
Promotion on the Internet: The Impact on the Consumer and Its Effects – Selected Examples

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Abstract:

Purpose: The cognitive purpose of this study is to identify consumers' opinions about various types of advertising, with particular emphasis on its visual form, as well as to determine the specificity of advertising recipients' reaction in selected areas of socio-economic activity. Research problem is to look for an answer to the question whether there are differences in the way advertising messages are received depending on the subject of advertising; if so, in what features are they noticeable? Such a formulation of the problem is related, among others, to the fact that in many aspects, marketing in Poland has already achieved a quality similar to that found in more developed markets but research on advertising is still insufficient.

Design/methodology/approach: Critical analysis of literature, analysis of website content, a questionnaire allowing for a comparison of the advertising recipients' reactions to selected verbal and visual messages using a selection of sample advertising messages on the Internet and analysis of the recipients' opinions.

Findings: Identification of differences and similarities in the advertising recipients' reactions to controversial messages compared to awareness-raising promotion.

Practical Implications: This study has implications for how managers could encourage citizens to accept a brand based on advertising. Furthermore, visual analysis and perception of content of advertisement is a new direction for interdisciplinary way of exploring the topic. The study's practical implications are connected with the possible application of the different forms of advertisement for successful marketing communication.

Originality/Value: To the best of the author's knowledge, there is not enough research on controversial forms of advertisement and presenting this as a dialog searching tool between the image or content of advertising and society, shaping attitudes to goods, services or experiences.

Keywords: Internet, promotion, controversial advertising, visual communication, social attitudes.

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1. Introduction

The contemporary market, both local and global, is developing dynamically, among others, thanks to the availability and development of new promotional tools, in particular advertising. Researchers have been analysing various aspects of advertising, but one of the phenomena that is still of interest to researchers is the controversy of advertising (Erdogan, 2008; Huhmann, 2008; Waller, 2005). Waller (2005, p. 5) notes that “In recent times there has been an increase in the amount of controversial advertising in the media”.

On the other hand, Erdogan (2008, p. 248) sees the economic foundations of such advertising: “The main rationale for this type of advertising is that it cuts through clutter and brings about a ‘shock value’ for the brand”. Among the many premises of this phenomenon, one should take into account the universality of the Internet used as advertising space, which easily reaches the recipient even in a controversial form.

Advertising as one of the important and popular promotional instruments, with its variety of forms, stands out in terms of its impact when it appears on the Internet. The initial stage of the development of advertising was characterised by a fairly limited scope; advertising mainly reached those recipients who had an opportunity to make visual contact with a poster, a signboard, an advertising board or who heard a town crier (Wiszniewska, 2019, p. 2).

Nowadays, advertising can be found at every turn – in the press, on television, on the radio, on billboards, in leaflets, but mainly 24 hours a day – on the Internet. The origin of the word “advertising” is closely related to the word “reclamare” in Latin, meaning, among others, making a noise around something. The dictionary of the Polish language explains advertising as activities that aim at persuading a potential buyer to purchase a specific product or use a given service (Słownik języka polskiego, www.sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/reklama); it seems that this approach to the essence of advertising well reflects the relationship between the offeror and the potential buyer in the process of communicating on the market.

Another definition, given by Krygier (2014, p. 98), also says that advertising is “a paid form of indirect communication of an impersonal nature”. The dictionary of the American Association of Marketing defines advertising more broadly: “Advertising is the placement of announcements and messages in time or space by business firms, non-profit organisations, government agencies, and individuals who seek to inform and/or persuade members of a particular or audience regarding their products, services, organisations or ideas” (The Universal Marketing Dictionary).

Advertising can be defined more precisely taking into account the recipient’s perspective: advertising is a communicative act aimed at creating a relationship with the buyer through an intelligent and humorous dialogue (Bernstein, 2005, p. 168). In psychological terms, M. Laszczak states that by using the knowledge about the

recipients' characteristics and their psyche, it is possible to shape information in an advertising message in such a way so as to influence their actions (2000, p. 15).

The cited definitions show that advertising has certain goals that it should meet including informing about something, persuading or encouraging the recipient to take certain actions. Therefore, advertising should draw the potential recipient's attention to the subject of the advertisement.

For the purposes of this article, taking as a basis of the classification of advertising its objectives and forms, its following functions and features as well as forms of expression of the transmitted content can be distinguished – as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Selected functions and forms of advertising*

The breakdown criteria	Functions/forms of advertising	Selected features
Objective of the impact	informing	It informs about the features, properties and use of products, prices, dates and places of sale.
	convincing	It convinces consumers to the company's offer by presenting its advantages in comparison with the competition.
	reminding	It reminds consumers of the benefits of the products they already know.
Type of senses	visual	To receive this advertising, the sense of sight is used, e.g. in the press.
	acoustic	The sense of hearing is used, e.g., on the radio.
	visual-acoustic	A combination of visual and acoustic form, e.g. television commercials.

Source: Own elaboration based on (Nowacki, 2006, p. 43).

In view of the above, the cognitive purpose of this study is to identify consumers' opinions about various types of advertising, with particular emphasis on its visual form, as well as to determine the specificity of advertising recipients' reaction in selected areas of socio-economic activity.

Therefore, the undertaken research problem is to look for an answer to the question whether there are differences in the way advertising messages are received depending on the subject of advertising; if so, in what features are they noticeable? Such a formulation of the problem is related, among others, to the fact that "in many fields, Polish marketing has already achieved a quality similar to that found in more

developed markets, which, however, cannot be completely concluded about research on advertising.

2. Advertising – Selected Legal Aspects of Functioning in Poland

Advertising as an important component of any marketing activity and as an activity that shapes social attitudes is legally regulated in Poland. One of the legal acts that contains guidelines regarding advertising is the Broadcasting Act of 29 December 1992. Its Art. 4, item 17, contains the following definition of advertising: “advertising is a commercial message, coming from a public or private entity, in connection with its business or professional activity, aimed at promoting the sale or paid use of goods or services; self-promotion is also advertising” (Ustawa...).

The relevant provisions of this Act specify, among others, what types of advertising is prohibited in Poland and specify seven key areas covered by this prohibition. From the social point of view, the provision which says that it is forbidden for advertising messages to negatively affect the behaviour of minors; in particular, a commercial message must not (Ustawa...):

- 1) violate human dignity;
- 2) contain discriminatory content based on race, gender, nationality, ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation;
- 3) hurt religious or political beliefs;
- 4) threaten the physical, mental or moral development of minors;
- 5) encourage behaviour that threatens health, safety or environmental protection.

The above bans constitute important restrictions for unauthorised advertising practices, but unfortunately, they do not always eliminate them. In the light of the presented selected researchers’ opinions, this situation seems to be a sufficient justification to formulate the above research problem, the solution of which will enable achieving the cognitive goal of this article.

The analysed bill also unambiguously defines acts of unfair competition, such as:

- 1) advertising contrary to the law and good practices or violating human dignity;
- 2) advertising that misleads consumers and may thus influence their decision to purchase a good or service;
- 3) advertising that appeals to customers’ feelings by inducing fear, using superstition or credulity of children.

The possibility of a multidirectional impact of advertising on the socio-economic reality requires statutory regulations also of other aspects of the functioning of advertising, such as preventing and combating unfair competition, preventing undesirable market practices, protecting consumer rights, the scope of published content in the press, landscape protection, and others.

The above-mentioned areas of the potential impact of advertising are characterised by a close relationship with the functioning of market entities, and the lack of legal regulations in these areas could not only cause a conflict of interest between them but also have a destructive impact on the business environment.

It should be emphasised that the selection of these aspects of the functioning of advertising and their reflection in the Polish law are based on the assumption that they play an “organising” role in the world of advertising, thus eliminating its negative social effects. Other legal regulations related to advertising have not been included in this article, as they go beyond its substantive framework in the sense of being conducive to the solution of the research problem.

In Poland, the Advertising Council also deals with advertising problems – this is a non-governmental non-profit organisation which was established, among others, to protect the principles to which entrepreneurs conducting advertising activities should adhere. The rules for creating an advertisement are set out in the Code of Advertising Ethics. The document specifies what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in advertising messages and is also constantly reviewed and modified. The code includes clearly written rules prohibiting, among others, discrimination, incitement to violence or betrayal of recipients’ loyalty (Rada Reklamy...).

It should be emphasised that legal regulations regarding the functioning of advertising do not limit the independence of the market but shape the social attitudes of entities towards many phenomena and advertising itself.

3. Visual Communication via the Internet

Visualisation of material products seems to be simple and legible; however, this process related to services or creating experiences and emotions encounters difficulties – both in projection and in consumption. The visual aspect of the product acquires special importance when its consumption involves the use of the Internet in the process of its acquisition. In particular, this concerns products whose main function is effective and pleasant customer service, on the one hand, and a positive user experience, on the other one. Therefore, the question arises whether the latter is an important element of marketing communication.

Looking for an answer to this question, it should be emphasised that marketing communication is a continuous process the effectiveness of which depends on the satisfaction of two parties – the sender of the message and its recipient. Based on these two-faceted expectations, User Experience (UX) Design has been developed. It is orientated towards websites and applications. Its task is to create the best experience — the user’s interaction with these types of applications — so that they can easily find and do what they want without hindrance and difficulties.

A good UX design can contribute to the conversion of a website or an application, as well as to please the eye, give satisfaction to consumers and increase their involvement in the process of production and consumption of the service.

Another aspect important from the point of view of online advertising using visualisation (a static or dynamic image) is the selection of such a means of expression of a given message that it does not cause extremely negative emotions.

However, “the potential to trigger the recipient’s desired reaction depends not only on the way the strategy is implemented — to what extent the message about the advertised product is tailored, reliable and unique — but, above all, on the strength of the adopted strategy, serving as the basis for building the message, i.e. linking specific meanings and values with the advertised product and brand” (Ogonowska and Ptaszek, 2013).

The strength of a strategy can have different faces – both a positive impact on its recipients’ attitudes (expectations, opinions, experiences, emotions) and negative effects, e.g. of aggressive or controversial advertising that goes beyond socially accepted norms.

Below, examples of various images of advertising are presented – both a controversial one which evokes negative experiences and emotions in the vast majority of respondents (Example 1), as well as those that build awareness of the need for change, adaptation, redefining lifestyle or a hierarchy of values (Examples 2 and 3).

Example 1: The example is based on the results of a survey conducted among students of Gdynia Maritime University in 2022 as part of a project task covering the issues of contemporary forms of marketing (Sztuba, 2022). From among several visual online advertisements covered by the survey, one was selected for an analysis of the controversy of the message, which – in the present author’s opinion – grossly violates the national and socially recognised value system (in this case: of Poles) to draw the recipient’s attention to a product of everyday consumption.

The photo below shows an advertisement for Tiger energy drinks. The authors of this image refer to the date of 1 August, i.e., the day of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, which for the vast majority of Poles has a patriotic dimension (Figure 1).

As many as 75% of the respondents did not like this advertisement, while 15% of the respondents expressed their approval. The others marked the answer “I don’t know”. In the following questions, the respondents mostly continued to speak negatively about this advertisement. More than 67% claimed not to have a positive opinion about the brand after watching this message. Around 63% of respondents were convinced that this advertisement violated moral boundaries, and 19% believed that this image did not violate the generally accepted norms.

Simultaneously, as many as 69% of the respondents declared that the message aroused negative emotions in them, and 17% answered “I do not know”. Adjectives which the surveyed students used to describe the advertisement included: outrageous (53%), shocking (40%), vulgar (38%).

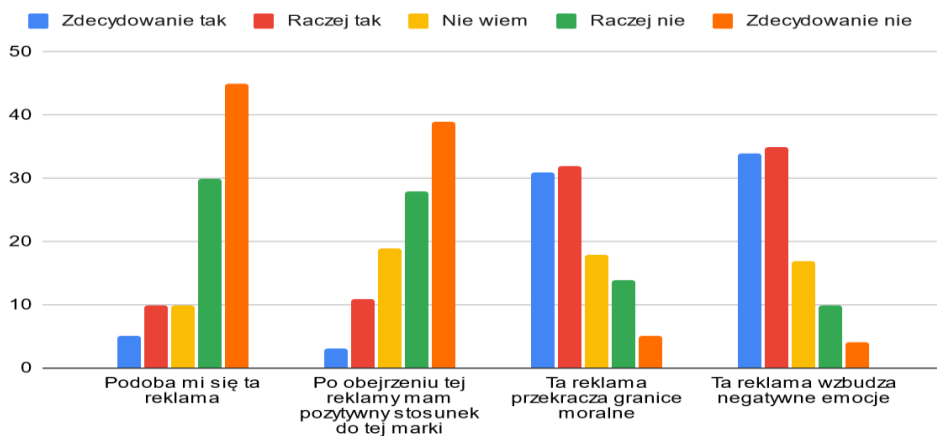
Figure 1. Tiger Advertising



Source: <https://marketingdlaludzi.pl/kontrowersyjne-tresci-i-grafiki-w-reklamach/>.
screenshot from the no longer existing Instagram profile of the Tiger Energy Drink brand.

Below is the distribution of answers to the question about the opinion on the attached visual advertising message.






Figure 2. What do you think about the following advertisement (conclusions from Figure 1)



The statements presented in the chart mean accordingly:

- I like this advertising
- After seeing this ad, I have a positive attitude towards this brand
- This ad crosses moral boundaries
- This ad evokes negative emotions

Legend:

-  Blue Definitely yes
-  Red Probably ye
-  Yellow I do not know
-  Green Probably not
-  Orange Definitely not

Source: Based on A. Sztuba. 2022. *Kontrowersyjne treści reklam a ich oddziaływanie na klienta – w opiniach odbiorców reklam. Master's thesis written at GMU.*

The above survey results suggest that even a graphically good advertising message may not have a positive effect in terms of building consumer awareness if the form of expression goes beyond socially accepted values. The above example of advertising uses the date of August 1, which for Poles is a symbol of the Warsaw Uprising and ensuing from it huge moral and material losses of the nation (Sztuba, 2022).

The cited respondents' answers allow an assumption that the advertiser has prepared a message aimed to arouse interest among consumers by using a shocking context for this purpose (Gorbaniuk and Stołecka, 2009) and which is indirectly related to "crossing social or cultural taboos" (Pope *et al.*, 2004, p. 70).

Example 2: A real-time marketing is based on the analysis of the content of websites and communication in social media of a selected market entity with international reach – also operating in Poland. It should be noted that the role of a visual advertising message in real-time marketing is slightly different, thanks to which market entities have an opportunity to reach faster a larger number of consumers with their activities.

It requires following current events, trends on the Internet or popular topics and responding to them creatively, for example by creating images whose content will refer to the company's activities and simultaneously to the specific trend. Real-time marketing is most often used on social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. These platforms give an opportunity to quickly reach the consumers and have the messages reposted, which increases the reach of the post.

Such an effect will also be achieved by users commenting on it and interacting with it. The use of real-time marketing requires an immediate reaction to current events, because trends on the Internet are dynamic and change quickly – even a few days after a very important event, it is forgotten, and the related articles or posts do not

bring the expected effects of gaining popularity, and on the contrary – they can even negatively affect the company's image.

One of the companies on the Polish market that uses the advantages of real-time marketing is the surveyed retailer named X in the article. This company has profiles on such social networks as: Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest and YouTube. Each of the listed websites features advertising campaigns in accordance with their purpose, matching the content to a given community. The company is happy to reply to its recipients' comments, questions and opinions.

For example, if customers are interested in a given product that is not currently on sale, it informs them about the passing on information to the relevant department. Relevant departments also try to help dissatisfied customers and solve unpleasant situations. At company X's brand profiles, commitment to customer communication and care for the satisfaction of the community purchasing products sold by the company is clearly visible.

In addition, the content is posted regularly and with up-to-date information. This company with branches in Poland dynamically operates in the field of marketing, especially on the Internet. It has its official website where one can learn about the current offer in physical stores, newsletters and promotions. Furthermore, visitors to the website can take advantage of advice and inspiration on various spheres of everyday life prepared by the company's team in Poland. The published articles contain recommendations of products that are available for purchase at this store.

In addition, the company also has thematic websites. One of them is about culinary topics. Recipes, tips, and cooking tricks are shared here. Recipes are created by celebrities – which is an important element of real-time marketing. Some recipe pages also have embedded videos from the Kuchnia X channel on YouTube that show how to prepare a given dish. In turn, another page is devoted to alcohol. After registering on this page, it is possible to reserve some items that the user will be available to collect in a selected store. Besides, there are articles on wines, whiskey and drinks. A different newsletter is available on each of the three X websites, which encourages subscription by offering a welcome discount code for online purchases in return (except for the Kitchen X newsletter). As part of the newsletter, the company sends information about the latest offers, promotions or competitions to the subscribers' e-mails.

4. Specific Areas Requiring Background Advertising with Awareness Function

The awareness function of advertising is most often implemented during special campaigns. In the literature, it is defined quite broadly. One of the possible definitions is that “an awareness campaign is an ad campaign that aims to educate customers on the existence of a brand or product” (Awareness Campaign...).

During the awareness campaign understood in this way, advertising can play a positive role in shaping consumers' attitudes and encourage them to use the promoted product. This is possible when "the goalposts for success" are defined, and when we know "why those are the right goals before you get started" (Choi, 2022).

In dealing with the analysis of awareness advertising, it should be noted that the degree of its impact on the preferences of potential buyers of products varies depending on the sector of the economy as well as on a specific market segment. Taking into account the results of Otffinowski's analyses indicating that "respondents showing increased attention show a significantly greater increase in preferences towards the advertised brand" (Ogonowska and Ptaszek, 2013), it can be assumed that the function of awareness advertising significantly shapes the decisions of future product buyers.

Therefore, practitioners should be involved in the creation of good advertisements "that *attract and engage the attention of consumers* and elicit a strong, informed response. The value of using treatments that arouse emotional involvement of recipients is also emphasised" (Ogonowska and Ptaszek, 2013).

The Internet, as a medium available 7 days a week and 24 hours a day, is widely recognised as an effective transmitter of advertising and other forms of promotion. However, there are areas in the Polish socio-economic life that are not promoted widely enough, and the advertising of many functions of these "social goods" is insufficient to register in the recipients' awareness.

Among others, attention should be paid to promotion, in particular to advertising, of new investments in the region and their social and economic functions. Below are presented selected results of research conducted in 2021–2022 by a team of researchers and students as part of research projects in the Pomeranian Voivodeship.

4.1 Promotion of New Application Investment: Caisson Technologies

Example 3: As part of the faculty research project led by the present author, a research problem was undertaken to select the most expected by the society and administration of coastal communes of the Pomeranian Voivodeship forms of promotion of caisson technologies with the intention of using them for the construction of offshore wind power plants.

It should be emphasised that in 2021, the issue of both wind power plants and caisson technologies did not find an important place in the awareness of municipal authorities in the Pomeranian Voivodeship and of their inhabitants. This state of affairs was confirmed by the results of research conducted in two stages as part of the above-mentioned project and presented in a master's thesis (Grzelka, 2021). In the first stage, a survey was carried out in municipalities adjacent to the Baltic Sea; the second stage comprised municipalities without direct access to the sea.

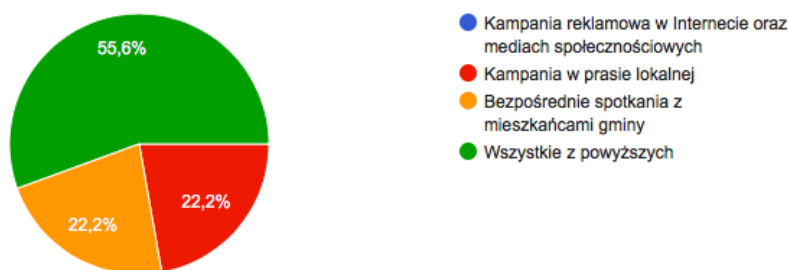
In one of the questions, respondents were asked about the possibility of promoting the caisson technology and the expected forms of this promotion. The respondents had the following options:

- an advertising campaign on the Internet and in social media,
- a campaign in the local press,
- direct meetings with the inhabitants of the commune,
- or “All of the above”

The percentage distribution of the respondents’ answers is presented in the following pie charts (Figures 3 and 4).

First stage of the study

Figure 3. “How would you promote the caisson technology?” – the first stage of the study.



The statements presented above mean accordingly:

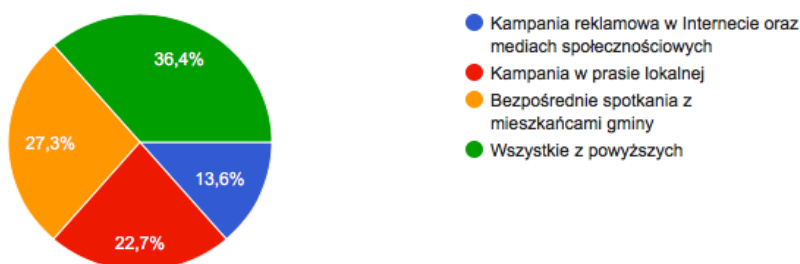
- Blue** Advertising Campaign on Internet and Social media
- Red** Campaign in local press
- Yellow** Direct meetings with residents of the commune
- Green** All of the above options

Source: Based on Grzelka, 2022. Organizacja kampanii promocyjnej morskich odnawialnych źródeł energii (OZE) na przykładzie technologii kesonów ssacych. Master’s thesis. Gdynia, GMU

There is no clear respondents’ indication, because according to them, a hybrid solution should be used – all methods indicated for selection. Such a breakdown of responses suggests a need to differentiate the means of promotional communication aimed at building new awareness among the recipients as regards the “future product”. The importance of an Internet message was not indicated in this survey. The distribution of answers to the same question in the second stage of the survey was different (Figure 4).

Second stage of the study

Figure 4. “How would you promote the caisson technology?” – the second stage of the study.



The statements presented on the figure mean accordingly:

Blue Advertising Campaign on Internet and Social media

Red Campaign in local press

Orange Direct meetings with residents of the commune

Green All of the above options.

Source: Based on Grzelka, 2022, Organizacja kampanii promocyjnej morskich odnawialnych źródeł energii (OZE) na przykładzie technologii kesonów ssacych. Master’s thesis. Gdynia, GMU

As in the first stage, the highest percentage of answers indicates using all methods together. The percentage of advocates for the use of all forms of promotion significantly decreased, giving way to the “An advertising campaign on the Internet and in social media” (13.6%). The second stage of the study covered administrative areas not directly adjacent to the Baltic Sea coastline.

The inhabitants of these municipalities failed to see the obvious benefits of the potential construction of the discussed technologies offshore, which prompted the researchers to consider the respondents’ suggestion that the awareness campaign should be implemented on the Internet and in social media.

Therefore, such respondents’ suggestions confirm the claim that “maintaining brand awareness at a constant level requires continuous, uninterrupted contact with the market, with the target group” (Filar, 2012, p. 8). The above results confirm the position known in Internet discussion: “...it’s a good idea to create ads that capture and engage consumers and elicit a strong, informed response “(styl-zycia.polki...).

5. Conclusions

The examples of respondents’ answers to questions about their impressions of a visual advertising message or the expected forms of promotion in relation to a little-known technology draw attention to the similarity of attitudes: respondents recognise the Internet as a medium that can effectively promote a selected product.

A similar impression is created by the described promotion by the analysed international company X, which pays particular attention to the word and image placed on the Internet in its marketing communication, thanks to which it effectively does real-time marketing.

Thus, nowadays, the Internet is perceived by advertising recipients as a space in which an advertising message has a chance to come across to the recipient. On the other hand, the intensity of marketing activities on the Internet described above by Company X proves that market entities appreciate the role of this medium for the effectiveness of communication.

A separate issue that should be noted is the fashionable trend of placing controversial ads on the Internet, which can positively affect purchasing decisions, on the one hand, but simultaneously evoke negative emotions and lead to the consolidation of adverse experiences in a certain group of recipients.

Therefore, the question remains open: what form of advertising should be chosen by managers in order to incite the desired decision-making effects among the recipients? Will the criterion of advertising uncontroversiality satisfy managers – especially those who prefer radical marketing?

The above questions may contribute to a new project focused on managers' attitudes towards advertising and, more broadly, towards the effectiveness of “socially sensitive” marketing.

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