

A STUDY ON THE PORTRAYAL OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN INDIAN TELEVISION AND DIGITAL ADVERTISEMENTS BEFORE THE DECRIMINALISATION OF SECTION 377

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Abstract: Equal and realistic depiction of homosexuality and the LGBT community on Indian media is essential, especially after the recent decriminalisation of section 377. However, there were several forms of media that portrayed homosexuality even when it was still considered a crime. To study various aspects of this portrayal, a research was conducted on the topic where three television commercials and two digital advertisements that portrayed homosexual elements while section 377 was still active, were studied extensively. The method of research used was participant observation on 20 samples between the ages of 18 and 30 and a questionnaire was used as the tool of data collection. The findings that were determined showed the level of awareness of the public on the topic of section 377, the selected advertisements, the portrayal of homosexuality in Indian advertisements as well as their perception on using homosexuality to advance brand image.

Keywords: Section 377, Indian advertisements, Homosexuality, Television advertisements.

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Homosexuality has been a topic of taboo in India for the longest period of time. It was never openly discussed and was always seen as a controversial subject and this could largely be because it was considered a crime until 2018. However, the fact that it was a crime only made people from the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) community as well as other citizens voice their opinions and stand up for their constitutional rights.

The result of this long battle was the decriminalisation of Section 377 on 6th September, 2018 following a landmark decision by the Supreme Court. What was remarkable was the reaction of the various brands and companies in India that came out in support of the decision of the Supreme Court. Any company having a digital platform posted tweets, uploaded posts, changed logos to the rainbow campaigns to show that their company is in full support of the decriminalisation of the section. Social media pages were flooded with brands expressing their opinions on the subject and how this is going to bring about bigger changes to the country. People all over the country were highly impressed by the stand taken by the various brands in this issue but also questioned why this stand could not have been taken at an earlier stage, even before the section's decriminalisation. Some even wondered if the sudden support of the companies was only so that they do not lose face before the public.

There could be various reasons why brands did not previously express their support; however, we cannot deny that there were companies who did openly support the cause. Brands like Fastrack, Myntra and others came out with advertisements and digital ad campaigns that openly portrayed homosexuality, and this was even when it was considered a crime. So one can only imagine the levels of risk taken by these brands to show their support. While in some of these ads the portrayal was only in a partial manner as part of a larger message, other ads sold their products/services using the subject of homosexuality itself. This research tries to analyse various aspects of these ads in detail and also get the public's perspective on the awareness of section 377 and its decriminalisation as well as their opinion on the brands that created these ads even while homosexuality was still considered a crime. The advertisements that are studied in this research paper fall under the category of television commercials and digital advertisements.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Advertising is one of the primary means of promoting a product or a service. Advertisements inform the public about the existence of a certain company or a brand and enables consumers to understand what the particular brand is trying to sell. Advertising is also a means to build the image of the company and to gain customer loyalty and trust, which does not happen all at once but over a period of time. It is through advertising that the company can show the public how its product or service is better than other competing brands.

III. OBJECTIVES:

- To study the portrayal of homosexuality in Indian television and digital advertisements and its relevance to the brand
- To understand the public's awareness, perception and opinions of five chosen advertisements

IV. LIMITATIONS:

- One of the major limitations of the research is the time in which the research was conducted, which was a short period.
- Participant observation was the data collection tool used for this research. The sample size selected for participant observation was small.
- The individuals selected for participant observation were between the age group 18 and 30 years which is very restrictive for the study.
- The individuals for participant observation were restricted to only one city in India - Chennai.

V. RESEARCH DESIGN:

The research design chosen for this particular research is quantitative in nature. Participant observation is being followed in this research paper. Participant observation is being followed by dividing the samples in two groups of ten each. The five selected advertisements are shown to the groups following which they are given a questionnaire of 16 questions to be answered. These questions will then be quantified and the percentage analysis method will be used to represent the data in the form of pie charts and bar graphs. The data will be interpreted using the percentage analysis method. For this research a group of 20 people are divided into two groups of 10 each. Each group is then shown the five advertisements that portray homosexuality starting with the television commercials and then followed by the digital advertisements. The sampling technique used for this particular study is convenience sampling.

VI. FINDINGS:

- 20% of the respondents in the participant observation were between the ages of 25-30 years whereas 80% of the respondents were between the age group of 18-24 years.
- 50% of the individuals were working professionals, 40% of them were students from various fields and 10% of them were unemployed.
- 75% of the respondents have not seen even one of the five advertisements chosen for the study. 15% of them have seen one advertisement and only 10% of them have seen two advertisements.
- 95% of the individuals are aware that homosexuality was a crime whereas 5% of them were unaware about it being a crime.
- 85% of the individuals are aware that homosexuality is no more a crime whereas 15% of them still think it is a criminal offense.
- 50% of the respondents are aware that homosexuality is being portrayed in Indian television advertisements whereas the remaining 50% think that there is no portrayal of the same.
- Only 10% of them were aware whereas 90% of the respondents were unaware that these ads were released at the time when homosexuality was still considered a crime.
- 20% of respondents strongly agree and 70% of them agree while 10% of them disagree those ads portraying homosexuality leads to discussion about the topic with friends and family.
- 65% of them agree, 20% of respondents strongly agree while 15% of them believe these ads do not help the LGBT community.
- Only 15% strongly agree and 55% agree with this, whereas 30% of the respondents disagree that such ads makes viewers to stand up for the social issue of homosexuality.
- 50% of the respondents think that the use of a social topic like homosexuality as a marketing tool is justified while 25% of them disagree and 10% of them strongly disagree with this.
- 55% of the respondents disagree that the LGBT community has been represented in a stereotypical manner in the selected five advertisements whereas 25% of them agree and 10% of them strongly agree that they have been portrayed in a stereotypical manner.
- 20% of the respondents believe that the social message that is trying to be communicated by the brand is lost behind the brand image whereas 55% of the individuals disagree with this.
- 65% of the respondents agree that advertisements portraying homosexuality benefit the LGBT community where 15% of them disagree and 5% strongly disagree.
- 60% of the respondents agree that brands portray homosexuality as a strategy to improve their brand image whereas 25% of them disagree and 5% strongly disagree with this.
- 70% of respondents disagree and 20% of them strongly disagree that Indian audience of all ages are ready to accept such content in ads while 10% of them agree that the people are ready to accept these advertisements.
- 70% of respondents are comfortable watching television advertising content that portrays homosexuality while 30% of them are uncomfortable watching such content.

VII. CONCLUSION:

Section 377 may be decriminalised today, but these five ads taken for extensive study were released to the public at a time when homosexuality was still considered a crime. We can only imagine the levels of risk taken by these brands in standing up for such a cause at such a sensitive period of time. It is undeniable that these ads are created with the motive of increasing sales or improving brand image. Whatever the reason, we must admit that these brands and their advertisements created an impact on society and on the decriminalisation of the section as well. However we must remember that instead of trying to promote homosexuality, the goal should be in spreading awareness and acceptance of the same. Promoting it might create a sense of discomfort among the public, whereas when we try to teach them to be more accepting and open minded towards the topic, a conversation is possible. We might not have reached a point in our country where everyone is ready to watch such content on their screens or readily accept people, but we are without a doubt heading in a positive direction. There needs to be more equal representation of both gay and lesbian couples as well as the portrayal of homosexuality in different situations and not just when it comes to relationships. There are various issues that they face in their workplace or public spaces that need to be better represented in order to make the public more aware. Despite its few flaws, the fact that these brands had the courage to stand up for the cause at a time when homosexuality was still a crime has to be commended.

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