

A Study on Consumer Perception of Bollywood Actors' Endorsement in Surrogate Advertisements

Kahkashan Afridi¹, Dr. Jesus Milton Rousseau S²

¹MA research student, dept of Journalism and Mass communication, Jain (Deemed -to-be University)

²Associate Professor, dept of Journalism and Mass communication, Jain (Deemed -to-be University)

Abstract

Advertising has become an inseparable part of modern consumer culture and plays a major role in shaping awareness, recall, attitudes, and purchase behaviour. In India, one of the most debated forms of advertising is surrogate advertising, especially in relation to tobacco, gutka, and pan masala products. Since direct advertisements of tobacco products have been prohibited, companies often promote legally permitted products such as elaichi, mouth fresheners, or silver-coated cardamom under the same brand identity as banned or regulated products. This allows them to retain brand recall and indirectly promote their core products.

The present study examines consumer perception of Bollywood actors' endorsement in surrogate advertisements, with special focus on pan masala and tobacco-linked brands. Bollywood actors are among the most influential public figures in India, and their presence in advertisements can strongly affect public memory, product perception, and social acceptance. The study investigates whether consumers identify these advertisements as promotions for the displayed product or as indirect promotions for tobacco-related products. It also explores how celebrity presence shapes recall, perception, and possible purchase intention.

The research uses a quantitative survey method with a sample size of 115 respondents across India, selected through snowball sampling. The questionnaire examined awareness of surrogate advertising, perception of product image, influence on buying decisions, impact of social media and television, and recall of selected celebrity-based ad campaigns involving actors such as Shah Rukh Khan, Ajay Devgn, and Priyanka Chopra.

The findings suggest that respondents are generally aware of surrogate advertising, and a large majority believe that Bollywood actors play a significant role in influencing consumer choices regarding banned or regulated products. Social media emerged as the most influential platform for such advertisements. The study concludes that surrogate advertising remains a powerful promotional strategy and that celebrity endorsement contributes significantly to brand recall and normalization of harmful or controversial products.

Keywords: Surrogate Advertising, Pan Masala, Gutka, Tobacco, Bollywood Actors, Consumer Perception, Celebrity Endorsement, Brand Recall.

Introduction

Advertising in India has undergone major transformation over the last few decades. With the expansion of media platforms, companies have developed increasingly sophisticated methods to maintain visibility even when direct promotion of certain products is restricted by law. One such method is surrogate advertising, a strategy in which a prohibited or regulated product is indirectly promoted through another product carrying the same brand name, visual identity, or message.

This practice became more visible in India after laws restricted direct advertisements of alcohol and tobacco products. Although such products cannot legally be promoted openly, companies continue to market them by using brand extensions such as elaichi, mouth fresheners, cardamom, soda, mineral water, and event sponsorships. In the case of pan masala and gutka, this strategy has remained especially controversial because of the serious health risks associated with tobacco and areca nut consumption.

India's pan masala market has grown rapidly. The market size was estimated at Rs 45,585 crore in 2020 and projected to rise to Rs 69,518 crore by 2026. Despite increasing awareness of health risks, pan masala and related products continue to enjoy wide visibility through advertisements, hoardings, television campaigns, digital media, and celebrity endorsements. This suggests that indirect advertising remains effective in preserving consumer attention and brand familiarity.

A key concern is the involvement of Bollywood actors in these advertisements. Celebrities such as Shah Rukh Khan, Ajay Devgn, Akshay Kumar, Amitabh Bachchan, Ranveer Singh, Priyanka Chopra, Salman Khan, and others have at various times appeared in campaigns for mouth fresheners, elaichi, silver-coated cardamom, or similar products associated with pan masala brands. Even if the advertised product is technically legal, the audience often associates the brand with its tobacco-linked or controversial identity. Public backlash against celebrity endorsements of such products has been growing. For example, Akshay Kumar faced criticism for endorsing a pan masala-linked brand and later publicly withdrew. Amitabh Bachchan also reportedly stepped away from a similar endorsement after criticism. These controversies reveal the ethical tension between celebrity branding, corporate promotion, and public health responsibility.

Surrogate advertising does not simply sell a product; it reinforces brand image, emotional appeal, and social acceptance. The visual glamour, catchy slogans, luxurious settings, and star power in such advertisements are designed to create favourable associations in the minds of consumers. As a result, consumers may remember the brand more strongly than the actual item shown in the advertisement.

The issue becomes even more serious when young audiences are considered. Youth and young adults are highly exposed to television, smartphones, OTT platforms, and social media, making them particularly vulnerable to repeated brand messaging. If a celebrity they admire appears in a glamorous ad linked to a pan masala or tobacco-related brand, the product may seem attractive, aspirational, and socially acceptable despite its harmful associations.

This study focuses on understanding how consumers perceive Bollywood actors' endorsement in surrogate advertisements. It seeks to examine awareness, brand recall, and the degree to which such advertisements influence impressions and purchase intentions. The topic is important not only from a marketing perspective but also from ethical, legal, and public health viewpoints.

Surrogate Advertising in India

Surrogate advertising refers to the practice of indirectly promoting products whose direct advertisement is restricted or banned. In India, it is most commonly associated with tobacco and alcohol brands. Instead

of directly advertising gutka, cigarettes, or alcohol, companies advertise another legally permissible product under the same brand name. The aim is not necessarily to increase sales of the displayed item alone, but to sustain recall of the main brand.

This form of advertising became prominent after the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995, which prohibited direct and indirect advertisements promoting cigarettes, tobacco products, alcohol, and similar intoxicants. Later, the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA), 2003 placed further restrictions on tobacco promotion.

Despite these laws, companies found legal loopholes. A pan masala or tobacco-linked brand could advertise elaichi, silver-coated cardamom, or a mouth freshener while using the same logo, color pattern, slogan, and celebrity endorsement associated with its larger product line. In effect, the consumer may see an elaichi ad but remember the pan masala brand.

Surrogate advertising in India has also extended to:

- event sponsorships,
- sports and entertainment promotions,
- retail displays,
- brand merchandise,
- point-of-sale advertising,
- online and social media content.

The tactic succeeds because consumers often recognize the hidden message behind the ad. Even if the ad does not directly mention gutka or tobacco, the brand recall is strong enough to remind viewers of the actual product.

Impact on Youth, Women, and Society

The impact of surrogate advertising is especially serious among youth and impressionable audiences. Young viewers are more likely to be influenced by glamour, celebrity culture, and repeated media exposure. In India, tobacco and pan masala use among young populations remains a major public health concern.

Studies have suggested that advertising exposure affects how young people perceive a product's status, desirability, and normality. When tobacco-linked brands appear through glamorous campaigns or celebrity faces, the harmful reality of the product may be hidden behind prestige, sophistication, and success.

Women have also become targets of such advertising, especially when products are packaged as mouth fresheners, cardamom, or lifestyle accessories rather than tobacco-related goods. Advertisements often use themes of class, purity, freshness, or achievement to broaden consumer appeal.

The broader social concern is that surrogate advertising normalizes harmful products by embedding them in mainstream culture. Instead of appearing as dangerous or medically harmful, the brands are recast as symbols of charm, confidence, masculinity, success, and glamour.

History of Surrogate Advertising

The roots of surrogate advertising are often traced to restrictions imposed on controversial products such as liquor and tobacco. When direct advertising became difficult or unlawful, companies began promoting alternative products using the same branding. In India, this trend expanded rapidly after restrictions on tobacco and alcohol advertising.

Pan masala and gutka manufacturers heavily used celebrity campaigns from the 1990s onward. When stricter controls were imposed, they shifted to product extensions such as elaichi, mouth fresheners, and silver-coated cardamom. Over time, the strategy evolved into a sophisticated branding practice involving television commercials, billboards, print media, social media, and celebrity endorsements.

Although governments have introduced regulations and courts have intervened at times, enforcement remains difficult because the line between a legal brand extension and an illegal indirect advertisement is often blurred.

Legal Framework

The legal framework regulating such advertisements in India includes:

- Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995
- Cable Television Networks Rules, 1994
- Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA), 2003
- Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) Code
- WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), Article 13

These laws prohibit direct and indirect promotion of harmful products and aim to prevent misleading advertising. ASCI also provides self-regulatory guidelines, such as avoiding misleading claims, not targeting minors, and not associating harmful products with social success or celebrity glamour.

However, regulatory ambiguity and weak enforcement often allow surrogate campaigns to continue under the guise of legal products.

1.1 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses an important intersection of advertising, celebrity culture, public health, and consumer behaviour. Bollywood actors hold immense influence in India, and their endorsement of brands linked to tobacco and pan masala raises serious ethical and social concerns.

The study is useful in several ways:

- It helps understand whether consumers recognize surrogate advertisements as indirect promotions.
- It examines whether celebrity involvement increases credibility and recall.
- It identifies media platforms that are most influential in spreading such messages.
- It contributes to discussions on advertising ethics and regulation.
- It helps policymakers, researchers, and media scholars understand how loopholes in regulation are used to maintain harmful brand visibility.

Understanding consumer perception is essential because the effectiveness of surrogate advertising depends not only on legal strategy but also on how audiences decode and respond to such campaigns.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

1. To study whether these advertisements are for the intended product or for tobacco products with the same brand name.
2. To study consumer perception of Bollywood actors involved in surrogate advertising.
3. To understand the influence of surrogate advertising on customer purchasing intention.

1.3 Operational Definition

For the purpose of this study:

- Surrogate advertising refers to the indirect promotion of a banned or regulated product through another product carrying the same brand identity.
- Consumer perception refers to the views, attitudes, understanding, recall, and interpretation of consumers regarding such advertisements.
- Bollywood actor endorsement refers to the use of Hindi film celebrities in advertisements linked to surrogate products.
- Pan masala and gutka-related advertising includes promotions for products such as elaichi, silver-coated cardamom, and mouth fresheners associated with known tobacco-linked brands.

The study mainly focuses on respondents in the 18-45 years age group, as they are active media users and more likely to encounter such advertisements across digital and traditional platforms.

1.4 Application of the Study

The study can be applied in the following areas:

- Government policy and awareness campaigns
- Regulatory evaluation of advertising laws
- Media literacy and consumer education
- Academic understanding of celebrity influence
- Public health communication strategies

It may help regulators assess whether existing rules are sufficient, and it may also support campaigns aimed at educating consumers about hidden promotional tactics.

Review of Literature

A number of studies have examined surrogate advertising, tobacco control, celebrity endorsement, and consumer response.

Research by Sushma and Sharang titled Pan masala advertisements are surrogates for tobacco products concluded that plain pan masala advertisements often function as surrogates for tobacco products of the same name. Their work demonstrated that advertising expenditure on apparently harmless products may be far greater than justified by the actual market size of those products, suggesting that the real intention is brand promotion. **(Sushma and Sharang, 2005)**

Dodrajka in the research titled Surrogate Advertising in India discussed how surrogate advertising in India emerged as a response to restrictions on direct advertising and showed that sponsorships, brand extensions, and celebrity participation helped keep restricted brands alive in public memory. **(Dodrajka, 2011)**

Jose and Roy in the research paper titled Effect of Surrogate Advertisement on Consumer Response in India found that surrogate advertisements can generate positive consumer responses in India, especially by improving brand awareness and influencing brand choice. Their study suggested that many consumers do not strongly oppose surrogate ads. **(Jose and Roy, 2020)**

Pednekar, Gupta, and Sinha in the research paper titled The relationship between tobacco advertisement and smoking status of youth in India examined the relationship between tobacco advertisements and youth smoking in India and found that advertising contributes to smoking initiation among young people. Their work reinforces the concern that indirect advertising may also influence harmful consumption. **(Pednekar and Gupta, 2008)**

Garg A, Chaturvedi, P, Mishra, A in the research paper titled A review on harmful effects of Pan Masala, reviewed the harmful effects of pan masala and emphasized its carcinogenic effects, especially due to areca nut and associated ingredients. Their work highlights the public health seriousness of products often glamorized through surrogate advertising. **(Garg A and Chaturvedi, 2015)**

Gopakumar, Nair, and Anoop in the research paper titled Impact of Celebrity Endorsement on Surrogate Advertisement among Youth in Kerala, reported that celebrity endorsement positively influences youth response to surrogate advertisements, especially in recall of original products. **(Gopakumar, Nair and Anoop)**

Gangopadhyay in the research paper titled Surrogate Advertisement on Satellite television Indian Experience, studied surrogate advertisements on satellite television and argued that such campaigns use aspirational messaging to bypass legal restrictions while promoting harmful brand identities. **(Gangopadhyay 2015)**

Overall, earlier research has separately examined:

- the effectiveness of surrogate advertising,
- the public health dangers of pan masala and tobacco,
- the role of celebrities in endorsement,
- and the ethical issues involved.

The present study brings these areas together by focusing specifically on consumer perception of Bollywood actors' endorsement in surrogate advertisements.

2.2 Research Gap

Existing literature covers surrogate advertising, consumer awareness, youth influence, and celebrity endorsement, but there is limited research combining all these dimensions in one focused study.

The key research gaps are:

- limited understanding of how consumers interpret celebrity-led surrogate advertisements;
- insufficient examination of whether audiences identify the intended product or the hidden brand;
- lack of focused study on Bollywood actors as agents of influence in pan masala-linked advertising;
- limited exploration of how such endorsements affect purchase intention and product perception together.

This study attempts to bridge that gap by combining surrogate advertising, celebrity endorsement, and consumer perception into one framework.

2.3 Theoretical Background

This study is supported by the following theories:

Associative Learning Theory

Consumers learn by linking one stimulus with another. In surrogate advertising, viewers may associate a glamorous celebrity, catchy music, or stylish visuals with a tobacco-linked brand, creating favourable emotional recall.

Celebrity Endorsement Theory

Celebrity presence enhances attention, trust, and memorability. In the context of surrogate advertising, Bollywood actors lend prestige and familiarity to brands that may otherwise face resistance.

Cognitive Response Theory

Consumer interpretation of an ad depends on their mental response. Positive responses to visuals, narra-

tive, or actors may lead to favourable attitudes toward the brand even if the actual product is controversial.

Social Learning Theory

People often imitate admired public figures. If celebrities appear in advertisements linked to tobacco-related brands, audiences may perceive these brands as socially acceptable or aspirational.

Research Methodology

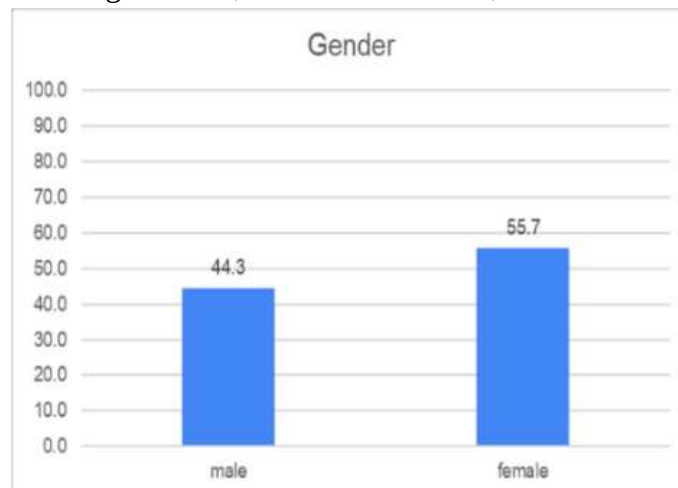
This study used a quantitative survey method to examine consumer perception of Bollywood actors' endorsement in surrogate advertisements. A structured questionnaire was designed to collect data on awareness, recall, and attitudes.

The sample consisted of 115 respondents from across India, selected through snowball sampling, a non-probability technique.

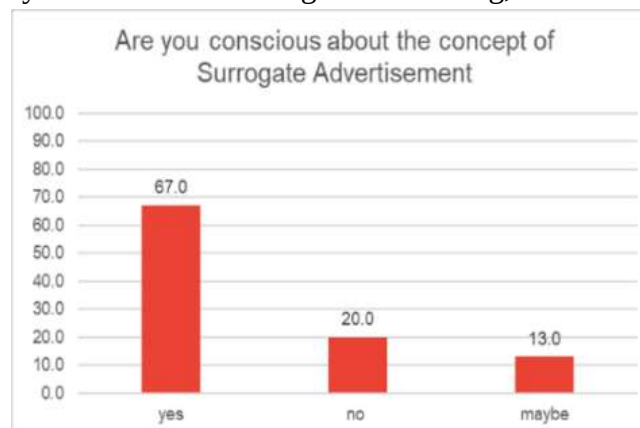
Primary data was collected via an online questionnaire on Google Forms; secondary data came from books, research articles, reports, and websites. The questionnaire covered awareness of surrogate advertising, its effect on product perception and purchase behaviour, media influence, celebrity endorsement impact, and recall of specific ad campaigns.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

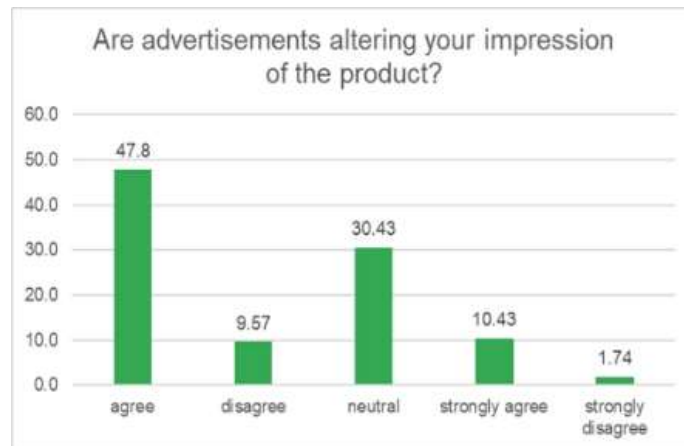
The demographic profile of the 115 respondents, shows 55.7% were female and 44.3% male. The sample was largely young: 78.3% were aged 18-25, 19.1% were 26–35, and 2.6% were 36-45.



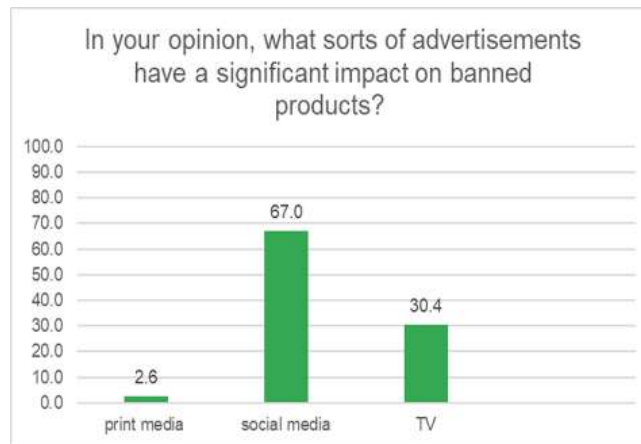
On awareness, 67% said they were aware of surrogate advertising, 20% were not, and 13% were unsure.



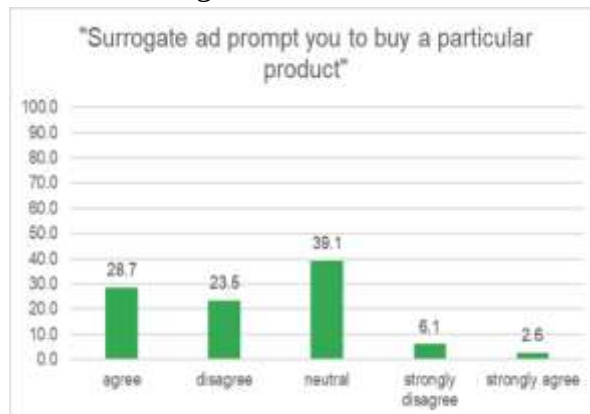
Most respondents felt ads shape product perception (58.2% agreed or strongly agreed) and influence purchase behaviour (52.2% agreed or strongly agreed after watching ads).



Social media was the most influential medium by far (67%), followed by TV (30.4%), print (2.6%), and radio (0%).



On whether surrogate ads directly prompt purchase of the banned product, opinion was mixed: 39.1% were neutral, 31.3% agreed, and 29.6% disagreed.

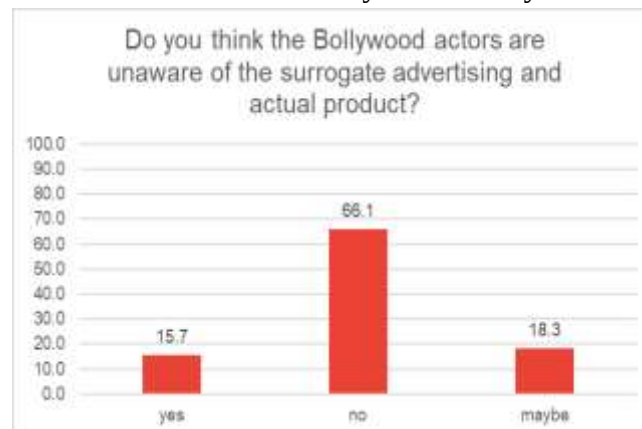


On Bollywood actors' influence specifically, over 71% agreed or strongly agreed that celebrity involvement affects customers' choice of banned products.



Recall was strong: for the Shah Rukh Khan/Ajay Devgn campaign, 93% remembered Vimal, 90.4% recalled the tagline "Bolo Zuban Kesari," 83.5% identified the product as elaichi, and 94.8% still linked the ad to pan masala. For the Priyanka Chopra campaign, 75.7% recalled Rajnigandha Pearl and 79.1% identified it as silver-coated elaichi.

When asked if actors were unaware of the actual product, 66.1% said no, 15.7% said yes, and 18.3% were unsure - suggesting most believe actors know what they're indirectly endorsing.



Findings

The major findings of the study are:

- Surrogate advertising remains highly visible in India despite restrictions.
- Consumers are generally aware of surrogate advertising, even if some are unclear about its full implications.
- Social media is seen as the most influential platform for promoting banned or regulated products indirectly.
- Advertisements significantly alter consumer impressions of products.
- Many consumers report purchasing products after seeing advertisements.
- Bollywood actors play a strong role in influencing customer choices and product attitudes.
- Celebrity-led surrogate advertisements create high brand recall.
- Respondents often remember the hidden or associated brand more strongly than the legal product shown in the ad.
- A majority of respondents believe actors are aware that the advertisement indirectly promotes a tobacco-linked or controversial product.
- Existing laws and regulatory measures appear insufficient to fully curb surrogate promotion.

Conclusion

This study shows that surrogate advertising continues to function as an effective marketing strategy in India, particularly for products associated with pan masala, gutka, and tobacco-linked brands. Although direct advertising of harmful products is restricted, companies preserve brand recall and public presence through legal substitutes such as elaichi, mouth fresheners, and silver-coated cardamom. The strategy succeeds because consumers often understand the hidden message even when the advertisement does not directly name the actual product.

A major conclusion of the study is that Bollywood actors significantly enhance the effectiveness of surrogate advertising. Their visibility, popularity, and aspirational appeal strengthen consumer memory and normalize brand associations. Respondents in the survey clearly indicated that celebrity participation influences perception and, in many cases, affects product-related attitudes and choices.

The data also suggest that social media has become the most powerful platform for the spread of such messages. Compared to television, print, or radio, digital platforms are more effective in reaching younger audiences and maintaining repeated exposure.

At the same time, the study points to serious ethical and public health concerns. The use of admired celebrities to indirectly promote brands associated with harmful products can blur the distinction between legal advertising and irresponsible influence. Even when the visible product is elaichi or mouth freshener, the real promotional effect may benefit tobacco-linked brand identity.

The study concludes that stricter enforcement, clearer legal definitions, and stronger public awareness are necessary. Celebrity accountability is also important. Public figures who endorse such brands should be more conscious of the social consequences of their participation. Consumers, especially young people, need better media literacy so that they can identify and critically evaluate hidden forms of advertising.

In sum, surrogate advertising is not merely a marketing loophole; it is a powerful cultural strategy that shapes perception, recall, and social acceptance. The involvement of Bollywood actors makes it even more influential. Therefore, the issue deserves continued attention from regulators, scholars, public health professionals, and the media.

References

1. Sushma, C., & Sharang, C. (2005). Pan masala advertisements are surrogates for tobacco products. *Indian Journal of Cancer*, 42(2), 94.
2. Bhatia, G., & Sarkar, S. (2022). Tobacco Industry and Surrogate Advertising in South East Asia Region. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*.
3. Rout Debasish et al. (2021). Impact of surrogate advertisement. *Shanlax International Journal of Management*.
4. Abdul Rahim. (2022). *Surrogate Advertisement in India (The Legal Loophole)*.
5. Jose, A. P., & Roy, R. (2020). *Effect of Surrogate Advertisement on Consumer Response in India*.
6. Dodrajka, S. (2011). Surrogate Advertising in India. *Management and Labour Studies*.
7. Chaudhry, K., Chaudhry, S., & Chaudhry, S. (2007). Point of sale tobacco advertisements in India. *Indian Journal of Cancer*.
8. Pednekar, M. S., Gupta, P. C., & Sinha, D. N. (2008). The relationship between tobacco advertisements and smoking status of youth in India.
9. Garg, A., Chaturvedi, P., Mishra, A., & Datta, S. (2015). A review on harmful effects of pan masala. *Indian Journal of Cancer*.

10. Gangopadhyay, S. (2015). Surrogate Advertisement on Satellite Television: Indian Experience.
11. Daniel K. Cortese, Glen Szczypka and Sherry L Emery, 'Smoking Selfies: Using Instagram to Explore Young Women's Smoking Behaviours' [2018] 4(3) social media 2-8
12. Emily T. Herbert, Kathleen R. Case and Steven H. Kelder et al, 'Exposure and Engagement with Tobacco- and E-Cigarette – Related social media [2017] 61(3) J Adolsec Health 371-377
13. Monika Arora, Gaurang P. Nazar and Praveen Sinha et al, 'Tobacco imagery in on-demand streaming content popular among adolescents and young adults in India: implications for global tobacco control' [2020] Tob. Control 1-7
14. N Hirschhorn, 'Corporate social responsibility and the tobacco industry: hope or hype?' [2004] 13 Tobacco Control 447-453
15. Jayant Panvelkar, 'Surrogate Advertising – An Ethical Way of Promoting Unethical Products' [2018] 1(25) International Journal of Management and Economics 88-94