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Communication

PANDEMIC PERIOD: THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND PRODUCT PROMOTION

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ABSTRACT

Media was at the forefront during the coronavirus pandemic and played a vital role in alerting and creating awareness about the events and issues related to different variants of coronavirus mutating during the same period in various parts of the world. If one watched the television very closely during the lockdown period in India, one could see almost all the top brands stopped playing their advertisements on the television, especially the top brands of cars, motorcycles, jewellery, fashion, and many other brands of FMCG were missing in action. It has been found that many advertisements were misleading as per the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), only a few were found to be true. The likeness in ads during the lockdown period is something the researchers would like to look at, especially the words used by the brands during the pandemic lockdown period, but the public took the ads and message very well.

The Coronavirus Pandemic for the first time shook the global village to its core more than any other pandemic or economic meltdowns the world has witnessed in the recent past. McLuhan's 'Global Village' was torn apart by the coronavirus pandemic, boundaries were sealed across the continents, and the world came to a standstill, people locked themselves in small apartments and secluded themselves to escape death from the deadly virus. People were requested to be indoors and maintain distance while having conversations or moving outside in the initial days of the pandemic. Intra and intercity, village-to-village movements are clamped down as and when required by the local and central governments in most parts of the world. The coronavirus pandemic caused huge economic, health, political, and social damage across the continents and impacted all forms of life, on the other hand, it brought people closer and made them adapt to new ways of life, especially in adapting to new technologies to interact and execute their work from home. There was an increase in online sales especially those of electronic gadgets like laptops, mobiles, and web cameras. The education system, corporate system, judiciary, and many others were for a complete overhaul, with online classes, work-from-home, and online meetings, including the court verdicts, executed with the help of social media apps and new media technologies.

Governments, corporate companies and organisations big or small were all working in coordination to prevent/restrict the pandemic at best by creating awareness among the masses about the deadly coronavirus. Organisations were quick to think out-of-the-box solutions to keep the company going, by making their employees work from home, while it worked for some, many had to shut down. Thousands of employees had been laid off during the pandemic. Media was at the forefront during this pandemic and played a vital role in alerting and creating awareness about the events and issues related to different variants of coronavirus mutating during the same period in various parts of the world. This was apart from individuals worldwide sharing information about various events related to viruses and other issues on social networking sites and mobile apps. Enormous information was shared worldwide during the pandemic, including misinformation and disinformation about the virus variants and other aspects of human suffering.

During the lockdowns around the world media was the only bridge between the state and its people, and it has done its job by highlighting the issues and making the governments act swiftly in many cases, especially in reducing human casualties in different parts of the world. Media played a vital role in differentiating authentic news from fake, especially the fake news that was widely circulating on social networking sites and other applications. Misinformation was the primary cause of most of the untoward incidents that took place in various parts of the world during the pandemic. Social media was extensively used during the pandemic as physical interactions were limited and mostly avoided to protect oneself, content production and sharing of info was common, and people were consuming more media than they do, during normal days. Governments and social networking sites were helpless in containing the misinformation. This pandemic in a way has helped in promoting and creating new awareness about fake news circulation and how to verify it, many news corporations, agencies and small media outlets and publications units today have space in their websites/live broadcastings alerting the readers about the fake news circulation and viral videos (fact check).

If one watched the television very closely during the lockdown period in India, one could see almost all the top brands stopped playing their advertisements during lockdown period on the television, especially the top brands of cars, motorcycles, jewellery, fashion and many other brands of FMCG were missing in action. In other words, it was a great opportunity for the top brands to reach out to the audience with their products to get the required attention and appreciation, a majority of the population was glued to the television sets eager to see and know the latest news from local to global. While many of the brands were out during the initial days of the coronavirus pandemic, many more products and brands were taking the coronavirus pandemic to their advantage to reach out to the viewers; especially those who cannot advertise their products during the normal days in the regional media. These are the local popular brands and products, educational institutions and others that got the opportunity during the pandemic to reach out to the large section audience with their products and services all rallying around and urging the general public about the dangerous coronavirus apart from the product promotion. In a few advertisements, we could see them saluting the brave Doctors, Paramedics, Police, Municipal staff and Media, concurrently promoting their products. Ritwika in one of her articles talks about how "Certain opportunistic brands conducted themselves questionably and launched campaigns and products with dubious claims. Such brands raise valid doubts and questions about marketing and advertising in crises". It has been found that many advertisements were misleading as per the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) only a few were found to be true.

Creativity is dynamic and very special; not everyone is good at it. Creativity is paramount for an advertising agency to thrive in the cutthroat competition they encounter in dynamic markets, the advertising agencies put all their might into making their clientele brands and products more visible and marketable. The agencies also thread a fine line between consumers and clients in fulfilling their needs. Frank Barron (1969) underscored the importance of an idea as "a discovery of something i.e. not only novel but also useful, is relevant or economical elegant or valuable" This definition of creativity is

the closest to the advertisements we have seen during the coronavirus pandemic on various social media platforms, television and print.

The agencies were very conscious of their ads during the pandemic. One would like to see more such ads in various forms of media from all internationally reputed brands. The advertising agencies work around the clock by considering the demographic, sociopolitical, cultural, and contemporary issues we encounter, i.e., seen and foreseen. Many advertising agencies worldwide follow what Murray (1980) said about creative advertising, in his opinion creativity must possess meanings, implications and symbolic equivalents of things and ideas for which an advertiser has planned to produce an advertisement.

The likeness in advertisements was something the researchers would like to look at if one analysed the words used by the brands during the pandemic, but the public took the message very well. Avi Dan CEO of Avidan Strategies quotes YouTuber Microsoft Sam's edited video of "COVID-19 commercials that all use exactly the same tropes in response to the pandemic. The endless recitation of phrases like "times like these," "more than ever," "home," "family," and "here for you." They are laden with clichés such as, "we've always been there for you," "we may be apart, but we can stay connected," "we'll get through this together." One may argue about the similarity of words but the presentation differed in content and style. It has been proved according to the study conducted by Grewal and his team that "comparative ads generate more attention, encourage greater message processing, and increase brand-name recall. Although they also concluded that comparative ads generate lower levels of source credibility, they did not find a significant effect on ad, or message, believability nor on informativeness".

Other ads like Lifebuoy by Unilever and Dettol took advantage of the situation in propagating the importance of washing hands regularly with their products such as hand wash gel or any other hand wash gel to protect oneself and family from the deadly coronavirus. This is the first time if one could say, that the top brands were not only promoting their products but also asking the viewers to use any other product that will help them keep safe. Brands like Asian paints, Axis Bank, Cadbury, WhatsApp, Facebook, and many others were doling out the ads that were considered appropriate to the situation, but with the same words.

Image Source- www.linkedin.com

Few brands have returned to the old ads found to be relevant during the pandemic. In media ecology none of the data that is generated gets lost, it is that at times it may lie dormant or at times people find a new way to use the old information in new formats (digital). This was evident during the pandemic as many brands have turned to their old ads and found them relevant. The other advertisements that one could see regularly during the lockdowns are those of educational institutes, life insurance and other health-related products.

I like to bring your attention to a few brands that were trending

on various social media platforms i.e. Facebook and WhatsApp and are appreciated by the majority for their creativity. These advertisements were from the brands that one would least expect especially during the initial days of the deadly coronavirus and more importantly during the lockdown period. Some of these brands were the leading car manufacturers like BMW, AUDI, MERCEDES, VOLKSWAGEN, JAGUAR HYUNDAI, and MCDONALD'S, and COCA-COLA all linking their product promotion and creating awareness about coronavirus (COVID-19). All these advertisements have one common message 'quarantine oneself', 'safe at home', 'Let's part to be together', 'social distancing' 'Prevention is better than cure' and other relevant messages. A few advertisements were trending and became viral on social media platforms compared to others. Especially advertisements by BMW, AUDI, and McDonald's, these ads were well received by the public for their almost similar creativity without any complaints, other brands were different in their approach to brand promotion and creating awareness among the public about the coronavirus.

When the entire world community especially the scientific community and medical fraternity was talking about reducing the curve during the pandemic (coronavirus curve) BMW came up with an advertisement that enlightened the general public in the most common jargon. With one opening shot the advertisement explains all without losing its brand value. We see a beautiful scene with a hill covered with trees and bushes and a road with a curve, we have a text in the foreground that reads.

The Only Curve That Matters, Is The One We Need To Flatten

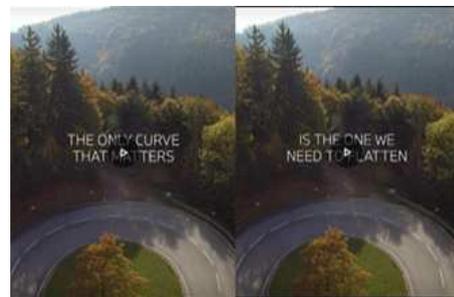Stay Home And Stay Safe, Today We Drive Forward Without Driving At All Bmw

Image Source -. https://www.youtube.com

The other advertisement is from AUDI, the car manufacturer that was able to convey the message to the public by using the brand logo about the situation we were in during the lockdown, many other brands followed the same during the pandemic like Volkswagen, McDonald's, Coca-Cola Mercado Libre and Brothers.
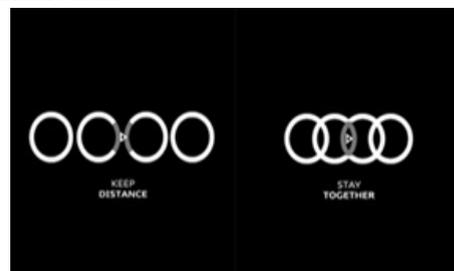

Image Source- www.adsoftheworld.com

The other advertisement is from Mercedes, which has its way of creating awareness about the pandemic and thanking all those who risk their life to save others. The first shot explains it all, which is about the product, we see a house and a Mercedes car parked in front. In the foreground we see a text that reads

ANOTHER MERCEDES THAT STANDS FOR SAFETY this is followed by the text that reads #STAYHOME then followed by THANK YOU cashiers, firefighters, medics, police officers, caregivers, Thanks to everyone Who keeps going, Thanks to everyone else for standing still.

Image Source- https://youtu.be/Uoc-Zi45rZI

All these and many such known and unknown brands were trending on various social networking sites and other mobile applications, reaching audiences across the globe and creating awareness. Iva Dan says "Sameness has been a problem for a while and one of the reasons for the decline on Madison Avenue. At times, and especially in recent years since the last recession, it seems that agencies have all lost the desire to innovate and the courage to stand apart". This point was true for most of the coronavirus period given the situation one was in and the best way for the brands to stay in touch and be relevant was to use the same words that were part of the pandemic, the brands differed in themes and ideas in promoting their products in the simplest way they can by utilising the available resources. Though it became a cliché after a point, it was a visual treat for the general public to see how brands interplay with words and visuals to convey the same message.

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