

The Rise of New Media Trends in Advertising: A Visual Study in the Post-COVID Era

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated a profound transformation in the advertising landscape, accelerating the shift from traditional mass-media platforms to digital and interactive communication channels. Lockdowns, social distancing measures, and the rapid adoption of online technologies significantly altered media consumption patterns and consumer behaviour (Baker, 2020; Campbell & Rapp, 2021). As audiences increasingly engaged with content through smartphones, social media, and streaming platforms, advertising practices evolved to become more participatory, dialogic, and culturally nuanced.

Visual advertising, as a site of both commercial and cultural expression, reflects these shifts by integrating interactivity, regional identity, and user-generated content (Belanche, Casaló&Flavián, 2021; Dwivediet *al.*, 2021). In particular, the use of local symbols, vernacular language, and humour has emerged as a critical strategy for enhancing audience engagement and emotional resonance, demonstrating the importance of cultural localisation within globalised digital ecosystems. Semiotic frameworks, such as Barthes' (1977) signifier–signified model, offer a valuable lens for decoding the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of post-pandemic advertising, enabling a deeper understanding of how visuals communicate meaning and foster co-creation between brands and consumers.

This study focuses on regional campaigns from Chandigarh, India, to investigate how visual culture, interactivity, and participatory strategies have redefined advertising in the post-COVID era. By bridging theory and practice, the research aims to provide insights into both the global and local dynamics of contemporary digital advertising.

2. Research Objectives

- To analyse the evolution of visual and participatory advertising strategies in the post-COVID digital landscape.
- To analyze how cultural localisation—through local symbols, language, and humour—shapes emotional appeal, audience engagement, and brand communication effectiveness.

3. Literature Review

Pre-COVID Advertising Practices

Traditional advertising largely relied on mass media channels such as television, print, radio, and outdoor displays, with communication following a one-way, broadcast-oriented model (Katz, 2022). Visuals played a significant role in conveying brand messages, but interactivity and user participation were minimal. Audience engagement was measured primarily through reach and recall, and regional or cultural adaptations were limited to broad market segments. Studies show that while formal design elements such as colour, typography, and composition influenced perception, semiotic interpretations of cultural symbols were often underexplored in mainstream campaigns (Chauhan, 2008).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented shift in media consumption patterns, as consumers spent more time on digital platforms due to lockdowns and remote work (Baker, 2020; Campbell & Rapp, 2021). Social media, video streaming, and mobile apps experienced exponential growth, prompting advertisers to adopt more agile, digital-first strategies (Dwivediet *al.*, 2021). Scholars note that the crisis accelerated trends such as short-form video, micro-influencer marketing, and meme-based content, creating new avenues for audience engagement that emphasised interaction and emotional connection (Belanche, Casaló&Flavián, 2021).

Post-pandemic advertising has increasingly adopted participatory approaches, allowing audiences to co-create content through challenges, duets, polls, and user-generated campaigns (Morrison, 2020). Participatory culture frameworks suggest that such practices strengthen brand-consumer relationships by fostering dialogue and shared meaning (Jenkins, 2006). Empirical studies highlight that campaigns leveraging local humour, vernacular language, and culturally recognisable symbols achieve higher engagement, emotional resonance, and social sharing (Belanche, Casaló&Flavián, 2021).

Semiotic analysis provides a critical lens to decode how visual elements convey meaning beyond literal representation. Barthes' (1977) signifier–signified framework has been widely used to interpret symbolic meanings in advertisements, including the use of colour, typography, and composition to evoke emotion or signal cultural identity. Research demonstrates that integrating semiotic analysis with visual content analysis enhances understanding of how design and symbolism interact to communicate brand narratives effectively (Chauhan, 2008; Barthes, 1977).

Recent studies underscore the importance of tailoring content to regional audiences within globalised media ecosystems. Localisation involves adapting messaging, visuals, and humour to align with cultural norms, values, and linguistic preferences, enhancing audience connection and authenticity (Dwivediet *al.*, 2021). Regional campaigns, such as those in Chandigarh, exemplify how brands can blend global media practices with local cultural markers to create participatory, emotionally resonant advertising.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative multiple case study design** to gain an in-depth understanding of post-COVID visual advertising practices, focusing on both global trends and region-specific campaigns from Chandigarh, India. Case study research enables contextual analysis of visual, interactive, and participatory elements in advertising campaigns, while accommodating the exploration of cultural, social, and technological factors influencing audience engagement (Yin, 2018).

4.2 Sampling Strategy

A **purposive sampling** approach was employed to select advertising campaigns based on four criteria:

- **Viral reach:** campaigns with high engagement metrics on digital platforms.
- **Visual novelty:** innovative design, typography, and colour use.
- **Audience interactivity:** campaigns encouraging user participation, comments, or content creation.
- **Pandemic-era thematic relevance:** messaging reflecting post-COVID experiences, recovery, or community solidarity.

Selected cases include Chandigarh-based campaigns such as the **Chandigarh Empathy Challenge** and **Chill Out Chandigarh**, alongside comparative global examples for contextual understanding.

4.3 Data Collection

Data were collected from **primary and secondary sources**:

- **Secondary data:** Brand archives, social media content (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook), and industry reports were reviewed to examine campaign structure, engagement metrics, and visual elements.
- **Primary data:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with marketing professionals, academics, and content creators. Additionally, focus group discussions with students provided generational perspectives on campaign effectiveness and engagement.

4.4 Data Validation and Reliability

To ensure rigor, the study applied:

- **Intercoder reliability:** Multiple coders independently analysed visual and semiotic elements.
- **Peer debriefing:** Findings were discussed with marketing and academic peers.

- **Member validation:** Participants reviewed interpretations of their contributions to confirm accuracy.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring **informed consent**, voluntary participation, and confidentiality for all interviewees and focus group participants. Digital content used for analysis was cited appropriately, and personal identifiers were anonymised.

5. Results & Discussion

The analysis of post-COVID advertising campaigns revealed significant transformations in visual strategies, interactivity, and cultural localisation. Six key thematic trends emerged from the data:

Shift from Broadcast to Dialogue-Oriented Advertising

Campaigns increasingly moved from one-way communication to interactive, participatory formats. Brands employed polls, quizzes, live streaming, and social media challenges to engage audiences actively. Interviews with marketing professionals indicated that **dialogue-oriented campaigns generated higher engagement rates**, particularly among younger, digitally native audiences.

Strategic Use of User-Generated Content (UGC)

User-generated content emerged as a central strategy for authenticity and reach. Campaigns such as the **Chandigarh Empathy Challenge** encouraged users to create and share personal narratives, memes, and short videos. Focus group participants highlighted that UGC fosters a sense of ownership and emotional connection, enhancing both **participation and brand loyalty**.

Regionalisation and Cultural Localisation

Visual and linguistic markers of Chandigarh—such as local landmarks, vernacular language, and regional humour—were employed to increase relatability and resonance. Semiotic analysis revealed that localised symbols signified community pride, recovery, and shared post-pandemic experiences. Participants noted that **regionalised messaging strengthens emotional impact**, particularly when coupled with humour or relatable scenarios.

Micro- and Virtual Influencers

Micro-influencers and virtual characters were frequently leveraged to target niche audience segments. Interviews suggested that micro-influencers, due to their perceived authenticity and closer connection with local audiences, were more effective in driving engagement than celebrity endorsements.

Meme and Humour Economy

Humour, satire, and meme-based content emerged as key engagement tools. Campaigns effectively used visual and textual humour to address pandemic fatigue, making messages memorable and shareable. Semiotic coding revealed that colour palettes and expressive typography were carefully chosen to enhance comedic effect.

AI-Enabled Personalisation

Artificial intelligence and algorithmic targeting were used to customise content according to user preferences. While personalisation increased relevance, participants cautioned against over-reliance on automation, noting that excessive AI-driven content could diminish creative spontaneity and emotional depth.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the evolving landscape of post-COVID advertising, revealing a shift from traditional broadcast models to interactive, participatory, and culturally localised practices. The integration of visual semiotics, user-generated content (UGC), and regional markers underscores the increasing importance of audience co-creation and emotional engagement in digital campaigns.

Dialogue-Oriented Advertising and Participatory Culture

The move from one-way communication to dialogue-oriented campaigns aligns with Jenkins' (2006) theory of participatory culture, wherein audiences are not passive recipients but active collaborators in content creation. Campaigns such as the Chandigarh Empathy Challenge exemplify this shift, demonstrating that participatory formats—like social media challenges, polls, and duets—enhance audience engagement and brand resonance. This reflects a broader trend in digital advertising where **co-creation strengthens consumer-brand relationships** and encourages sustained interaction.

Cultural Localisation and Regional Identity

Regionalisation of advertising content emerged as a critical strategy for relevance and authenticity. Semiotic analysis revealed that vernacular language, local landmarks, and humour function as symbolic markers of community identity, facilitating emotional connections with audiences. These findings corroborate prior research suggesting that culturally tailored messages outperform generic global campaigns in terms of engagement and recall (Belanche, Casaló&Flavián, 2021; Dwivediet *al.*, 2021). In the Indian context, Chandigarh-based campaigns demonstrate how local narratives can operate within globalised digital ecosystems, enhancing both relatability and cultural pride.

Visual Strategies and Emotional Resonance

Visual elements such as colour palettes, typography, and composition play a significant role in conveying mood and narrative intent. Warm pastels were associated with empathy and calm, while saturated hues communicated optimism and dynamism. The study supports Barthes' (1977) assertion that visual signs carry symbolic meaning beyond their literal representation, indicating that careful design choices enhance both affective and cognitive engagement.

User-Generated Content and Authenticity

UGC was identified as a powerful tool for building authenticity, trust, and community engagement. Participants noted that campaigns leveraging audience creativity fostered emotional investment and brand loyalty, echoing findings from global studies on participatory digital media (Morrison, 2020).

AI and Personalisation: Opportunities and Limitations

AI-enabled personalisation enhances content relevance, yet the study highlights a cautionary note: over-automation can reduce creativity and diminish emotional depth. This suggests that strategic integration of AI with human creativity is essential to maintain authenticity and engagement.

7. Recommendations:

Based on the findings, advertisers and creative agencies are encouraged to prioritise interactive, dialogue-oriented campaigns that actively involve audiences through social media challenges, polls, and user-generated content. Integrating cultural localisation—such as vernacular language, local landmarks, and region-specific humour—can enhance emotional resonance, relatability, and community identity. Careful attention to visual semiotics, including colour palettes, typography, and composition, ensures that design choices effectively convey intended emotions and cultural meanings. While AI and automation can personalise content and optimise targeting, they should be balanced with human creativity to preserve spontaneity and authenticity. Additionally, brands should monitor emerging digital trends and short-form formats to remain agile and relevant. Overall, adopting these strategies can help create culturally sensitive, participatory, and emotionally engaging advertising that resonates with post-COVID audiences while bridging global trends and local specificity.

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