

## Media and Health: Analysis of Advertisements of Supplements in the Indian Newspapers

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**Abstract:** Health awareness has been driving more consumers to take an active role in their lives. The paper discusses the findings of the study which established that cashing on this trend; many companies have come up with a variety of supplements that —delay ageing, enhance vitality and fulfil nutritional requirements of the body. This exploratory study was conducted to understand the nature of health supplements being presented by Indian print media (one English and one local language newspaper/media) over the period September 2010-2012 using the Public Health perspective. The study employed Inductive Content Analysis. The findings established that keeping in mind the plethora of advertisements on supplements, it would not be wrong to comment that supplements are being aggressively advertised in the newspapers. In the wake of weak regulation, many companies have been making misleading claims related to health which in majority of the cases have not been backed with scientific evidence. Further, the claims of some of the supplements end up complicating the relationship between health and beauty. And some even promote gendered notions of health. Further study is required in this regard otherwise owing to lax regulation the companies will continue to come up with innovative ways of promoting their products which might have implications for the health of the consumers.

**Keywords:** Commodification of health, media and health, health related communication, health related advertisements.

### INTRODUCTION

The influence of advertising on society is well established. It not only influences the buying patterns of customers but also the values and behavior of people. The advertisements with their emotional and rational appeals promote not only the product but also a particular idea/notion (Berger, 3). They have the power to influence certain values in society that can have either positive or negative implications for the people. These implications can be analyzed in terms of health of the people as well. The advertisements through its strategies can popularize notions related to various aspects of people's health which could lead to both long term and day to day health repercussions. These repercussions could be both health promoting and health impeding. One such category of products is supplements. It is noteworthy to mention that the range of promises these companies make go beyond diseases and health related conditions.

Many times these ideas might not be rooted in logic and truth and are just promotional strategies. In view of the lack of strict regulation in terms of making wrongful claims, the practice of companies making false or misleading claims while promoting the products is easy to go unnoticed and unpunished .

The various strategies they use to advertise their products can promote negative health behavior. However, one needs to analyse the advertisements in a comprehensive manner to arrive at its implications. It becomes highly imperative to understand how audiences react to such claims and what influence it creates in their minds and lives. But before that could be done, one needs to have a comprehensive knowledge about the kind of products that are making health related claims, the nature of these claims, and if these are backed by any scientific study or evidence.

There exists a gap in academic literature on this topic as the current studies do not afford a comprehensive picture in this regard. The current paper is therefore based on the study that was conducted to fill this gap in literature and arrive at a better understanding of the supplements being promoted and the corresponding values they perpetuate. The study analyzed the advertisements of supplements (directly related to health and those not related to health) making health related claims. The health related claims here are understood as claims in which any relation to health is drawn. This relation could be drawn by claiming the product to be Herbal/Ayurvedic, or by using images or

names of doctors/health professionals; and using any health related term.

The paper discusses the findings of the study that was undertaken to explore the variety of supplements making health related claims and develop a better understanding of the health implications of these advertisements. The analysis aimed to examine these advertisements and arrive at an understanding of the kind and range of promises being made, the perceptions about health and the market that is being created through them. This included examining if they are backed by any scientific evidence. It also attempted to look into the strategies used to promote these products and if the claims or strategies used are health promoting or not. This is attempted by analyzing the content of these advertisements<sup>1</sup> in English and Hindi national dailies. The Times of India and Navbharat Times were examined over a period from September 2010 to September 2012 (The research was conducted during 2012-2013).

The advertisements were examined from a Public Health perspective. By exploring the nature of the facts and opinions it also aimed to analyse the perspective being communicated.

## METHODS

After conducting a pilot study of four newspapers, two newspapers one each in English and Hindi were finalised. The paper with the highest readership and circulation was chosen as the sample; Times of India<sup>2</sup> (Indian Readership Survey, 5).<sup>3</sup>Navbharat Times was chosen as the local language newspaper sample since it belonged to the same media house. Each page of each day's (1st September, 2010 - 1st September, 2012) newspaper (including the supplements) was examined for these health messages. The PDF version of the English and the online version/archives of the Hindi newspaper were selected (since the Hindi paper did not have the PDF version for the selected time period).

The technique of Inductive Content Analysis was used for the study. It allows sub categories/raw themes to emerge out of the data leading to the formation of broad categories (Inductive analysis) rather than organising data into pre-determined categories (Deductive Analysis). Willig's [8] strategy for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used as a guide for the process of arriving at these categories. The steps involved in it are: a) Reading and rereading transcripts, b) identifying emerging themes, c)

structuring emergent themes, d) creating summary table of themes.

Largely, the categories that emerged for both the newspapers were similar. The researcher has refrained from naming the products and date of publication, while quoting the advertisements (content) to avoid identification of the products. This was done keeping in line with ethics in social science research. The purpose of the research was not to defame or malign the image of a particular product or company. It was to explore the kind of supplements being promoted and the claims being made and discuss the concerns emerging from a public health perspective.

## FINDINGS

During the process of Content Analysis, one came across a range of pharmaceutical products right from nutritional supplements to those that help ease joint pains to the ones that increase vitality. They can be thus divided into a) those related to particular health conditions, and b) general supplements. The latter category included a whole range of products that offered benefits related to 'body image/ideal': increasing height, reducing weight and enhancing beauty, removing white spots. A range of products also claimed to enhance 'virility/sexual prowess'.

The particular categories that emerged from the analysis were: a) Health related conditions, b) Daily Health supplements, c) Body Images/Ideals, d) Weight/Fat and Increasing Height, e) Sexual Prowess/Vitality, f) Food Concentrates, g) Body building and Sports Nutrition. These categories though present in the English newspaper were much more visible/pronounced in the Hindi paper.

Most of those published in the Hindi paper were products of local companies. The categories that emerged are being discussed briefly:

### Health related conditions

There were some advertisements of medicines related to common ailments; cold, fever, headache, indigestion. It also included many products offering pain relief for joint pains and back ache. A few others were related to medical conditions like depression. The product that claimed to be Ayurvedic in its advertisement has the picture of a doctor (a male model with a stethoscope) in an attempt to strengthen the linkage with health.

### Daily 'Nutritional' Supplements

There was a large number of products that were promoted as 'nutritional' supplements which claimed to contain vitamins/minerals and natural extracts. Most of the products claimed to provide nutrients like vitamins, minerals, proteins, amino acids or other nutritional substances. The products advertised included more than one form of vitamin/mineral and

<sup>1</sup>of supplements making health related claims, that may or may not be making claims related to health

<sup>2</sup> largest circulation among all English-language newspapers in the world,

<sup>3</sup> Hindi paper of the same media house

usually claimed to contain both vitamins and minerals and some other 'healthy ingredients' and 'special natural extracts'. The analysis of the messages in this category established that the nature of the claims in the advertisements/promotional strategies of most of the products ended up promoting a concept of an unhealthy lifestyle. The product was presented as taking care of all the nutritional needs of one's body or as a replacement of a healthy lifestyle like diet and exercise. The advertisements of some of these products made them seem like necessities. One suggested that it: "*Fulfils the daily nutritional needs of your body to enable a good health for life.*" Another advertisement states "*Make your diet complete with all the nutritional requirements that your body needs every day. A daily dose of the supplement meets all of your body needs of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants so that you can lead a long, healthy life.*"

It is noteworthy that few promotional strategies of the advertisements in this category ended up complicating the relationship between beauty, health and gender. For instance, a health supplement product had separate category of supplements for men and women; both were being promoted as a health supplement and the advertisement mentioned it in bold: "Daily Health Supplement." However, it promotes a gendered idea of health by making different claims for men and women; "*Beauty and vitality for today's women*" and "*stamina and strength for active men.*" The meaning of health is different for both the genders with "*beauty and vitality*" for women and "*stamina and strength*" for men. This becomes significant as the idea of gendered notion of health could have implications in promoting wrong ideas about women's health by complicating it with beauty. Advertisements in a few other categories also (discussed in the following sections) ended up having separate claims for men and women. Being 'beautiful' has been promoted as being healthy for women. These messages have a high possibility of promoting a wrong sense of health and beauty. Further research is warranted in this regard.

### **Body Images/Ideals**

There were a number of supplements that were available to enhance 'beauty/utility' of various parts of the body. These ranged from those promising 'fairer and clearer skin', 'removing acne and pimples', 'for hair growth' (male and female) and hair loss prevention to supplements for 'enhancing the size of breasts' and 'toning/shaping of breasts'. It was worrisome to find in this category, vaginal tablet that promised to 'tighten the vagina'. Though some of the products belonged exclusively to the Hindi paper, few like the latter appeared in both the papers. There were also advertisement of "*liver and skin health capsule*" that further complicated the relationship between health and beauty. The products related to beauty were available in both versions; as creams and capsules.

The advertisements of tonics/tablets/capsules for 'curing' pimples and acne had taglines like "*Reveal your spotless beauty*", "*For clearer skin and greater confidence*" and "*Makes skin spotless, fair, and healthy*".

### **Weight/Fat and increasing height**

The analysis established that the number of products related to reducing weight and fat were too high to form a separate category. These were usually available in powdered, cream and tablet form and their advertisements were found in both the papers. The number of products (in this category) advertised however were much higher in the Hindi paper. Though not a regular feature, the advertisement of meal replacement product was also found during the content analysis. A noteworthy feature of the advertisements was that the majority of the products in this category claimed to be "*100 % Ayurvedic/Natural/Herbal.*"

Further, a majority of these advertisements used a variety of 'emotional' and 'rational' (factual) claims as part of their promotional strategy. They promised "*tummy tuck and reduce weight*", or claims in the vein of "*Just 1 pill a day lose upto 3 kgs a week*".

The analysis of these appeals reveals that along with promoting the supplements, the advertisements were also promoting the notion of "*thin is beautiful.*" However, how much 'weight/inch loss' could be understood as 'beautiful'; the standard criterion isn't mentioned in any of these advertisements. Though very few in number, there were advertisements of products related to increasing weight and height. Few products in this regard promoted their products by exhorting the consumer "*If you are also underweight and aspire to look fitter and better, try it today.*" The advertisement mentions that it's a food supplement. Further, the advertisement of supplements (products) to increase height was also present. Though advertisement of only two products was there, it was a recurrent feature in the paper.

### **Supplements for enhancing sexual prowess and vitality**

During content analysis, one observed a regular but unique attribute of the Hindi newspaper; considerable space was devoted to advertisements of products/services offering to enhance virility/sexual prowess. Quite interestingly, such advertisements appearing on the front page was quite a common phenomenon. Such advertisements were scattered across the Hindi newspapers. What is noteworthy is that one of the products; a capsule with sexually expletive imagery appeared on the front page of the hindi paper many times (at least twice a week in 2011) next to important National/international happenings.

The extent of such advertisements scattered throughout the paper was such that one almost came to associate the paper with such advertisements and began to wonder whether conditions related to sexual prowess and virility were a serious condition amongst the Hindi speaking readers. They were explicit and on your face. Sometimes advertisements of two such products were clubbed and placed on the front page. This along with highlighting the importance of the product had a simultaneous effect of demeaning the news that appeared on the front page. After reading the advertisements and the issues of national importance one next to the other, one wondered whether sexual prowess was a prime issue of national concern as well.

Advertisements of such products were more prevalent in the Hindi paper but were not completely missing in the English one. Even in the category of sexual prowess and vitality, the one for females (*for her*) claims to improve tissue build up and breast shape; whereas, the version for males (*for him*) states that the product is "*for distinguished sexual activity.*"

#### **Food Concentrates**

Though few in number, there were also products that were tablets/capsules that claimed to be concentrates of certain 'food' with health benefits. The advertisement promoted the product by highlighting the significance of the particular food in maintaining and improving one's health. There were products related to Krill oil and garlic. The former listed the benefits of krill oil. Likewise, the advertisement for the latter claimed to "*preserve all the goodness of garlic.*" It listed the benefits of garlic and had the tagline "*Choose the Natural way to Healthy Heart and Digestion.*" One is at a loss of how taking pills could even be dubbed as a 'natural way' without any scientific evidence presented in the advertisement. The advertisement claims that taking two pills after every meal is scientifically known to give a wide range of health benefits. But it does not mention the scientific study that established that claim.

#### **Body Building and Sports nutrition**

The analysis established that a few of the supplements were specifically for males and were related to body building. Along with extorting the prospective consumers to buy the "*100 % natural/herbal product*", the advertisements also had the image of a well-built muscular man flexing his muscles.

The advertisements made use of different strategies to promote their products.

#### **Emotional Appeals**

The majority of advertisements of supplements across categories made use of emotional sanctions and appeals as part of its promotional strategies. This was done by including pictures of a healthy family, a happy

couple or a female model. Further, the tag lines linked health with beauty which in turn was further linked to self-esteem and acceptance. Hence, those claims ended up complicating the relationship between beauty and health. Though prevalent across categories, the usage of emotional sanctions and claims was more pronounced for products related to various aspects of body images including weight and height. Some of them drew a direct relationship between health and beauty and further linked it to self-respect and acceptance.

For example, the advertisement of vaginal tablet made use of emotional appeal in the following manner. The advertisement totally based itself on self-esteem:

*"...married life loses its charm, sheen and grip...love life vanishes...You as women are worst sufferers...what a pity. Say goodbye to your woes. Rejuvenating the grip in your married life, with the zing. All over Again."*

#### **Rational appeals**

Further, the advertisements made use of the rational appeals like "*no dieting*", "*no exercise*", "*no side effects*", "*reduce sweet craving, restraining appetite naturally without dieting, quick effect from first day*", "*Reduce 10-12 kgs in three months*", "*100 % natural, 100 % safe*", "*100 vegetarian*", "*100 % effective*" '*Easy to swallow*', "*100 % natural, odour free*", "*feel the difference in just 30 days.*"

#### **Testimonials**

Further establishing the connection with health, there were testimonials of 'doctors' as well. There were a few advertisements that had testimonials as a part of their strategy. There were a variety of testimonials depending upon the claims they were making. These testimonials were given by doctors, housewives, elderly people, sports men and even corporate honchos.

#### **DISCUSSION**

Some of the concerns that emerge from the trends witnessed during the analysis of the advertisements are being discussed:

#### **Promoting unhealthy lifestyle**

One of the most common features of the advertisements was that they implicitly or explicitly ended up promoting unhealthy lifestyle. The supplements available over the counter are increasingly being promoted as a substitute for a healthy lifestyle. These products especially the nutritional supplements almost exhorted the reader to feel that the nutrition/diet they are already taking (no matter how healthy or balanced it is), is not sufficient and one can no longer remain healthy without taking these nutritional supplements. Hence, it commodified health and made it available for 'sale'. However, experts are of the view that promotion of such a notion amongst consumers

could be harmful in many cases and that *“there is no replacement to a healthy diet and active lifestyle”* and that *“the supplements won’t fix bad/unhealthy diet and lifestyle”* [6] as the advertisements claimed.

When an advertisement endorsed by a famous personality uses emotional and rational appeals and/or testimonials appear almost daily with the claim that no matter how balanced one’s diet is, it cannot suffice the nutritional requirements of the body, it is bound to promote an unhealthy behavior or a wrong perception about one’s health.

### Suppléments and adverse health effects

Literature in this regard suggest that many of the products advertised carried no clarification owing to *“lax régulation”* and are *“either made from, or laced with, chemicals, and so, just like prescription drugs, they force the human body to react in a certain way”*. Not only are these harmful but the the majority don’t carry clear warnings and do not reveal *“what causes the human body to change. By listing proprietary blend as an ingredient, these companies often use steroids, creating, diuretics and more to the detriment of its customer”* [6]. This has made experts feel strongly that heavy advertising of such products is a cause of concern.

Yet another issue that becomes important in this regard is what Zutshi [9] highlighted in his book; these easily available supplements were being taken up without prescription from doctors. He has highlighted how some people take them as supplements to diet as *“some people cannot take care of their diets owing to a hectic lifestyle.”* Even though many of the advertisements claimed that the product is ‘natural’, the important issue here becomes the possibility of people taking a *“cocktail of supplements which might prove lethal to one’s health”*. Further as Zutshi [9] explains that many manufacturers wrongly claim that their product contains ‘natural’ ingredients. However, this in many of the cases is far from the truth. He states aptly *“Natural substances can be poisonous, and others may interact harmfully with prescription medicines. Ingredients that are not considered potentially lethal are not regulated and/or subjected to thorough testing, but even some vitamins can be toxic at high doses.”*

The issues one should be raising are *“Did this consumer consult a doctor? Are they aware of the side-effects of the additives they are absorbing? Are they aware if any one drug reacts differently when taken with another? And have they read the labels?”* [6]. Mehta [6] quotes experts who assert *“When it comes to supplements, there is a big distinction between those that help the human body versus those that could have adverse effects. And that not all supplements are bad, however, and some may be required for people with nutritional deficiencies.”* But they are also of the view that a cocktail of supplements could lead to health

complications and thereby they highlight the need of *“increased consumer awareness.”* They strongly recommended that physicians should be consulted before taking such supplements.

Mehta [6] quotes a naturopathic doctor who clarified the distinction between food concentrates and nutraceutical supplements by explaining that the former is not dangerous or harmful for the body as it *“allows the body to liberally use what it needs”*. However, the latter *“forces the body to act a certain way, much like a prescription drug would.”* She explained that the concentrated food supplements are made from food sources. Consuming them is similar to *“consuming the foods they come from, which is why the human body will treat them like food, taking what it needs and storing or discarding what it does not.”* The nutraceutical supplements on the other hand are either *“made from, or laced with, chemicals, and similar to the prescription drugs, they force the human body to react in a certain way. This means that they have similar adverse side-effects.”*

However, through advertising the idea of such supplements being healthy and supplementing one’s diet is being aggressively promoted.

### Lax Regulation

The market of nutritional supplements is *“growing enormously”* in India. The current law dealing with it in the country is the Food Safety and Standard Act in a year 2006 – *“a modern integrated food law to serve as a single reference point in relation to regulation of food products including nutraceutical dietary supplements and functional food.”* But there are several loopholes that renders the law less strict *“till now India does not have the strict and clear cut guidelines related to this fastly growing field”* [1].

The lack of strict regulation in marketing of such products can affect the health of the prospective consumers. Selling of these over the counter, without any warnings issued in the advertisement doesn’t portend well for the consumers.

The Food Safety and Standards Act (FSSA), 2006 *“prevents making of false claims in oral, writing and visual presentation regarding the nutritional value or efficacy of a product without scientific substantiation.”* However, under the Act fine of Rs. 10 lakh is imposed for the defaulters, which *“...would not be much for the companies with a turnover in crores”* (Angre, 2). Hence, in the wake of weak regulation, this trend of unsubstantiated and false health related claims that mislead the consumers (by using health related/scientific/confusing terms) will continue. Thereby, Angre [2] correctly asserts *“Regulation in India helps companies get away with whatever claims they make.”*

### Traditional Medicine

One of the important characteristic that emerged was that many of the products (in the Hindi paper) were sold with the promise of them being “100% Ayurvedic and herbal”.

There were a host of Ayurvedic products that claimed to ‘cure’ a wide range of issues from removing blemishes/white spots/patches, enhancing the size of breast(s)/increasing height, hair, reducing/increasing weight, and enhancing sexual prowess. Further, there were a number of products that claimed to help in weight loss and decreasing joint pain.

A host of Ayurvedic products available in the market has led to a debate on various issues. One of the issues is related to over the counter Ayurvedic products. The many proponents of Ayurveda have expressed concern over the plethora of products flooding the market and making a range of claims. They are of the view that though there are products that claim to be 100 per cent Ayurvedic, there is no regulation with regard to its preparation and marketing and a lot of confusion and controversy persists [7].

The basic diagnostic method of Ayurveda was simply being ignored, and their advertisements claimed the products to be “100 per cent Ayurvedic”. They asserted that the treatment in Ayurveda is a positive, long-lasting relationship between the patient and the physician; “*For any problem, the physician has to see the patient and only through proper diagnostic methods can one understand the patient’s problem and help him cure that with proper lifestyle and medications*”[4]. An Ayurveda specialist expressed concern over the fact that they sold the product in the name of Ayurveda, and they “*didn’t want to know the patient, his body constitution, digestive capacity etc.*” They strongly believe that Ayurveda is based on the physician-patient interaction and can never mean “*over the counter cure*”[4].

### No scientific evidence

Majority of the advertisements’ claims were not supported with scientific evidence. This is despite the fact that many of them stated that the claims they made were “*scientifically proven*”. However, neither name nor details of the study were cited. No study was cited when the product claimed that it can provide a “*natural way to healthy heart and digestion*” or when it made claims in vein of “*...scientifically proven that taking 2 supplements daily is bound to improve health*”. Such claims without backing/citing scientific study are baseless and mislead the consumers. Many of the complaints owing to lack of strict regulation continue to run as it is.

### Gendered notion of health being promoted

Some of the advertisements complicate the relationship between health and beauty. A few even promoted gendered notions of health and sexual health

where health of men was related to vitality and that for women was to beauty. Such advertisements will end up complicating the relationship between beauty and health. This could have ramifications for health of women. More research needs to be conducted in this regard.

### CONCLUSION

Media has the potential to influence the perception of the consumer when it is used to create an effect in the mind of consumers through various marketing/advertising tactics; images, personalities to endorse the product. When a personality makes a statements like no amount of food, milk vegetables can give you proper nutrition, and advices to have smart nutrition; nutritional supplements, it is promoting an unhealthy behavior. The advertisements are filled with such messages and it must be realized that these messages can have detrimental effects with regard to health promotion and education. Thereby, such messages too should come within the purview of regulation. Apart from functional foods, there less research in the field of health claims in the country. It all points out to the fact that there is a strong need for research in this field and its effects on the consumer behavior in terms of buying such products. Secondly, there need to be more stringent measures to arrest this trend through strict regulation and punitive action otherwise companies continue to mint money from consumers by making false promise related to their health or hiding harmful effects or promoting unhealthy attitudes.

This could have serious implications on the health of the consumers. This calls for stricter regulations in the context of advertisements of supplements. This should include in its purview both health and non-health products. Further study in this field is needed to analyse the influence the advertisements have on the minds of the audience/readers/prospective consumers.

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