

A Study on Consumer Awareness of Misleading Advertisements and Its Impact on Buying Behaviour

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Abstract:

Advertising is the means of information as well as influencing the general public to buy a product or service through visual or oral or written messages. The Advertising Industry has seen tremendous growth in India in the last few decades, money spent on advertisement has increased dramatically in recent years. Television advertising has emerged as the most influential and widely preferred medium in the Indian advertising industry, surpassing traditional print and radio platforms. The advent of satellite channels and regional networks has transformed television into a powerful communication tool that effectively reaches diverse audiences across urban and rural India.

The combination of visual appeal, audio-visual storytelling, and mass outreach gives television advertisements a greater impact on consumer perception. Hence television advertising remains one of the most influential forms of mass communication, significantly shaping consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. However, with increase in competition, the advertisers are opting for false information and misleading ads to reach the high demand. Hence the use of misleading claims in television advertisements has raised significant concerns regarding consumer awareness and protection. This paper adopts a case study approach to examine the influence of misleading television advertisements on consumer awareness and buying behaviour. The study analyses data of selected cases of misleading television advertisements collected from published research articles,

legal judgments, reports of the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), government publications, and consumer protection literature. The case study analysis highlights how misleading claims related to product quality, health benefits, and pricing influence consumer trust and purchasing decisions. The findings indicate that inadequate consumer awareness and limited media literacy contribute significantly to consumers' vulnerability to deceptive television advertising. Conversely, cases demonstrate that informed and aware consumers are better equipped to question advertising claims and make rational purchase decisions. The study emphasizes the importance of strengthening consumer awareness initiatives, effective regulatory enforcement, and ethical advertising practices in television media, to protect consumer interest.

Keywords: Misleading Advertisements, Television Advertising, Consumer Awareness, Buying Behaviour, Advertising Regulation.

1. Introduction:

According to American Marketing Association (AMA): 'Advertising is any paid form of non- personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services by an identified sponsor'. Basically, advertising is a means of public announcement, a form of persuasive communication, which involves communication with the public about a product, idea or service through a medium which the public have access to. The communication is usually one-sided from the advertisers to the public. But information is not the sole purpose of advertisement. Its main purpose is to motivate its audience for a desired action. Today ads are all around us, be it conscious or unconscious we cannot escape from looking at it or listening to it. Advertising is mass communication of information intended to persuade buyers so as to maximize the profit. Ads serve as an important tool not only for manufacturers and traders, but also holds a significant importance for consumers and society at large. Advertising plays a crucial role in modern market economies by informing consumers about products

and services and influencing their purchasing decisions. With the rapid expansion of mass media, particularly television and digital platforms, advertising has become more persuasive, visually appealing, and emotionally driven. Advertising can be called a game that is played among 4 key players, they are: The Advertiser: Advertising begins with the advertisers, the person or the organization that uses ad to send out a message about its product/service. They initiate the marketing effort by identifying the marketing strategy that the ad can solve and make the final. The 2nd player is the ad agency who creates the advertisement. They are hired to plan and implement all or part of the ad. Their main function is to create, plan and manage ad campaigns for client to promote their product or service effectively to the target audience. They are responsible for all the creative content, final budget and shaping of the ad. Then comes the media, one of the most important players as they are the vehicles through which the ad reaches to its final destination, that is the audience. The Consumer or Target Audience are the final players of the game. The formulation of an ad strategy begins with identification of the target audience or the potential customer and the content is created to persuade them to get a desired action, which is to buy the product or service. Though the communication is mostly one-sided and audience are regarded as passive receiver but their action is very much desired as the success of the whole ad campaign depends upon the action of the audience. Hence, they are the most important player as they take the final call. In today's challenging market economy, ads have become an important element in the society. Moreover, it plays a powerful constructive role in the economic role of a country. Also, it has a high influence on an individual and the society as a whole. Hence it is important that ad professionals observe high ethical standards in regards to truthfulness, human dignity and social responsibility. However, alongside its positive role, advertising has also been criticized for promoting misleading and deceptive claims that distort consumer perception. Misleading advertisements refer to promotional messages that provide false information, exaggerate claims, or conceal important

facts, thereby creating a wrong impression in the minds of consumers. Misleading television advertisements often exaggerate product benefits, conceal material information, use ambiguous language, or present false representations related to quality, price, performance, or health benefits. Such advertisements distort consumer perception and influence buying decisions in ways that may not align with reality. In India, misleading advertisements are commonly observed in sectors such as healthcare, food and beverages, cosmetics, education, and financial services. These advertisements often exploit consumers' trust, lack of awareness, and emotional vulnerability. The regulators that exist in India today are not doing enough to tackle the problem and there are a lot of misleading advertisements today which trick the consumers. Loopholes are basically in implementation. There is also no proactive monitoring of the misleading advertisements. The most important problem is that all restriction, actions and regulations are followed after the ad is released and the consumers are exposed to the misinformation. Unless a complaint is registered, it is impossible to identify misleading advertisements. So, it is evident that the damage has already happened, plus the investigation & judgement process is very slow as it takes minimum 6-4 weeks for CCC to take view on an advertisement & for ASCI to convey final decision. At best, what the self-regulatory body does is stopping a certain type of advertising well after the campaign is over. The violator gets away by issuing an apology letter in most of the time or in most cases the ad is asked to be modified or in serious cases if the damage is big the ad is withdrawn. The existing model of self-regulation (ASCI) is also not adequate and totally ineffective. The primary gaps that have been identified include limited consumer awareness about the complaint mechanism, resulting in very limited number of complaints compared to sizeable proportion of the problem; the advertising code which is dated and not able to keep pace with the changing trends; the mechanism is largely reactive in its approach and also takes longer period to take a final call which may have a great impact on the practical implications of the decisions. Under the guideline of ASCI the code is applied for the advertising

Industry which includes the Advertisers, The Advertising Agency and the Media but the accountability of scrutinized ad is restricted to the advertisers & the agency only and also the action of withdrawal or modification does not affect the media, when the advertisement is one of the largest revenue generators of the media. Though not creatively involved, but media stands as the medium or the bridge between the advertisers and the consumers. So they should also be held accountable and should be restricted with a guideline on what can be or can be not published or broadcasted.

2.1. Some of the principles one should follow while creating an ad to maintain high professional standards are:

- Ethical Advertising Standard: under the guideline of ASCI all ads should maintain an ethical standard for fairness in competition and good quality ads. They should address their customers with truthfulness and loyalty. They should not misguide the consumers and should follow a legal process in ad creation

- Decency: ads should not content statement or visual representation which impairs public confidence in advertising and should maintain prevailing standards of decency.

- Honest: ads should be so framed as not to abuse the trust of the consumers or exploit their lack of experience or knowledge. They should be truthful to what they produce.

- Social Responsibility: ads should not promote any form of discrimination, including that based upon race, nationality, religion, sex or age, nor should they in any way undermine human dignity.

- Truthful Presentation: ads should not contain any statement or visual representation which directly or indirectly question their true capacity and mislead the consumers. Exaggerated claims are likely to mislead the consumer by gaslighting them with false potentials.

- Comparison: ads containing comparison should be so designed that it should not likely to be misleading and should comply with the principles of fair competitions.

- Testimonials: ads should not contain or refer to any testimonials or endorsements unless it is genuine, verifiable and relevant and based on personal experience or knowledge.
- Safety and Health: ads should not without reason, justify on educational or social grounds, contain any visual representation or any description of dangerous practice or of situations, which shows disregards to safety or health.

Consumers with limited media literacy and awareness are particularly vulnerable to these deceptive practices. Hence Consumer awareness is a critical factor in determining how individuals interpret advertising messages and make purchasing decisions. An informed consumer is better equipped to evaluate advertising claims critically and avoid deceptive practices. Recognizing the growing threat of misleading advertisements, the Indian legal system has introduced regulatory frameworks such as Cable Television Network (Regulation) Act 1995, Telecommunicating Authority of India Act 1997, The Young Person (Harmful Publication) Act 1956, Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986, Drug & Magic Remedies (objectionable ads) Act 1954, the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, along with self-regulatory bodies like ASCI. Despite the existence of such legal and regulatory mechanisms, misleading television advertisements continue to appear across various product categories. This paper examines the issue of misleading advertisements from the perspective of consumer awareness and buying behaviour. The study seeks to understand how misleading television advertisements influence consumer decision-making and the role of awareness in protecting consumer interests. By analysing selected case studies based on secondary data, the study seeks to understand the effectiveness of existing regulatory mechanisms and the role of consumer awareness in protecting consumer rights. The analysis is confined to the role and effectiveness of the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) and the provisions of the Consumer Protection Act in addressing misleading advertising practices. By focusing exclusively on these two regulatory mechanisms, the study aims to evaluate

their impact on protecting consumer interests and shaping informed purchasing decisions.

2. The Research Problem

In today's highly competitive media environment, audio-visual advertisements often exaggerate or manipulate facts to attract consumers. While such ads are designed to persuade, many cross ethical boundaries by making misleading claims about product quality, performance, or benefits. This not only deceives consumers but also undermines trust in the advertising industry and violates ethical norms. Despite the existence of comprehensive legal provisions and self-regulatory mechanisms, misleading advertisements continue to influence consumer decision-making. Advertisers frequently use exaggerated claims, emotional appeals, and celebrity endorsements to promote products, often blurring the line between persuasion and deception. This raises serious concerns regarding the effectiveness of regulatory enforcement and the level of consumer awareness.

A significant gap exists between regulatory intent and actual consumer protection. Many consumers remain unaware of their rights and the mechanisms available to address misleading advertisements. As a result, deceptive advertising practices persist, leading to financial loss, health risks, and erosion of consumer trust. The problem, therefore, lies in determining to what extent audio-visual advertisements present truthful information and how misleading claims and ethical violations affect consumer perception and decision-making and to highlight how awareness levels or the lack thereof shape consumer responses and outcomes. This study seeks to address these gaps by analysing misleading advertisement cases and assessing their impact on consumer awareness and buying behaviour.

3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To examine the concept and nature of misleading advertisements in India.

- To analyse the legal and regulatory framework governing misleading advertisements.
- To study selected ASCI and consumer court cases related to misleading advertising.
- To assess the impact of misleading advertisements on consumer awareness and buying behaviour.
- To understand how lack of awareness contributes to consumer vulnerability and how informed consumers respond differently to misleading advertisements.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of regulatory mechanisms in protecting consumer interests and to increase consumer awareness.

4. Research Questions

- What constitutes misleading advertising under Indian law?
- How do misleading advertisements influence consumer buying behaviour?
- How effective are regulatory bodies such as ASCI and consumer courts in controlling misleading advertisements?
- How informed consumers behave to misleading advertisement?
- How by enhancing consumer awareness and promoting ethical television advertising practices effect consumer protection?

5. Review of Literature

Several studies have examined the issue of misleading advertisements and consumer protection. Misleading advertisement broadly refers to any false or deceptive information presented by marketers that can distort consumers' choices and beliefs about a product or service. According to the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, an advertisement is misleading if it falsely describes a product/service or misleads consumers regarding nature, quantity,

quality, or other characteristics. Kotler and Keller (2016) emphasize that deceptive advertising undermines consumer trust and long-term brand credibility. According to Preston (1994), misleading advertisements often rely on ambiguity and omission rather than outright falsehoods, making regulation challenging. Vance Packard, in *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), highlighted the psychological techniques used in advertising to manipulate consumer emotions and subconscious desires. His work laid the foundation for understanding how advertising can influence consumers beyond rational decision-making. Scholars such as Neil Postman (1985), in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, have critiqued television as a medium that blends entertainment with commercial messaging, often prioritising attention over factual accuracy which inadvertently creates an environment ripe for misleading claims

In the Indian context, Singh and Bansal (2018) highlight the growing prevalence of misleading advertisements in healthcare and education sectors. Their study reveals that consumers often fail to verify claims due to lack of awareness and overreliance on advertisements. A study by the Advertising Standards Council of India (2022) indicates a rise in complaints related to misleading claims, particularly in television and digital advertising. Legal scholars such as Ramanujam (2020) argue that while the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 provides stronger enforcement powers, implementation remains inconsistent. Studies also indicate that consumer education and media literacy play a crucial role in reducing the impact of deceptive advertising. Richa Jhanwar and Dishita Khanddia in *International Journal of Law, Management & Humanities*. (2022) concluded that, a consumer should be aware of all facts and shouldn't be carried away with any information that has provided they should have the knowledge of all the facts regarding the product or service to avoid misleading. Studies specific to India have identified gaps in advertising regulation and enforcement. Researchers have noted that while the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 provides comprehensive provisions against misleading advertisements, particularly under Section 2(28),

awareness among consumers about their rights and redressal mechanisms remains limited. Similarly, self-regulatory bodies like ASCI have been active in identifying and flagging misleading ads, but their reliance on voluntary compliance from advertisers limits their enforcement power. The review reveals a gap in integrated studies combining legal analysis, case studies, and consumer awareness, which this paper seeks to address.

6. Research Methodology

6.1. Research Design: The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. It is qualitative in nature and focuses on understanding patterns and implications of misleading advertisements through case studies. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of how misleading television advertisements affect consumer awareness and buying behaviour in real-life situations.

6.2. Nature of Data: The study is based entirely on secondary data. Secondary data were collected from official reports of the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), consumer court judgments, news articles, academic publications, and government sources. The case study method enables a detailed examination of instances where misleading television advertisements have been challenged by regulators or consumers, providing insights into how awareness influences consumer behaviour. The study particularly focuses on documented decisions where misleading claims have been identified and addressed by regulatory or legal authorities.

6.3. Sources of Data: Research journals and books, ASCI reports and case summaries, Consumer court judgments, Government publications (CCPA, Ministry of Consumer Affairs), Newspapers and authentic online legal databases.

6.4. Method of Analysis: Content analysis of advertisements, Case law analysis, Comparative legal analysis.

7. Case Study Analysis

7.1. ASCI Case Examples (Misleading Television Ads):

7.1.1. Dettol Handwash “99.9% Virus Protection” Claim In 2020, ASCI upheld complaints against Dettol’s television advertisement that claimed “99.9% protection against viruses,” suggesting superior efficacy in preventing viral infection without adequate scientific validation. ASCI determined that such claims required substantiation from credible scientific evidence and directed corrective action. This case illustrates how unverified health claims in television ads can mislead consumers about product performance.

7.1.2. Lenskart “Free Glasses” Offer

In 2022, ASCI found a Lenskart TV campaign misleading because the claim of “free glasses” was conditional and coupled with hidden requirements and charges. Such promotions, when presented without clear qualifiers, can create false impressions in consumers’ minds about the nature of the offer.

7.1.3. Healthcare and Cosmetic Claims

ASCI has repeatedly upheld complaints against ads that make exaggerated or unsubstantiated claims. For example, the advertisement for a diabetes treatment promising a “cure in 72 hours” was found to be false and grossly misleading by the ASCI Consumer Complaints Council.

7.1.4. Consumer Goods & Lifestyle Claims

Various television advertisements by brands like Tata Sky and Prestige Livestraw Water Purifier have been criticised for misrepresenting product benefits without factual backing, highlighting how everyday consumer products often feature claims that overstate performance.

In FY 2023–24, ASCI’s annual report showed that 81% of complaints processed involved misleading claims, underscoring how widespread such issues are in Indian advertising, including television.

8.2. Consumer Court Case Examples:

8.2.1. FirstCry – “Drip Pricing” and Hidden Costs (2025)

The baby-products brand FirstCry was fined ₹2 lakh by the CCPA for misleading pricing tactics known as drip pricing. Here the initial price advertised did not include mandatory additional charges, misleading consumers about the true cost.

8.2.2. Patanjali Ayurved – Misleading Health Claims (2022–2024)

Patanjali faced long-running judicial scrutiny and a temporary ban on its commercials for making unsubstantiated health claims (such as curing diseases) and disparaging modern medicine. The Supreme Court of India intervened and imposed corrective measures (including public apologies and warnings).

8.2.3. Pan Masala Advertisement Case

In 2025, a District Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission in Kota took up a case alleging that a pan masala television advertisement featuring celebrity endorsement by a well-known actor was misleading. The complainant argued that the product could not plausibly include expensive ingredients like saffron as claimed in the ad, given its low price point. The court ordered a forensic test of the celebrity’s signature on legal documents and directed the actor to personally appear, signalling the seriousness of consumer allegations against misleading claims.

8.2.4. Rapido “Guaranteed Auto” Claim

The Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) fined Rapido Rs 10 lakh for a misleading advertisement claiming “Guaranteed auto ... or get Rs 50,” which the authority found was not consistently deliverable. This demonstrates regulatory action against misleading service claims including those adapted for television and online promotion.

8.2.5. VLCC Instant Weight-Loss Claims

The CCPA also penalised VLCC Limited Rs 3 lakh for misleading advertisements promoting instant weight-loss technologies without adequate evidence. Regulatory fines serve as deterrence but also highlight how consumers are influenced by exaggerated claims about health and body image.

8.2.6. District Forum Fine for False Product Claims

A consumer forum ordered a Noida-based company to refund money and pay compensation to a couple misled by an advertised weight-loss product that failed to deliver results and caused side effects. The case exemplifies how misleading product claims can directly harm consumer health and finances.

These cases demonstrate recurring patterns of exaggeration, omission, and emotional appeal in misleading advertisements.

9. Discussion and Findings

The analysis of secondary data reveals several common themes:

9.1. Prevalence of Misleading Claims

Misleading claims remain ubiquitous in television advertising, ranging from exaggerated performance to unverified health benefits. ASCI's high percentage of upheld complaints (81% in 2023–24) indicates that a large proportion of television and other media advertisements fail to meet advertising standards.

9.2. Consumer Vulnerability and Awareness

Consumers with low levels of media literacy are more susceptible to misleading claims, particularly when advertisements feature emotional appeals, persuasive language, or celebrity endorsements. In contrast, consumers who recognise deceptive elements are more likely to seek redressal from ASCI or consumer court forums.

9.3. Role of Regulatory Bodies

Regulatory and self-regulatory bodies including ASCI, CCPA, and consumer courts play critical roles in identifying and correcting misleading television advertisements.

However, enforcement is often reactive rather than preventive, relying on complaints or monitoring to trigger action.

9.4. Impact on Buying Behaviour

Misleading television advertisements distort consumer expectations and can lead to impulsive purchases or dissatisfaction when product outcomes fail to match advertised claims. Cases involving health-related products show particularly high stakes, as consumers may experience not only financial loss but health risks.

So in short the analysis reveals that misleading advertisements significantly influence consumer buying behaviour, particularly among less informed consumers. Emotional appeal, celebrity endorsements, and visual persuasion play a major role in shaping consumer perception. Regulatory bodies like ASCI and consumer courts have taken corrective action, but enforcement challenges persist.

Consumer awareness emerges as a key factor in mitigating deceptive advertising. Educated and informed consumers are more likely to question claims and seek redressal mechanisms.

10. Conclusion

The study concludes that misleading television advertisements continue to exert a significant influence on consumer buying behaviour, particularly in cases where consumer awareness is limited. The case study analysis based on secondary data demonstrates that lack of awareness and media literacy increases consumer vulnerability to deceptive advertising practices.

While regulatory frameworks such as the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, and self-regulatory bodies like ASCI play an important role in controlling misleading advertisements, their effectiveness is closely linked to informed and vigilant

consumers. Enhancing consumer education, promoting media literacy, and ensuring strict enforcement of advertising regulations are essential to protect consumer interests. The study emphasises the importance of ethical advertising practices and concludes that consumer awareness serves as a powerful tool in combating misleading television advertisements and fostering a transparent and responsible advertising environment.

10.1. Suggestions and Recommendations

It is evident that misleading television advertisements continue to influence consumer buying behaviour significantly, particularly among those with limited awareness and media literacy. While regulatory frameworks such as the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, ASCI guidelines, and CCPA penalties form an important foundation for consumer rights protection, their effectiveness depends on the proactive participation of consumers and enhanced awareness of consumer rights and advertising standards. Strengthening consumer education, media literacy campaigns, and robust enforcement of advertising standards is essential to safeguard consumer interests in a media environment saturated with persuasive advertising.

The study underscores the need for continued monitoring of television advertisements and encourages consumers to be vigilant, informed, and empowered to hold advertisers accountable for misleading claims.

10.2. Recommendations:

- Strengthening enforcement of advertising regulations
- Promoting consumer education and media literacy
- Mandatory disclosure of evidence for advertising claims
- Accountability of celebrity endorsers
- Encouraging ethical advertising practices

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