

CARACTERISTICS AND FACTORS INFLUENCING THE USE OF SHOCK TACTICS IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL AND COMMERCIAL ADVERTISING

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Abstract: For the national context, shock advertising is a relatively new field, little studied, but attracting increasing attention from both theorists and practitioners who are looking for innovative methods of communication. Research paper has focused on defining the elements and particularities of shock advertising, concluding that it must "intentionally and unexpectedly violate social norms for consumers", surprise and create negative emotions. Reviewing the diversity of theoretical concepts, the author develops a proper definition and a conceptual model of shock advertising. The research methodology focused on a complex approach and was based on the use of several scientific methods, such as: documentary analysis, synthesis, scientific abstraction, induction, deduction, systemic approach and comparative analysis. This stage of the methodological approach made it possible to substantiate the conceptual and theoretical framework of shock advertising and its impact on consumers. In analyzing the impact of advertising shock on consumer emotions and behavior, the literature states that the nature and intensity of consumer reaction 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 in men. The type and intensity of consumer reaction is determined by the advertising contexts in which shock tactics are used.

Keywords: shock tactics, shock advertising, consumer behavior, cultural factors

JEL Classification: M1, M3

1 Introduction

In pursuit of exceptionality and persuasion, advertising agencies often use innovative strategies to create messages that shock consumers by provoking strong negative emotions. This approach cuts through traditional advertising clutter to reach existing or potential customers. Since the 1980s, shock advertising has been studied and applied to enhance communication strategies. However, research in this field has been fragmented and primarily focused on defining the theoretical concept of shock advertising. It is generally agreed that shock advertising must intentionally and unexpectedly break social norms, surprise consumers, and evoke negative emotions.

Four decades after the initial attempts to use shock tactics in advertising, a review of the literature reveals limited research on the impact of different types of shock on consumer behavior. There are divergent views in the international literature regarding the factors that influence consumer reactions and the effectiveness of shock advertising in both commercial and social contexts. While previous studies tend to describe components of shock advertising in isolation, less attention has been paid to

the sustainability or long-term impact of this strategy. Additionally, few studies have examined the role of socio-economic context in shock advertising through a holistic approach.

In the national context, shock advertising is still in its early stages of use and remains understudied. Nevertheless, it is gaining interest from theorists and practitioners who seek innovative communication methods or aim to adapt international best practices locally. Given the rapidly evolving advertising environment, it is crucial to investigate and understand the defining elements of shock tactics in advertising, as these elements can profoundly influence consumer attention, reactions, and behaviors.

2 Theoretical considerations and characteristics of shock advertising in contemporary marketing

2.1 Definitions, elements and characteristics of shock advertising

To define "shock advertising," it's essential to understand the terms "advertising" and "shock." According to the explanatory dictionary of the Romanian language, advertising is "a commercial activity aimed at arousing public interest in certain goods or services through various media." Publicity is defined as "the action of making something known to the public; dissemination of information."

The term "shock" is central to shock advertising. Although it has various meanings across contexts, it generally refers to a sudden state of surprise, disorientation, or emotional disturbance. In a relevant definition, shock is described as "a sudden, violent disturbance of bodily functions caused by external factors," which leads to physical and psychological imbalance, often resulting from a strong emotion. Research in the field has focused on defining shock advertising as a strategy that deliberately and unexpectedly violates social norms to attract consumer attention. Studies suggest that shock advertising can be more effective at capturing attention and making messages memorable than traditional methods. However, individual factors such as culture, beliefs, and values can influence consumer responses and perceptions of offense.

Despite extensive literature on shock tactics, there is limited research on the long-term effects of various types of shock on consumer behavior. Opinions on the factors affecting consumer reactions and the effectiveness of shock ads in commercial and social contexts are conflicting. Dahl (2003) defined shock advertising as "a deliberate attempt to surprise an audience by violating societal norms to capture attention", highlighting its controversial nature (Dahl et al., 2003).

Terms related to shock advertising include irritating, non-traditional, offensive, taboo, provocative, shockvertising, and controversial. These terms, though not absolute synonyms, share characteristics such as violating social norms, creating surprise, and provoking negative emotions by breaching ethical standards. This ambiguity often leads to public discussions and increased attention.

The AISDA Model—Attention, Interest, Share, Desire, and Action—replaces the classic AIDA model for analyzing shock advertising. This model emphasizes the effectiveness of shock tactics in drawing attention and fostering interest through unconventional messages that may violate social norms. These tactics spark discussion, create buzz, and employ emotional appeals to stimulate consumer desire and action, such as purchasing the advertised product (Fig.1)

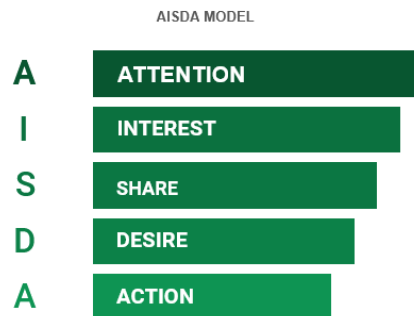


Figure 1. AISDA Model applied for shock tactics in advertising

Source: based on LEE, Michael et al (2020)

Considering the diversity of existing approaches in the literature and analyzing the similarities and divergences, the author develops the following definition: shock advertising is a form of promotion, which aims to produce a strong emotional impact on the target audience by intentionally and unexpectedly appealing to social and moral norms, values, in order to attract attention, differentiate, achieve a higher level of memorization of the message, and persuade the consumer to act.

The purpose of the shock ad is to draw attention to a product or service by creating a strong emotional impact on the public, or to make people aware of an important social or political issue in the case of the social context. Understanding consumer attitudes, behavior, reactions and emotions in response to a shock advertisement is of major importance and various researchers have conducted studies in this area. In field literature, reference is most frequently made to three specific characteristics of shock advertising:

- a) distinctiveness - has a positive effect on the level of attention attracted by the advertising message, the degree of memorization and on the evaluation of the brand,
- b) ambiguity - is the extent to which the advertisement leaves room for various interpretations, if not of its content, then of the intentions of the broadcasters.
- c) violation of norms and taboos - it is considered that the shock, most likely, can occur when the content of an advertisement refers to a subject that is considered by consumers to be taboo. This element might be the most important, since an advertisement that is merely distinctive and ambiguous would hardly shock and would rather tend to be simply rejected (Andersson et al., 2004).

Marketers take various approaches to the shocks evoked in advertising and the key element that causes shock, they argue that audiences may be shocked by the 'advertising object' or 'shock tactics' used in advertising and which, through various emotional appeals, create a shocking way of advertising. Empirical research indicates that the advertised object and tactics with various stimuli encourage cognitive processes that produce strong effects on memory, thus, shocking advertising content attracts attention and provokes cognitive processing and has a greater chance of eliciting behavioral reactions:

1. The promoted object (which can be a good, service, person, place, idea or organization).

Many experts believe that the element of shock in an advertisement can be primarily caused by the specifics of the product/service we want to promote. There are a number of products that create emotions just by openly mentioning them in public, as a rule, these are the products that from the

perspective of social and moral norms should not be displayed or discussed publicly, e.g. Waller (2009) presents a list of 15 products and groups them according to their level of consumer offense (from lowest to highest): *alcohol, cigarettes, condoms, female contraceptives, hygiene products, lingerie, funeral services, gambling, men's underwear, pharmaceuticals, political parties, racially motivated extremist political groups, religious cultures, sexually transmitted diseases and weight loss programs*. We note that the negative attitude towards a product can disappear in the long term, if the product is perceived by consumers as useful, or it can lose its shock intensity when it is heavily promoted and consumers no longer feel discomfort when seeing it, creating a state of habit (Andersson et al., 2004).

2. Shock tactics in advertising.

Emotional appeals in advertising, as they are frequently used in practitioner discussions and the consumer's response to them, are heavily discussed topics in the marketing literature. The analysis of emotions triggered by shock advertising by Dahl et al. (2003) identify seven types of shock tactics: *disgusting images, sexual references, profanity or obscenity, vulgarity, indecency, moral offences, religious taboos*. The essence of the 7 types of " shock appeals " identified by Dahl is generalized in table 2.

Table 1. Typology of shock tactics in advertising

Shock Tactics/The Offensive Element	The description
1. Disgusting images	Use of images of blood, body parts or secretions, orifices, especially urine, gas, odors, disease, vermin, bodily harm, dismemberment, death.
2. Sexual references	Images or references to sexual relations, full or partial nudity
3. Profanity / obscenity	Cursing, obscene gestures, racial epithets
4. Vulgarity	Display of cruelty or bad taste, actions of people or animals, such as picking the nose or drinking the water from the toilet
5. Indecency	Violations of social values or violation of decency and ethical norms e.g. clothing, manners
6. Moral offense	Injuring innocent people/animals, violence, allusion to people or objects that cause violence (e.g. Hitler), violation of standards of correct behavior (e.g. shooting someone in the back), placing children in challenging situations (e.g. sexual, violent or victim exploitation)
7. Religious taboos	Improper use of spiritual words or religious symbols and/or rituals

Source: based on Dahl et al. (2003)

Research results highlight two types of emotional tactics: *positive and negative emotional stimuli*. *Positive emotional stimuli* have a beneficial impact on the audience to change behavior. However, only 3 stimuli - *humor, rationality and values* - cause positive emotions. Out of 13 tactics identified in the reference literature, 7 types of tactics were found to elicit positive emotions and 3 mixed emotions, both positive and negative. For example, highway safety ads typically elicit negative emotional appeals, such as broadcasting incidents and collisions. If positive emotions are triggered,

the public may not take this fact seriously and, consequently, not produce the behavior change (Williams, 2009). Theoretical research based on specialized literature published abroad, allowed us to conclude that there is no unanimity in the classification of shock tactics and a holistic approach to shock advertising is missing. Generalizing the defining elements and characteristics of shock advertising with the classification of shock tactics, we propose a schematic model, which, in the author's view, represents the typology of shock tactics (Fig.4.)

2.2 Characteristics and factors influencing the use of shock tactics in the context of social and commercial advertising

The literature has shown that consumers' positive or negative attitudes towards 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 developed based on socio-cultural and demographic factors, consumer buying behavior and consumer perception of shock advertising. (Fig.1)

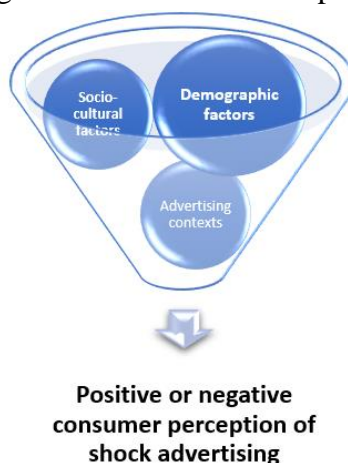


Figure 2. Factors influencing consumer perception of shock advertising

Source: author own study

These elements can have different impacts depending on the context of use - social or commercial context. Studies show that the demographic and socio-cultural factors that may influence consumer attitudes and actions after viewing shock advertisements relate to:

1. *Age*- there are differences in the perception of shock advertisements among consumers of different ages, typically younger consumers have a more positive view towards the use of shock tactics compared to older people. To better understand the differences in consumer behavior by age, generational theory, which was formulated in 1991 by Wiliam Strauss and Neil Howe, was used to delineate 5 distinctive generations: baby boomers, generation X, generation Y, generation Z and generation Alpha. It was found that each of these generations has its own personal moral values, views and attitudes towards the role of family and career, life balance, which Strauss and Neil Howe developed under the impact of changing social environment (Machova et al., 2015).
2. *Gender* - there is evidence that women and men may react differently to the same shock tactics, for example nudity may be perceived neutrally by women, whereas indecent images related to children may have a much stronger impact on women due to maternal instinct compared to men's perceptions. Differences may occur not only in reactions to different shock tactics, but also in the intensity of the shock.

3. *Religion* - Religious aspects have a large impact on consumer reaction to shock advertising. Sabri et al. (2012) conducted research examining how religion can affect consumer behavior to shocking or offensive advertising. The authors concluded that for religious people, the level of acceptance of shock advertising and the promoted product is low and the reaction is negative (Sabri, 2012)

4. *Moral principles* - ethical values, personal morals can influence the reaction of consumers to shock advertising, the more they are influenced by the ethical and moral rules of society in his behavior, the higher the level of shock can be and the more negative the reaction.

Cultural factors play an important role in the studies analyzed. These can make a significant difference in 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 overview and there are variations and subtleties within each culture. Further research, testing, and evaluation are needed to better understand how the impact of shock ads may vary based on these factors, as well as in combination with other demographic factors such as gender, religion, culture, and everyone's moral principles.

In the discussion of the impact of shock advertising on consumer emotions and behavior, it was concluded that the nature and intensity of consumer reaction is determined by different advertising contexts. When creating commercial or social advertising, the same shock-inducing techniques and methods of consumer influence are used; however, the purpose of advertising in the two contexts is essentially different. Research findings show that consumers are more willing to shock advertising in the social context than in the commercial context, the level of involvement and awareness of the message is higher (Banyte et al., 2014). Social advertising is intended to educate society, change attitudes, propagate and enhance social welfare and thus is used to solve problems in one way or another related to an individual's actions as a member of society. Social advertisements are most used in areas such as health care, environmental protection, harm prevention, and the promotion of social initiatives and involvement and are focused on changing and shaping stereotypes of social behavior. Studies also show the risks of using shock ads for companies: the message may remain ambiguous and confusing, and if consumers perceive the ads as offensive, they may refuse to buy the promoted products.

3 Conclusion

There are no comprehensive studies that reflect consumer reactions to shock advertising in the context of both commercial and social advertising, nor are there models based on such results. This underscores the need for a conceptual model of consumer responses to shock advertising across various contexts. It is essential to note that these tactics may be perceived differently by the public, depending on their sensibilities and values, which can elicit both positive and negative reactions. Therefore, companies must be mindful of the impact of advertising messages and tactics, considering the target audience and the social and cultural environment in which they are presented.

There are no comprehensive studies reflecting consumer reactions to shock advertising in the context of commercial and social advertising, and there are no models based on these results, which argues for the need to develop a conceptual model of consumer response to shock advertising in various advertising contexts. It is important to note that these tactics may be perceived differently by the public, depending on their sensibilities and values, and may attract both positive and negative

reactions. Therefore, companies need to be attentive to the impact of advertising messages and tactics and consider the target audience and the social and cultural environment in which they are presented. Capitalizing on the advantages of shock advertising in commercial and social advertising depends on the following aspects:

1. *Grab attention*: shocking ads with unexpected images or messages can grab the audience's attention more than regular ads.
2. *Stimulates emotions*: shock ads can cause a strong emotional reaction in the audience, which can increase their interest and involvement in the product or service being presented.
3. *Incite discussion*: shock tactics can spark discussion and debate among audiences, which can lead to additional exposure and increased brand awareness through viral marketing.
4. *Differentiate from the competition*: by using shocking messages or images, companies can differentiate themselves from the competition and make their product or service more attractive and memorable to the public.
5. *It's better remembered*: consumers are more likely to remember shocking ad content compared to traditional ad content due to the evoking of higher intensity emotions.
6. *Inform and educate the population*: messages with shock elements, especially in the social field, have a greater impact in informing, raising awareness and educating people, especially when it comes to vices and their harmful effects.
7. *Contributes to increasing the visibility of non-profit organizations*: shock advertising increases the role and contribution of organizations, especially those that collect charity funds, which have a relatively small advertising budget in a crowded and competitive environment.

However, it is important to consider that shock advertising can also have disadvantages. This can be perceived as *insensitive, offensive or exaggerated*, which can lead to negative reactions from the public. It is also important for advertisers to consider their target audience and ensure that the messages and images used are appropriate for their profile and will not be misconstrued or interpreted in a negative way.

The risks and limitations of using shock tactics in advertising include the following:

1. *Negative reactions from the public*: shock ads can be perceived as offensive, which can lead to negative reactions, such as boycotting the products or the company.
2. *Distraction from the main message*: if the shock level used is too high or the message is not directly related to the product or service presented, it can distract the audience from the main message and lead to a decrease in the effectiveness of the ad.
3. *The risk of exploiting the emotions of the public*: shock stimuli can be perceived as exploiting the emotions of the public in order to increase sales, which can have a negative impact on the image of the brand.
4. *Adverse reactions from the authorities*: some shock ads may be considered immoral or unethical and may lead to adverse reactions from the authorities, such as fines or the withdrawal of the ad or even the products from the market.
5. *Creating a negative image of the brand*: if the use of shock tactics becomes a constant strategy of the brand, it can develop a negative image, perceived as insensitive or too aggressive towards the public. The advantages of using shock advertising are more present in the short term by attracting the attention of the public, but in the long term there is a risk of damaging the brand image and losing some of the more sensitive customers.

6. Some consumers may ignore the shocking ads, preferring to avoid reality and ignore the seriousness of social issues.
7. Shock tactics in advertising could be addictive and the shock level would need to be amplified to get the audience's permanent attention, yesterday's shock may become today's normality.

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