



## **ASCI cracks the whip on brands claiming to boost immunity in covid ad campaigns**

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**NEW DELHI** : From anti-corona mattresses and shirts to immunity-boosting bread and biryani, several products have tried to cash in on the fears associated with coronavirus. Industry watchdog Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) has been cracking the whip on ads that use “immunity boosting” proposition for their products. These ads are flagged by users on ASCI’s official social media handles, WhatsApp, and website.

ASCI has been taking proactive action against these companies, asking them to prove their claims with facts or withdraw the ads and tweak packaging.

The watchdog has started exercising the “suspension pending investigation” (SPI) option after considering that the continued publication of the such ads could cause public harm or was against public interest, said ASCI secretary general Shweta Purandare.

“We have seen an increase in the number of cases that we had to look into through SPI as some advertisers are pushing the envelope by making out-of-line claims,” she said.

SPI was done on a range of products, from an anti-corona mattress and tulsi drops to apparel claiming it could protect people from coronavirus. There have been a range of claims across sectors that have come under the microscope. These include covid-19 prophylactic medicines, food, and beverages promising an immunity boost. The ministry of AYUSH has asked ASCI to alert it about such misleading advertisements.

Since April, the regulator has looked at more than 400 advertisements through its suo motu surveillance, particularly on digital and social media platforms such as the websites of advertisers, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

The hand sanitizer packaging of hygiene brand Lifebuoy owned by Hindustan Unilever, which claims to have an immunity-boosting effect, has been called out by consumers on social media. ASCI flagged it to the company, which clarified its claim.

"Our product formulation and claims are based on robust scientific evidence. In fact, ASCI themselves had raised a suo moto complaint in 2016 and our claims were validated," said a company spokesperson.

ASCI has also flagged textile company Siyaram's and Zodiac Clothing Co. Ltd's for their claims in the ads promoting anti-Corona fabric and shirts. The body is also actively working with other industry regulators such as the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, flagging misleading claims by food and beverage, dairy and restaurant businesses.

Recently, after ASCI flagged an immuno booster claim by a bread brand Modern Foods on its packaging the company had to withdraw the product. It has also tagged FSSAI to verify a claim made by restaurant chain Biryani Blues about the immunity boosting impact of turmeric in its flagship dish in a print ad.

Harish Bijoor, brand strategy specialist and founder, Harish Bijoor Consults Inc said in a highly self regulated advertising industry the onus is on marketers to take preemptive action and avoid making such claims.

"There's a certain degree of insensitivity from the marketers end to use 'immunity' word so loosely in such sensitive times. There has to be self regulation from their side. A Chyawanprash claiming immunity benefit makes sense not a sanitiser or bread," he noted.