

Integrated Marketing Communication Forcing Consumers to Compare Themselves with Others and Buy Brands: Case Study for Brand Success in Indian Context

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Abstract

It is natural for consumers to compare themselves with one another as human beings in various aspects of life. Right from childhood, directly or indirectly, everyone is compared with some person or another by those concerned, whether it is one's own parents, teachers, friends, colleagues or others. It starts so early in life that by the time one moves from childhood to teenage and further, they start comparing themselves with every other person throughout their life, whether at home, at the workplace or anywhere else. This constant comparison, initially by others and later by oneself, makes everyone a strong target of brand communications directed to satisfy one's ego in acquiring or possessing brands just because someone else in their circle is having it, in order to get an equal, if not an upper hand, in comparison to that other person. This article tries to unearth how companies use integrated marketing communication to make consumers feel that something is missing in their life just by not having or using some brand or another, which motivates them to acquire it, thereby bridging the gap. Once it gets bridged, another gap is highlighted by IMC, and the process goes on endlessly in everyone's life.

Keywords

Consumer, comparison, brand, marketing, communication

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Introduction

Human beings are fed a constant diet of comparing themselves with others in every aspect since they are born. This childhood experience remains unknown to the child until they attain a particular age, and then it remains a part of life wherein they compare themselves with others whenever it is convenient. By the time an individual becomes a real consumer of different brands, comparison gets ingrained as an everlasting part of their life, serving as a constant motivation for buying more of some brands as well as new brands from time to time. Integrated marketing communication constantly plays a decisive role in converting this feeling of comparison in many consumers towards buying one brand or another, whether the brand is required or not for any need fulfilment. This article tries to explore this journey from consumer feelings of comparison with others and missing something as compared to others, exploitation of this feeling by companies to promote their brands and consumers buying these brands, and eventually becoming brand promoters themselves in many cases. Whether old traditional media like print, audio and audio-visual, or modern media, including social media in its different forms, it is everywhere.

Consumer Tendency of Comparison with One Another Unleashed

The 1990s was the decade of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation (LPG), and brands of Indian origin, foreign origin, Indian-owned foreign origin, foreign-owned Indian origin and so on have established, and continue to establish, their presence across the country since then. Simultaneously, masses in India have seen their aspirations rise due to an increase in their economic levels, thereby resulting in decent disposable incomes regularly increasing for many sections of society since the 1990s and right into the 21st century. At the same time, the consumer tendency to compare oneself with others in the closest as well as the farthest circles has made all consumers across sections and levels of income buy and use all types of brands among all products and services, feeling empowered many times, if not always. Promoters of certain products and services who have taken full advantage of this consumer tendency of comparing themselves with one another are highlighted below.

Readymade Garments

Comfort, style, impression and personality of the buyer/consumer/user are some of the words or indicators that are communicated by the companies making and promoting readymade garments. Whether celebrity endorsement is done or not, viewers and readers are targeted with messages wherein they should feel comfortable in their garments, and the endorsed brand or brands are projected as the best compared to other brands. Not only comfort, but their style as well as personality would come out in full form only if they sport the advertised brand,

wherein the advertisement shows those consumers not wearing the brand as dull and unhappy. It generates a feeling among many viewers and readers that only if they wear the advertised brand will they have confidence and fulfilment in conducting themselves in all walks of life. A large number of consumers do get carried away many times with the repeated exposure to such advertisements, especially those who normally trust companies and brands. It is projected to these consumers that if they do not wear these brands, they will miss something big in life or will fall behind others. Such marketing indicators are used by many famous brands in this category, which include Allen Solly, Peter England, Van Heusen, Arrow and Zodiac. As a matter of fact, taking cues from big brands, many small and recently launched brands promote themselves as if they are big and create this aspirational feeling among many consumers who have no idea about the brand track records and get carried away by flashy and impressive brand communications. At times, flashy logos and stylish fonts used by new brands in brand names and others make consumers believe them to be old brands while blaming themselves as ignorant, and this very characteristic of consumers is used by these clothing brands in promoting themselves.

Packaged Foods

Packaged foods fall into the categories of ready-to-eat and ready-to-cook foods (alone or along with some other item or items). They are a part of the kitchens of almost all homes in some form or another. There may be some kitchens in homes where such packaged food items are not encouraged due to the presence of preservatives in them, which are considered to be harmful to health by some people, either due to belief or due to some medico-health reasons. Apart from this health-conscious section of society, a large majority of people across all sections of society and across India consume a lot of packaged foods in their kitchens in ready-to-eat and ready-to-cook categories. Edible oils, butter, jams, jellies, spices, pickles, noodles, spaghetti, vermicelli, sweets, creams, dry fruits, fruits and others are some of the product categories wherein excessive branding is common, and exposure to this branding is on the rise. Amul, Gowardhan, Patanjali, Adani, Ankur, MDH, Everest, Rajesh, Goldee and others are brands that communicate constantly about being the best in their categories and try to motivate consumers through their communications to consume them in larger quantities if they already use them, and those who do not use them or use them infrequently are motivated to change their preferences towards these brands by highlighting that they are compromising their health by not consuming them. Actually speaking, these communications often harp on consumer ignorance, which results in consumers trusting everything the brand communicates, resulting in brands becoming big. Sometimes brands harp on Ayurvedic expertise, like Patanjali; sometimes it may be a different legacy, like Amul or Dabur, and at other times, it may be the scale of operation, like Adani. Whatever may be the route to fame, every brand does it and keeps improving its numbers, whether consumers get the desired benefit or not. It is not that no one benefits, but every brand claims to be the best, which cannot be true.

Health Foods/Drinks

This category of products/brands could have been discussed under the previous category, but the 21st century has come up with a very different classification by so-called health experts, wherein health foods/drinks are separately marketed and projected as different from normal packaged foods/drinks, mainly on grounds of health and nutrition. It is, however, debatable whether these are healthy or not. What is important to note is that a huge section of society across India is highly impressed by these brands, as their marketing communications have played a major role here. Numerous brands in this category are promoted as essential for maintaining health from all perspectives. More important here is health as perceived by viewers, listeners and readers and the very fine line of difference between health and fitness. Complian, Bournvita, Horlicks, Women's Horlicks, Fitmor, Pintola, Protinex, Urban Platter and others operate as healthy food brands in India, claiming a very healthy life for all their consumers. However, marketing communications around these brands need analysis from the perspective of consumer welfare. Numerous research from time to time have come out and projected that claims made by these so-called health drinks are doubtful and that children, adults and others should consume them based on sound advice from doctors or experts and not merely on the basis of marketing communications by these brands. In spite of all this, it is very difficult for gullible, innocent masses to ignore these motivating and dream-oriented communications wherein all viewers, readers and listeners are repeatedly told that these health drinks/foods are a sure-shot path to success in life, sports and so on, and that without these health foods/drinks, they will be left behind in the race to excel and make their mark. At times, these communications target innocent emotional mothers of growing children who would go to any extent to make their child strong in order to excel in life. It is worth mentioning here that not all brands and brand communications are wrong, but many brands take advantage of the immense trust that many consumers place in them. At times, blind faith in the celebrity endorsing these brands plays the right trick for the companies (Kanchan, 2022). Moreover, many paid social media influencers are effectively used by these brands to establish connections with such innocent consumers through their regular posts, reels and updates praising these brands and almost guaranteeing their value in consumers' lives. When they are correct, it is acceptable; however, not every influencer is correct every time. After all, many among them are paid, and no one comes to know who belongs to the paid category.

Mobile Phones

What started as a luxury in the late 1990s is now a necessity. On 31 July 1995, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, made the first mobile phone call in India using a Nokia handset while inaugurating ModiTelstra's MobileNet service from Writers' Building, Kolkata, to the then Union Telecom Minister Sukhram at Sanchar Bhavan, New Delhi. Over a journey of almost three decades, this luxury has ceased to remain a luxury, whether one looks at the mobile handset

industry or the mobile service provider industry. From 1 April 2003, every incoming call on any mobile phone in India was made free by Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), and the mobile subscriber revolution started, never to end (Our Economy Bureau, 2013). The world of mobile phone handset and mobile service provider have almost turned around since 2003, which is more than two decades running. With the launch of its telecom services under the Jio brand by Reliance Industries in September 2016, offering free voice and data services, another big disruption happened and it forced major competitors like Bharti Airtel, Vodafone and Idea Cellular into consolidation (Lohchab, 2024). These major interventions in 1995, 2003 and then eventually in 2016 made mobile handsets and mobile service providers literally a family member across families in almost all socio-economic classes (SECs) of our country. Mobile phone handsets moved from very basic in 1995 to slightly smart and eventually very smart, carrying the whole world inside them, wherein anyone and everyone using a smartphone can control almost everything around their lives by using it. So far so good. Integrated marketing communication has made the mobile handset industry very interesting as well as aspirational, whereas there is not much differentiation in the mobile service provider industry as within a particular rental in post-paid services. There is almost unlimited incoming and outgoing calls and a lot of mobile data, of which some always remains unused in every billing cycle with many users of different service providers, majorly Jio, Vi, Airtel as well as BSNL. Differentiation in prepaid services is also not much to highlight. When mobile number portability was introduced in India by TRAI on 20 January 2011 (Singh, 2013), the craze of moving from one mobile service provider to another started and all mobile service providers communicated their users to remain with them and their non-users to port in to them, and extensive use of marketing communications did help many of them to a large extent. It is going on and some people do get impressed by these communications and change their mobile service providers. But, by and large, there is not much difference between them to be marketed. However, mobile handset industry has two major players, Apple iPhone and Samsung, using creative marketing communication constantly to make consumers come closer to them. Apart from these two major brands, Oppo, Vivo, Redmi, OnePlus, and others are other brands that are present in India and also involving themselves in reaching out to their existing and potential consumers through innovative communication tools. Communications from Apple iPhone and Samsung smartphones stand apart as these command high prices and impress people on the pitch that if they do not own these smartphones constantly in their lives, they will miss out on their status among their peers as well as in their social circle. Moreover, with these mobile phones offered on EMIs as part of IMC done by them, makes them accessible to every socio-economic class of society, thereby completely blurring the difference between luxury and economy. In other words, premium mobile phone brands reach all people regardless of their purchasing power, and in making it happen, a large number of people do not mind paying EMIs for 12 or 24 months as the case may be. In this way, these brands grow by making consumers compete with one another and buying these brands in order to overcome this so-called lack of their status regularly. It is another matter that

many consumers do not use many features of these very smartphones, which does not bother them as well as these companies as long as IMC serves the purpose.

Two Wheelers

A motorised two-wheeler is the first symbol of power for any child in India who attains the legal age of driving as per Indian law. They feel immense power in their world when taking the first ride after attaining this age. Integrated marketing communications by two-wheeler manufacturers take full advantage of this stage, and further stages, in the lives of all two-wheeler drivers in India. Whether the two-wheeler is geared or automatic, petrol- or gas-based or electric, marketing communications take current as well as potential riders on a dream tour of the benefits of using it in whatever work or profession they are involved in. In recent times, the storage capacity of a two-wheeler is used very creatively to promote its utility, over and above aspects of mileage and convenience. Two-wheelers are also promoted as easily manageable in rush hours due to heavy traffic on Indian roads. Apart from that, marketers of two-wheelers put in their historical backgrounds to impress their current and potential customers while doing integrated marketing communications. Bajaj, TVS, Honda, Yamaha, Suzuki, Royal Enfield, Piaggio and others are some brands that are just like folklore in many families for generations, and consumers take pride in owning and driving these (TATA AIG Team, n.d.). Almost every brand of two-wheeler promotes itself as a possession of pride for current and potential consumers, as if they will miss out on life if they do not possess it. This feeling of envy generates a desire to possess it by many consumers who do not have it, and consumers who have it are motivated to upgrade to a so-called, or actual, better and improved model of the same brand. This communication is more directed towards students who reach driving age as per Indian law, and whose parents could do anything for their happiness. Women empowerment is also shown by two-wheeler manufacturers while promoting them, wherein a successful woman is confidently riding it, indicating not just arriving in the world of business or jobs but also being at par with her male counterpart in all aspects.

Four-wheelers

Four-wheelers have moved from an aspirational possession to an essential part of the lives of a majority of Indians, especially the traditional middle class, in the 21st century. Moreover, with the launch of Tata Nano in 2008, a large section of the Indian middle class moved from a two-wheeler to a four-wheeler and started feeling comfortable on otherwise busy and congested Indian roads. It was conceptualised in the early 2000s, providing middle-class Indians with a safe and affordable car, motivated by the sight of families riding scooters in precarious conditions. Easy car loans were already available, but cars as such were not available in the price range that Tata Nano offered at that time (₹100,000 or around \$2,500 then). It is another matter that manufacturing of the Tata Nano stopped after 2020 as orders were no longer coming (ET Online, 2024). However,

it can be credited for democratising the car market and taking cars out of the category of a rich person's vehicle. Now, when a car has become a common man's vehicle, all companies are targeting all classes of people in India to buy or upgrade to a better car in order to show their enhanced status, and people are believing in that. Integrated marketing communications that make people envy one another on the basis of ownership, or lack of ownership, of a particular car spur car sales like anything, and year-round festive seasons in India make it big. Ironically, many cars in many residential societies are more in the parking lot than on the road, as these were bought more out of envy than necessity.

Skin Cosmetics

Skin cosmetic brands have been a phenomenon in India for decades, and consumers of both genders use these cosmetics to look and feel good. It needs to be emphasised that companies making these cosmetics use aggressive integrated marketing communications to influence young boys and girls who are always on the lookout for ensuring that they look good through their skin, including facial skin. This tendency and expectation to look good are cleverly used by all companies in promoting their own brands. Promotion as such is no problem, but when every brand communication by every company claims itself as the best and others as bad, these young boys and girls fall into a trap and, at times, hurt themselves by damaging their skin. Moreover, every cosmetic brand is projected as 100% natural, at times Ayurvedic also, and gullible young buyers have no option but to believe these claims. It has generated, and continues to generate, huge sales and increasing market share for almost all brands regularly since decades.

Soaps and Detergents

Here, the discussion focuses on bathing soaps and washing detergent cakes and powders for clothes. These categories of household brands have impacted the lives and lifestyles of millions for decades across the world as well as in India. In India, these categories of essentials are promoted extensively across all media with a heavy dose of comparison, generating a feeling among consumers who use, as well as who do not use, these brands. Customers are constantly targeted by the message that if they are not using a particular bathing soap brand, their health, glow, beauty and so on will not show up completely, which makes them, especially the vulnerable ones, believe it literally. The same goes for washing detergent cakes and powders. In fact, premium brands in this category, like Rin, Surf, Tide and Nirma, have all used this messaging against one another in constantly generating huge returns since decades (Students of BBA Semester VI, n.d.).

Property

Residential and commercial property marketers have used integrated marketing communications for a long time, and the 21st century has seen a big change here,

wherein these companies and groups promote themselves just like any other marketable product or service. Across all media, including social media, these real estate companies market their residential as well as commercial properties using the natural envy factor in the consumers, making them feel that if they do not want to miss out on scoring points over their circle of friends and relatives, they should go for these properties without waiting. Marketing pitches in print media, electronic media and others use jargons like RERA (Real Estate Regulatory Authority) (The Institute of Company Secretaries of India, n.d.) approved, close to the main market of the city, sea facing and so on to convince prospective as well as vulnerable buyers, although all claims in the marketing communications may not be true. Moreover, real estate developers market their schemes as investment options to consumers by pitching them as safe as compared to other financial schemes, which may not increase the money of the investor as compared to the value of the property, which always appreciates over time. As a result of this pitching, a large chunk of real estate (residential as well as commercial) is purchased for its resale value and not just for its residential or commercial value. It appears good for the economy, but it also harms the environment in the long run, which can be seen in the form of flood-like situations across the country due to massive deforestation everywhere.

Education

Education was more of a service provided mainly by the central or state governments, barring some private schools, colleges and universities, as late as the end of the 20th century in India. Here also, marketing communication by educational service providers was not widely heard of in the 20th century, except for coaching classes for competitive examinations. The 21st century changed this completely and drastically. It is common for everyone to hear, see and read advertisements and other marketing communications used constantly and increasingly by all education providers, especially by private education providers of primary, secondary, higher secondary, as well as higher education. Indian education is just like any other service that is marketed across all media around the world. There is nothing wrong in it as long as it serves the purpose of education. The problem arises when priority is given to business and profit over education. Education across all levels has seen this trend in the 21st century unfold in a big way all over India, with various regulatory bodies in different streams of education. These bodies are University Grants Commission (UGC), All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), National Medical Commission (NMC), Dental Council of India (DCI), Pharmacy Council of India (PCI), National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), Bar Council of India (BCI), Indian Nursing Council (INC), Council of Architecture, Central Council of Homeopathy (CCH), Central Council of Indian Medicine (CCIM) and others (Study in India, n.d.). Various educational institutions at primary, secondary, higher secondary, as well as higher education levels impart education well within these regulations and make sure that their marketing communications are as

ethical as possible. However, many institutions across disciplines use legal but unethical and ambiguous terms in their marketing communications to get admissions, and simple, honest students and their parents get trapped in it. This needs to be curbed and controlled by all means.

Financial Services

Banks, financial institutions and other financial service providers in the government as well as the private sector are always marketing their offerings in one form or another, and consumers/subscribers to these services have all benefited from them. It is worth noting that integrated marketing communications by these service providers have become very creative and address almost all concerns that consumers have in this direction. Safe investment, secure returns, assured gains, no risk and so on are many jargons used by these financial service providers in order to gain consumer/investor confidence from first-time consumers/investors as well as existing consumers/investors. However, certain dubious or fake companies claiming to be genuine also operate in this arena, besides other legal and genuine ones, thereby taking advantage of consumer ignorance. Such dubious companies cheat the consumers many times. This market requires a lot of caution on the part of the consumers/investors. Genuine companies in this sector should properly educate people investing in them. Moreover, the Reserve Bank of India (Central Bank of India) and Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) regularly educate people about possible scams and scamsters and how to safeguard their hard-earned money while investing (CCI India, n.d.). This helps investors in differentiating very impressive marketing communications of genuine companies from those of fake and dubious companies. However, comparison-based communications by companies exhorting consumers/investors to invest in order to feel superior to their peers and others are very much prevalent in this sector.

Event Organisers

The 21st century has seen a big boom in the form of event organisers who work on a turnkey basis and take responsibility for organising part of, or the whole, event; however big or small. Right from a small birthday party with a minimum number of guests to a big marriage extravaganza spanning multiple dates, corporate events, seminars, conferences or any other event spanning multiple cities, anything under the sun can be organised by these event organisers (Pillareddy, 2023). Some event-organising companies own everything that they use in the process of the event, and some use others in organising it. All in all, this business activity has become a big industry with extensive use of integrated marketing communications across all geographies, cultures and societies. So much is the impact of these communications in the ordinary lives of many people in India that they give total contract of their important events to these agencies and just relax throughout the event. A section of consumers feel that the personal touch is missing in such events, but even then, the lack of botheration on many

fronts scores over the personal touch argument in many cases. Here also, many people go for these event organisers out of peer pressure of 'not missing out on something for a rare event of their lives' feeling, even though they could have organised it on their own in a satisfying manner. It is all a game of intelligent marketing communication by these organisations which wins in all such cases.

Restaurants

Restaurants of all types, serving or self-serving, are also big implementers of integrated marketing communications all along their existence across India. Many of these operate like big corporate entities in the form of chains of restaurants having multi-city presence, which include franchisee model. It also coincides with a big increase in eating out behaviour of Indians across cultures, demographics and locations throughout India. One can easily observe waiting areas of restaurants packed on weekends for lunches as well as dinners in almost every city of India. Apart from that, these restaurants are also available for home delivery through mobile apps like Swiggy, Zomato and Uber Eats, wherein they are not worried much about their physical guests as long as their offerings are ordered and delivered through these apps. One can see these restaurants promoting themselves as better than their competitors within geographies as well as across geographies. Eye-catching photographs and hoardings of mouth-watering and beautifully plated dishes have come up in this century, and no one can ignore them on the streets, at home while watching television or while using mobile phones (Jenkin et al., 2014). These restaurants not only promote their offerings using all audio-visual appeals but also try to convert customers of other restaurants by using all types of influences through all media. Sometimes food delivery apps do it on their own, as well as in alignment with these restaurants. In the midst of these heavy marketing communications, consumer consumption of all types of foods, healthy as well as unhealthy, has grown manifold, and it needs research to determine whether all these restaurants using the word 'healthy' in their advertisements are actually providing healthy food. In the recent times of app-based food ordering on mobile phones, while ordering food, customers experience comparative advertising, thereby making them do app hopping until a final order is booked. In other words, 24×7 comparison-based advertising across all forms, formats and devices is making life enjoyable as well as disturbing for customers, depending on how they look at it. At the end of the day, business flourishes, although the health of consumers may suffer.

Travel and Tour Operators

LPG, since 1991, has helped the masses in our country improve their socio-economic status. It helps them manage their money so well that travel for leisure is now a necessary part of their lives, giving them a break from work, thereby recharging them for more work in the future. This sector of business has multiplied manifold as every class of society is travelling for leisure, whether the break is as short as 3 days or as long as a week or even more. Across the marketing

communication spectrum in this service area, all marketers are projecting themselves as better than the other from various angles, like destinations covered, hospitality comfort, ease of visas and travel insurance. Thomas Cook, SOTC, MakeMyTrip, EaseMyTrip, Goibibo and others are certain online travel and tour portals on the internet that take care of everything related to making the entire travel of customers as comfortable as possible. These companies also provide offline support to travellers. There is a big element of online as well as offline marketing communications by all these service providers, and in it are also advertising, where direct and indirect comparisons with rival brands are done to influence current as well as prospective customers/travellers. This comparison results in consumer shifts from one brand to another from time to time. It is also important to note that effective or ineffective comparative marketing communication by these organisations results in fresh customers drifting towards one and going away from others, as some customers also expect this comparison (Bhatia, 2014).

Airlines

Air travel remained a luxury for a large section of Indians almost until the end of the 20th century, and even if this vast majority travelled by air, many of them travelled on official visits wherein funding came from their employers. It is this vast majority of masses who got opportunities in the 21st century to travel by air for leisure using their own money, which has brought a big boom to domestic and international airlines. Whether it is Air India (earlier owned by the Government of India and later transferred to the Tata Group), IndiGo Airlines, Akasa Air or others, every airline is witness to this phenomenon. Even international airlines could sense this boom resulting in their expanded operations in India by connecting many Indian cities to many international destinations around the world. This automatically brought marketing communications by airlines in the forefront and all airlines started doing comparative integrated marketing communications to generate loyalty towards themselves through not only by acquiring new flyers but also weaning away flyers from other rival airlines. In this direction, various factors like ease of flying, airport hospitality, meals, in-flight care, comfortable seats, more legroom, more flight connections and cheaper fares are regularly resorted to by all airlines from time to time. Whether it is Air France, British Airways, or even Etihad, Emirates or any other international airline, comparative marketing communications are found everywhere (AltexSoft Editorial Team, 2024).

Conclusion

The above discussion covers many sectors of business in the form of a case study. However, certain sectors are not covered. One thing that comes out clearly is that comparison-based marketing communications are used by all companies, big or small, old or new, and they learn from one another. At the same time, consumers of all products and services love to hear and react to comparative advertising from time to time.

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