

Advertising as an Agent of Social Change: A Study of Its Impact on Society

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Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

Received: 26-05-26

Approved: 18-06-26

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Impact on Society*

Artistic Narration 2026,
Vol. XVII, No. 1,
Article No.16 Pg. 135-144

Similarity Check: 01%

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2026-vol-xvii-no1](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/artistic-narration-june-2026-vol-xvii-no1)

Referred by:

DOI:[https://doi.org/10.31995/
an.2026.v17i01.016](https://doi.org/10.31995/an.2026.v17i01.016)

Abstract

Advertising is often perceived as an instrument that can be used to advertise products and services but over time it has at least changed and transformed to become a massive advertisement tool that can change social norms, values and behaviors. This paper explores the advertising as a force of social change with special reference on how it influences the popular opinion, breaks stereotypes and promotes progressive change in the society. The paper examines the multidimensional influence of advertising through the use of the existing theoretical frameworks, such as media and communication theories as well as empirical data and case studies not only in India but in the global arena.

The discussion shows how adverts can be a viable means of creating awareness regarding some social issues like equality of gender, health promotion and environmental sustainability. Meanwhile, it also admits two-sided character of advertising accepting that it can also perpetuate stereotypes, consumerism, and social inequalities, when its main motifs are commercial interests.

The research will outline that advertising has a lot of potential to play a positive role in the development of the society under the influence of ethical behavior and social responsibility. It has a large scope with great persuasive abilities, which allow it to affect attitudes and behaviors in large numbers. Thus, advertising, as a source of inclusivity, awareness, and positive behavioral change, may serve as an engine to a more inclusive, more aware, better-behaving society when applied wisely and with substantial good intent.

Keywords

Advertisement, social change, the impact of the media, consumer behavior; social awareness, India, global advertisement.

Introduction

Advertisement can be regarded as one of the most prominent and effective forms of communication in a modern society. Traditional television commercials to online campaigns on popular sites like Instagram and YouTube, advertising is delivered to millions of people on a daily basis. As this has traditionally been linked to economic activities, mainly promotion of products and services, advertising has over time taken a new form to play an important role in terms of culture and society. It not only mirrors the values of the society, but also helps in their development over the years.

Over the past few decades, advertising has come to touch on critical social topics including gender equality, environmental sustainability, societal health, and social justice. This shift is also very much connected to evolving consumer expectations, as audiences now expect brands to be valuable, responsible and ethical. Consequently, advertisers have started to realize that they can have a certain impact on the behavior and attitudes of people. The concept of advertising as the social change agent implies its ability to influence the perceptions, challenge the status quo and help bring larger social transformation. Advertising has the ability to make progressive ideas normal and ensure that audiences change their minds about what they thought through convincing messages, narrating stories, and presenting information.

This paper focuses on advertising as a vibrant power that can achieve social change. It examines the theoretical underpinnings that describe the influence advertising has on society, how it influences attitudes and behavior and its overall implication. Through a synthesis between theoretical knowledge and reality on the ground, the discussion outlines the opportunities and challenges related to the growing social importance of advertising.

The media and communication theories can help us to find the appropriate theoretical approach to the role of advertising in social change. Among them is the agenda-setting theory that was elaborated by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. With this theory, the media does not dictate what people need to think, but what they need to pay attention to in issues. In this regard, advertising may impact social discourse through repetition of particular social issues, thus, becoming more visible and relevant to people.

The other influential theory is the cultivation theory of George Gerbner. According to this theory, one will observe that, in the long run, exposure to media contents gradually colors the perceptions of reality in people. Advertisements that are designed with the use of progressive values on an ongoing basis (e.g., equality, diversity, inclusivity) can help foster a progressive change in societal values and standards.

The social learning theory pioneered by Albert Bandura is another theory that explains the adoption of behaviors by means of observation by others. The adverts tend to include the figures of influence or characters that viewers relate with, who can act as

examples to viewers. This renders advertising as a potent tool of encouraging the coveted social behaviors.

Simultaneously, the critical theory is more pessimistic because it outlines on how advertising may strengthen the status quo, such as gender stereotypes and consumerist ideas. It highlights the necessity of meticulously analyzing the content of advertisements, since they do not necessarily have a beneficial impact. Combined, these theoretical frameworks present a holistic view of the complex nature of advertising in creating and transforming society.

2- Social Norms and Advertising

Advertising is an important factor in the formation of social norms, as it also reflects the current culture and it is a dynamic force that provides its own impact. It is not just a mirror of society but it is involved in creating notions of what is acceptable, desirable, aspirational. In the past, advertising tended to support the conventional norms especially on gender roles. Women had often been misrepresented as housewives who cook, clean and take care of children and men were seen as the decision makers and breadwinners. These portrayals helped to legitimize gendered inequalities.

It has however changed with changing social realities and with more awareness, advertising has been shifting to more progressive displays. Modern campaigns are portraying more women in the role of independent, self-assured and successful people in their profession. This change is not only related to the changes that are happening in society but also to the increased demands by audiences to see more inclusive and realistic portrayals. In this meaning, advertising is a response to social change, which hastens social change.

In the Indian case, other brands like Tata Tea and Aerial India have contributed significantly to breaking the social norms. The most commonly known campaign that was initiated by Ariel was called Share the Load, which aimed to raise awareness about the lack of female gender balance when it came to distributing household duties, as well as, encourage more men to become housemaids. The campaign was able to open up gender equality discussions in the homes by demonstrating real family scenarios and emotional stories that the audience could relate to. Not only did it reinforce the image of the brand, but it was also a step to a slow change in attitudes of people.

On the same note, international companies like Nike and Dove have employed advertising as a means of incorporating issues of identity, diversity and self-acceptance. The campaigns conducted by Dove, such as Real Beauty, have been an example of questioning the limited definition of beauty through women in their different body shapes and backgrounds. Nike promotions have frequently featured the themes of empowerment, strength, and equality, such as the support of the athlete, who holds out on social matters.

These are some ways in which advertising may challenge the prevailing cultural narratives and foster more inclusive values.

Through the consistent display of progressive images and ideas, advertising is contributing towards normalization of new social behaviors. Such representations, over time, affect the way people look at themselves and others thus helping to bring about gradual significant changes in the societal attitudes.

3- Publicity as an Awareness Means

Among the greatest contributions that advertising has towards social change is the level of creating awareness of pressing issues. The purpose of public service advertisements (PSAs) is to inform, educate, and sensitize. Compared to commercial advertisements that are mostly created in the process of products promotion, PSAs are oriented at the social good and the common good.

The Government of India has launched campaigns in India where advertising has been used in an effective manner in tackling issues like sanitation, health and safety. One of such prominent campaigns is the Swachh Bharat campaign, in which advertising of mass media was key in advocating cleanliness practices and hygiene. The campaign was easily transmitted via television, radio, print, and digital media to change behavior at both individual and communal levels. Its impact was still enhanced by the involvement of influential public figures, as the message became more relatable and persuasive.

On the same note, advertisement had the ability to change the perception of people, which has been evidenced in awareness campaigns associated with road safety, vaccinations, and health of the population. Advertising contributes to the breaching of the policy gap and perception by simplifying high level of information and presenting it in a captivating way.

Organizations like the United Nations and the world health body at the international level have extensively employed advertising in order to resolve international issues. Environmental campaigns on climate change, the prevention of diseases, and sustainable development are based on persuasion requirements in the communication approaches to reach a range of people. These campaigns underline the effect of advertising as a pedagogical device which can cross-geographical and cross-cultural borders.

Awareness-based advertising is effective because of its capability to engage attention and convey messages fast and precisely. Advertising can effectively produce a long-term impact because it combines both visuals and emotional appeal with a minimal amount of messaging and makes the audiences consider their significant social problems.

4- Advertising and change of behavior

In addition to increasing awareness, advertising can also affect the real behavior. The behavior change campaigns aim not just at informing but also encouraging individuals

to change their habits, or to quit their bad habits. Their campaigns in most cases are based on emotive narration, convincing modalities, and repetition of their campaigns.

A good example of how advertising can lead to changes in behavior is the use of anti-smoking campaigns. Through their graphic imagery, personal testimonies, and powerful warnings these campaigns are geared towards discouraging tobacco use. As it has continuously been researched, these advertisements are able to lower smoking rates by providing the awareness of the potentially harmful health effects, as well as by making their message emotionally resonant. The results of these campaigns prove that advertising can effectively impact personal decisions in significant directions.

Digital payments are a key focus in Indian advertising which have been promoted by advertising after the 2016 demonetization policy. Agreements promoting transactions without cash emphasized the attractiveness, safety and expediency of online platforms. Firms like Paytm became the focus of such change, with massive advertising to orientate users to the world of digital payments. This consequently led to a marked change in consumer behavior and more people started using mobile wallet and online-based transactions.

Advertising also plays a significant role in behavior shaping as depicted through environmental campaigns. Adverts that encourage utilization of reusable products, slashing down of plastic use, and energy conservation have affected preferences of consumers across the world. Sustainability has become a part of the messaging of many brands as it is becoming an increasingly important issue among consumers. By making their identity consistent with the ecological principles, these brands improve their reputation as well as promote more sustainable living.

In sum, the power of advertising to persuade behavior is important due to the persuasive elements and their broad reach. The messages could build up over time and influence habits and decision-making processes when messages are repeated and delivered in an appealing way. Such campaigns are however effective based on credibility, cultural importance and the degree of their appeal to the audience.

In sum, advertising is a strong platform through which social norms are shaped, awareness raised as well as behavioral change. The extent of its influence lies outside the business environment, so it is a significant instrument of encouraging social advancement when applied in a responsible and ethical fashion.

5- Case Studies: India

Advertising in India presents a profound setting in which to explore advertising as a social change agent because of its cultural plurality and the changing social-structure. We are finding advertising campaigns in India to be adopting a more social entry to advertising, yet at the same time adheres to commercial goals, and thus affect the attitude and behavior of the people in significant terms.

1. Ariel That is, Share the Load Campaign

A classic example of socially responsible advertising that is widely embraced is the Share the load campaign of Procter and Gamble (Ariel India). The advertisement tackled gender inequality at home, the problem was deeply embedded in Indian society where household chores used to be regarded as a responsibility of a woman, despite being a working woman.

The campaign also showed a family campaign through emotional storytelling showing a familiar situation that showed the disproportionate responsibility of women. Another rather effective story had featured a reflection of a father who has started reflecting on his behavior after seeing his daughter juggle between work and household. This formed a powerful emotional appeal to the audiences and stimulated introspection.

The campaign attracted a lot of coverage and went viral on the internet. It provoked the debate on the issue of gender roles and encouraged men to play a more active role in domestic work. The reaction of the audience and research indicated that it not only augmented brand awareness, but also led to a gradual transformation in mindset on shared domestic roles.

2. Tata Tea Jaago Re Campaign

Jaago Re is the Tata Tea campaign which was designed to raise awareness and social responsibilities of citizens. It dealt with important challenges like participation of voters, corruption, and safety of women.

The campaign established a significant relation to the real life as tea was related to consumption of tea was connected with the concept of social awakening which made the message more relevant and effective. Its message motivated people to learn and exercise more about their rights and duties. The availability of straightforward language and easy to relate situations made the complicated aspects of social issues reach many.

The campaign was carried out not only through conventional advertising by incorporating new programs that assisted in voter registration and active participation. This combination of communication with a practical course of action made it more successful. It showed that advertising was able to not only raise awareness, but also active involvement in democratic affairs.

3. Swachh Bharat Advertising Campaign

Swachh Bharat is a nationwide campaign launched by the Government of India that proves to be a prime demonstration of how advertising can contribute to large-scale social programs. The campaign was aimed at, enhancing sanitation and promoting cleanliness in the country.

The key to its implementation was the mass media, and messages were spread through television, radio, print, and online sources. The participation of movie stars and famous people contributed to the spread of the campaign and its credibility.

The campaign focused on behavioral change that promoted practices that included proper waste disposal and sanitation facility utilization. Its continuous communication helped to enhance awareness and habits, especially on the rural communities where sanitation awareness was low at the time.

Case Study: Global scenario.

The international campaigns also help to show how advertising can be used to appeal to universal social concerns and impact the audiences of various cultures. Themes that are common to these campaigns include identity, equality and empowerment.

4. Dove - Real Beauty Campaign

Dove Real Beauty campaign defied the established body ideals and has shown women of various body types, ages, and ethnicities. This was in contrast to traditional advertising that tends to push very thin sliced and unrealistic beauty standards.

The campaign created dialogues on self-esteem and body image worldwide, challenging prospective listeners to challenge definitions of beauty in society. It contained educational programs that were to be used to enhance confidence among the youths.

5. Nike Social Justice Campaigns

Nike has spoken to the issues of social life through social advertising, especially equality, and social justice. Action campaigns involving athletes that talk about racial discrimination have gained international publicity.

Such adverts lay stress on the messages of bravery and strength, motivating people to take a stand. Such campaigns, though on controversial occasions, draw attention to the possibilities of advertising in interacting with complex social issues and influencing social discourse.

6. Always – #LikeAGirl Campaign

The always campaign in its campaign called Like A Girl was geared towards reinterpretation a phrase that has been in negative connotation. The campaign was able to challenge and make people feel empowered by bringing up stories that examined the impact of societal views on confidence.

Its emotional narrative and the way it could be relatable helped it achieve popularity and showed that advertising could have an impact on attitudes and provoke the development of positive identity.

6- Negative Impacts and Criticism

As much as advertising has benefited society, its drawbacks include promoting misogynistic stereotypes and consumerism. Most of the advertisements have maintained unrealistic beauty standards that may be harmful to self-esteem and body image, especially on the younger audience.

The gender roles and cultural prejudices have also been linked to advertising. Despite the improvement, there are still campaigns that are based on the old traditional portrayals that can be detrimental to social equality. Besides that, the high consumer-focus tends to associate personal achievement and enjoyment with material wealth, promoting materialism as a value.

The rise of online advertisement has brought about new issues. With the help of targeted advertising, which is founded on the data about the user, a company can manipulate behavior in a very minor manner, provoking concerns with privacy and transparency. People do not necessarily know the methods of the use and collection of their data.

The identity of socially motivated campaigns is another criticism. Other brands can be involved in social issues due to the main motive of marketing which can decrease credibility and trust amongst audiences.

7- Ethical Considerations

Advertising plays a crucial role in society because of the ethical considerations involved. Since advertising is far-reaching and has the ability to influence, the need to be responsible and trustworthy should guide the advertising.

Ethical advertising entails honesty, fairness and diversity. Advertisements must not be misleading and culturally and socially sensitive. They should also take care that the vulnerable populations, particularly children are not exploited.

The Advertising Standards Council of India in India controls the advertisement practices and establishes guidelines that are adhered to, so that advertisements can be true and socially responsible. Such practices assist in keeping up the trust of the populace and make sure that the advertising power is not abused.

The responsible communication is another aspect that has been highlighted by international organizations like the United Nations, especially during campaigns of global concerns. Ethical practices are crucial when it comes to making sure that the advertising can benefit the society and that harm may be minimized.

8- Discussion

Advertising in terms of a social change agent can be described as a multifaceted phenomenon and can be viewed as a complex phenomenon that transcends the socially acceptable commercial role of advertising. Through repeated exposure and persuasive communication, advertising has the potential to change the attitude of a population, norms, as well as promote change in behavior. It is one of the most influential instruments of forming modern society discourse due to its reach and visibility.

However, the effects of advertising greatly hinge on the motives and plans of using the same. Advertising could also be a valuable contribution to positive change when

it is done in line with the ethics and the value of society in general. The example of equality campaigns that are sustainable, socially aware shows how advertising can contribute to progressive changes and bad behavior among the individuals.

Conversely, in cases where the motive of conducting advertisements is more of a commercial interest, it might strengthen the preexisting differences, stereotypes, and materialistic principles. Under these circumstances, its power might turn out to be counter-productive, inhibiting its possibility as a social good force. This two-sided composition shows both the need to take responsibility and engage in ethical practices in the advertising industry.

The increasing interference of the brands into social and political matters demonstrates a certain change of the expectations of consumers. In the modern world, consumers are more demanding with regards to brands taking a very open stand on issues like gender equality, environmental concern, and social justice. The change offers both the opportunities and challenges to advertisers. Although it enables the brands to develop closer relationships with consumers, it needs authenticity and responsibility. Inability to deliver on these expectations might result in scepticism and criticism and it would be crucial that the brands take meaningful and transparent activities on factors of social concern.

Conclusion

Advertising has undergone a serious evolutionist transition where it was just a commercial media of advertising goods and services to the one that could impact social change. Its influence spans several platforms in the modern society so that it can influence masses in terms of their attitudes, values and behaviors. This increased role has now made advertising a significant power in solving social problems and also helping develop the society.

As the analysis carried out in this study shows, advertising does not simply mirror the current social norms; it is an act that is involved in the formation and renegotiation of social norms. Advertising can break the stereotypes, foster inclusivity, and increase awareness on vital issues like gender equality, national health, and making the environment sustainable through well-thought campaigns. The case studies presented above show that the elements of the corporate and government-owned campaigns can be meaningful in motivating the positive behavioral change. Social brand campaigns, public service ads, and other initiatives, show how persuasive communication can be used to motivate audiences to act.

Meanwhile, the research recognizes that ad marketing is not necessarily good. It is influenced by the reasons to create it and the values it propagates. Commercial interests can perpetuate negative stereotypes, promote unnecessary consumerism, and unrealistic social ideals, especially when advertisement is motivated by commercial interests. Such constraints are a pointer to the necessity of a balanced and critical interpretation of the role

played by the advertising in the society. It is critical to note that advertising can lead to positive change but can also enhance the status quo in case it is not employed in a responsible manner.

Ethical aspect of advertising is thus of prime interest. Advertisers should make sure that their messages are honest, dignified and considerate of various social, and cultural backgrounds. Responsible advertising incurs belief in truthfulness, openness and social responsibility. Regulation and self-regulation authorities are pertinent in enforcing the standards, but the ultimate task is to be integrity-driven by advertisers and organizations. With the society still undergoing change, the demands attached to advertising are on a change as well. Audiences are becoming conscious and discerning and require genuineness and openness on the part of brands. The change leaves the opportunity to advertisers to eliminate the shallow message and discuss social issues on a deeper level. Advertising can make its commercial purpose more credible and help advance the society in the long term, by the way of making ad socially responsible.

Advertising, in this situation, is a strong and multifaceted instrument. It is an influential agent of social change due to its power to impact thought and behavior, which is effective as a consequence of how well it is used. The future of advertising is in its ability to be both persuasive and purposeful, because it is not just aimed at achieving economic objectives, but has a positive impact on the environment at large.

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