BRANDED CONTENT.

WHAT'S CULTURE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

An E-Book by Leapfrog Strategy for BuzzinContent
Contents

Foreword from Leapfrog Strategy 03

Foreword from BuzzinContent 04

The Thesis Presented in this book 05

Chapter 1
Why have brands turned into publishers instead of staying only advertisers 06

Chapter 2
The Advertiser's Journey into Branded Content 16

Chapter 3
The Many Formats of Branded Content 23

Chapter 4
Content as Cultural Discourse 32

Chapter 5
Utilizing Pop Culture in Content 55

Chapter 6
Evaluating Effectiveness, ROI and Business Results 62

A word from our Sponsors 70

Contributors 72

References 73
Branded Content: What’s Culture Got to do with it?

Marketers are very familiar with advertising in all parts of its ecosystem and production process – creation, media release, measurement of effectiveness. They are unfamiliar with content, as traditionally, content is the product that channels create, not the advertiser.

Content promotes cultural conversations that have the potential to make bigger impact on audiences. Its seminal role in the cultural discourse enables it to examine recurrent narratives and form emergent ones. Based on the manner of execution, content can form the basis of a deeper engagement for brands.

However, branded content remains a fairly new concept without proper definition and rules. It is more often than not misplaced with traditional advertising. But a growing number of content creators or artists, if you will, are learning by doing. These include copywriters, marketing and advertising professionals and of course many influencers.

In this book, we look at content from a cultural lens to produce structured knowledge on the topic. Our approach is part theory and part application which means that while examining the existing literature on the topic, we also substantiate it with contemporary examples. We use many recent pieces of branded content as illustrations in order to explore the meaning and dimensions of the term. Thus, we attempt to gauge the potential imbued within branded content vis-a-vis culture.

The thrust behind, ‘Branded Content: What’s Culture Got to do with it?’ is to widen perspectives and deepen the knowledge of practitioners which in turn, enriches the ecosystem of content creation.
It all began in September 2020 when we launched a dedicated weekly section "Content & Culture" on BuzzInContent.com where Hamsini Shivakumar, along with her team at Leapfrog Strategy Consulting, started analysing trends in content marketing, or any piece of content done by brands, through the lens of culture and semiotics.

We have come a long way since then. It has become one of the most-read sections on our platform. Earlier this year, Hamsini suggested that we should curate a book on the basis of learnings from the over 75 analysis pieces published so far. It took only a second for me to say yes to this.

Firstly, because I knew this book could become an encyclopaedia and guide for content marketers in India. Secondly, it is in line with the purpose of BuzzInContent.com, which is to grow the content marketing ecosystem. Thirdly, there couldn't have been a better person than Hamsini to create something so meaningful and useful for marketers to learn from. It does take a giving nature to share knowledge and I can vouch that she possesses that. Fourthly, I am so proud of our journey with this unique section, and converting the thoughts shared in this section into a book is the next logical step in our journey.

As the Editor and Co-founder of India’s only news platform on content marketing and branded content, for four years now, I highly recommend marketers, agencies, content creators and platforms to add it in the must-read section of books to read it in 2022.
As marketers and brands turn into publishers and content creators themselves, not just staying advertisers, they need a deeper appreciation of how content integrates into culture, the role played by cultural discourse in shaping society and social mores and the relationship between audiences and content.

At a definition level, marketers and brand owners need to appreciate that content is cultural discourse.

So, whether they acknowledge it or not, they are automatically participating in and contributing to cultural discourse when they create and put out a piece of content/branded content into the world out there. They need to take a deep dive of content x culture in the construction of cultural meaning. And think about how they intend to participate in cultural marketing.

This will help them create more engaging and meaningful content that is beneficial to their brand. It will also sensitize marketers to the potential opportunities and pitfalls of being a publisher in the age of social media, including social media backlash and creating content that aligns to cultural sensibilities. Finally, it will help them evolve useful and accurate frameworks of evaluation.
WHY HAVE BRANDS TURNED INTO PUBLISHERS INSTEAD OF STAYING ONLY ADVERTISERS?

To begin at the beginning:
Marketing, brands and media have a symbiotic relationship. Marketers need media channels that aggregate audiences for them. Through which channels they can reach their prospects and customers and get their messages out to them. Audiences come to the channels to consume content on these channels – be with it entertainment, news, opinions or anything else. Media channels create the content that attracts the audiences while marketers fund media channels via advertising. Advertising itself interrupts readers and viewers in the middle of their content consumption. But audiences are willing to accept being interrupted by advertising because it reduces the cost of access to the media content, which they would otherwise have to pay for fully. In other words, both advertisers and audiences know that it is advertising that subsidises the cost of accessing content, to audiences.

This is the well-established and well-known model of media, brands and marketing in which advertising is the central pillar of the business model of media channels.

In this model, the role of the media channel as content producer and audience aggregator, the role of marketers and brand owners as producers and releasers of advertising into the media channels as well as the role of audiences as content consumers is clear and kept separate.

While advertorial content does blur the line between content and advertising, from time to time, by and large the walls between the holy trinity have been maintained.

PR or public relations is the route through which corporates, marketers and brands participate in public discourse with respect to their category or industry. PR agencies liaise with journalists in order to put across the company’s viewpoints and agendas into mass media in order to shape public opinion.

A) The Traditional Holy Trinity: Publisher, Advertiser, Audience

The limits to this model have arisen from consumer fatigue with advertising and declining levels of their engagement with advertising on media channels. This naturally leads to declining ROI of advertising spends for business. With growing public awareness on how the mainstream media is no longer speaking for the public but for their sponsors, the loss of credibility of media can also erode, in turn, affecting the channel’s ability to aggregate an audience via their content.
Marketers, their media and communications agencies therefore, identified a need to extend brand communication beyond advertising as formally defined for traditional media – viz newspaper and magazine ads, radio ads, TVCs, point-of-purchase/sale material to other formats and ideas that extend beyond and outside of conventional media channels. Thus was born the concept of IMC or Integrated Marketing Communication. These concepts also converge with greater importance being given to the brand vis-à-vis product and the need to build brands via a multiplicity of touchpoints.

The stretching of communication beyond advertising into IMC marked the first step of marketers turning content creators and publishers. Marketers start engaging directly with audiences with their brand messages inserted into content that audiences like to consume rather than inserting advertising messages into modules that are placed within a content capsule. Sponsorships of events and programs are just the tip of the iceberg here. It takes just a leap of creative imagination to convert any object or place into a touchpoint – be it rotis served to devotees at the Kumbh mela, a sculpture placed on Wall Street or a pledge signed and attached to a visitor’s passport. These are just a few of the award winning examples of IMC featured in the Cannes winner’s list in recent years.

With investment in IMC, one can say that marketers have turned quasi-publishers and content creators but have not yet become full-fledged content creators, like a media channel would be. Audiences still stay passive or active consumers of content but are not yet creators of content.
The advent of IMC:
With the advent and popularizing of social media platforms, the entire model of marketer as advertiser, publisher as content creator and audience as content consumer and advertising viewer has been shattered and reconfigured completely. On social media platforms, audiences are both content creators and content consumers, marketers are both advertisers and content creators. The platforms are audience aggregators as well as content regulators.

Marketers, advertisers and brands can create their own channel to access audiences of relevance and interest to them, who are otherwise participating in and moving around in the social media platform. Thus they have the opportunity to turn publisher and create content, not just advertising. And to engage with audiences via content, not just with advertising.

With social media, the marketer’s push towards turning content creator and publisher does not arise only due to advertising fatigue from consumers and the broken model of ‘content interruption’ by advertising. It also gives marketers and brands a platform to create a wider range of information, news, views, opinions, stories, performances, videos with which to attract and engage audiences of their prospective and current consumers.

The availability of social media and digital channels and their ability to gather audiences in the millions, across barriers of place/geography is unparalleled in the history of media. There is also the aspect of costs of creating a brand channel. Arguably, mega corporations with a large portfolio of brands who are among the largest investors in advertising could have created their own television channels with which to attract audiences. They could have channelized a big part of their advertising budget into making their own TV channel. But they never did. Because, they didn’t see themselves as operating in the media business.

But with digital platforms such as You Tube, Instagram and Facebook, Linked In etc, brands can create their own ‘brand pages’ as well as ‘video channels’ and turn into publishers at a fraction of the cost and effort that it would take for them to set up and operate their own TV channel or newspaper.

This presents a never-before opportunity for brands to engage with audiences too. Thus, from a scenario where marketers and brands did not consider content creation to be a relevant activity for them, leaving it to media owners, digital and social media marketing has made content creation almost an imperative for brands. Brands are no longer just advertisers, they have also turned publishers themselves and have had to learn the rules of the publishing and content game.
D) Multi-channel, multi-platform consumption and Audience fragmentation:

The proliferation of media channels that has taken place over the past three decades, including via digital platforms and the Internet has led to extreme audience fragmentation. It is much harder for brands to run their ads in one or two programs, on one or two media channels, secure in the knowledge that they are reaching 80%+ of their intended audience. IPL is perhaps one such program in India today that aggregates vast audiences in one program, but the cost of advertising on it, puts it out of reach for all except advertisers with deep pockets or huge budgets.

This audience fragmentation also makes content marketing and branded content an appealing option for marketers – to be used as an alternative/substitute or in addition to conventional advertising.

In simple terms, content is something that audiences seek out and watch/listen to/consume out of interest. That is, audiences want to actively engage with content. Content pulls in audiences. Whereas, advertising is something that interrupts content viewing/reading/listening by audiences and is pushed out by media platforms, channel owners on behalf of marketers. Consumers typically don’t seek out ads. But they do seek out content.

Hence, the thought is that if brand communication is designed like the content that audiences seek out, instead of like advertising that is pushed out, then marketers will be able to benefit from the engagement levels that content typically gets from audiences. If an ad mimics a content video most closely or digital ads mimic blog posts, then audiences would seek them out, view or read with deeper engagement, share, discuss and debate ads, just the way they do with media content.

Since branded content at scale is a new development in the marketing world, much of the discussions and debates and experiential learning so far has been to do with the “know-how” of branded content. How to create branded content that gets audience engagement, how to assess its effectiveness, what sorts of creative strategies are effective and so on. In this process of “know-how” development, a key piece has been overlooked.

We believe that there is another perspective to branded content and content marketing that is as important to consider. This is the cultural perspective to branded content. That’s because media content and cultural discourse are inseparable.
1. Media content is cultural discourse. Media content and cultural discourse are one and the same.

In modern societies, with the advent of mass media, content on media channels has always been the leading source of cultural discourse, shaping knowledge, ideas, opinions and mental models/the shared imaginary of the public at large. This ability to shape the discourse and mould public opinion gives editors, content creators and publishers great power in society.

Culture is a big and broad concept like society and polity. Everyone of us is a member of a collective and hence is acculturated to function as a member of that collective. It is defined in multiple ways in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and semiotics.

For our purpose, which is to understand the role and value of culture for branded content and content marketing, culture can be conceptualized in a couple of different ways, keeping in mind the Semiotic world-view.

*There is lived culture or culture as a way of life.* This is manifested and visible in behaviours, both individual and collective, that are underpinned by beliefs that are taught to all members of that society or social group and learned by them. The rules that govern the shared way of life are the culture codes that are known and accepted, set via social and political consensus processes among members of a social group or society.
So long as marketers stayed advertisers and focused their effort on creating advertising, they had only a limited role to play in the creation and shaping of cultural discourse. Advertising might be a strong force for business – revenue and profit growth. But it is a weak force, relative to content, in shaping cultural discourse. However, as brands and marketers have turned into publishers and content creators themselves, they are now turning into active shapers of cultural discourse.

Brands as advertisers, took the well-established signs, symbols and narratives that existed in popular culture or lived culture and leveraged it in their advertising for greater audience resonance and acceptance. This is a passive approach to culture. The passive approach to culture works for advertising, as advertisers are primarily focused on ad effectiveness for revenue/profitability/business results and ROI. The cultural role of advertising is a secondary or even a tertiary consideration.

However, this approach no longer works when brands turn publishers and content creators. As creators of branded content and publishers themselves, content marketing teams of brands need a deeper appreciation of cultural discourse, the shared imaginary as well as the frames, positions and stances that they take, to put forward a point-of-view. There can possibly be social/cultural neutrality in advertising, but not in branded content. There is always a visible or invisible/ embedded perspective and point-of-view, a stance within content.

As an active participant in and shaper of cultural discourse, brands enter touchy territories and impact the sensitivities of many communities. Brands can easily be accused of hurting public sentiment or the sentiments of specific social groups or communities. The viewpoints that they espouse can meet with public or even political resistance or push-back. Brands that take very strong, almost activist stances or positions can attract as well as repel segments of their user base/consumers.

Even if consumers and the public at large apply the label ‘ads’ to all commercial content from brands, branded content is not advertising because it does not have the goal of selling product. Hence, consumers and audiences cannot rationalize messages or positions.
put forward by the brand that they dislike or disagree with, “it’s just an ad”, “it’s just a way to sell products.” They cannot rationalize that the brand’s point of view is not worth taking that seriously / can be ignored if the products are good quality and the price point is right. Positions and stances are an integral part of cultural discourse and hence elicit audience responses on that basis.

Creators of branded content need to account for a diverse audience set in terms of possible responses to what they put forward.

The audience for branded content does not only comprise their users/ consumers, the media TG or marketing TG. The audience for branded content also comprises social activists, political activists, politicians and other interest groups/guardians of culture. They could raise objections to the content at any time and take action as well – creating pressure to withdraw or modify the branded content to make it more socially or rather culturally acceptable. While this could be true for advertising itself (there are many well known cases and examples of activist initiated, public protest against some ad campaigns), the possibilities are greater for branded content as it is designed as cultural discourse, not selling material.

Creators of branded content/content marketers are participants in cultural discourse, whether they acknowledge it or not.

The cultural content that they create can be analysed in terms of three dimensions. These dimensions are based on the strategic choices that marketers as content creators make, when they think about creating content.

While creating branded content, messaging can be sourced from the category in which the brand operates or from the culture in which the brand resides.
**Culture Anchored Messaging Platforms** are used by brands when they create content for culturally significant moments such as Festivals, Daughter’s Day, Mother’s Day, Women’s Day, Valentine’s Day, Friendship Day etc or big sporting and other events that capture the imagination of the populace.

Brands can also take up mainstream cultural beliefs as narrative platforms for their content, with the intent of challenging and altering the mainstream cultural beliefs towards a more progressive world-view.

Whereas, **Category Anchored Messaging Platforms** are based on the product or service category that the brand primarily operates in. It requires the brand to answer questions such as “what business are we in?” and define it in the broadest sense.

So a maker of mattresses would say that they are in the sleep business and even in the wellness business, as good sleep is a necessity for good health. Or the maker of sanitary napkins would focus on cultural beliefs around menstruation and periods. And a player in the paints category could articulate their business as that of creating beautiful homes. The business we are in definition typically, integrates human needs with cultural values.

In terms of Stance or Position, content can be classified on a continuum of maintaining or changing mainstream culture – cultural beliefs and behaviours.

**STANCE OR POSITION**

- **ALIGN TO MAINSTREAM CULTURE**
- **CHANGE MAINSTREAM CULTURE**

**Change/Reshape Culture** – This is an assertive stance that is often taken by brands in order to fuel business growth and/or express their brand purpose. The brand/marketing team’s assessment could be that the existing cultural beliefs and practices do not support or are contra-indicated for the brand’s growth. For e.g. dating apps such as Bumble or Tinder in order to grow their business in India, must deal with a culture that is still centred on arranged marriages. There is very little of dating culture that has complete and comfortable cultural permission or blessing in India. There could exist, a thin layer of upper crust Indians in metro cities, the globalist aspirants whose parents and young adults accept dating as normal and normative. Among the middle classes, however, youngsters may practice dating under the radar of parents in a hidden/parallel life. Hence brands like Bumble and Tinder need to become initiators of culture change in order to grow their business.

On the other hand, brands like Dove take an activist stance in their effort to become champions of women’s self-esteem and self-worth, which is indeed their brand purpose. This makes Dove a brand whose content is more aggressively ‘feminist’ and champions the women’s point-of-view in order to change mainstream culture and its stance towards women.

**Maintaining Mainstream culture by aligning and adapting to Culture** – this is a more negotiated or nuanced stance, where branded content doesn’t seek to rock the boat by questioning cultural norms and value sets. Rather the content appeals at a more humanistic level and side-steps contentious topics and questions of ideology. Brands therefore align themselves to the mainstream position on cultural
values. They seek to participate in cultural discourses (via social media conversations) that their TG in engaged with. The way they do this is via producing emotionally appealing story videos, humorous memes and similar. Many large brands approach branded content in this way. They don’t wish to court controversy. They want to be pragmatic and result oriented.

Signs and symbols used in content expression could be realistic, depicting the socio-cultural reality as it is, aiming for emotional connection from the audience via realism and authenticity. Or they could be aspirational, not mirroring the culture as is, but depicting a vision of how it could be. Thus branded content can aim to achieve cultural connect with audiences via mirroring or via envisioning.

Any producer of branded content has to make strategic choices around these fundamental dimensions when designing and creating both the content calendar as well as the actual content itself. Cultural critique of content arises from a consideration of the messaging, the stance and the signs & symbols. Individually and taken together, what is the meaning that they imply or point towards? As an engaged member of the audience, do I agree or disagree with the meaning(s) put forward in the content?
CHAPTER 2

THE ADVERTISER’S JOURNEY INTO BRANDED CONTENT
Becoming publishers instead of advertisers requires a change of the lens through which marketers perceive and the rules by which they make choices and decisions. The rules for an advertiser who is developing advertising are very different from the rules for a publisher who is developing content. Creating content that audiences actively seek out to watch/read/listen to/consume requires a shift of perspective from creating advertising that interrupts audiences content consumption to push out a selling message about a product or service. It is a journey that marketers and brand teams need to travel in order to create engaging content that is also impactful for brands and helps in reaching brand goals for communication/content.

Learning about what works, doesn’t work and how to get it right can be done in two ways. The first and most favoured is the best practice example to emulate. Sometimes, though, looking through examples of where the content creators stumbled can help in avoiding the errors and getting ahead faster.

We have looked into this journey and created a handy reference for content creators of five pitfalls to avoid.
Some of these negative examples are referenced below:

The temptation to create a hybrid story telling format, a cross between an ad and branded content can be too strong to resist. An equally strong temptation is to view branded content like a Sponsor of a program to make sure that there is sufficiently strong brand visibility in the show, bring in brand personality elements into the show etc.

This type of hybrid is also a problem as it falls between two stools. Celebrity plugs for the product and brand where they speak like Brand Ambassadors are another pitfall to avoid in creating branded content. Finally, the always positive tonality of advertising shouldn’t be transferred to branded content, as content often connects more deeply through realism and mirroring the lived reality and culture of the audience rather than relying entirely on aspirational and idealized image montages.

In summary, the pitfalls to avoid in the transition journey from advertising to branded content are those that are rooted in the advertising mindset.

a. High visibility product placements and plugs with range shots and taglines

b. Use of celebrities / influencers as brand ambassadors and sales persons for the products

c. Sponsorship level of brand visibility through the set and stage

d. Long form stories that are a hybrid between ads and content, having elements of both with highly visible branding elements affixed into the video screen

e. Only positive tonality, aspirational imagery and the familiar/cliched tropes and symbols used in advertising narratives
ARTICLE: ADS, BRANDED CONTENT & HYBRIDS
WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?

Brands juggle between ads and branded content has given rise to hybrid formats that are often visible during the festive season.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

The Blueprint of an Ad
It has a short narrative of 30-60 seconds that leads up to the product reveal and positions the product as a key part of the experience the characters are going through. The product also finds its way into the closing shot that captures the ad’s sentiment in a single statement as seen in the ad by Cadbury Celebration.

The Blueprint of a Branded Content film
These don’t just feature a situation but offer a story with a distinct beginning, middle and end. The product may not feature through their duration at all, maybe subtly woven into the narrative or may only be mentioned at the end. So, it doesn’t necessarily serve as a key feature of the characters’ experience.

Instead, the admirable qualities in the film are meant to be a reflection of the brand in the consumer’s life as in Mankind Pharma’s short film.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Making a hybrid format (of an Ad and Content) work is a matter of sound conceptualisation and convincing execution. Till the elements gel, it probably doesn’t bother the consumer who seems to categorize everything from a brand as an ad.

The hybrid format makes more sense to the marketer who feels concerned about the ROI on a pure branded content film and sees this as a way to continue the product sell while making it less interruptive.
ARTICLE: THREE CONCEPTS OF BRANDED CONTENT IN ONE SHOW

Attempt at brand visibility can turn into sponsorship which further undermines the structure of content and leads to a confusing mix in place of distinct brand persona.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

The content approaches the ‘Brand x Content’ integration through three distinct and parallel ideas about branded-ness of content - visibility, embodies personality/avatar and difference/distinctiveness.

Creating branded content and maintaining brand visibility at the same time can be tricky. Too much brand visibility can result in interruptions that lead to break in the deep emotional connection. In such a case, the content comes across as sponsorship.

Comedy Adda by Bingo! Incorporates several small segments like Mad Rules and Mad News that to foreground Bingo’s persona but the attempt fails due to lack of fresh perspectives.

Similarly, Bingo! tries to structure its program to reflect its brand ethos of ‘tedha’.

But instead the structure comes across as a mix between new ways to define comedy and a rather unwelcome inversion of authority.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Comedy Adda hasn’t been able to bring the three strands

• Brand Visibility • Brand Persona • Brand difference

together to create coherent branded content. Moreover, in trying to turn both the product and the brand persona into heroes, it has succeeded at neither attempt. Therefore, the larger intent of making Bingo! a star in India’s comedy culture is not realised.

Pieces Under Consideration

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<th>Brand</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bingo! Comedy Adda</td>
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ARTICLE: THE RECIPE FOR CREATING UNIQUE FOOD-RELATED BRANDED CONTENT

Pandemic saw an increase in the consumption of food-related content, making many brands take this path. But the challenge was to differentiate.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

Currently, brands seem to be approaching food content with a sales and advertising campaign mindset, viz how do I use the cookery show format to strongly plug my product? And in order to get audiences and viewership, what can I modify of the familiar elements of a cookery show? Who is cooking, what are they cooking, what cooking tools and aids do they use and where are they cooking — these are the 4W elements available to do something a little different in a basic format of a cookery show.

Many brands have settled for celebrities as the anchors of the cookery show, as the safest bet for getting viewership of the content. And for getting the celebrity to visibly plug the product and its features like they would do for a celebrity endorsement TVC. This makes for non-distinctive, forgettable content with audiences perhaps remembering the celebrity more than the brand.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Food culture is a treasure trove of insights and ideas for creating more original content. Food videos as branded content have a huge opportunity to up the game by using brand x culture as the starting point for content development. A ‘content’-centric approach that aims to engage audiences with food-based videos and is distinctive by reflecting some key characteristics of the brand, drawing from the brand’s unique symbolism yields higher quality content.

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<th>Pieces Under Consideration</th>
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<td>Royal Da Swaad</td>
<td>Panasonic India</td>
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<td>The Sweetest Diwali with Arjun Kapoor</td>
<td>Cadbury</td>
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<td>Neena-Masaba Gupta- Sun Masala Microwave</td>
<td>Samsung</td>
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ARTICLE: FAILURE TO BE IMPACTFUL - ALWAYS SUMMER BY BIRA 91

Role played by cultural relevance in making a piece of branded content successful

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:
Bira’s logo appears at the start of the video and is followed by a mention of Blonde Summer, a faint watermark remains on the frame’s right-hand corner for the duration and a case of Blonde Summer features thrice.

Despite Bira publishing the video and the many subtle references, they have included; viewers don’t seem to have paid attention to the brand (as seen in the comments on the video). One, because while the brand is integrated, the product is never shown being consumed. Even the bottle is never seen on screen. And the case of Blonde Summer is turned into a background presence. And two, the beer is associated with chilling in sunny settings (what Blonde Summer’s packaging is based on) — a connection that is so conventional, it can easily be made with another brand of beer.

THE TAKEAWAY:
Content by both Center Fresh and Cadbury are examples of achieving masterful brand integration. Both show clear shots of their products with some modifications like Cadbury shows a chocolate bar with a poppable heart.

The consumers enjoy such content even with the cognisance of them being ads or branded content. Whereas Bira’s video is far from the lived reality and therefore fails to make the mark even with a popular artist and a great on-screen presence.

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<th>Pieces Under Consideration</th>
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<td>Always Summer</td>
<td>Bira 91</td>
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<td>Keep It Fresh</td>
<td>Center Fresh</td>
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<td>Sang Rahiyo</td>
<td>Cadbury</td>
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CHAPTER 3

THE MANY FORMATS OF BRANDED CONTENT
Unlike advertising which is formatted and fixed, branded content can explore many different formats of communication and story-telling. Digital platforms and the Internet also enable the exploration of different kinds of formats beyond the tried and tested long-form video.

In the days of mass media domination, apart from advertising, brands engaged in PR to put their point-of-view forward in mainstream media by working with journalists. And then they used Sponsorship of programs and various types of events with huge public appeal.

To this mix got added product placement, when the companies’ products got placed and used in movies and television programs.
However, in the post IMC, content marketing world, brands also explore multiple types of formats as they develop different kinds of content. A simple listing of formats would include:

- The most used, tried and tested format – the long form video running from 2 to 10 minutes
- Content websites with a lot of video content apart from written content
- Interactive content where audiences can participate and contribute to the development of the story, plotline
- Music videos, including rap songs, youth anthems etc
- Chat Shows
- Audio shows and podcasts
- Shows such as fashion shows, comedy shows etc
- Stand Up Comedy
- Talent contests
- Influencers Speaking/Stand Up Videos
- Performance Poetry
- Panel discussions, interviews and expert conversations

We make note of some interesting and less explored formats in the articles below and highlight how more innovative and risk-taking content marketers are trying these out to good effect.
ARTICLE: HOW TO GET STAND-UP FORMAT IN BRANDED CONTENT RIGHT

Stand-up comedy as branded content can succeed only when it enables brand to partake in culture

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

Stand-up driven approach to branded content illustrates how a problem can hassle you in small yet multiple ways, and thus, merits resolution for a better-quality life. The brand providing you with a way to achieve that resolution forms a small part of the communication.

This authentic articulation of everyday problems resonates even more with millennials and Gen Z, who have grown up with a surfeit of products and huge exposure to advertising. They see the staged melodrama of advertising for what it is and don't warm up to its unreality.

It sounds like the ideal way to subtly highlight a product without following the format of a product sell. Yet brands often fail to implement the formula. So, many of them end up creating a hybrid that features a real-life comedian who promotes the product instead of entertaining the viewers. The jokes are only focussed on consumption and usage situations, like a typical ad. They reflect the seller’s agenda and highlight problems and inconveniences that the product can address.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Stand-up as branded content still hasn't caught on in a big way, even while brands frequently use comedians to enact storylines in their communication.

Stand-up comedy as branded content can only succeed when it is a way for brands to participate in culture. When brands juxtapose selling with such content, it immediately lowers its appeal and creates a hybrid that doesn't bring in the kind of success promised by either advertising or content.

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<th>Pieces Under Consideration</th>
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<td>Keep it Simple, Silly - Friend’s Dadi</td>
<td>Tata Docomo</td>
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<td>Apne Washing Machine ko #RakhoSambhalKe</td>
<td>One Assist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Every Maid During Diwali</td>
<td>GodrejHit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aishwarya Mohanraj on Lingerie</td>
<td>Zivame</td>
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ARTICLE: PERFORMANCE POETRY AS AN ALT TO HUMAN INTEREST STORYTELLING

Performance poetry can be used to create and sustain emotional connection through its use of real emotions.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

Adopted from the west, performance poetry is a newer communicative art. It is when an individual gets up to perform a monologue to an audience. Performance poetry wields introspection with a sobering impact.

Performance poetry is direct. Unlike human-interest storytelling, it does not build an emotional connect by turning the audience into observers of a third-party interaction. It does not warm them up to the issue through a fictional narrative. It has a straightforward conversation with them. Whether by looking right into the camera lens or by addressing a live audience that is seen/sensed on screen, and of which the virtual viewer is treated as an extension.

Performance poetry is realistic. Or at least, it is not fictional in the way human-interest storytelling is. It may illustrate its argument through anecdotes and stories. But the assumption is that it draws from the performer’s observations and experience of life. Just like a memoir. Therefore, what is spoken carries greater weight and believability.

THE TAKEAWAY:

The primary goal of brand building is to build and sustain an emotional connection with the audiences. To that end, human-interest storytelling has been the most favoured approach so far, both in the frequency of usage and success received.

Performance poetry is a new approach. Its strengths are the very opposite of human-interest story videos — it is direct, raw and real. Playing to its strengths can certainly help fill the gaps left by storytelling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pieces Under Consideration</th>
<th>Brand</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thank you Moms for breastfeeding</td>
<td>Phillips Avent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Naya Nazariya</td>
<td>Bharati Axa General</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mast Maula for Life</td>
<td>PGIM India Mutual Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gentleman Kise Keha Hai</td>
<td>The Man Company</td>
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</table>
ARTICLE: SWIGGY INSTAMART’S PHYSICAL BOOK IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

There is a substantial importance of branded content in the physical form even as majority of it gets produced in the virtual space.

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ARTICLE: INTERACTIVE BRANDED CONTENT

With its ability to offer stimulation and customised storylines, interactive content is a technological innovation well suited to the needs of the fast-paced consumerist culture. The trend of interactive content is slowly picking up steam in India. With two shorts by Axe and Amazon with MX Player, the element of interactivity has been introduced in branded content. While shopping culture has seen its fair share of interactivity over the past few years, it is now enriching content too.

Interactivity in content opens up new avenues in aspects of choice and agency. It allows content to have multiple directions at the same time. In many ways, it expands and experiments with the 'pick and choose' culture. In doing so, it successfully generates a thrill that is a seminal constituent of consumerist culture. Interactivity in content redefines the shopping experience and further boosts it by offering a virtual image of brands’ products in real-life situations. The power accorded to content by interactivity is rooted in a consumerist culture that is constantly looking for new and exciting developments.

THE TAKEAWAY:
Interactive content sets itself apart from the existing trends by inviting engagement from the moment go. It runs on a fixed set of instructions that must be read carefully in order to proceed. It captures one's attention in the first frame itself and thus makes the consumption of content an active process and not a passive one.

Most of all, it allows content to cater to an extended degree of personalised needs. It refutes the 'one-size-fits-all approach.'

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Pieces Under Consideration | Brand
--- | ---
Balcony Buddies | Amazon
The Right Click | Axe
ARTICLE: SPOTIFY’S INFLUENCER LED CONTENT

Co-ordinated content produced by influencers can be culturally relevant and engaging.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

Ads, no matter how good, don’t really have an audience of their own the way content creators do. They occasionally make for fun viewing but wouldn’t necessarily have the brand’s audience seek out the YouTube channel they’re available on, hit subscribe and click the bell icon to be notified as soon as the next one comes out.

Content creators, in contrast, do nurture that type of loyalty and grow an audience of a different kind. One that sticks around, listens to them and will engage with everything they put out. So, it only makes sense for Spotify to go beyond the numbers it has attracted through ads by collaborating with popular comedians and tapping into their audience base.

What really makes this move deliver is finding content creators whose communication approach overlaps with theirs. Here, both Spotify and the comedians put out funny and relatable content.

THE TAKEAWAY:

As a young brand looking to gain cultural relevance in consumers’ lives, through content, Spotify has smartly recycled an idea with a history of heat and controversy and reintroduced it as per our context. Turning the jokes palatable has put the roast format onto a journey of being gradually adopted by the Indian culture.

And it has done all this while keeping its product a relevant part of the exercise.
The vast and varied world of content formats can be classified in the ways indicated below. The content types essentially follow the formats established in mainstream media and modify them for the digital age.

a. Editorial style branded content – this could include native advertising, blogs, long format articles, white papers and posts

b. Branded content Videos – these could include story-telling videos of varying length and duration, interactive video, the Zoom conversation video (panel discussions and expert conversations)

c. Branded content that is similar to Mainstream TV – these could include stand-up comedy/comedy shows, lifestyle shows, sitcoms, documentaries, talk/chat shows, performance poetry

d. Games and gamification

As imagination is infinite, and technology evolves, in the coming years, we will no doubt see many new formats of content and branded content emerging for marketers to experiment with. Some of them will become more mainstream or dominant forms whereas others will stay niche or on the periphery.
CHAPTER 4

CONTENT AS CULTURAL DISCOURSE
As brands become more sure of their role as Publishers and give up the Advertiser mindset, their content is more effectively designed to be a part of cultural discourse. As an author of cultural discourse, brands can take several different stances towards cultural discourse in their content.

When we combine the different possible positions that brands can take on the three dimensions of messaging, stance and signs/symbols, we find five distinct Stances or Positions that are visible in branded content.
These are:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Category Anchored Messaging</th>
<th>Aligned to mainstream culture</th>
<th>Mirroring the audience’s lived culture</th>
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<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>THE CONNECTOR STANCE</td>
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<th></th>
<th>Category or Culture Anchored Messaging</th>
<th>Aligned to mainstream culture</th>
<th>Aligned to mainstream culture</th>
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<td>B.</td>
<td>THE ENTERTAINER STANCE</td>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Category Anchored Messaging</th>
<th>Changing the culture with respect to the category</th>
<th>Mirroring or Envisioning</th>
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<td>C.</td>
<td>THE SHAPER STANCE</td>
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<th></th>
<th>Culture Anchored Messaging</th>
<th>Changing mainstream culture</th>
<th>Envisioning aspirations</th>
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<td>D.</td>
<td>THE PROGRESSIVE STANCE</td>
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<th></th>
<th>Culture Anchored Messaging</th>
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<td>E.</td>
<td>THE ACTIVIST STANCE</td>
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The Connector Stance is the most conservative/safest stance that branded content can take. The brand is very much focused on creating content that is anchored into the category that it belongs to and the truths of that category as experienced by consumers. It aims to establish an emotional and cultural connection with audiences via story-telling of various kinds. Such content is often intended to work like advertising does, but without the secondage and footage given to product windows and product shots that are mandatory for advertising. Human interest stories in long form video are a very popular format for such content, along with music videos.

In the Connector stance, the branded content mirrors the audience’s lived culture, playing back mainstream culture as is, to consumers. Such content stays within all the normative cultural codes and beliefs. It does not seek to put forward an original / progressive / radical point-of-view from the brand. The Connector stance seeks to avoid all controversy, backlash and extreme reactions from audiences. The Connector stance aims for deep engagement via storytelling.

Some of the best examples or prototypes of the Connector Stance in branded content that we have found are:
ARTICLE: FACEBOOK’S POOJA DIDI

Facebook’s seven and a half minute film stood out amidst all the other content released on Diwali.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

In ‘do good’ Diwali ads, kindness is often extended from the socially and economically privileged to the disadvantaged section of society, and the gesture never makes a dent in the former’s resources. But here, when Pooja offers support, she does it at the cost of her own financial stability — including selling off her car.

The authentic flavour and a longer than usual time format allows Facebook to engage in effective messaging. It shows the power of ordinary people in an empowering light.

An effective exercise in damage control, the film shows the platform as an enabler of good and draws focus away from oft-repeated accusations of data manipulation and ineffective monitoring of fake news. And perhaps there’s another subtle message: Facebook only amplifies the pre-existing. It is a reflection of society. If the people do good, then the platform does well.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Pooja’s story shows brands that successful storytelling lies in tapping into the grassroots and touching a local chord (like Fevicol’s popular visual of village dwellers piled onto a bus). As Bollywood has shown, the glittery narrative with superstars playing the rich no longer overpowers the audience. Viewers wish to watch the average person going about their daily lives while making a difference, as the light dispelling darkness metaphor of Diwali.
ARTICLE: PROMOTING TRAVEL ALA KERALA TOURISM

Facebook’s seven and a half minute film stood out amidst all the other content released on Diwali.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

The promotion strategy here drops the theme of ‘splendour of heritage’ to focus on everyday experiences. Kerala Tourism’s content capitalises on a very prominent contemporary phenomenon associated with travelling — travel vlogs!

Nowadays, there is abundant information available for just about any place on Earth. Branded content by Kerala Tourism is thus woven around symbols of a place that are not usually listed on a travel website. Known attractions are complemented by unknown human stories.

The content stays firmly rooted in Nativist themes and celebrates the ordinary. School teachers, nuns, fishermen, housewives, dancers, mahouts are all signifiers of everyday lived culture. These signifiers accompanied by very well-thought-out symbols of calm (sounds, folk culture, forests, elephants, waves, school kids on their morning routine, etc.) construct an imaginary place that occupies a consumer’s mind.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Taking a leaf out of Kerala Tourism’s book, brands can thus adequately maximise their messaging via exploring the rather ordinary symbols associated with a place or product. They can further amalgamate an already famous phenomenon (vlogging in this case) from the field into their branded content to find a wider resonance. Tales, myths, songs originating from the landscape itself can be employed to create an authentic aura that is both ordinary and exotic at once.

Pieces Under Consideration | Brand
---|---
Human by Nature | Kerala Tourism
Kerala Monsoon Vibes | Kerala Tourism
Alleppey: Human by Nature | Kerala Tourism
Tales from my Village | Kerala Tourism
Voice of Vypin | Kerala Tourism

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The Entertainer Stance

The Entertainer Stance is very similar to the Connector stance in being aligned to mainstream culture. However, in the Entertainer stance, the messaging could be anchored in the category or be drawn from culture. And, instead of mirroring lived culture, the signs and symbols present an aspirational picture, envisioning something beyond the lived reality of the audience.

This stance is one in which the brand is more keen on being interesting, creative and engaging than in being controversial or activist. Rather, the brand seeks to put out interesting and engaging content within the framework of mainstream cultural values and category benefits/values platforms.

Some of the best examples or prototypes of the Entertainer Stance in branded content that we found are:
ARTICLE: CADBURY DAIRY MILK’S SANG RAHIYO

The song reimagined the old association between love and chocolate by balancing familiar and unfamiliar symbols

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

Content centred on something as universal as love can’t afford to completely redo the narrative. Employing a good number of conventional tropes is necessary because it creates comfort through familiarity and allows the audience to quickly settle.

Another set of rather utopic elements (individual spacious flats, beautiful furniture, etc.) are included to create a visual escape from where viewers are, to what their lives could look like. The final building block that strengthens the execution is its understanding of love and the struggle young couples face.

The goal is not to change or convert content into advertising, but to keep content as content – which is material that people want to watch and listen to.

The song reimagines chocolate in two fresh ways: chocolate as a lasting symbol of love rather than as something consumed and forgotten. And two, of chocolate not just as a way to express your feelings to someone else but also to yourself.

THE TAKEAWAY:

The makers took a concept that viewers are well-accustomed to and made a slight but significant alteration through the bar’s placement. Making it any more overt or different would have disturbed the sense of familiarity and comfort created by other signs in the video.

It also works because the brand doesn’t want to tell viewers to eat more of their chocolate or establish how chocolate must be consumed. It instead wants to make them aware of the variation being offered, why it’s different and how that difference can occupy the lives of consumers in a way they didn’t imagine before.

Pieces Under Consideration

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<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sang Rahiyo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cadbury</td>
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</table>
ARTICLE: ASIAN PAINTS AS PUBLISHER SHOWS AN EFFECTIVE MODEL FOR ENGAGEMENT

Facebook’s seven and a half minute film stood out amidst all the other content released on Diwali.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

Asian Paints’ branding in the content is subtle. Despite the covert presence, the show seems to be generating brand love for Asian Paints. Because over a period of time, it has fostered respect for the brand as a publisher of content that can be enjoyed by a wide variety of viewers – super fans, idle gossips who keep up with celebrities out of curiosity, and even viewers who are uninterested in celebrities but interested in homes, architecture and interior design.

The setup is designed to make you, the viewer, feel special given that a widely adored celebrity is opening their doors to let you into their personal space – even if for a brief eight minutes. Cleverly executed, this content IP feeds into the celebrity x fan culture and, through association with celebrity homes, grows Asian Paints’ repute as exceptional home stylists.

THE TAKEAWAY:

By turning into a publisher instead of seeking sponsorship for visibility, Asian Paints has demonstrated how the equation between brands, fans and celebrities can be successfully reinvented. It has shown how brands can reclaim importance by retraining the focus on their audience instead of themselves, unlike in the past where visibility came at the cost of interruptions in the consumption experience.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pieces Under Consideration</th>
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<tr>
<td>Where the Heart is ft. Shankar Mahadevan</td>
<td>Asian Paints</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where the Heart is ft. Smriti Mandhana</td>
<td>Asian Paints</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where the Heart is ft. Anita Dongre</td>
<td>Asian Paints</td>
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ARTICLE: OLYMPICS CAMPAIGNS CREATE CULTURAL RESONANCE

P&G, Rin and Coca-Cola partake in cultural conversation around Olympics by finding unique connections to the event

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

Given its global significance, the Olympics brings brands an unparalleled chance at visibility. But finding relevance through the event can be a challenge for them.

After discovering that mothers viewed athletes as someone’s child, P&G took a behind-the-scenes approach to Olympians and showed their mothers were the ones to credit for their greatness.

Coca-Cola films equated the moment of winning the gold medal, when athletes feel a natural outburst of joy, with the everyday ‘golden’ moments of life that feel similar in the experience of unbridled happiness – even if they aren’t as intense.

Local Relevance: Rin employed the symbols of gold mortgages, women empowerment, grit and hard work. Thums Up on the other hand presents Indian athletes as the underdog who are shown training with determination early morning. This narrative is aimed at the brand’s TG, who have enjoyed the thrill-seeking thought of ‘aaj kuch toofani karte hain’.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Any brand and company can find cultural resonance through the Olympics, even if its product or TG don’t directly relate to the event. But we do believe that such associations come with a caveat.

Brands may find a convincing way to connect themselves with the event, but do they have the cultural sanction to do so? Put differently, even if they can associate with the event in some way, will their audience find that association acceptable?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thank You Mom</td>
<td>P&amp;G</td>
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<td>Thats Gold</td>
<td>Coca-Cola</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ab Waqt Hai Chamakne Ka</td>
<td>Rin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Toofan Wahi Jo Sab #PalatDe</td>
<td>Thums Up</td>
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ARTICLE: EVOLUTION OF VALENTINE’S DAY CAMPAIGNS 2017-2020

In trying to say something different than their competitor, brands respond to emergent cultural codes and expand the Indian landscape of love.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

With brand narratives growing more realistic, now brands have begun to recognise the polar extreme of the lovey-dovey couple: the cynical single who sees the pursuit and maintenance of romantic love as a never-ending hassle. This point of view proudly claims the freedom and peace of mind that comes with singlehood instead of seeing it as a sorry state that needs the remedy of love.

Culturally in India, love in the family is a more prevalent concept than love between couples. Therefore ‘Indianising’ or turning the concept desi can mean greater resonance among a brand’s audience, especially if it is not targeting the youth.

A glaring limitation of the traditional visualisation of Valentine’s Day is its focus on only those couples who fit the social bill, i.e., heterosexual partners from similar social backgrounds and from the same age group. Some campaigns now emphasise that romantic love isn’t just the preserve of matches approved by the orthodox gatekeepers of society.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Both India and the world of branded content can be described as high-context cultures. Whereas, advertising, is a low-context culture since it depends on overt and obvious communication to ensure that its product-selling is successful. Branded content allows brand the space for building on unarticulated contextual details to ensure richer communication for an Indian audience about a foreign topic. What else does a theme like romantic love demand in a country that feels conflicted about following its heart under the disapproving gaze of the omnipresent moral police?

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Free to Love</td>
<td>Close Up</td>
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<td>First Valentine</td>
<td>Borosil</td>
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<td>The Love Weekend</td>
<td>Big Bazaar</td>
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<td>The Colleagues</td>
<td>Caratlane</td>
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<td>Swag se Solo</td>
<td>Pepsi</td>
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The Shaper Stance

The Shaper Stance is one that is focused on re-imagining the category as per the brand’s purpose or intent. The Shaper stance/brand is not much focused on challenging mainstream cultural beliefs around cultural values or themes. It is more interested in elaborating upon its Brand Purpose, within its category, through the use of branded content.

Thus a Shaper Stance in the edu-tech category for example, would be focused on promoting the merits of the tech based approach to education. The brand may not care to take a position on nationalism or history or the curriculum per se and what the curriculum should contain as a political position. Thus it is not taking an activist stance on various aspects of education per se. But is seeking to shape the cultural discourse in favour of edu-tech vis-à-vis class-room based education.

Below are several examples of the Shaper Stance in branded content.
ARTICLE: RESHAPING CONCEPT & IMAGERY OF SLEEP THROUGH BRANDED CONTENT

How do brands shape culture while shaping habits of good sleep

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

Brands are responding to the growing cultural obsession with health, fitness and personal care.

The restlessness and anxiety brought on by the pandemic, the uncontrolled usage of screens that run into the night, unhealthy lifestyles induced by high-pressure jobs and the resulting disturbance in sleep patterns—constitute the many reasons to go beyond category requirements to justify the surge of sleep-focussed content.

Branded content uses some popular codes associated with sleep:

• Restful sleep as a return to traditional wisdom and time-tested practices
• Restful sleep as a sign of the educated modern-day individual
• Restful sleep as an achievement like any other in a productive, capitalist society
• Restful sleep as something that needs to be induced/worked towards

THE TAKEAWAY:

We see brands using content for two purposes: habit formation and to ease their audience into the practice—since poor sleep is being seen as a normalised and naturalised reality, the way things are in urban, modern society, almost the price to pay for progress.

Through the material generated as sleep aids and all the educating they have done; brands have emphasised restful sleep as a state achieved after putting in a fair bit of effort.

Branded content has not only allowed the brands to weigh in with their stance but also set them up as shapers of culture and culture change.

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<td>Sounds of Sleep</td>
<td>Duroflex</td>
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<td>Sleeptime Stories</td>
<td>Centuary Mattress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atul Khatri on Sleep Issues</td>
<td>Philips</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Sleerer</td>
<td>Wakefit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bed Talks</td>
<td>Peps</td>
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ARTICLE: EDITORIAL CONTENT FOR BRANDS LIKE NATURAL DIAMOND COUNCIL

Every product forms part of a larger cultural context and, therefore, must effectively interact with it to find relevance in consumers’ lives.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

A conventional marketing or promotional effort, with a fixed starting and endpoint, is finite and almost limited — both in the period it communicates with consumers and the ideas it is able to highlight. Therefore, what it contributes to the semiosphere is one-off and participatory.

The website has been able to do what a marketing campaign, a series of advertisements or a promotional exercise couldn’t have achieved — the ability to direct and shape the diamond semiosphere.

In short, acting as a force that creates culture rather than only participating in it, and, thereby, turning into one of the bigger influences on the semiosphere. Which is exactly what the Natural Diamond Council needs to win the battle on behalf of natural diamonds.

THE TAKEAWAY:

A website that is a repository for a continually growing body of branded content gives the brand a multi-faceted and dynamic characteristic. This means the chance to cover the entire consumer base by addressing all the possible reasons that can attract them to the product, and do this on an on-going basis. The chance to utilise all the different formats when dialoguing with the brand’s audience. And finally, the chance to position the product as such a powerful cultural symbol that it needs a go-to place of its own.

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<th>Pieces Under Consideration</th>
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<tr>
<td>Only Natural Diamonds</td>
<td>Natural Diamond Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewels of Royalty</td>
<td>Tanishq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noor ka Jhurmuth</td>
<td>Nakshatra</td>
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</table>
ARTICLE: EMPLOYER BRANDING & CONTENT MARKETING BY DENTSU WEBCHUTNEY

The agency breaks the boundaries between marketing and HR by introducing branded content to the latter.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

The minisodes are a rare example of B2B branded content in the HR space. But it is not this participatory effort that makes them worth studying. It is the success with which they have disrupted the standard approach to employer branding. Through branded content, they have introduced creativity and entertainment to an otherwise functional space that runs on job postings and office walkthroughs.

The camera catches senior employees swivelling in the same chairs as their junior colleagues and busy corridors and are more reminiscent of college roommates brainstorming for an upcoming project than employees thinking up the next proposal.

And just so that you don’t mistake Webchutney for anything other than a modern-day digital agency, all clips are consistently characterised by understated humour and entertaining randomness. Much like the hit TV show The Office (we’re not the first to make this comparison).

THE TAKEAWAY:

For employers who can pull off the balancing act between the promises made via branded content and the reality of the work culture, branded content gives them a great opportunity to shape the conversations around work culture and to attract the right talent.

Webchutney’s minisodes narrativize the scenarios just enough so that they are entertaining and believable. But being innovative and pioneering isn’t enough. Creators of such branded content must ensure that their culture lives up to how they present themselves in their branded content/mini-series.
ARTICLE: CULTURAL MOMENTUM FOR DAUGHTER’S DAY

Content released around Daughter’s Day even while being in nascent stages does well do lay ground for a larger cultural conversation.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

The marketing of Women’s Day kickstarted in the late eighties/early nineties by Pond’s. Mother’s Day seems to be an import from the US. As was Valentine’s Day from the West. These are three examples of ‘Days’, which started small, but over time have morphed into cultural markers of modernity. This has made consumers take notice of calendarised celebrations like they never did before. They expect to be spoken to about the day’s subject through fresh storytelling that makes them push the ‘share’ button. Brands entering this space – especially those with women users – are highlighting all constraints imposed upon daughters, by addressing the parents in their audience. Right now, it looks like they are laying the ground for it. By building upon a core thought that derives from the specificities of the daughter’s life experiences, and speaking to parents (voicing daughters’ innermost thoughts and feelings), these campaigns achieve differentiation from content created around women in general and mothers in particular.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Daughter’s Day faces a tougher challenge to stand out now, because we live at a time when progressive narratives and politically correct stances have become the norm.

Cultural momentum will be built when the two parties in the conversation — parents and daughters — feel motivated to celebrate their relationship. Branded content that serves as a catalyst for regular folks to start their own conversations — that’s the next step in the content creation journey of brands for Daughter’s Day.

Pieces Under Consideration

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stayfree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parachute Advanced</td>
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<td>Raho Safe</td>
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ARTICLE: CODIFYING THE NEW-AGE DAD IN BRANDED CONTENT

Brands try to re-define the concept of parenthood as shown in advertisements, through branded content.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:
New-age understanding dictates that fathers should be approachable, empathetic and involved. Of course, the ground reality is yet to align with this progressive vision. But as usual, brands are at the forefront, acting as cultural activists to nudge more and more consumers into making it come true. They are either reflecting it back to their audience like it is already the obvious and predominant way of being a father, or framing their communication as the responsible way forward.

This collective effort has led them to unanimously form the code of the new-age dad. While each brand has pulled a different storyline from it, the code seems to remain consistent regardless of that.

Just because the message is progressive, they haven’t kept it restricted to the elite, globalised Indian. They have tried to present it as a goal that can be achieved by anyone who gives it a go.

THE TAKEAWAY:
Brands are trying to focus the message of the new-age dad onto as large a cross-section as they realistically can. This suggests that brands are trying to use branded content to bring a cultural change through consumer culture. They are trying to undo the definitions of parenthood set by advertising, which have been largely focussed on the mother-child unit, and expand its understanding to something more gender-neutral.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pieces Under Consideration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrating Dads Who Do it All</td>
<td>Flipkart</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Father’s Promise</td>
<td>Pampers</td>
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<td>Papa Toh Papa Hote Hai</td>
<td>Wakefit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ladki Haath Se Nikal Jayegi</td>
<td>Mahindra and Nanhi Kali</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happy Father’s Day</td>
<td>Amazon</td>
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ARTICLE: EVOLUTION OF BROTHER-SISTER RELATIONSHIP IN BRANDED CONTENT

Brands reimagine the bond of brother and sister in order to update their cultural stance and also change traditional understanding at the root.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:
Brands are questioning the water-tight conceptualisation of brother and sister. An honour culture like ours prefers to keep girls in a safe bubble whose boundaries are manned by her brother.

Branded content make for the dos and don’ts of how the modern-day brother should treat his sister. It tries to explain that her welfare will not result from trying to impose archaic ideas of protection and rescue on her, which boost the brother’s ego more than anything. But will emerge from offering her support as an ally when she is trying to be her own person.

According to the new content, the strong must certainly protect the weak. But that an age-old festival like Raksha Bandhan must not get to determine which one is which between brother and sister. It must simply celebrate the bond of protection regardless of where it flows from.

THE TAKEAWAY:
There seem to be major cultural shifts underway that are trying to turn our collective thinking more progressive. Overall, brands are beginning to question stereotypical role-bound expectations and associations in the hope that their audience will gradually learn to do the same. Seeing how this is turning into a dominant trend, perhaps more of them should be looking into how they can expand these conversations beyond the current talking points. And pump greater fuel into a movement that looks like it’s here to stay.
ARTICLE: EVOLUTION OF BROTHER-SISTER RELATIONSHIP IN BRANDED CONTENT

Brands reimagine the bond of brother and sister in order to update their cultural stance and also change traditional understanding at the root.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:
The largely similar and consistently growing mass of content indicates that, over the past decades, Women’s Day has become well codified in brand culture. Brands are well versed with what to say and how to say it. They know which elements are necessary for creating communication that fits the occasion. And other marketing elements as well, such as offers and deals for shopping and partying.

Consumers have started to notice the patterns and brand codes, with a little help from some brands.

It is unclear what gap Women’s Day is filling. When the day doesn’t get into discussing relational support for women, it is largely left with giving out inspirational messages telling women how powerful and unstoppable they are. A fine message, especially when done well, but it can create an impact only so many times. Especially when it starts being seen as just another way for brands to sell their product or service due to the offers and deals that are showered on women for Women’s Day.

THE TAKEAWAY:
On the whole, communication is about making a progressive statement by resisting the stereotypes long imposed on women. The campaigns liken women to a force or a powerhouse of some kind.

But often, its messaging ends up not being relatable or does not create cultural resonance. Brands first need to create virtual engagement and go beyond that to create specific customs and practices around the day, as exist for Rakshabandhan and Valentine’s Day.

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<th>Pieces Under Consideration</th>
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<tr>
<td>Every Women’s Day</td>
<td>Blush</td>
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<td>Happy Women’s Day?</td>
<td>Netflix</td>
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<td>Every Women’s Day Ever</td>
<td>Ola</td>
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<tr>
<td>She is Complete in herself</td>
<td>Prega News</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wow Womaniya Anthem</td>
<td>Pepperfry</td>
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ARTICLE: DOES TINDER’S INITIATIVE GEL WELL WITH INDIAN CULTURE

How relevant was a campaign is to Indian youth who, were more than ever, studying and working from home, under the watchful eyes of their elders.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:
The information revolution from the West has introduced us to modernised thinking at a rapid speed. Platforms like Netflix and Tinder have pushed us to juggle polar ideas resulting in a conflict between what we aspire to and what we’re actually comfortable with.

Even though put together for laughs, the underlying message in the campaign is clear: dating is interlinked with sex but since we’re not a sexually permissive culture, we’re yet to become comfortable with overtly acknowledging it. This cultural traditionality also shows in the influencers’ recognition of their parents’ continuous presence in the background of their dating lives.

You may not need to show your sincerity by sitting down to discuss prospects with their parents over chai, but you are expected to engage him/her/them in honest conversation that helps you find points of similarity and shared interests, and approach the activity with a visible degree of commitment.

THE TAKEAWAY:
Indian youth may have quickly taken to the platform but there’s still a long way to go with bridging the gap between their traditional upbringing and the bold ways of living they’ve been suddenly exposed to.

Digital platforms have given brands the opportunity to actively and consciously act as an instigator and change maker of popular culture. No longer restricted to traditional forms of media, they have the chance to become active participants in shaping culture to support their agenda.

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<th>Pieces Under Consideration</th>
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<td>Dating in 2020</td>
<td>Tinder</td>
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ARTICLE: CARDEKHO AS A SPOKESPERSON FOR THE ELDERLY

Brands can bring synergy between branded content and ads

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

Just because it is representing the elderly, the brand doesn’t portray them like we are used to seeing elders on screen – a stationary and/or feeble presence that doesn’t do much aside from nurturing blessing and issuing orders. These are new-age elders who have retired as working professionals.

Across the three pieces of communication, they are shown moving about with a desire for change, recreation and purpose, just like any other age group. They have lives of their own; time hasn’t reduced them to passive observers of the younger generations around them. It is as the old man declares in ‘E for Elderly’: ‘Hum retired hain, museum piece nahi! Humari bhi social life hai’ (We may be retired but we aren’t museum pieces. We too have a social life).

While CarDekho still has a long way to go, it has been able to disrupt the automotive category by positioning itself as a spokesperson for the elderly, and ensuring that this positioning gets repeatedly reinforced across communication formats and over time.

THE TAKEAWAY:

CarDekho’s example is a lesson in how brands can bring synergy between branded content and advertisements. Just because the two formats serve different requirements and may be used to address different segments within the brand’s audience, doesn’t mean they need to differ in how they build the brand.

Staying true to the creative demands of a product sold through an ad or a cultural stance through branded content is crucial. But it is also necessary that both methods of communication harmoniously sit together through some elements of commonality.

Pieces Under Consideration

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<td>CarDekho</td>
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<th>Brand</th>
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<td>CarDekho</td>
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ARTICLE: EMERGENT FEMINIST NARRATIVES IN BRANDED CONTENT

producing content around sensitive issues related to women empowerment can be a tricky area, but brands can’t afford to be silent.

CRUX OF THE ARTICLE:

A key rationale for branded content is cultural participation wherein brands can be a part of the unfolding cultural shifts or even contribute to it and act as a changemaker. However, getting this right can be tricky, especially where women’s empowerment is concerned. Our piece today looks at how some brands are attempting to become culture shapers, going beyond the clichés and obvious strategies.

Production of content that addresses sensitive issues either by the means of a discussion or a light-hearted review series signals an understanding on the brand’s part. Consumers are more aware today than ever. Moreover, they have a voice that can lead brands to even change the names of their products (case in point: Fair and Lovely). With consumers more involved than ever, the choice to stay silent is simply not one that brands nowadays can afford. In order to be relevant, taking part in the cultural conversation is almost a must for a brand.

THE TAKEAWAY:

If done right, branded content of this kind can help the brand be a very relevant part of the culture which is increasingly anchoring itself in the fourth wave of feminism. A major chunk of space on social media is now dedicated to sexual intimacy, harassment, body-shaming or depictions in popular media. It, therefore, is essential that brands do their part of the talking. Normalising taboo or tackling subtle concepts around sexual intimacy can meaningfully place brands in the emergent feminist narrative.

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<th>Pieces Under Consideration</th>
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<td>Stand Up</td>
<td>L’Oreal Paris</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behensplaining</td>
<td>Netflix</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consent</td>
<td>Netflix</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cliteracy Drive</td>
<td>Skore</td>
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As we have seen in the previous articles, some brands are seeking to reshape culture in order to grow their business and take a more activist stance. Some other brands are seeking a differentiated purpose in order to make themselves distinctive and stand out from the competition/get noticed. This often involves taking a contrarian stance that attempts to reshape culture. Many brands are slowly treading into activist territory, especially brands whose customers are women.

In recent years, brand purpose has become THE gateway for brands to engage with cultural discourse. A sense of responsibility and leadership to tackle social evils and educate the public also takes branded content in the direction of social activism.

The usefulness of more deeply understanding the various dimensions of branded content as cultural discourse can be felt at the planning and briefing stages as well as in the post-production stage. In the first instance, at the planning stage, content development teams don’t just think and strategize about content as a product for achieving business goals. They also strategize with respect to content’s role in culture. At the post-production stage, a cultural consciousness can help teams better fine-tune and nuance the content material in a way that achieves greater audience connect and brand affinity via cultural symbolism.

It can also help teams better anticipate possible responses and reactions to the content from various types of audiences, not just their own marketing target group. These could comprise social activists, political activists, politicians and other interest groups/guardians of culture who could raise objections to the content at any time and take action as well – creating pressure to withdraw or modify the branded content to make it more socially or rather culturally acceptable.
CHAPTER 5

UTILISING POP CULTURE IN CONTENT MARKETING
The cyclical and mutual effect of Media, Content and Culture has been well documented in many markets. Sometimes the people, referred as ‘consumers’ by corporates, mirror what they see and at other times they do what is shown. I’ve had the privilege of working for brands who believe in listening to their customer’s voice, in turn gaining first-hand experience of listening to people across various geographies and cultures of India. My current role has been especially enlightening, having access to MTV’s rich repertoire of youth insights over the last decade. Distilling my observations over the last few years, I have no doubt that leveraging culture yields deeper relationship with people and customers for brands.

For our youth, the relationship between their identity and culture is an ever-evolving tussle. The youth want to be progressive and build a constructive mindset for the society, but with a balanced approach that can preserve their traditions and culture too. They don’t want to upset the apple cart while moving forward.

The place of pride that culture has in their heart is only getting bigger; while multiple factors are at play, one of the key factors fuelling this pride for culture amongst the smartphone-wielding internet-savvy youth is the success of the Indian diaspora-from Silicon Valley to Hollywood and now the White House. MTV rode on this trend with its successful campaigns for the popular reality show Roadies, reflecting this revolution in the youth’s mindset and then acknowledging the real heroes who’ve effected the positive change in the society, in the last two seasons respectively.

Further, this pride in culture is now decentralised across India. Thanks to connectivity and access, gone are the days where the youth were required to move to larger cities to pursue their dreams.
Some of the most successfully films and shows – from Dabbang, Bareilly Ki Barfi, Badrinath Ki Dulhania, Toilet: Ek Prem Katha, Tanu Weds Manu, Masaan to the recent Mirzapur – are mirroring the fact that there’s glory in every gaon now.

However, people are also aware that not everything is hunky-dory in our society. They understand that there’s a dark side to every culture and society and they appreciate its sensitive and mature portrayal in content.

These realisations found their way into MTV Hustle, India’s first Hindi rap talent hunt. The rappers reminded us of the flaws of our culture and society with great nuance and poise. Marketing campaigns bordering on such sensitivities are fraught with risks of getting trolled. But sometimes brands must bite the bullet and stand by what is right and not necessarily popular. MTV did that cheekily with a campaign like Trash Talk, which not only cleaned 1 kg of garbage from the beaches of Mumbai for every trashy comment, but also installed a ‘Trashasura’ to highlight the perils of online and offline ‘garbage’ and the vicious damage it causes to the ‘environment’.

With increasing literacy and higher education, there’s a marked shift in the cultural bias against women. The youth have spoken their mind in this regard – rules in the society or in a relationship need to be equal for boys and girls.
This reality has seeped into characters of popular cinema and television too. In a world where young minds feel that their aspirations and ambitions are not taken seriously enough, a film like Nil Battey Sannata stands apart, making a stellar comment on how a mother can make a young girl realise the importance of having a dream and living for herself, all while embracing the flaws and insecurities on all sides. From Irrfan Khan's character, Bansal, in Angrezi Medium to Pankaj Tripathi’s Mishra in Bareilly Ki Barfi, parents are being portrayed as progressive and supportive of their daughters’ decisions within the frailties of our society.

An example of media/content influencing culture is the increasing importance being imparted to looks and grooming.

Consequently, the need for equity in relationships reflected in the latest season of MTV Splitsvilla and the season campaign also highlighted the equal role of the woman and her maturity to foster relationships.

It is no secret that women have been unnecessarily subjected to cultural policing for absurd reasons. They’ve had to deal with uncomfortable glances and unwelcome taunts, targeted at their clothes to even the intangible body language. When this reality gets captured in popular cinema, from Queen, English Vinglish to Pink and Thappad, it is widely (and sometimes unwillingly) appreciated. MTV did a cheeky campaign – Baar Bra Dekho – which told the strap shammers to take a chill pill and turn up the tolerance level in the age of outrage.

Fortunately, parents are playing a critical role in freeing the minds of young girls, enabling them to seize opportunities and shape their own future.
The proliferation of social media platforms, thanks to easy internet access, has made people look at the camera more often than they look at themselves in the mirror. However, contrary to this trend, MTV Supermodel of the Year campaign decided to focus on the concept of beauty and fashion in being comfortable with oneself instead. Bollywood is known to make a song and dance of it all. But that is for good reason and measure. Nothing unites us more than a good tune, relatable words, and a good dance to wrap it all up.

Exposed to international culture and trends, the Indian youth has started imbibing a progressive outlook towards the LGBTQ community.

They’re open to the idea of gender fluidity and have started shedding the stigma associated with the unconventional. Now that the Supreme Court has legalised homosexuality in India, this cultural evolution has started reflecting across Media and content too. Sometimes there are opportunities to tap into multiple cultural trends to build a compelling narrative. Given the intrinsic value of music in our lives and the opening of minds towards the LGBTQ community, it was apt for India’s most popular contemporary music channel MTV Beats to set sail with these winds of change. Producing 1500 - 2000 movies a year across 20 languages, India has the largest film industry in the world. But this industry hadn’t been doing justice to the LGBTQ community that 71% of the youth surveyed were accepting of; sometimes the portrayal of them and their love was painted with a comical lens too, which placed them at a disadvantage. MTV Beats created a stimulating campaign – MTV Beats Love Duet – that gave India its first unlabeled love duet album written and composed by artists and musicians from the LGBTQ community, who came together to celebrate love and represent their community in the music industry. It was a step towards normalizing conversation on same gender love and social acceptance.

Do you feel that Indian soaps overplay the family in its episodes? Well, MTV’s Youth Report tells us that is for good reason.
Reflecting on the challenging times we have overcome so far, the role and significance of the family unit in the larger social fabric has been emphatic. Our family has inevitably been the bedrock of our emotional wellbeing in this uncertain and volatile World. In fact, the recent adversities have only got families closer. Hence, when you turn on any entertainment channel in the evening, you’ll see this cultural reality playing out. And millions of families are watching it all together, every night.

Engaging with people meaningfully requires communications that is relevant and value-adding to their lives. While social trends help in gauging the immediate pulse, cultural and behavioural traits are far deeper and don’t change as easily. In fact, while classic consumer research and data analytics help us understand and reason past behaviour, cultural insights may be the most reliable compass to forecast future behaviour and preferences. Thus, pop culture will not only continue to play a pivotal role in content marketing, but also help in designing engaging content that holds up a mirror to the society and guides in the right direction.
Annexure

Insights quoted here are from MTV Youth Report 2019, as per sample detailed below.

Survey markets covered include –

CHAPTER 6

EVALUATING EFFECTIVENESS, ROI AND BUSINESS RESULTS
Branded content, content marketing and culture marketing are all relatively new developments in the media-marketing world. The definitions, boundaries to concepts and practices are constantly evolving. Our literature review of academic research as well as practitioners white papers into the concept also confirms the same.

This being the case, how best to evaluate the effectiveness of branded content is also an evolving discussion. Unlike advertising for which decades of academic and practitioner research has been done to identify the parameters and tenets of effectiveness, the conversation around evaluating the effectiveness of branded content is just beginning. The theories and concepts are nascent and the practices are wide and varied. Therefore, we don’t aim to offer a definitive point-of-view, which could be considered the last word. We offer a range of approaches to think about and adopt as found to be useful.

Definitions are the starting point:
To evaluate anything, we need to start with a precise definition of what it is that we are evaluating. In the academic literature that has studied branded content and from practitioner discussions, we can identify a few definitions.

The definitions of branded content that are prevalent:
a. The Branded Content Marketing Association interprets the meaning of branded content from a holistic and managerial perspective, defining it as “any content associated with a brand in the eye of the beholder” (Canter et al. 2013 p.10).

While accurate in its breadth, capturing the variety of content forms and formats out there, our view is that this definition is very basic. All it says is that whenever audiences can spot a brand’s presence in any content that they are exposed to, such content is branded content. The definition is based on a visible presence or absence of brand name, hence commercial intent or source/backer for the content.

b. A recent study conducted by IPG Media Lab and Google defined branded content as “Content that lives on its own, produced by and for the brand, as opposed to content produced by someone else the brand affixes itself to” (IPG Media Lab 2015).

This definition is led by the funding aspect, where brands fund their own content instead of funding channels to produce content, into which they insert their advertising modules.

c. Managerially, branded content is “Any output fully or partly funded or at least endorsed by legal owner of the brand which promotes the owner’s brand values, and makes audiences choose to engage with the brand based on a pull logic due to its entertainment, information, and/or education value” (p.34). In addition, branded content has been said to be the reverse of traditional advertising which focuses on product stories through features, benefits, and unique selling propositions (USPs) and to start instead with people stories that help brands connect with the target audience’s hearts and minds (Contagious 2014).

This is a more elaborate definition of ‘branded content’ in that it considers multiple parameters in order to classify and categorize material put out by a brand as ‘branded content’. These could also be read as a check-list of qualifying criteria.
Based on all of the above, a Checklist for identifying branded content from all of the communication out there is given below:

a. It is NOT advertising – it does not aim to “sell” a product or a service
b. It is funded by a brand and that brand name is visible enough in the content for audiences to notice and remember
c. It seeks to attract audiences and engage them such that audiences seek it out, the pull factor
d. It seeks to achieve brand / commercial goals more subtly and indirectly (soft or invisible sales pitch) than advertising campaigns do (hard and visible sales pitch)

Evaluating Branded Content:

There are fundamentally two different approaches to evaluating any creative product of which branded content is but one type.

The first approach looks within the product to identify its internal characteristics and critique the product. The second approach looks outside of the product to assess its impact on the external world. Thus, the internal and external is the binary on which branded content can also be assessed.

Looking within branded content, we can further critique it from two angles. The first angle is one that gives primacy to creativity, viewing branded content as another exemplar of creativity. Such an angle of evaluation would have a list of criteria such as Quality of Idea, Quality of execution, Quality of Production, Brand integration and so forth.

The second angle is the cultural angle. Cultural critique of branded content would consider parameters such as Codes,
The external impact of branded content is necessary to address the ultimate issue of funding and investment. External impact needs to be measurable and proven in order for branded content to obtain its legitimate share of the marketing budget. The external impact of branded content can be on audiences, on business, on brands and on culture.

Audience impact via engagement is the gateway for branded content to have an impact on business, on brands and on culture. “Engagement” in the academic literature is a multi-dimensional or multi-faceted concept. However, in practice, engagement measurement have been defined by social media platform provided metrics as likes, shares and comments.

What is evident from the elaborate definition of branded content is that content is effective, if it is able to attract and aggregate an audience for itself. Therefore, the size of the audience as well as the depth of engagement of the audience with the content is the first level of effectiveness to be measured.

The diagram below puts forward a framework for evaluating the external impact of branded content.
Business impact metrics are the simplest to define. They would include short term sales spike and/or long term sustained revenue growth.

Brand impact metrics have also been defined for a long time from the study of advertising impact and drawing from the psychology of consumer choice and decision-making. These would include Brand awareness/salience measured via brand recall or brand recognition. Followed by Brand liking, preference, attachment which are measures of Affect. Apart from these, there are also brand image and impressions metrics. These three sets of measures – awareness, affect and image are the basic metrics to consider. There could be other measures such as brand trust, brand respect etc which are more complex or evolved metrics to assess.

The assessment of the cultural impact of brand communication has so far, not been a focus area for communications practitioners. Culture x brand communication has mostly stayed within the realm of cultural critique by commentators or theorists. PhD students have written many theses on advertising as cultural artefacts and the semiotics embedded within advertising. However, it has not been a matter of much concern for the practitioner community, especially marketers.

Hence, we propose a set of measurements and metrics for consideration. Depending upon the cultural intent and stance of the branded content, it could be assessed for its impact on culture at three levels. Does the branded content/campaign bring about a shift in the cultural discourse by introducing new ideas, new themes and new topics to consider? Does the branded content/campaign bring about a shift in the shared imaginary resulting in the acceptance of new ideas and beliefs among the public at large? Finally, we can assess if the branded content/campaign bring about a change not only in beliefs, but also in behaviour? Does it engineer a change in the lived culture?

Such types of cultural impact – shifts in the discourse, in the imaginary and in the lived culture can be assessed via a combination of qualitative research among consumers as well as quantitative attitude or public opinion surveys. Ideally, attitude surveys conducted longitudinally, over time, would be able to provide the data required to measure the cultural shifts taking place.

The WARC Effectiveness Awards and their Creative Effectiveness Frameworks developed most recently in 2020-2021 provide a more formal structure to the thinking outlined above.

https://www.warc.com/awards/effectiveness

The WARC (World Advertising Research Council) put forward in 2020, a completely revamped design for its Effectiveness Awards. These are the WARC Awards for Effectiveness, in association with the Cannes Lions. They claim that these set a global benchmark for marketing effectiveness like no other – they are the best of the best when it comes to Marketing Awards.

WARC has six main categories of awards. The awards combine all types of creative marketing campaigns – from advertising to IMC to branded content and place them all
on the same plane as different ways to leverage creative ideas and narratives for business and brand results. The six categories are:

1. Customer Experience
2. Collaboration & Culture
3. Sustained Growth
4. Instant Impact
5. Brand Purpose
6. Business to Business

Out of these six categories of awards, the two categories of direct relevance to branded content from a cultural lens are the Collaboration & Culture Award and the Brand Purpose Award. Let’s take a closer look at these two categories of awards.

The Collaboration & Culture Award:
This category will reward strategies and instances of brands entering or impacting on culture that can demonstrate a business outcome. The judges will be looking for evidence of how these approaches helped a brand achieve business goals. This might include sponsorships or partnerships, short-form social video or long-form video, native advertising or advertiser-funded TV shows.

There is undeniable power in work that successfully enters culture. Authentically leveraging cultural insights can grow brands and help them secure a place of their own within culture. Within the Collaboration & Culture category of the WARC Awards for Effectiveness, we will be looking for exciting and authentic work that leaves a mark on culture, while delivering results for the brand.

The Brand Purpose Award:
For marketing initiatives that have successfully embraced a brand purpose and achieved commercial success as well as benefit for the wider community. Entries should demonstrate clear evidence of how a brand purpose has both achieved societal impact and met commercial goals. For brands to be successful in today’s performance-driven world, they must own and live their purpose. It’s essential because today’s consumers want to know what a brand stands for and in turn what it stands against: they don’t just want to buy brands, they want to buy “into” them.

Both the awards take into account impact not just on business and brand, but on the collective, indicated as a specific community as well as the culture at large.

The WARC Creative Effectiveness Ladder does not make a specific reference to culture as such and is hence focused on the classical advertising campaign-IMC led thinking, looking to structure business and brand impact into a ladder of campaign effectiveness. Never-the-less, the ladder can be an aid to marketers and agencies thinking about creating branded content that works. For a more detailed reading into the CEL, here is the link.

https://www.warc.com/effectivenessawards/learn-from-the-ladder
THE CREATIVE EFFECTIVENESS LEADER

01
INFLUENTIAL IDEA
Over achieve on campaign metrics

02
BEHAVIOUR BREAKTHROUGH
Change consumer behaviour

03
SALES SPIKE
Create short-term temporary sales growth

04
BRAND BUILDER
Improve brand health

05
COMMERCIAL TRIUMPH
Create sustained sales success

06
ENDURING ICON
Create long term brand and sales growth

A hierarchy of the six main types of effects that creative marketing produces from least to most commercially impactful.
There is an alternative approach to culture than branded content which Professor Douglas Holt has called Cultural Branding. In his article for HBR (https://hbr.org/2016/03/branding-in-the-age-of-social-media) he points out that the rise of crowd culture has diminished the value of sponsorships and branded content, but has led to a new opportunity, that of cultural branding. Taking the examples of Axe, Dove and Old Spice, he says:

“These three brands broke through in social media because they used cultural branding—a strategy that works differently from the conventional branded-content model. Each engaged a cultural discourse about gender and sexuality in wide circulation in social media—a crowdculture—which espoused a distinctive ideology. Each acted as a proselytizer, promoting this ideology to a mass audience. Such opportunities come into view only if we use the prism of cultural branding—doing research to identify ideologies that are relevant to the category and gaining traction in crowdcultures. Companies that rely on traditional segmentation models and trend reports will always have trouble identifying those opportunities.

Companies need to shift their focus away from the platforms themselves and toward the real locus of digital power—crowd cultures. They are creating more opportunities than ever for brands. Old Spice succeeded not with a Facebook strategy but with a strategy that leveraged the ironic hipster aesthetic. Chipotle succeeded not with a YouTube strategy but with products and communications that spoke to the preindustrial food movement. Companies can once again win the battle for cultural relevance with cultural branding, which will allow them to tap into the power of the crowd.”

Concluding Remarks

It is our view that for various reasons, branded content and content marketing are here to stay. And they will surely grow exponentially in the coming decade for a number of reasons – from audience fatigue with advertising, shift of audiences from conventional media to digital media, further deepening of social media engagement, new platforms as well as improvements in technology as well as measurement. One critical factor that can enable or impede the growth of branded content is the assessment of its effectiveness. Alongside, lies the acceptance that by turning into publishers and creating content, marketers are moving away from being advertisers to becoming culture creators. Learning what that entails makes for 21st century brand communication.
A WORD FROM OUR SPONSORS

How News Nation connects the brand to its customers and delivers its message in its unique way

In the modern era, we are constantly looking for better alternatives. In the field of brand communication, Branded Content is a newly emerged alternative, which can help us deliver innovative strategies.

Branded content helps brands tell a story that connects audiences to the brand, a story that dives deep into the brand history, its relevance, and its existence. It’s about brand values that gets audiences to develop an emotional connection with the brand.

Branded content has provided marketers with a tool to deliver the brand value in its unique way. News Nation Network has used the strategy to connect the brand to its potential customers and deliver the brand value for various companies in the past and continues to deliver the same even today. With the changing scenario in the country, branded content has taken a leap for promotion through various mediums and a news media channel is one of the vehicles. However, since the pandemic has broken out, our network has connected with its audience about the current situation of the world and how to keep themselves safe and healthy in these tough times. The network has extended its great support to various brands in delivering their message and making people aware of the challenging times and how to overcome them through various brand campaigns.

If we were to look at some of the branded content that the network has executed to promote the brand message and campaigns are:

- Flamingo was integrated to promote World Arthritis Day. Dr. Janki Shah Choksi, Prosthetics & Orthotics specialist spoke about arthritis, its symptoms and precautions that need to be taken care of.
- "Jal Hi Jeevan Hai", a session by News Nation was aired to promote the importance of water in our daily lives and how the world would be a disaster without water. The session was powered by Doctor Plus.
- On World Cancer Day, Praful Kumar, Chairman, Samita Mishra Memorial Foundation for Cancer Research shared his views on cancer and how to stay aware and updated about it.
- In these tough times of Covid-19 when the world was going through a rough phase, there were many digital platforms that helped the citizens in being aware of the deadly virus and what all precautions need to take to stay away from it.
- When the world was dealing with its tough days, Helo App made it easy for the citizens to share how they are keeping their immunity levels high and strong. The App delivered its message "Thinking will not overcome fear, but actions will" through the News Nation channel in its best way. It gave its message to fight Covid-19 and Spread Smiles and Not Virus. Their campaign #SpreadTheGoodness went well where everyone came out to support each other through the app showcasing the videos as to how they are keeping themselves fit. News Nation branded the Helo App in its channel through a promo delivering their campaign message, adding the L-Band, Aston Band, Logo Bug.
• Brands like Jiva Ayurveda and Sanyasi Ayurveda has been integrated on the channel where the gurus talk about their products and its benefits.

• Mahindra & Mahindra (Supro HD Series) was integrated on our channel wherein the activity was played for 1 month. Their Supro brand completed 3 years in 2018 on Indian Roads since its launch. To celebrate its 3rd anniversary, we created a segment “Khabar 3 minute” for the brand. We also created a special jacket for the brand wherein we had a Supro vehicle along with an offer on the vehicle.

• We also did another integration for Mahindra & Mahindra for their Farms & Equipment Sector. In 2019, it became the 1st Indian Tractor Brand to roll out 3 million tractors. To celebrate this grand achievement, a 360-degree campaign was planned and executed titled “Aapka Aabhar 30 Lakh Baar”. To celebrate this milestone, we created a segment “30 Badi Khabar”. We also created a special jacket wherein we had a range of Mahindra Tractors on the slate with a message “Aapka Aabhar 30 Lakh Baar”.

• Saregama Carvaan in 2019 wanted to extend their positioning with a thought “Whenever You Say a Thank You, Say It with Carvaan”. The network wove the idea with the Lok Sabha Elections 2019 wherein the Voters were urged to exercise their right to Vote and Sargema Carvaan will say a Thank You. The brand was integrated into the idea through Vignettes, L-Band and Logo Bug that ran on the channel at high decibels thanking the voters for casting their vote and choosing the government.

Branded content has always been a powerful medium in delivering brands messages. Abhay Ojha, President- Sales & Marketing- News Nation Network says, “News Nation Network has always taken a step ahead to highlight branded content delivering the brand campaign and its message. Integrating the brands content into the channel’s shows to deliver the brands idea in a way that the audience recalls it in its true form. The network has also been on the forefront in integrating the brand campaigns to its distinctive shows that builds a connection between both, the brand and the show delivering the brand message in its true form.”
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