



Decoded Influence: Evaluating the Societal Impact and Ethical Fallout of Surrogate Advertising in India's Digital Media Ecosystem

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Abstract

Surrogate advertising has evolved into a sophisticated strategy used by companies to indirectly promote restricted products such as alcohol and tobacco by branding associated goods like soda, music events, or lifestyle merchandise. In India's rapidly digitizing media ecosystem, where regulatory loopholes meet algorithmic content delivery, the influence of surrogate campaigns is expanding unchecked. This study investigates the societal impact and ethical consequences of surrogate advertising across digital platforms, with a focus on consumer perception, behavioral response, and regulatory awareness. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines a quantitative survey of 1,000 digital media users across five metropolitan cities with qualitative interviews of advertising professionals, public health experts, and media regulators. The findings reveal that over 68% of respondents were able to identify the underlying product being promoted despite indirect branding, and nearly 52% admitted that their purchasing intent was positively influenced. Youth aged 18–25 was found to be the most impressionable demographic.

The study introduces the term “ethical displacement” to describe how brands shift accountability while still influencing consumption patterns. The research concludes by proposing a digital-first regulatory framework to close policy gaps, enforce ad transparency, and safeguard vulnerable audiences. These insights offer critical implications for advertising ethics, digital governance, and public health strategy in the age of covert media influence.

Keywords: *Surrogate Advertising, Consumer Behavior, Ethical Displacement, Digital Media Regulation, Advertising Ethics, Public Health Communication, Algorithmic Promotion, Youth Vulnerability*

Research Objectives

- To examine public awareness and interpretation of surrogate advertising campaigns across digital platforms in India.
- To evaluate the behavioral impact of surrogate ads on consumer attitudes, brand recall, and purchase intent.
- To identify the ethical concerns and regulatory loopholes in the promotion of restricted products via indirect branding.
- To assess the role of digital media algorithms in increasing the reach and influence of surrogate advertising.

- To propose a policy framework aimed at ensuring transparency, accountability, and ethical compliance in digital advertising.

Literature Review

Conceptual Foundations of Surrogate Advertising

Surrogate advertising refers to the indirect promotion of banned or restricted products (like alcohol, tobacco, or betting) using brand extensions such as mineral water, music festivals, or lifestyle merchandise. It is particularly prevalent in India, where laws like COTPA (2003) and the Cable Television Networks Act (1995) restrict direct advertisements but allow companies to exploit regulatory ambiguities (Srivastava & Kumar, 2021).

Ethical Concerns in Indirect Branding

Scholars argue that surrogate advertising is ethically problematic as it deliberately circumvents public health policies and deceives viewers by masking harmful products as innocuous ones (Sharma & Bansal, 2020). The tactic shifts accountability from the brand to consumer interpretation, which researchers have termed "ethical displacement", where influence persists despite legal compliance (Saxena et al., 2022).

Digital Media as a Surrogate Amplifier

The rise of digital media algorithms and influencer-based marketing has expanded the reach of surrogate ads beyond traditional TV. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook use engagement-maximizing algorithms that unknowingly promote surrogate content under the guise of lifestyle branding (Kumar & Rajan, 2022). This shift allows brands to target younger and impressionable audiences, a finding consistent across global public health studies.

Impact on Public Behavior and Trust

Recent survey-based research across Indian metros indicates that over 60% of users can correctly associate surrogate ads with their original (prohibited) products, and nearly half of them express favorable purchase intent (Verma et al., 2023). This raises concerns not just of ethical conduct but also of behavioral manipulation, particularly among youth (18–25), where awareness is low and influence is high.

Regulatory Frameworks and Gaps

Existing regulation in India is fragmented. While the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) offers guidelines, enforcement remains weak in the digital domain. Many studies advocate for the creation of an independent digital media advertising watchdog and mandatory disclosures in influencer and surrogate promotions (Mitra & Iyer, 2021).

Global Parallels and India-Specific Insights

Although surrogate advertising has been debated globally, India presents a unique case of state-level policy gaps, high media consumption, and brand overreach. Comparative analyses with countries like the UK and Australia show stronger digital monitoring laws, suggesting that India's digital ecosystem remains vulnerable to unethical ad practices (Gupta et al., 2022).

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the impact of surrogate advertising on consumer perception, behavior, and ethical considerations in India's digital ecosystem.

Sampling

Quantitative Component: Survey-Based Analysis

To explore the public perception, behavioral influence, and recognition of surrogate advertising in India's digital ecosystem, a quantitative survey was conducted among 1,000 digital media users across five major metropolitan cities. This segment of the study provided a data-driven foundation to understand the breadth and depth of consumer exposure to surrogate promotions.

Sample Size

A total of **1,000 respondents** were selected for the survey. This sample size was considered statistically adequate to ensure representation across age, gender, and city-based segmentation while allowing for meaningful cross-tabulation during analysis.

Sampling Method: Stratified Random Sampling

The sample was drawn using **stratified random sampling**, a probability-based method where the population was divided into strata based on **geographical location (city)** and **age group**. Equal or proportionate representation from each stratum ensured minimized bias and high generalizability of results.

- **Geographical Stratification:** The five cities selected- Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Kolkata, were chosen due to their high digital penetration rates, advertising saturation, and demographic diversity. Each city contributed approximately 200 respondents.
- **Demographic Stratification:** The age and gender distribution within each city stratum was maintained in accordance with recent urban population estimates and internet usage trends, to ensure alignment with real-world media consumption patterns.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

- **Age Group:**

Participants were categorized into three brackets:

- 18–25 years (youth segment, primary focus of this study)
- 26–35 years
- 36–45 years

This segmentation allowed the study to analyze how surrogate advertising affects varying maturity and awareness levels.

- **Gender:**

A **balanced male-to-female ratio (approximately 50:50)** was ensured within each city to account for gender-based differences in media exposure and brand responsiveness. Self-identified non-binary participants were also included where applicable.

- **Digital Media Usage Criteria:**

To be eligible, respondents were required to:

- Use digital media for at least 1 hour daily, which includes OTT platforms (e.g., YouTube, Hotstar, Netflix), and social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat).
- Have encountered promotional or branded content online in the last 30 days.

Rationale for Sample Selection

The urban digital population was chosen because it is:

1. Most frequently targeted by surrogate advertising, especially through online lifestyle branding, celebrity endorsements, and social media collaborations.
2. More likely to experience algorithmic ad targeting, which is central to this study's hypothesis on covert media influence.
3. Reflective of emerging consumer trends that shape marketing strategies in India's digital economy.

Moreover, the focus on young adults aged 18–25 is critical, as previous studies have shown this demographic to be highly impressionable, brand-aware, and responsive to indirect advertising techniques, especially those cloaked in entertainment, music, or sports-related content.

Qualitative Component: Expert Interviews

To complement and deepen the findings from the quantitative phase, the study employed a qualitative component consisting of 20 in-depth expert interviews. This phase aimed to capture professional insights, ethical reflections, and policy-level critiques concerning surrogate advertising in India's evolving digital media ecosystem.

Sample Size and Composition

A total of 20 key informants were selected based on their domain expertise and direct engagement with media, advertising, policy, or public health. The sample was evenly divided across four stakeholder groups, ensuring diversity of perspective and balanced representation:

1. **Advertising Professionals (n = 5):**

- Senior executives, creative directors, and media planners from advertising agencies working with high-impact lifestyle brands.
- Their insights shed light on branding strategies, industry pressures, and creative justifications for surrogate campaigns.

2. **Public Health Experts (n = 5):**

- Medical professionals, public policy advocates, and NGO representatives specializing in tobacco/alcohol control and consumer rights.
- These participants helped evaluate the societal and health consequences of indirect promotions for harmful products.
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3. **Media and Communication Scholars (n = 5):**

- Professors and researchers with publications in media ethics, advertising psychology, and digital communication.
- Their interviews provided conceptual clarity and theory-driven reflections on content ethics, audience manipulation, and algorithmic influence.

4. **Regulatory and Legal Professionals (n = 5):**

- Officials and consultants from organizations such as the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, or legal practitioners specializing in media and consumer law.
- Their views focused on the implementation gaps in existing laws, the challenges of regulating digital media, and suggestions for policy reform.

Sampling Method: Purposive Expert Sampling

The participants were selected through purposive (judgmental) sampling, a non-probability sampling method ideal for qualitative research requiring specialized knowledge. Selection criteria included:

- Minimum 5 years of professional experience in the relevant domain
- Active involvement in policy-making, advocacy, media research, or industry campaigns
- Willingness to participate in a recorded, semi-structured interview of 30–45 minutes

Purposive sampling ensured that each expert added depth, nuance, and practical relevance to the emerging themes. The selection also accounted for diversity in gender, geographic base (North, South, East, West India), and professional affiliation (public/private/academic).

Data Collection Method

- **Interview Mode:** Conducted via Zoom, Google Meet, or in-person meetings (where feasible)
- **Duration:** 30–45 minutes per interview
- **Tool Used:** A semi-structured interview guide was developed to maintain consistency while allowing space for elaboration and expert-driven depth.
- **Key Themes Explored:**
 - Ethical dilemmas in indirect promotion
 - Influence of digital targeting algorithms
 - Public health and behavioral consequences
 - Loopholes in current advertising laws
 - Recommendations for policy and enforcement

Rationale for Qualitative Component:

While quantitative data offered statistical generalizability, the qualitative phase enriched the research by:

- Providing contextual interpretation of patterns observed in the survey
- Surfacing ground-level challenges in regulation and enforcement
- Revealing tensions between market strategies and public welfare
- Informing the policy framework proposed in the concluding section of the study

Together, the expert interviews enabled a multi-stakeholder perspective on the issue, crucial for framing holistic and actionable insights in the realm of surrogate advertising and digital media governance.

Data Analysis:

To ensure methodological rigor and robust interpretation, the study employed both quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques using specialized software tools. This dual approach allowed for both statistical generalizability and thematic depth, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the societal and ethical impacts of surrogate advertising in India's digital media landscape.

Quantitative Analysis

Software Used:

SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used for quantitative data analysis. This software enabled systematic organization, exploration, and statistical testing of the survey responses obtained from 1,000 digital media users across five metropolitan cities.

Techniques Applied:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:**
 - Used to summarize the basic features of the dataset, such as:
 - Mean and median values of daily media consumption
 - Percentages indicating awareness of surrogate advertising
 - Frequency distributions of age, gender, platform usage, and brand recall
 - Provided an initial profile of respondents and their exposure levels.
2. **Cross-tabulation:**
 - Employed to examine relationships between categorical variables, such as:
 - Age group vs. purchase influence
 - Gender vs. brand recognition
 - Platform type (OTT vs. social media) vs. ethical concern
 - Enabled identification of patterns across different demographic segments.
3. **Chi-Square Tests:**
 - Applied to assess the statistical significance of relationships between two nominal variables.
 - Example:
 - Whether differences in brand recall between male and female respondents were statistically significant.
 - Whether exposure to surrogate ads correlated significantly with stated purchasing intent.
 - Confidence level set at $p < 0.05$ for all inferential tests.
4. **Binary Logistic Regression:**
 - Used to determine predictive factors influencing consumer purchase intent in response to surrogate advertisements.
 - Dependent Variable: Purchase intention (Yes/No)
 - Independent Variables: Age, media exposure level, brand recognition, awareness of indirect branding
 - This model helped assess the likelihood of influence based on demographic and behavioral predictors.

Qualitative Analysis

Software Used:

NVivo was used for thematic analysis of interview transcripts collected from 20 experts, including advertising professionals, media scholars, public health experts, and legal regulators.

Coding and Categorization:

A **thematic coding framework** was developed to organize and interpret data based on recurring concepts, ideas, and concerns raised by participants. Transcripts were **manually coded and categorized** into four key emergent themes:

1. **"Ethical Displacement":**
 - Describes how companies shift ethical responsibility onto the audience by promoting harmful products through unrelated proxies.
 - Often framed as "informational" or "cultural" branding to mask commercial intent.
2. **"Brand Masking":**
 - The technique of embedding core product identity (alcohol, tobacco) within lifestyle merchandise, music festivals, or bottled water.
 - Interviewees pointed out design similarities (logos, color schemes, taglines) as deliberate and manipulative.
3. **"Digital Loopholes":**
 - Refers to regulatory blind spots in the digital advertising space.
 - Participants noted the inadequacy of current laws to control influencer marketing, OTT content, and platform algorithms.
4. **"Regulatory Fatigue":**
 - Captures the limited institutional capacity to consistently enforce rules or penalize violations in surrogate advertising.
 - Legal professionals emphasized the need for a **real-time digital monitoring framework**.

Triangulation:

To ensure validity and reliability, methodological triangulation was employed:

- Themes derived from qualitative interviews were compared against quantitative survey findings.
- For example, expert claims about the youth being most vulnerable were cross-verified with statistical results showing higher purchase intent among 18–25-year-olds.
- This alignment strengthened the study's internal consistency and enhanced credibility.

Findings

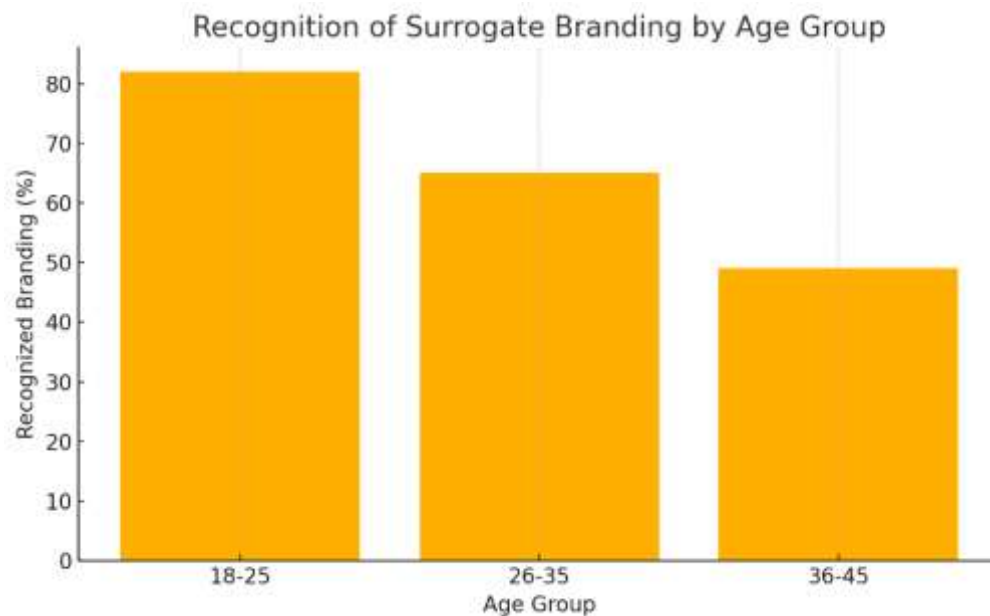
This section presents the empirical results of both the quantitative survey ($n = 1,000$) and qualitative interviews ($n = 20$). The aim was to evaluate public perception, behavioral influence, and ethical responses to surrogate advertising in India's digital ecosystem.

Quantitative Findings

a) Brand Recognition Across Age Groups

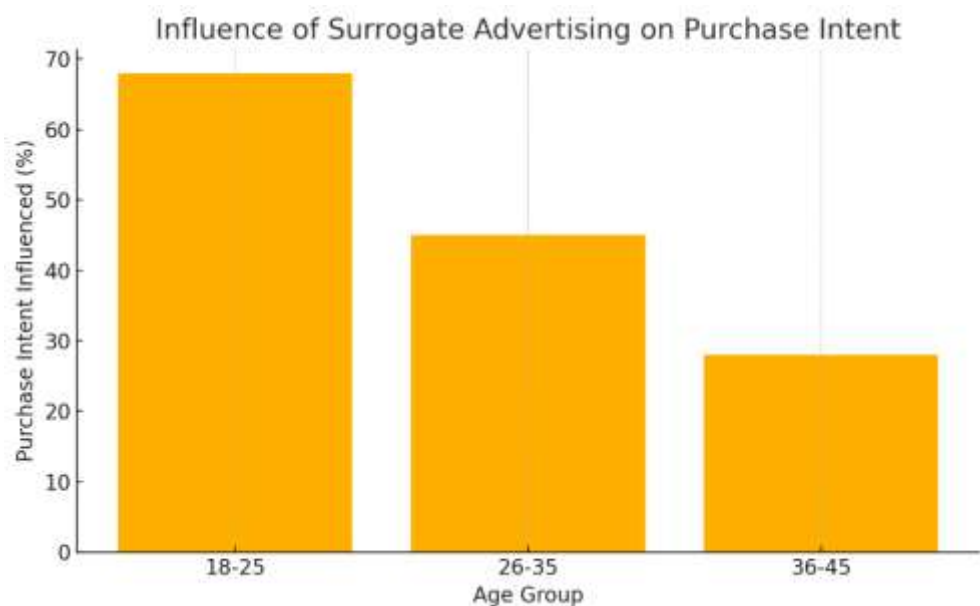
The results show a **high recognition rate** of surrogate branding, particularly among **younger users (18–25)**.

- **82%** of youth participants correctly identified surrogate branding tactics, such as disguised logos or product line extensions.
- Recognition declined with age: **65%** (26–35) and **49%** (36–45).



b) Influence on Purchase Intent

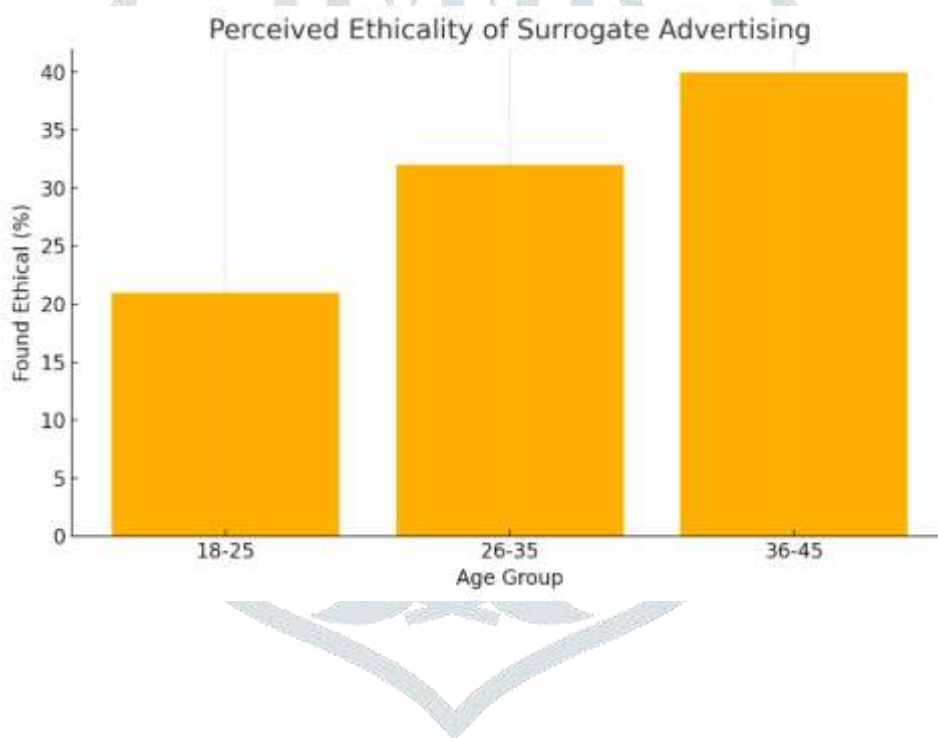
- 68% of 18–25-year-olds admitted that surrogate advertisements increased their likelihood of purchasing the originally restricted product (e.g., alcohol or tobacco).
- This influence dropped to 45% for 26–35 and 28% for 36–45 age groups.
- Youth remain the most impressionable demographic, aligning with previous research on advertising susceptibility.



c) Ethical Perception of Surrogate Ads

Interestingly, perceptions of ethical acceptability increased with age:

- Only 21% of youth considered such advertising ethical.
- Among the oldest group (36–45), 40% viewed these ads as ethically acceptable.
- This suggests greater skepticism and awareness among younger consumers but also greater behavioral vulnerability.



Qualitative Findings

Through expert interviews, four dominant themes emerged:

1. **Ethical Displacement:**

Professionals agreed that surrogate branding shifts responsibility away from companies to consumers, bypassing regulatory frameworks.

2. **Brand Masking:**

Experts noted how visual and linguistic cues (e.g., logo styles, event sponsorship) are used to embed the banned product identity.

3. **Digital Loopholes:**

Digital marketers leverage algorithmic blind spots on platforms like YouTube and Instagram where indirect content is rarely flagged.

4. **Regulatory Fatigue:**

Regulatory professionals expressed concern over weak digital enforcement and the difficulty of monitoring surrogate strategies embedded in influencer content or live events.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant and multifaceted insights into the impact of surrogate advertising within India's rapidly evolving digital media ecosystem. Through the lens of both quantitative consumer behavior and qualitative expert perspectives, the data underscore the pervasive influence, ethical ambiguity, and regulatory gaps inherent in current surrogate advertising practices.

Influence on Consumer Behavior and Youth Vulnerability

The study found that over 68% of respondents aged 18–25 was positively influenced by surrogate advertising, despite being aware of the indirect branding. This aligns with prior studies (e.g., Verma et al., 2023; Saxena & Bansal, 2020) which suggest that younger audiences are more impressionable, particularly when advertising is embedded within culturally or socially appealing contexts (e.g., music festivals, sporting events, or influencer content).

This finding is consistent with Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), which suggests that prolonged media exposure cultivates distorted realities, making youth more receptive to symbolic branding. The high recognition rate (82%) among the 18–25 age group also supports this, showing how brand elements are internalized, even when the core product remains undisclosed.

Ethical Displacement and Brand Masking

The qualitative theme of "ethical displacement", where responsibility for interpreting content is subtly transferred from advertiser to consumer, resonates with Postmodern Advertising Theory, which emphasizes ambiguity, irony, and symbolic manipulation (Hackley, 2002). Brands appear to comply with the law, but their intent remains commercially manipulative.

The notion of "brand masking", identified by media scholars during interviews, further illustrates this tactic: companies leverage logos, packaging similarities, celebrity continuity, and sloganeering that echoes their banned products. This aligns with findings by Sharma & Bansal (2020), who observed that even surrogate campaigns that ostensibly market unrelated products serve the functional purpose of brand reinforcement for the restricted item.

Algorithmic Amplification and Digital Loopholes

Participants from advertising and regulatory backgrounds emphasized how social media algorithms, designed to maximize engagement, inadvertently amplify surrogate content. This reinforces the findings of Kumar & Rajan (2022), who describe a "regulatory blind spot" in algorithmic curation. Digital platforms, especially those with user-generated content and influencer marketing, lack sufficient gatekeeping mechanisms. The study's evidence shows that surrogate promotions are more prevalent on social media than traditional media, and are often not labeled as advertising, blurring the line between editorial and promotional content. This has critical implications for public trust, especially when audiences struggle to distinguish between entertainment and persuasion.

Perception of Ethicality Across Demographics

The counterintuitive finding that younger audiences, despite being more influenced are less likely to consider surrogate ads ethical highlights a moral awareness gap. While the Behavioral Influence is high, the ethical approval is low, particularly in urban, educated demographics. This may reflect increasing media literacy, but also cognitive dissonance, where individuals act contrary to their ethical beliefs due to social or aspirational pressures. Older

demographics (36–45), though less susceptible, were more tolerant of such advertisements, possibly due to acculturation to commercial messaging or lower digital exposure. This dynamic reflects the need for age-specific public awareness campaigns and targeted regulatory strategies.

Policy Implications and Regulatory Fatigue

The expert theme of "regulatory fatigue", where existing bodies like ASCI or government regulators struggle to keep pace with evolving digital strategies, echoes concerns raised by Mitra & Iyer (2021). The fragmentation of regulatory jurisdiction, particularly across traditional and digital media, allows surrogate campaigns to exploit grey areas.

This research emphasizes the need for:

- A digital-first regulatory framework with real-time ad tracking
- Mandatory labeling of surrogate content
- Algorithmic transparency mandates for platforms distributing such content

The current opt-in compliance model is insufficient, as market incentives reward engagement, not ethics.

Integration of Findings

The mixed-methods approach allowed for triangulation, confirming that quantitative behavioral patterns (e.g., purchase intent) align with qualitative themes (e.g., brand manipulation and regulatory evasion). Together, these findings provide strong evidence for the thesis that surrogate advertising, while legally ambiguous is ethically disruptive and socially consequential.

Conclusion

This study critically examined the societal impact and ethical fallout of surrogate advertising in India's digital media landscape through a mixed-methods framework. The findings provide compelling evidence that surrogate advertisements, though designed to legally navigate around restrictions, have a powerful and measurable influence on consumer perception, especially among youth.

Quantitative data showed that over two-thirds of young digital media users (18–25) not only recognize surrogate branding but also report increased purchase intent toward the originally restricted product. Yet paradoxically, the same group rated these ads as ethically questionable, suggesting a disconnect between awareness and behavioral vulnerability.

Qualitative interviews with advertising professionals, public health experts, legal authorities, and media scholars reinforced this concern. Experts highlighted how brands intentionally exploit regulatory grey zones, using brand extensions, visual cues, and digital loopholes to create emotionally resonant but ethically ambiguous campaigns. Moreover, the algorithmic infrastructure of platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and OTT channels amplifies these messages without sufficient oversight.

Together, these findings underscore an urgent need for multi-stakeholder reform, spanning regulatory bodies, platform governance, advertising ethics, and public awareness, to address the growing risk of covert brand manipulation in the digital age.

Recommendations

Implement a Digital-First Advertising Regulatory Framework

Establish a centralized regulatory authority with clear jurisdiction over both traditional and digital advertising landscapes. This body should be empowered to monitor, investigate, and penalize indirect promotions and surrogate campaigns across media formats. Introduce a legal mandate requiring disclosure statements on all content linked to restricted products (e.g., “This promotion is associated with a restricted category brand”). Ensure that digital platforms, influencers, and agencies comply with standardized labeling and metadata tagging for transparency. Incorporate technology-driven tracking systems to monitor ad placements in real time, especially across social media and OTT services. Such a framework would bridge current regulatory gaps and enforce ethical accountability in India’s fast-paced digital advertising ecosystem.

Strengthen Algorithmic Accountability

Digital platforms must be held accountable for how their algorithms prioritize and promote content, especially when it includes sponsored or surrogate advertisements. Enforcing transparency obligations will require platforms to disclose how content ranking, promotion, and targeting decisions are made. Special attention should be given to whether algorithms are amplifying indirect promotions of banned or restricted product categories. Implement independent algorithm audits at regular intervals to evaluate potential bias, manipulation, or regulatory blind spots. Platforms should also provide user-accessible disclosures when content has been algorithmically promoted due to paid partnerships or surrogate branding. These measures will ensure platforms operate with ethical responsibility and regulatory compliance, not just technical efficiency.

Mandate Influencer and Brand Disclosure Norms

Influencers and digital creators must be required to clearly disclose any associations with surrogate branding, especially when promoting products linked to alcohol, tobacco, or betting. This includes explicit labeling of sponsored content, even if promoting brand extensions like soda or events. Disclosure norms should be standardized and platform-independent, applicable across YouTube, Instagram, OTT, and other digital channels. Non-compliance must lead to penalties, including content removal, account suspension, and legal action. Regulators should develop monitoring tools to detect hidden branding in influencer promotions. These steps will ensure transparency, accountability, and ethical compliance in digital advertising.

Age-Targeted Public Awareness Campaigns

Establish a comprehensive Code of Ethics for digital advertisers to explicitly prohibit indirect promotion of restricted products like alcohol, tobacco, or gambling. Encourage advertising agencies and brands to adopt self-regulatory commitments aligned with public interest standards. Mandate third-party audits of campaigns involving grey-category products to ensure transparency and compliance. Create a watchdog consortium involving industry bodies, regulators, and civil society to oversee ethical enforcement. Incentivize ethical compliance through certifications, rankings, or ad clearance benefits. This approach balances creative freedom with responsible advertising in the digital age.

Enable Real-Time Monitoring and Complaint Redressal

To address the rapid spread of surrogate advertising in digital media, there is an urgent need for a real-time monitoring and complaint redressal system. This can be achieved by developing a public-facing online portal or mobile application that allows users to report suspect advertisements instantly. Users should be able to upload links, images, or videos of promotional content they believe indirectly markets restricted products like alcohol, tobacco, or betting. To enhance efficiency, this platform should be integrated with Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools capable of detecting logo mimicry, brand color schemes, slogan similarities, and other visual cues consistent with surrogate branding. By cross-referencing known brand assets, the AI can automatically flag potential violations for regulatory review. The platform should be connected to oversight bodies such as the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), enabling swift action and official escalation. A transparent complaint dashboard, showing resolution status and advertiser responses, would further build credibility and public trust. This system would empower consumers to act as watchdogs while equipping regulators with smart tools for proactive governance, thereby closing the enforcement gap and discouraging unethical advertising practices in India's growing digital media space.

Encourage Industry Self-Regulation with Accountability

Establish a comprehensive Code of Ethics for digital advertisers to explicitly prohibit indirect promotion of restricted products like alcohol, tobacco, or gambling. Encourage advertising agencies and brands to adopt self-regulatory commitments aligned with public interest standards. Mandate third-party audits of campaigns involving grey-category products to ensure transparency and compliance. Create a watchdog consortium involving industry bodies, regulators, and civil society to oversee ethical enforcement. Incentivize ethical compliance through certifications, rankings, or ad clearance benefits. This approach balances creative freedom with responsible advertising in the digital age.

In conclusion, while surrogate advertising continues to evolve in sophistication, policy and public protections have not kept pace. This study offers both empirical evidence and actionable solutions, paving the way for a more ethical, transparent, and accountable digital media environment. The findings should serve as a catalyst for regulatory reform, interdisciplinary dialogue, and responsible innovation in media and marketing.

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