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APR 30 2015 BY BENAZIR SHAH

2 COMMENTS



Yasuyoshi Chiba—AFP

### SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE RETAIL ARE HELPING PAKISTANIS OVERCOME SOCIETAL TABOOS ABOUT CONTRACEPTION.

Contraceptives are a hard sell in conservative Pakistan. Public talk of sex is muted, and promotional campaigns advocating safe sex are far more likely to offend than educate their intended audience. Fortunately for manufacturers and retailers of condoms, they have a new weapon in their arsenal: social media.

DKT International, a U.S.-based non-profit, is at the forefront of an aggressive marketing campaign to educate Pakistanis of the perils of unprotected sex. For the past three years, the company has worked to identify the steps necessary to reach Pakistani couples—a noble goal that hasn't been without difficulties.

In 2013, Pakistani regulators yanked a DKT commercial from TV after accusing it of immorality. The waggish 50-second clip featured a newly married bride, played by controversial siren Mathira, who is eager to please her husband in the bedroom. The outrage was near instantaneous. Government censors said they received over 1,000 complaints against the advert, with some even claiming it promoted premarital sex. But even though the ad was only broadcast 10 times, its notoriety, and subsequent views on YouTube where it has been seen over 2 million times, helped double the company's sales.

Despite this success, DKT's latest campaign is playing it safe. "Initially, we even avoided using the word 'condom' in our ads," says Danish Amjad, the company's marketing manager. "We are also taking care to ensure the actors are clearly shown wearing wedding bands to emphasize their status as a married couple."

The company's new ads aim for subtlety. Last year, its campaign featured three men—and no women. It was broadcast only three times last year, but has been viewed by thousands online. A similar ad that premiered earlier this month shows a married couple with prominent wedding bands frolicking on the beach as a chorus of "Let the good times roll" plays in the background. According to Amjad, it is easier to have a more frank discussion about contraceptives on social media.

"No one in Pakistan talks about sexual health openly. Social media makes it easier for men and women to be vocal and frank. We get a lot of queries in our [Facebook] inbox. People especially want to know how they can improve their performance," he says.

Despite the growing perception of contraception, the market in Pakistan remains limited—especially for a country with a population of 200 million. According to UNICEF, only 27 percent of Pakistanis use contraceptives. DKT International and Green Star—which works with the Government of Pakistan—are the two major companies targeting middle- and low-income Pakistanis through radio and print ads. Their prices are also fiercely competitive, with some brands selling for as low as Rs. 15.

But no amount of marketing or low pricing is enough to ease squeamish Pakistanis from buying condoms at neighborhood pharmacies. Nosy retailers can make the situation even worse by demanding to know if the buyer is married. "I was buying condoms for a friend ahead of her bachelorette party," says one woman who chose to remain anonymous. "As soon as I asked for condoms, the retailer pointedly looked at my [ring-less] finger, and I had to repeatedly explain that I was buying them for a 'married' friend." Men find the experience no easier. "It has to be a point, buy, and run interaction with minimal communication," says a 25-year-old college student.

To ease this problem, and hopefully encourage contraceptive use, online retailers have stepped in to fill the gap. In addition to DKT's own online shop, customers can also purchase contraceptives from Karachi-based condomshop.pk.

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Launched in 2013 by Husain Karrar, a 30-year-old entrepreneur who also runs a pharmaceutical company, condomshop offers customers 80 different kinds of adult products. To reduce potential embarrassment, the purchased goods are delivered in plain packaging and anonymity is guaranteed. "We guarantee that not even the person delivering your order will know what is in the box," reads the online policy statement.

According to Karrar, business isn't exactly booming but remains consistent. He says the online shop receives around 12 orders every day—mostly from Karachi and Lahore. "Our highest selling products are delay sprays, creams and delay condoms," he told *Newsweek* via email. "For Pakistani couples, especially men, performance seems to be very important."

But even the online retailer takes care to remain within the bounds of Pakistan's societal conventions. A disclaimer on the website states that the shop targets only married couples and on checkout, customers are asked to confirm that they are of legal age and wedded.

"We are not there yet... to openly talk about sex," says DKT's Amjad. "But we're getting there. It could take us another five years. People used to change the channel whenever adverts for sanitary napkins were broadcast. That has changed. This will too."

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#### 2 COMMENTS



MalikSaabSays 4 YEARS AGO

(Reply)

Talking openly about sex is not the problem, rather it is the judgementalism that genuine couples have to undergo when going for such options. Political discourse takes most of the time of this country's talkshows leaving no time to discuss these issues with appropriate attention. Ofcourse nobody wants to be associated with promoting sex-outside-marriage, thus the high judgementalism. (this is analysis not justification)



Saleem Raza 4 YEARS AGO

(Reply)

I'm happy to see people finally talking about sex and sexual health openly. For something so natural and which affects each and every one of us, it is highly unhealthy to suppress discussion on it. More power to DKT and CondomShop.pk for pushing the boundaries and getting people to talk about this subject.

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