

THE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF SHOCK TACTICS IN ADVERTISING UPON CONSUMERS IN REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract: Advertising can appeal to the rational side of consumers, it can convey information and elicit cognitive reactions, however the most interesting aspect of advertising is the emotional aspect that affects the feelings of the audience. Striving for exceptionalism and persuasion, advertisers tend to use dramatic emotions, they create messages that would shock consumers and increasingly resort to breaking social norms and established morals, so that their advertising messages break through the traditional advertising clutter and reach the existing or potential customer. Since the 1980s, shock advertising has gained interest among both advertising industry specialists and academics. For the national context, shock advertising is a new, less studied field, but one that is attracting increasing attention from both theorists and practitioners in the field who are looking for innovative methods of communication. The aim of this article is to analyze how Moldavian consumers react to various shock tactics in advertising, that is argued by the need to understand how it could help companies create a competitive advantage and what are the benefits and risks of using shock tactics in various contexts in our country. For this study authors used mixed methods of research (qualitative and quantitative), including two focus-groups and a survey with a sample of 600 people. The results show that there are differences in reactions due to demographic factors, such as age and sex, but also cultural factors such as religion. Moldavian consumers are not very tolerant to shock advertising and disgusting images, religion taboo and cruelty were perceived as most offensive. In the same time consumers reacted more positively to the use of shock tactics in social advertising in comparison with the commercial context, considering it more effective in attracting attention and influencing consumers to act.

Keywords: shock tactics, advertising, consumer reactions, focus-group, survey

JEL Classification: M1, M3

Introduction

Advertising has become an integral part of everyday life, due to the abundance of advertising messages, it is impossible to pay attention to or retain them, so over time, consumers learn to ignore

most ads they are exposed. Studies show that an average person is exposed to more than 5,000 promotional messages every day, but remembers only 11% of the ads, and the remaining 89% go unnoticed by consumers.

Research focusing on shock advertising can be traced back to the early 1980s, the methods of ad implementation that could cause shock are those that show "antisocial behavior, use of indecent language, nudity, racism, sexism, or executions that include excessively personal subjects" (Kerr et al., cited by Evans A.,2014). The US Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) found that advertisements containing elements of violence, sexual references or nudity, gender stereotyping, charity and public service advertisements raised the most complaints of harm and offence to the public. Shock advertising is an attempt to "surprise an audience by deliberately violating common norms or values and individual ideals in order to capture the attention of a target audience" (Dahl et al.,2003).

For the national context, shock advertising is a new, less studied field, but one that is attracting increasing attention from practitioners in the field, who are looking for innovative methods of communication. The importance of studying shock advertising is argued by the need to understand what reactions it can provoke among Moldavian consumers, how it could help companies create a competitive advantage, and what benefits and risks of using shock tactics in different contexts might be. Studies have focused on defining the elements and features of shock advertising, with the common emphasis that must break social norms in ways that are intentional and unexpected by consumers. Analysis of theoretical framework for shock advertising has shown that it could be more interesting than other types of advertising, and the shock experienced because of exposure to the advertising message captures attention, helps recall and recognition. The author used mixed method of research, involving qualitative focus-groups and quantitative survey to analyze cognitive and affective reactions of local consumers toward shock advertising.

THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF SHOCK TACTICS IN CONTEMPORARY ADVERTISING

Theoretical review of the shock advertising concept and its impact on consumer behavior

When discussing such a type of advertising, a term - shock advertising - is particularly common in practice. However, a review of the scientific literature reveals that marketing academics and practitioners use different terms to define shock advertising. Other terms with the same semantic meaning that are mentioned in the literature by researchers are: irritating, non-traditional, offensive, taboo, provocative, shocking and controversial. These concepts refer to the same marketing objective of provoking shock among the target segment through the type of promoted products and the way of promotion using emotional appeals.

Shock advertising is advertising that conflicts with established expectations, norms and behaviors (Stiensmeier and Pelster, 2008). Dahl (2003), one of the most cited authors on shock advertising, defined it as "a deliberate attempt to surprise an audience and thereby violate societal norms and values and personal ideas in order to capture the attention of a target audience".

Offensive advertising is commonly viewed as advertising that intentionally, rather than unintentionally, horrifies and upsets viewers (Gustaeson and Yssel, 2008). Venkat and Abi-Hanna defined it as one that calculatedly offends its audience. Authors Gerard Prendergast, Wah-Leung Cheung and Douglas West (2009) use the concept of offensive advertising to refer to 2 types of advertising: one which promotes products that may offend and another which uses offensive ways of promoting products.

Controversial advertising has been described as "an advertisement that suddenly captures the viewer's attention by creating a buzz (effect of controversial discussion), violating moral or social norms, traditions and customs" (Skorupa, 2014). Pflaumbaum (2011) conceptualized shock advertising as one that challenges various taboos in order to surprise the target audience and create negative reaction. Javed and Zeb (2019) referred to definitions by Dahl and others, but proposed their own definition of "shockvertising" stating that it is advertising that suddenly grabs the attention of the audience and creates the resonance or buzz marketing effect and may go against social norms, customs, traditions or cultural values.

Nigel K. LI. Pope, Kevin E. Voges and Mark R. Brown (2014) have referred to shock advertising using the term provocative advertising, which they define as characterized by an intentional attempt to gain attention through shock and which operates through three characteristics: distinctiveness, ambiguity, and violation of social norms and cultural taboos. Parry (2013) noted that shock advertising includes terms and formulations such as "advertising provocation", "violent advertising" (Andersson, 2004), "advertising taboo" (Sabri and Obermiller, 2012), "offensive advertising" (Waller, 2005) and "sexually referenced advertising" (Sengupta and Dahl, 2008).

From the concepts analyzed in the theoretical field it can be concluded that not all the terms used in the description of shock advertising are identical, however many common aspects and characteristics are found, which allow these terms in the paper to be used as synonyms, among them are violation of social and moral norms, creation of surprise effect to cause the highest level of shock. The message used is ambiguous and confusing, leading to group discussions and creating a buzz to attract greater attention among the public. Another common element mentioned in these notions is - provoking negative emotions among consumers, which arises because of violation of ethical and moral norms in society. Consumers' negative reaction to shock advertising may be partly since no one gives the reason or explanation why the shock tactic is used, which creates confusion and greater interest.

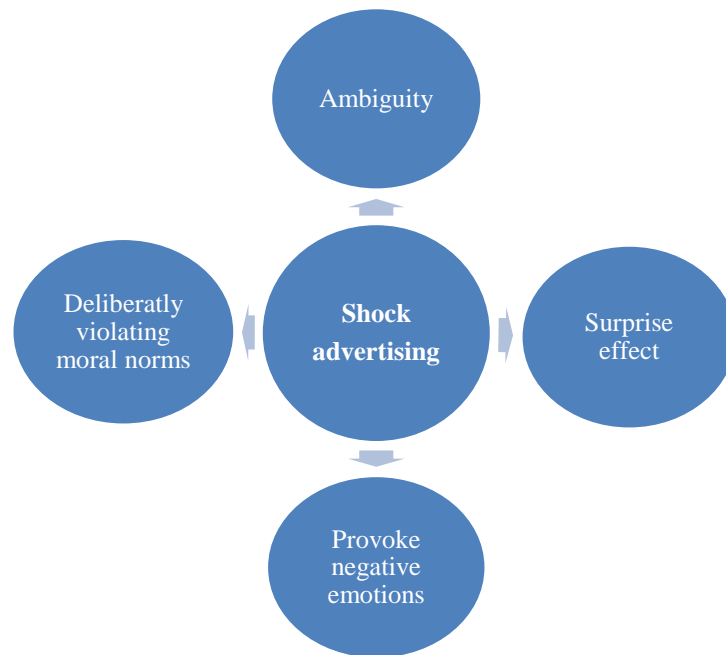


Figure 1. Distinctive elements of shock advertising

Source: authors own study or based on literature review

Based on the relevant literature review, the author proposes the following definition: “shock advertising” is a form of advertising that is designed to create a strong emotional impact on the audience by intentionally and unexpectedly violating social and moral norms, values, and norms to attract people's attention, differentiate itself, achieve a higher level of message recall, as well as persuade them to perform an action.

There are different types of shock ads, such as those using shocking or violent images, those containing vulgar or offensive language or those dealing with taboo or controversial subjects. The aim may be to draw attention to a product or service by creating a strong emotional impact on the audience, or to raise awareness of an important social or political issue.

Shock advertising, like traditional advertising, can be used in a variety of media and communication channels, depending on the marketing objectives and target audience. Here are some examples of media where shock advertising is frequently used

1. Television: Shock ads are often used in TV commercials, where they can reach a large number of viewers in a short period of time. They can be placed in commercial breaks of news programs, popular TV shows or major sporting events.

2. Internet: Shock ads can also be used on online platforms such as websites, social networks or YouTube. These can be distributed through paid advertising campaigns or through organic content such as viral videos.

3. Outdoor: Shock ads can also be placed on billboards or in crowded public places such as subway stations or airports. This type of advertising is aimed at passers-by and can attract attention through the large size of posters or the use of powerful images.

4. Print media: Shock advertising can also be used in newspapers or magazines, where advertisements with strong images or striking messages can be placed.

It is important to note that, regardless of the type of media used, shock advertising must be strategically placed and relevant to the target audience to generate the desired impact. Researching consumers' emotional response to their product, service, idea, or advertisement is the bulk of advertising research. According to the approach proposed by most researchers, to achieve an optimal psychological effect, advertising should evoke strong positive emotions in the audience. However, sometimes the opposite situation can occur, for example, advertising might encourage consumers to buy a product even though it provokes unpleasant and irritating emotions, fear, or anger. Ortega-S (2011) mentions that negative emotions still encourage consumers to make the purchase to release the negative emotions they feel after exposure to the advertising message. Most people are certain that shock ads are created for the sole purpose of attracting attention, which is true, but for people to change their thinking, their deep and strong emotional reaction must be provoked.

According to Williams (2009), shock ads are successful because they affect the most sensitive part of the audience and their emotions. The author states that shock tactics acquire an increasingly strong emotional form. Studies mentioned that people do not try to remember information that provokes negative emotions, consumers still tend to dismiss a shocking emotional appeal by deciding "I'm not that bad" or "This issue is not about me". Shock advertising, showing the emotional consequences to other consumers comparing to just showing the problem to the audience, is the latest and most effective trend.

To increase advertising recall, recognition, and recall of information, specialists often use comparison, identification, and contrasts. According to the phenomenon of selective retention, human memory registers certain elements of a product's advertisement, which help to keep the advertised phenomenon in memory of consumers for a longer period of time. One of the tasks of advertising is to achieve artificial association and to reinforce new images in the consumer's memory.

Studies conducted at Ogilvy's research and development center in 2009 show that ads that people like, boost sales more than those that irritate them. To influence consumers to buy, they need to be compelling, showing new possibilities that would come with one or another product purchased. Therefore, advertising specialists should combine skills from psychology, philosophy, and sociology, and advertising should affect not only the mind, but also the feelings. Society has become more complex, forcing companies to constantly look for new ways to capture the public's attention. The advantages and disadvantages of shock advertising are identified in the figure 2.

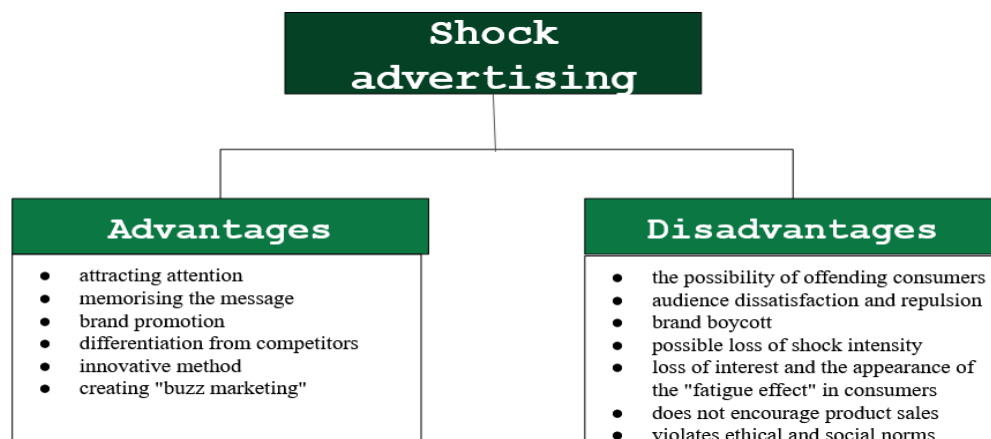


Figure 2 Advantages and disadvantages of the use of shock advertising

Source: author own study or based on literature review

The biggest challenge for ad creators is that shock advertising could be an absolute success or total failure, it all depends on consumer reaction. Analysis of theoretical approaches to shock advertising has shown that it is considered to be more interesting than other types of advertising, and the shock experienced as a result of exposure to the advertising message captures attention, helps recall and recognition. In the literature, there are numerous criticisms of shock advertising and the effectiveness of its use. It is noted that the effort to shock consumers may result in a degree of dislike of the advertisement and an increased level of dissatisfaction or revulsion, subsequently creating a negative dissonance towards the advertised product or company brand among end consumers. It is considered that after a period of time, shock advertising becomes less controversial method, that no longer works, because it loses its shock value and needs to be replaced with new methods (Urwin and Venter, 2014). The shock in the advertisement could alienate consumers and create brand distaste, which could lead to brand boycotts (Klara, 2012; Hodge, 2007). In two experimental studies, Lee et al. (2020) demonstrated that when a well-known brand is promoted using shock tactics, consumers will evaluate brands associated with a socially accepted product (as opposed to a controversial product) less favorably.

The ineffectiveness of shock tactics is explored in the study by Andersson et al. (2004), who argue that shocking advertising can create a negative image of the brand in the consumer's mind, which can lead to lost sales. Shock advertising is more suitable for increasing brand awareness than for promoting sales, Sandikci (2011) argues that shock advertising creates brand awareness in the short term, but in the long term the impact has not been sufficiently studied. Isaac A. in 2016 published an article in The Guardian, which states that repeated use of shock advertising leads to a decrease in shock intensity and target segment detraction, thus the fatigue effect can occur.

Types of shock tactics in contemporary advertising

The literature shows that the following three types of offensive tactics are most commonly used in advertising: a) sexual references, b) appeals to fear and c) violent stimuli. A more in-depth analysis of the emotions triggered by shock advertising was carried out by Dahl et al. (2003) who identified seven types of shock tactics (the term used in English sources is "shock appeals"): disgusting images, sexual references, profanity or obscenity, vulgarity, indecency (ethical rudeness), moral offences, religious taboos. The typology of shock tactics according to Dahl (2003) is described in Table 1.

Table 1 The types of shock tactics in advertising according to Dahl

Offense Elicitor	Description
Disgusting images	References to blood, body parts or secretions, orifices, especially urinary/fecal, gases, odors, disease, parasites, bodily harm (e.g., dismemberment), death and decay
Sexual references	References to masturbation, implied sexual acts, sexually suggestive nudity or partial nudity
Profanity/obscenity	Swear words, obscene gestures, racial epithets
Vulgarity	References to crude or distasteful acts by humans or animals, such as nose picking, farting, licking, humping, or drinking from the toilet
Impropriety	Violations of social conventions for dress, manners, etc.
Moral offensiveness	Harming innocent people/animals, gratuitous violence or sex, alluding to people or objects that provoke violence (e.g., Hitler), violating standards for fair behavior (e.g., shooting a person in the back), putting children in provocative situations (e.g., sexual, violent), victim exploitation
Religious taboos	Inappropriate use of spiritual or religious symbols and/or rituals

Source: Tiwari Munich, Kaur Jaspreet, Manglik Ami, Goel Anshu, Impact of shock advertisement on consumer behavior, International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering (IJRTE) ISSN: 2277-3878, Volume-8 Issue-4, November 2019, p.1840-1848

Breaking rules and taboos have caught the attention of many researchers in the field. Thus Pollay (2015) states that "Standards of public decency have changed greatly in the twentieth century, and advertising has been one of the elements that has contributed to the changing norms in society", it should be noted that reciprocally, changing social norms have affected the content and specifics of advertising. For example, the use of sexual references in advertising can be considered as a specific case of transgression, as the subject of sexuality is considered taboo - at different levels - all over the world. Current research on the use of sexual appeals in advertising tends to show that despite the controversy surrounding the tactics, sexual content increases the level of attention and interest, as well as the level of purchase intent. These effects, however, often seem mediated by other factors, such as the degree of congruence between product and sexual appeal, the context in which these ads are presented, and certain cultural and individual characteristics of the audience. In addition to sexual appeals, other social issues such as drugs, racial discrimination and violence may maintain a similar degree of shock value across cultural and national boundaries.

Some consumers perceive the whole message when they see an advertisement, others have emotions related to objective associations and memorize the emotional elements of the advertisement, and others focus their attention on the execution of the advertisement. Studies show that even twins interpret the same message of an advertisement differently due to their different interests and life

experiences (Mick and Buhl cited by Banyte 2014). Consumers' reaction to shock advertising can be explained based on Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda's (2003) model. Study results show that the use of provocative, controversial, and/or offensive advertisements captures consumers' attention (Phau and Prendergast, 2001), but not all of them are noticed by the target audience. Dahl (2003) argues that the violation of acceptable social norms is the stimulus that draws attention to a shocking advertisement and calls for its elaboration. If an advertisement unexpectedly "violates" established norms in an appropriate, tasteful, and ethical way, it evokes consumer surprise. For the public to understand the message communicated by an advertisement, they are forced to elaborate on it. Consequently, according to Dahl, the surprise caused by the violation of socially acceptable norms attracts attention and stimulates elaboration, retention, and therefore influence certain behavior.



Source: Darren Dahl, Ranjesh Machanda, Does it pay to shock? Reactions to Shocking and Nonshocking Advertising Content among University Students, *Journal of Advertising Research*, September 2003

It is the aspect of violation of social norms and values that supposedly underlies the ability of advertising to break patterns and capture the attention of the target audience. The initial processing of advertising information involves a cognitive evaluation that determines whether the advertisement has violated a social and/or personal norm. Any object or event (such as an advertisement) that contradicts an established expectation or pattern takes the target audience by surprise. Surprise is a significant part of the process because it causes the initiation of processing of advertising information and draws attention to the innovative stimulus and 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 of expectancy disconfirmation theory. Empirical research shows that individuals engage in deeper thinking about unexpected events than the unexpected. Therefore surprise encourages further cognitive activity because individuals because they want to understand the source of their surprise. Further processing of advertising information takes the form of comprehension, literal understanding of the message and elaboration, production of thoughts related to the product/message.

3 Based on the relevant literature review and the aim of the study the author states the following research objectives:

1. To assess the impact of shock tactics in advertising on consumer behavior

2. To comparatively analyze various shock tactics to determine which are perceived to have a higher level of shock

3. To analyze how do socio-cultural factors influence consumers' perception of shock advertising? (Generation Y and Z, gender, education level, urban/rural environment)

The following research questions have been formulated in line with the advertising impact measures mentioned above:

Cognitive variables:

- How do consumers define shock advertising?
- Do shock ads succeed in getting consumers' attention? - Attempts to shock consumers can generate high levels of awareness but can also lead to low levels of acceptance or even high levels of disapproval.
- Do consumers remember the content of these provocative ads? (message recall)
- Do the shock tactics used in social and commercial advertising have a different impact?

Affective variables:

- To what extent do consumers like certain provocative advertising messages?
- What is the impact on company brand perception? (Is it possible for consumers to have a negative attitude towards an advertisement and still maintain a positive attitude towards the promoted brand?)
- What is the nature of the consumer's reaction when exposed to shocking advertisements? (adjective checklist) – shocking, scary, disgusting, educational, obscene, confusing, amazing, etc.

Conative variables:

- Do shocking ads influence consumer purchase intentions or change behavior, especially compared to more traditional appeals?
- Are there socio-demographic variables that explain differences in reactions to shocking ads?

All shock tactics will be analyzed in terms of 3 aspects:

- Level of shock
- Violation/violation of moral norms
- Message/brand recall

Two research methods were used in the study:

1. Qualitative method - Focus Group Discussions - with the aim of collecting information from specific target groups to formulate hypotheses to be used later in the qualitative research method, finding out the attitudes towards shocking advertising of certain target groups of consumers, obtaining

qualitative data, perceptions and opinions, quotes, that capture individuals' behaviors towards shocking advertising and testing examples of shocking advertisements and questionnaire questions before launching them in the quantitative part of the research.

METHODOLOGY:

From the qualitative methods Focus Group is one of the most popular research methods used to analyze the impact of advertising on buying behavior. To achieve the objective of the research, 2 online Focus Groups were organized on the Zoom platform. The first Focus Group included participants from generation Z (aged 15-26) and the second with representatives of generation Y (aged 27-42). Online focus groups are a growing trend in the market research industry because of their ability to provide cost-effective qualitative information in a shorter time. The main advantages of conducting focus groups remotely mostly revolve around cost savings,

time savings and wider geographical areas for recruitment.

2. Quantitative method - Online interviews - with the aim of measuring the hypotheses received from the qualitative method, proving through quantitative analysis, is it really the majority opinion or just someone's perception, quantitatively confirm or disprove information received from the qualitative method.

METHODOLOGY:

From quantitative methods was selected online survey conducted in May 2023, using specialized software: online panel for quantitative data collection - Evonix CATI / Web fieldwork system. The study was conducted on the basis of a probability, stratified and random sampling, with respect of region, gender and age quotas. Total 604 resulting interviews: Generation Z (15-26 years) - 302 interviews and Gen Y (27-42 years) - 302 interviews. Urban environment, including Chisinau - 456 resulting interviews and rural environment - 148 interviews. For a sample of 600 interviews with the population aged 15 - 42 years - maximum error +/- 2.83%, this would mean that for 50% of real answers, in the analytical report the deviations range from 47.17% to 52.

Research methodology and findings

Results are presented according to the type of shock tactic in the ad compared on quantitative and qualitative methods.

1. Disgusting images in advertising

QUANTITATIVE METHOD

The majority of respondents (93%) have a negative impression. For the most part, the advertising given was rated from 1 to 6 by both Gen Z and Gen Y. 46% of all respondents rated the level of shock caused by this advertising with 9 and 10 (on a 10-point scale). 74% of all respondents mentioned that this image provoked negative feelings, 25% - neutral feelings, and only 3% - positive feelings. Gen Y has a more negative position than Gen X (80% compared to 68%). Positive emotions (4%) have respondents aged 15-26 years (especially - interest, hope, enthusiasm, respect, excitement, etc.). Sadness is a feeling most provoked by the given image. For others fear, disgust, dislike, dissatisfaction - are the TOP-5 provoked emotions. 85% of all respondents mentioned that this advertisement provoked no or partial interest. The share of those who are interested in this advertising is higher among Gen Z.

QUALITATIVE METHOD

This disgusting advertisement has a different impact on generations: generation Z has a neutral, confused attitude, whereas Generation Y has a negative attitude. It will not influence consumer behavior, so as conclusion that the advertising with disgusting images has more of a negative impact and can affect the image of the brand.

2. Religious taboos in advertising

QUANTITATIVE METHOD

The majority of respondents (94%) have a negative impression. For the most part, the advertising given was rated from 1 to 6 by both Gen Z and Gen Y, 42% of all respondents rated the level of shock caused by this advertising with 9 and 10 (on a 10-point scale) and 74% of all respondents mentioned that this image provoked negative emotions, 27% - neutral emotions, and only 2% - positive emotions.

Gen Z has a more neutral position than Gen Y (34% vs. 20%). Positive emotions (3%) only respondents aged 15-26 have positive emotions (in particular - joy, hope, enthusiasm, respect, optimism, etc.). Disgust is a feeling most provoked by the given image, for others shame, dislike, irritation, dissatisfaction - represent TOP-5 provoked negative emotions. 92% of all respondents mentioned that this advertisement provoked no or partial interest. The share of those who are interested in this advertising is higher among Gen Z.

QUALITATIVE METHOD

Advertising with religious taboos is more likely to have a negative impact on both Generations. Such advertising will not influence consumer behavior, it will have a more negative impact and could affect the image of the brand.

3. Sexual references

QUANTITATIVE METHOD

The majority of respondents (87%) have a negative impression. For the most part, the advertising given was rated from 1 to 6 by both Gen Z and Gen Y, 24% of all respondents rated the level of shock caused by this advertising with 9 and 10 (on a 10-point scale) and 52% of all respondents mentioned that this image provoked neutral feelings, 41% - negative feelings, and only 10% - positive feelings. Gen Y as well as Gen X rated this advertisement as neutral (Gen Z 51%, Gen Y 52%). Positive emotions (13% Gen Z and 7% Gen X) especially - Interest, joy, enthusiasm.

For others shame for others, dislike, displeasure, irritation are the top-5 negative emotions provoked, 79% of all respondents mentioned that this advertisement provoked no or partial interest. Interest provoked by this advertisement among Gen Z/Y are at the same level (21%)

QUALITATIVE METHOD

For both generations, advertising with sexual references of this kind provokes neutral emotions.

It will not influence consumer behavior. The message is clear and it will not influence the consumer to change their attitude towards the brand. As a conclusion sexual references in advertising have more of a neutral impact and will not affect the image of the brand.

4. Moral offensiveness

QUANTITATIVE METHOD

The majority of respondents (96%) have a negative impression. For the most part, the advertising given was rated from 1 to 6 by both Gen Z and Gen Y, 50% of all respondents rated the level of shock caused by this advertising with 9 and 10 (on a 10-point scale) and 83% of all respondents mentioned that this image provoked negative feelings, 17% - neutral feelings, and only 1% - positive feelings. Gen Y has a more negative position than Gen X (88% compared to 78%).

Disgust is a feeling most provoked by the given image, for others dislike, displeasure, irritation, fear - are the TOP-5 negative emotions provoked. The share of those who are interested in this advertising is higher among Gen Z, but 91% of all respondents mentioned that this advertisement provoked no or partial interest.

QUALITATIVE METHOD

Social advertising of this kind is visually ugly for both generations, but at the awareness level it will have an impact. It will influence them, it will make them think, maybe even act. The message will be retained, it will be memorized by gender Z. At the action level it will influence the Gen Y consumers, so it probably will have more of a negative impact.

5. Impropriety

QUANTITATIVE METHOD

The majority of respondents (60%) have a negative impression. For the most part, the advertising given was rated from 1 to 6 by both Gen Z and Gen Y, 75% of all respondents rated the level of shock caused by this advertisement as 1 and 6 (on a 10-point scale) and 43% of all respondents mentioned that this image provoked negative feelings, 34% - positive feelings, and only 28% - positive feelings. Gen Y has a more negative position, than Gen Y (50% compared to 36%), positive emotions (31%) have respondents aged 15-26 (especially - hope, respect, trust, interest, optimism, etc.). Sadness is a feeling most provoked by the given image.

For others fear, shame for the laity, shame, dislike are the TOP-5 negative emotions provoked. 49% of all respondents mentioned that this advertisement provoked absolute or partial interest.

The share of those who are interested in this advertising is higher among Gen Y.

QUALITATIVE METHOD

For both generations the message of this advertisement is clear, more neutral attitude for Gen Z negative attitude for Gen Y, will impact primarily for violent offenses.

As a conclusion moral offensiveness in advertising has more of a neutral impact and will not affect the image of the brand.

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