60	
It is unethical to use strong sexual appeals in advertisements.	Strongly Disagree	4.9%	3.1%	3.1%	0.0%	3.4%
	Disagree	11.2%	8.8%	4.1%	7.1%	8.6%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	20.0%	10.0%	10.3%	4.3%	13.2%
	Agree	33.7%	38.1%	36.1%	31.4%	35.2%
	Strongly Agree	30.2%	40.0%	46.4%	57.1%	39.7%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 3 shows that 63.9 % of the respondents belonging to the age group 18 – 30, 78.1% of the respondents belonging to the age group 31 – 45, 82.5% of the respondents belonging to the age group 46 – 60, and 88.5 % of the respondents in the ‘above 60’ age group agreed or strongly agreed to the statement.

Table 3.1: Test of Significance of Association of ‘It is unethical to use strong sexual appeals in advertisements’ with Age

	Value	df	p Value
Pearson Chi-Square	33.042	12	0.001

The p-value indicated in Table 3.1 is less than the level of significance (0.05). Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected and alternative hypothesis is accepted. There is significant difference in opinion among the respondents of different age groups that it is unethical to use strong sexual appeals in advertisements.

Hypothesis 3

H₀: There is no significant difference in opinion among the respondents of different age groups that the manner in which controversial products are advertised in public media is unethical.

H₁: There is significant difference in opinion among the respondents of different age groups that the manner in which controversial products are advertised in public media is unethical.

Cross tabulation results and chi-square test are shown in tables 4 and 4.1 below.

Table 4: Cross Tabulation for ‘The manner in which controversial products are advertised in public media is unethical’ by Age

The manner in which controversial products are advertised in public media is unethical		Age Groups				Total
		18 – 30	31 – 45	46 – 60	Above 60	
	Strongly Disagree	7.8%	8.1%	2.1%	0.0%	5.8%
	Disagree	24.4%	21.9%	15.5%	5.7%	19.5%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	31.2%	23.1%	26.8%	12.9%	25.6%
	Agree	31.2%	36.3%	39.2%	38.6%	35.2%
	Strongly Agree	5.4%	10.6%	16.5%	42.9%	13.9%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4 shows that 36.6 % of the respondents belonging to the age group 18 – 30, 46.9% of the respondents belonging to the age group 31 – 45, 55.7% of the respondents belonging to the age group 46 – 60, and 81.5 % of the respondents in the ‘above 60’ age group agreed or strongly agreed to the statement.

Table 4.1: Test of Significance of Association of ‘The manner in which controversial products are advertised in public media is unethical’ with Age

	Value	df	p Value
Pearson Chi-Square	83.535	12	<0.001

The p-value indicated in Table 4.1 is less than the level of significance (0.05). So, the null hypothesis is rejected and alternative hypothesis is accepted. Respondents' of different age groups significantly differ in their opinion on the statement.

Hypothesis 4

H₀: There is no significant difference in opinion among the respondents of different age groups that surrogate advertising is an unethical practice.

H₁: There is significant difference in opinion among the respondents of different age groups that surrogate advertising is an unethical practice.

Cross tabulation results and chi-square test are shown in tables 5 and 5.1 below.

Table 5: Cross Tabulation for ‘Surrogate advertising is an unethical practice’ by Age

		Age Groups				Total
		18 – 30	31 – 45	46 – 60	Above 60	
Surrogate advertising is an unethical practice.	Strongly Disagree	5.4%	1.9%	5.2%	4.3%	4.1%
	Disagree	28.8%	21.9%	12.4%	12.9%	21.6%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	27.8%	29.4%	23.7%	17.1%	26.1%
	Agree	24.9%	28.8%	32.0%	42.9%	29.7%
	Strongly Agree	13.2%	18.1%	26.8%	22.9%	18.4%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 5 shows that 38.1 % of the respondents belonging to the age group 18 – 30, 46.9 % of the respondents belonging to the age group 31 – 45, 58.8 % of the respondents belonging to the age group 46 – 60, and 65.8 % of the respondents in the ‘above 60’ age group agreed or strongly agreed to the statement.

Table 5.1: Test of Significance of Association of ‘Surrogate advertising is an unethical practice’ with Age

	Value	df	p Value
Chi-Square	30.837	12	0.002

The p-value indicated in Table 5.1 is less than the level of significance (0.05). Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected and alternative hypothesis is accepted. Respondents of different age groups significantly differ in their opinion on the statement.

Findings

- The study reveals that people above 60 years of age are more sensitive to the ethical issues as compared to people in the age group of 18 - 30. Although the society still upholds the traditional values of Indians, changes are slowly creeping in. The results indicate that young people in the age group of 18 - 30 are more tolerant about the ethical issues in advertising considered for the study than the people in other age groups.
- Significant difference in opinion was observed among the respondents of various age groups regarding the practice of advertising to children. A high percentage of respondents belonging to different age groups expressed that advertising to children is unethical as children are unable to understand the company's intention to sell. 59.5 % of the respondents belonging to the age group 18 – 30, 67.5% of the respondents belonging to the age group 31 – 45, 76.3% of the respondents belonging to the age group 46 – 60, and 84.3 % of the respondents in the 'above 60' age group agreed or strongly agreed that such advertising practice is unethical.
- Significant difference in opinion was observed among the respondents of various age groups regarding the use of strong sexual appeals in advertisements. 63.9 % of the respondents belonging to the age group 18 – 30, 78.1% of the respondents belonging to the age group 31 – 45, 82.5% of the respondents belonging to the age group 46 – 60, and 88.5 % of the respondents in the 'above 60' age group agreed or strongly agreed that it is unethical to use strong sexual appeals in advertisements.
- The respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the manner in which controversial products are advertised in public media is unethical. Significant difference in opinion was observed among the respondents of various age groups. 89.7 % of the respondents belonging to the age group 18 – 30, 85.1% of the respondents belonging to the age group 31 – 45, 91.7% of the respondents belonging to the age group 46 – 60, and 95.7 % of the respondents in the 'above 60' age group agreed or strongly agreed to it.
- Significant difference in opinion was found among the respondents of different age groups regarding 'surrogate advertising. 38.1 % of the respondents belonging to the age group 18 – 30, 46.9% of the respondents belonging to the age group 31 – 45, 58.8% of the respondents belonging to the age group 46 – 60, and 65.8 % of the

respondents in the 'above 60' age group agreed or strongly agreed that surrogate advertising is an unethical practice.

6. Limitations and Scope for future research

The study is based on responses of educated respondents. So, the opinion of the part of the population that is uneducated has not been obtained. The study also focused only on certain ethical issues to understand how these are perceived by the people of Kolkata. There are many other areas in advertising which are considered as unethical by authors and practitioners but these issues have not been brought within the scope of the study.

Future research can extend into areas where other ethical issues can be considered to understand the perception of people. A larger sample covering the whole of India can also give a comprehensive picture of the perception of Indian consumers towards different ethical issues in advertising. In future studies the viewpoints of consumers without any formal education may also be taken by preparing structured questionnaires in local language and collecting information by interviewing them. The study did not consider demographic characteristics like type of occupation, religion etc. This can be introduced in future studies in this area.

7. Conclusion

Using a sample drawn from the consumers of Kolkata, the study investigated consumers' perception about four ethical issues in advertising across age groups. The results reveal that irrespective of age, people consider advertising to children as unethical. Almost 60% or more of the people from different age groups expressed their disapproval of targeting children, the percentage being the highest among the senior citizens. More than 63% of the respondents of all age groups considered the use of strong sexual appeals in advertisements to attract the attention of consumers as unethical reflecting that in spite of the influx of Western culture, the people of Kolkata across age groups still value the Indian culture. Dissatisfaction about the use of such appeal was found to be the strongest with the senior citizens where it was as high as 88.5%. The strongest displeasure was found regarding the manner in which controversial products are advertised in public media. Respondents in the 'above 60' age category were found to be the most agitated by such advertisements. More than 95% of them strongly criticized the manner of presentation of controversial products. The younger generations also found such advertisements to be unethical. Significant difference in opinion was found among the respondents of different age groups

regarding 'surrogate advertising'. A higher percentage of senior citizens considered such practice to be unethical than the other age groups.

The study highlights the need for managers to consider these results while designing advertising messages for their target audience. The organisations advertising or planning to advertise their products in Kolkata can use the results of the study to understand how the consumers of Kolkata belonging to different age groups perceive some of the debatable issues of advertising. The study will help the advertisers to develop commercial messages that will have a better chance of being accepted by their target group of audience.

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