



Impact of Television Advertising on the Impulse to Purchase Over-the-Counter Medicine

Maria-Cristina ȘTEFAN^{*}, Violeta-Andreea ANDREIANA^{**}, Irina Antoaneta TĂNĂȘESCU^{***},
Georgiana STOICA^{****}

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ABSTRACT

The pharmaceutical industry is a dynamic ever-growing market. It is a market that will never cease to exist. Given the current economic, political and demographic situation in Romania, the demand for medication will be increasingly higher for all age categories. The motivation is as simple as it is complex: time and time management for the 21st century man becomes a concept that is more and more difficult to control. Health care in this light century keeps going down due to long hours spent at work, highly processed foods and lack of or continual postponement of physical exercise. All these trigger a body weakness and implicitly a deterioration of one's health. Therefore, people are more prone to embrace more rapid and miraculous methods towards physical restoration. People tend to believe that their health issues are more numerous while television advertisements promise to solve all these issues for them. We consider that it is firstly necessary to educate consumers in this respect as they are the only ones able to decide on what is best for them; on the other hand, drugs advertising may only influence a potential consumer to the extent to which they allow this to happen. Throughout this study, we will mathematically show how advertising influences the impulse to purchase over-the-counter drugs.

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1. Introduction

Advertising is omnipresent. Whether we consider newspaper, radio, TV or direct marketing, advertising forms part of our life and its absence would make everything seem more dull, obsolete and lack innovation.

The television commercial is the only advertising means that has become a daily ritual to the 21st century man. It is comfortable, available and just a click away, at any time and place in the country.

A both controversial and incomprehensible topic relates to television commercials advertising over-the-counter drugs. One could say that the disease itself is a notion impossible to promote as well as an uncomfortable topic even though the goal is information and prevention alone. The opinions are antagonistic, and the success of these commercials is, however, a mystery still to be clarified due to the complexity and depth required to analyze and understand it. Understanding it resides in a very good psycho-sociological analysis, closely related to other external influence factors that should not be seen only individually (Marcu, L., 2010).

We start from the controversial idea according to which our society tends to see us as mere objects needed for long-term use and unconsciously induce us the idea that it is normal to take pills or to be ill (Cristache et al., 2019).

We consider that man may be thus influenced and manipulated provided they agree to and in most cases it is in our power to choose what we want to hear or in favour of whom we want to militate; we ourselves are the amount of our thoughts and perceptions.

2. Field research on the impact of television advertising on the impulse to purchase over-the-counter drugs

2.1. Research methodology

We may all see or have heard of the effects caused by television commercials on the individuals' impulse to purchase. Even though we ignore them and change the channel, commercials are present on almost every television channel, more and more often and more and more diversified, depending on the season and the context of the present world in which we all live. Unconsciously or not, they automatically

^{*}, ^{**}, ^{***}, ^{****}Valahia University of Targoviste, Romania. E-mail addresses: andreea.vivi@yahoo.com, a.irinatanasescu@yahoo.co.uk, monicad_d@yahoo.com.

induce us certain codified messages; they create various emotional states and try to determine us to form an opinion. There are many assumptions and some studies conducted in this respect; however, we consider that this topic has not been under sufficient analysis to reach most realistic conclusions, and since the pharmaceutical industry is so wide and necessary, it becomes at a certain time a taboo subject.

Broadly, we are all aware of the negative effects, but the trade interests are much more important and such sensitive issue will be avoided for as long as it is lucrative to do so.

We have started from this premise and have tried our best to find out the opinions on this controversial issue of both medicine consumers and pharmacists. Taking the television commercials as the most available form of advertising, we have carried out a research on the importance of both advertising, in general, and television advertising, in the decision-making process relating to purchase of over-the-counter medication, both among consumers and among the pharmacists (persons closest to the customer at the time of the purchase). We will compare the responses received in order to see whether there is a genuinely close collaboration between the two categories of persons analysed and whether their opinion on this subject are close and can be correlated.

We consider that it is necessary to conduct a qualitative and not a quantitative research in order to collect the biased opinions or reasons taken into consideration when responding.

As for the form of research, we have chosen the individual interview because we wanted the interviewees to feel free in expressing their opinions on this topic. Furthermore, we wanted to go beyond the multiple choice questionnaire and eliminate the potential non-responses or partial responses (Toma A., Mărgărit, D., 2012). Additionally, the visual contact, the verbal or paraverbal language is much more effective and may be interpreted beyond words (Lavingia K., Tanwar S., 2020).. The interview applied was based on a random 60-person method, both consumers and pharmacists in the municipality of Târgoviște (central area and around the pharmacies around this area) and Bucharest (sectors 1-6), between 01 and 28 February 2021.

Despite the fact that they were randomly chosen, the persons interviewed belong to all age categories, have different knowledge levels and work in various fields of activity.

Nine open-ended questions were prepared for medicine consumers and 10 questions of the same type were intended for pharmacists.

Similar to any form of research, the analysis conducted imposes however some limits, e.g.: the sample is not representative (this study has to be carried out nationwide to collect most exact and representative data). Nevertheless, at the case study level, one may easily see some behaviour variations and tendencies. This is the reason why the results may not be expanded or generalized; some categories of persons may not be assigned as they are simply demonstrative; the quality of the responses depends to a large extent on the expertise of the interviewer, their ability to ask appropriate questions and also the willingness of the interviewees to respond to this request (Bailey et al, 2020).

We have formulated some hypotheses of the study that will be confirmed or refuted based on the responses received:

1. Advertising, television advertising in particular, has a great influence on the sale of over-the-counter medicine;
2. The role of the pharmacists in recommending pharmaceutical products to their patients decreases at a considerable rate due to advertising literature;
3. The consumption of useless pharmaceutical products has increased proportionally to the number of television commercials for such products;
4. The television commercials intended to promote medicine may influence the audio-visual depending on the emotional and mental state of the viewer.

2.2. Interpretation of the results obtained following the interviews applied

2.2.1. Interpretation of interview applied on pharmacists

The expertise of most pharmacists interviewed (70%) exceeds 5 years in this field. Therefore, they have gone through a wide variety of experiences and have witnessed different situations, which helped them form an opinion on the real needs of the consumers. They are the main observers of the human behaviour in pharmacies as well as good analysts of human gestures. According to pharmacists, most medicine consumers are concerned and sad. They pay attention to prices; they are immersed in their everyday life, unable to focus enough when expressing themselves and, most times, they do not know the exact problem that they face or what (over-the-counter) medicine to choose.

For such reasons, the pharmacist-patient relationships are mainly based on trust and professionalism when it comes to recommending appropriate products, and further on mutual support and friendship. Moreover, this response is confirmed by a study conducted in 2010 regarding the Romanians' trust in different categories of professions where the pharmacists take the third of twenty places, which is a leading place in terms of the trust they inspire to their patients (<https://www.cariereonline.ro/actual/piloții-pompierii-și-farmacii-topul-încrederii-românilor>).

Most customers who come to buy medicine (60%, figure 2.1.) have no information on what medication they would need and the symptoms described are most times incomplete or inexact. The customers most often remember names of pharmaceutical products they have heard on television and, despite the pharmacist's recommendation of a series of medicine among which the ones promoted by the television advertising, the level of trust tends to be in favour of the information provided by the television commercials. Their explanation is that the television advertising for such products is extremely persuasive and claims to be miraculous and beneficial to everybody. The people in pain are more likely to believe such things. This is where the human subconscious interferes and always tends to go towards personal experiences or to rely on some experiences/recommendations made by other acquaintances, which makes the customers more confident in relation to their purchasing-related decisions. Yet, a lower number of people are willing to try new medicine, which were not promoted on television, only because the medication already used no longer work for them.

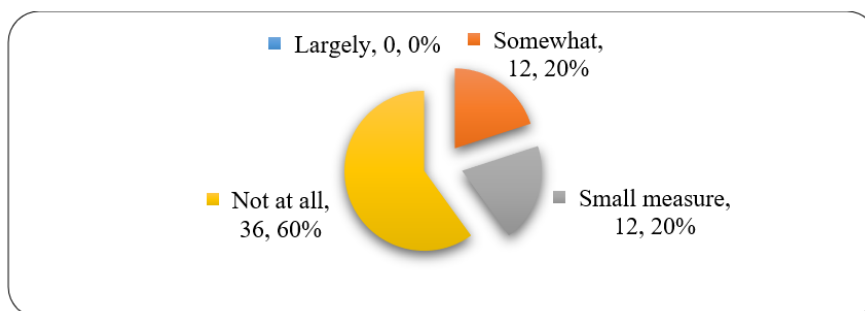


Figure 2.1. Patients' level of information on medicine

In reality, pharmacists confirm that basic over-the-counter drugs are sometimes regarded with scepticism whereas drugs promoted on television sell much better. However, in most cases, medication administered based on what one has heard in relation to it has no effect or no similar effect to all individuals and may even harm or interact with other medical conditions of the patient. This is the pharmacists' biggest fear and the medicine they recommend upon the customer's request is frequently herbal and not very strong in order to avoid potential complications.

Every time they have a suspicion as to the customer's symptoms, the pharmacists recommend them to see a doctor and get a confirmation of the symptom and the treatment required (figure 2.2.).

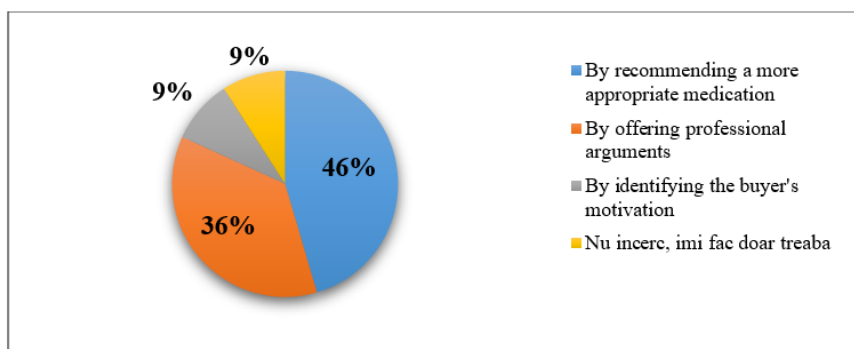


Figure 2.2. How do pharmacists try to persuade a customer that they do not need the drug requested?

The customers wrongly tend to go and see the pharmacist before they see a doctor; the explanation is tied to the idea according to which the former may also help. As for the pharmacists, they also tend to recommend medicine just because they personally tried it and it worked or because such product is very popular.

The sixty pharmacists have unanimously given a positive response: they have all seen patients who are so convinced that some drugs are the best that any other recommendations are not even an option. The main reasons mentioned in this respect are: the impact of advertising upon the regular consumer and the doctors' recommendations in a proportion of 70 to 30 percent. The conclusion is that the Romanian customer is influenced by drugs commercials every time they have to choose a medical treatment.

Additionally, there are drugs which sell excessively even though the customers do not need them (70%, figure 2.3.) e.g. common colds, congested nose, mild or average headaches, stomach ache etc. The main motivation for the purchase of such products is prevention and preparedness when travelling or under different circumstances.

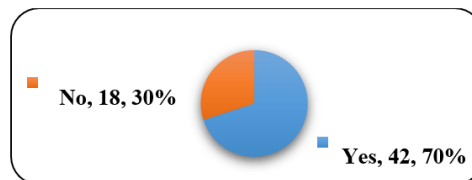


Figure 2.3. Are there drugs which sell excessively even though the patients do not need them?

According to pharmacists, there is a very interesting phenomenon: patients hope and strongly believe in the miraculous effects of a simple pill (which starts to work after a certain period of time, not immediately) and therefore some may jump to conclusions according to which this particular pill does not work for me, while others are so desperately pursuing healing that the same pill starts working right away and the patient is cured; this is the case of the placebo effect.

Nevertheless, 60 percent of the pharmacists consider that advertising does not prevail over a pharmacist/physician; their motivation is that most people are conscious and trust themselves to such an extent that advertising merely keeps their interest alive and makes them more aware of the health issues they may have. A rather worrying percentage of 40 is represented by the pharmacists who have been forced to face up to customers for whom self-medication is the best treatment and who refuse to consider other options.

80% of the pharmacists have knowledge of what television commercials convey in relation to medicine highly demanded in drug stores and only 3% consider that the information is accurate and is provided in an accurate manner. This is a rather low percentage by comparison to the 97% which consider that drugs advertising is aggressive, too repetitive, generalizes the concept of cold or pain and makes the patients believe that the products promoted are better and more effective than the ones they have never seen on TV (figure 2.4.).

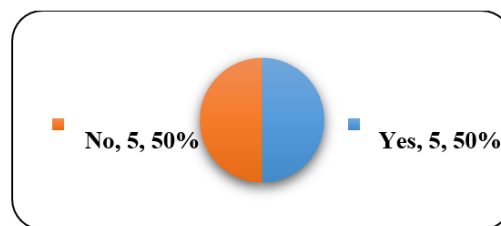


Figure 2.4. Do you consider that excessive drugs advertising represents a problem?

To the best of their understanding, accurate information and information provided in an accurate manner means only the information prescribed and recommended by a doctor following a thorough medical examination.

Moreover, they have the same opinion on the importance of television advertising to medicine sales and consider that medicine should not be accompanied by commercials; it should only be recommended by a doctor.

Customers tend to use much too strong medicine for mild pains; in addition, they neglect to read the leaflet or purchase medication for mild/average pains based on recommendations made by relatives or friends, considering that the pharmacists may recommend only the more expensive variant (Gabor, M.R. et al, 2021).

All pharmacists interviewed gave a negative response when asked whether they consider that drugs advertising is important - they believe that advertising brings about an unjustified demand and fails to improve the quality of life – instead of promoting a medication-free life, they encourage such lifestyle.

Excessive drugs advertising is seen from two different standpoints; the pharmacists fall into two categories: pharmacists who consider that advertising itself does not harm as long as the final user seeks the doctor's or the pharmacist's opinion, and pharmacists who see excessive drugs advertising as more harmful and less useful. They consider that most of the target audience are still unable to distinguish between what they need and what they do not need as mandatory medicine, which makes them act on impulse.

2.2.2. Interpretation of interview applied on patients

All patients interviewed consume over-the-counter medicine, mainly to improve low and average intensity pains; they consider that prescription by doctors should prevail over the over-the-counter purchases, every time the side effects may affect them. The people who strongly believe this thing are usually the middle and third aged people, with more serious health conditions.

The question “Do you think that medicine commercials influence patients?” raises another question mark if we compare it to the pharmacists’ accounts: the patients are this time convinced that the television commercials have no influence whatsoever on the purchasing decisions – i.e. 60%, and that they are simply informative. On the other side, 40% of the persons interviewed are represented by the young people who confirm that their purchasing decision is influenced by the television commercials which help them to make a choice when they are forced to purchase medicine.

When asked “Have you ever considered purchasing medicine based on the information you collected from an advertisement? If so, why?”, the patients offered a positive response in a percentage of 60% and mentioned that they may buy some medication based on the television advertisements. Their reasons in this case are curiosity, the promise of a quick healing and a defective patient-family physician relationship

In terms of their relationship with the pharmacist, all patients consider that the latter’s advice are useful, worth to take into consideration, indispensable and appreciated. They are extremely delighted that they are able to maintain a good communication channel (better than the one they developed with their own family doctor) and that they may receive advice or recommendations which are just informative and not mandatory. Most times, the pharmacists helped them to find cheaper alternatives, yet with the same effects, for some medication of which they had never heard on television. The persons interviewed are very happy that they may seek the help of a specialist who can recommend other medicine, better and more efficient than the ones presented on television. The pharmacist may also explain them the difference between the medicine seen on television and the new medicine on the market, which have not been promoted yet.

For all these reasons, most patients (70%) consider that the information on medicine available provided on television is scarce and fails to persuade them to purchase the product. This is the very reason why their relationship with the pharmacist is very good and they always get the pharmacist’s opinion prior to make the purchasing decision. Most people do not understand the exact message conveyed by the commercial, while some messages may have several interpretations; one advertisement may subordinate another and this causes some confusion.

The television commercials are seen as aggressive as they seek to communicate the most possible; the quality of the message conveyed is rather imprecise. The consumers have a difficult choice to make when it comes to medicine against colds, for example, and the smallest inappropriate details may convince them to choose a different product.

Consumers have identified another form of promotion, i.e. the drug store advertising which invites you to buy products from a specific drug store. They believe that such advertising may influence them to head for this particular drug store, even for no other reason than testing it (Cristache et al., 2019).

The consumers consider that the offer is wide enough and they may choose any type of drug store they want, the basic selection criterion being the price, than the availability of medication and lastly the kind attitude of the pharmacist as well as the business hours (Lovin et al., 2021).

Taking into consideration that the television commercial is seen as aggressive, most persons interviewed do not personally know cases of other people’s health being affected by over-the-counter medication purchased; however, they are aware that all medicine may sooner or later have various effects on a person’s body.

3. Research conclusions

Following the interviews conducted, we see that the attitude towards the television commercials of the two categories of people interviewed cannot be clearly defined and may be divided into two categories of public / consumers, with completely opposite points of view: - people who need television commercials – they feel the need to be informed even though they do not purchase the medication right away, yet they store the information and feel ready when the purchasing need emerges; moreover, they consult with their pharmacist for mere confirmation; and people who do not find this category of commercials important and influential, who consume medication based on doctor’s prescription only.

We haven seen that the persons interviewed are not aware that the television commercials may influence them, even though they do act in line with what they state and are tempted to try specific medicine. Why? Because, by their repetitiveness and content (messages associated to images and sounds, which usually show most familiar situations, sensitive topics in someone’s every day life or associations to celebrities who experienced the same medical conditions), television commercials induce them in an unconscious manner a feeling of confidence and safety.

We consider that the decision as to whether to purchase or not some medication is closely related to education, consumption habits since childhood, level of information of each and every individual who has the duty to filter such information and get further information when in doubt or when messages are vague. Nevertheless, most people indulge in the present situation and consider that it is more comfortable to act as most people do because it is safer and it is a way requiring less effort (<http://www.wall-street.ro/articol/Social/156432/internetul-al-doilea-medic-de-familie-cat-de-des-merg-romanii-la-medic-intr-un-an.html>).

Based on the arguments presented above, all three hypotheses from which we started our research have been confirmed throughout the study, respectively: television commercials influence sales of medication; the role of the pharmacists in recommending other medication decreases due to the influence of television advertising; consumption of useless medicine evolves in line with the amount of television commercials.

Following the analysis of the nonverbal behaviour, we see a slight insecurity about the opinions expressed; neither the pharmacists nor the consumers may offer the exact motivation; furthermore, they find it difficult to express themselves and they feel the need for additional helpful questions towards the final response. Their looks also inspire some confusion or even a complete lack of involvement; a rather low percentage of the interviewed persons were very receptive or willing to express their opinions and thoughts (Micu et al, 2018).

The consumers are not informed on the side effects of such over-the counter effects and medicine, in general; they do not always read the leaflet and they take as reference points some mentions on the box, which is more and more colourful and attractive. In its turn, the package plays a rather important role; the quality of the material and the intensity of the colours used as well as the way they were combined on the package also matters to patients; last but not least, the amount of the information offered on the package makes a difference as to the choice made by the patients (Voss et al, 2020). This criterion becomes increasingly important when the consumers have to choose between two or several types of medicine with similar effects.

Following an analysis of the arrangement and the appearance of the medication on the shelves in the drug stores, it can be stated that only the medication promoted on television is placed in the forefront so that customers may see them first; moreover, some drug store even use special stands to promote new medicine on the market. Therefore, we may say that, contrary to statements made by the pharmacists, the drug stores also support the sale of medicine promoted on television to a large extent; which means that it is not only the responsibility of the consumers alone. This type of memory in the drug store is useful and stimulates the memory and the impulse to buy.

Consequently, this industry of pharmaceutical products and drug stores promoting them work in close partnership and they focus mainly on increasing profit, irrespective of how they act or convey the information. The legislation is what limits the impact and conditions this industry, starting from the premise that any consumer should be protected against any type of harmful advertising that may affect them directly and any consumer should be able to decide what is best for themselves and the extent to which they want to let themselves influenced.

To conclude, we consider that we are the result of our choices; every individual is unique and has a unique way of thinking and it is in our power to choose what is best for us.

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