

ADVERTISING PUFFERY IN THE INDIAN EDUCATION SECTOR: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ELECTRONIC AND PRINT MEDIA PUFFERY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nandan Kumar Dey

Research Scholar, Dept. of Marketing and Strategy, IBS Hyderabad, Telangana, India

ABSTRACT

In this highly competitive Indian educational product market, marketers are continuously searching for innovative ideas to sell their products. As a consequence, advertising puffery has been extensively used a tool to acquire a new customer. This article aimed to explore the various types of media used in advertising puffery in the Indian education sector. With this regard, a list of consumer complaints was collected from the Advertising Standards Council of India's (ASCI) official website and analyzed. The results revealed that traditional print media is predominantly used for puffery in advertisements in the Indian education sector. As far as advertising puffery through electronic media is concerned, digital media is considered as the most notorious media followed by Television & YouTube, Facebook & Instagram, and Website. Comparing the results of both the traditional print media and various electronic media in promoting the Indian education sector, it was evident that digital media was extremely responsible for spreading advertising puffery. Based on the literature review and consumer complaint data analysis, the author has given few recommendations which may be useful for future research.

Keyword: *Puffery, Advertising, Print Media, Electronic Media, Digital Media, Education, India.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The sellers and marketers are continuously searching for new and better ways to increase their sales volume for any product or service. Business entities use puffery as a key marketing tool allowing them to advertise their product/brand as “The Best”, “No. 1”, “The Better Choice” or even “The World’s Most Effective”, etc. Advertising puffery is also seen as one of the most common practices to promote the Indian education sector nowadays. According to the annual report 2019 – 20 by ASCI (The Advertising Standards Council of India), the Indian education sector has the maximum no. of advertising puffery (i.e., 2000 no. of misleading advertisements), followed by the healthcare sector (787), Personal Care (202), Food & Beverages (175), and so on. Despite this, advertising puffery has remained as one of the under-researched areas [1]. Therefore, this article aimed to explore the ASCI Complaint Analysis Report – Q3 FY (2020-2021). From the analysis, it has been observed that both electronic and print media are extensively used to promote the education sector in India. A comparative analysis of electronic and print media advertising puffery has been done.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Advertising puffery is defined as “advertising or other sales representations which praise the item to be sold with subjective opinions, superlatives, or exaggerations, vaguely and generally, stating no specific facts” [2]. It is the language used by marketers to describe their brands in advertising and sales presentations. Similarly in India, as per ASCI, the advertisements must be truthful and justifiable. The decision on whether an advertisement is justifiable or unjustifiable is objective whereas, deception or untruthfulness is subjective that resides in the mind of the

consumers. The untruthful (deceptive) and unjustifiable advertisements are commonly considered as advertising puffery [3].

How to identify advertising puffery?

According to Russo et al. [4], the first and the most important presumption in misleading advertising is the discrepancy between the claims of an advertisement and the facts of actual product/brand performance. Hence, the misleading status of an advertisement is initially decided based on the occurrence of this discrepancy. The second presumption is that consumers cannot correct some claims by themselves because verification is technically impossible or prohibitively expensive. There are three alternative views of advertising puffery: *fraud*, *falsity*, and *misleading*. *Fraud* focuses on the advertiser and assumes a deliberate intent to create false beliefs about the brand. *Falsity* in advertising refers to the existence of a claim-fact discrepancy (e.g., price and availability claims, as when a vendor advertises a product at a reduced price). The third view, *misleading*, focuses exclusively on consumer beliefs. Thus, falsity refers to a claim-fact discrepancy whereas, misleading refers to a belief-fact discrepancy.

The six levels of advertising puffery are commonly used in promoting the education sector in India. Based on the presumed strength of claims, from the strongest to the weakest claims, and from the least to the most likely to imply (Preston, 1996), these are ordered level-wise as follows:

- Level 1: “The Best” - as in “The Best / No.1 / The Largest”
- Level 2: “Best possible” - as in “More than 100%”
- Level 3: “Better” - as in “Higher or lucrative packages/ 94% Placement Offers”
- Level 4: “Especially good” - as in “excellent/world-class”
- Level 5: Good, as in “good”, and
- Level 6: “Subjective qualities”- as in “Placement support / Job assistance”

Though advertising puffery is broadly used through both electronic and print media nowadays, various electronic media are extensively used leading to more no. of advertising puffery. To curb this activity, it is essential to do a comparative analysis of both these media along with scrutinizing the different types of electronic media.

3. METHODS

3.1 Data and Sample

ASCI Complaint Analysis Report – Q3 FY (2020-2021) was downloaded from ASCI’s official website [5]. The raw data consisted of a list total of 1230 complaints from all sectors. Complaints were obtained from two sources namely, direct sources and Suo Motu. Two complaints were excluded from the list as the sector was undefined. Hence, from the list of 1228 complaint data list, 750 complaints were on the Indian education sector, followed by the healthcare sector (149), Food & Beverages (97), Personal Care (31), and so on. From this list, Indian education sector data (750) was filtered out. Out of these 750 complaints, two complaints were excluded as the media type (electronic/print) was not mentioned. Thus, the sampling frame consisted of a list of 748 (n) complaints (data) from various educational institutions of India including higher education. Microsoft Excel was used to analyze the data.

Table – 1: Sample Profile

Total Sample Size (n)		= n1 + n2 = 748	
Complaint Source	Count	Percentage (%)	
Direct	11	1.5%	
Suo Motu	737	98.5%	
Media Types	Count	Percentage (%)	
Print (n1)	533	71.3%	
Electronic (n2)	215	28.7%	
Major Types of Electronic Media	Count	Percentage (%)	
		Out of ‘n’	Out of ‘n2’
Digital	194	25.9%	90.2%
Television and YouTube	16	2.1%	7.4%

Facebook & Instagram	4	0.5%	1.9%
Website	1	0.1%	0.5%

3.2 Data Analysis and Results

Out of 748 complaint data of the Indian education sector, 11 complaints were from direct sources and 737 complaints were from Suo Motu source. Out of the total no. of complaints (n=748), 71.3% (n1=533) of the total no. of complaints were on print media whereas, 28.7% (n2=215) complaints were on electronic media. The complaints on electronic media was consisting of various media types such as Digital media (194), Television & YouTube (16), Facebook & Instagram (4), and Website (1) (See Table – 1 and Chart – 1). The percentage of various electronic media complaints was calculated on the total no. of complaints (n=748) and the complaints on electronic media separately. Of the total no. of complaints, 25.9% was on digital media, 2.1% on Television & YouTube, 0.5% on Facebook & Instagram, and 0.1% on Website. Similarly, out of the total no. of electronic media complaints, 90.2% was on digital media, 7.4% on Television & YouTube, 1.9% on Facebook & Instagram, and 0.5% on Website (see Table – 1).

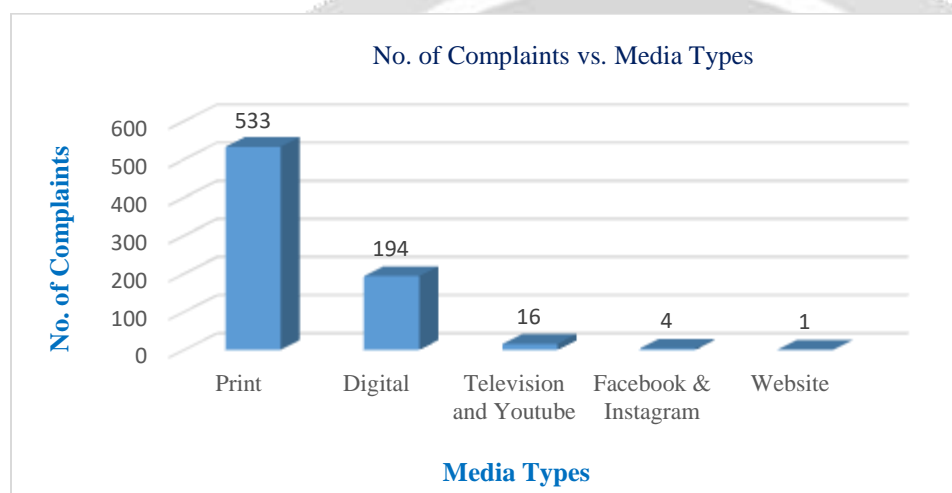


Chart – 1: No. of Complaints vs. Media Types in Indian Education Sector based on the Data from ASCI Complaint Analysis Report – Q3 FY (2020-2021).

Besides, the educational institutions with more than two registered complaints against them were filtered out from the database and analyzed. As a result, 11 no. of educational institutions have a total of 38 complaints against them were found (see Table – 2).

Table – 2: Media-wise Registered Complaints against Indian Educational Institutions having more than two complaints

Sl. No. *	Total No. of Complaints Registered	Print Media	Electronic Media			
			Digital Media	Facebook & Instagram	Television and YouTube	Website
1	6	0	6	0	0	0
2	4	4	0	0	0	0
3	4	1	0	1	2	0
4	3	1	2	0	0	0
5	3	0	3	0	0	0
6	3	0	3	0	0	0
7	3	3	0	0	0	0
8	3	0	3	0	0	0
9	3	0	3	0	0	0
10	3	0	0	0	3	0
11	3	0	3	0	0	0
Total	38	9	23	1	5	0

Media-wise (%)	-	23.7%	60.5%	2.6%	13.2%	0.0%
----------------	---	-------	-------	------	-------	------

* N.B.: The name of the institutions are not disclosed here.

According to Table – 2, out of 38 no. of complaints, 23.7% were on print media. Similarly, concerning various types of electronic media, digital media was responsible for the highest percentage of complaints (60.5%), followed by Television & YouTube (13.2%), Facebook & Instagram (2.6%), and Website (0.0%). The order of the individual electronic media-wise percentage results was found consistent with that of the previous results (also see Table – 1).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From Table – 1 & 2, it is evident that marketers are still dependent on the traditional printing media (71.3%) as a tool to promote educational institutions in India. That may also mean that in this digital era, traditional printing media play a dominating role in spreading advertising puffery in an emerging market like India. Comparing the results of both the traditional print media and electronic media in promoting Indian education sector, it is clear that digital media is extremely (25.9% & 60.5%) responsible in spreading advertising puffery followed by Television & YouTube (2.1% & 13.2%), Facebook & Instagram (0.5% & 2.6%), and Website (0.1% & 0.0%). But as far as only the electronic media is concerned, digital media is considered as the most notorious media (90.2%), followed by Television & YouTube (7.4%), Facebook & Instagram (1.9%), and Website (0.5%) (See Table – 1). Advertising puffery observed through website medium is the lowest among all types of electronic media puffery.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Educational institutions in India should understand the negative impact of advertising puffery on people's minds and society. They should try to satisfy their consumers by taking care of consumers' expectations and sell educational products under the fullest extent of disclosure.
- In the educational sector, branding should be done with extreme care, i.e., advertisers should say only what is true and the brand should be built without hype.
- Puffery in advertising as a promotional tool might not be very effective in education branding, because when we puff, that may mean we are touting.
- In education branding, gradual good works and patience might be considered as the key to success for an educational institution, and it may take more than years to build a successful education brand. Being mostly nonprofit, educational institutes have to be much more careful about the perceived commercialization and commoditization of their marketing and branding efforts.
- Some institutions in the process of branding portray themselves as "The best," "World-class," "The leader", etc. and may end up handling severe consumer complaints. The increasing trend in brain drain can be curbed by controlling the puffery in advertisements.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I like to thank all the professors and scholars who encouraged and guided me to explore advertising in puffery in the Indian education sector. I would also like to thank the ASCI officials and the reviewers for their commendable efforts.

7. REFERENCES

- [1]. Punjani, K. K., Kumar, V. R., & Kadam, S. (2019). Trends of puffery in advertising—a bibliometric analysis. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*.
- [2]. Preston, I. L. (1996). The great American blow-up: Puffery in advertising and selling. *University of Wisconsin Press*.
- [3]. Gao, Z., & Scorpio, E. A. (2011). Does puffery deceive? An empirical investigation. *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 34(2), 249-264.
- [4]. Russo, J. E., Metcalf, B. L., & Stephens, D. (1981). Identifying misleading advertising. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 8(2), 119-131.
- [5]. <https://www.ascionline.org/>