

Research Paper

Impact of Below-The-Line (BTL) Marketing Strategies on Brand Awareness among Teenagers

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the differences in impact created by below-the-line marketing strategies, including trade fairs, sponsorships and sales promotion on brand awareness, with a specific focus on Indian teenagers. The importance of brand awareness in consumer decision-making has been highlighted through its role in enhancing brand loyalty and brand image in the market. Using a mixed research method with a combination of literature review, the BASS (Brand Awareness Screening Survey) survey with 60 individuals, and semi-structured interviews with a chosen focus group, evaluates the links between below-the-line marketing strategies used in India with brand recognition, recall and loyalty. Outcomes reveal sales promotion as the most effective strategy in impacting brand awareness through pop culture-based brand associations and cost-effective incentives, followed by trade fairs which creates an impact through hands-on and experiential exploration. Sponsorships create minimal impact unless the consumer engages with a familiar brand. Findings further highlight the importance of integrating teenage psychological foundations with interactive marketing experiences to strengthen brand associations.

Keywords: *Below-the-line marketing, Brand awareness, Indian teenagers, Associative memory model, Consumer behavior*

Did you know that 70% of brand marketers list brand awareness as their top marketing goal (Storm & Storm, 2025)? This goal is given high importance because, in a dynamic business environment, brands must constantly uniquely engage customers to distinguish themselves from other competitors and achieve success. The best way to achieve this is to establish high brand awareness within the target market. Brand awareness refers to the extent to which a consumer can recognize, recall, and perceive the utility of a brand. This is a key factor that affects the extent to which effective marketing is conducted, as it establishes multifaceted impacts, such as enhanced brand image and brand loyalty through increased trust, repeat purchases, and effective consumer engagement (Paramita et al., 2023).

Brand awareness plays a crucial role in successfully marketing and convincing the consumer to purchase the product, as it influences the psychological perception that the consumer has about a brand. Psychologically tested and proven models such as the associative memory

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model, illustrate the necessity of offering firsthand experiences and fostering personal connection with consumers, through marketing strategies, to achieve significant brand awareness (Sundar & Pandey, 2012).

BTL marketing strategies are highly effective in building such connections. Unlike traditional Above the Line which focuses on mass media advertising, BTL marketing focuses on advertising the product to customers in a personalized and targeted manner. BTL marketing is an advertising strategy that encompasses the benefits of brand awareness by fostering direct relationships with customers and encouraging two-way communication to understand the needs of customers (Barik & Mukherjee, 2023).

The following marketing strategies were chosen, based on the observations of their prevalence and the frequency of interaction among the target audience and sample. This study investigates the impact of three specific BTL strategies: trade fairs, sales promotions, and sponsorships on brand awareness among Indian teenagers aged 13–19. These tools were selected for their accessibility, prevalence, and cultural relevance in India, as well as their ability to shape consumer behaviour and their choices, making them worth exploring in this study.

Trade fairs, such as book fairs in India, provide opportunities for customers to interact with exhibitors to collect information, purchase products, and share experiences. This enables B2B (Business-to-business) and B2C (Business-to-consumer) networking opportunities and fosters business innovation (Moeran, 2011). Sales promotion uses incentives such as discounts, convenience cards and prize programs. This tool is crucial for extending the product life cycle by raising awareness and stimulating demand, especially in competitive markets (Kehinde et al., 2024). Sponsorship is a below-the-line advertising tool used by an entity to fund another in exchange for enhanced brand exposure through promotional activities when associated with the sponsored entity. This is rampantly used in India, especially in the organization of major sporting events like the Indian Premier League, where brands can leverage sponsorships to capture non-traditional and diverse market segments with their promotions (Sinha et al., 2022). While BTL strategies are widely recognized for driving consumer engagement, their impact on brand awareness among Indian teenagers (13–19) remains underexplored. This research gap is particularly significant as teenagers represent a diverse demographic with varied preferences in the market.

Although previous studies have explored BTL strategies and brand awareness among adults, there remains a lack of specific research on their impact on brand awareness among teenagers. They represent varied preferences as they are becoming increasingly empowered consumers, with the ability to influence purchasing decisions by utilizing apt platforms like social media to share experiences and opinions on products (Batat, 2009). They are also able to influence the product choices of their families, through their access to sufficient information about a brand and their access to increased disposable incomes (Dinesh, 2023). This underscores the need to focus on the teenage consumer segment.

Existing research on the effectiveness of BTL marketing on purchasing strategies has primarily focused on adult consumers, with limited attention on teenagers. However, it is important to delve deeper into the consumer behaviour of Indians, due to the consumer segment's diverse cultural landscape and a strong degree of value orientation which will require tailored marketing strategies to suit the variations in tastes and attitudes.

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Furthermore, the Indian consumer market is expected to reach approximately 5 trillion USD by 2025, making it the 5th largest consumer market in the world (Rathi, 2023). This massive contribution to consumption underscores the need to understand their preferences and mindsets to effectively capture their attention through the right marketing strategies.

As the study focuses on this specific Indian age bracket, it aims to understand how individuals within this demographic react to personalized BTL marketing strategies. A key moment of inspiration sparked when the collaboration between Kinder Joy and the Harry Potter franchise, offered Harry Potter-themed collectibles through a sales promotion strategy. Despite having no prior interest in purchasing Kinder Joy, many teenagers purchased several for the sole purpose of collecting Harry Potter-themed toys. This experience helped reflect on how sales promotion strategy can significantly affect purchasing behaviour and intention. It also led to the thought that these methods are as effective when promoting such actions among other teenagers of the same age. This personal experience raised questions about how BTL can impact the purchasing behaviour of teenagers in India, motivating further exploration.

Beyond observations, literature review was conducted to identify how local and global brands are increasingly targeting teenagers in their marketing campaigns were conducted. This shift is driven by the growing purchasing power of teenagers and favourable consumer behaviour exhibited by the teenage demographic (Budhiraja & Gupta, 2022). As brands prioritize teenagers more, it is vital to analyse how BTL marketing can be designed to effectively influence Indian teenagers' purchasing decisions. The findings will provide insights into the effectiveness and implications for below-the-line marketing strategies in the future.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample included in the Brand Awareness Screening Survey consisted of 60 Indian participants between the ages of 13 and 19, recruited via volunteer sampling. Data was collected from residents across Chennai, Hyderabad and Delhi.

Procedure

The research is divided into 3 phases, a combination of primary and secondary research. The primary research included a survey and a semi-structured interview. Secondary research was conducted in phase 1, datasets from Indian government websites, surveys conducted with South Asian samples, and systematic search synthesis were used as sources. Systematic search synthesis is a secondary research strategy that is used to gather information on a broad topic by combining keywords and subject headings into specific search engines (Schwager & Schalk, 2022). Keywords such as advertising effectiveness, brand awareness, teenagers, consumer buying behaviour were used in the systematic search synthesis.

Government sources such as population reports by the Ministry of Statistics and program implementation were used to understand the age structure and demographic dividend of the Indian population, to understand the extent of impact created by teenagers on the economy and business sector in India (Population Statistics of India, n.d.). Such databases increase the reliability and credibility of the study by providing verified and large-scale data on youth demographics, trends, and economic prospects. As the study focuses on Indian teenagers, South Asian sources were used since consumer behaviour patterns are shaped by cultural, regional, and economic factors.

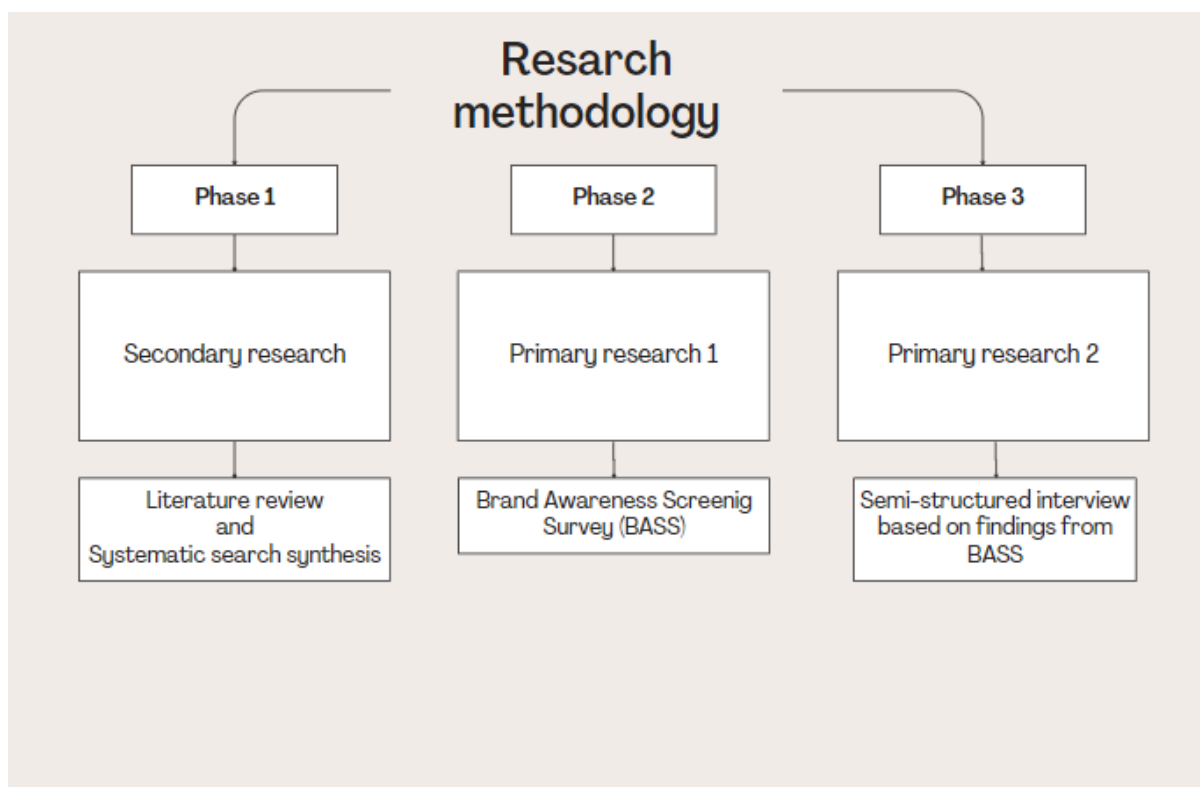


Fig 1.1 A diagrammatic representation of the three-phased research methodology

Phase 1

The first phase included a comprehensive literature review to operationalize the chosen BTL marketing tools. An understanding of the positive impacts of high brand awareness and ways to achieve them was studied. The literature review provided insights into the evolving trends in marketing and consumer behaviour. A crucial emerging trend is the increasing influence of kids and teenagers in buying decisions, as many teenagers in India have started entering the workforce at an early age. The emergence of a teenage workforce is changing spending patterns and brand loyalty among younger consumers. Hence, a major shift in the demographic dividend, and an increase in the youth bulge, calls for the repositioning of marketing strategies, via increased awareness, innovative product offerings, and non-conventional communication methods, to cater to this emerging consumer segment (Agarwal, 2013).

Phase 2

Building on the findings from Phase 1, the second phase involved the preparation of a Brand Awareness Screening Survey (BASS), to choose Indian individuals between the ages of 13 and 19 with high brand awareness from the respondents. The emphasis on teenagers' increasing role in purchasing decisions, as identified in the literature review, directly shaped the survey's design, ensuring it targeted the most relevant consumer segment. This finding directed the choice of teenage respondents of ages 13-19.

Furthermore, the review highlighted the need for repositioning marketing strategies to cater to the teenage consumer segment and address the levels of brand awareness of the evolving consumer segment. This finding enforced the need to examine and assess the brand awareness of teenagers. To address these objectives, the BASS survey investigated how

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often teenagers engage with marketing efforts, and the factors influencing their purchasing behaviour, and aimed to objectively measure brand recognition, recall, and engagement. This focus aligned with the Phase 1 findings on the evolving teenage workforce, necessitating a data-driven approach to understanding their interaction with brands.

An inclusion criterion, supported by a quantitative scoring system, was developed to select participants from the total pool of respondents for an interview in the third phase of the research. A numbering scoring system was used, by assigning numbers ranging from 0 to 5, for each option available for the respondent to answer with. The scores were added together for each respondent, to identify individuals with high brand awareness, to participate in the focus group later. Individuals who scored 55 or above out of the total score of 68 were included in the high brand awareness category. The survey included most closed questions with predetermined answers for respondents to choose from, to collect quantitative data.

This method improves the objectivity of the study, further increasing the reliability of results (Foddy, 1993). Closed questions were opted for the study instead of open-ended ones, due to the risk of respondent and evaluator's subjectivity compromising the reliability of the results. Furthermore, the usage of closed questions reduced the ambiguity of responses and increased the response rate, as it took minimal time for respondents to complete the survey and demanded less cognitive effort, compared to the requirement for open-ended questions (Brubacher et al., 2019). The emphasis on closed-ended questions allowed for robust statistical analysis, which contributed to selecting a well-defined participant group for the next stage of the study, creating a conclusive framework for the interview in the third phase.

Phase 3

The third phase included a one-on-one virtual interview, with participants scoring high on brand awareness, to gather qualitative data. These participants were screened and selected through the BASS survey, using the scoring criteria. 7 participants were chosen to participate in the 3rd phase. The highest-scoring participant in brand awareness from each age group (13–19) was included in the third-phase interview to represent the total sample. The qualitative data was gathered to provide enhanced clarity and to improve the reliability of the data collected, through the sharing of detailed experiences and other subjective content.

A semi-structured interview was a self-report research method used to gather data from the participants by using open-ended questions. This method combined pre-determined questions with the flexibility to explore responses further, allowing spontaneous questioning for clarity and depth. The list of pre-determined questions helped standardize one part of the interview, ensuring enhanced accuracy and reliability during data interpretation and analysis (Andalib, 2024). The questions were framed in a non-leading manner, to prevent deliberate elicitation of biased responses and opinions from the participants in the interview. This greatly improved the validity of the experiences shared and reduced participant bias.

Questions such as ‘Which audiences do you think brands are targeting these days?’, and ‘What perception do you have of a brand based on the marketing strategies they use?’ were included in the interview, to gain an understanding of the relationship between consumer choices and the impact of BTL marketing strategies on consumer perceptions. Each interview lasted for an average of 15 minutes, and the participants’ responses were audio recorded, with prior consent.

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Overall, the research methodology employed is a three-phase mixed method, with a combination of primary and secondary research, to effectively analyse the extent to which BTL marketing affects brand awareness among Indian teenagers. The comprehensive structure directly addresses the research gap by collecting primary data via the BASS survey and the interview, designed using precedents of literature review from the teenage sample.

RESULTS

59.6% of respondents in the BASS questionnaire were moderately familiar with the BTL marketing strategies investigated in this study, represented by Figure 1.2. This shows the high prevalence of BTL marketing strategies usage in India, as most teenagers have interacted with the tools, further validating the choice of strategy under investigation. However, there were significant differences in the levels of teenage interaction and the extent of impact created by sales promotion, trade fairs, and sponsorship.

How familiar are you with marketing strategies like trade fairs, sponsorships, and sales promotions?

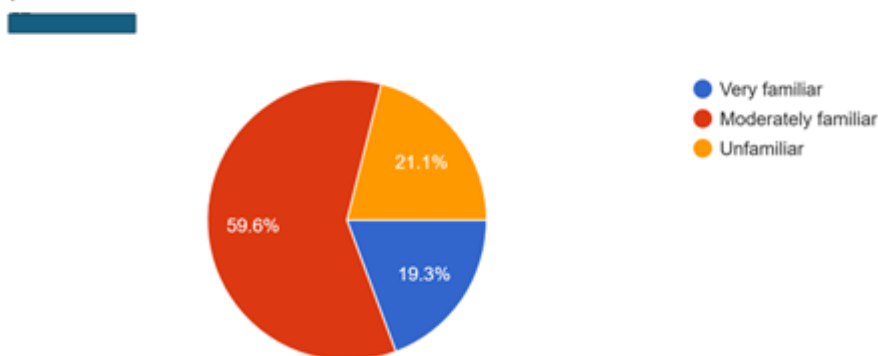


Fig 1.2 Familiarity with BTL marketing strategies

Sales promotion

87% of the respondents reported experiencing elevated levels of brand awareness while engaging with sales promotion techniques. They stated that cost-saving incentives, such as free samples and price reductions on their purchasing decisions. Fig 1.3 shows a combined proportion of 71.9% of respondents found discounts and free samples as the most appealing strategy.

From this we can interpret that sales promotions are highly effective in increasing brand recall and building trust among teenagers. The success of the strategy lies in its ability to trigger the desire to purchase the product, which other BTL strategies might fail to achieve.

What types of sales promotions appeal to you the most?

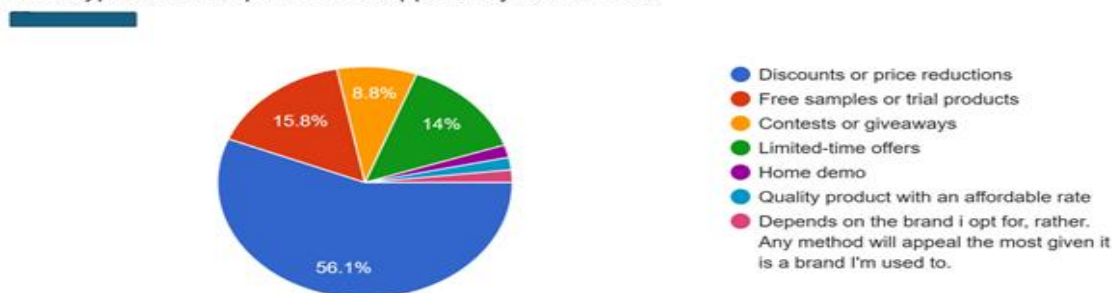


Fig 1.3 Preferred type of sales promotion strategy among teenage consumers

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The desire to purchase also depends on the products and the extent to which the brand can get teenagers to resonate with their product via partnerships and novel themes. The new partnership of Kinder and Harry Potter franchise collectables was often mentioned as a memorable BTL marketing experience of many respondents in the BASS survey and interview.

Other examples such as clothing stores that provided freebies in partnership with 'Deadpool and Wolverine' were mentioned frequently. Similarly, the sales promotion strategy undertaken by ASUS and DELL attracted the teenage audience by offering significant discounts along with additional tech accessories during every purchase. The brands above captured the consumer segment by creating associations between the brand and popular pop culture references, making it relatable to the consumer segment, hence enhancing the effectiveness of the marketing strategy.

The effectiveness of sales promotion can be explained by the associative memory model. This states how the repetitive interaction of consumers with a brand in conjunction with incentives, like discounts and free samples creates associations with memories saved as interconnected nodes in the brain. As the memory is stored in a significant manner, the awareness and preference levels of a brand can be influenced by the marketer, through fostering long-term associations in the brain.

Trade fairs

A nearly equal split exists between teenagers who attend and do not attend trade fairs in India. Despite the low frequency of interactions with trade fairs, teenagers reported a high extent of brand awareness and brand recall, after. Brand awareness is largely created because of the experiential nature of this marketing strategy, causing consumers to associate certain memories and experiences gained in the trade fair with the knowledge and awareness of the product in the future.

Respondents mentioned that trade fairs offer personalized experiences and hands-on opportunities to directly interact with the product, inducing a sense of curiosity and trust to explore the brand. The exposure and perception offered by trade fairs signify the fulfilment of BTL marketing's aims of achieving marketing success through directed and personalized promotional methods. This experience and choice of teenagers is also backed by the associative memory model, which highlights the importance of brand associations. Strong connections formed between a brand and its benefits, experiences, and features, aid in establishing high brand awareness and altered consumer perception, by creating a positive and graphic image of the brand (Pizam & Godovykh, 2022).

Sponsorship

In contrast to sales promotions and trade fairs, sponsorships foster brand associations and create brand awareness only to a limited extent, as only 18% reported experiencing a great extent of brand awareness while engaging with sponsorships. 52% reported a limited extent of brand awareness and recall, while 30% reported experiencing a moderate extent of brand awareness. Consumers ranked sporting event sponsorships as the most influential strategy, with 77.2% in Figure 1.4. highlighting frequent interaction as a key factor in their engagement and perception. However, political and cultural events were reported as influential by only 10.5% of respondents, as this consumer segment resonates with sport-related and recreational sponsorships better.

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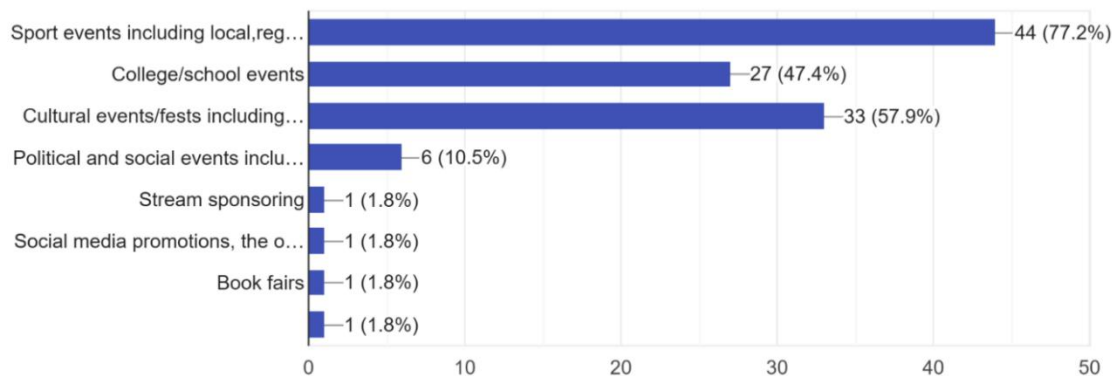


Fig 1.4 Preferred type of events for sponsorships among teenage consumers

Though sponsorships are a viable option to create brand visibility, they do not effectively gauge brand awareness and recall in teenagers. This is supported by the respondents' ranking of sponsorship on lower scores of 1 and 2 on a 5-point Likert scale in the BASS survey, to link the less engaging events and memorable activations created by sponsorships with low levels of impact on brand awareness and perception. They do not increase brand awareness largely in teenagers like trade fairs or sales promotions, as they do not have elements that create personal experiences for the consumer. This fails to create brand associations between a specific experience and the brand in the teenagers' minds.

Respondents indicated paying more attention to sponsorships of familiar brands than unfamiliar ones, causing the effectiveness of sponsorships to vary in both situations. One respondent mentioned the following, "Skoda had sponsored a local clothing brand and had set up a stall at a car show that I had attended back in 2021. That's when I saw the Skoda Rapid at the booth and enquired about it, ended up buying it because of the known clothing brand I had gone to check out." The respondent also stated that they would not have connected with Skoda if an unfamiliar clothing brand had been sponsored by Skoda.

Hence, sponsorships serve as a useful tool in enhancing brand awareness only in situations where teenagers are already familiar with the brand. This reinforces the need for brands to combine experiential marketing aspects such as interactives and incentives with sponsorships, to enhance brand awareness in teenagers, irrespective of their familiarity with the brand by strengthening brand associations. This distinction between familiar and unfamiliar brands is evident when understanding brand awareness, as the extent varies due to prior exposure to the brand.

To what extent do you connect/associate a brand with an event it sponsors (e.g., through its logo, name, or promotional content)

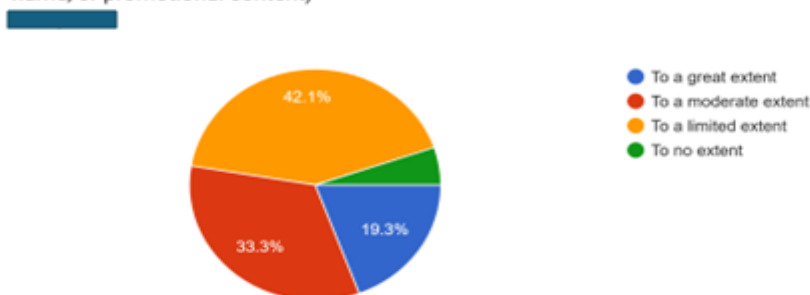


Fig 1.5 Extent of Brand Association with Sponsorships

Familiar Vs Unfamiliar Brands

Consumers reported significant differences in the effectiveness of BTL marketing strategies influencing brand awareness depending on whether the consumer was engaging with BTL's familiar or unfamiliar brands. BTL marketing strategies have more impact in enhancing existing levels of brand awareness of familiar brands, as consumers show reluctance to engage with BTL unfamiliar brands due to lack of trust or simply do not notice the marketing efforts.

This is caused due to the psychological concept of mere exposure. The mere exposure concept underscores the importance of familiarity, as consumers tend to interact and develop positive attitudes toward familiar concepts and products rather than unfamiliar ones (Ruggieri & Boca, 2013). The familiarity of the brand induces a sense of trust and perceived reliability, causing consumers to be more receptive to familiar brands.

A respondent mentioned their in-store demo interaction with a smartphone brand because they were familiar with it and were keen on learning more about the brand. However, the respondents also mentioned that the frequency of ignoring promotions from unfamiliar brands is high and that they would not have interacted with the live demo if it had been conducted by an unfamiliar smartphone brand. This example best indicates that prior exposure influences a consumer's willingness to explore the product further.

Given the reduced effectiveness of below-the-line marketing on the teenage consumer segment for unfamiliar brands, it is essential to refine these strategies to better capture and engage this consumer segment. BTL marketing strategies alone will not be sufficient to create brand associations in the teenage mind without prior interest or connection established with the brand. Hence, marketers of growing brands should pair BTL marketing strategies with other approaches like digital marketing.

Digital marketing is a suitable strategy to integrate with other BTL tools, as the teenage consumer reports experiencing high levels of brand awareness and purchasing impulse while interacting with digital promotions (Pramayanti, 2024). To support this claim, one respondent mentioned an experience where they encountered a sales promotion strategy employed by the Souled Store, which was circulated using digital marketing techniques in the form of pop-ups on social media. The respondent mentioned how the technique led them to impulsively purchase the product. Similarly, multiple respondents reported their perception of digital promotions to be more relatable and interactive than traditional marketing strategies.

DISCUSSION

BTL marketing serves as an effective method in increasing brand awareness among Indian teenage consumers to a great extent. Sales promotion creates the greatest impact on an increase in brand awareness among the Indian teenage consumer segment, followed by trade fairs which create a reasonable impact. The study also presents the focus of the Indian teenage consumer segment on cost-saving incentives, causing the success of sales promotions in India. This may be influenced by the Indian cost-cutting mindset, further exemplified by frugal innovation. Teenagers seek interaction and personal attention from marketers to gauge their attention and largely remember a brand. Sales promotion and trade fairs capture teenage consumers effectively, by creating brand associations through experiential marketing strategies and triggering impulsive buying, further supporting the concept of the associative memory model.

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Contrastingly, sponsorships create brand visibility but do not impact brand awareness and recall in Indian teenagers, due to the lack of interactive and personalized elements. To further strengthen the effectiveness of BTL marketing strategies in enhancing brand awareness of unfamiliar and growing brands, attempts to combine sales promotion strategies with other marketing strategies like digital promotions can be undertaken.

Strengths

The data collection is well-rounded, as the study integrates primary and secondary research, ensuring a comprehensive approach to data collection. The study is highly reliable and replicable, due to the usage of authoritative secondary sources such as government data and credible academic literature to back the claims made in the research. This is important as it allows replication of consistent results in the future.

Another strength is the balanced incorporation of quantitative and qualitative data, that supports the efficient evaluation of results. This balance ensures a multifaceted perspective. This ensured the reliability and validity of the study.

The operationalization of variables such as ‘BTL marketing’ by focusing on 3 specific tools, ‘brand awareness’ by using an objective scoring system, and the sample of teenagers, by including the nationality and age category, enhanced the measurability of the variables. This also contributes to increased validity, by reducing subjectivity during interpretation.

Ethical consideration

The study was ethically sound in numerous ways, particularly while gathering primary data from participants. The BASS survey gathered informed consent from all participants, before engaging with the survey. Informed consent was obtained by providing participants with comprehensive information about the research, including details on study procedures, expectations, and participation requirements. Participants were required to carefully review all the information provided before giving their consent by clicking an acceptance button on the form, confirming their voluntary participation.

Other ethical guidelines such as confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, by presenting consolidated results, without revealing the identities of participants. Any specific information such as anecdotes mentioned in the study, was published with anonymity and with prior consent from the participant. Participants in the interview were debriefed and thanked for their participation, given the space to ask further questions about the study and express any concerns that existed.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is the generalizability, due to the focus on the Indian nationality. The findings may not apply to consumers from other parts of the world due to cultural differences prevailing in consumer behaviour and marketing approaches. Differences in consumer mindsets due to differences such as individualistic and collectivist societies will cause difficulties in generalizing.

Similarly, the study does not include samples from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, causing it to become unrepresentative and limiting generalizability. Variations in consumer preferences, attitudes to marketing campaigns, and existing levels of brand awareness across socioeconomic backgrounds will be diverse. The limitation of lack of generalizability due to

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demography and culture can be solved by including broader age demographics and conducting cross-cultural research in the future for comparison.

The choice of participants for the interview in the third phase may be affected by subjectivity. This is a weakness, as participants self-reported their levels of brand awareness through the BASS survey, increasing the subjectivity of the rating of their levels of brand awareness. This might reduce the measure of validity due to the occurrence of potential bias. A standardized and objective method of measuring brand awareness, such as a test can be used, to overcome the limitation of subjectivity in the future.

Similarly, the volunteer sampling technique used also poses disadvantages. Participants who took part in the survey may be passionate about the topic or might share similar behavioural traits that cause them to volunteer in the survey, leading to volunteer bias. This bias may skew the results by producing more extreme responses and results. Such shared behaviour and traits will reduce the generalizability of the results. A combination of a stratified sampling approach and random sampling will be useful to eradicate volunteer bias.

Another weakness of the BASS survey's response is the problem of social desirability bias among respondents, affecting the validity. The participants might have ranked their awareness and knowledge on brand awareness and BTL marketing strategies on higher scales, to align with social norms, reducing the validity. This can be mitigated in the future, by using indirect questioning methods, instead of directly questioning their opinions and knowledge.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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