



# A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF CONSUMER CULTURE AND MESSAGE ETHICALITY OF TELEVISION COMMERCIALS FOR SELECT FMCG PRODUCT CATEGORIES

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## **Abstract**

*Consumer culture helps one understand the consumers' consumption choice and their behaviour towards a product or a brand, built by their culture<sup>[1, 2]</sup>. In the study proposed by Triandis & Gelfand (1998)<sup>[3]</sup>, it is mentioned that India and other East Asian countries fall under the Vertical Collectivist societies because people focus on enhancing the cohesion and status of their in-groups by sacrificing their own personal goals and by getting influenced by their peer groups. This contradicts the present finding. This paper attempted to examine consumer culture and the message ethicality of television commercials, for select FMCG product categories. Content analysis was done to study the commercials of five product categories with their top five brands, which were chosen based on the sale and the preference of the people. 25 commercials were coded for the degree to which it emphasized five benefits. The data for the TARES test were collected using the Intercoder reliability test. Ranking method was chosen to rank the commercials for their adherence to the TARES principles. The result exposed that most of the brands stand out only because of their exaggerated commercials. Only certain brands of a product have adhered to the theory. The rest have failed to fit in, though they stand as the top selling brands in India. The study also revealed that the Indian commercials these days depict both vertical and horizontal cultures. This result deviated from the previous study affirming that the commercials are persuading their targeted audience by using both the vertical and the horizontal orientations. Moreover, the Indian consumers have proven to progress towards attaining an independent worldview.*

*Keywords: Consumer culture, FMCG, Message ethicality, Television commercials, TARES test*

## **I. Introduction**

Researchers such as Triandis and his colleagues<sup>[4], [5], [6]</sup>, noted that along with the constructs of Individualism and Collectivism, the societies are divided into horizontal (emphasizing equality) and vertical (emphasizing hierarchy). Cultural understanding and knowledge are essential to comprehend marketing. Hence for the study, using cultural artifacts such as television commercials, the consumers' reaction towards a brand and a product



was considered. Certain times the message delivered by a commercial will make the audience think, decide and then go for the product. This results in a positive response. Hence such advertisements which makes a consumer think, persuade and act will not be called unethical. At the same time, if the advertisers try to fool the audience by showing some impractical things, it definitely will be known as unethical commercials. These days the television commercials are exaggerated and puffed up so much making it clear that the advertisers either lack knowledge about the norms and principles of advertising or are unwilling to adapt them into their commercials. At times exaggerated commercials are necessary to let the consumer know about the quality of a product<sup>[7]</sup>.

For the study, Fast moving consumer goods (FMCG), popularly known as Consumer packaged goods (CPG) as a sector was chosen as it cannot be ignored because of its massive sales throughout the year<sup>[8]</sup>. Culture is portrayed in the commercials of this sector to influence consumerism. Understanding culture will help in knowing the choices of the consumers, which can then be utilised to increase the demand and sale of a particular product. People buy a product or a particular brand based upon their culturally built choices (Nikhil Khanna 2015)<sup>[9]</sup>. Several researchers have studied how ethical the messages in the advertisements are. For this research study, the message ethicality of the television commercials was tested using **Baker and Martinson's (2001) TARES test**, an ethical advertising tool that allows the advertiser decide whether the commercial should be broadcasted or not. It asks if it is;

**Truthful** to its audience

**Authentic** in representations

**Respectful** in its persuasion

**Equitable** to all the recipients and is

**Socially responsible**<sup>[10]</sup>.

## II. Objectives of the study:

- ❖ To analyze the extent to which the TARES principles are manifested for truthfulness, authenticity, respect, equity and social responsibility towards the message ethicality of the commercials
- ❖ To examine the consumer culture of the television commercials based on the ad coding categories

## III. Literature Review:

Matrade Chennai (2005)<sup>[11]</sup>, studied consumer behavior in India, its aspect and found that Indian consumers are alarmed with their traditions and values. The study found out that Indians consider their family advice in order to purchase something. This aspect is slightly changing. A study proposed by Shavitt and Cho(2016)<sup>[12]</sup> talks about the distinction between the vertical and horizontal culture with regard to the advertising appeals. This study can be combined with the previous findings of Triandis and his colleagues<sup>[13], [14], [15]</sup>, who had addressed cultural



differences with the orientations of individualism and collectivism. They noted that along with the constructs of Individualism and Collectivism, the societies are divided into horizontal (emphasizing equality) and vertical (emphasizing hierarchy). In their study, it is mentioned that countries such as the U.S., Great Britain, and France, come under Vertical-Individualist (VI) societies, and countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Australia, fall under the Horizontal-Individualist (HI) societies. It is specified that India and other East Asian countries fall under the Vertical Collectivist societies because people focus on enhancing the cohesion and status of their in-groups by sacrificing their own personal goals and by getting influenced by their peer groups, whereas Brazil and some other Latin American contexts can be put under the Horizontal-Collectivist (HC) societies. The Indian television commercials were studied for this research paper to check whether India still lies as a Vertical Collectivist society.

Several researches were done to study the differences between the cultural variables and the persuasive appeals. A research done by Shavitt, Johnson, and Zhang (2011)<sup>[16]</sup> has emphasized on the coding categories which include five benefits to code the advertisement. This had assisted in testing the culture that is now portrayed in our commercials. Study about this difference has facilitated in understanding the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic, or independent and interdependent, cultural variables. In individualistic (IND) or independent cultures, people tend to prefer independent relationships with others and to subordinate the goals of their in-groups to their own personal goals, while in collectivistic (COL) or interdependent cultures, people tend to prefer interdependent relationships to others and to subordinate their personal goals to those of their in-groups (Hofstede 1980)<sup>[17]</sup>. Studies on advertising and consumer persuasion have recognized that in IND cultures and contexts, the ad appeals emphasize on independence, uniqueness, and personal rewards and goals. In contrast, COL cultures and contexts, the appeals emphasize on group goals, interdependent relationships, harmony, conformity, and consensus<sup>[18], [19], [20]</sup>.

Advertising has turned out to be a massive institution and a major symbol in exposing us to a number of messages. It is evident that we live in an advertising oriented and consumer based culture<sup>[22]</sup>. It is always important for the advertisers to give away ethical messages to get the attention of the target audience. Message ethicality in the commercials play an essential role in placing and positioning a product and its brand in the minds of the people. Andersen (1978)<sup>[23]</sup> defined *ethical* persuasion as "a communication activity that unites people ... [while it] permits maximum individual choice" (p. 3). For Andersen, ethical persuasion is an effort "to effect a desired voluntary change in the attitudes and/or actions of" (p. 7) those to whom particular persuasion efforts are directed.

Baker and Martinsons TARES Test (2001), a five-part test, establishes the ethical boundaries for persuasive communications. The five interconnected principles include: *truthfulness* of the message, *authenticity* of the persuader, *respect* for the person being persuaded, *equity* of the persuasive appeal, and *social responsibility* for the common good. According to Baker and Martinson<sup>[24]</sup>,



Although professional persuasion is a means to an instrumental end, ethical persuasion must rest on or serve a deeper, morally based final (or relative) end. We suggest that these five principles, taken together, comprise the legitimate end of professional persuasive communications and that these communications are ethical and morally justified if they adhere to the principles of truthfulness, authenticity, respect, equity, and social responsibility. (p. 172)

For the study, the message ethicality of the commercials of five FMCG (Soap, Biscuit, Toothpaste, Health Drinks, and Detergents), with their top five brands were studied to see their adherence to the TARES Principles.

#### IV. Research Methodology

##### 4.1 Research Design

The present study, “Consumer Culture and message ethicality of television commercials. Content analysis of select FMCG product categories”, was aimed at analyzing how ethical the messages of the selected 25 commercials were. Content analysis was done to analyze the message ethicality of the commercials and to find the consumer culture depicted in all the selected commercials. Hence this study was done in a descriptive analytic design.

The commercials of five product categories and their top five brands were chosen to analyze their message ethicality. Ranking between 1 and 5 was done to rank the brands based on five principles of the TARES test. 25 commercials were coded for the degree to which it emphasized five benefits (Status, Relationship, Pleasure, Uniqueness, and Utilitarian). A checklist approach was chosen to ensure the existence of five benefits and to check whether they exist in the commercials. Each benefit falls either under horizontal or vertical or sometimes under the both. This helped in analysing the role of consumer culture portrayed in the commercials.

##### 4.2 Post-test with controlled group

In order to avoid bias in ranking, an *Intercoder reliability test* was conducted among three coders. The ads were coded by three post graduate students of different programs. Each coder coded the commercials to the TARES principles by ranking the five brands between 1 and 5. The mean values of the TARES principles were then aggregated to content analyze the brands adherence to the theory.

##### 4.3 The products and their top five brands selected for the study

Soaps	Biscuits	Toothpaste	Health drinks	Detergents
Dove	Parle – G	Colgate	Bournvita	Surf Excel
Lux	Britannia Milk Bikis	Pepsodent	Complan	Ariel
Mysore sandal	Sunfeast Farmlite	Sensodyne	Horlicks	Tide



Pears	Priyagold CNC	Oral-B	Boost	Rin
Medimix	Anmol Butter Bake	Dant Kanti	Amul PRO	Henko

#### 4.4 The coding categories (5 benefits)

##### 4.4.1 Status Benefits:

- a. Luxurious/wealthy, prestige, status image
- b. Foreign appeal (or using a foreign model/spokesperson)
- c. Impressing others
- d. Prominence/success
- e. Product symbolizes that user is superior to other person(s)

##### 4.4.2 Relationship benefits

- a. Show your love, friendship,
- b. Close connections with others
- c. Warmth or nurturance (e.g., taking care of another person)
- d. Intimacy (but not necessarily sexual pleasure)
- e. Group identity or working toward group goals
- f. References to the expectations of other person(s)
- g. Charity/community giving.

##### 4.4.3 Pleasure/Excitement/Fun benefits

- a. Pleasure
- b. Having fun/enjoyment/being playful
- c. Sensual/sexual; includes sensual references to taste or scent/aroma
- d. Excitement (including sports excitement)
- e. Providing an engrossing emotional experience

##### 4.4.4 Uniqueness/Differentiation benefits

- a. Express yourself,
- b. Being individual and/or self-reliant
- c. Different or unique
- d. New/trendy/modern
- e. Describing the product or user as the alternative to the standard.

##### 4.4.5 Utilitarian benefits

- a. Practical/functional
- b. High quality product components/performance



- c. Quality assurance (warranty, guarantee, seal)
- d. Price or value
- e. Utility/comfort/durability
- f. Health
- g. Convenience
- h. Taste good (except highly sensual appeals, which belong as Pleasure benefit)

#### 4.5 Sample Selection:

'Non-Probability sampling technique' was chosen for the study. 25 commercials that were selected for the research work were the samples, hence 'purposive sampling method' was chosen.

#### 4.6 Coding procedure:

The 'lot method' helped in determining the other two coders without any bias. Coders performing their postgraduate in mass communication were chosen as they would have enough knowledge in the area of advertising to avoid error in data collection. With the help of the two coders, ranking was done for the TARES test and the mean values were aggregated to compare which brand adheres to the theory and hence stands as the top leading brand in India.

### V. Results

Baker and Martinson's (2001) TARES test, worked as the best ethical model to examine the message ethicality of the selected commercials.

#### 5.1 Soap:

On comparing the five brands, it is clearly visible that only *Dove* has adhered the best to the theory, i.e. to all the five TARES principles. *Dove* runs first as the top selling soap brand in the Indian market. The creator of the commercial had added sensitivity appeal to show people the acidic nature of soaps "But Dove is Different". Rather than sticking onto beauty, hygiene, fragrance and other common thematic frames, this brand has given importance for 'pH value', capturing the hearts of the viewers. Both the thematic frame and the appeal that are shown in the commercial have coded it under the uniqueness benefit. Hence it stands out in its sale. *Dove* leads with 21.5% as the highest market share of sales. On considering the consumer culture portrayed in the commercial of *Dove*, of the five benefits it has expressed the pleasure, uniqueness and utilitarian benefits. This shows that the brand has focused on revealing both equality and hierarchy to gain the attention of the audience. This has also made the brand stand out. *Medimix*, on the other hand, has partially adhered to the TARES principles and it has depicted only the pleasure and utilitarian benefits. The ad creator has failed to talk about the other benefits making it fall slightly lower than the other brands. *Lux*, *Mysore Sandal* and *Pears*, though they come under the top selling brands, have ignored the principles. Of these three brands, *Pears* is the brand which has adhered to all the benefits except for the status benefit. This clearly settles that the commercials are exaggerated in order to attract its target audience and to get an increase in sales. Such commercials rise the preference of the people.



TABLE 1 Mean values of the TARES principles: (The lowest value has the highest ranking and the highest value has the lowest ranking)

Social Responsibility	Equity	Respect	Authenticity	Truthfulness	TARES Principles	
1.33	3.33	3.33	2.00	2.67	Dove	SOAP BRANDS
-	1.67	1.67	2.00	3.33	Lux	
-	2.00	2.33	3.67	2.00	Mysore Sandal	
-	3.00	3.33	2.67	3.00	Pears	
1.00	5.00	4.33	4.67	4.00	Medimix	
-	2.33	2.67	3.00	3.00	Parle G	BISCUIT BRANDS
2.00	1.33	1.67	1.67	1.67	Britannia Milk	
1.00	2.33	1.67	1.33	1.33	Sunfeast Farmlite	
-	4.00	4.33	4.33	4.00	Prisagold CNC	
-	5.00	4.67	4.67	5.00	Amul Butler Bake	
3.00	2.67	2.67	2.33	2.67	Colgate	TOOTH PASTE BRANDS
3.33	4.33	4.33	4.33	3.67	Persodent	
1.00	3.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	Sensodyn	
4.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	Oral B	
3.67	2.00	2.00	2.33	2.67	Dant Kanti	
1.33	3.67	4.00	2.67	3.00	Bournvita	HEALTH DRINK BRANDS
2.67	2.67	3.33	3.00	3.33	Complan	
3.00	2.33	2.00	2.67	3.33	Horlicks	
4.33	4.33	3.33	4.33	2.67	Boost	
3.67	2.00	2.33	2.33	2.67	Amul Pro	
2.67	2.67	3.00	2.00	2.67	Surf Excel	DETERGENT BRANDS
2.00	2.33	3.33	2.33	2.33	Ariel	
1.33	2.33	3.00	3.33	3.00	Tide	
1.67	3.00	2.00	3.33	2.67	Rin	
3.67	3.67	2.67	2.67	3.67	Henko	

5.2 Biscuits:

On comparing the top five brands of biscuits, *Sunfeast Farmlite* and *Britannia Milk Bikis* have a prominent presence in the five principles of TARES test. *Sunfeast Farmlite* stands first followed by *Britannia Milk Bikis*. Of these two brands, the commercial of *Britannia Milk Bikis* is coded under all the benefits except for relationship benefit and hence makes it obvious that it describes both the horizontal and vertical cultures as it



talks about prominence, the pleasure in consuming the brand, its uniqueness, and performance. *Parle – G* runs first as the top 10 and the leading biscuit making company in India. Though it comes first in sales, it has failed to adhere to all the five principles. Even for the benefits, the commercial is coded only under status and uniqueness benefits which represent only the vertical culture. The way in which the commercial is created leads to its increase in sales. Exaggeration definitely has a role. *Britannia Milk Bikis* and *Sunfeast Farmlite* follow *Parle – G* in sales, yet here they show a prominent presence in TARES. This reflects that the push in sales is always in terms of the commercial. *Priyagold CNC* and *AnmolButter Bake* have emphasized only on the pleasure benefit since the commercial simply speaks about pleasure, enjoyment, fun, excitement and emotional experience. People's preference is acknowledged based on how effective that particular brands commercial is.

### 5.3 Tooth paste:

Though all the five brands have partially stood by the theory, *Sensodyne* stands first since it has the highest ranking when compared to the other four brands. Our Indian market is flooded with various toothpaste brands. *Colgate* comes first as the top selling toothpaste brand in India, but it has fallen a shade lower by giving partial importance to all the five principles of TARES and it has highlighted only the uniqueness, relationship, and utilitarian benefits. Similarly, *Pepsodent* has gained its place in the market by its attractive commercials which persuade the target audience to purchase the product. Though the message in certain commercials is exaggerated, it attracts the viewer and hence increases in the preference of the people and in its sale. *Sensodyne*, on the other hand, attains the foremost place here and adheres to the theory. This makes it stand out. *Sensodyne* and *Pepsodent* are coded under all the benefits except for the status benefit. Both the commercials haven't focused on uplifting its status, but the use of the other benefits have elevated the commercials position. *Dant Kanti* is a brand which has newly entered into the market. But it has proven itself to reach the top leading brands of toothpaste and partially fits the theory. Except for the status and relationship benefit, even this brand has focused on other benefits paving a way to both the vertical and horizontal cultures.

### 5.4 Health Drinks:

In this product category, all the five brands have adhered to the five principles of TARES. As the nature of the product and consumption play an important role, it is essential that this product category abides by the theory for its increase in sales. But *Amul Pro* is the most popular one. Based upon the preferences of the people, *Bournvita*, *Complan*, *Horlicks*, and *Boost* acquires the top four places, but they have failed to play sufficient role in the theory. Their commercials include most of the benefits since it talks about status, pleasure, uniqueness, emotional experience, excitement and its performance. The commercial of *Amul Pro* is very simple, plain and personal but it has run because of its prominent role in the five principles. In sales, it has the least rank, but it has attained the rank one in the adherence to the theory. This brand has also adhered to all the five benefits in its commercial and hence accentuates on equality and hierarchy. The commercial of the other brands give a push, which supports them with an increase in their sales. The visual and the verbal content of *Amul Pro's* commercial are not exaggerated, hence positions it on the top.



#### 5.5 Detergents:

All the five brands have partially adhered to the TARES principles. *Ariel* stands out among its competitors since it has its presence in all the five principles at an above average level. This commercial is a testimonial advertisement which is testified by the Representative of the Global Humanitarian Organisation about how important it is to maintain a decent look to gain respect from people around us. *Surf Excel* is the top selling brand of detergents based upon the preference of the people. Yet it hasn't paved enough importance for the TARES principles. The commercial of *Surf Excel* is created in a very catchy manner with the play-on-words appeal to attract viewers and to position itself in the minds of the people. All the other three brands have played a role here because of their creative commercials which push them to remain as the top brands. It is clear that exaggeration is used to push a product. Hence this increases the preference and the sales of the product. All the five brands are coded under pleasure, uniqueness, relationship, and utilitarian benefits. Though they haven't spoken about their status, their prominent role in expressing the other benefits have made them stand out.

#### VI Discussion

From the study, it is obvious that exaggeration plays a role to uplift a particular product or a brand. The visual in the commercials are made attractive to get the immediate attention of the consumers. This has helped most of the brands acquire the top places though they fail to adhere to the ethics in advertising. Exaggeration has inculcated a sense of normality in the minds of the consumers. From the study conducted, it is strong that the highly exaggerated commercials of a product create higher sale than those with less exaggeration. This again contradicts the product category 'Soap'. This is the only product category which stands out. Consumers use this product for the self-preservation of oneself. Hence, it requires more orientation on the ethical side. 'Dove' is the only brand which has adhered the best to the TARES theory. This brand leads as the top selling brand of soaps and has proven itself with its complete adherence to the theory. Hence it is a run-away hit.

The commercials have addressed most of the benefits which represent both the vertical and the horizontal culture. This result deviates from the previous study. Hence we can conclude that India no longer fits as a Vertical Collectivist society because people are focusing on gaining personal status, seeking opportunities to stand out and to impress, and are valuing equality and expressing uniqueness. This affirms that the commercials are persuading their targeted audience by using both the vertical and the horizontal orientations since we had moved to that phase. Moreover, the Indian consumers have proven to progress towards attaining an independent worldview.

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