

## **Brand involvement; the controversial kind**

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### **S Ramesh Kumar**

Sensationalism is nothing new to celebrities. The recent episode associated with Ponam Pandey was something that had attracted attention on a variety of issues ranging from ethics of celebrities to brand management. Ethics is always on a continuum, especially, in marketing practice. There may be several marketing success stories that may be questionable with respect to ethics. Some marketing practices may break the letter of law, some the spirit of the law and some may never be traced and pinned to its causal effects. Michael Moss the Pulitzer award winning author in his book, "Hooked: Food, Free Will, and How the Food Giants Exploit Our Addictions", elaborates on the insidious impact of marketing campaigns and cutting edge food science in getting millions the world over addicted to processed foods. Perhaps in such a scenario, the seemingly unethical sensation created by a celebrity will pale into insignificance. Just that, it may be human tendency to focus more on situational ethics, rather than absolute ethics, when it comes to overt marketing actions.

On a different count, the article attempts to delve into the professional advantages of controversies associated with brands and celebrities.

### **Brand Involvement of controversial kind**

Involvement is the degree of personal interest. The degree is an important aspect of this concept as we are involved in most of our actions that are executed consciously. From adding sugar to tea to buying, a home, we are involved in our actions. It is just the degree of involvement that varies and the challenge for marketers is to raise the involvement of the offerings through several initiatives that include social media as well. In fact, low involvement and high involvement reside in the mind of the consumer and individual and not in brands. Hence brands should necessarily focus on the wants, aspirations, and goals of consumers to raise their involvement. Even a mineral water brand like Bisleri advertises to create involvement. However, the challenge for marketers does not stop just with creating involvement. And a brand or celebrity getting into controversial involvement will have to weigh the pros and cons of generating such controversy. Creating sensationalism through social media may not serve the brand's purpose if a brand or celebrity generates controversy without considering several relevant factors associated with the brand or situation. And finally, there is always some risk with respect to how the consumers will react to the controversy.

### **How strong is the brand image?**

A brand that has a strong image or a firm footing in a category may be less affected by controversies than a brand /celebrity having a much lower equity.

Manyavar's "tradition wahi, sochnayi" campaign involving a well-known celebrity and going against the tradition of Kanyadan in weddings received a huge push back on social media channels.

Fair&Lovely, the fairness cream had changed its name to Glow& Lovely after the "Black lives Matter", movement. Discrimination on skin color is something that can be associated with the concept of Value Paradox in the literature on culture. It means that in a social setting, there can be certain paradoxes that may point to contradictions at a collective societal level- "White skin is what I desire inwards but I may outwardly express that discrimination on skin color is something that I would agree is a fundamentally inhuman".

### **Would the controversy enhance the intent to consume the offering?**

Animal the recent film had a controversial misogynistic theme, it was successfully received, in a social environment that is increasingly creating awareness about the rights of women. It may be difficult to reason out every aspect of success or failure of films that are controversial (several of them flop). The charisma of the celebrities involved, and the narrative aspect of the movie may have appealed to the viewers.

### **The image of the celebrity**

The image of the celebrity in a cultural environment matters, when controversy with respect to the celebrity is generated. Have we not seen controversy on colas being endorsed by iconic celebrities and the criticism was about these celebrities were insensitive to the damage that may done to the younger generation getting addicted to the drink.

Some of these celebrities are still revered and adored and may be charging a premium for brand endorsements .

### **Product category timing and controversial brands**

Condoms as a category was associated with a social taboo during the nineties and Kamasutra Condoms had created "sexual revolution"( as quoted by western media). Both the ad and the model were considered controversial.

Doordarshan channel ,had shown the ad during 1990-91 and had banned the ad subsequently . The category and its appeal, the permissive ad shot by the famous Alyaque Padmsee, at a time when the culture was at the inflection point and the curiosity associated with the primal drive were perhaps the reasons for brand to have survived despite controversial aspects. The brand went on to become a successful brand.

### **Scandalous celebrity and the digital era**

Tiger Woods, the well known celebrity who had modelled for brands like Nike and Accenture had got into a scandal involving his private life.

Journal of Consumer Research had published an interesting article from Wisconsin School of Business, on the research work done by the professors. The research involved digitally blending the image of Tiger Woods (35% of his face) with an unfamiliar face. The composite face after the scandal was considered more trustworthy than the original face pre scandal. 100 percent of the respondents failed to identify any difference between the Tiger 's morphed face and Tiger himself! This should give us an idea of the several exciting possibilities of the digital era involving celebrities and technology.

*As far as the maya associated with the consumer's mind, is in sync with the maya associated with the marketer's mind, marketing realities will be a win-win situation for both, with or without controversial brands and celebrities.*