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Online Branding during Covid-19 Crisis: An Analysis of Indian Corporate Websites

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Abstract. Covid-19 pandemic has proved disastrous for the world economy, adversely affecting individuals and businesses alike. Several companies, however, have identified opportunity in adversity, and have put in renewed branding efforts using Covid-19 as a base for their communication strategy. With all business transactions moving online, companies have ensured that they invest in “health communication” on their website to improve their corporate image and to prove their solidarity with their online consumer base during these difficult times. This paper analyses the online branding communication strategies and brand positioning on the official websites of eight Indian companies, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Qualitative content analysis is used to examine the content and design elements of the websites with regard to branding communication related to Covid-19. Analysis of observations has revealed that apart from engaging content, adequate visibility is also necessary to gain the attention of online consumers.

Keywords. *Brand communication, brand positioning, Covid-19, digital branding, online branding, website branding*

Introduction

The Covid-19 crisis has plunged most industries into despair, making them cut down their spending on brand advertising efforts. The interval has been long and the pandemic shows no signs of abating. Neither are companies in a position to push their brand through rigorous marketing and advertising, and nor are consumers in a position to buy the products. But this results in a weakening of the brand impact, as there is little or no communication between the brand and its consumers through traditional marketing and media channels. Branding, however, has moved online, and this shift has happened with the advent of Web 2.0, long before the Covid outbreak. But a clear brand promise and valued offerings are a must for consumers even in the digital sphere, and the strategic touch points that can open up channels to influence and interact with consumers have changed (Edelman, 2010), and need to be figured out by the marketer. Thus, engaging the user through interactive features, content and attractive design on company websites has taken precedence in branding strategies (Gehrke & Turban, 1999; Dang, 2019).

The official website of the company is an important brand vehicle- both in terms of content and design, the website represents the company’s philosophy, brand values, and its brand identity. In the current digital age, a consumer’s first point of reference for information regarding a brand is the company website. Therefore, the trust and reliability factors that form the basis of a brand’s relationship with the consumer are built through effective communication efforts on the website that engages the online user.

Research problem and objectives of the current study

Continuity and consistency are necessary for conveying brand values (Stuart & Jones, 2004), even on the website. Companies must strive to maintain a relationship with its publics by actively trying to resonate with the good and bad that they go through— organisations are especially expected to communicate their solidarity with an affected group, or make a statement regarding an important cause, or appear impassioned during times of distress and tragedy, in order to strike a chord with its current and potential consumer base. And in the times of Covid-19, brands are recognising the need to leverage the opportunity provided by the unfortunate pandemic, to reinforce the communication of their brand values. This can be done by providing information on their website regarding Covid-19, its management, and Corporate Social Responsibility efforts by the company to mitigate the effect of Covid-19 in their own way, in alignment with their company philosophy.

This study is an attempt to analyse the content and design of the websites of the most popular and successful Indian companies for branding efforts that are based on Covid-19 management, and to identify the innovative strategies used by these companies for reaching out to their consumer base during the pandemic.

The objectives of the current study can therefore be outlined as follows:

- Analyse the branding/ brand positioning strategy of the company on its official website with reference to Covid-19, and identify innovative branding features, if any;
- Analyse the manifestation of such branding activity in the content and design of the websites;
- Evaluate the Covid-19 based branding strategy on the basis of the company's vision/ mission/ organisational philosophy and values.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that forms the basis for this study is the Customer-based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model proposed by Keller (2009), which tries to fit in all the different types of marketing communications for brand building, a comprehensive, cohesive model of brand equity. According to this model, "brand equity is fundamentally determined by the brand knowledge created in consumers' minds by marketing programs and activities." Customer-based brand equity is defined here as "the differential effect that consumer knowledge about a brand has on their response to marketing for that brand." Brand knowledge comprises not just facts, but also all feelings, emotions, visuals, perceptions and experiences that become associated with the brand in the consumers' minds (individuals and organisations). 'Brand awareness' and 'Brand image' form two important components of brand knowledge.

The following steps are envisioned in the CBBE model: "(1) ensuring identification of the brand with customers and an association of the brand in customers' minds with a specific product class or customer need; (2) firmly establishing the totality of brand meaning

in the minds of customers by strategically linking a host of tangible and intangible brand associations; (3) eliciting the proper customer responses in terms of brand-related judgment and feelings; and (4) converting brand response to create an intense, active loyalty relationship between customers and the brand”.

Literature review

Brands are developed by organisations to attract and retain customers through the promotion of certain values, images, prestige, or lifestyle (Singh, 2012). While the process of branding is nothing new to companies, the use of the internet as a medium to engage consumers for brand communication is complicated, given the nature of the medium. There is a constant need to innovate and revise both content and design of websites to suit the avant-garde features that can attract and retain the attention of consumers.

Online branding/e-branding

The “brand” has been characterised as the most important of the six marketplace fundamentals for building trust on the internet. The process of branding itself, is being redefined by companies online, as the medium’s unique characteristic is constantly changing innovative technologies and market trends- most of which transfer the power into the hands of consumers (Ibeh et al, 2005). A study by Ibeh et. al (2005) found that companies use the latest online tools to communicate brand values, enhance site visibility and popularise their Web platforms. Building a deeper, personal connection with online customers was also found to be a priority, apart from a focused e-brand communication system.

In another study, it was found that ‘Continued dialogue’ in the form of the company’s offers, schemes or messages from the organisation aids in increasing brand awareness, especially on social media (Yan, 2011).

The nine goals as expounded by Yan (2011) regarding social media in branding, include (i) encouraging the communication of brand values; (ii) using dialogue to help the company establish a competitive advantage and (iii) building positive brand associations. In a 2018 study by Al-Zyoud, it was found that social media tools aid in intentional branding, and establish the intended “brand image” in consumer perceptions.

Websites as a brand positioning tool

According to a study by Oralkan (2019), brand information must be made easily accessible for the success of brand strategies; brand positioning must differentiate the brand from others while ensuring that it complies with the brand values of the company. Thus, in the digital sphere, websites are a suitable medium for brand positioning as it is the first point for providing brand information to the consumer.

A ‘Website’ can be regarded as informative, cognitive or promotional means of communication (Jeon & Jeon, 2012). According to Ind & Riondino (2001), an organization’s

website should be consistent with the presentation of the brand in its entirety; and the company's presence on the web should simultaneously reflect technology and the online environment. Moreover, the study stressed that values that reflect brand personality must be conveyed through messages and dialogue to engage online users; content should be continuously updated. In a study by Florek et al, (2006) on place branding, it was observed that the websites consisted of a high representation of brand communication items and more diversity was observed in brand design items. Chan (2009) in his study on 'green branding strategies' on IT firm websites, concluded that there is an opportunity for companies to appeal to emotional benefits in their brand positioning strategies, as most attempts to build a strong brand by supporting a social cause, which is connected to consumers' values, often focused on facts rather than emotional appeals.

A study on B2B websites of Brazil and India gave empirical data that stronger expressions of corporate branding resulted in higher levels of financial performance (Simoes et al, 2015) thus showing the importance of branding on websites. In another study of CSR communication on websites, organisations that were interviewed stated that businesses were expected to be socially responsible by key stakeholders, and that CSR initiatives and their communication were no longer optional but necessary, while aligning them with organisational philosophy and goals to enhance credibility (Pang et al, 2018).

Gavilan and Avello (2020), in a general study on branding, found that "brands are evocative" and exposure to a brand can stimulate the creation of powerful visual mental imagery, which gets stronger as the reaction becomes more favourable towards the brand. Thus, it can be assumed that providing such information on the company website can favourably enhance the attitude of present and potential consumers towards the brand.

Health communication on websites

Most studies on health-related communication have been observed on websites related to the medical and health industry. e-Health or online health communication has been found to have better efficacy when it relates to users at an emotional and rational level, and when it relates to users' social/lifestyle contexts (Neuhauser & Kreps, 2003). When adopted by companies, even those that are not directly related to the health industry, it helps in creating a stronger bond with consumers. In this context, public health advocacy recognises the connection between individual action and circumstantial factors, thus highlighting the role of policy in creating healthy environments (Dorfman et al, 2005). One study established corporate philanthropy as a link that connects corporate image and policy objectives to influence public health (Tesler & Malone, 2008).

Studies have found that Internet users view the medium as an alternative source for information related to health, diseases, etc., and find 'empowerment' by accessing online health information. Moreover, it gives them more control over their decisions, and

establishes a deeper sense of “partnership” in the relationship when availing of such information online (Leung, 2008). Message characteristics and structural features of the website play an important role in determining website credibility: the presence of statistics, quotes and attribution in the health message made users’ attitude more positive (Rains & Karmikel, 2009). However, a study by Sorensen & Brand (2011) has recognised the importance of linking health literacy with corporate social responsibility, which signals engagement in health for both business and civic reasons, that enables the workforce to attain awareness and also take action in case of public/individual health concerns. An initiative by CSR Europe outlines holding an active dialogue with the company’s key stakeholders to share best practices. The study also concludes that promoting health literacy in organisations as a corporate strategy can enable “built-in” CSR instead of just an add-on, where social considerations are part of the company’s strategy and operations. Further, it gives the company a competitive advantage (Sorensen & Brand, 2011).

Leveraging the Covid-19 crisis for brand positioning

The rapid spread of Covid-19 has had an unprecedented effect on individuals, industry and the economy worldwide. According to He & Harris (2020), the effect of this pandemic in the area of marketing and branding is such that organisational goals, vision and mission statements, organisational philosophy need to change and adapt to measures that will stand in good stead in the long run, such as long-term survival, meaningful social responsibility and strategic agility. Another effect is the complete shift to online communications (He & Harris, 2020). Another study by Cankurtaran & Beverland (2020) expounded the need for design thinking in the field of brand innovation, which would enhance a company’s competitiveness and resilience in crisis situations, and ultimately lead to enhanced reputations, new markets and strategies. (Cankurtaran & Beverland, 2020)

A case study of Barcelona’s digital economy during the Covid crisis threw up interesting observations: while communications focused on the pandemic-related news in all media, the Internet became the main medium of communication. The study showed that within the first few weeks of the crisis, 77 percent of companies had modified their communication strategy; 73 per cent opted to work on preparation and distribution of digital content on the pandemic, sending press releases, organising online events and an increase in internal communication efforts (Coll-Rubio, 2020), thus proving the role of Covid as a strategy in Brand positioning. According to Cobb (2020), however, while companies are trying to express “support and care” in these trying times, consumers are already tired of messages that hint that “we are in this together”.

Most customer centric brands offered support and acknowledgement of the suffering of the common man in the initial days of the pandemic itself, while also initiating programs that tangibly provided genuine empathy and care. But it is still possible for brands to show

their customers that they care, by actively seeking out feedback on what consumers want the brands to do in terms of support. (Cobb, 2020)

The fact remains that consumers, who are now accustomed to high visibility of businesses' campaigns on social media and insights into their cultural practices in the workplace, would now expect companies to show leadership, accountability and responsibility in the current Covid crisis (Yohn, 2020).

Thus, there should be an active effort on part of the company to give customers positive consumption experiences to regulate the negative emotions induced by the pandemic. The brand can choose to use the traditional content that aims to “educate, persuade, entertain and inspire”, and add a category that enhances a consumer’s well-being through positive reinforcement, or it may choose to use a “promotion-focused content” strategy that will have long-term benefits that will cater to the consumer base emotionally as well as increase consumption (Gaston-Breton, 2020).

Covid-19 based branding on websites

There are only a few studies that explore the brand positioning strategies employed by companies on their websites based on the Covid-19 crisis. A study by Tien et al (2020) that analysed digital marketing opportunities in Vietnam post Covid-19, recommended that businesses of all sectors must employ digital marketing in order to achieve strong growth. As part of the solutions recommended for improving digital marketing strategies, it stated that content and messages on the website need to be optimised, and in view of the current (pandemic) situation, creation of optimal content should be focused on empathy and providing “valuable information to customers”.

Prihadini et al (2020) in their study on digital branding and promotion of university websites in Indonesia during the Covid-19 period, found that building consumer communities on social media and internet platforms was popular among the target audience, especially in view of the pandemic; this indirectly increased their brand value. Having quality websites with attractive design, with adequate information and customer engagement were identified as important factors.

A study by Diresta et al (2020) on the impact of Covid-19 on ‘Advertising and Marketing Campaigns’, recommended that brands must devise such campaigns keeping in mind the sensibilities of the consumers, with careful use of language and imagery in all its marketing communications. Social media marketing must be especially carried out with utmost care. A multiple case study analysis of leading hotels in Odisha during the pandemic conducted by Smrutirekha et al (2020) pointed out branding strategies used by the hospitality industry in the state, on the physical as well as the virtual platforms. The hotels were found to put up recipes of “well being dishes” and “immunity building” foods on their websites, so that users could try the recipes at home; and a “worry-free” booking policy was

posted on the website to regain visitors' trust. Through website content evaluation, the study identified that 60 percent of the hotels studied posted new safety measures on their hotel websites; details of health and hygiene standards were also put up on the websites.

A study by Pinariya et al (2020) on content marketing practices on Indonesian tourism websites as crisis mitigation during the pandemic also recommended updating the websites with information relevant to the current crisis, i.e., Covid-19 and providing Covid-related information on the website.

Other studies, such as that of Bhattacharya & Faisal (2020) and Orzan et al (2020), focused on the use of social media marketing campaigns that used Covid-19 as the basis for their social media messages (e.g.: Back to school; study among Romanian women, Social posts on Covid-19 awareness, etc.) and the corresponding 'Return on Investment' (RoI). Therefore, the importance and scope of digital branding and health communication during the Covid pandemic was explored by several scholars, but hardly any studies focused on the possibilities of branding on the company website using Covid-19 as a base and catalyst for the branding communication and branding process. Also, no case studies of Indian company websites in the context of Covid-19 could be identified in the literature search, and this current study seeks to address this gap and contribute towards research in this area.

Research methodology

This study is a descriptive research study that employs the research method of Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), by taking up case studies of specific websites. Content analysis, in simple terms, can be defined as a "method of data analysis" (Mayring, 2014). As websites are repositories of large amounts of data nested in multiple web pages, often far too complexly organised for a user to be able to easily discern and analyse the content, qualitative content analysis can be used as a method to facilitate comprehension of the text (including copy, images, videos, user-generated content, etc.) meaning and symbolism. Research involving the use of qualitative content analysis is flexible enough to (i) accommodate the study of 'language characteristics' with reference to content or contextual meaning; (ii) analyse content in various forms, as either plain text in verbal, print or electronic forms or images, graphics, etc., which has been derived from various sources or data, such as surveys, interviews or even books and manuals; and (iii) aid the researcher in classifying large amounts of data into broad themes for identifying the sections that represent similar meanings. Thus, QCA can be defined as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). QCA helps to put into perspective the interpretation of text to suit the study being carried out; the method helps the researcher identify (i) which part of the communication she/he must use to draw inferences; (ii) the

experiences and emotions of the communicator; (iii) socio-cultural background to the text; (iv) the circumstances of text production and (v) the effect of the message (Mayring, 2000).

A summative approach, as defined by Hsieh & Shannon (2005) serves to approach specific words or particular content in a text, which, upon analysis, reveal patterns that lead to interpretation of its contextual meaning—this methodological approach has been adopted in the current study as well. Moreover, case studies contribute towards building theory, wherein QCA serves as “an appropriate analysis and interpretation method” (Kohlbacher, 2006). It has also been argued that QCA is a better method to differentiate and theorise the content being analysed (Marvasti, 2019). This particular study, therefore, aims at identifying underlying themes through observation and analysis of website content, and interpret patterns to build meaning. Recent studies on branding too have employed the use of QCA as a research method. Company branding on the website has been well analysed and reported in a number of studies, in the context of destination promotion and branding (Vinyals-Mirabent, 2014; Oliveira & Panyik, 2014; Hefny, 2020; Lupu et. al., 2021), with success. A study by Rowley & Hanna (2019) considered the effective expression of symbolic and narrative representations within website texts as a part of destination branding, through the use of Content Analysis. Similarly, studies in airport branding (Castro & Lohman, 2014, Lin et al, 2018, Seo, 2020), employer branding (Vasavada-Oza & Bhattacharjee, 2016, Theurer et al, 2018, Macalik & Sulich, 2019), sports (Echevarria, 2017, Frederick & Patil, 2010) and higher education branding (Samokhvalova, 2017, Wannenberg, 2021,) on websites have been carried out using content analysis as the research technique.

As several studies on branding through websites have used qualitative content analysis successfully as the main research tool for arriving at thematic patterns and drawing conclusions, the same technique is used in this study.

Thus, a total of 08 Indian company websites were chosen for this study through purposive sampling, based on the 2019 ET 500 list (except for Sole proprietorship/start-ups category), with two belonging to each of the four different categories as given below:

- Government Owned/Public Sector Undertaking: (a) Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL); (b) State Bank of India
- Quasi-government/Public-Private Partnership: (a) Hindustan Petroleum (b) Maruti Suzuki Ltd.
- Private Sector: (a) Hindalco [Aditya Birla group] (b) Vedanta Ltd.
- Sole proprietorship/Start-ups: (a) Ola Cabs (b) Zomato

The companies in the first three categories were chosen based on their ranking in the ET 500 list (top to bottom) and ownership patterns (Quarter 1 of FY 2020). Only those companies whose websites had a minimum of two drill- downs (two-layer complexity of

webpages) were chosen. Also, when a company of a similar sector was next on the list as per rank after a chosen company, it was avoided in the study— for e.g., ONGC was at position no.2 in the list, following Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL). However, not only does it belong to the Oil & Gas sector like IOCL, but also has a share in IOCL. Hence, it was not included in the study. Hindustan Petroleum was included under the “Quasi government/ Public-Private partnership” category despite a major chunk of its shares being owned by ONGC, as some of its other shareholders include mutual fund investors such as HDFC, Reliance, Mirae Asset, and Franklin India Equity fund. A foreign bank and ICICI bank also hold shares in Hindustan Petroleum, apart from overseas corporate bodies and Non-resident Indians. It may be noted that the companies chosen in the category “Sole-proprietorship/Start-ups” include companies that have started out as sole proprietorship companies but may at present be a public or private limited company. The companies chosen for this study were randomly picked based on their popularity, as start-up company names were not found in the ET 500 list. This is because, once start-up companies are established, they cease to be owned singly and are opened up for investment to private and public entities to promote growth and expansion.

The analysis was carried out during the month of September 2020, by accessing the websites online through a browser and analysing the content.

Observations and analysis

The websites chosen for analysis were studied only with reference to branding strategies and brand positioning in the context of Covid-19. Both content and design elements of Covid-related features were studied.

Government Owned/Public Sector Undertakings

Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL) - <https://iocl.com/>

The homepage of the IOCL website has minimal information/ brand positioning concerning Covid-19 management. Just below the site menu bar on the top of the homepage is a single banner click tab in the brand colours of blue and orange, with “INDIANOIL OPERATIONS DURING COVID-19” in bold white font on the first line, and “CLICK HERE FOR DETAILS” in the second line. The tab leads to a separate web page, whose navigation pathway shows that it is categorised under “Indian Oil for Media” tab options. However, there is no other direct link or description of this page under the above tab in the site menu bar.

The newly-opened web page is subtitled “News releases” and displays 11 press releases in the period from 21st March 2020 to 08th July, 2020, which are related directly or indirectly to Indian Oil operations during the Covid crisis and lockdown. Most of these press releases focus on the uninterrupted supply of Indian oil products despite Covid lockdown restraints, thus highlighting the company’s work ethics and commitment towards ensuring a smooth life for common citizens and keeping their trust, a manifestation of its vision/values of

“Care”, “Trust” and “Passion”. A single news release of April 08th, 2020 (as at the time of this study) is aimed at internal employees as well as other stakeholders, wherein the company takes cognisance of the efforts being put in by its LPG delivery men, petrol pump attendants, tank-truck drivers and also its refinery & supply/distribution personnel. Its efforts at maintaining a safe workplace and utilisation of digital technology for work and to distribute messages/awareness among staff are also highlighted. The remaining news releases focus on re-opening work on various projects despite the crisis.

While a lot of information exists on the website regarding IOCL's activities during Covid, it is in the form of press releases, and not available for a common user on the website in a concise and attractive form. Only media personnel may take the action of actually accessing the news releases to utilise the information for news stories.

The only other indication of Covid branding is the presence of two creatives on the main panel of cover images on the homepage, where various creatives/images slide in succession. Each of the creatives is a photograph or illustration that combines images and text. Most of these creatives are regular messages conveyed to online users. Only one creative panel shows a family wearing masks travelling by car, and it highlights the facilities for contactless transactions. The other creative that shows an illustration of IOCL employees working while wearing masks, with red coloured Covid particles to the left of the panel, is also a clickable tab that leads to their Integrated Annual Report, 2019-20. It also has the slogan “Commitments made, Promises delivered” that once again highlights their commitment to keeping the trust of their consumer base.

State Bank of India - <https://sbi.co.in/>

The values of the organisation have been specified as “Service, Transparency, Ethics, Politeness, and Sustainability”. However, the homepage of the corporate website of the SBI does not indicate any specific category or information specific to Covid-19. There has been no attempt at branding the organisation in light of the Covid crisis. The homepage has a central panel with various creatives sliding in succession as seen on the IOCL website. When accessing the homepage, it is by default set on the “Personal” category. One of the creatives in this category is a clickable tab that shows “Relief to Retail Borrowers from Covid-19 Stress” in the SBI Brand logo colours of blue and white, placed next to an image of a notebook, a pair of glasses and a calculator, with “Financial relief!” written across the page of the notebook. It acts as a “Call to Action” tab, as it shows “Check your eligibility now”, with a cursor pointing at it. On clicking the tab, a new window opens, for EMI Customer login, with the field for “Loan Account Number” to be filled in order to generate an OTP. Hence, the feature is useful only to those who have an existing loan account. Yet, the details of what constitutes eligibility are not available for general users or even those with the loan account. This goes against their value of transparency.

In the “Announcements” section, further down the homepage, there are two sets of FAQs for the users- one for the Personal segment and one for others, such as businesses, which gives the details of relief to borrowers affected by Covid-19. The Notice on Covid-19 relief measures, pertaining specifically to EMI Deferment as directed by the RBI, and is official and informative in nature, with no corporate branding efforts involved.

The “Corporate Governance” tab shows an icon that combines the outline of the Covid-19 virus and the rupee symbol, and is featured to the left top of the page.

(ii) Quasi-government/Public-Private Partnership

Hindustan Petroleum - <https://www.hindustanpetroleum.com/>

The homepage of Hindustan Petroleum also has a similar Web page design as the previous two websites, with a main panel of cover images, with creatives displayed successively one after the other. Compared to the previous two websites, HP has used this space effectively to brand the company on the basis of the Covid crisis. It’s cover image of “Stay home, save lives” with a social media hashtag #IndiaFightsCorona, along with a (water-painting effect filter) picture of the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, and his quote (in Hindi) sends across a message of standing with the country and the government in the fight against Corona. It positions the brand as one that is concerned about the crisis and is standing with all stakeholders in defeating the virus. Moreover, the placement of this message on the Cover image gives it high visibility and catches the attention of the user as soon as the webpage loads. Another cover image shows the company recognising the efforts of its employees during the Covid crisis, and says “Saluting all our warriors” with the social media hashtag #TogetherWeFightCorona. It displays a collage of images of its employees in various roles.

However, there is no other content that is purely aimed at branding the company on this basis. Except for one press release in July regarding Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, there is no other reference to Covid -19 in remaining press releases. There is also no reference to activities related to Covid-19 in the CSR category.

However, the use of social media hashtags and cover images hint at a team effort, in line with their brand value of “Team Spirit” and “Respect for the Individual” (both in case of use of images of their employees and the PM of the country).

Maruti Suzuki Ltd. - <https://www.marutisuzuki.com/>

Maruti Suzuki Ltd. espouses its brand values to be (i) Customer Obsession, (ii) Openness & Learning (iii) Networking & Partnership (iv) Fast, Flexible First mover and (v) Innovation & Creativity. Though there are no branding efforts based on the Covid Crisis on its homepage, on the “Service” web page there is Covid-related communication/content. It has cover image design and changing panels as in the previous websites. The Cover images are also “Call-to-action” tabs that direct the user to book an appointment. The images are mainly illustrations which highlight the precautions being taken by the company, such as monitoring staff

health, ensuring social distancing and sanitising the car before and after service. Further down the page, there is also an illustrative 40-second video on the precautions being taken during service of cars and facilities for customers. Below the video, are 04 sets of FAQs, of which one set with 6 questions is regarding servicing of vehicles during lockdown.

In the Media page, there is a dedicated section titled “Together against Covid-19”. The company has directly addressed its consumer base, acknowledging the gravity of the situation and its commitment towards fighting the pandemic. A panel of cover images are on display, photographs of the company supplying frontline warriors with masks, serving meals to the needy, and supporting the Government by supplying masks, ventilators and PPE. Below this panel is a section on “Partnering with the Government” where the company’s contributions to the governments of various states in the form of cloth, masks, etc., are featured as tabs in a horizontal scroll. Each of the tabs has a “Know more” option, which when clicked, opens into a new window, where the concerned press release is displayed. Similar sections “With the Community”, “Customer well-being”, “Employee safety”, “Dealer, Vendor and employee initiatives” and “Social” are placed below, detailing the good work of the company. In the “Social” category, several illustrative videos with positive messaging with reference to the pandemic have been featured. Maruti Suzuki has successfully created a strong case for brand positioning with reference to Covid.

(iii) Private Sector

(a) Hindalco [Aditya Birla group] - <http://www.hindalco.com/>

The company has a purely entrepreneurial vision, i.e., to become a premium metals major, to spread globally and excel in every field, creating value for stakeholders. Its brand values too, are aligned along this principle: Integrity, Commitment, Passion, seamlessness, speed.

The company has not attempted any brand positioning in the wake of Covid crisis on its homepage. There are no attractive visuals, illustrative graphs and videos and no indication of Covid-related communication on the home page.

It is only in the Press releases page that there are two press releases that are related to the fight against Covid. One of them details the contributions of the company towards the cause, where it details its initiatives such as extending Covid-19 health insurance to contract workers; its community work such as providing 37000 masks in 86 villages and converting a school owned by the company into a quarantine centre. However, these have not been highlighted for brand positioning on the home page.

(b) Vedanta Ltd. - <https://www.vedantalimited.com/>

The company has listed “Trust, Entrepreneurship, Innovation, Excellence, Integrity, Care and Respect” as its values. Vedanta has leveraged the opportunity provided by the Covid crisis to its advantage, by providing the right inputs along with visibility.

On the company's homepage, of the large cover images that slide over in succession, there is one cover image that communicates a message from the Chairman of the company, regarding the stand taken by the company to protect their employees, exhorting the CEOs to take every possible measure to ensure the safety of the people before business. The image also acts as a click tab, which opens a press release in a new window, which carries details of the Rs. 100 crore fund set up by the Chairman to protect the livelihood of vulnerable communities impacted by Covid-19. Another cover image shows in the background an image of a woman in a mask, and "Click-to-action" tab that promises details of the Company's response to Covid-19 and measures being taken by them. This tab too, opens in a new window as a fresh page. It is also possible to access this page from the direct link provided in the site menu bar "Covid-19 response".

An entire webpage has been dedicated to the Covid-19 response of the company. There is a banner image which gives the numbers of Meals & ration kits, and Health, hygiene & PPE kits distributed so far.

This is followed by three videos of (i) Chairman's message (ii) Vedanta combats Covid 19 and (iii) Apollo helpline for employees.

All press releases related to Covid response activity have been provided below the videos. The next subsection titled "One Vedanta contributions to combat the impact" has six links below it, which lead to either detailed reports or photographs with briefs.

The other sections in the page are "Contribution Corner" (with links to contribute for related causes), "Social Media Corner" (features links from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) and "Employee guidelines for Covid" (which contains 3 PDF manuals: (i) Combating Covid-19 as #OneVedanta (ii) Workplace readiness guidelines (iii) FAQs).

The FAQs are not in relation to the operations of the company, but rather, general information for people regarding the nature of the virus, the possibility of its spread, mode of transmission, precautions to be taken, etc.

Sole proprietorship/Start-ups

(a) Ola Cabs - <https://www.olacabs.com/>

Ola Cabs does not profess any specific vision or values on its About us page. It also does not feature any Covid-related information on its home page through direct links. However, it does feature Covid-related contributions of the company to the community and to various stakeholders listed among the press releases on the Media page. It also features published stories of Ola in various newspapers/online news sites, etc., titled as "In the News". The top of the page consists of cover images, sliding in succession. It features several images accompanied by copy that spells out steps taken by Ola to combat the crisis. Its contribution to the PM CARES fund, launching of "Drive the Driver" fund to aid drivers who are out of work, gratitude to front line workers, etc. were the themes explored in this image. Each of these images is also a click-tab, which opens up a new window with the news coverage of the

particular theme/action taken by Ola. The website also has a blog, where FAQs on the Ola Covid Care package is extensively presented, followed by other Covid-related posts that expound the precautions and measures taken by Ola.

(b) Zomato – <https://www.zomato.com/>

Zomato is a food aggregator company and lists as its brand values “Resilience, Acceptance, Ownership, Humility, Spark and Judgement”. Zomato has not leveraged the opportunity to position itself as a brand that can be relied upon to deliver food safely. Information for customers regarding the hygiene standards of their staff when delivering food are not touched upon in any content on the homepage. There are no direct links to Covid related information. The only information on Covid on the site is in the blog, which contains three performance reports of Indian restaurant businesses and Zomato during Covid lockdown. A fourth blog is regarding the message of the company’s Founder and CEO to all Zomato employees regarding initiatives, focus, pay cuts, layoffs, and helping those who will be laid off to find other jobs, along with health insurance and financial support.

Conclusion

Of the eight (08) websites belonging to the four different categories as mentioned, the company websites of organisations that were government owned/PSUs have shown minimal branding efforts in the context of Covid-19 crisis. As government owned companies, their efforts at rebranding themselves as companies committed to standing by citizens’ welfare, would have created a good branding pitch, and enhanced the trust and reliability factors. Of the quasi-government sector company websites, Hindustan Petroleum has succeeded in securing visibility for its branding efforts, but failed to provide sufficient content that would engage the online user. On the other hand, Maruti Suzuki has been innovative in its branding efforts through the use of creative illustrations, FAQs and short, informative videos, but has failed to provide a direct link on the website’s home page. Unless users access the “Service” page, there is no way of viewing the Covid-related content. As the content shown on the page is still a current issue and relevant to the present situation, having suitable “quick links” or “Call-to-action” tabs on the home page that incite curiosity in the reader for information would help more users to access the content. Of the private sector websites, the website of Hindalco has once again neglected to highlight company response towards Covid. Vedanta Ltd. however, has achieved a commendable goal of branding itself right during the crisis, and also ensuring visibility. By using leadership value (through featuring Chairman’s message on the home page), they have not only attracted the user to go through the website to gain understanding of their contribution, but have shown that their leaders are willing to take responsibility and are committed to giving back to the society. Also, they have dedicated an entire webpage for the purpose of detailing their contribution to the fight against Covid-19, with a well-organised layout and categorisation of content. In

the start-up sector, while Zomato has also used leadership to convey the company's decisions, it is hidden among various other blogs in the blog-related webpage.

The website of Ola cabs too, has not posted any links or information on the home page, but has rather chosen to include the details of their initiatives on web pages that may or may not be accessed by the user. Of all the websites studied, only two websites have used illustrative videos and FAQs.

An average web user would not actively seek out Covid-19 information on the website of any brand. Hence, it is important that a brand ensure visibility of its brand positioning strategies on its website, either through direct links or Call-to-action tabs on its homepage. Apart from visibility, engaging and convincing content, with attractive design that blends with the brand colours and overall Web page design, is also a must to attract and retain existing and potential consumers online. Interactivity as a feature must be included to engage more users. Thus, a model of communication that combines quality content and design, brand strategy and visibility can ensure successful brand positioning even in the time of adversity, and increase the goodwill of key stakeholders.

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