

Unravelling Social Narratives in Advertisements on India's Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

This study explores the linguistic representation of environmental, social and governance issues (ESG) within advertisements, employing the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) theory as its theoretical framework. In the context of India's dynamic growth and its pledge towards accomplishing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), marketers stand at the intersection of societal responsibility and brand communication. Through an examination of 84 commercials that address a spectrum of social concerns, this study seeks to identify and illuminate the prevailing societal issues that necessitate attention. In navigating this inquiry, we conducted text analysis to examine the linguistic features and intricacies of these advertisements. The prominence of themes such as "Good Health and Well-being" and "Gender Equality" underscores their significance in the discourse. Additionally, the distinct linguistic patterns between different SDG themes shed light on the nuanced communication strategies employed to the social communication. This academic exploration contributes valuable insights into the intersection of marketing, societal responsibility, and the linguistic strategies employed in addressing critical issues.

Keywords: Social Advertising, Sustainable Development Goals, Language

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Introduction

Language serves as a powerful mechanism which subtly influences one's nature of thoughts (Carnevale et al., 2017), therefore it is also important to study the linguistic portrayal of environmental, social and governance issues (ESG) within advertisement as advertising plays a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions and behaviours. Research indicates that ads not only influence brand personality, credibility and attitude towards a brand (Sander et al., 2021) but also reflect and impact societal norms and values (Wakefield et al., 2009). Advertising can shape attitudes and perceptions, especially among younger demographics who are more vulnerable to media influence (Wakefield et al., 2009). Advertisements portraying specific lifestyles or behaviours as desirable can contribute to the normalization of these behaviours within society. For example, the efficacy of social communication in influencing societal issues is underscored by its impact on memory for pro-nutritional messages, drawing on theories rooted in advertising, information processing, and cognitive psychology (Samson, Nanne & Buijzen, 2021). This emphasizes the motivational significance of appeals embedded in social communication. Consequently, it is crucial to analyse advertisements and how they are communicated (their communicative language), particularly those that raise awareness about social and environmental issues.

Marketing communicators bear a dual responsibility, not merely confined to the enhancement of corporate image, motivation of stakeholders, and the fortification of brand loyalty but extending towards the exhibition ESG issues in consonance with Corporate Social Responsibility (Lantos 2002). This multifaceted approach aims to elevate awareness about societal issues while cultivating a positive brand perception, reflecting a broader commitment to societal welfare (Chandy et al. 2021). This strategic duality aligns with the overarching narrative of contributing to a better world through conscientious marketing practices. A tangible example of this is the collaborative study conducted by management consulting companies, McKinsey and NielsenIQ, investigate the sales growth of products (over 28%) that are marketed and communicated as environmentally and socially responsible as compared to the ones who took no such approach (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) signifies a strategic approach focused on upholding by ethical standards and proactively contribute to societal and environmental welfare. Departing from viewing CSR merely as a marketing tactic, it embodies a commitment to acting as responsible citizens within the social ecosystem. The term "corporate social responsibility," or "CSR," refers to a company's commitment to generating financial and economic benefits to the shareholders and conduct business ethically and enhancing societal welfare. It involves initiatives across various domains, including philanthropy and sustainability which benefit the financial interest of the organisation (Lantos, 2002). Marketing communication concepts such as cause-related marketing, environmental marketing, social responsible buying, and sustainable consumption are intricately woven within the CSR framework, reflecting a shift from business-centric to society-centric perspectives (Pagel & Gierl, 2010). In the contemporary globalized and socially conscious environment, advertisers bear the responsibility of extending beyond product promotion, focusing on the communication of social issues. This heightened responsibility aligns with the United Nations' call for businesses to play a central role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Jones, Comfort & Hillier, 2016).

Numerous studies have demonstrated the tangible benefits of CSR for businesses, including enhancing brand reputation and driving long-term profitability while also contributing positively to society. For instance, ESG ads initiatives gained prominence among brands such as Nike, Dove, and Gillette. For example, in 2018, Nike launched the ad “Dream Crazy” addressing issues of racial equality and social justice. The campaign sparked a significant amount of media attention and public discourse. Despite some backlash, Nike saw a 31% increase in sales (Sweeny, 2018) and revenue of 6 billion (Linnane, 2018) following the campaign launch. Dove’s ‘Real Beauty’ campaign attracted audience with their body positivity and self-esteem message. Consumers appreciated the authentic representation and the positive messaging about beauty and self-esteem. Sales of Dove products increased, and the campaign became a long-term brand strategy (Bold, 2015). Gillette recognized that ‘the best a man can get’ campaign required a new dimension to emotionally connect with consumers. The brand took a leading role in shaping attitudes and male perspectives on toxic masculinity and gender equality and changed stereotypes (ETBrandEquity, 2023). Such initiatives underscore the strategic role of ESG advertisements in aligning business objectives with societal welfare, demonstrating its potential to foster sustainable development and enhance corporate credibility.

Language of ESG Advertisements

Effective communication of ESG initiatives must be culturally and linguistically attuned to effectively connect with diverse audiences. Advertisements in different languages can have varying impacts due to the nuanced levels of expression each language offers. Some languages have multiple terms for concepts that others express with a single word (Boroditsky, 2001), influencing the specificity and detail of ESG messages. Additionally, the emotional resonance of words can differ across languages; terms that carry deep emotional weight in one language may not evoke the same feelings when translated. Understanding these nuances is crucial for crafting impactful ESG communications (Pavlenko, 2005). Furthermore, different cultures have different communication styles; some favour clear, direct communication, while others tend to take a more deceptive approach. Aligning the communication style with the audience's preferences can significantly enhance the effectiveness of ESG advertisements (Hall, 1976). Another important factor in determining how reliable and trustworthy individuals find a communication is the set of words selected. In order to effectively communicate ESG messaging and increase awareness among their target audiences, marketers require meticulously evaluate the language and terms they choose.

While prior research has delved into sustainability in advertising (Claro & Esteves 2021; Anwar & El-Bassiouny 2019; Jones, Comfort & Hillier 2016), the examination of language in advertisements, particularly the choice of words, remains a pertinent and underexplored area of study. Despite studies exploring linguistic features in conveying corporate values (Rajandran 2016; Fuoli 2012; Livesey & Kearins 2002), a significant gap persists. The present study addresses this gap through text analysis specifically centred on SDG-themed Indian advertising communication. This analytical approach seeks to unveil nuanced linguistic strategies employed across different languages, providing insights into the communication dynamics related to SDGs in advertising. The study's academic pursuit is rooted in the recognition of the pivotal role language plays in shaping perceptions and influencing societal engagement.

We examined 84 Indian advertisements to study how ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) practices and awareness are depicted, and to analyse the language utilized by

advertisers. This examination provides insights into how corporations perceive and address social issues, enabling us to assess whether their ESG advertisements align with broader societal objectives. Several factors motivated the choice to concentrate on India for this study. Firstly, India's vast array of cultures, languages, and traditions provides a distinct backdrop for examining advertising and its portrayal of social issues such as poverty, inequality, and environmental matters. Understanding the corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies and ESG communication of Indian corporations has become increasingly important, especially considering India's growing influence as a major player in the global economy. As stakeholders emphasize greater transparency and responsibility, Indian companies face growing pressure to demonstrate their commitment to social and environmental causes. Thirdly, India's status as the world's fifth-largest economy, actively pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and making significant strides, underscores its relevance in global sustainability efforts as reflected in its six-point ascent in the Sustainable Development Goals Index (NITI Aayog, 2021). Lastly, India's expansive and expanding consumer market presents substantial opportunities for CSR initiatives and ESR advertisements to drive impactful change and contribute to sustainable development by aligning business objectives with the SDGs.

This study seeks to address two key inquiries:

- a) What societal issues take precedence in social advertisements addressing India's Sustainable Development Goals?
- b) Does the use of words and terminologies significantly differ between Hindi and English language social advertisements?

By examining how advertising, societal demands, and CSR overlap, we promote ethical business behaviours that support long-term growth. This is in line with the increasing worldwide shift towards ethical consumerism and corporate responsibility.

Research Methodology

Our methodology involved a comprehensive exploration of social advertisements drawn from the expansive repository of Ad forum website. To ensure relevance and alignment with the evolving landscape of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we specifically curated a dataset spanning from 2015 to the April 2024.

The first phase of our methodology encompassed meticulous coding, whereby each social advertisement (84) was systematically categorized according to prevalent social themes. This categorization was then aligned with the corresponding Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, an advertisement advocating for women rights has been coded under the theme "Empowerment" and aligned with SDG Gender Equality. Another example could be an advertisement promoting environmental sustainability, coded under "Environment" and associated with SDG Climate Action.

Subsequently, we employed text analysis technique, such as generating word clouds, to unravel the linguistic nuances within each identified theme. This process facilitated a granular understanding of the terminologies and language constructs commonly utilized in social advertisements. By deciphering word clouds, we aimed to discern patterns indicative of effective audience engagement and potential catalysts for societal change. As a final step, our methodology involved analysis of Hindi and English language advertisements. We sought to ascertain whether there were discernible differences in the choice of terminologies and

linguistic approaches when addressing social issues. This comparative study delved into the linguistic intricacies that contribute to the cultural resonance and societal impact of advertisements in different languages.

Result and Discussion

A. Theme-Based Result

1. Highly Represented Themes

- a. Good Health and Well-being (26.2%): The discernible prevalence of advertisements addressing health-related issues underscores a substantial societal commitment to well-being. Marketers strategically prioritize messaging that contributes meaningfully to public health awareness.
- b. Gender Equality (19%): The commendable emphasis on gender equality signifies a concerted effort to address deeply rooted gender-based challenges. Advertisements, in this context, manifest a dedicated commitment to fostering inclusivity.

2. Moderately Represented Themes

- a. Reduced Inequalities (16.7%): The considerable representation of advertisements addressing societal inequalities suggests a conscientious societal commitment to the principles of social justice. Advertisers, in turn, recognize and respond to the imperative of addressing disparities.
- b. Climate Action (7.1%): The moderate representation of climate action themes indicates a growing societal awareness of environmental sustainability. Advertisements, in this realm, reflect a commendable willingness to engage with ecological concerns.

3. Low or No Representation

Partnership for the Goals (4.8%), while not the highest, indicates some acknowledgment of the importance of collaborative efforts to achieve sustainable development. The absence of ads associated with Decent Work and Economic Growth, Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, Sustainable Cities and Communities, and Life Below Water prompts reflection on potential areas for strengthening or diversifying messaging strategies. Pictorial presentation of the result can be seen in Fig. 1.

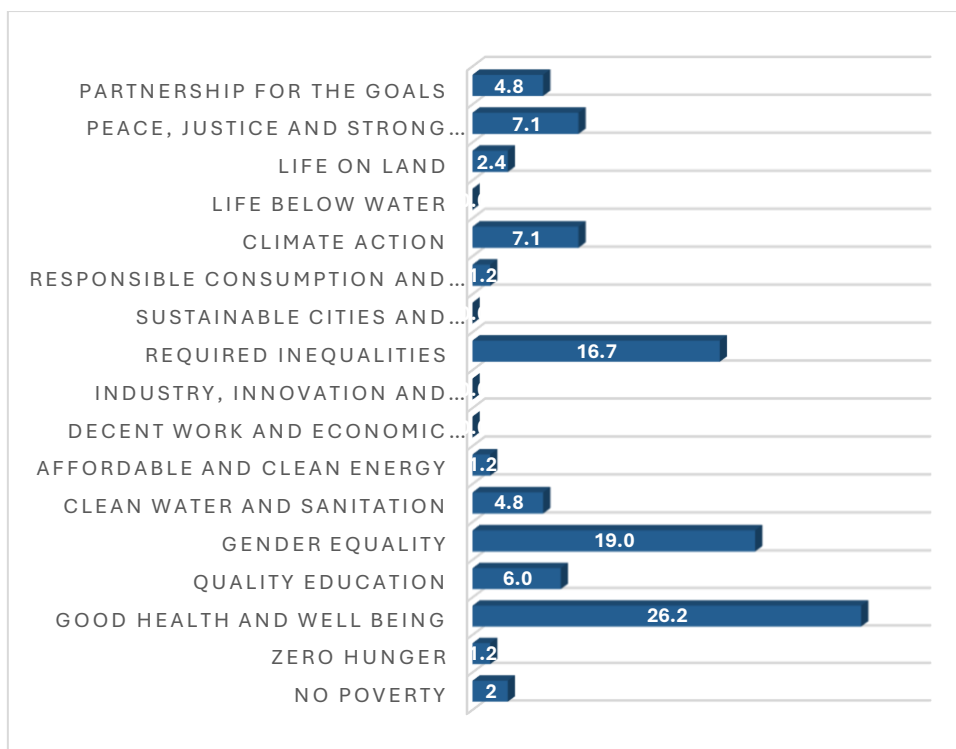


Fig. 1 Proportion of SDG themes in Indian social advertisements

B. Terminologies-Based Result

For practical purposes, we have two major addressed SDG theme of advertisements; Good health and wellbeing (26.2%) and Gender equality (19%). We have observed linguistic nuances in words and terminologies used in social advertisements. For example, Fig. 2 shows Gender equality (English) concentrates on nuanced societal issues, encompassing violence, movement, and challenges faced by gender, reflecting themes of strength and independence. In contrast, Gender equality (Hindi) addresses broader facets of daily life, job, family, body characteristics, and events in one’s life as shown in Fig. 3.



Fig. 2: Word cloud of SDG Gender equality (English language ad)

The linguistic disparity observed between English and Hindi language social advertisements underscores a strategic choice in communication. English ads leverage more scientific terminologies and disease-related vocabulary, catering to a broader understanding of social issues with a potential medical and formal inclination. This choice aligns with the objective of conveying societal concerns effectively. In contrast, Hindi, being a native language, resonates with the daily lives and personal experiences of the Indian audience. The preference for Hindi in ads reflects a deliberate effort to connect with individuals on a more personal and relatable level, emphasizing the significance of cultural and linguistic nuances in shaping effective social communication strategies.

Conclusion

This research provides valuable insights into the interplay between marketing, societal responsibility, and linguistic strategies. The significant presence of themes such as "Good Health and Well-being" and "Gender Equality" within these advertisements indicates a strong societal focus on these critical areas. This trend underscores the alignment of marketing messages with public health objectives, reinforcing the role of advertisements in promoting community health and hygiene practices. The theme of "Gender Equality" reflects a societal acknowledgment of the importance of equal opportunities and rights for all genders, illustrating the commitment of advertisers to foster a more inclusive society. It emphasizes the critical role of language in shaping societal perceptions and advancing sustainable development. The study also reveals notable linguistic differences between English and Hindi advertisements. English-language ads frequently use scientific terms and disease-related vocabulary, aiming for a broader and more formal understanding of social issues. In contrast, Hindi advertisements emphasize personal well-being and individual experiences, highlighting an effort to connect with the audience on a more personal and relatable level. This strategic choice in communication underscores the importance of cultural and linguistic nuances in crafting effective social messages. Marketers are encouraged to adopt linguistically sensitive approaches in their ESG communication to resonate their messages more effectively. As India progresses in its dynamic growth and dedication to the SDGs, the influence of advertisements in addressing societal and environmental issues will continue to be crucial in driving positive change.

Implications

This study contributes to the existing CSR and advertising literature by examining the complex linguistic aspects associated with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). On an applied level, the insights gained from this study offer significant recommendations for advertisers, marketing professionals, and state agencies. A comprehensive understanding of linguistic preferences and resonances in distinct languages, with a specific focus on Hindi and English within the Indian context, facilitates more efficacious and culturally sensitive communication strategies. Our study delivers valuable insights for marketers seeking to create and design campaigns that drive substantial social influence. By understanding which SDG themes resonate most with Indian audiences, marketers can tailor their messaging to align with societal values and priorities. By identifying common themes and terminologies in advertisements, corporations can better understand societal expectations and preferences. This knowledge informs CSR strategies, enabling companies to address relevant social issues authentically. Our findings contribute to policy discussions aimed at promoting responsible advertising practices and corporate accountability. Encouraging cooperation among government, private sector, and civil society, policymakers can develop a robust environment

for CSR endeavours aimed at fostering social improvement. This practical application aligns with the evolving landscape of responsible business practices, emphasizing the pivotal role of effective communication in fostering positive societal change.

Limitations and Future Scope

This study's exclusive focus on English and native language content may limit insights from regional language speakers. A recommendation is to incorporate visual analysis for a comprehensive understanding, recognizing the potential impact of visual elements. Future research should conduct detailed content analyses within each SDG theme and explore cultural nuances globally. Additionally, sentiment analysis on textual content could unveil emotional tones, enhancing comprehension of advertiser-audience connections. In conclusion, this research initiates comprehension of linguistic nuances in SDG-themed ads, providing a foundation for subsequent studies to delve into cultural variations and the evolving landscape of sustainable development messaging in advertising.

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