

ETHICAL DIGITAL MARKETING AND CHILD PROTECTION: DEVELOPING A RESPONSIBLE COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK FOR POCSO AWARENESS

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ABSTRACT

In India, digital communication is an important tool for public legal education and child protection awareness. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO Act) puts it in the public domain, and governmental and civil-society actors are increasingly using social media, video, influencers, hashtags, school programs, and other communication mechanisms to discuss child-safety rights and reporting channels. The employment of marketing approaches in communicating for child protection, however, poses a special moral dilemma: the consumption is a behaviour change, but the population communicated with is a legally protected and extremely vulnerable group. This paper stretches a Responsible Communication Framework (RCF) for POCSO awareness, drawn from social marketing theory and fear appeal research, and incorporates elements of child rights and Indian media restrictions, advertising self-regulation, and data protection regulations. The study will use a qualitative multiple case study approach of a doctrinal nature. The key legal sources are the POCSO Act; the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) advertising standards and the Consumer Protection Act framework; the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Rules, 2020; and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, and rules, 2025. Three communication models are discussed: ProtectedByPOCSO campaign, a comparative Indian social-marketing model (Bell Bajao), and communication campaigns in schools and institutions for POCSO sensitization. They list six interrelated needs: legality, dignity and non-identifiability; efficacy-balanced persuasion; data minimization and child-safe targeting; audience co-design and pre-testing; and multi-stakeholder accountability. Earlier versions of the manuscript have a significant legal qualification: the rules contained in the DPDP Act itself were introduced in 2023, the final rules were notified in November 2025, and the substantive rules on children's data will start only from 13 May 2027. Therefore, the paper makes a distinction between current obligations and prospectus compliance obligations. The RCF will not replace existing statutory responsibilities; it is suggested as a working bridge between marketing effectiveness and child-protection law.

Keywords: POCSO Act, Social Marketing, Ethical Digital Marketing, Child Protection; Fear Appeals, Responsible Communication, India, Children's data

INTRODUCTION

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, is a dedicated act that was passed to safeguard children from sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, and pornography and to establish special courts. The statutory structure is thus devoid of notions of punishment and contains reporting, media conduct, child sensitivity, public awareness, and monitoring. It is Section 43 that is significant for communication policy, as it calls for adequate publicity of the Act so that the provisions of the Act can be made known to the public, children, or parents or guardians of children (Government of India, 2012). The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has thus created an information, education, and communication material, and through the use of radio, social media, webinars, etc., it sensitizes (National Commission for Protection of Child Rights [NCPCR], 2019; Press Information Bureau, 2023).

The communication issue is not whether marketing techniques are to be used or how long they are to be used. The question that is more to the point is how marketing tactics can be practiced without violating the child rights themselves that child protection legislation aims to protect. Social marketing focuses on communication in a way that it is not just the provision of information but the beginning of a process that leads to behaviour change (Andreasen, 1994; Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). Ideal exchanges for POCSO awareness include: Identifying unsafe situations, as well as starting a conversation with a trusted adult, reporting a suspected offense, and understanding what the roles and responsibilities are of the institutions. These behaviours have consequences, are hard to manage emotionally, and are marred by legal procedures. If a click campaign results in the creation of fear, stigma, or identification of a survivor, it is not accepted as a successful campaign, nor would the flip consequence be a confusion of what to report.

Digital media intensifies this tension. The algorithmic distribution, analytics, audience segments, influencers, and persistent content can increase visibility exponentially but also raise a risk of unwanted visibility, profiling, and secondary dissemination. UNICEF's child-rights assessment of digital marketing highlights transparency, the avoidance of manipulation, and responsible collection and usage of children's personal data (UNICEF, 2019). In particular, Indian legislation provides a crucial protection by incorporating Section 23 of the POCSO, which specifies that information, which could identify a child involved in proceedings, cannot be disclosed. (Government of India, 2012) The Supreme Court's judgment in *Nipun Saxena v. Union of India* (2018) reiterates the broader tenet that information that allows the identification of a sexual-offense victim directly or indirectly must be protected.

A gap between marketing ethics and child protection jurisprudence is therefore addressed in this paper. Social marketing scholarship already exists that provides tools to analyze the audience, behavioural objectives, exchange, message design, and evaluation (Andreasen, 1994; Gordon et al., 2006; Rothschild, 1999). Research in fear appeals indicates that fear influences attitudes, intentions, and behavior, and efficacy information is important to the efficacy of messages (Bigsby & Albarracín, 2022; Tannenbaum et al., 2015). Child-rights literature, on the other hand, emphasizes dignity, privacy, no manipulation, and age-appropriate communication (UNICEF 2019). This paper seeks to provide the linkage of these strands to the Indian legal framework on POCSO communication.

The paper addresses three research questions:

RQ1. What are the legal constraints governing digital and public communication relating to POCSO and child sexual abuse in India?

RQ2. What ethical tensions arise when social marketing and digital marketing techniques are used for POCSO awareness?

RQ3. How can a responsible communication framework reconcile legal compliance, child dignity, behavioral effectiveness, and accountability?

The objectives of the paper are (a) to identify the relevant laws and regulations, (b) to bring together legal and behavioural evidence relevant to sensitive child protection communications, (c) to examine specific Indian children's awareness-raising campaigns, and (d) to create an operational framework that can be employed by partners, communication agencies, schools, NGOs, and government agencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Marketing as a Behavior-Change Approach

Social marketing grew out of using marketing techniques for social goals. Kotler and Zaltman (1971) defined social marketing as using marketing analysis, planning, implementation, and control to promote a social cause. Andreasen (1994) then noted that while social marketing messages should not be confused with information transmission, their focus is on the change of voluntary behaviour which benefits the individual and society. (Rothschild, 1999) also illustrated the importance of not approaching the role of education and marketing/legal interventions as competitors. Capacity building can help to improve capability, marketing can improve motivation and ease behavioural barriers and law can change the external environment.

This change is significant, especially for POCSO. No awareness communication can ensure reportage, prosecution, or victim support. A campaign can make things known but not change the institutional barriers. Social marketing is best suited to goals where the goal of communication is narrowly targeted and linked to an actionable pathway. Evidence derived from health-related social marketing demonstrates that interventions that rely on systematic planning and understanding and evaluation rather than publicity alone can lead to desired results (Gordon et al., 2006). It is therefore implied that campaign designers need to first identify the behaviour they are looking for (i.e., calling for assistance, reaching out to a proper authority, or understanding a reporting requirement) before choosing a message format, content, and tone in their campaign.

Fear Appeals, Efficacy, and Responsible Persuasion

It is natural that fear comes with communication about the harm to children attached to child protection raising, as the harm is serious. But in the realm of ethical use of fear, increases in emotional intensity are not enough. The study by (Tannenbaum et al., 2015) meta-analyzed 127 studies from 248 independent samples with 27,372 individuals to measure the impact of fear appeals on attitudes, intentions, and behaviour overall, concluding that there was a positive effect overall and that fear appeals with efficacy statements had a stronger effect. Later, (Bigsby & Albarracín, 2022) conducted a meta-analysis of 158 studies with 19,736 participants, which revealed that fear appeals with positive response-efficacy information were more effective in achieving behaviours.

The real-life thing to note is that a POCSO campaign shouldn't finish with a threat, statistic, or warning. It should respond to the audience's next question, "What should I do?" For a parent, this reality can manifest itself in what to do when a child confesses to abuse. It can be an institutional reporting responsibility for a teacher.

It for a child could be being able to find a trusted adult and accessing age-appropriate support. The message architecture, therefore, should link the perceptions of seriousness to a responsive and feasible message. This methodology also does not turn the fear factor to the concept of

effectiveness. An awareness campaign is NOT about maximizing concern; it is about enabling protective actions.

Children, Digital Marketing, and Manipulative Communication

Children are especially susceptible to inevitably hidden forms of commercial manipulation and persuasion, such as 'data-driven targeting' and 'communication that is obscured by its persuasive intent,' as listed in UNICEF's discussion paper on children and digital marketing (UNICEF, 2019). While concentrating on commercial marketing, the points discussed in the paper are relevant to social marketing on child protection. A child can be a target of a POCSO campaign, a 'secondary target' (they may be featured but not targeted), or a part of a school-based campaign. Comprehension, emotional impact, and privacy (and the child's ability to comprehend the communication) should be factors that campaign designers take into account in all three cases.

It is important to recognize that there is a difference between marketing to children and marketing about children. While this does not mean a child protection campaign is selling a product, it can nonetheless be designed in a persuasive way, segment it, use the right communicators, and evoke emotions. When an audience is autonomous, their dignity and vulnerability are consequently respected in the methods used, rather than the campaign's purpose being beneficial to society or not.

Indian Evidence on POCSO Awareness

Concerning the implementation of awareness, it is a fact. In a cross-sectional study of 403 health care providers from Eastern India, (Patra et al., 2025) report that data on knowledge and practices regarding POCSO responsibilities was quite poor, while attitudes were generally good. This evidence is not an assessment of marketing campaigns per se, but it shows that the legalization of a formal law typically fails to create operational legal literacy of professional actors. National assessments of awareness have also revealed inconsistencies in awareness among parents and teachers in school sensitization settings (Ministry of Education, 2024).

The findings support a stakeholder-segmented approach. Assuming a single national message is effective for reaching children, parents, teachers, health professionals, police officers, and digital-platform users is incorrect. Any design for a social marketing project should thus start with audience research and barriers to behavior, with differentiated communication and evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

A doctrinal and qualitative multiple case study approach is used in the present study. The doctrinal component focuses on key legal texts on POCSO communication, such as the POCSO Act; the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Rules, 2020; the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023; and the Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, along with relevant advertising and consumer-protection instruments. The case study investigates documented publicly available communications efforts to uncover similar communication design practices and ethics conflicts.

The three cases that were selected were purposive, as they represent instances of the operation of different communication logics: Protected ByPOCSO is an established contemporary digital/public communication campaign explicitly focused on POCSO. Bell Bajao is an existing social marketing campaign about gender-based domestic violence and hence only used as a transferable comparator, while POCSO sensitization in schools is a lower-data, supervised communication model. The cases are not considered representative. They're used for analysis and theory building.

Triangulation from sources was performed. For ideas of law, primary legal sources were

emphasized; for factual information about campaigns and policy, official government and institutional sources were employed; and for theoretical and behavioural assertions, peer-reviewed scholarship was employed. Sources composed in the second and third hands to the original manuscript have not been preserved when a primary source was present. Note that the analysis is presented separately for the obligations that are required as of August 2026 and those that will be required in the future. The substantive provisions of Sections 3-10 and the operative provisions of the DPDP Rules are planned to become effective 18 months after the notification of the final DPDP Rules, which will be on 13 November 2025 (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology [MeitY], 2025a, 2025b).

Legal Architecture for POCSO Awareness Communication

Table 1 below summarizes the key legal provisions in India that govern the communication for awareness on POCSO.

TABLE 1 THE LEGAL ARCHITECTURE GOVERNING POCSO AWARENESS COMMUNICATION		
Legal source	Relevant requirement	Communication implication
POCSO Act, 2012, Section 23	Restricts publication to information that may identify a child involved in a case; disclosure requires the statutory court-permission pathway.	Do not use names, photographs, addresses, school details, family details, or combinations of facts capable of identifying a child.
POCSO Act, 2012, Section 43	Requires adequate publicity of the Act and awareness among the public, children, parents, and guardians.	Awareness is a statutory policy objective; campaigns should therefore be designed as rights-based public education rather than promotional publicity.
POCSO Act, 2012, Sections 19–21	Creates reporting duties and consequences for failure to report in specified circumstances.	Messages should accurately explain reporting pathways and must not encourage unlawful handling or investigation by private actors.
POCSO Rules, 2020, Rule 3	Provides for awareness generation and capacity building.	Campaign design should be linked to stakeholder training and institutional capacity, not treated as a stand-alone media activity.
DPDP Act, 2023, Section 9	Provides special requirements for processing children's personal data, including parental consent and restrictions on tracking, behavioral monitoring, and targeted advertising.	Future operational compliance should prohibit child-directed behavioural targeting and require child-safe data practices.
DPDP Rules, 2025, Rule 10	Specifies mechanisms concerning verifiable parental consent for children's data, subject to the Rules' commencement timeline and statutory exceptions.	Campaigns collecting children's digital data should be designed for the forthcoming regime rather than relying on informal consent practices.
ASCI Influencer Guidelines, 2021	Requires clear disclosure of material advertising relationships.	Sponsored or paid influencer content should be transparently labeled; social-purpose messaging does not justify deceptive sponsorship practices.
Consumer Protection Act framework	The CCPA's 2022 guidelines address misleading advertising and endorsements and include safeguards relating to children.	Claims, endorsements, and child-facing creative should be truthful, non- deceptive, and appropriately substantiated.

There is an important asymmetry in the legal framework. While the DPDP Act's substantive children's data obligations will begin to work as of August 2026, POCSO, by its nature, establishes immediate duties to address child protection, reporting, and media conduct. The paper thus contains

no mistake in claiming that the obligations in Section 9 are an existing operative commitment in August 2026. Rather, it views Section 9 and the related Rules as an upcoming compliance standard that marketers of responsible campaigns should strive toward. This is key to ensuring a correct legal reference and preventing the 2023 statute from being treated as if all its provisions were in place.

Ethical Tensions in POCSO Digital Marketing

The main ethical tensions resulting from the use of digital marketing techniques for POCSO and child-protection awareness are summarized in Table 2. It highlights the perils of alarmist messaging, child visibility, data targeting, sensationalism, and undisclosed sponsorship. The table also lists mitigation techniques from the literature to ensure that awareness communication is effective, lawful, child-sensitive, and ethically responsible.

TABLE 2 ETHICAL TENSIONS IN DIGITAL POCSO AWARENESS MARKETING AND LITERATURE-INFORMED MITIGATION STRATEGIES		
Tension	Risk	Responsible design response
Fear without efficacy	An alarming message may increase concern without increasing the ability to act.	Pair severity with concrete, verified response information and accessible next steps (Bigsby & Albarracín, 2022; Tannenbaum et al., 2015).
Identification and secondary victimization	Case details, images, or local contextual clues can reveal a survivor's identity.	Use fictional, composite, or fully de-identified narratives; apply a legal review to every case-based creative.
Child data and behavioural targeting	Analytics, retargeting, or profiling can create privacy and manipulation risks.	Avoid collecting unnecessary child data; do not design behavioural targeting of children; prepare systems for the DPDP regime.
Sensationalism	Graphic or shock-driven content can stigmatize abuse and distort the campaign objective.	Use age-appropriate, dignity-centered creative and test emotional impact before publication.
Undisclosed sponsorship	Influencer or celebrity participation without disclosure can undermine trust.	Use clear sponsorship disclosures consistent with ASCI standards.
Overgeneralization	A single message may fail across age, language, literacy, and stakeholder groups.	Segment audiences and co-design communication with relevant adult stakeholders and child-protection professionals.

Case Analysis

#Protected By POCSO

Arpan's (2024) Protected The POCSO campaign is one such example after another of the increased reliance on widespread public communication to call what is now about to become a public issue to present one made more serious as a legal and social matter. The campaign is relevant to this paper because it was specifically about awareness and POCSO and made use of modern methods of public communication. Its dominant advantage from a social-marketing perspective is the clearness of the messages: the focus is on the penalties for committing the crime and on what the offenders are responsible for. But, from the perspective of responsible communication, it is inappropriate to replace protective efficacy with deterrence. It's just as important in any campaign to explain to parents, teachers, kids, and every onlooker what they can do if they come across a risk.

Owing to the modern nature of the campaign, relying only on campaign reach and visibility as independent evidence of outcomes is insufficient. The present study, thus, does not assert causal behavioural efficacy. In lieu of that, the campaign is approached as an example of a communication approach that would benefit from being bolstered via the RCF.

***Bell Bajao* as a Transferable Comparator**

Bell Bajao is not a POCSO campaign, nor is it presented as one here. It serves as a comparative surveillance case on domestic violence and bystanders in India. The beauty of the case was the behaviour, not just informing audiences of a social issue, but affixing a 'runnable action' (to ring the bell) to the mass communication and to community-level engagement. This exemplifies Rothschild's (1999) suggestion that collaboration between education, marketing, and institutional action might be required.

It would seem that enabling parents to think about a clear behavioural ask is the lesson to be learned by POCSO—the substantive message need not be copied. POCSO communication may similarly flow from 'know the law' to 'know what to do'—but these do not have to be steps that are unlawful and do not shift responsibilities for investigation from the child and officially trained members of the public to others.

School- and Institution-Led Sensitization

Based on the educational content provided by the government, sensitization has been carried out in the school setting, reaching children and teachers; however, parental awareness levels are uneven in some evaluated school settings (Ministry of Education, 2024). One advantage of school-based communication is that it can be supervised and be age-appropriate and linked to the existing safeguarding arrangements as part of a structured approach. Meanwhile, schools need to carry out awareness as not a one-time but an ongoing process. These are the elements of training, reporting in a system, complaints, and institutional accountability, which are needed to turn information into protective capacity.

Cross-Case Synthesis

Table 3 provides a cross-case comparison of the three communication models investigated in this study. The comparison illustrates the difference between the models, each based upon its own behavioural logic: #ProtectedByPOCSO is built around legal awareness and deterrence, *Bell Bajao* emphasizes bystander intervention and social-norm change, while school- and institution-led models are structured with an eye to legal and safety education.

The cases also highlight an important scale-behavioral specificity trade-off between exposure of data and institutional supervision. While digital campaigns can reach a wider audience, privacy and targeting concerns may also arise; school- and community-based interventions can be larger in scope and control but typically at a smaller scale. The storytelling around the action from the perspective of a low, clearly defined behaviour - in *Bell Bajao* is evidence of this. Together, the comparison demonstrates the importance of a communication model that would balance the scope of digital communication and protections around issues of dignity, privacy, behavioural effectiveness, and institutional accountability.

TABLE 3 COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS			
Dimension	#ProtectedByPOCSO	Bell Bajao	School/institution model
Primary logic	Legal awareness and deterrence	Bystander action and norm change	Structured legal and safety education
Primary strength	High salience and legal framing	Simple behavioural ask	Supervised and contextual learning
Primary risk	Fear without sufficient action guidance	Transferability limits because subject matter differs	Limited scale and uneven documentation
Data exposure	Potentially higher on digital channels	Lower in broadcast/community formats	Potentially low where no digital profiling
Evaluation priority	Behavioural response and reporting literacy	Norm/attitude change	Knowledge, confidence, and institutional response

The Responsible Communication Framework (RCF)

The RCF integrates the legal, ethical, and behavioural findings into six pillars. It is deliberately designed as a governance process rather than a list of abstract values. Each pillar should be translated into an approval gate, a documented responsibility and an evaluation indicator.

TABLE 4 SIX-PILLAR RESPONSIBLE COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK FOR ETHICAL POCSO AWARENESS MARKETING		
Pillar	Core requirement	Operational test
1. Legality	Review every creative against POCSO media restrictions, reporting duties, advertising standards, and applicable data law.	Written legal clearance before publication; source register for all legal/statistical claims.
2. Dignity and non-identifiability	No survivor identification or case reconstruction through direct or indirect clues.	Identity-risk review covering text, image, audio, location, and contextual combinations.
3. Efficacy-balanced persuasion	Fear or severity messages must be connected to realistic protective action.	Every high-risk message contains a verified 'what to do next' component.
4. Data minimization and child-safe targeting	Collect only what is necessary and avoid behavioural targeting of children.	Data inventory, retention rules, targeting audits, and future DPDP readiness assessment.
5. Audience co-design and pre-testing	Test comprehension, stigma, emotional impact, and actionability before launch.	Documented pre-tests with parents, educators, and qualified child-protection stakeholders; age-appropriate testing protocols.
6. Multi-stakeholder accountability	Disclose sponsors, assign responsibility, and provide feedback/grievance channels.	Named accountable officer, disclosure statement, escalation process, and post-campaign review.

DISCUSSION

The RCF has three ways to contribute to marketing scholarship. First, it takes normal social-marketing operating principles into a statutorily challenged arena. Ethical challenges are typically part of a discussion with regard to responsible persuasion in conventional social marketing, but with POCSO there must also be a focus on statutory non-identification and child protection responsibilities, which can limit creativity. Where the marketing objective is not just to maximize

persuasion, it's to optimize behaviour within limits of the right-based law.

Second, there is a tie between persuasion theory and legal compliance. Both fear appeal and efficacy information (Bigsby & Albarracín, 2022; Tannenbaum et al., 2015) have been suggested by the research on fear appeal apparent to date. So, a responsible POCSO campaign should meet a series of gravity, understanding, effectiveness, and action. It's a better option than either end that they try to trick you with this graphic flak-coat shock or these same 'safe' messages that don't give any meaningful behavioural cues.

Thirdly, the concept of data minimization is reconceptualized within the field of marketing design. The child rights approach to data collection by UNICEF (2019) suggests against behavioural advertising on children. These principles will be supplemented by a statutory layer with the substantive children's-data provisions of the Indian DPDP kicking in. Prospective compliance is therefore the appropriate academic position taken in 2026, meaning that organizations need to plan now for the 13 May 2027 operational date for Section 9 and not be misled about the legal status of Section 9 at present.

The framework also identifies an institutional problem. Awareness of diseases by POCSO cannot be gauged through impressions and views & shares/hashtags alone. Marketing metrics should be complemented with metrics of legal literacy and safeguarding—understanding of reporting processes, confidence to report, understanding of duties by institutional actors, reporting safeguarding tools, and use of safeguarding tools. In line with the social marketing theory of the whole, which sees behavioral results instead of communication exposure as the final target of social marketing efforts (Andreasen, 1994; Gordon et al., 2006).

Managerial and Policy Implications

Government should have a process for POCSO campaigns, which needs to be legal and ethical in nature; identity risk, legal claims, data practices, and creativity being child-faced should be independent of each other and thus be reviewed separately.

NGOs and communication agencies need to differentiate themselves between awareness and fundraising or brand goals and report on any sponsorship deals when advertisers are using influencers or paid promotional content.

Awareness sessions of POCSO should not be treated as standalone events in schools but incorporated into the school's safeguarding and reporting protocols and staff training curriculum. Campaigners should not profile children while managing digital campaign activities, and campaign architecture should include data-minimization and deletion powers before they are implemented in DPDP.

Reach and engagement must not be the only behavioural indicators used to evaluate campaign success; monitoring knowledge, confidence, help-seeking, and reporting literacy are also important. Policy makers could benefit from introducing specific guidance on advertising for child protection issues due to the unique nature of survivor confidentiality, child vulnerability, legal reporting requirements, and digital targeting (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The biggest limitation of this study is the lack of its own campaign performance data sets. As a result, the case analysis can neither provide causal consequences nor be used to order campaigns in terms of their effectiveness to enact behavior. Second, Bell Bajao is not a POCSO campaign, and so the transferability of the campaign is limited. Thirdly, the analysis of the law is significantly sensitive to jurisdiction and attempts to capture the Indian legal landscape as of 20th August 2026. Fourth, the DPDP framework is an evolving body; judicial and regulatory as well as implementation changes in the future could impact the operation.

Future studies need to validate the effectiveness of the RCF using message experiments with fear-only, efficacy-balanced, and neutral POCSO messages. Self-efficacy towards being arrested and behavioural intention, perceived severity, perceived response efficacy, trust, and legal knowledge. It is also a good idea we propose here, and we see this as a major potential pathway to go down: experimentation with stakeholders (parent, teacher, and healthcare practitioner). Evaluation of the engaged awareness efforts would also help researchers transcend engagement metrics and measure the effectiveness of communication in creating long-term behavior change and institutional response.

Recommendations

The creation of an Integrated Child-Safety Reporting Interface.

There is a need in the child protection framework in India to synchronize the handling of all existing child/complaint reporting systems like Cyber Crime Reporting Portal, NCPCR's POCSO e-Box and Childline services. Having more than one reporting channel could lead to confusion and uncertainty about where to make a complaint for a specific incident for parents/children or other complainants. A single point of contact for a unified digital interface or an interoperable referral system could be created rather than replacing some of the existing systems. Such an interface may allow the user to submit a complaint once, and, based on the nature and jurisdiction of the complaint, inform the competent authority – via predefined protocol. This would minimise duplication, enhance accessibility and make institutional responses more coordinated while maintaining supervision and obligations of individual agencies.

Institutionalisation of a Right to Information on Action Taken

A mechanism should be formalised to provide complainants with timely and meaningful information on the status and action taken with their complaint, taking into account legitimate confidentiality or child protection and ongoing investigation concerns. Acknowledging number and simple to basic tracking of status achieved could be offered at the reporting time and be updated only at predetermined stages during the process of responding. The mechanism would increase transparency and institutional accountability which in turn could boost public trust in digital mechanisms to protect children. The framework should, however, make a distinction between the right of the complainant to acquire information about how the process will unfold and the disclosure of sensitive investigative information.

Enhancing Platform Based Detection and Referral Mechanisms

The obligation of digital platforms to identify or receive credible reports relating to child sexual abuse material (CSAM) should have clearly defined duties regarding detection, preservation, and reporting/referral in accordance with relevant Indian regulations and privacy, due process and proportionality principles. The non-disclosure of concise and clear complaints won't be replaced by the function of the reporting complaint mechanism established at the platform level, but should be complemented with it. A standardized reporting procedure may be established to identify the criteria for making an escalation; the information to be recorded; and the rules for secure sending of relevant evidence. This would help to remove inconsistencies in responses on the platform and enhance the inherent proof and investigation values of reports.

Mandatory Child-Centred POCSO Reporting in Digital Awareness Campaigns

There is a need to include clear, standardised and age-appropriate information, on reporting options regarding the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO) in digital awareness campaigns by government agencies, educational institutions and other organisations. It is important for the campaigns to state clearly in a simple manner where and how complaints can be made (such as helplines and online reporting avenues). A method of reporting-in information could be standardized in order to make things uniform for all campaigns. Care should be taken particularly for accessibility for children, parents, caregivers, and those children who are not very digitally literate.

Introduction of standardised QR complaints to the reporting mechanism.

Government agencies may be able to help mitigate day-to-day practical challenges in reporting to the unknown channels by using standard codes that can be scanned to directly access a verified child-protection reporting system. QR Codes could be used in schools, educational resources, public awareness activities, government websites and other suitable public facing resources. QR should be added on top of existing reporting mechanisms like Cyber Crime Reporting Portal, e-Box of POCSO and relevant Child Protection Helpline mechanisms and not be another reporting mechanism. Codes should be centrally managed and regularly updated to ensure they function correctly, don't get caught and aren't redirected to inappropriate links.

Risk Based Compliance Audits of Digital Platforms

Improved independent and risk-based compliance monitoring system to digital platforms is a possibility to consider. The competent statutory authority, within the scope of its duties and as consequently established in accordance with the provisions of the law and/or regulatory framework, may consider or coordinate periodic audit(s) for platforms that pose a significant risk to children. These types of evaluations can include reporting and grievance mechanisms, response times, how children's safety is ensured by settings, transition processes, transparency processes and adherence to legal requirements. There is a need to exercise a risk-based approach in the audit framework, not a one-size-fits-all basis. Where applicable, evidence might influence regulatory actions, corrective actions and recommendations.

Creation of inter-agency coordination and accountability mechanisms.

Obviously, the effectiveness of the digital child-protection framework relies on reporting avenues, but also on the coordination of the reporting platforms, law-enforcement agencies, child-protection institutions, and intermediary actors. A formal inter-agency coordinating mechanism can then be configured that would help introduce standard operating procedures to relate to referral, acknowledgement, evidence preservation, investigation & feedback. Measurable response indicators and clear institutional accountability would allow for resolution to continue with the avoidance of complaints being bounced between institutions.

Create measurable standards for Digital Child-Protection Responses

Last but not least, a system of standardized, measurable and evidence-based institutional performance criteria must be established within the regulatory framework. These can include proving and acknowledging complaints, referral timings, resolving the complaint, repeat complaints, platform track and how long it takes for the platform to respond and comply with

directions. Appropriate anonymisation and aggregation of data provided on a regular basis allowing for transparency, policy evaluation and evidence-based regulatory reform, while keeping the privacy and safety of children and complainants intact.

CONCLUSION

The position of awareness creation communication in POCSO is unique in marketing research. It aims to induce behaviour change in a public good, and the object of the research relates to children whose dignity, privacy, and safety are guaranteed by law. Neither rejecting marketing techniques nor letting persuasive effectiveness trample on the rights of children is the proper step. Rather, the goal of POCSO communication should be created at a nexus of social marketing, behavioral science, and legal governance.

An operational framework for this integration comes from the six-pillar RCF: legality; dignity and non-identifiability; efficacy-balanced persuasion; data minimization and child-safe targeting; audience co-design and pre-testing; and multi-stakeholder accountability. The framework also addresses a crucial legal misconception in the earlier version of this manuscript: the DPDP Act 2023 plus Rules 2025 introduce India's future child-data regime, with the substantive provisions applicable from 13 May 2027. Crafting a campaign that will be responsible should at least license that expectation, though.

Thus, the central proposition is simple: the effectiveness of a POCSO awareness campaign should not be determined by its volume of condemning messages but by how planned and effective it is for people to take protection measures. This is a chance to advance a unique parallel stream of socially responsible marketing towards the audiences who are subject to the law and are in vulnerable conditions. In policy and practice it provides a means of embedding legality with dignity for children and behaviour effectiveness within the same communication.

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