

# Media Message and Public Sensitivity: A Study on the Conditional Nature of Public Responses towards Controversial Advertisements in India

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## Abstract

The advertising boom has opened multiple ways to ensure a favourable public image of a product intended to be sold off in a competitive market today. But not all of them make up to their full efficiency and life cycle before a controversy comes up. The conditional nature of the public response is often very subjective, as they are shaped by many factors including individual value systems and attitudes. We analysed multiple advertisements that had become controversial in India due to their seemingly 'uncustomary' content. In the study, the efficiency of such advertisements is measured against qualitative variables of communication outcomes through the Reasoned Action Approach. The result defines the factors that influence and trigger a particular response at the public and individual level towards a persuasive media message, which in this case is, the content of controversial advertisements.

**Keywords:** *Reasoned Action, Advertising Content, First Exposure, Attitudinal Shifts, Public Opinion*

## Introduction

Media has a profound impact on how people think and how they are made to think and act. It, as both a direct and indirect agency that affects public opinion, also influences how messages are received, perceived, processed, and responded by the public, which inherently shapes up the characteristic of receptive capabilities to a particular stimulus, outlined generally as 'public sensitivity'. In a way, we can assert

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that media messages and public sensitivity are highly dynamic evolving forces, conditionally and symbiotically shaping each other over time and type. It thereby yields diverse possibilities for understanding how the duplex shapes social and communication dynamics in human life. To address the wider dimensions of this multifaceted relationship, the relevant example of public responses towards controversial advertisements has been chosen as the primal research subject, with a special focus on the Indian scenario.

For those involved with advertising campaigns in India, the hailed ‘nation of extensive diversities’(www.transcend.org ), it appears that they should be aware of the potential to offend the public, which can trigger a negative response in the forms of sales drop, ill publicity, public action, boycott, ban and ultimately affecting the interests and business of the advertiser. Thus, it is important to understand the relationship between persuasive advertising messages and the public (their potential customers). ‘The last thing an advertiser would want to do is to offend its customers and cause a negative reaction in the marketplace’ (Waller, 2004).

‘Conditionality’ can be defined as when something holds, if and only when a related something else holds valid. In this study, the focus would be on how the net effects of exposure and reception patterns (especially the first one) to the message would conditionally define and affect public sensitivity as a characteristic of priorities, perceptions, permeability, persuasion and propagation of media message among the largely diverse public, through the analogue window of how people tend to respond to advertisements that go controversial in India.

### **Existing Research**

The public’s perception of advertisements has been the subject of numerous studies in the past (Alwitt, Lendell,1991; Andrews,1989, Mittal,1994; Muehuka,1987, Zanot,1881, 1984; Bauer and Greyser,1968; Gallup,1959; Louis Harris and associates, InC,1976; Red & Soley,1982; Sandage & Leckenby,1980). These perceptions are particularly relevant to advertisers because attitudes toward advertising in general impact attitudes toward a particular commercial, because likability for an advertisement is the most important discriminator of advertising effectiveness, and because brand attitude is affected by perceptions of a commercial (Mittal,1994). Wilson & West (1981) defined ‘controversial’ to be “products, services or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality or even fear, tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage when mentioned or openly presented.”

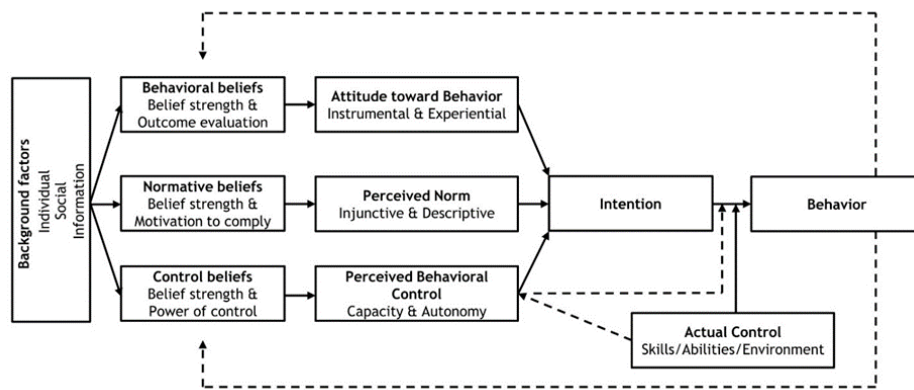
In terms of research methodology, sample types, and data collection techniques, these studies have used a wide range of approaches. For example, data for the study of Mittal (1994) were obtained from completed survey forms returned by 203 members of a consumer panel. Darrell D Muehling (1987) in his research titled 'An Investigation of Factors underlying Attitude-toward-Advertising-in-general' used an empirical study utilising traditional attitude and belief items and a thought-elicitation exercise, to support the notion that attitudes toward advertising are multi-dimensional. One of the early research studies on this topic is by Zanot (1984) in which the article begins with the first public opinion surveys which were undertaken during the Depression and chronicles 38 public opinion surveys concerning advertising. Although differences in sampling and methodology do not permit rigorous correlations, the chronological order in which the studies are presented allows a broad and general view of the changing attitudes of the public regarding advertising.

Numerous studies have looked at different aspects of how people perceive advertisements; some of these studies only focus on how people perceive them, while others also consider other factors. For example, the study of Suher & Ispir (2008) focuses primarily on two aspects; one is the attitude towards the ad ( $A_{ad}$ ), and the other is the attitude towards advertising in general ( $A_{ad}$ ) refers to specific advertisements. While one of the central ideas which Professor Sandage has attempted to communicate over the years has been that of the distinction between advertising viewed as a social institution and advertising as observed in advertisements (Sandage & Leckenby, 1980). In addition to all of these, several researchers specifically looked into some particular aspects. For example, Alwitt & Lendell (1992) identified the role of gender, and Andrews (1989) observed various beliefs towards advertisements.

A five-step information processing model was adopted by Argo and Main's (2004) meta-analysis. It comprised five elementary dimensions - attention, comprehension, recall, judgement, and behaviour. The attention dimension focused on the ability of the message information to be noticeable and recognizable. Comprehension concerned the ability of the consumer to understand the message. Recall focuses on whether the contents of the message can be retrieved for further information processing, as and when needed. The set of wide reactions and attitudes that the consumers might have towards the product was recognised as judgement, which also examines to what extent the message content was beneficial or rather applicable to the consumer, in terms of cognitive factors. Behaviour examined the level of compliance and situational dynamics that would elicit a desired response that the message stood for.

An important proposition in the study of how responses as behaviours are formed out of various factors of individual and social characteristics is the Reasoned Action Approach (2010). This framework for the prediction and change of human behaviour was developed out of the original Expectancy-Value theory by Eccels (1980), which was expanded to the theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behaviour by Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen as a more comprehensive view of all the earlier versions.

**Figure 1**



*Schematic presentation of the Reasoned Action Approach<sup>2</sup>*

Behaviour (as shown in Figure 1) is studied as a result determined by intention and moderated by actual control. The attitude of the individual towards the behaviour – as behavioural belief strength and evaluations of behavioural outcomes influences the behavioural intention amongst other factors of the subjective behavioural norm (descriptive – normative beliefs, and injunctive – motivation to comply) and perceived behavioural control (capacity and autonomy). Performing the behaviour then feeds back to the belief sets of these three determinants of intention. Any possible behavioural influences outside the model are considered background influences with their determinants. The intensive rationality of the framework and the rise of automatic behaviour as opposed to reasoned action behaviour are criticisms the approach faces. However, this approach has been successfully applied both

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from *Graphical Representation of the Reasoned Action Approach, a Psychological Model to Explain and Predict behaviour*. Peters, G. J. (2013). Available online at: [https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Reasoned\\_action\\_approach](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Reasoned_action_approach)

quantitatively and qualitatively to explain health behaviours, gambling behaviour, and work-to-nonwork integration behaviour, making it adaptive to the study.

## **Methods**

We used random sampling through a survey to quantitatively correlate the relationship between media messages and public reception with a sample size of 304 respondents. Respondents include those across the ages of 18 to 65, with 156 females and 143 males (5 respondents choosing to not reveal their gender). The age breakdown of the respondents is 74.7% (N=227) between 18 and 40 years, and 25.3% (N=77) between 40 and 56 years. The demographic characteristic of age was used for comparatively analysing any differences that may exist in the formation of response towards an advertisement and general perception and priorities therein.

Respondents were queried on their demographic information, advertisement exposure, perception patterns, nature of responsive action, and what they felt about the advertisements with seemingly problematic content. We also selected four advertisements that went widely controversial in India – Tanishq Ekathvam Ad (October 2020), Layer Shots Ad (June 2022), Swiggy Holi Ad (March 2023), and Bharat Matrimony Holi-Women's Day (March 2023) to study how the public responded to their content. Responses to queries describing several characteristics of general opinion towards these advertisements like 'different individual opinion than publicly deemed opinion', 'controversy as a result of vested interests', etc. were recorded.

Responses as a result of various attitude-borne (offended and welcoming) actions to were coded separately as – criticism, calling out to the ones seemingly affected by problematic content of the ads, call for a ban (regulation through power enforcement), boycott (voluntary decision to not use), disregard, neutral stance, telling others and distribution of propaganda (spreading the word and mobilising a particular opinion) and feeling supportive – to map the dynamics of public responses based on individual preferences. Disregarding means ignoring or paying no attention to something. On the other hand, a neutral attitude is characterised by traits such as indifference and detachment. People with a neutral attitude don't give enough importance to situations or events (Gasper et al., 2019). The negative reaction that can be caused by controversial advertisements can lead to offensive attitudes, often resulting in actions of call for a ban, boycott, extensive hate, increased need for regulation, ill publicity, and falling sales, amongst others (Fam & Waller, 2003).

The results are compiled and analysed on the qualitative outlines of the behavioural model propounded by the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975).

We also referred to the theory of hierarchy of effects (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961) in advertising – Awareness, Knowledge, Interest (originally liking), Preference, Conviction, and Action (originally Purchase) to study how advertising ultimately influences intent, decision, and responsive action.

## **Findings and Analysis**

A significant section of the respondents (27.8%) wants humour appeal to be an important factor in advertisements. This may be because humour appeal can lock in viewers to make a positive association with the advertised product or message entertainingly, as opposed to strictly serious modes of advertisements. “People’s feeling of enjoyment and indignity associated with advertisements played the strongest role in accounting for their overall attitudes towards advertising, followed by their perceptions of the trustworthiness or usefulness of the advertising content (Shavitt et al.,1998, p. 13).

23.4% of the respondents mentioned a preference for advertisements that provide social feedback. This suggests that a portion of the respondents appreciate ads that raise awareness or address social issues. Such advertisements can be thought-provoking and resonate with individuals who value social responsibility. Though in a low proportion (0.8%), there's still a small segment of individuals who enjoy advertisements with exaggerated elements, possibly for entertainment or attention-grabbing purposes. A subset of respondents (9.6%) value ads that evoke emotions such as joy, nostalgia, or empathy; as mentioned in Table 1.

The preference for advertising content by different age groups shows that the majority of people in the age group of 18-40 years want innovative content (40.98). Also, they prefer humour appeal (27.05%) to play out more as opposed to social criticism (21.56%). This might be a result of younger generations' affinity towards novelty and engagement with a limited context of social constructivism, underlining an existing finding that “the use of humour in advertising can result in increased sales of the product humorously touted” (Gruner, 1996). However, “using intertextual humour in advertising can sometimes be risky because, even though the ideal interlocutor is supposed to be familiar with the humorous reference the author alludes to, the latter can never be certain of whether it will be favourably received” (Dore, 2020). Thus, there can be a situation where some find the alluded reference humorous, but for others it might be offending.

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**Table 1*****Public preferences for content in advertisements.***

Age Group	Content preference in advertisements ( % of response)				
	Humour Appeal	Innovative Content	Social Criticism	Exaggerated Claims	Emotional Appeal
18-40	27.05%	40.98%	21.56%	0.98%	9.41%
>40	29.92%	29.92%	29.92%	0.00%	10.21%
% of Total Respondents	27.7	<b>38.6</b>	23.3	0.8	9.6

Notably, both age groups generally do not prefer exaggerated claims or emotional appeal in advertisements. Maintaining the balance in content between innovative strategies and humour appeal has to be handled carefully as it can lead to bigotry and stereotype setting.

**Public evaluation of content in controversial advertisements**

As cited in Cartmell's *Teaching Adaptations through Marketing*, F.R. Leavis demonstrated the inferiority that advertising as an entertainment medium uses through "cheap tricks to attract an audience." It all narrows down to the question of what people, the public at large, thinks ultimately, which is largely shaped by their perceptive domains.

70.46% of the sample mentioned that they have come across at least one advertisement with content they found to be problematic within two weeks of the survey (done in mid-March 2023). Another 26.54% of respondents were unsure if the content was problematic or not and only about 3% responded that they never got exposed to a seemingly problematic advertisement over the mentioned period of the survey.

The proportion of respondents finding certain content in advertising in India offensive or problematic is high in the sample and many others are not entirely sure of the nature of the content they were exposed to. This uncertainty can be attributed to three different sources (Han et al., 2011) – probability (randomness or indeterminacy of information), ambiguity (limitations in information), and complexity (uneasiness to comprehend information) – all of which can impact perceptions of the individual regarding the content.

Those who came across advertisements with objectionable content were queried to determine which aspect(s) of their perception or values were being affected by controversial advertisements in general. The majority of responses (20.3%) mentioned culture, tradition, or customs as the value(s) affected the most by controversial advertisements they were exposed to. This suggests that advertisements that deviate from accepted cultural standards and norms are more likely to get controversial. This may be because people are generally more aware of accepted cultural norms and do not accept claims that stray from the accepted path marked by them.

This argument can be again observed to be substantiated by the responses of the next majority, which indicated that controversial commercials had an impact on social norms, notably family values (18.5%). The major proposition of the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) is that when two actions or ideas are not psychologically consistent with each other; people do all in their power to avert or change them until they become cognitively consistent. This discomfort is triggered by the dissonance in the person's belief clashing with new cognition of information perceived, wherein the individual tries to find a way to resolve the contradiction to reduce their discomfort (Dawson, 1999).

**Table 2**

*Public perceptions of controversial advertisements*

Value Affected by Advertisement	% of Respondents
Religious Values	13.3
Culture, Tradition, or Customs	20.3
Minority group Values	12.5



Human rights	11.9
Social norms	21.7
Business image of the product	8.7
Personal values	11.6
Total	100.0

Social norms (21.7%) and culture, tradition, or customs (20.3%) have the most influence on public perception. The conventions and expectations that are prevalent in various cultures might affect how people view and react to commercials. If an advertisement conflicts with their established values or goes against what they consider socially acceptable, they are more likely to have a negative perception of it. Advertisements that deal with delicate cultural or traditional subjects may cause viewers to respond emotionally, meanwhile the advertisements that fail to adapt to changing cultural dynamics or address emerging societal concerns may face criticism or backlash, as they are seen as out of touch or insensitive.

Different individuals and communities may have diverse interpretations and reactions based on their religious values (13.3%) and personal convictions. Religion is one of the most universal and influential social institutions that have a significant influence on people's attitudes, values, and behaviour at both the individual and societal levels (Mokhlis, 2009). Advertisements that challenge or contradict these values may be viewed negatively by individuals who strongly adhere to their religious beliefs. These advertisements may elicit strong emotional reactions, leading people to form opinions based on their religious sentiments rather than solely on the content of the advertisement. The more religious a person is, the higher their concern for moral standards, the more of being conservative (Waller et al, 2002), and the more chances of being offended by ways that break or beyond them.

12.5% of the respondents attributed the impact of the controversial advertisement to minority group values. This shows that the advertisement may have marginalised or misrepresented some minority groups, which caused them to react negatively. This can also be due to stereotyping and prejudice. Discrimination is not randomly distributed across the population (Altonji and Pierret, 2011) and thus, it is general for people to feel offended when representation is not given its fair share of due in the advertisement content.

Among the values least represented to be affected by controversial advertisements is the business image of the product (8.7%). It is important to recognise that controversial ads have the potential to generate both positive and negative effects on the product’s image and public perception. Its impact on a product’s image can have long-lasting effects. Even after the controversy subsides, some consumers may continue to associate the brand with the controversy, affecting their perception and purchase decisions in the future.

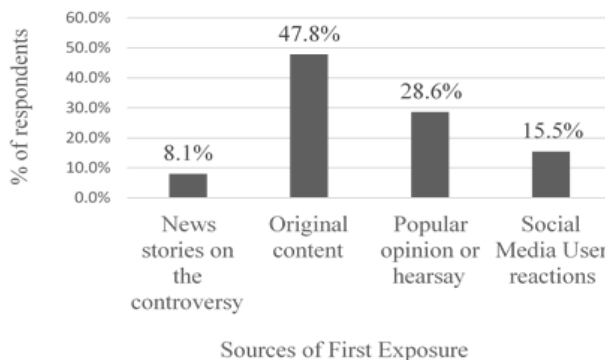
### Exposure to advertisements with ‘problematic’ content

‘Source of first exposure’ is the initial source through which individuals encounter certain content. First exposure decides the first set of experiences and interactions that the audience has toward the message. “First experiences are also utilised in retrospective and prospective evaluations of self and experience. Some histories are more culturally salient than others. Memories of firsts associated with those histories can indicate the extent to which personal meaning is derived from cultural models, and whether that is a deforming or informing influence” (Robinson, 1992, p. 1).

The various sources of first exposure and the correlations they might have with the age group of the respondents were identified. The larger the percentage associated with the source, the larger should be its prevalence in media message exposure. Among the sources of first exposure to such advertisements were original advertisements (coded as 1st-degree sources); credible and objective news stories (2nd-degree sources); popular opinion or hearsay, and social media and user reactions (3rd-degree sources).

**Figure 2**

Sources of First Exposure to Controversial Advertisements



The majority, around 47.8% of respondents mentioned that they are first exposed to content through original advertisement sources. This suggests that a significant portion of individuals prefer to explore primary material directly. Seeking out original content allows individuals to form their perspectives and opinions without relying on intermediaries.

Around 28.6% of respondents indicated that popular opinion or hearsay serves as their first exposure to content. This implies that a substantial portion of individuals rely on the opinions and viewpoints of others to shape their initial understanding of a subject. This factor highlights the influence of social interactions and interpersonal communication in the dissemination of information.

About 15.5% of respondents mentioned that they are first exposed to content through social media user reactions. Social media platforms have become increasingly influential in shaping public opinion and sensitivity. Users often share and discuss various topics, which can significantly impact how individuals perceive and engage with media messages. The relatively lower percentage suggests that social media is not the primary source of initial exposure for the majority of respondents.

Approximately 8.1% of respondents stated that they are first exposed to content through news stories. This indicates that a small proportion of the participants rely on traditional news outlets as their primary source of information, which is often considered a credible source of information. News stories often provide factual and researched information, which can shape public perception and sensitivity toward various topics. However, it's worth noting that this percentage is relatively low compared to the other factors mentioned.

One of the key factors involved in identifying the credibility of the data collected through the survey is by identifying the frequency of credible media exposure to these controversies. To analyse that we examine the responses to the question: "Do you think you were exposed to the content of credible news platforms apart from just social media interactions regarding these controversies?", surveying the frequency of exposure to 2nd-degree sources as opposed to 3rd-degree sources.

**Table 3**

*Frequency of exposure to 2nd-degree sources as opposed to 3rd-degree sources*

Level of Exposure to 2 <sup>nd</sup> Degree Sources	% of Respondents
Many	7.9

More than once, but few	33.5
Neutral (exposure to equal levels of news and social media response content)	2.3
Never	20.2
Once	36
Grand Total	100.0

As the above data shows, 7.9% say they are exposed to credible news platforms many times. This group can be considered more credible in their media interactions, as they claim to frequently consume content from trustworthy news sources. Their exposure to diverse perspectives and reliable information is likely to contribute to a more informed viewpoint on the controversies. 33.5% say they are exposed to credible news platforms more than once but a few times. This group also demonstrates some level of credibility in their media interactions, as they acknowledge consuming content from reliable news platforms, although less frequently than the previous group. Their occasional engagement shows they seek information beyond social media platforms.

2.3% claim to have an equal level of exposure to both social media and credible news platforms. While their responses don't explicitly indicate a higher credibility in media interactions, the fact that they consume news content suggests they are at least open to seeking information from reliable sources. 20.2% may have limited or no exposure to credible news sources. Relying solely on social media for information increases the risk of encountering misinformation or biased narratives, potentially impacting their understanding of the controversies.

36% of the respondents have minimal exposure to credible news platforms, suggesting limited engagement with appreciably reliable sources of information. As a result, their understanding of the controversies may be more influenced by social media interactions, which can sometimes be less credible.

**Public responses to controversial advertisements in India – Case study**

Public responses are highly specific to the nature and scope of the content embodied in the advertisement. Not all ads are perceived the same or to the same effect by the same set of the public. Thus, an analysis of some advertisements is important for comparative study. Excerpts from popular news stories and social media responses

(ones which, the news outlets chose to embed) surrounding the controversies provided basic information on the advertisement and its dynamics thereafter than a researcher's point of view of the controversy. This is because of the finding that such modes of exposure were some of the dominant forms of exposure regarding the controversial subject.

### ***Swiggy Holi advertisement***

Swiggy is an online food delivery chain where users can place orders for food from a variety of restaurants in their neighbourhood. Customers can conveniently browse menus, place orders, and have food delivered to their door using the company's website and mobile app. Swiggy offers a wide variety of cuisines and collaborates with a large number of restaurants. An out-of-home advertising billboard by Swiggy in early March raised some eyebrows, as reported below:

*Advertising has become trickier in the new age, with brands having to walk on eggshells (pun intended) to avoid hurting people's sentiments. For Swiggy, it's the 'Holi egg' billboard. The OOH ad was placed in the Delhi NCR area urging people to not throw eggs at each other under the pretext of Holi (Islur, 2023).*

*Swiggy has faced criticism over its 'Holi egg' billboard advertisements. The billboards featured eggs and read, "Omelette; Sunny side-up; Kisi ke sarr par. #BuraMatKhelo. Get Holi essentials on Instamart", promoting the consumption of eggs instead of wasting them by smashing them on someone's head during the Holi festival (Mukhopadhyay, 2023).*

*This seems to have hurt the sentiments of many who slammed the food delivery company for its "Hinduphobia". Several users even called for a boycott of the app with one saying, "I have been a regular user of @Swiggy and have been using it for a long time now. After watching this I was really disappointed and now I am uninstalling @Swiggy and using another app for ordering food. #HinduPhobicSwiggy. "Did you put up the same billboard during Eid, asking Muslims to refrain from slaughtering goats or during Christmas urging Christians to not cut down trees? Keep your Hinduphobia out of our festivals and let us celebrate Holi the way we want," a Twitter user wrote (TimesNow, 2023).*

5.2% of the respondents think the advertisement controversy was a result of some propaganda by certain interest groups, 4.6% find it as an effort to gain product attention, and a significant 2.3% feel it should be taken down; as shown in Table 4.

Especially in a country like India where religion is deemed culturally valued, many social media users expressed concerns about the advertisement negatively targeting the Hindu religious group. This identification can appeal to the members of the group and religion, and invoke collective action. The public may, at large, also view the advertisement as a vain attempt to get attention if they believe it is trying too hard to be provocative or spectacular without having any link to the brand or product, thereby affecting the publicity and brand image.

### ***Tanishq Ekathvam advertisement***

Tanishq is a prominent jewellery brand in India, known for its wide range of gold, diamond, and other precious gemstone jewellery. It is a subsidiary of Titan Company Limited, which is a part of the Tata Group. It continues to operate and offer its products through various retail outlets and online channels. Tanishq has 410 retail locations spread across more than 240 cities and is headquartered in Bangalore. Titan launched Tanishq, which focused largely on exports to European and American markets, to increase its foreign exchange reserve and later shifted the focus of the brand to the Indian market. A Tanishq commercial that featured an interfaith couple's baby shower in October 2020 sparked controversy on social media, as cited by various media reports:

*Tanishq has removed its new advertisement from social media after certain sections accused the jewellery brand of promoting what they called 'Love Jihad' through the commercial video (India Today, 2020).*

*Jewellery brand Tanishq said it was "deeply saddened by the inadvertent stirring of emotions" (Moneycontrol News, 2020).*

*The advertisement, released ahead of the festive season, shows a baby shower being thrown by a Muslim family for their daughter-in-law, who is a Hindu. Towards the end of the video, the young woman points out to her mother-in-law that baby showers are not a tradition in their household. To which the mother-in-law replies: "Isn't it a tradition for every home to keep daughters happy?" (The Hindu, 2020).*

*Within hours of the ad's release, the hashtag #BoycottTanishq began trending and by Monday afternoon the YouTube video had garnered over 2,000 dislikes and just 500 likes (Times Now Digital, 2020).*

*Twitter users are divided into two groups. Where some people think that the ad was beautiful, there is a section of people who believes that the ad was inappropriate (Koimoi, 2020).*

Tweets like:

*“Why I see Hindu daughter-in-law everywhere.... why don’t you show Muslim daughter-in-law anywhere. Just Asking.”, “#BoycottTanishq Now it is becoming a national problem. We have to fight this issue with legal and social motives. Protect our daughter from love jihad and save their lives,” and so on (Youth ki awaaz, 2020).*

As evident in Table 4, 4.9% of the respondents are of the view that their individual opinion was directly contradictory with that of the majority-held public opinion at some point of the controversy, outlining the defining factors of the subjective norm (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). 3.2% of them initially held opinions that were generally favourable to the advertisement content but had a change of opinion at some point during the controversy. This demonstrates how individual perspectives are influenced by prevailing popular opinion. 3.6% of them, however, feel it was an attempt to attract attention from the public.

**Table 4**

***Public responses to controversial advertisements in India***

Characteristics of the advertisement / opinion/response	Controversial advertisements under study (Affirmative responses as % of the total sample)			
	Swiggy Holi Ad	Tanishq Ekathvam Ad	Layer'r Shot Ad	Bharath Matrimony Holi -Women's Day Ad
Existence of problematic content	3.2	2.3	7.5	3.2

Different individual opinions than public opinion	3.6	4.9	3.9	5.5
Believe that the ad should be taken down	2.3	2.3	6.9	2.6
Controversy is the result of a group propaganda	5.2	3.9	2.9	3.9
Felt initially welcoming, then different attitude	2.6	3.2	2.6	1.6
Content threatens the value system strongly	1.3	2.6	5.5	1.6
Controversial content was an attempt to gain public attention	4.6	3.6	7.2	4.2

### ***Layer'r Shot advertisement***

Layer'r is one of the fastest-growing personal care and styling product brands in India. Adjavis Venture Limited, the parent organisation of Layer'r, was established in 2013. “*LAYER'R SHOT has a range of diverse and strong body sprays for men, that complement the masculine energy and bring in a storm of freshness*” is how Layer'r describes its product. Beyond Layer'r Shot, they also offer LAYER'R Wottagirl, a range of body splashes and perfumes for women. The SHOT and Wottagirl ranges come in clear, see-through bottles. Its recent advertisement has drawn a lot of negative attention. Few media reports on the controversy:-

*Brands try out different ways to promote and sell their products and one of the most common ways is sexualizing. Such advertisements by brands have been pulled off in no time. The recent ad by the body spray Layer'r Shot seemed to have crossed all its limits (Newsroom Post, 2022).*



*The advertisement features a group of men and a woman, in a grocery store. The men talk about taking a "shot" at the woman, a pun deemed distasteful and "disgusting" by several viewers (DNA, 2022).*

*Many accused the brand of promoting rape culture and trivializing the issue of women's safety. Following the outrage, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) said on Twitter that it has taken immediate action and notified the advertiser to suspend the ad, pending investigation (India Times, 2022).*

*Layer'r Shot apologises for controversial ads, has asked media partners to stop telecast (Et online, 2022).*

One of the netizens wrote,

*"How does this kind of ad get approved, sick and outright disgusting. Is @layerr\_shot full of perverts?" while another commented, "Whoever ideated, wrote, produced, acted in and approved the new Layer'r Shot ads, shame on each one of you" (Newsroom post, 2022).*

A considerable majority (7.5%) of those who were aware of the ad chose Layer Shots as the sample ad that was the most bothersome. 6.9% of respondents favoured removing the advertisement from the public domain, and 5.5% felt it threatened their moral principles. The fact that the Layer Shots advertisement was disliked by a significant proportion of people and that most people wanted it to be taken down suggests that a larger set of Indians might have perceived the advertisement's message to be offensive, inappropriate, or unpleasant. People's responses to advertising might differ depending on their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, reflective of the particular sentiments and cultural values that are prominent in India.

### ***Bharath Matrimony Holi- Women's day advertisement***

Bharat Matrimony is an online matrimony service that serves the Indian community worldwide. It is one of the largest matrimonial websites in India. It provides a wide range of features and services to assist people in finding their potential life partner. Users can build profiles, conduct preference-based searches for matches, interact with other users, and initiate the marriage process.

The platform provides profiles of individuals from various communities, religions, castes, and regions across India. Users can tailor their search criteria to suit their

needs. It also offers additional features like personalised matchmaking services, horoscope matching, and assistance in the wedding planning process. The matrimony platform faced a severe backlash on social media over its latest ad on Holi, news reports:-

*As the festival of Holi coincided with the International Women's Day on March 8, Bharat Matrimony released an ad which raised the issue of harassment and domestic abuse (The Indian Express, 2023).*

*In the video, a woman - her face spread throughout with colour - is seen washing her face to remove the colour, but cannot take the mark off her face, left behind after celebrating the festival (Money Control, 2023).*

*However, the video did not go down well with netizens as many expressed their anger over linking a severe social issue with a Hindu festival (Outlook, 2023).*

*People are hollering as to why the brand chose to post such an ad during Holi, a Hindu festival, and not during Muslim festivals and against its traditions (Afaqs, 2023).*

*“How dare you link a social message with the Hindu festival of Holi. What has domestic abuse got to do with Holi?” said a user, while another said, “Women harassment is not a festival linked activity but companies like you unnecessarily link such things to Hindu festivals. Stop such gyan on Hindu Festivals” (Business Today, 2023).*

The majority of those who took part in the study held a substantially different viewpoint contrary to the commonly held opinion (5.5%). Also, a significant proportion of respondents (4.2%) believe the advertisement is a publicity stunt, while 3.9% perceive the advertisement as propaganda (as in Table 4).

### **Controversy and beyond - Regulation of advertisements**

The respondents were queried on the extent to which they support advertisement regulation on a 5-point Likert scale of various levels of support coded as – strongly support, support, neutral, oppose and strongly oppose. Most of the respondents either support or strongly support (combined 38.9%) regulating advertisements, with a strong inclination to strongly support the cause (31.3%). On the other hand, those who oppose or strongly oppose regulation make up 38.4% of the responses. The remaining 22.7% of respondents remain neutral on the matter. The question of how

far advertising should be regulated is a complex one, with much previous research pointing at different levels of opinions on regulation – some seek extensive control, self-control, to absolute freedom. These opinions may differ based on individual values, beliefs, and experiences.

### **Conditionality of responses**

The research was also extended to study how individuals would respond, relatively to the varied attitudes they might have, towards advertisements that seemed to have problematic content. As mentioned in the research methodology, variable attitudes (offended, neutral and welcoming) were provided with possible forms of response actions (boycott, support, call for ban etc.) they would engage in, had they been under the given attitude. This would ensure that a single respondent would hypothetically and generally assess the varied choices of action they might want to engage in if they harboured the given attitude towards the content of the advertisement; thus, trying to approach the notion of conditionality of responses as a function of attitudes, besides factors of age and source of first exposure.

### ***Conditionality of age group on offended attitude-borne response actions***

The age characteristics of the sample were evaluated against the responsive action of individuals in an offended frame of attitude to check if there is any correlation between the two, that would prove the conditionality of age as a factor influencing varied responses towards seemingly problematic content in advertisements.

Most members of the age group of 18-40 years would respond by telling others (28.6%), a response that would mean spreading and mobilising one's own opinion or feeling(s) by sharing information related to the problematic content, largely with an offended frame of attitude to gain pluralistic identification and weighted denomination, as opposed to doing the action alone. This is thus an action that can also lead to other responsive actions on a group scale. They would also engage in responsive actions of criticising the content (26.8%), calling for a ban on the product (24.2%), and may even go further as to boycott (22%) the promotion, sale and use of the product being advertised.

Empirical evidence (as in Table 5) suggests that individuals of the age group above 40 years of age will generally resort to criticism (30%) and call for a ban as a government or authority action (28%). They also respond by calling out to the ones affected (20%) by the problematic content of the advertisement. Notably, individuals of both age groups would least prefer to support the advertisement when in an offended attitude.

**Table 5**

***Response action of different age groups with offended attitudes***

Age Group	Action when offended (% of Total Respondents)							
	Support	Calling out Affected Ones	Call for Ban	Disregard	Neutral	Criticism	Telling Others	Boycott
18-40	2.6	21.5	24.2	18.5	6.6	26.8	28.6	22.0
>40	1.7	20	28	0	10.4	30	10.2	15

***Conditionality of source of first exposure on offended attitude-borne response actions***

The source of first exposure to the controversial advertisements and the action that took place when offended by the content were analysed. The sample's (mutually nonexclusive responses) majority had been first exposed to advertisements with problematic content through the original source (1<sup>st</sup> degree) means, out of the total response (N=434) of which 11.5% would respond by criticism, 8.9% by telling others about the content and feeling, and 7.3% by disregarding, amongst others.

Respondents of first exposure through second-degree sources (news stories on the controversy) generally prefer to engage in responsive action through means of criticism (3.4%) and calling out to the affected ones (1.1%, as in Table 6).

However, individuals gaining first exposure through popular opinion or hearsay tend to prefer to act by calling out affected ones (10.8%) and calling for a power-mediated ban on the product (7.1%), than those through social media user interactions reacting out their responsive action by calling for a ban (3.9%), telling others (3.6%), wanting boycott (3.4%) and also by calling out the affected ones (2.7%). Notably, the levels of support that an advertisement containing seemingly problematic content is maximum (3.2%) with the first-degree source of first exposure and falls steeply with later levels of first-exposure sources. Thus, offended individuals respond in ways that would act as inoculums to collective action as opposed to individual responses, outlining the rise of public responsive action.

**Table 6**  
*Response Action of Different Respondents with Offended Attitude through Various First Exposure Sources.*

Source of First Exposure (*total responses)	Number of Respondents Engaged in Offended Attitude-Borne Action (*total responses)							
	Feel Supportive (17)	Calling out affected Ones (94)	Call for ban (62)	Disregard (41)	Neutral (No action) (26)	Criticism (80)	Will tell others (74)	Boycott (40)
News stories on the Controversy (31)	2	5	4	0	1	15	1	3
Original Content (202)	14	28	10	32	16	50	39	13
Popular Opinion or Hearsay (127)	1	47	31	3	3	6	18	18
Social Media User Reactions (74)	1	12	17	2	3	9	16	15

### *Conditionality of source of first exposure on welcoming attitude-borne response actions*

When feeling welcomed with the content (mutually nonexclusive responses, N= 323) of a controversial advertisement, most individuals across all sources of first exposure prefer to feel supportive (57.2%) of the content being seemingly misunderstood as problematic. However, responsive action of disregard (9.9%) and neutral stance (11.1%) followed by criticism (8.3%) are also dominant. Individuals with first-degree sources of first exposure are more likely to respond with criticism (7.4%) and a neutral stance (6.5%), after supporting the content cause. With third-degree sources of first exposure through popular opinion or hearsay, individuals tend to disregard (8.9%) much more than they tell others (2.7%).

Notably, the actions that build collective response and mobilisation among the public like telling others, public criticism and calling out to the ones deemed 'affected', all

enjoy minimal effectivity, thus underlining a wide gap in mobilising action when welcoming as opposed to when offended in attitudes.

**Table 7**  
*Response Action of Different Respondents with Welcoming Attitude by Various First Exposure Sources.*

Source of First Exposure (*total responses)	Number of Respondents Engaged in Welcoming Attitude-Borne Action (*total responses)							
	Feel Supportive	Calling out affected ones	Call for ban	Disregard	Neutral	Criticism	Will tell others too	Boycott
	(185)	(18)	(6)	(32)	(36)	(27)	(17)	(2)
News stories on the Controversy (23)	17	3	1	0	2	0	0	0
Original Content (129)	69	2	4	3	21	<b>24</b>	4	2
Popular Opinion or hearsay (127)	66	12	0	<b>29</b>	9	2	9	0
Social Media User Reactions (44)	33	1	1	0	4	1	4	0

## Discussion and Conclusion

The study focused on evaluating the conditional nature of public responses as a narrower prospect of understanding the inherent dynamics and correlations between media messages and public sensitivity to them. Responses at the wider public level can be seen as an accumulation of individualistic characteristics of responses bound together by common identification, group power and mutual trust.

Innovative and humorous content is generally preferred over exaggeration and emotional appeals in the advertisement message content. However, audience sensitivity exists to the level that they are more likely to have a negative opinion of advertising if it contradicts their established beliefs or goes against what they deem socially acceptable. The forms and frequencies of the first and succeeding exposures determine public engagement and the mode of response and attitude they might develop. A significant portion of the public is first exposed to advertisements with

controversial content through popular opinion, social media interactions and news stories than original content alone.

An advertisement in India, that people largely believed to have problematic content (Layer'r Shot advertisement), they prefer that it be taken down as they felt that the controversial content strongly threatened value systems and that it was an attempt to gain public attention. In another advertisement in India that the least respondents found problematic (Tanishq Ekathvam advertisement), they were affirmative of the holding that the controversy was a direct result of group propaganda of vested interests rather than a real issue. In the case of regulating advertisements, the public generally held a view of mixed opinion, as approximately equal levels of support, opposition and neutral arguments were recorded.

The case of age being a characteristic of the public that conditionally influences the way a response is made, individuals of a younger age group (18-40 years of age) generally preferred telling others while those of an older age group (above 40 years of age) preferred criticism and call for a ban. Also, through comparative analysis of various modes of first exposure and effective attitude duplex (offended and welcoming), offended individuals respond in ways that would act as inoculums to collective action as opposed to individual responses, outlining the rise of a larger public responsive action unlike welcoming individuals who would resort to actions that embody minimal mobilising effect. Thus, individual response formation largely affects the building up of public opinion. This can be effectively viewed with the qualitative framework of the Reasoned Action Approach by Fishbein & Ajzen (2010).

In general analysis of the findings in combination with the framework, viewing the 'controversial response' as the final behaviour, we observe that attitudes of the individual are shaped through anticipatively placing preferences for innovative and humorous content (Instrumental aspect) and by the perceived negative experience of finding content problematic (experiential aspect). This can also be due to reliance on inferior levels of sources of first exposure (social media user reactions and popular opinion) as opposed to first-degree sources (original content), which is being more and more prevalent today.

Subjective behavioural norms are operational with the acceleration of such individual perceptions in social dynamics. When the content affects a highly perceived public value like social norms, religion, culture or minority affairs, dissonant convictions arise on a larger scale. Descriptive norms of other's behavioural action take shape when there is an increased level of a strong offensive response action (call for a ban, boycott, criticism etc.) combined with mobilisation effects of spreading information (telling others and calling out potential victims) in contrast to falling levels of fair

criticism and support and mobilisation for reasonable content being deemed problematic. Injunctive norms are thus shaped by public action, and at times the individual finds themselves with an opinion that conflicts with the widely accepted public opinion, as some controversies are identified to be a direct result of vested interests and group propaganda.

Perceived behavioural control is the perceived autonomy of individual liberty of freedom of expression through media and user reactions freely on social and popular platforms, combined with the perceived capacity of self-efficacy (Albert Bandura, 2010) and social persuasion. The combined effects of all these can result in the intention of an offended attitude-borne unwelcoming response that can fuel a responsive action of a controversial effect in public. Thus, the response (as the action) can be thought of as a function of attitudes and norms, which conditionally influence the former through actual control and intent.

Conditionality may be attributed to being present when something holds valid only when something else holds valid. The conditionality of factors can be understood with a simple AB – alphabet conditionality proposition:-

*If A and B are factors present together and simultaneously in a single system with A preceding B, then B will succeed A.*

*Conversely, B will succeed A, if and only if A and B are factors present together and simultaneously in a single system, and A compulsorily precedes B.*

*Also, B will immediately succeed A, if and only if A and B are factors present together and simultaneously in a single system, A compulsorily precedes B and no factor exists between A and B at all.* Therefore, the conditionality of B immediately succeeding A can be summarised as:- A and B are factors present together and simultaneously in a single system, A compulsorily precedes B and no factor exists in between A and B at all.

Similarly, the conditionality of offended action public responses towards controversial advertisements depend on a multitude of mutually non-exclusive and independent, yet accumulative factors depending on their varied characteristic:-

- Involve out-of-preference and problematic content messages.
- Threaten or misrepresent strongly held norms and beliefs (dissonance effects).



- The falling order of source of exposure brings in more noise and miscommunication between the advertiser (sender) and the public (receiver audience).
- Higher levels of mobilisation that push the public for controversy.
- Provoking strong public actions of call for ban and boycott.
- Suppression of varied opinion as opposed to a widely held public opinion.
- Rise of vested interests and propaganda effects from both public and advertisers.

Future research can focus on quantitative evaluation of responses in the reasoned action approach, comparative analysis of other factors like believability of the brand, durability and popularity of the product, previous history of controversies, response public relations strategies by the brand, role of self-regulatory bodies like Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) etc. to systematically map how public responds to advertisements with controversial public opinion.

Advertising in the mass media is bound to cater to the needs and preferences of the audience (the general public) for increased effectiveness and marketing. Thus, media messages have to take into account how sensitive and receptive the public audience is towards it, for enhanced communication that aims for successful public reception of messages both assonant and dissonant with them and their beliefs.

### ***Conflict of Interest Declaration***

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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