

STUDY CASE OF DEVELOPMENTS IN ROMANIA'S ADVERTISING INDUSTRY TRIGGERED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26758/13.1.13>**

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Abstract

Objectives. This study emerged as a result of interactions with advertising professionals. Thus, it was found that the contemporary crises, especially the one generated by the COVID-19 pandemic - have brought some radical changes in the economic and creative environment of the advertising industry in Romania.

Material and methods. This study is based on several dialogues that can be considered interviews focused on the structural changes observed behind the scenes of the advertising industry by the professionals met and who are actual witnesses of the negative and positive transformations that this industry has undergone in recent times.

Results. The pandemic was not only a health and economic crisis, but also an identity crisis, in which advertisers and companies had to not only build brand communication, but reposition their own identity as well. While old jobs were lost, new ones were created. And while off-line channels were lost, new channels emerged, such as Bolt and Glovo delivery. Furthermore, cultural events, such as theatre plays and concerts, stepped beyond the traditional stage and became part of the streaming platforms, thus being relaunched with the help of digital strategy and marketing.

Conclusions. The transformations impact not only advertising agencies, but clients as well. The off-line communication “ban” has not only forced the communication to be moved into the digital realm, but also rushed agencies and companies to create new departments and specializations, in order to cope with these digital requirements. The conclusions that can be drawn from the study can become useful to both professional advertisers and local teachers trying to train future communicators with professionalism.

Keywords: advertising, COVID-19, advertising transformation, semiotics, fashion, communication during the pandemic.

Introduction

Even though, apparently, the ways in which the economic or medical crises are perceived have a strictly negative connotation, the reality encountered throughout Romania's publicity environment seems to somehow contradict such initial perception. The crisis that the COVID-19 pandemic inflicted upon Romania's advertising industry seems to have redefined the economic relationships and creative advertising strategies, adapting them to the new working conditions imposed by the social distancing that the pandemic brought in the spotlight. The hypothesis that was the basis of this deductive research is that the current economic and medical crises have not only generated negative effects and economic damage to the advertising industry, but also some possibly positive effects that could not be observed at the start of the research.

Since the effects of these crises - and especially the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic - brought about a number of structural changes with economic and human implications (Tharanga, 2022), since most agencies were obliged to lay off some of their staff or cut their benefits along 2020-2021 (Sengupta & Dhir, 2023), it can be considered that the topic approached here is a matter worth researching in its own right, but - at the same time - it is also an actual social issue, considering the social, human and economic implications that could be seen in contemporary society (Chaurasia & Ghose, 2023; Silverman, 2004, pp. 20-21).

Apparently, the crisis that was generated by COVID-19 and that came along with a host of restrictions impacting human interactions, but not in the circumstances of a major economic crisis such as the one we had over 2007-2008, generated new communication dimensions and we were all supposed to look for strategic solutions that were adequate to promoting products in the digital and television environments.

Periodically, the humankind goes through radical transformations in all areas of activity. The COVID-19 pandemic might have been that radical turning point when contemporary advertising started to transform itself. Messages started to travel around more quickly, once new publicity channels became available, but also after the target public became more professional (the public's capacity to decode messages improved as messages started to become more complex). The printed media built a certain type of speed for the propagation of messages, television marked another phase of how messages were disseminated and how viewers would send their feedback, whereas the digital era which is based on complete interactivity came up with a host of new facilities: higher communication speeds and more efficient reception of advertising campaigns. According to the analysis made by Delia Balaban, the interest that the young public takes in the printed media and television dropped, and the focus is now placed on using the Internet on a frequent basis (Balaban & Szabolics, 2021, p. 20). Under these circumstances, the COVID-19 crisis came up and pushed the entire business of the advertisers into the online environment.

Material and methods

It was useful to enter in a dialogue, in a manner that focused strictly on the changes that occurred in the advertising industry, with two advertising experts who are shareholders or top managers of certain agencies.

The first interlocutor is a shareholder in a Romanian advertising company, with an experience of over 23 years in marketing and advertising, whom will be code-named *I1* for purposes of this article, and my second interviewee is a top management lady working for another advertiser, with a track-record of about 14 years, whom I will name *I2*. It must be mentioned here

that these interviews were made over March-December 2022. These interviews were made both in person and via telephone, lasting from 30 to 47 minutes.

The interviewees were only available as time allowed, as they were involved in various activities and campaigns, which influenced their willingness to speak freely about the topics of interest to this study.

The specialty literature highlights the idea of authenticity of the qualitative research and specifies that qualitative interviews are mostly done with a narrow sample of people (Silverman, 2004, p. 29).

Considering that advertisers are not too numerous in Romania, basically there are a few dozens of them that are significant for Romania's advertising industry, having two interviews with two insiders is a starting point relevant for an analysis of the topic which is of interest. Moreover, has to be stressed out that the two experts represent two agencies that are quite relevant for Romania's advertising industry.

The research method used is the one defined by the specialty literature as "theme-centred interview" that deals solely with only one matter of interest (Marinescu, 2009, p. 53). Moreover, the questions asked to the two interviewees followed the same topics and the same structural order specified in the interview guide.

Case presentation

In the upcoming pages the main opinions of the two specialists which came out in the dialogues will be reviewed.

Expert I1 – “*The Covid crisis is actually an identity crisis of the communication industry*”.

The starts will highlight the most important elements that expert I1 mentioned, since he drew an interesting parallel between the economic crisis in 2007-2008 and the medical crisis generated by COVID-19, considering that he had participated as an insider in meetings of certain communication groups, in both crises. In his view, there is a noticeable difference in how the advertising industry worked out during these two different crises. "*The 2007 crisis was a financial crisis*", "*the market shrunk*", and from his point of view, as an experienced advertising manager and entrepreneur, "*the crisis may be an opportunity*", while he is convinced that such a crisis never affects all players in the same way.

From his angle, as a businessman, I1 believes that a crisis may bring you an "opportunity to reinvent yourself, to take new paths". The crisis of 2007-2008 rearranged the global market by "*re-targeting the budgets*". One of the main relevant conclusions which I noted during my interview with I1 is that - while the global economic crisis was in full swing - "*players shifted their focus aiming for something more profitable*". In order to detail and explain his understanding of profitability, he was asked to give an example illustrating how this economic and professional goal could be achieved. And he explained that - over 2008-2010 - clients "*skipped all intermediate communication elements and they would only communicate through the selling point or through the TV*".

Given that the crisis of 2007-2008 was generated by a plummeting purchasing power, advertising agency clients became interested in saving and, therefore, "*the client felt that the public is either influenced while they are at home, and they go shopping already knowing what they want to buy, or they are massively influenced to make this or that purchasing decision when they are in*

front of the shelf". I1 believes that the 2007-2008 crisis brought under the spotlight a "*reduction of the budgets*" of the large players that operate on the world advertising market.

The main difference which I1 noted when analyzing the pre-2010 economic crisis vs. the health crisis generated by COVID-19 is that "*money was not the issue for the second crisis*", i.e., during the health crisis money stayed there, while the big players and agencies would look for solutions to strategically use the funds effectively. All of these efforts, and all that quest for new solutions have generated together and have speculated on, I1 believes, any sort of opportunity and that is why the "*streaming market - Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, Disney*" *inter alia* took off exponentially.

Considering that I1 had some interested customers operating in the area of streaming, he was also capable of seeing a sort of niche pattern that defines this digital service. I1 talked about other new "*streaming platforms that provide access to niche art, like theatre performances, documentaries and concerts*", which actually existed before the crisis but which the pandemic boosted significantly. The I1 interviewee, was asked to provide even more examples, and explained and detailed the way in which - as far as he was concerned - new technologies were used specifically. He also said that „*the aim of streaming is to replace culturally the live experience. A play you are streaming may be viewed by 10 times more viewers than a hall can hold*".

In terms of time sequence, I1 took stock of the phases in the evolution of the COVID-19 medical crisis and their impact on the Romanian advertising industry. He explained that when this sort of medical crisis first occurred, players were all stupefied and perplexed and that "*people did not really know how to spend their budgets*". It has to be clarified that - at the time when the lockdown was declared - all events that were scheduled to take place outdoors, on stadia, etc. all OOH promotional campaigns, the mesh boards, etc. were discontinued and all budgets that had been earmarked to finance these types of communication remained partially available to cover for other purposes.

I1 believes that "*most industries did not shrink, but grew*". Advertisers handled the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in different and complex ways and the way in which the interviewee explains it makes me think that the topic that had been chosen for this paper and the assiduous quest for details of interest that can be explained and understood by interviewing experts was actually a great idea.

I1 explains his earlier point about the growth potential of certain industries that thrived during the COVID-19 pandemic and said that "*the growth of food delivery platforms, coupled with the fear of a direct social contact during the pandemic came out as a boost to restaurants that were closed to the public, but were able to continue their business through home deliveries*".

Comparing advertising to fashion and to how evanescence and volatility are the adjectives of contemporary fashion, I1 recalled that he had observed during the pandemic "*fashion-like short-lived peekaboo trends in the advertising industry*", for example, certain forms of digital communication related to the pandemic context.

However, apart from the short-lived phenomena that came alive in the imagination of advertisers back in those days, it should be noted that the global crisis also generated some long-term effects, structurally altering the universe of the advertising agencies, and I1 explained that some effects were there to stay in the long term too: "*people will no longer work exclusively in their physical offices*". The expert anticipates that "*office spaces will become hubs hosting project teams*", this was already been confirmed just a few months after my interview with I1 with news coming out of a company that provided a space with desks and facilities which employees could share in turns, depending on their ongoing projects, therefore the idea of having a personal office

is water under the bridge. I1 also said that “*remote working arrangements exist and will exist as a wish of the employees*”, even though in reality employers want to check and supervise the work of employees, and would therefore like employees to return to the in-person work.

The central idea that came out from the interview with expert I1 is also the one that gave the title of this chapter of the research, namely that the COVID-19 crisis, for the advertising agencies, for the entire industry “*is an identity crisis of the communication industry*”. It is also worth mentioning that during the interview which took place in the agency office, one important observation was the fact that less than 10% of the staffers were actually there; what also was relevant to notice was that I1’s approach was always marked by this ambivalence of him being both an advertising professional and an entrepreneur.

The expert I1 took an interesting angle on how the world economy might evolve in the aftermath of a general medical crisis. The expert believes that COVID-19 “*will put an end to globalization*”, since “*every country will try to protect itself, its own economy and citizens*”.

Strictly speaking of the advertising industry, one first economic and professional effect that I1 noticed after the pandemic is associated to the dynamics of the videos. The interviewee told he had seen a “*freeze effect in the videos*”, and that this sort of halt was caused by the “*difficulty to come up with some proper messages in the context of the pandemic*”. This difficulty to adapt messages to the overall pandemic circumstances may be a central element, and may be the essence of what the expert said during the interview: “*the Covid crisis is actually an identity crisis of the communication industry*”.

In fact, as consumers, we have noticed this tendency to create stereotypical advertising messages and many of them actually being repetitive.

Moreover, many of the new productions revolved around the pandemic, which created an unprecedented similarity amongst the campaigns of different, even competing, brands. Moreover, quite originally, the expert stated that “*brands continued to communicate out of inertia, but they just did not know what to say anymore*”.

This difficult situation that is generated by the dramatic context of the pandemic required a swift adaptation of the production houses and advertising agencies, because, expert I1 said, “*some pre-existing campaigns were built on a cheerful narrative and no longer reflected the social realities*”.

The I1 expert also explained the general context in which the advertising industry was caught somehow off-guard by the pandemic; I1 explained that moment was a tough one since a lot of the advertising campaigns were “*focusing on Bellow The Line (BTL) actions*” and the agencies and their strategic campaigns had to adapt themselves quickly and go exclusively digital.

An important transformation that I1 highlighted refers to the new dynamics of commercials, which, given the new context of progressively accelerating digitals, managed to take over a lot of the commercials that were previously meant to run on television; my interlocutor explained that “*many commercials that are no longer on TV stay in the digital environment*”. I1 continued his reasoning and explained what the building blocks of this type of mutation were, stating that “*it is easier to reach your target audience more frequently in the digital environment*”. He also believes that neither agencies nor clients were able to save on their money by transferring videos from one broadcasting environment to another, as this does not guarantee that “*budgets shifted from TV to digital have been reduced*”. Another important aspect that came out during these interviews refers to the benefits of the digital world whereby the target audience can be more easily and precisely targeted, achieving the so-called “micro-targeting”.

Expert I1 also noted a cultural peculiarity which he considers specific to Romania and which blocked the massive transfer of material from the TV area to the digital area: the preference of Romanians to watch TV rather than interact in the online environment, and considered that this national peculiarity would ultimately encourage "*advertising campaigns to return to the television, at the expense of the digital environment*". The reasons for this cultural preference for TV programmes, which is specific to the Romanian society, derives - according to the interviewed expert - from the fact that "*television provides the cheapest entertainment*". So, Romania's characteristic of TV programmes being preferred over internet materials might just work as a barrier or a mitigant of the massive and global impacts that COVID-19 has inflicted upon the advertising industry and the media.

The expert noted that we are witnessing a post-pandemic return to the BTL universe and that due *inter alia* to the absence of in-person events, "*enthusiasm for BTL is higher now than in the pre-pandemic period*".

As a remark of a general importance, the expert noted a relevant strategic change in the advertising business in general and considers that, although such effect may not be triggered exclusively by the pandemic and the changes deriving from it, "*advertising slides towards a show-like product, the Internet has increased the attention span towards attractive messages*". The expert is convinced that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the trend according to which "*brands need to take on the role of entertainers*". I1 explains that when talking about this phenomenon *advertainment* is the catchword, which he defines simply as a new form of advertising in which "*people must enjoy watching ads*". According to Merriam Webster's dictionary, the term refers to "a form of entertainment that is created primarily to advertise something: advertisement presented in the form of entertainment" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023).

I1 mentioned two of the examples of TV productions in which brands become actual entertainers: *Chefi fără limite (Chefs without borders)*, a show produced by Lidl and broadcast by Antena 1; and in terms of advertising videos, one of the brands that has created an entire animated universe and animation characters dedicated to its own promotion is Vlad Casino that the brand used to "*clearly stand out against any other casino*", I1 explained.

In conclusion, I1 believes that traditional advertising agencies are significantly different from those specialising in digital campaigns, which emerged mainly during the pandemics, and explained that "*digital agencies do not know how to work on a concept*". Moreover, he says that the shortcoming faced by digital agencies is that digital specialists are predominantly "*technicians*" rather than creators, strategists and communicators.

The second expert, I2 - "*Home delivery services like Glovo or Bolt Food have been turned into promotional channels for different brands, with dedicated sections, ads and promotions*".

In the following pages are extracts and highlights with the 2nd interviewer, the interview with the I2 specialist. One important takeaway from this interview is that I2 - a top manager for one of Romania's leader advertisers - was able to see both the positives and the negatives generated by the pandemic. In the following pages, we will review and exemplify the highlights of the discussion with expert I2.

Regarding the main element that I2 considers positive (it should be specified that this expert is an employee of the advertising agency, unlike the previous interlocutor who owns his own agency), it is worth remembering what she said about remote work: "*it involves helping employees use their time more efficiently, but also encouraging agencies to use more part-timers*".

/ project-based contributors, while the advertising workforce itself has moved from being employed in one agency to collaborating with several agencies or clients".

On a positive post-pandemic note, according to I2, both Romanian and foreign "employees find it easier to work internationally without having to relocate".

The I2 interlocutor considers that the development of the digital environment during the global crisis generated another benefit: "clients were supposed to find ways of coping with the lack of offline projects and switch to online communication, and even develop dedicated digital departments if none had existed before, and hire the specialised workforce".

Also, when it comes to the uber-specialisation generated by the digital universe, I2 also noted that a new form of advertising graphics, dedicated to the online environment, had emerged, stating that "advertising graphics had to adapt itself to the online environment, complying with the UX/UI (user experience and user interface) requirements when creating content. Print designers acknowledged the requirements of the online environment, moving to tabular, responsive graphics with internet-friendly fonts and different rules for structuring information so that the most relevant information can be captured in the first part of the layout."

The new developments in digital departments have also impacted the jobs or, rather, the specialisations of the employees working for advertising agencies, generating their need to upskill and live up to the new requirements of the digital environment or, even more so, generating new positions and niche jobs which placed unprecedented challenges on the hands of HR departments that had to start looking for talents endowed with these new skills. About this matter, I2 said: "events have moved online, through Minecraft-type platforms. New specialised jobs have appeared, such as online event manager". For players of certain types of games working in the virtual environment, such as Minecraft, virtual covering concrete facts or other events that have been transferred from the real world to the virtual one; this is how the sponsors or partners of those events were also attracted into the virtual environment, and their graphic and identity elements are now displayed in the new universe.

Another peculiarity observed by the specialist, who analysed the changes to be found in the advertising industry, at a structural level, from a technical point of view, is that the "3D resources have been exploited much more in the digital world, by creating virtual realities and environments that are able to reproduce the offline inasmuch as possible. Under such circumstances, digital products were developed and sold as NFTs or digital avatars (fashion collections, paintings, etc.)".

The specialist also noted another structural change on the market where consumer goods are sold, but also a structural change in the expectations and services that brands have from advertising agencies, namely "the development of new online platforms or the adjustment of the existing ones to support advertising activities. We're also talking about brands that did not have an online shop before the pandemic, but have invested in this method in order to sell directly to consumers, such as Napolact."

After all, there are areas of the production sector or of the large producers that would only sell their products through large distribution networks and that, in the absence of the communication and sales channels that could have enabled them to contact the final client directly, were facing an imminent bankruptcy or, in any case, a possible major economic crisis. Regarding the online distribution networks that started to play the role of offline hypermarkets, the I2 expert notes a significant detail, stating that "Home delivery services like Glovo or Bolt Food have been turned into promotional channels for different brands, with dedicated sections, ads and promotions".

Also as elements considered to be beneficial and introduced in the everyday business of the advertising industry by the 2020-2021 COVID-19 crisis, the I2 specialist also identified the particularities generated by the need of the streaming networks to develop more and by the particularities of the video productions, adapted to the new digital conditions, about which she stated that *"online streaming services are evermore increasingly present, and so does their advertising, since these services have even started to be advertised on traditional TV stations"*. As far as video productions are concerned, what I2 told confirmed, to a certain extent, the issues mentioned in the interview with I1: *"brands have focused on social media communications, targeting the video content"*.

Concerning the possible negative effects, expert I2 tried to speak objectively and summarise the following elements. First of all, the expert believed that the main negative matter is that certain departments have been overcrowded to the detriment of others; moreover, certain communication channels have been overcrowded, generating a certain type of inflation of the advertising messages. *Along this line, the I2 interviewee said that "the massive shift of the advertising communications to the online environment has overcrowded an area that was already crowded with ads, and brands find it increasingly difficult to stand out against each other"*.

As a manager of largely-staffed departments, the I2 specialist noted a peculiarity of remote working, stating that *"educating juniors is more difficult when done remotely, it involves a larger workload on the side of the seniors who have to spend more time managing their projects while handling trainees as well"*.

While expert I1 noted that some of the messages and materials created to be televised have started to run mostly in the digital environment, expert I2 considers that a possible negative side of using digital channels in a massive and uniform manner is the lower quality of the advertising messages, and explained: *"communicating cheaply in the digital realm often pushes brands into offering quantitative communication at the expense of quality. The focus is on the number of daily/weekly posts and often more posts come with lower quality."*

We could say that the new digital campaigns generated and deployed in the online environment somehow reignite that sort of aggressiveness of the messages which the generalized advertising had gradually lost during the historical evolution of the advertising phenomenon. As Roland Barthes stated, the meaning of advertising, after all, is to be visible, even marked by a shocking aggressiveness (Codeluppi, 2003, p. 82, author's translation).

Discussion, conclusion

Putting the interview takeaways together generated a number of conclusions about the evolution of the advertising industry and the impact of economic or medical crises upon this universe.

The first conclusion is that the difference between the 2007-2008 crisis and the COVID-19 crisis is fundamental. The economic crisis of 2007-2008 contracted the market and shrank the corporate advertising budgets substantially. This conclusion is complemented by another significant detail: the COVID-19 crisis did not generate a contraction of the budgets, but rather a strategic shift in the communication channels (Amirul, Ahmad, & Nasip, 2023). It also brought about a contraction of the contract-based staffers, and both of my interviewees confessed that their advertising agencies had seen massive layoffs of about 20-30%.

Another relevant conclusion may be that agencies with departments predominantly working on BTL were affected by the COVID-19 crisis in greater ways, as a large part of their

projects eventually became digital campaigns. It is obvious that another negative effect, apart from the disappearance of the BTL campaigns, was the moment of a halt or absence of the general advertising communication, triggered by the inability of clients and agencies to adapt themselves quickly to new communication requirements, which were not even known at the time. One could say, metaphorically speaking, that creative industries felt baffled for a short while, and found themselves unable to communicate in a dramatic global situation.

The streaming market boomed significantly during the pandemic, ignited by both the investments in alternative productions dedicated to this field and the increased numbers of film viewers on Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, Disney etc. that were all encouraged by the global lockdown policies. Consequently, the development of this type of business and its advertising universe is based on economic and anthropological dynamics.

The new opportunities that have been available once streaming platforms started to thrive will reduce or enhance, depending on how each consumer sees that, the current humanitarian and cultural phenomenon, brokering and transforming contemporary cultural consumption in a radical manner.

The new digital experiences have altered the behaviour of consumers, we could say that – to a certain extent – they actually depleted the cultural act in itself: watching a play in the digital environment lost the magic that viewers would have felt in an authentic art temple, the theatre. This is how - tapping the possibilities to edit and manipulate the broadcast – new ways of expression and opportunities for content creators and advertisers are generated.

However, it seems that the effects of maximising the use of digital opportunities tend to fade or will fade in the coming period, since they will not keep up the accelerated growth speed that they have now. In this respect, both interviewees noted a somehow aggressive return of the BTL events into the everyday life.

Other conclusions that are relevant and useful to the future development of the advertising industry (if such opinions will ever be studied and considered) refer to how difficult it is to train junior advertisers who work remotely, which implies the absence of in-person interaction and, consequently, makes it rather impossible to properly teach the trainees who are just learning the ropes. Therefore, we can anticipate that if working remotely is used for too much time, the professionalisation and upskilling of the specialised staff will face new hardships.

Moreover, after discussing with these specialists, one of the takeaways is that product distribution networks such as Glovo, Tazz, Bolt Food, etc. have become real communication and promotion channels for various brands, becoming, in a hybrid form, a new media and product distribution channel, because through these food or non-food delivery networks that were massively used during the pandemic and post-pandemic years, brands and advertising agencies were able to run extensive campaigns.

Moreso, even the technological elements and the gadgets have been and must be adapted to the new digital requirements; for example, communication platforms, such as Zoom, Google Meet and the like, have become widespread and started to be used by the general public. Advertising agencies used all these types of platforms to meet and pitch during the pandemic period, as the existing literature pointed out for other societies (Jankhoteli, 2023).

The research topic presented and showcased a number of exploratory opportunities that might have never been expected, and its academic potential could be further scouted in future research.

To a certain extent, making an analogy with what Filippo Tommaso Marinetti wrote about speed and how it massively started influencing humanity and Italian society since the beginning

of the 20th century (Marinetti, 2009, pp. 155-157), It could be said that nowadays the speed of internet is structurally altering the evolution of contemporary advertising, its effects on society and, why not, even the future dynamics of human professions that will develop and diversify in unsuspected directions under the influence of digital communication.

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