ABSTRACT

1. Background

In the present highly competitive marketing scenario there is a clutter of advertisements in the media such as newspapers, television, magazines, outdoor and cyber media. The advertisers and advertising agencies design the print advertisements for the newspapers and magazines, television commercial films, billboards in such a manner that they should catch the attention of the readers and viewers immediately. There are too many products and services competing for the attention of the public. The advertisers try to make their advertisements in such a way that they will be seen, will stand out, will be noticed and remembered and acted upon leading to the acquisition of the product or service by the public. At times, the advertisers knowingly or unknowingly, make the advertisements which public might consider as indecent, dishonest and full of tall claims. In a situation like this, there has to be a regulatory body to control the content of the advertisements. There is no government agency for pre clearance of the advertisements. But the advertising fraternity consisting of advertisers, media, advertising agencies and allied professions related to the business of advertising have got together and formed a Self Regulatory Body or SRO, known as The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI). The said SRO, ASCI is in existence in India for over 25 years now. Present research is undertaken for the purpose of studying how effective ASCI is in ensuring fairness in advertising and particularly how effective they have been in curbing unethical marketing communication with specific reference to the portrayal of women by advertisers.

The topic for the study is as follows:

“A STUDY OF ADVERTISING STANDARDS COUNCIL OF INDIA (ASCI) AND ITS REGULATORY ROLE TOWARDS CURBING UNETHICAL MARKETING COMMUNICATION WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN BY ADVERTISERS”.

2. Aims and Objectives of the study

- To find out the level of awareness among the general public about:
  a. The existence of ASCI
  b. Role of ASCI
• To find out whether ASCI has been successful or not in curbing unethical marketing communication which appears in the media.
• To study the public perception about the portrayal of women in advertisements, especially when the advertisements portray women only as sex objects.
• To find out the general perception on the relevance of attractive models shown in the advertisements to the product, service and the message.

3. Hypotheses:
   The following hypotheses were formulated for the purpose of this study.
   i. There is a significant difference at the 0.05 level towards the existence of and awareness about ASCI and its role by the general public.
   ii. There is a significant difference at the 0.05 level in curbing unethical marketing communication by ASCI (Advertising Standards Council of India).
   iii. There is a significant difference at the 0.05 level towards the opinion that women are portrayed as sex objects in most advertisements.
   iv. There is a significant difference at the 0.05 level towards the degree of depiction of beautiful and glamorous women not compatible to the relevance of the product/service advertised.

4. Data Collection
   • Primary Data
     Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire and compiled for the purpose of this study. A sample size of 550 respondents were interviewed with the help of a specifically designed structured questionnaire which contained 55 questions. In response to each question, the respondents had to indicate the following:
     ▪ Strongly Agree
     ▪ Agree
     ▪ Undecided
     ▪ Disagree
     ▪ Strongly Disagree
     Responses from the entire sample were analyzed. In addition, responses from the male and female respondents also were compared to study similarities and
differences in responses. Questions relevant to each hypothesis were grouped together and their responses were compiled and studied.

- **Secondary Data**

  From the published information on complaints received by ASCI and by European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA) specifically about the portrayal of women were studied. Complaints upheld and not upheld were compiled and studied. Relevant published literature on the portrayal of women in advertisements, information available on the topic of study in the relevant books, articles, magazines, research papers and websites was all part of literature review.

5. **Analysis of Data and Findings**

All the responses to the questions were analyzed and the following are the main findings:

- 95% of the respondents agreed with the statement that there is frequent exposure to an overdose of advertisements in the media.
- There is a good level of awareness about the existence and role of ASCI.
- ASCI is considered to be fairly successful in curbing the unethical marketing communication.
- 79% of the respondents have felt that ASCI should have more powers to curb unethical marketing communication.
- It is expected that ASCI should conduct more campaigns to educate the public and make them aware of their responsibility to lodge a complaint to ASCI when they notice an advertisement which is indecent, dishonest or unfair to the competition.
- 92% of the respondents have stated that when an advertisement is found to be misleading or indecent, public should complain to appropriate bodies like ASCI. However, the number of complaints received by ASCI in a year on an average in the past three years is under 200. Whereas in a country like United Kingdom, where the public awareness and alertness is high, number of complaints received in a year is over 25,000.
- There are 75% of the respondents who agreed with the statement that some advertisements are degrading to women. A similar percentage of respondents
feel that the civil society, the women’s organizations are not doing enough to curb such indecency in the advertisements.

- In response to questions on use of sex and nudity in the advertisements, upto 80% respondents have opined that there is heavy use of sex and nudity.
- Advertisements making heavy use of sex and nudity are not appreciated by the general public. In fact, companies/products which make use of such indecent portrayal are held in low esteem by the consumers.
- On the whole, women are more concerned about the indecent portrayal of women in the advertisements.
- Modest use of sex appeal and suggestive approach was preferred by 62% of the respondents.
- Unethical marketing communication about products or services through advertisements particularly with indecent portrayal of women was considered to be a bad influence on all age groups such as children, teenagers, adolescents and adults.
- 70% of the respondents associate unethical marketing communication by companies with a lack of corporate social responsibility.
- There is a strong feeling that use of attractive, glamorous models is made in the advertisements even though such use may not be relevant to the product/service.
- 65% of the respondents have said that portrayal of women as sex objects encourages a climate that tolerates violence against women.

6. Hypotheses Validation

Hypotheses validation was done by using two methods as follows:

i. By arriving at weighted mean score for each question and compiling scores for questions relevant to each Hypothesis.

ii. By applying Chi Square test to groups of questions under each Hypothesis.

**All the four Hypotheses are validated, i.e Accepted.**

7. Major Conclusions

- Level of awareness about ASCI, their role and effectiveness is good among the general public.
ASCII has been effective in curbing unethical marketing communication.
ASCII is expected to conduct public awareness enlightenment campaigns more frequently.
There is a strong feeling that in most advertisements women are portrayed as sex objects.
Unethical marketing communication in the advertisements portraying abuse of women has a very bad influence on children, teenagers, adolescents and adults.
There is strong belief that portrayal of beautiful and glamorous women in the advertisements is not compatible to the product / service being advertised.
The indecent portrayal of women in the advertisements encourages a climate of violence against women.

8. Key Recommendations

- ASCII should conduct more campaigns to educate public to react, to lodge complaints when they see dishonest, misleading or indecent advertisements.
- Government should make it essential for the advertisers to have their advertisements pre cleared. This will require vast infrastructure and manpower. Bodies like ASCII should be empowered to undertake pre clearance.
- Government should give more backing, support and recognition to ASCII.
- Advertisers, media and advertising agencies need to be cautious while designing their advertisements so as to avoid or minimize indecent portrayal of women.
- Advertisers, media and advertising agencies should consider it as their corporate social responsibility to avoid unethical marketing communication.
- The target audience or the general public should also be more responsible and responsive in lodging complaints about unacceptable advertisements to the appropriate bodies like ASCII.
- Local and national media, agencies and the advertisers should not blindly follow or copy the trends of advertisements, especially in indecent portrayal of women in the advertisements.
• Topics like Ethics in Marketing Communication, Self Regulation in Advertising should be an important part in the syllabus of Business Management Schools, Universities and colleges offering courses in Mass Communication, Marketing, advertising and Law.

9. Recommendations for further study
• The study undertaken has dealt with the portrayal of women by advertisers. There is scope for further studies related to ethics and truthfulness in
  i. Political advertising
  ii. Advertising of spiritual products
  iii. Role of NGOs, Civil Society, Women’s organization
• Need for broadening the role of ASCI and more close coordination with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of the Government of India
• Legislations, Acts required from the government to curb unethical marketing communication in respect of dishonesty, false claims, unsubstantiated claims by the advertisers.
• Assessment of infrastructure needed in terms of locations, facilities, equipment and trained manpower needed for implementation of pre clearance of advertisements