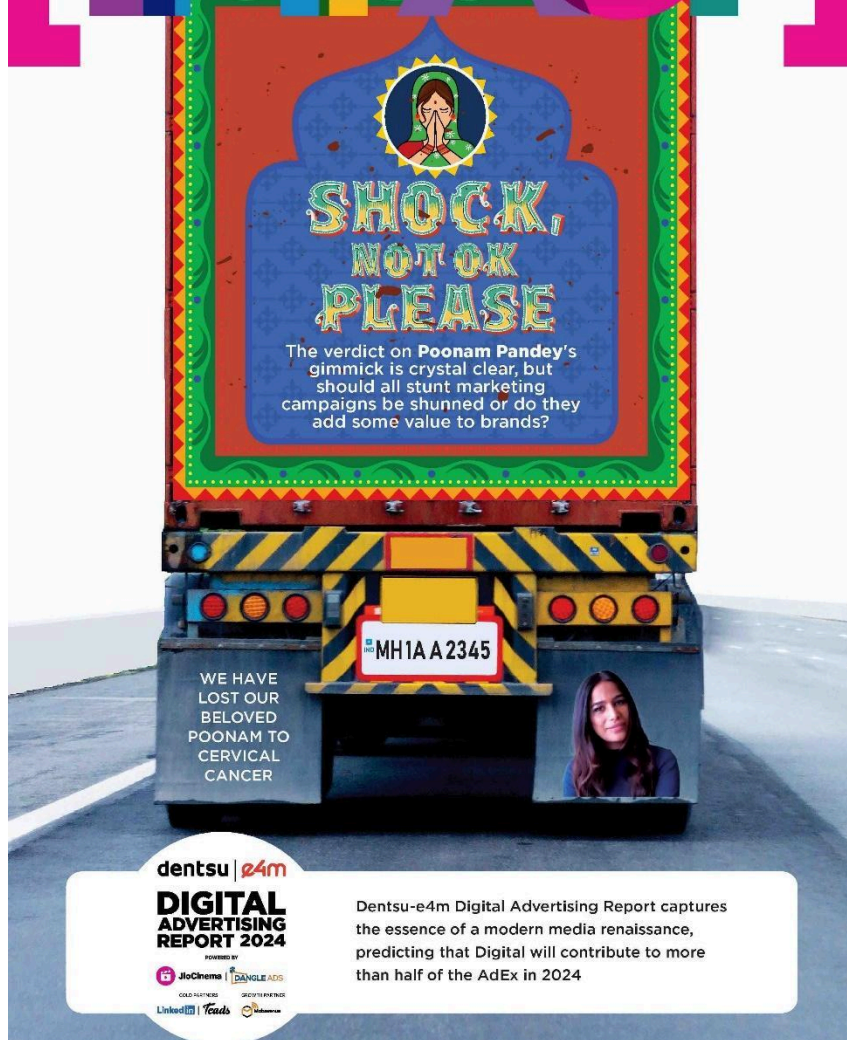


IMPACT



WE HAVE
LOST OUR
BELOVED
POONAM TO
CERVICAL
CANCER

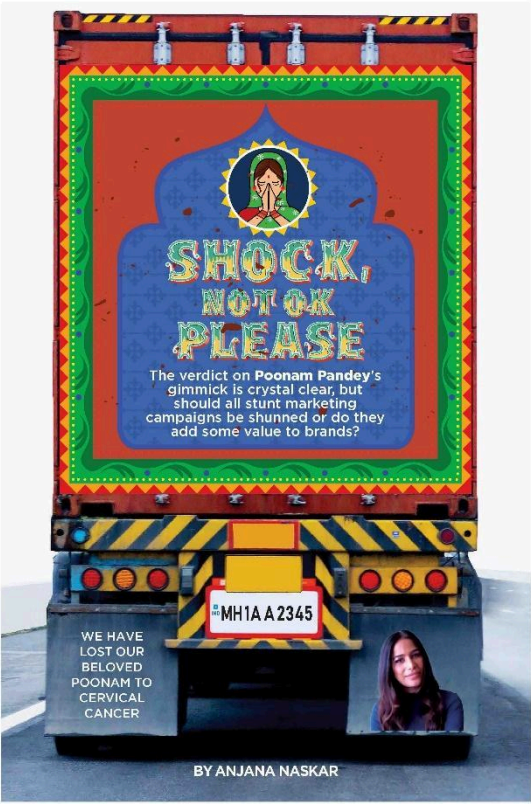
MH1AA2345

dentsu | e4m

**DIGITAL
ADVERTISING
REPORT 2024**

POWERED BY
JioChem | PANOLE ADS
GOLD MILEAGE | VIDEO TO REVENUE
LinkedIn | Feeds

Dentsu-e4m Digital Advertising Report captures the essence of a modern media renaissance, predicting that Digital will contribute to more than half of the AdEx in 2024



February 18 • 2021 | impactnet.com |

The end of the Second World War ushered in the philosophy of the absurd, coined by the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. This in turn gave rise to the theatre of the absurd, shocking audiences with their unconventional treatment. To suggest that Poonam Pandey's death stunt was an absurdist art would be a stretch, but the word absurd certainly describes this campaign that provoked people. As netizens wrap their heads around the event, the question of ethics looms large. Pandey, who worked in collaboration with Hauterfly and digital agency Schbang, faced severe backlash for the shocking stunt, with critics condemning it as a shameful and disgusting act. This incident raises crucial questions about the fine line between impactful marketing and crossing ethical boundaries. But did it work?

In a parallel narrative, HT's Fever FM embarked on a daring prank, announcing the sudden shutdown of the popular FM channel. The move stunned listeners, only to be later revealed as a rebranding strategy. Recently, just before the Poonam Pandey and Fever FM episodes, we saw HDFC Bank roll out a stunt marketing campaign with Nora Fatehi. While these 'pranks' successfully generated buzz and excitement, they also raised questions about the potential backlash such tactics might incur. More importantly, what are the acceptable boundaries for marketing stunts, and when do they cross the line into distasteful or offensive territory?

IMPACTFUL OR DISTASTEFUL?

In the wake of the Poonam Pandey controversy, the debate over impactful versus distasteful marketing campaigns intensifies. While some stunts enhance

credibility, others risk tarnishing brand and influencer reputations, highlighting the fine line between attention-grabbing tactics and long-term credibility.

In this case, even the digital agency that came up with the campaign was quick to 'apologise' to those who were 'triggered' by the stunt. Schbang put out a statement on LinkedIn which said, "Our actions were driven by a singular mission - to elevate awareness about cervical cancer."

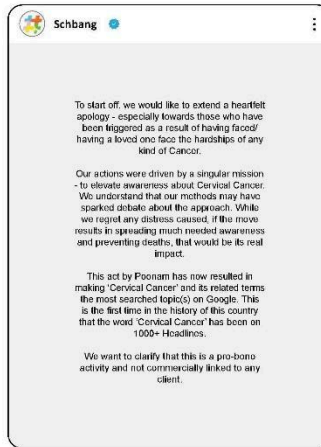
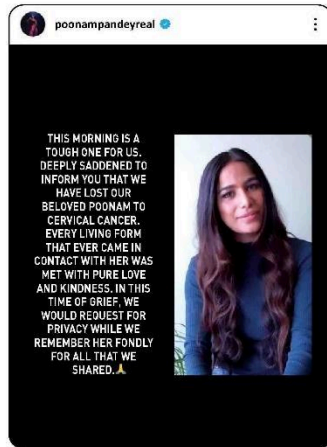
But brand experts are not impressed with the afterthought. "The cause is a good one, the act is a terrible one. Cervical cancer needs awareness levels to be heightened among the young and their parents.



But this is not the way. This is a case of a marketing gimmick gone awry. I do believe the nobility of the objective could have been achieved without the gimmick. Gimmicks sully, they give marketing and brand personas a bad name, as they sully the reputation of the digital medium altogether, to say that 'Publicity ke liye kuch bhi karega!', states **Harish Bijoor, Business & Brand-strategy expert & Founder, Harish Bijoor Consults Inc.**

According to a Lancet report published in 2022, more than 58 percent of all cervical cancer cases globally were estimated in Asia, while more than half of the deaths were estimated in Asia. 21 percent of all cases occurred in India, while 23 percent of all deaths also occurred in India. It is indeed a matter of grave concern.

Sanjay Trehan, Digital & New Media



"As marketers, we must approach shock marketing with a steady hand and a clear purpose. While it holds the potential to break through the clutter and elevate brands, its misuse can tarnish reputations irreparably. Harness its virality to illuminate truths, ignite conversations, and challenge societal norms, but tread cautiously. Respect boundaries, avoid exploitation, and aim to provoke thought rather than incite outrage. Remember, shock fades, but trust endures. Choose your message wisely, shock with purpose, and leave a lasting imprint on hearts and minds."

RUCHIKA MALHAN VARMA

Chief Marketing Officer, Future Generali India Insurance Ltd.



Advisor, shares mixed feelings about the stunt. While acknowledging its shocking impact and the resulting media coverage on cervical cancer prevention, he highlights its manipulation of emotions and trust. "In an age of short attention spans, it was an effective and dramatic stunt. Having said that, it played with people's emotions and their trust in the mainstream media.

Though broken in social media, it gained currency in mainstream media and wore a cloak of credibility, only to break that trust when the lady miraculously came back from death. I think it was literally like playing with fire and one needs to be very cautious about taking people's trust for granted. Was it for a good cause? Yes, certainly. Did the messenger overpower the message? Yes, unfortunately."

While 'Brand Poonam Pandey' even otherwise wasn't very high on the credibility list, this stunt seems to have done its bit to drive another nail to the influencer's coffin, pun not intended.

Dr Sandeep Goyal, Managing Director, Rediffusion opines, "Faking death is about the lowest that any communication campaign has stooped. It sure has shock value, but the subsequent revision triggered by the cheap stunt tells you how negative



the reaction of the public has been. I think the entire thought behind the campaign was badly advised. Cervical cancer is not a trivial matter. Hence, cannot be treated casually. Such stunts weaken the very basis of consumer trust."

Amit Wadhwa, CEO, Dentsu Creative India explains that the whole idea of a stunt is to create a sudden,

unexpected shock, evoking various emotions upon its revelation. "It can lead to awe, disappointment, or even anger. It's crucial to avoid inciting anger, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. We must assess the sensitivity of the issue before proceeding, as seen in recent cases where the seriousness of the topic and its mishandling escalated the situation. While the cause might be noble, it can get overshadowed by the controversy, diverting attention from its essence. Now, no one is talking about the cause, it's lost," he adds.

Cancer campaigns in India have seen better days. In 2015, Dabur Vatika, a shampoo brand rolled out a digital commercial featuring a bald woman, with an engaging note, 'some people don't need hair to look beautiful,' as an ode to people fighting cancer. That sent shock waves across the country, but in the right direction.



HDFC Bank collaborated with Nora Fatehi for a stunt-marketing campaign, wherein using her deepfake video, the brand created a fictitious brand to add gravitas to its 'What the Fraud' series.



Hrithik Roshan was about to pose for the paparazzi at Mumbai's Film City when two people carrying a banner for Burger King photo bombed him. A couple of days later, Roshan admitted that it was all a collab and a planned deception.

"I strongly advocate for creativity in marketing and advertising, but not at the expense of negativity. Creative campaigns shouldn't rely on shock value or negativity. Instead, they should inspire positivity and innovation. I believe in the power of positive, creative approaches to raise awareness effectively."

ANKIT AGRAWAL

Director, Mysore Deep Perfumery House & Zed Black



"As creative leaders, we often encourage free thinking and say that the sky is the limit. But, even in that blue sky, the limits of ethics prevail," says **Aalap Desai, Co-Founder & CCO, TGTHR**. "This stunt is in bad taste. Ethics were disregarded when this idea came into being. Good advertising always makes you feel something. The worst part of this campaign is that it made some people feel loss. That emotion not only triggers people, it also makes them feel worse if it turns out to be a prank. Have similar ideas been suggested in brainstorming sessions by people at other agencies? Yes. Were they pursued? Absolutely not. Because there were responsible seniors who helped keep the idea in check and kept something insensitive from getting released. I feel an absence of a senior keeping the thinking in line might have enabled this fiasco," he adds.



Iraj Fraz, Creative Head, DDB Tribal believes that awareness for a worthy cause shouldn't come at the cost of causing mental anguish to millions. He elaborates. "Look at Ogilvy's 'Bell Bajao,' or DDB's 'Project Free Period.' Sensitive issues need to be handled with nuanced sensibilities. Normalising death and murder don't help the society at large. And in this case, using the back story of a girl from a small town accused of doing soft porn in Mumbai, dying mysteriously, is so concerning. It doesn't leave room for the conversation to turn to the actual topic of how to protect ourselves from cervical cancer."



Ankit Agrawal, Director of Mysore Deep Perfumery

House & Zed Black, emphasizes the importance of addressing sensitive topics seriously, preferably by individuals with firsthand experience for added credibility. For instance, he suggests that Yuvraj Singh's discussion about his cancer battle and cricket comeback would have a significant impact.

This is not the first time that shock value has been devalued for its apparent tastelessness. From Mahesh Bhatt sharing Manisha Koirala's fake death news for movie promotion, Malaika Arora and Arbaaz Khan staging a fake split for an ad in 2008 to Burger King pulling off amazing stunts time and again globally, there are many instances where brands and influencers have resorted to shock marketing or stunt marketing. While some did create an impact, others were criticised even back then.

Citing an example of DSP Mutual Fund's past campaign, **Abhik Sanyal, Head of Marketing, DSP Mutual Fund** explains how the brand used the surprise element for their campaign. "We've utilized similar strategies in the past, though I wouldn't categorize it as shock marketing. One notable campaign featured a bold headline: 'Minus 67%'. Launched around 2017 or 2018 for our DSP Small Cap Fund, it emphasized the reality of investing, urging individuals to consider the risks associated with small-cap funds. Our goal has always been to promote informed decision-making and responsible investing, prioritizing transparency and integrity."

In 2022, Vim turned black to prove a point which sparked quite the frenzy on social media. The brand rolled out an ad featuring Milind Soman, where he was seen in the gym boasting about helping his mother with the dishes. Soman's endorsement of 'Vim Black for men'



Anushka Sharma slammed Puma for using her picture without permission. It turned out to be their brand ambassador announcement campaign.



In a staged act for OPPO, actor Ranbir Kapoor was caught on camera throwing a fan's phone to ground in anger.



"It is alright to tease, surprise and romance the audience like in any other relationship to create excitement, refresh the bond and optimize the engagement. It does not negatively impact a brand's long-term image and credibility. This camaraderie goes for a toss when the act is laced with gimmicks like flirting and cheating which are mostly unpardonable by the targeted entities basis the outcomes of disbelief and doubts raising a definite uncertainty about the future of the relationship."

AMIT SETHIYA

Head of Marketing, Syska Group

led to a barrage of jokes and memes. However, the stunt and the ad quickly drew criticism for promoting sexism, prompting Vim to clarify that it was meant as a joke and there was no such product. The same year, Puma's use of Anushka Sharma's picture without permission caused a stir initially. However, as it turned out, the usage was part of their brand ambassador announcement campaign.

While the stunt marketing approach may have generated buzz, it also raised important questions about consent and ethical advertising practices. Where should one draw that subtle line between humour and sensitivity in their advertising campaigns.

Presenting a slightly different perspective, **Debraj Tripathy, Marketing Communication Consultant** states that regardless of opinions, it effectively raised cervical cancer awareness in one day. "It was



kind of disgusting for me, as it was for others, I guess. But that is how social media works-- the bigger and more extreme the stunt, the better it is. I think the degree of disgust that consumers have shown, is also because it was Poonam Pandey. A more serious influencer with higher credibility (though I don't think many would

have agreed to do such a stunt) would have been able to better convince consumers of the need for such a stunt."

Sahil Gupta, Lead - Influencer Marketing, Interactive Avenues

shares, "The campaign succeeded in sparking discussions about cervical cancer through a controversial staged death stunt. Despite the potential backlash, the campaign achieved its goal, proving unconventional tactics can yield results. Poonam Pandey's involvement, though polarizing, grabbed attention, overshadowing efforts by more reputable figures in health. The campaign highlighted the power of shock value in advertising, but debate continues over whether attention justifies potential harm."



Abhishek Vyas, Founder & CEO, My Haul Store

echoed a similar opinion on the matter, "Poonam Pandey is a social media influencer with a good number of people following her. Generally, any marketing that is not harmful or doesn't make a fool out of people is considered fine. However, this time, her faking death was a little out of bounds.



Vim's ad campaign featuring model Milind Soman showed a man in the gym talking about how he helps his mother do the dishes. Soman then approaches the man, praises him for bragging and then offers him 'Vim Black' with the advice 'Vim Black for men, easy to clean, more to brag'. Vim later clarified that the ad was a joke.



To announce her OTT show 'Moving in With Malaika', Malaika shared a cryptic post on Instagram, which read, "I said yes." As followers speculated that the post was a marriage announcement with her boyfriend Arjun Kapoor, the actress remained silent to keep the rumour mill going. She later revealed that "she said yes" to an OTT reality show and not to a marriage proposal.

“Immediate attention that has a negative motive behind it will affect the brand’s image in the long term. People tend to remember bad things more as compared to the good ones. Even after years, the public will remember that ‘Oh, so and so company pulled off that negative stunt.’ You must believe that you cannot achieve anything overnight. Your campaigns shouldn’t have focus to achieve something immediately but to build someone meaningful even if it takes time.”

RAGHUNANDAN SARAF
 Founder & CEO, Saraf Furniture



I can't say it's good marketing in the moral sense because we live in a society where even attempting suicide is a crime if you don't succeed. Simultaneously, any marketing that works and meets its objective is considered a successful campaign. In that way, Poonam Pandey faking her death to raise awareness about cervical cancer can be seen as a successful marketing strategy, but whether it's good or bad marketing is a question," he shares.

Experts say Greenpeace and PETA have used shock tactics for decades and have managed to succeed. The question however is whether there was a balance struck here. If one were to measure it on a beam balance, with purpose on one end and shock on the other, will purpose weigh higher? The answer lies in the extent to which the search or awareness on cervical cancer really went up once the news broke.

Vijay Singh, Director & Business Head, Oberoi IBC adds, "When it comes to using sensitive topics for marketing campaigns, brands and influencers should approach with extreme caution and empathy. They should aim to provide educational content that raises awareness and provides value to their audience, rather



than exploiting the issue for profit or attention. If there's any commercial interest involved, it should be disclosed to the audience. Care should be taken to avoid triggering content that could harm or distress individuals who are directly or indirectly affected by the health issue."

WHO FUNDED THE CAMPAIGN?

Poonam Pandey in her clarification video mentioned that 'Cervical Cancer is entirely preventable and that the key lies in the HPV vaccine and early detection tests. Both Pandey and Schbang who tied up with media company Hauterrfly for the stunt stated that the campaign was a pro-bono activity for a good cause and none of the parties were paid for their participation. This even as other theories are floating in the market on how Merck Sharp & Dohme- better known as MSD (which has been selling its cervical cancer vaccine, Gardasil, in India since 2008) has silently funded this campaign.

Post the controversy, MSD went on to publicly part ways with Schbang. In an official statement, MSD also told e4m, "MSD would like to categorically state that the recent public relations activity on cervical cancer carried out by Poonam Pandey and digital marketing



Makers of the film Pihu promoted the movie by prank-calling people. Several unsuspecting Twitter users had complained of getting a phone call from a crying child, only to receive a link to the film's trailer after they tried calling the number back in panic.



In 2015, a mysterious graffiti appeared on the wall of Shah Rukh Khan's house. It said, 'love you SRK c u on 15th' and was signed, 'Gaurav'. Even as Shah Rukh Khan took to Twitter to express shock over the incident, it was later revealed that the graffiti was part of the promotional campaign for the film 'Fan'.



"The fundamentals of marketing involve attracting attention to your message, but it's crucial to do so responsibly and ethically. As a brand, our priority is to maintain integrity and responsibility in all our communication. While shock marketing may be effective in some contexts, for a fiduciary business like ours, where trust is paramount, we must be cautious in its use."

ABHIK SANYAL

Head of Marketing, DSP Mutual Fund

agency Schbang was neither initiated with MSD's endorsement nor made with the knowledge of MSD."

RESPONSIBLE APPROACH

In today's marketing landscape, brands are increasingly emphasizing a responsible approach in their campaigns. By prioritizing ethical considerations and social consciousness, they aim to strike a balance between capturing attention and maintaining integrity to set a precedent for responsible marketing practices. Let's hear from experts about what should brands and influencers keep in mind when dealing with sensitive issues and using stunt marketing for their campaigns.

"I believe consumers perceive brands much like they perceive other individuals; they scrutinize the messages they receive from them," shares Wadhwa. "Our role, as communication experts, is to cultivate a sense of affinity or love towards the brand. However, missteps can erode that affection, making balance essential in maintaining consumer loyalty. Sometimes, the impact of these missteps is immediate, and restoring that love requires swift action," he adds.

Also, it's disheartening to see instances like the promotion of the film Pihu, where prank calls left unsuspecting individuals traumatized. Many Twitter users reported receiving distressing calls from a crying child, only to be directed to the film's trailer upon calling back in panic. Such tactics not only exploit people's emotions but also disregard their well-being.

Brands have been known to create quirky ad

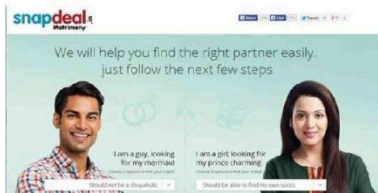
campaigns tricking their consumers in and around April Fool's Day. Ola is one of the few brands that almost every year comes up with a prank for April Fool's Day.

Bijoor believes that brand persona is a sort of trust. He says, "Your fans trust you. Consumers and fans hate being tricked, they hate being played with, and being fooled. Yes, you can fool consumers once a year, and that is on the first of April. You just might be excused. But not on any other day. Consumers feel tricked. The next time round, you will not be believed."

Bijoor goes on to say, "Digital brand personas themselves will face disbelief by and large. Gimmicks that trick can give a bad reputation to brand personas, advertising and digital agencies, advertising by and large, PR, and branding and marketing. As it is, marketing and advertising people have a reputation that is best described as walking on the thin ice of credibility. Why worsen it all?"

Coming back to the case in point, Cervical cancer is often referred to as a 'silent killer' because it does not show any obvious symptoms in its early stages, but stunts like the one Poonam Pandey pulled off may end up as a not-so-silent killer of advertising, if the trend continues unabated.

However, **Avik Chattopadhyay, Co-founder & Partner, Expereal India** argues, "Sustainable brands will typically never resort to such gimmicks for fear of brand equity erosion and a backlash from



In 2014, Snapdeal fooled people with the fake launch of SnapdealMatrimony.in. The website allowed users to find their ideal, tailor-made life partner by selecting their most desirable qualities. Snapdeal later released a video on YouTube depicting the making of the elaborate prank.



Cricket commentator Harsha Bhogle faked his kidnapping for Fantasy Akhada's campaign.

“Though it seems grey and blurry, it is as simple as identifying the difference between shocking news versus fake news. For an advertising message to qualify as ethical marketing, it will have to be rooted in a basic consumer truth and not mislead the viewer. A clickbait based on honesty without ever crossing the boundaries into blatant lying is the effort that a marketer has to take. Some brands have done this extremely well and some even do it consistently making shockvertising their tone of voice.”

JANANI KANDASWAMY

Senior Category Lead, Brand Marketing, ITC



stakeholders. But when the entire social system around you thrives on fakes and gimmicks, most brands take that as the barometer of a society's ability to forgive and move on. If we are conscious enough to pull up perpetrators of deliberate fakes on social media, the message clearly goes out to brands too, that they need to stay their moral and ethical course and draw clear lines. This is a global social malaise and will take a lot of time to clean up and course-correct.”

“While marketing gimmicks can generate immediate attention, it's essential for brands to consider the potential long-term impact on their image and credibility. Sure, some clever gimmicks can be

beneficial, especially for tactical gains, but they should align with the brand's values and long-term goals. For instance, Burger King's Valentine's Day campaign urging people to sit with a lonely Ronald McDonald had a positive and lasting impact without causing controversy,” highlights **Gaurav Arora, Co-Founder, Social Panga**.

Indeed, shock marketing campaigns have proven to be highly effective for certain brands, with some consistently adopting this approach as their tone of voice. Burger King stands out as a prime example. From stirring dismay by temporarily removing the Whopper

from the menu in the “Whopper freak-out” campaign to incentivizing consumers to unfriend friends on Facebook for a ‘free Whopper’, the brand's daring stunts consistently generate publicity.

WHAT MEASURES CAN BE TAKEN?

In light of recent controversies sparked by marketing stunts, the discourse on the need for regulations in the industry has gained momentum. As brands and influencers push boundaries with attention-grabbing campaigns, questions arise about the necessity of formal guidelines to ensure ethical standards and protect against exploitation of sensitive issues.

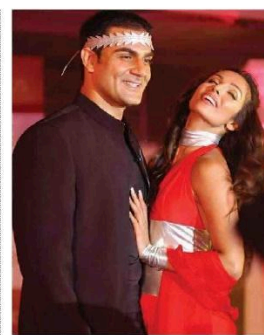
“We do have regulatory bodies in place that try to bring sanity to all this frenzy. For influencers, there are no such lines or regulators and they can have a field day. For sensitive subjects like health and education, industry bodies should create clear guidelines and deviations should be publicly highlighted and punished,” asserts Chattopadhyay while further adding that guidelines can be set for and implemented in organised business contexts. There can be none for individuals in a truly democratic setup. “If there are too many rules and regulations, we will start protesting against curtailment of freedom of speech and expression. A regulatory body can control a fever or monster but society has to draw the lines for people like



Founder, Social Panga



In a promotional stunt for her courtroom drama ‘Trial’, actor Kajol informed her fans that she was “facing one of the toughest trials” of her life’.



Malaika Arora Khan and Arbaaz Khan's fake split in 2008 for a Ponds advertisement.