

What India Takes Offence To - A Report

ASCI findings detail out which advertisements get the country worked up

Reveals six key patterns in ads that were considered offensive

Mumbai, January 13, 2022: In recent times, several advertisements have faced controversy with various individuals or groups objecting to them. Given the sensitivity of our times, the advertising industry has had its work sharply cut out. The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) has been receiving hundreds of complaints every year against advertisements that people in India find offensive.

Based on 1,759 complaints against 488 advertisements over the past three years, ASCI undertook a deep dive to identify trends in such complaints in order to deconstruct, not only the messaging that was found objectionable, but also the articulation of the complaint along with desired action asked for. The ads covered include those that may not necessarily be in violation of ASCI codes, but nevertheless offended people/ groups. The result: A report on **'What India Takes Offence To'**, which uncovers six major triggers.

1. **Socially undesirable depictions for commercial gains:** Some ads were seen to reinforce depictions of society that perpetuated unhealthy practices or beliefs for the sole purpose of commercial gains. For example, ads that promote stereotypes such as fair skin, certain body shapes or ads that create undue pressure on parents and kids in the field of education.
2. **Inappropriate for children:** This category had ads, mostly viewed at prime-time, that seemingly provoked children's interest in 'adult life', particularly in the idea of sexuality and physical intimacy. The complainants were largely embarrassed or concerned parents.
3. **Ads where people seemingly crossed cultural boundaries:** Depiction in these ads seemed to cross boundaries set by society or to make fun of what was considered sacred in our culture. Individualist depictions, particularly of youth and women, were key triggers. Many ads that showed intergenerational dynamics in non-traditional ways were also considered problematic by some people.
4. **Advertising mocking men:** Ads where men were depicted in a negative or poor light, even in humorous or introspective ways, were considered offensive by some.
5. **Hurting religious sentiments:** Ads portraying mixed religious narratives, depictions of new interpretations of traditions or the use of religious and cultural motifs in a humorous manner became a trigger point. Complainants questioned the intent of the ads and felt the need to guard against 'conspiracies'.
6. **Depicting unpleasant realities:** Everyday realities, when depicted in an in-your-face manner, triggered complaints from consumers who preferred a more sheltered and 'civilised' version of realities. Showcasing death, raw meat or blood tended to raise the hackles of these complainants.

The objective of the report is to provide a pulse on consumer sentiment to different stakeholders. The study gets to the heart of the complaints and the complainants to reveal the underlying issues in advertising that bother Indian consumers and citizens. For brands, the report offers insights that may help in more sensitized creative development.

The full report can be accessed at <https://ascionline.in/>.

Manisha Kapoor, Secretary General, ASCI, said: “Being in direct touch with the complainants gives ASCI a unique vantage point to understand what people find offensive in advertising. We are sharing these insights with our stakeholders to help advertisers plan campaigns better and be more cognizant of consumer sentiment.”

This report makes observations that could help advertisers plan campaigns better. These include easy fixes, such as planning media placements with greater awareness and sensitivity, and also alterations to depictions that are peripheral to a film’s script but may have the potential to lead to objections. There would also be instances of brands deciding to stand firmly behind their advertising, particularly when it represents the core of their philosophy.

Subhash Kamath, Chairman ASCI said “At ASCI, we believe our role is not just to police the narrative but to also constantly add value to the industry by guiding our members towards more responsible advertising. These kinds of reports, along with initiatives like our ‘Advertising Advice’ service will help the industry a lot in that direction.”

The Advertising Advice is a paid-for service, available to both members and non-members, and helps advertisers and brands understand, at the campaign planning stage itself, whether their claims are exaggerated or not. It helps them identify whether an advertisement potentially violates any ASCI guidelines. A panel of technical experts from the relevant field help the advertiser examine their claim and the evidence for technical claim support.

About The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI)

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), established in 1985, is committed to the cause of self-regulation in advertising ensuring the protection of the interest of consumers. ASCI seeks to ensure that advertisements conform to its Code for Self-Regulation, which requires advertisements to be legal, decent, honest and truthful and not hazardous or harmful while observing fairness in competition. ASCI looks into complaints across ALL MEDIA such as Print, TV, Radio, hoardings, SMS, Emailers, Internet / website, product packaging, brochures, promotional material and point of sale material etc. In January 2017, the Supreme Court of India in its judgement affirmed and recognized the self-regulatory mechanism as an effective pre-emptive step to statutory provisions in the sphere of advertising content regulation for TV and Radio in India. ASCI’s role has been acclaimed by various Government bodies including The Department of Consumer Affairs (DoCA), Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), Ministry of AYUSH as well as the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB). MIB issued an advisory for a scroller providing ASCI’s WhatsApp for Business number 77100 12345, to be carried by all TV broadcasters for consumers to register their grievance against objectionable advertisements. In 2021, ASCI signed an agreement with FSSAI to track and report potentially misleading advertisements from the food & beverage sector. On the international front, in 2021, ASCI Secretary – General, Ms. Manisha Kapoor was elected as one of the four Vice-President’s on the Executive Committee of the International Council on Ad Self-Regulation (ICAS). Among several awards bestowed by the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA), ASCI bagged a Gold Global Best Practice Award for the Mobile App “ASCIonline” (2016), a special recognition for its “Guidelines for Celebrities in Advertising” at the first-ever ‘Global Awards for Effective Advertising Self-Regulation’ hosted by the ICAS (2019). In 2021, ASCI also won two ICAS awards, one for the ASCI scroll telecast across television in the ‘Best Awareness Raising Initiative’ and for its extensive digital suo-motu monitoring through NAMS initiative, in the ‘Special Category’. It also got a special mention in the ‘Best Sectoral Initiative’ category for its efforts and regulatory recognition of its Gaming Guidelines.

For further information, please contact:

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