

<https://doi.org/10.52326/mled2025.10>

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF SHOCK ADVERTISING

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Adnotare: Articolul explorează conceptul de reclamă de șoc, punând accent pe impactul său asupra percepției consumatorilor. Se pornește de la înțelesul general al termenului „șoc” și se face trecerea spre utilizarea sa în domeniul publicității, unde este definit ca o strategie de comunicare ce intenționează să atragă atenția prin încălcarea normelor sociale și provocarea unor reacții emoționale puternice. Autorul evidențiază că eficiența acestei forme de reclamă este influențată de factori culturali, personali și contextuali, iar literatura de specialitate tratează mai ales efectele imediate ale acestor mesaje, acordând mai puțină atenție impactului pe termen lung. Sunt prezentate diferențe în percepția publicității șocante, în funcție de profilul consumatorului, și se subliniază lipsa unei abordări holistice în studiile existente. Articolul oferă o bază teoretică solidă pentru analizarea efectelor reclamei de șoc în context social și comercial.

Cuvinte-cheie: Reclama de șoc, contexte publicitare, comportamentul consumatorului.

Abstract: The article explores the concept of shock advertising, focusing on its impact on consumer perception. It begins with the general meaning of the term "shock" and transitions into its application in advertising, where it is defined as a communication strategy that deliberately breaks social norms to provoke strong emotional reactions and capture attention. The author highlights that the effectiveness of this approach is influenced by cultural, personal, and contextual factors. The literature mostly addresses the short-term effects of shock messages, with limited research on their long-term impact. Differences in how consumers perceive shocking advertisements are presented, depending on their background and personal characteristics. The article emphasizes the lack of a holistic approach in current research and provides a solid theoretical foundation for analyzing the effects of shock advertising in both social and commercial contexts.

Keywords: Shock advertising, advertising contexts, consumer behavior.

Introduction

The term shock is a priority in the concept of shock advertising. It can have several meanings and uses in various contexts, but, in general, it refers to a sudden state of surprise, disorientation, or emotional and physical disturbance. The definition of shock, which would be relevant to the researched field, establishes that shock is “a general, sudden, and violent disturbance of the body’s functions (caused by a varied external cause)”, which manifests itself through a physical and psychological imbalance, usually caused by a strong emotion and generating a sudden and more intense reaction [1].

At the same time, researchers in the field argue that shock advertising can be a much more effective means of attracting consumer attention and memorizing the message compared to traditional promotional methods, but they have emphasized that an individual's culture, beliefs, and personal values are factors that could influence responses to shock advertising and the perceived level of offense [2].

The analysis of the specialized literature shows that the impact of various types of shock on consumer behavior is less studied. There are divergences and contradictory opinions regarding the factors that would influence consumer reactions in various contexts and the effectiveness of shock advertising in the commercial and social fields, more attention is paid to the analysis of the

immediate impact of shock tactics in advertising and less is studied the sustainability or long-term impact of this communication strategy. Previous studies describe the components of shock advertising in isolation and less investigate the concept depending on the socio-economic context through a holistic approach.

Theoretical delimitation of the concept of shock advertising

When addressing the elements of shock in advertising, a term is particularly frequently used - shock advertising. Dahl (2003), one of the most cited authors of shock advertising, defined it as "a deliberate attempt to surprise an audience and, therefore, to violate societal norms and values and personal ideas in order to capture the attention of a target audience" or it can be advertising "that conflicts with established expectations, norms and behaviors" [3, p.269].

Some consumers perceive the entire message when they see an advertisement, others have emotions related to objective associations and memorize the emotional stimuli of the advertisement, and others focus their attention on the execution of the advertisement. Studies show that even siblings can interpret an advertising message differently due to different interests and life experience [4, p.37]. The results of studies demonstrate that the use of provocative, controversial or offensive advertisements captures the attention of consumers, but not all of them are understood by the target audience.

Consumers' reaction to shock advertising according to Dahl's model is explained in fig.1.1.

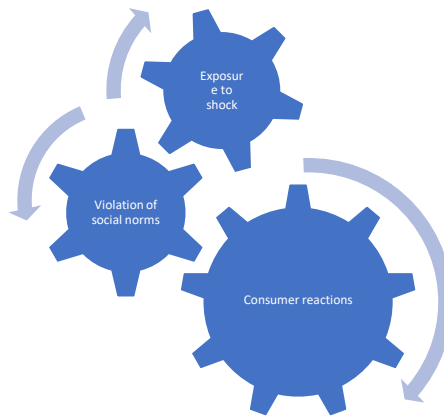


Figure 1.1. Dahl's model of reactions consumers to shock tactics in advertising

Source: Dahl et al.

The aspect of violating social norms and values is the determining factor underlying advertising's ability to break patterns and capture the attention of the target audience. The initial processing of advertising information involves a cognitive assessment that determines whether the advertisement has violated a social and/or personal norm.

Any object or event (such as an advertisement) that contradicts established expectations or patterns can take the target audience by surprise. The element of surprise is a significant part of the process because it triggers the processing of advertising information and draws attention to the stimulus and the new event. By focusing attention on the stimulus that causes the shock, the element of surprise encourages further and more detailed processing of the advertising content, an idea that is also supported by studies in the field. Empirical research conducted in international practice shows that people engage in deeper thinking about unexpected events than about ordinary and expected ones. Therefore, the element of surprise encourages continued cognitive activity, as people want to understand and explain the source of their amazement. Further processing of advertising information takes the form of cognitive understanding of the message and the development and generation of thoughts and ideas related to the product or brand [5, p.271].

Empirical research indicates that the promoted object and tactics with various stimuli encourage cognitive processes that have a strong effect on memory, so shocking advertising content attracts attention and provokes cognitive processing and is more likely to provoke behavioral reactions.

Williams suggested that shock advertising is useful because it triggers the most sensitive part of consumer perception, namely emotions [6]. The research results highlight two types of

emotional tactics: positive and negative emotional stimuli. Positive emotional stimuli have a beneficial impact on the audience in terms of changing behavior. However, only three stimuli—humor, rationality, and values—elicit positive emotions. Of the 13 tactics identified in the literature, seven types of tactics were found to elicit positive emotions and three elicited mixed emotions, both positive and negative. For example, highway safety advertisements usually evoke negative emotional responses, such as the broadcasting of incidents and collisions. If positive emotions are triggered, the audience may not take this seriously and, as a result, may not change their behavior. Theoretical research based on specialized literature published abroad has allowed us to conclude that there is no unanimity in the classification of shock tactics and that a holistic approach to shock advertising is lacking. By generalizing the defining elements and characteristics of shock advertising with the classification of shock tactics, we propose a schematic model that, in the author's view, represents the typology of shock tactics.

To achieve the desired impact, commercial and non-profit organizations must try to understand how people react emotionally to various types of shock tactics. It is important to conduct market research, testing, and evaluation to better understand how the impact of shock advertising can vary depending on these factors, to ensure that it is used effectively and responsibly.

Shock advertising is a conscious attempt to shock the consumer by violating the social, cultural, moral, and religious values of society. Analysis of scientific literature shows that active discussion of the purpose of shock advertising and its impact on consumer behavior has attracted the attention of many researchers and remains relevant today. Researcher Williams states that shock is an effective means of capturing attention and a quick way to communicate a message for any organization. In his studies, Fendley notes that shock advertising attracts media interest and puts the company's name in the public spotlight. Dahl predicts that shocking messages are used to draw attention to an advertisement in the hope of not only noticing it but also continuing to be aware of the issue. On the other hand, there are discussions about the scope of use of shock tactics and whether they can be used for non-profit organizations for social purposes [5, p.268-269].

The literature has shown that consumers' positive or negative attitudes toward shock advertising can be affected by cultural and socio-demographic factors such as religiosity, age, moral code of conduct, gender, individualism, and collectivism. The theoretical model is based on socio-cultural and demographic factors, consumer purchasing behavior, and consumer perceptions of shock advertising. These elements can have different impacts depending on the context of use, they may have different impacts in social and commercial context (Fig.1.2.).

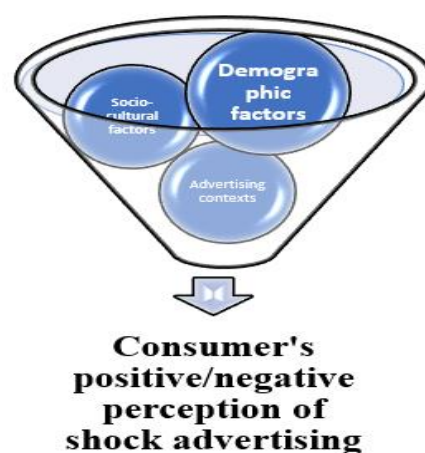


Figure 1.2. Factors influencing consumer perception of shock advertising

Source: developed by the author

The demographic and socio-cultural factors that can influence consumer attitudes and actions after viewing shock advertising relate to:

1. Age—there are differences in how shocking ads are perceived by consumers of different ages; younger consumers tend to have a more positive opinion of shock tactics than older people. This was also confirmed by Hwa and Prendergast, who concluded that people over the age of 40

were more likely to refuse to buy products promoted through shock advertising than younger people. Barry and Brugiére highlighted that younger consumers may have a more positive attitude toward offensive advertising and will not have a negative attitude toward purchasing the product [7].

2. Gender – it has been shown that women and men may react differently to the same shock tactics; for example, nudity may be perceived much more neutrally by women than by men, while indecent images involving children may have a much stronger impact on women due to their maternal instinct. Differences may arise not only in reactions to various shock tactics, but also in the intensity of the shock. The level of shock may be higher in women because they are more emotional and influenced to a greater extent by social norms. There are differences between men's and women's reactions to nudity used in advertising. It was found that female nudity tended to be rated as very interesting and attractive more by men. On the other hand, advertisements featuring fully clothed men and women elicited only mild reactions, advertisements with sexual suggestions tended to elicit stronger cognitive reactions in women, who generally rated the advertisements as more offensive, less appealing, and less interesting as the degree of suggestion increased. Because the sample was small, the methods chosen allowed for analysis of the intensity but not the valence of consumer reactions to sexual references based on consumer gender.

3. Religion – religious aspects have a major impact on consumer reactions to shock advertising. Sabri et al. conducted research analyzing how religion can affect consumer behavior in the case of shocking or offensive advertising. The authors concluded that for more religious people, the level of acceptance of shock advertising and the promoted product is lower, and the reaction is more negative. This is especially true for Muslim countries. Sabri's research showed that shocking advertising arouses feelings of guilt, dishonor, and confusion among customers in Morocco, who claim that such advertisements violate religious norms and that viewing them is a sin. Consumers in France showed a predominantly positive attitude toward the same shock tactics in advertising, being less religious. The conclusion of this study is that religious consumers have a negative reaction to shock advertising and will not accept it [8, p.217].

4. Moral principles – personal ethical and moral values can influence consumers' reactions to shocking advertising; the more they are influenced by society's ethical and moral rules in their behavior, the greater the level of shock and the more negative the reaction. It depends on consumers' individual perceptions, attitudes, and social behavior.

In the studies analyzed, an important role is attributed to cultural factors. These can significantly differentiate how people interpret and respond to provocative or controversial elements in an advertisement. It is important to note that these cultural dimensions provide only a general perspective and there are variations and subtleties within each culture. Further research, testing, and evaluation are needed to better understand how the impact of shock advertising can vary depending on these factors independently, but also in combination with other demographic factors such as gender, religion, culture, and the moral principles of each individual. The following cultural aspects that can influence the perception of shock advertising are most frequently mentioned in the literature:

- Cultural norms and values - each culture has its own norms and values, and this influence what is considered acceptable or unacceptable in advertising. Certain topics or images may be taboo in one culture, while in others they may be tolerated or even appreciated. Shock advertising that violates cultural values or deviates from existing norms may be rejected or even condemned by the public;

- Cultural sensitivities - different cultures may have different sensitivities to certain topics or images. Elements considered shocking or offensive in one culture may be considered normal or even humorous in another. For example, advertisements involving religion, sexuality, or cultural traditions may be perceived differently depending on the cultural context.

- Ethics and morality - the perception of shocking advertisements may be influenced by a culture's ethical and moral codes. Certain elements of shock may be considered exploitative or manipulative, while others may be perceived as legitimate means of attracting attention and

conveying a message. A culture's ethical and moral standards can play an important role in the evaluation and acceptance of shock advertising.

- **History and traditions** - Shock advertising can be influenced by the history and traditions of a culture. Certain events or experiences in the past may make certain topics or images more sensitive or less acceptable in advertising. Knowledge of the cultural context and historical sensitivities can help avoid negative or offensive reactions from the public.

- **Cultural diversity** - in an increasingly globalized world, shock advertising can be broadcast in various markets with different cultures. It is important to understand and respect cultural diversity to avoid stereotypes or discrimination in advertising. Adapting shock advertising to the specific cultural context can be essential to achieving a positive impact and acceptance among the public.

The model that includes the synthesis of factors that may influence consumer response to shock advertising is illustrated in Fig. 1.3. It is important to note that studies in the field most often refer to the cultural variable of individualism/collectivism in analyzing the cultural impact on consumer perceptions of shock advertising. Thus, Fam and Waller compared the acceptance of potentially offensive products in four Asia-Pacific countries. The results emphasized the influence of individualism on the perception of offensive products. In New Zealand (an individualistic culture), consumers perceived all four product groups (political products, addictive products, sex-related products, and healthcare products) as less offensive than those in Malaysia, Taiwan, and China, countries with a high level of collectivism, so audiences in collectivist societies would be less likely to accept advertising that violates social norms.

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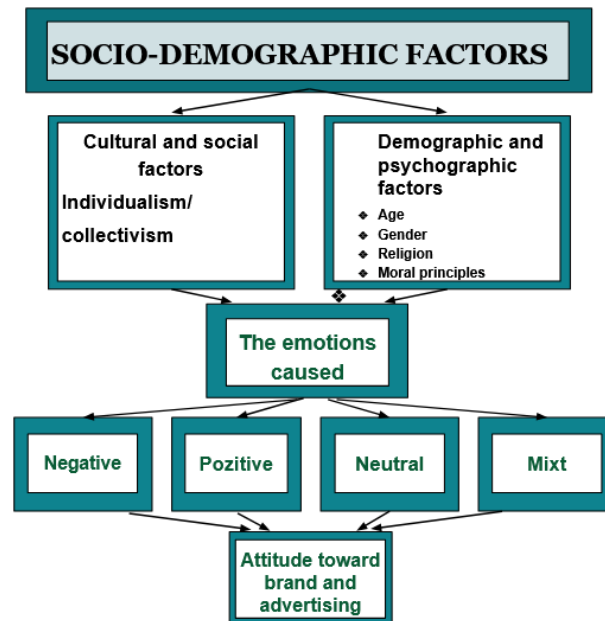


Figure 1.3. Factors that can influence consumers' attitude towards shock advertising

Source: Developed by the author

An important aspect to consider when analyzing the influence of shock advertising on consumers is the context of its use. Opponents of shock tactics in advertising accuse the creators of shocking advertisements of emotional manipulation and commercializing social issues, while supporters of the phenomenon analyze the factors that determine shock in advertising and seek to determine how they affect the emotions and behavior of the public. However, there is no unanimous opinion among marketing specialists on this issue.

In the discussion on the impact of shock advertising on consumer emotions and behavior, it was concluded that the nature and intensity of consumer response is determined by different advertising contexts. When creating commercial or social advertising, the same shock techniques and methods of influencing consumers are used; however, the purpose of advertising in the two contexts is fundamentally different. Research results show that consumers are more susceptible to shocking advertising in a social context than in a commercial one. Social advertising is intended to educate society, change attitudes, promote and enhance social welfare, and thus is used to solve problems in one way or another related to the actions of an individual as a member of society. Social advertisements are most used in areas such as health care, environmental protection, damage prevention, and the promotion of social initiatives and involvement, and are focused on changing and shaping social behavior stereotypes. Non-profit organizations use provocative images to explain the causes of social problems, shocking society to elicit a certain response, reaction to the problem, awareness of the social issue, or behavioral change.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the use of shock tactics in advertising can be effective in certain situations,

but it must be used with caution and in a balanced manner to avoid the risk of negatively impacting the brand's image and its relationship with the public. In analyzing the impact of shock advertising on consumer emotions and behavior, the literature mentions that the nature and intensity of consumer response is determined by the demographic and socio-cultural factors of the target segments, as well as by different advertising contexts. The intensity of shock in advertising messages perceived by women is higher than that perceived by men. The type and intensity of consumer response is determined by the advertising contexts in which shock tactics are used. Research results show that people are more susceptible to shock advertising in a social context than in a commercial one, with a greater impact on informing, raising awareness of issues, and changing behavior.

Research and practices in the use of shock advertising outline the following advantages: a higher level of consumer attention, better message recall, differentiation among competitors, the creation of special interest through strong emotional reactions, and in some cases, it can contribute to promoting brand or product awareness. While shock advertising has the potential to be effective in capturing attention and generating impact, it can also be controversial and attract criticism from those who consider it excessive, insensitive, or manipulative. Therefore, it is important to approach the use of shock advertising with care and responsibility and to consider the following risks: such advertisements may be perceived as aggressive or offensive, which can negatively affect the brand's image and cause the public to stop buying the promoted product, violation of ethical and moral standards can lead to complaints from the public and fines from the authorities. The public may become immune to such advertising messages after a certain period of time, and a change of tactics may be necessary to maintain public attention. Studies show that people are less likely to choose and buy products from a company that uses offensive advertising if there are similar products offered by a company that uses traditional advertising.

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