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TV ADVERTISING AS A CONSUMER EDUCATION TOOL IN THE CURRENT ROMANIAN SOCIETY

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calinrazvanalexandru@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6677-2911>*Motto: „Tell me what you consume so I can tell you who you are!”*

ABSTRACT

We are born and live in a consumer society whose functional principles revolve around the economic model of demand and supply proposed by Antoine Augustin Cournot since 1838.

However, as we move towards modernity, the principles that govern the referred model have taken on nuances, so that nowadays, through tools such as advertising, the determinations and the meaning of causality have reversed, so that the offer contributes, sometimes decisively, to building the demand.

Taking into consideration this observation, the present research paper reveals the results of a longitudinal study based on the method of the systematic observation through which the advertising broadcast coming from ten representative Romanian television stations was monitored for three months, during three different extents of time, which were considered to be the more significant.

The final results, grouped into a list of the main categories of the advertised products, allowed the formulation of a set of conclusions regarding the "desirable" profile of the Romanian consumer from the perspective of the economic entities that finance the advertising campaigns. The interpretations of the results of our exploratory approach highlight the impact of advertisements on the formation of consumer preferences and consumption habits and, implicitly, on the direction of the general evolution of Romanian society.

Keywords: Advertising; Social impact; Training; Consumer

INTRODUCTION

We constantly develop ourselves as a result of the direct or indirect influences of three great determining factors: heredity, environment and education. At the beginning of our journey in this initiatory trip that life represents, we are given a small baggage containing the instruments and hereditary potentialities, which during the journey may or may not be used, developed or preserved, depending on the influences exerted by the whole assembly of experiences we have gone through or have learned about.

This is where our evolution would end if education did not intervene, as a human activity specialized in development, which connects the development potential proposed by heredity (what could be) and the environment's offer of possibilities (what is offered) (Iacob, 1999).

In this equation, there are perceived plenty of direct and indirect, intentional and unintentional, conscious and unconscious influences exerted by the mass media as a socio-economic phenomenon, part of social life with a significant impact on our formation as members of the society.

About the more or less assumed role of the mass media on influencing the development path of each of us, there have been expressed multiple opinions over time in some studies elaborated on the subject (Voinea, 2015; Vlăduțescu, 2013; Negrea, 2014, Dadacheva, 2023, Zulfahmi, 2022, Hannan, Hussain & Tab, 2023 etc.).

The base of these influences is represented by communication, operation perceived as a transactional process "through which people transfer energies, emotions, feelings and change meanings. It always has a purpose, that is making the interlocutor feel, think or behave in a certain way, and therefore implies an act of influence, of mutual influence between the actors who take part in the act of communication" (Călin & Bunăiașu, 2010).

From the perspective of our study, mass communication gains importance as a particular form of communication aimed at large audiences, an undifferentiated, unorganized public composed of physically separated individuals who do not have the opportunity to communicate with each other and react alike.

"In mass communication, the transmitter (communicator or gate-keeper) is represented by groups of people specialized in producing types of messages, organized in complex institutions, carrying out activities bearing the mark of industrial production processes" (Călin & Bunăiașu, 2010).

This whole influencing process is carried out by means of some tools, among which advertising occupies a privileged place. It manifests itself at the level of all means of mass communication (printed press, radio, television, cinema, posters etc.) and mainly exercises two of the five functions specific to the mass media: informative, respectively instructive - educational.

ABOUT MARKETING, ADVERTISING AND FORMATION

Undoubtedly, we live in a world where decisions (strategic, political, or social) are based on economic reasons. And for the global economy to function, it is absolutely necessary for resources to exist and therefore be transformed into products that can be consumed.

Consumption and advertising are inseparable partners in this equation, and the solution lies in the paradigm shift from need (predominantly rational) to desire (predominantly emotional). The psychological transformation of a desire (which is essentially nonessential for our physical existence) into a need (perceived as such only in the psychological realm, as targeted by our study) is the key to advertising success, an objective that, once achieved, must be subsequently maintained, with advertising playing a decisive role in both cases.

A distinction of terms is required here.

We understand advertising as "the act of making something known to the public (through written dissemination or through oral reports transmitted from person to person); dissemination of information to the public through mass media; the quality of being public" (DEX, 2009).

There are numerous studies and approaches regarding advertising, and listing them all would be unnecessary from the perspective of the objectives we aim to achieve in the context of this investigative endeavor. However, we cannot overlook some of the viewpoints expressed by several specialists in the field.

We draw attention to a typology formulated by Dan Petre and Mihaela Nicola, which distinguishes various types of advertising based on criteria such as the target group of the advertising campaign, the campaign's purpose, the type of goods for which communication is carried out, the type of message, or the type of communication channel. Of interest to us is the psychological mechanism criteria used to persuade consumers, and based on these criteria, the types of rational, mechanistic, integrative, and psychodynamic advertising are being highlighted (Petre & Nicola, 2004).

Although it covers a large part of the existing spectrum of advertising, the emotional mechanisms frequently used today to influence consumers' desired behaviours are not emphasized, despite the obvious emotional impact experienced when exposed to advertising.

Neuromarketing is the discipline that has been developed and has helped advertising agencies make the significant transition from rational arguments to emotional motivators. When advertising creators succeed in evoking appropriate emotions in consumers, they establish "useful" (non-rational) connections between the brand and the individuals in the commercial, between characters and consumers, and between the imaginary situations/contexts presented and the real situations experienced or dreamed of by consumers. The ultimate goal is to increase preference for the brand, create sympathy for the product, and ultimately positively influence the decision to purchase/consume the marketed product (Ciobotaru, 2018).

Moreover, the correct choice of emotional motivators for consumption, whether they relate to an individual's need for survival or their desire to thrive or stand out, is crucial in ensuring the development of a positive consumer attitude towards advertising, with direct consequences for its effectiveness. Liking the commercial develops a positive attitude towards the brand and increases the intention to purchase the product (Mitchell & Olson, 1981).

It becomes obvious, therefore, that all types of emotional calls have a stronger effect on consumers compared to non-emotional ones (Ciobotaru, 2018). And in cases where emotion gains ground, reason loses.

The importance of emotions as behavioral determinants are emphasized by Mick Williamson, whose study highlights their primacy over reason in the context of passive viewing of advertising clips (Williamson, 2002).

On the other hand, when viewed as a form of advertising, "the commercial" is perceived as a "commercial activity aimed at arousing and capturing public interest in certain goods, books, shows, the use of services, etc., through advertising (through print, radio, television, cinema, etc.). The spread of commendatory information (about someone or something) with the aim of creating reputation or popularity. 2. Article (in a publication), poster, billboard, panel, prospectus, etc., used for advertising" (DEX, www.dexonline.ro, 2009).

There are multiple taxonomies of advertising, and authors such as Gheorghe Teodorescu or Dan Petre highlight criteria and subtle differentiations (Teodorescu & Bejan, 2003; Petre & Iliescu, 2008).

It is worth noting that, in general, the classification of types of advertising corresponds to that of publicity since advertisements are the final product of advertising communication. Relevant to our study is the criteria of the mediatic channel (distinguishing between TV and cinema commercials, radio spots, print press layouts, indoor/outdoor billboards, digital media banners, and advertisements created on unconventional supports for BTL activities) and the type of message (which distinguishes between rational and emotional advertisements) (www.creeaza.com, n.d.).

Multiple studies highlight the significant, intentional or unintentional, impact that advertisements have on consumers, that are viewed as a current or a future market. Notably and alarmingly, there is an increasingly evident trend of "commercializing childhood," a phenomenon illustrated by the 2008 film "Consuming Kids - The Commercialization of Childhood," which describes the main unethical practices used in advertising, with the sole purpose of selling any product to children through any means (Potra, 2008).

The effectiveness of advertisements, therefore, becomes the primary objective that revolves around rules such as simplicity, ingenuity, content, story, and interesting subjects (www.reclama-pitesti.ro).

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Clearly, taking an analytical overview of all these points of view becomes enlightening from the perspective of understanding the impact that advertising and commercials have on shaping the profile of a consumer.

The seriousness of this conclusion gains additional weight when considering that once a particular consumer typology is formed, it will "ask" to receive what he already "needs."

This is where the present study comes in, attempting to establish what types of consumers are currently formed through advertisements, to bring the consequences consciously or unconsciously associated with the acceptance, support, and promotion of different product categories through advertising, as well as the methods/ways/techniques used in designing advertisements, to the forefront of ethical debates in the decision-making area of institutions regulating the field of advertising.

The investigation of these product categories proposed for consumption through advertisements was conducted through a longitudinal study that lasted three months, carried out from September to November 2022. In practice, 30 students (observers) monitored the advertising segments from 10 television stations with the highest audience ratings in Romania (according to the audience barometer of the website www.paginademedias.ro).

In the selection of the monitored tv stations, it was taken into account the type of programs/productions of these stations (entertainment, news, sports), considering the criteria of the diversity of viewers' options/interests (active or passive consumers of advertisements).

The list of the 10 tv stations resulting from the selection is: ProTV, Antena 1, Kanal D, România TV, Antena 3, TVR 1, Prima TV, Digi 24, Digi Sport 1, and Eurosport 1.

The 30 students were divided into groups of 3 observers for each TV station and they monitored 3-time segments (07:00-10:00, 17:00-20:00, and 21:00-24:00), writing down the type of product advertised during these time intervals.

The method used was a systematic observation, and the results were recorded in an observation grid filled out during the observational process.

This grid was structured into multiple sections, each corresponding to a monitored item. The items we focused on in our study were:

1. The type of product advertised.
2. Rational or emotional "arguments" used in the advertisements.
3. Remarks/comments from the observers, based on the type of advertisements and commercials monitored.

Weekly, the data resulting from each observer's observation sheet, including their notes, were compared with those of the other two observers to validate the accuracy of the recording and confirm the correctness of categorizing each advertised product.

We would like to state that our study did not aim to identify the types of products advertised on each television station separately, nor did it focus on determining the predominant time intervals for advertisements of specific product categories, although these differentiations can lead to conclusions of certain relevance.

Our goal was to establish the dominant categories of products that are the subject of advertisements, in the context of which, as we have determined, one of the main objectives of advertising campaigns is to shape and educate the consumer audience, ultimately turning them into loyal customers of those products.

As a result of the observational process, we obtained a list of advertised products, which we decided to present in a centralized manner by combining the data collected from observing all the tv-stations included in our study.

The resulting dimensions were collated, redundant entries were eliminated, and a list of product types advertised was generated, ranked in the order of their frequency of appearance during the three-month period of our research.

The list of product categories and their ranking is presented in the following table.

| Product categories present in commercials | Streaming frequency (%) | Rank |
|--|--------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>Medication (dietary supplements, medical devices)</i> | 20 | 1 |
| <i>Pharmacies</i> | 16 | 2 |
| <i>Sports betting and gambling establishments (including online)</i> | 15 | 3 |
| <i>Cleaning and cosmetic products (personal care)</i> | 12 | 4 |
| <i>Supermarket chains</i> | 10 | 5 |
| <i>Food (excluding supermarket category)</i> | 8 | 6 |
| <i>Clothing items (including online sales)</i> | 5 | 7 |
| <i>Alcoholic beverages</i> | 4 | 8 |
| <i>Automobiles</i> | 3 | 9 |
| <i>Phones and mobile phone companies</i> | 2 | 10 |

Table 1 – Categories of products present in commercials

Before drawing a series of conclusions and issuing any potential hypotheses, several clarifications need to be made.

First and foremost, the presented list was limited to the top ten product categories advertised in Romania. Advertising moments that promoted other TV programs within the observed TV channels were excluded. Similarly, moments that involved "product placement" within shows were not included, as only the designated advertising intervals marked by the participating TV channels were monitored during the study.

Although the observational process took place throughout December 2022, the dates from this month were excluded from the analysis. The analysis revealed specific characteristics related to the winter holiday season, which, in our opinion, could have distorted the results and, consequently, the conclusions of the research.

Furthermore, following the discussions within the working group, it was agreed that Cosmetic Products and Cleaning Products would be merged into a single category related to personal care and household products. Similarly, the categories of Sports Betting and Gambling were also combined.

CONCLUSIONS AND OPENINGS

"The eye only sees what the mind is prepared to comprehend".¹

Our journey highlights advertising as a "persuasive form of communication, aiming to modify the attitudes of recipients towards the acquisition of a specific product or service, whose advertised qualities are real" (Petre & Nicola, 2004, p. 4).

Advertising educates. However, there is such a fine line between advertising and education that it is often difficult to distinguish. Both seek to modify, change, and shape beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors through the presentation of information. Both aim to engage the viewer, to identify/construct a specific need, and subsequently provide a solution. To achieve their own objectives, both of them strive to obtain a captive audience, a public that is only "released" at the end. However, the greater the need a person has for the presented information, the more inappropriate/unethical it is to offer them advertising instead of education (Downes & Neal, 2008).

We all have at least one opinion (if not a belief) regarding how the surrounding advertising influences our lives and determines the decisions underlying the purchase of one product or another. Our investigative approach aimed, as it was designed and implemented, to eliminate, as much as possible, this subjectivity and to highlight, whether we like it or not, where we currently stand and, more importantly, where we will likely end up as consumers, considering the "education" we receive in this regard.

In general, advertisements and advertising have the stated goal of persuading the public about various aspects, therefore bringing into discussion the concept of persuasion. In fact, based on the intended purposes and the nuances and distinctions between three forms of communication, namely persuasion (which seeks to satisfy the

¹ Henri Bergson.

common interests of the sender and receiver), propaganda (which only pursues the goals of the sender), and manipulation (where only the goals of the sender are pursued, leading to undesirable consequences for the receiver), it is evident that the advertising and commercials present in the Romanian market, the techniques of neuromarketing employed, and the low level of ethics and civic responsibility cause them to approach and take on forms closer to manipulation than to persuasion.

From the analysis of the final picture, as presented in Table 1, we cannot help but notice that the top two positions, representing the products most frequently advertised in Romania, are medications and drug stores. During the observational process, there were even periods when one out of two commercials was about these products! A more in-depth analysis of these advertisements reveals a series of implemented psychological practices that, in our opinion, surpass the realm of ethics. The commercials heavily incorporate messages with emotional impact (children, family, elderly people, emotionally charged life situations, etc.), whose sole purpose is to deviate from rational decision-making and appeal to the subconscious and emotional level.

We strongly support the idea that advertisements for any type of medication, pharmacy, or medical device lack ethics and responsibility on the part of the decision-makers. It is evident that access to such products should only be available through a family doctor or specialist, similar to the approach in most other European countries that prioritize the safety and health of their citizens.

Equally concerning is the placement of sports betting and gambling advertisements in third place. It is well-known that engaging in such activities is addictive, and the consequences for individuals and families who consume these products are extremely negative. In this context, we express our concern regarding the lack of reaction and responsibility from the state entities whose mission is to ensure the financial, familial, and psychological well-being of people.

From the evaluations of remarks noted by observers in the dedicated column, we can observe a suspicious overlap of advertising periods on similar TV stations, which may lead us to suspect a synchronization between them. The undisclosed but evident goal seems to be to prevent viewers from migrating from one station to another in an attempt to avoid the advertising segment. In this way, the viewer is "captured" and "obligated" to watch a section of commercials, whether on the same station or another.

Based on the products found in our table (only 5% of the total advertisements during the evaluated period refer to anything other than the indicated categories!), we can say, without great risk of being wrong, that the present and perhaps future generations will predominantly be consumers (not producers, value generators) with questionable health education, and with addictions (such as gambling, compulsive shopping, or eating) as (improper) solutions to the problems they face. Their path to individual and social success will be predominantly directed towards chance and luck, and less towards effort and education.

This entire motivational process, of transforming an idea (product) into desire, then into a (subconsciously imagined, non-essential) need, only to be satisfied through consumption, is nothing more than a form of manipulation aimed at constructing a certain profile of consumers, often addicted and incapable of rational thinking.

Advertising, whether intentionally or not, shapes. It shapes needs, tastes, and ideals. The question that we formulate as the final conclusion of this study is: Does it do so in an ethical, assumed, and responsible manner?

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