



WHAT INDIA TAKES OFFENCE TO

A STUDY OF COMPLAINTS RECEIVED AT THE
ADVERTISING STANDARDS COUNCIL OF INDIA

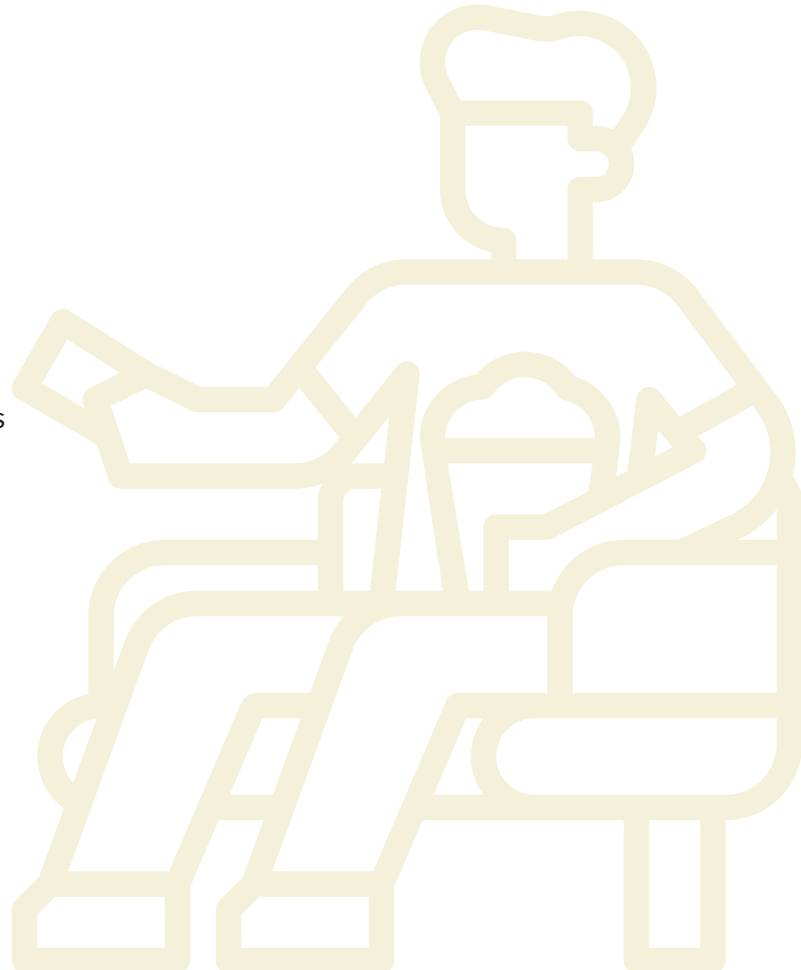
INTRODUCTION

At the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), we receive several complaints against advertisements that offend the sensibilities of Indian citizens.

What patterns do we see? What lies underneath a stated complaint? This is what this report attempts to reveal. The themes that emerge across written protests, lodged against pieces of communication dealing with a spectrum of products that fill up our everyday life, can be viewed as artefacts of popular culture. They can be deeply insightful and provide us a peep into the mindsets from which the protests originate. When viewed as a collective, they provide a sense of what citizens of this country find problematic.

While the starting point of the enquiry was complaints received against advertisements, the objective was also to dig deeper into why these issues offend some people. The study tries to get to the heart of the complaint and the complainants to reveal some of the underlying issues that Indian citizens are bothered by. These complaints are just one of the manifestations of the various conversations happening in India.

By no means is this report meant to be an exhaustive study of what is offensive to people today, however it gives us a sense of some of the issues people are debating in private and public domains. With this study, we hope to offer brands insights from ASCI's unique vantage point, which could help inform the creative development process.



METHODOLOGY

The basis for the report are the advertisements against which ASCI has received complaints over the last 3 years, prima facie violating Chapter II that requires ads to be within the generally prevailing norms of decency and propriety, and Chapter III, which requires that ads do not depict situations that could be harmful to individuals or society. 1759 complaints against 488 ads were received by ASCI in these categories.

We also examined the vocabulary of these complaints- the articulation of the objection, the emotions that were revealed. Were the complainants angry, disappointed, upset, or scared? What actions did they desire?

Complaints with a common theme have been clubbed and read into as a collective.

ASCI's complaints team often has the opportunity to speak directly to the complainants. Interviews with this team helped to understand the mindset of the complainants better.

These findings were then mapped and synthesised in the larger context of advertising issues that receive significant public and media attention.

The complaints mentioned in the report could be considered as representative of the nature of complaints we receive.

Since the objective was to study the consumer sentiment, we have taken into account all complaints that we received, irrespective of whether the Consumer Complaints Council (CCC) found them to be violative of the relevant ASCI codes. Hence some of the examples in the report and in the study were complaints that were NOT found in violation of the ASCI code.

KEY FINDINGS

The study uncovered **six major patterns** in ads that people find offensive

- 1** Ads that are seen to **reinforce socially undesirable depictions for commercial gains.**
- 2** Ads that are seen to be **inappropriate for children** and are aired during prime time or family viewing time.
- 3** Ads that portray **characters that seem to either cross boundaries** set by society or make fun of what the societal culture considers sacred.
- 4** Ads that are seen to **mock men**
- 5** Ads that are seen to **hurt religious sentiments.**
- 6** Ads that depict **unpleasant realities**

1. ADS THAT ARE SEEN TO REINFORCE AND EXPLOIT SOCIALLY UNDESIRABLE DEPICTIONS FOR COMMERCIAL GAINS

Underlying issue

Complainants point towards what they think is

1. Unfair towards a section of society, or
2. Perpetuates beliefs and practices that makes society unhealthy .

Mindset of this Complainant:

Advocates for equity & fairness

These are people who have an imagination of a world that's perfect. They see the world as a fair place, where it is the collective responsibility of society to ensure that everyone is treated fairly and with dignity.

Society tends to organize itself into groups and communities, structure itself hierarchically, identify simplistic handles to grasp what is unfamiliar, reinforce stereotypes and modernize itself in its appearance without really changing its essential structure.

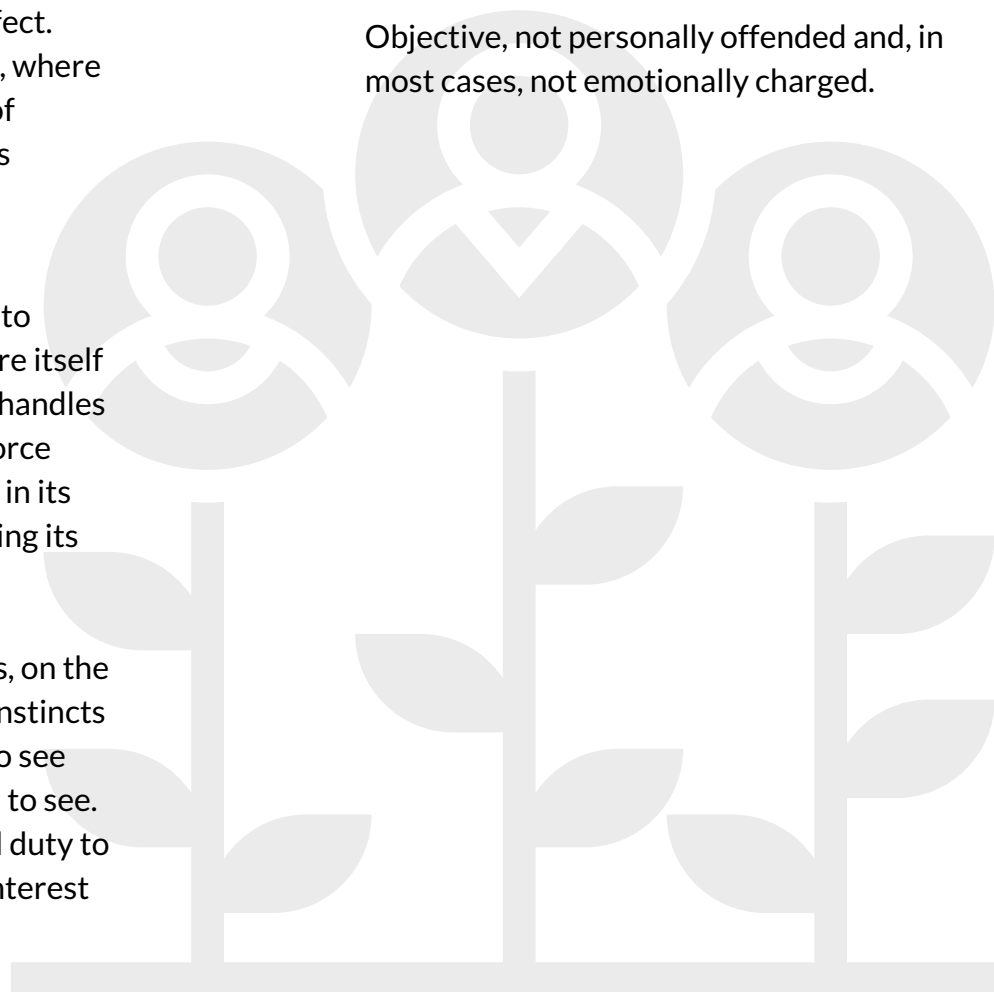
Advocates for equity and fairness, on the other hand, keep a check on the instincts of society. Their own instinct is to see what society often is ill-equipped to see. They consider it to be their moral duty to point out what's not in the best interest of society.

Triggers in ads

- Objectification of a man's or woman's body
- Unhealthy stereotyping
- Glorification of fair complexion or of sculpted body types that are popularly considered perfect
- Typification of certain ideas of male/female hood
- Idolization of success that is competitive and heroic in nature.

Complaint tonality

Objective, not personally offended and, in most cases, not emotionally charged.



EXAMPLES OF COMPLAINTS THAT FALL IN THIS CATEGORY

Complaints against **Whitehat Jr. ad**

"This works towards creating a more stressful environment for young kids and their parents selling 'Fear of missing out' rather than the product."

"So the Whitehat Jr. App advertisements create such a false and wrong impression amongst children and their parents if they do not learn coding at early years of their childhood they may suffer and will not be successful in life."

"Since it pertains to education, it becomes a really sensitive matter. Historically, India has seen increasing pressure on youngsters for pursuing JEE/NEET and such high-pressure examinations. With these ads taking over the televisions, it is following the trend where kids will be forced to opt for such expensive classes at the cost of their freedom."

Different complainants express their disapproval in different ways but all raise their voice to protect children and parents from the 'rat race traps' that society keeps them stressed about.



Ziddi perfume with the tagline "Jo paseene mein nahaatein wohi hain asli mard kehlaatein hain" translated as "real men are those who are not afraid to bathe in their sweat", is seen to harm society. "This advertisement aims at creating an image and prejudice about how men are supposed to be and how they should act, thus promoting toxic masculinity. Therefore, I'd like to report this ad as my complaint."



"A teenage girl playing football recklessly and hitting the cars parked in a lane in an advertisement of **Seltos SUV by KIA motor**. The lane has several other cars also parked. She is hitting the ball in an arrogant manner on the rear view mirror etc. There is nothing sports about it, rather the whole act displays an extreme juvenile behaviour with least regard to safety to others property....Please for a moment think, if your car parked outside has a broken rearview mirror costing Rs 15000/ or scratched fully by a child thinking that it's funny, how will you react.I request the advertisement be taken off the air immediately"



In one of the **CRED advertisements**, Jackie Shroff is seen leading a Zumba session with a group of women and men. In one of the scenes, for a fraction of a second, the camera zooms in closely on the backside of a woman.. One complaint read as follows, "The CRED advertisement featuring Jackie Shroff has an offensive or objectionable shot of an exercising lady around 22 seconds into the ad. The shot is unnecessary for the advertisement and offensive to women. Request to modify the ad."



Similarly, an ad for **Levis jeans** featuring Deepika Padukone is seen to promote body image that is demanding and anxiety-causing for women, "The ad leverages the ill-mentality of body-conformity and creates psychological stress to slim down and attain a certain bust waist hip ratio to be considered "JAWAN" or "HASEEN"



"The **CRED ad** featuring Rahul Dravid being broadcast on various TV channel shows Dravid breaking side mirror of a car with cricket bat. This promotes vandalism. This advertisement should not be shown as it has adverse effect on the minds of children and it promotes vandalism."



Wild stone Intense Deo

"This ad shows that man enters office and his boss gets attracted towards him and she hits on him. This ad is subliminal, it gives wrong msg to consumers that you can attract women by using a deo. Also this derogates the image of women. "



2.

ADS THAT COULD BE SEEN BY CHILDREN AND CONSIDERED INAPPROPRIATE FOR AIRING DURING PRIME TIME OR FAMILY VIEWING TIME.

Underlying issue

1. Early access to 'adult life' for kids in the context of sexuality. The concern here is that this could provoke children's interest in sex, and physical intimacy before they are ready for it.
2. The body as a source of shame
3. Being confronted unexpectedly with visuals and conversations that are culturally embarrassing and difficult
4. Feeling of the "home" a safe space, being violated

Mindset of this complainant:

Complainants are usually parents who see the intimate space of the family as a chaste bubble of care, obedience, and middle-class upbringing. As a family unit, while they may want to be open and curious, but as parents, they also want to filter out curiosities they feel awkward about.

These guardians of innocence nurture an imagination of virginal parenthood. Any stimulus that awakens the curiosity of children or encourages conversation about the body or physical intimacy, is seen to malign the chaste bubble of the family.

Triggers in ads

- Bare bodies in undergarments, lingerie ads
- 'Seemingly adult' situations in ads targeted at kids.

Complaint tonality

Urgent, scared, indignant.

Demand for immediate action.

Complainants may use high degree of capitalisation and punctuation such as exclamations and question marks in articulation.

2. EXAMPLES OF COMPLAINTS THAT FALL IN THIS CATEGORY

Complaint against the **Crax Rings** snacks

"This advertisement is being continuously aired on kids channels like Pogo, Nick Jr and Sonic. Children as young as 2 and 5 are getting exposed to puns and innuendos involving pregnant women. This is highly objectionable and will form an impression on innocent minds."



Another example of a complaint with similar sentiment is that of an ad for **Sebamed baby bath** product called Pratham Snan. The complainant is irked by the curiosity shown by his/her daughter, on seeing a pregnant lady in labor, asking the doctor about the right pH value of the baby bathing product, while the doctor keeps insisting that she first let the baby come out.

Complaint against the Sebamed

"There are some QUESTIONS for You That MY 3-YEAR-old Daughter asked me after watching this advertisement.

Sebamed woman giving delivery

1. Dad, What is this about?
2. Dad, Why this woman is crying?
3. Dad, Why this woman is covered with bedsheet?
4. Dad, What is doctor looking between her legs?
5. Dad, Is it good to look at someone like this?

NOW WHAT AND HOW SHOULD I ANSWER HER?"



Parle Kismi toffee ad wherein a pre-teenage girl asks her boyfriend for a kiss and the father of the girl is fooled into thinking that it is the Kismi toffee that's being exchanged, evokes comments like; "It promotes child/teenage sexuality. Even more concerning thing is that it is mostly being aired on kid's cartoon channels"

"It promotes 'puppy love' and physical intimacy amongst pre-adults."



"This is the latest ad of ONN comfort underwear currently being aired on TV channels. I found this ad to be obscene as it features a man roaming in a hotel without putting any clothes except underwear, it also features a woman in a two piece bikini. I found it inappropriate for family audience"



"This is to bring into your kind notice one ugly ad of Loveable female undergarments on NDTV.in news channel around 9 pm .
In the ad story - two girls meet and remove their T shirts on screen to show each other their lingerie. And then communicate about this in very obvious terms .The ad is obnoxious and company needs to be advised to alter their copy or withdraw it . We watch news channels together as family and such obnoxious ads bring embarrassing moments .



3.

ADS WITH CHARACTERS THAT APPEAR TO CROSS BOUNDARIES SET BY SOCIETY OR MAKE FUN OF WHAT CULTURE CONSIDERS SACRED

Underlying issue

Fear of new , emerging societal structures

Mindset of this complainant:

Complainants here consider themselves the gatekeepers of tradition. As long as the change depicted celebrates or makes tradition grander, they are fine by it, but the moment there is a discontinuity in how things are supposed to be, they are angered. Their instinct is to discipline the rule-breakers.

Upholders of cultural values mark boundaries around the roles and play referee to call out social fouls. How women, men, married couples, youngsters, and the elderly should behave or appear, is prescribed and idealized, and variations become a reason for angst.

This is a paternalistic mindset that believes that people left to themselves will be lost and would not know what's good or bad for them. Institutions like the family with their hierarchical structure help people locate themselves in society. They also provide them with a moral compass and a set of dos and don'ts. Hence institutions and the place assigned to people in them are sacred in this worldview.

Triggers in ads

- New interpretation of traditions
- Portrayal of women and youth in a more individualistic manner
- Non traditional generational dynamics

Complaint tonality

Self righteous
Antagonistic

3. ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES OF COMPLAINTS THAT FALL IN THIS CATEGORY

In an ad for **Amul macho** featuring the actor Vicky Kaushal, a woman gym instructor is shown to be playful and impishly creates situations to get a glimpse of the actor's underwear strap. While there is one complaint that argues against the ad by questioning, "what if the same were done by a man to a woman would it be ok?" most of the other complaints viewed the ad through a patriarchal perspective and mention that "this stuff is tarnishing the image of women".



Alia Bhatt, in the **Kwality Walls** ads, despite being in a theatre with her partner, shares an ice cream cone with a stranger sitting next to her. For the upholders of cultural values, this violates their view what a traditional relationship should be, and how a woman should behave.

"How many creators of this advertisement will allow their spouses to grab ice cream from a stranger nearby and it is very #cheap #creativity"

"Just for the ice cream can't expect that people would go crazy and jump off the boundaries."

"cheap and dirty-minded creativity should not affect our social and cultural values."



"I want to raise my concerns against the advertisement of '**Mouj**' app. In this ad, a teenager, a mouj addicted girl, is visualizing senior citizen of her family dancing in an objectionable style to awkward songs"

Representations of youth that does not conform to the image of "Agyakari child" gets complained about. Disney Hotstar ad with the tag line, 'Bahut hua parivaar', where the teenager is encouraged to watch cricket matches with his online friends and not with the old-styled noisy family, is not received with a sense of humor by this mindset. Multiple complaints see this as disrespect for Indian family values.

"This is an effort to create a gap between teenager and his family. It is also against Indian family values and culture"

"It mocks the Indian middle-class families and its family relationships. It is quite insulting and is putting American family values on India. We are deeply hurt by this ad and request to ban Disney Hotstar ad, penalize them and demand an open public apology."



Bingo MAD angle ad featuring Ranveer Singh.

"The ad is a very bad example of how to treat your elders." The ad takes a dig at the typical, what's the plan now? A question that elders usually ask young college pass-outs. Instead of seriously and factually responding to the question Ranveer makes up an answer that means nothing but is full of scientific terms."

Humour at the cost of elders who are seen to be an unquestioned authority is considered offensive by this category of complainant.



4. ADS THAT ARE SEEN TO MOCK MEN

Underlying issue

Men are torn between their privileged past, and a more equitable present in which they are trying to navigate a role. They feel that women should not get back at them by depicting stereotypes or situations that portray men in a negative light.

Mindset of this complainant:

These complainants feel that men as a group are being unfairly targeted in advertising. They feel that in some way men are victims of women's progress and that on behalf of their gender, they need to protect any further erosion of their stature or role in society.

These are complainants who come from a deep sense of being wronged, and feeling victimised. The complainants seek justice against ads that appear to demean men by representing them as helpless and voiceless. They feel these ads mock men, show them in a negative light, depict them as props, and portray them as punching bags that women can use to vent their feelings.

Triggers in ads

- Men shown as flawed in some way, even if it is through humour or introspection
- Acts of violence against men by women

Complaint tonality

Feeling victimised
Invoking gender role reversal as a comparison

4. EXAMPLES OF COMPLAINTS THAT FALL IN THIS CATEGORY

Complaint: On Sony TV yesterday between 7:30 to 8:00 i saw **Cars24** advertisement which again reduces men to objects of desire. Concept is home delivery of husband."

"The advertisement is disrespectful towards #Husband, #Men. Not following Community Guidelines. If someone asks, "Can wife be returned in 7 days if not found interesting?" Will same return policy be taken so laughingly as this one if we reverse the #gender?"



"The **Pepperfry** ad shows a furious woman throwing knives at a man who is sitting and relaxing and there are several attempts made by her.

Video shows a violent and harmful act of throwing knives at a person. Imitation of which can cause grave injuries. Not to mention if the genders were reversed it would have fall in category of violence against women. Violence against anyone in any form should be condemned and also the concern is kids watching and imitating the same which actually happens. Some other innovative idea should have been chosen to promote the stuff."

"I'm a Men Rights Activist. Pepperfry is a leading furniture selling company and has a good reputation. Adversely they published this ad which shows hate against Men. Here in ad a wife chopping vegetables in kitchen throws multiple knives on her husband to kill. Can it be imagined if a husband throws knife towards his wife. I condemn this hateful ad by the company. Spreading love could have been in favour of family and social harmony."



"An advertisement of 0:53 secs was uploaded on 2nd December 2020 on **Lionsgate** India YouTube channel where a girl and a boy were deciding over what to watch but all of sudden the girl violently starts slapping him!! Respected Sir/Madam, In this advertisement of 0:53 secs from 0:15-0:31 The girl in this advertisement can be seen slapping the boy unnecessarily, unilaterally and violently! Which does not go in line with the Pledge of ASCI, and is offensive to the public and promotes violence! So I earnestly request you take necessary action in this regards as soon as possible"

"Please look at this ad by Lionsgate Play. It promotes violence on men and encourages gender divide. Please take it down"

"This is to bring to the kind attention of authorities that an advertisement by Lionsgate play features a woman slapping a man as a way of resolving a question she is faced with. This is a very harmful portrayal of violence on men by women and more so a portrayal of domestic violence. The sad thing is, this is used as a gimmick and joke and is perpetuating bad stereotypes that domestic violence is a way of resolving issues and, for this reason must be immediately banned from publication. Please take action against Lionsgate Play for such a dangerous portrayal that violence on men by their female partners is okay."

"Such advertisements are normalising violence against men. There is nothing to be taken as fun here. Please look into the issue and take appropriate actions against them. We demand a formal apology from the company."



5.

ADS THAT HURT RELIGIOUS SENTIMENTS

Underlying issue

A feeling that religious identity is constantly under attack, and is under the threat of becoming diffused or diluted.

Mindset of this Complainant:

These complainants believe that certain advertisements are part of a conspiracy against their religion. They operate like search engines that scan ads to identify elements that are associated with their religion and have the potential to be contentious. Narratives and motives are ascribed behind the usage of ritualistic elements like the coconut or the kundali and a shared feeling of being victimized is created. They believe that even the smallest of deviations from a very strict interpretation of religious rites and rituals is unacceptable. They constantly question the intent of the advertisement and believe that there is a more devious agenda behind ads, which they wish to put an immediate end to.

Triggers in ads

- New interpretation of traditions
- Ads portraying mixed religion narratives
- Use of religious or cultural motifs in humorous ads

Complaint tonality

Indignant
Nit picking
Guarding against conspiracy

5. EXAMPLES OF COMPLAINTS THAT FALL IN THIS CATEGORY

"Howzat is showing advertisements in sports channel that shows player yuvraj standing in basement area of building and calling people to play cricket with him where ad shows one old man using coconut as protector guard. As i am Hindu and I have a great belief in Hindu god and worship material used for them by seeing such ad my emotions was seriously hurt, how can you show in ad that you are using coconut as protector guard which we Hindu worship a lot and at times we resemble them as god too."



*"I was trying to lodge a complaint against **Wonder cement** on Ndtv india. Which says not to believe kundali for fixing house warming ceremony. This is against the Hindu sentiment and with no knowledge about the importance of kundali and muhurat."*



"Fevicol is a classic example on how much ignorance and contempt it has for Yakshagana. Yakshagana is a unique blending of music, extempore dialogues, phenomenal dancing moves, rich make-up and intrinsically designed costumes. This unique harmony is extensively found in Tulunaadu and Malenadu region of Karnataka and is exhibited from dusk to dawn. Revered and celebrated by the coastal Karnataka People. Fevicol denigrating Yakshagana uses it as tool to market it's product."



*"I came across an advertisement by **Mohey Manyavar**, which is falsely projecting Hindu religion as regressive and hurting Hindu religious sentiments by mocking Indian culture and traditions like Kanyaadan. The advertisement featuring Alia Bhatt portrays 'Kanyadaan' as an oppressive practice and suggests 'Kanyamaan' as an alternative. Manyavar claimed that it was "Promoting a progressive way of thinking, one tradition at a time!" Apparently, 'Kanyamaan' "gives a new spin to wedding rituals, highlighting the idea of respecting brides instead of 'giving them away."*

"Kanyādāna is a highly revered sacred Hindu wedding ritual with origins that can be traced to 15th century stone inscriptions found in Vijayanagara empire in South India. 'Kanyadaan' is a Sanskrit word that means giving away the daughter to the family she weds into. This is embraced with love and respect throughout our country and is clearly not a subject to mock and sell products through cheap controversies such as these."

"We don't want our children to grow up in a society where advertisers can freely mock our religion to sell their products."



*"Usage of the phrase 'upar wala' to refer to God in **ICICI business banking** ad is a promotion of Islam, because there is No upar wala in sanantan dharm. God is everywhere...."*



6.

ADS THAT DEPICT UNPLEASANT REALITIES

Underlying issue

- A sudden, unexpected confrontation with reality that one would rather avoid.
- The cushion of modern consumption has created a shield between us and the real biological world, and naked reality disturbs us.

Mindset of this Complainant:

There is a "civilised" way of depicting reality that is more acceptable in today's world. There is no place for what looks crude, unfinished or raw.

As humans, we have evolved from being raw and vulnerable to being refined and insulated. We are uncomfortable with reality that is not couched in less jarring depictions. We do not wish to be reminded of aspects of life that could be too real to confront.

Triggers in ads

- Blood
- Raw meat
- Reference to death

Complaint tonality

Despairing
Urgent

6. EXAMPLES OF COMPLAINTS THAT FALL IN THIS CATEGORY

"RIO sanitary napkins

"This advert should be banned. Few things are better be symbolic."

"This is not a bold move as claimed but vulgarity and attack on women privacy. This advertisement is not going to make things easy for girls but difficult. Our society still lack the kind of sensitivity require to deal with such matters."



"Before the was using blue color to show the flow but now they are using Red color to show the product use it is very very cheap way to show. For **Stayfree** ad



Policy bazaar "The advertisement directly describes about unexpected death hospitalisation and soaring medical bills and asks us to take policy from policy bazar.

As it directly talks about unexpected death, hospitalisation, the insecurity the family is going to face when we die, it causes fear in people especially in the times of the pandemic. This is giving sleepless nights as already people are scared of economy, expenditures and even death during these difficult times of covid 19. Please remove Policy bazar advertisement or force them to make it more gentle and subtle."



The complaint against the ad for **Fresh to home** reads as follows, "Suggest to ban gory and repulsive photos of animal parts in Ads - just as photos of accident victims."



Licious

"The advertisement shows chicken products in a very crude and disgusting way. It seems to lure its viewers in a direct graphic manner, which is very disturbing for vegetarian families like us who have to watch these unwanted visuals on family tv channels. It is so disturbing that our children are exposed to unwarranted and non veg products on family shows."



END NOTE

What offends us in advertising depends on many factors. Besides the actual content of ads, who we view ads with, our life stage, the proximate context of our societal environment, our own sense of identity and the collectives we belong to all play a role in determining our response to advertising.

What offends one individual or a group may be completely innocuous to another. At ASCI, making a recommendation on whether ads can cause widespread and grave offence or harm is often a matter of intense debate. Some of the examples quoted in this report were not found violative of ASCI's code.

The composition of the Consumer Complaints Council (CCC), which seeks to bring in varied perspectives is particularly useful in coming to a conclusion on these matters. Not all ads that are complained against may need modifications as per the discussions and recommendation of the CCC. In fact, in some of the cases given in the report, the advertiser did not have to make a change, because the CCC, taking all things into consideration, did not find the ads to be in violation of the ASCI code.

There is also a growing trend of ads and brands getting trolled on social media when an individual or a group takes offence to a particular message or depiction. While in some cases, the offence is genuine and justified, in others it is observed that some people seem to be intent on assigning a devious agenda to a particular ad where none actually exists. Creativity always tries to push boundaries, provoke new thinking, nudges us to see things differently. And some thoughts and depictions may seem jarring at first, not all of them are harmful. Indeed some could actually help establish more progressive and equitable narratives.

However, it is also a fact that brands today, use "social issues" in very shallow ways, with negligible understanding or investment in the actual cause. In such cases, they do run the risk of being called out by citizens who feel that the representations are incorrect or improper. In some cases, it is about depictions and vocabulary that may not be thought through.

What this report tries to put a spotlight on, are some observations and insights that could help advertisers plan their campaigns better, or help them respond better to consumer sentiments. Some could be easier fixes, such as planning media placements with greater awareness and sensitivity, others might consider alteration to depictions that are incidental to a film's script, but may have the potential to trigger people. In some cases, the brands may take a call to stand firmly behind their advertising, particularly when the ad represents the very core of the brand philosophy. ASCI, through its Advertising Advice can also help advertisers avoid some of these pitfalls at the pre-production stage.

It is important to state that mature discussions between stakeholders, seeking remedies through a neutral forum such as ASCI are perhaps the best way to navigate these complex waters in what are fairly polarised times.



To know more about ASCI, the CCC, the complaints handling process or any other information, please visit www.ascionline.in or write to contact@ascionline.in