Empathy marketing during COVID-19 pandemic: decoding the impact and effectiveness on the brand image

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Abstract

For brands, empathy can create a customer persona, which can help in effectively targeting their consumers. In terms of marketing, however, it means asking what customers truly value rather than what will sell. Moreover, by creating content that evokes empathy, consumers are more likely to take action – sharing, responding, and even prompting change within their communities. Nevertheless, why are brands suddenly realizing the power of empathy? This is because consumers today are not only interested in passively consuming content. Instead, they actively seek out content that prompts a change in themselves and the world around them. This need of the hour made the brand realize the power of effective communication and hence the rise of empathy as a useful marketing tool. The research used a qualitative approach to understand the effectiveness of Empathy marketing during the pandemic hit time. Focus Group Discussions were conducted to understand the importance and relevance of empathy-based communication. The findings established that this type of communication is useful and helps the consumer create a positive brand image and a recall, but this may not directly impact or lead to a purchase decision.

1 Introduction

The pandemic has changed the way business is done. Marketers are focusing more on engaging with people in various ways. Due to the pandemic, people got house arrested for a more extended period, impacting the business a lot. Now brands are thinking about innovative ways to attract consumers towards brands. One of the vital marketing tools that the brand uses in recent times is "Empathy-based marketing." The entire marketing concept, rather than being more rationale, focus will be based on emotions. So, the customer is already going through turmoil during the pandemic; connecting them with some emotional motivators will help for better engagement, according to Donthu & Gustafsson. It has been observed that the communication around the disruptive times, i.e., 'during' the pandemic has the power to guide and inform the customers of the information for them to take the guided steps [1]. The marketing strategies developed during such times deliver the information desired by the consumers at different stages. It also helps in dismaying the fear, panic that the consumers may encounter from different mediums. During this global pandemic of COVID-19, it was very evident that the internet has kept all of us bounded. It has been an outlet for fast and transparent communication. At the same time, one also needs to be varying from the fact that everything that one reads and learns about on the internet cannot be trusted [2]. The fake news, panic messages can quickly turn into a catastrophe amidst such a situation. These make the marketers and the communicators more cautious about the message they are communicating, which should be clear, rather than creating a state of confusion, irritation, or fear.

According to a report published by Influencer marketing Hub (2020), it was noted that 74 percent of brands surveyed are posting less on their company social accounts at present [3]. It is no shocker since many firms are closing their shops and are refocusing on other activities. Hence, the marketing on these fronts has taken a back seat. The report cited that 34 percent of the people moved from Instagram to Twitter, primarily due to its news and understanding the current trends. According to Kapoor et al., people are now concentrating on the output part of social media usage since Twitter is about the trends and the happening of each day globally; the shift is inevitable. It was also ob-

served that during any crisis, the consumers are more attracted towards those brands which seem to care for them. Consumers are more concerned about spending and would like to purchase only if necessary; that is why they look forward to brands with more credibility, according to Niyomkij et al [4].

On the other hand, it is a fantastic opportunity for the brands to customize and tailor their products and services as per customer preferences. The brand's approach should be simple and should inform, connect, help, and amuse people. The brands can take an approach where they lead by responding to the change, making an impact by tangible help, and moving from a corporate approach to a more humane one, according to De Smet et al. During the pandemic, many

brands have come up with different, innovative and empathetic communication strategies, one of the example being Marks & Spencer following the "carrying the team forward approach" by caring for their employees by offering them full salary and giving their workers allotted time breaks to sanitize themselves [5]. Many other brands have changed their approach from a profit steering approach to a more empathetic one. The luxury conglomerate LVMH is using its perfume line to manufacture sanitizers. There are innumerable examples that have come up during these trying times. Through these rational and empathetic steps, marketers can further sustain their customers and grow their business further. According to Sheth et al., Apart from just focusing on positive, supportive communication and marketing, the brand also needs to have a plan in place for contingency. Whenever a pandemic arises, one does not know how long it will last for how long. So a brand must plan its finances accordingly, as stated by Baker et al. and take care of its customers to make the business inclusive and sustainable [6].

2 Literature review

Exploration of the existing works of literature helped to build the framework of the research. Emotional branding and social media activities build up to a significant level with brands. Hence, the ways it is impacting the brand image are discussed thoroughly in the literature.

It was observed that in a virtual/online setup [7], the brands could successfully build a strong emotional bond and an attachment with the public; as stated by Hudson et al. was noticed that the presence of emotional bonds with a company leads to a better and

more robust level of communication and also there is a will of the customers to pay more than what is acceptable in order to obtain goods and services. The whole act of attaching emotions to the brand appeal and linking them with consumers unswervingly affects the brand-consumer relationship and leads to a positive effect on organizational success, as observed by Thomson et al. Organizations, these days, especially in the field of tourism and travel, are using their reach on social media to create an emotional connect with their customers, as observed by Moro & Rita [8]. There has not been much study done around the effect of social media communication on the ideologies and perceptions around the brand image, as observed by Madden et al. The study intended to explore that aspect and hence considered looking into the possible constructs that will lead the research to understand further and strengthen the research. Three variables were considered - Emotional Appeal, Brand Image, and Brand commitment [9].

2.1 Emotional appeal

A connection between two individuals is termed as an attachment, as observed by Vlachos et al. Thus, emotional branding has been defined as engaging the consumers in a long-term, meaningful relationship with the brand. Brands engage with the customers beyond the sales and service experience to establish trust amongst the customers, as observed by Morrison and Crane, and to take forward the relationship [10]. The different approaches to emotion branding are believed to create a sense of personal connection with consumers, as observed by David & Maheswari. It was also observed that emotions could be a vital source of capturing and leading to a holistic experience of merging the brand identity in the personal lives of the consumers, as observed by Thompson et al.; Kinniburgh et al. in which the researchers said that such interactions between brands and people help in developing the brand identity and makes the brand form personal connections. A child starts getting attached to many brands in his early years, and this may be between him and his favorite food, toys, or parents, as observed by Gu and Ryan. Psychologists consider these connection traits as something very concrete [11]. The person who is attached to this wants to linger on to that forever or, in some cases, forever, as observed by Esch et al.

As we dug up the literature more, we found that emotional appeal involves various facets of human

emotions, like a sense of belongingness, connection, passion, respect, and love, as observed by Hwang et al. Ma and Chan discussed that over a period when a consumer uses and interacts with the brand, that has an emotional appeal, he or she develops a strong sense of connection with the brand. The present study will evaluate whether a person feels connected to a brand through the campaigns or ads he sees on social media, especially in the context of COVID-19. The focus will be on whether the advertisements or campaigns demonstrating the emotional appeal positively reach the consumers and were conceived as an effective method of communication [12].

2.2 Brand image

Brand image is defined as a set of perceptions about the brand set by different individuals in their minds, as researched by Cretu and Brodie. It has also been observed that brand image consists of attributes like the images, packaging, perceptions, valuation, and many more, as researched by Keller. Brand image has a deeper dimension to it [13]. The brand image also takes the positive attributions from the unique brand name, which differs from the other brands, as researched by Webster and Keller. The image of a brand does not depend solely on brand identity attributes, preferably also on how the brand portrays itself. Positive perceptions about the brand are made concerning how the brand functions and interacts with the public, as researched by Zhang. It was discussed by Esch et al. that a positive brand image has a direct association in the minds of consumers and can help form a greater connection with them, causing them to be consistent consumers. In his study, Chen et al. added that getting attached to a particular brand or making it a preference is directly proportional to the development of the brand image. It was discussed and established by Dennis et al. that the relationship between brand image and emotional attachment [14].

2.3 Brand commitment

"Commitment" was defined by Moorman et al. as an everlasting wish of maintaining a relationship beyond price. When an individual is associated with a brand or a company, they start identifying themselves with the brand and thinking of it as a part of themselves. Moreover, this is what is committed to a brand means, as studied by Gundlach et al [15]. According to researchers Fu et al. and Thompson et al., with com-

mitment comes a sense of assurance and a belief in the customer-brand relationship. A sense of commitment was discussed by Morgan and Hunt that is forged when there is an equal effort put in a relationship to keep it healthy and flourishing. However, commitment towards a brand, or a consumer's commitment with a brand, is measured in terms of their communication and the effort put behind it to reach out to the brands, as studied by Anthony Wong & Hong Gao. This phenomenon is commonly seen in social media. Brand commitment never takes only one party into the picture; instead, it is measured when both the brand and the consumer are involved in forging a connection more substantial and more profound than just a time buy association [16], as studied by Gundlach et al. Any positive bond made to keep it for a longer duration can be termed as commitment, as studied by Roberts et al. It is not limited to just the individual or any business entity; instead, it refers to the emotional attachment between the two, as studied by Nusair et al.

Another theme that was uncovered while going through literature was that the level of involvement of brands on various social media and their indulgence in social media in the form of different activities, as studied by Koh et al. In addition to it, Webster also pointed out the benefits of rewards given on activities to the consumers. He mentioned that such rewards help build the relationship, as it motivates them, which in turn grows the brand image positively [17].

In the current study, we wish to find out whether empathy acts as a factor in building brand commitment or not. We wish to find out if a personal and emotional approach by the brands would change the consumer's perception and if that would turn them into brand loyalists.

3 Methodologies

The research used a qualitative approach to establish and conclude its findings. The data was collected using snowball sampling. The participants were in the age group of 25-40 years, residing in the urban locality of India. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted at a mutually convenient time for the participants to understand their views [18]. A total of six focus groups were conducted with six participants (36 participants) in each focus group. Post the last focus group (the sixth one), the researcher started to get some repetitive inputs, which indicated the attainment of data stagnation point, as studied by Charmaz. The

FGDs happened over the month from July to August 2020. Participants were invited to be a part of the panel through email and social media platforms. The medium of conducting the FGD's was a virtual meeting through video conferencing. All the participants were given an overview of the study at the beginning of the call. They were also made aware that the discussion will be recorded for documentation, and their consent was taken for the same. All the comments made by the participants are based on their own opinion [19].

The groups were randomly formed to make the discussion more meaningful and cohesive. A common FGD guide was prepared before conducting the FGDs. This guide was slightly modified in different groups, as per the flow of the discussion. A few advertisement campaigns were also shown to the participants to probe them and get their views and notice their reactions [20].

The standard guide is followed to understand the following points -

- To understand the participant's presence on social media and their consumption patterns.
- To discuss the different campaigns released during the pandemic and to know their views on them.
- To understand their take on empathy branding.
- To understand the level of involvement the campaign created with them.
- To understand their take on the current advertising campaigns and the effectiveness of the same.

The whole theme of the discussion revolved around the above points. The FGD's lasted for 60-80 minutes [21]. The FGD's were transcribed and summarized to underline the themes that emerged from the repetition of various concepts and ideologies, as studied by Charmaz.

4 Findings

After analyzing all the FGDs and the transcripts, the researcher came up with the following themes/conclusions based on the repetition of a few concepts.

Theme 1: Emotional appeal leads to a higher Brand Recall in the future.

The advertisement/campaigns shown to the participants had a positive impact on them. It made them feel good and connected with the brand. Such campaigns evoked a sense of community [22], empathy, and belongingness in them. This theme emerged from the above categories, which, as opined by the participants

a. Sense of being connected
b. Evoking emotions
c. Sense of reassurance

Theme 2: Empathy works if it is aligning with the Brand Personality

This construct came up from the concepts and discussions around the point that the participants mentioned: "*Such campaigns do not create an impact if the actions when the brand is not in tandem with what they are preaching in their advertisements.*" So, the vital theme is [23].

a. Consistency
b. Resonance of the brand with the message/communication

Theme 3: Empathy branding creates a good perception whereas it does not affect the purchase intention

This theme was derived from the discussions around

a. Practicality and use of the commodities
b. Brand loyalty

5 Discussion and conclusion

FGDs started with a small overview of the study. The participants were given the guidelines to be followed throughout the discussion, post which they introduced themselves. The discussion revolved around the FGD guide created by the researcher, although slight changes were made as the discussion progressed. The topic engaged all the participants positively and led to meaningful discussions.

Each FGD began with the question of them being active on any social media during the complete lockdown. A standard answer was observed in almost all of the groups. Eighty-eight percent of the participants said that their consumption of social media had increased multi-folds. The common platforms that emerged were - Instagram, Face book, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Instagram and Face book were topping the poll. Eight percent of the participants said they have been active on a few specific platforms like LinkedIn and Twitter (not so much on Instagram or Face book). In contrast, the remaining 4% said that they have not been active on social media.

As the discussion went on, the participants were asked to recall the advertisements they may have come across during the past few months. All the participants had a lot of different examples of brands that they could recall. This recall was mostly based on the

frequency of advertisements/campaigns appearing on their respective feeds. At a later stage, it was deduced that it had nothing to do with the participants connecting with the respective brand.

The majority of the participants felt that the storytelling has evolved; nowadays, all the ads have a common theme around safety, hygiene, and staying at home. They all unanimously supported this statement with facts and examples of advertisements/campaigns by different brands. Although four participants also felt that these advertisements are quite repetitive and getting mundane sometimes, the companies need to develop something new. A participant from FGD-1 also stated that he would like to see brands take a different approach, a bold one. He felt that brands need to stop playing safe.

In FGD-6, a marketing communication specialist said the campaigns had become a strategic part of their goodwill-building practices. It is nothing but a marketing gimmick to appeal to the customers. He further stated that it is nothing but "wordplay" from the companies, and he sees right through it.

Many campaigns were shown to the participants - campaigns of brands from different industries. Automobile brands like BMW, Mercedes, Jaguar, UBER, Coca-Cola, Nike, and Face book were shown. The participants were shown these advertisements to note their immediate perception and thoughts about them and gauge the effectiveness of these advertisements.

While analyzing the FGDs of the six groups, the researcher found a lot of repeated concepts and answers. When asked about the change in the approach of brands regarding their communication, a standard reply was that *"the product-centric approach has changed."* The brands are not trying to sell their product but are instead, extend themselves to be a part of the community. Concepts such as – *empathetic, positive, feel good, and humanitarian came up while discussing the change in the approach.* All the participants in unison felt that the brands are now standing with the people *and offering support. The message is all across,* quite contrary to what they have been preaching earlier. Another thing that was highlighted is that *this approach is the need of the hour in order for the brand to stay "relevant," "in the picture," and to be "remembered" once the pandemic is over.*

When asked about their takes on the campaigns and how they feel about it, similar answers were recorded that the campaigns made them feel good. It gave them hope and made them feel as if the brand cares for them. However, at the same time, another observation that surfaced in the discussion was if the impact was long-lasting or whether it impacted the participants as consumers of the brand, a standard answer came up that no, these advertisements albeit affect the brand image and gives the brand goodwill in the market, it does not directly impact the buying decision of the participants, which made a revelation in the research and gave a theme to it.

From the FGD-2, a participant also brought forward the brands acting in tandem with what they are preaching. The participants were shown a commercial by UBER. UBER took the approach of thanking the customers for staying at home. The 30-year-old participant put up a vital point *calling out to the recent lay-off done by UBER and said that the empathy should not be one-sided. Companies should empathize with their employees as well.* Another participant also gave another example of ASIAN PAINTS, who are being there for their employees. To which the other group members agreed. We saw another construct being built upon by this group discussion.

A participant in FGD-6 spread some more light on the matter, telling the group how direct marketing has been hit in pandemic times. It is essential to send out a message that the brand is remembering and thinking of everyone, whether they are their consumers or not, to build goodwill to stay relevant in the eyes of consumers. The campaigns that were shown to the participants were not of necessary goods. The participants felt that these campaigns make sense as the brands are trying to garner the audience for the future. Although they remained fixated on the fact that it does not affect the purchase decision, it gives the brand good recall value. The participants also revealed an exciting thought, *"the background music in the advertisements is a crucial deciding factor on the feel of the brand."* The researcher believes that this concept can be studied in detail as future research. Another concept that came up during the FGDs of almost all the groups was the concept of belongingness. The emotional appeal was received and understood by the entire participants well.

In the FGD-6, one of the participants put forth that empathetic communication also comes in the form of their service provided to the customers. According to that participant, *he will prioritize the brands, which prioritized him during this pandemic.* "Empathy is a two-way process, "*I will be empathetic to the brands even if they go wrong and support them because of the support they extended towards me."*

Finally, while concluding the discussion, the participants agreed that communication targeting the public's emotional appeal and reassuring them that they are not alone do leave a positive impact on them. While watching the advertisements, they felt good and developed a sense of community. Although few of them (close to 22 percent) felt that this was a temporary feeling, and once the pandemic is over, they may not remember this. At the same time, others felt the opposite way. They felt that this exercise has made them feel good about the brand and will give them a strong recall. They will still remember the brands in this light once everything goes back to normal.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

Author contributions

The authors read the ICMJE criteria for authorship and approved the final manuscript.

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