

# CONSUMERISM AND ADVERTISING ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to analyze the manifestation of consumerism in today's society and its connection with advertising on social networks. This would enable consumers to be aware of its effects and companies to better connect with their audiences.

The structure and tasks of the paper are predetermined by its aim: to outline the two most frequently used definitions of consumerism and their application in social networks advertising. To do so, the methodology uses content analysis of studies to trace back the origins of the term and discuss how it has evolved throughout the years. The research question is which of the two perceptions of the term are applicable in advertising with regard to its evolution.

The analysis pays special attention to advertising appeals as a major motivator for purchase intentions. It distinguishes between rational and irrational (emotional) and gives examples from practice. The influencers' role in the advertising communication is also studied. The paper has its limitations, as well. Only two social networks would be analyzed - Facebook and Instagram.

**Keywords:** *consumerism, advertising, social networks, influencers, Facebook, Instagram, emotion appeals.*

## 1. Introduction

Currently, in a world of turbulent global trade, consumers are able to choose from a variety of products and services, compare characteristics and prizes, browse for opinions on the Internet and eventually make an informed decision with just a click of a button. The world wide web has made all this possible and user friendly due to its evolution over the years. Consumers have also evolved in terms of their needs and the variety of businesses that compete to satisfy them.

The perception of consumerism, as a term, has also changed with time. Back in the 1960s people referred to it as protecting consumers' rights. The 1990s saw a shift in its meaning to denote excessive buying. Online shopping has made it easier for consumers to indulge. The number of digital buyers is increasing. In 2020, more than 2 billion people purchased goods or services online with sales of more than 4.2 trillion US dollars worldwide (E-commerce worldwide, 2022).

Advertising promotes products online. The Internet, as a channel, has proved to be efficient, with ad budgets expected to reach 1,089 billion US dollars in 2027 (Internet Advertising Market Statistics, 2020). One of the few places on the internet that is at the intersection of the two perceptions of consumerism and advertising are social networks. There a user may both be an object of advertising and be able to express his opinion and influence others and business. Thus, he/she exercises his/her right to choose, to be informed and to be heard.

## Methodology

This paper should be regarded as a starting point for further, in-depth and broader research in this field of communication. The methodology includes desk research in order to establish a view of the evolution of definitions from various scientists of the term consumerism. The content analysis of studies raises the following research question: which of the two perceptions of the term are applicable in advertising with regard to its evolution. Whether it is the notion of preserving consumer rights or being synonymous with excessive buying.

The analysis also investigates the causes for consumerism and discusses the two opposing theories: the first one viewing the consumer as king and the second one, regarding him as a mere pawn in the process of making an informed decision. The role of advertising appeals as a major motivator for purchase intentions is also analysed. Two main clusters are distinguished: the rational appeals and the irrational (emotional) ones. Both of them are analysed with examples from the practice.

The role of the opinion leaders or influencers in social networks is also studied. They are able to convey the brand's message or philosophy much more subtly

than conventional image advertising. This paper has also some limitations. The first one being that only two social networks are examined with regard to advertising and its influence on users purchase intentions – Facebook and Instagram. The second one is that two main types of advertising appeals would be studied: rational ones and irrational (emotional) ones and what part they play in the buying decisions.

## **2. Evolution of the term consumerism**

### **2.1. Protecting consumers' interests**

Consumerism has been given various definitions. Nearly opposing definitions have been adopted by scholars on one hand, and by the general public on the other, to denote something that is positive for the consumer by protecting his/her interests to something that reflects the bad habits of buying more and more in the consumer society. Although the consumer movement could be traced back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Mayer, 1989), the word consumerism is a bit younger. Swagler (1994) traces the origins of its first use back to 1944 in *The New Republic*. In his article, Greer (1944) deals with the consumer cooperatives.

Although at that time consumerism was used in reference to the reformist tradition, no evidence that it is used with regard to the consumer movement could be found before the mid-1960s when the movement was revived by President Kennedy's speech in 1962 for the "Bill of Consumer Rights". According to Cohen (1993), the emergence of the term is linked with *Printer's Ink*, the first national advertising trade magazine (Pendergrast, 2000). In their publications in 1965 they used "consumerist" to describe federal initiatives to protect consumers. Soon thereafter, in 1967, the term consumerism gathered speed in the eight-part series of *Advertising Age* entitled "Consumerism and Marketing" (Weiss, 1967). The *Journal of Marketing* also contributed to the proliferation of definitions (Buskirk&Rothe, 1970). In their article the two scientists reviewed several definitions, one of them being "Consumerism means that the consumer looks upon the manufacturer as somebody who is interested but who really does not know what the consumers' realities are. He regards the manufacturer as somebody who has not made the effort to find out, who does not understand the world in which the consumer lives, and who expects the consumer to be able to make distinctions which the consumer is neither willing nor able to make" (Drucker, 1969). Another definition that implies the shift in the perception of consumer values is by the special assistant to the President for Consumer Affairs, Virginia Knauer. She states that then the old "Let the buyer beware" has been substituted with "Let the seller beware".

The 1970s continued to contribute to the examination of the term and its connection with marketing and advertising by various scientists (Kelley 1973; Murray 1973; Greyser and Diamond 1976; Harris 1976; Jones and Gardner

1976). In 1973, Cravens and Hills came up with a somewhat operational definition. They proposed that consumerism “encompasses a multitude of group actions concerned with such issues as consumer protection laws, the availability of product and price information, fraudulent and deceptive business practices, and product safety” (1973, 233). Bishop (1973, p. 223) saw that consumerism “seeks nothing less for every American than a secure physical environment and a just economic one”. In the spirit of the consumer movement in the 1960s, Garman proposed the following definition. “Consumerism was a label put on the efforts of a growing number of consumer advocates who questioned the inadequacies of the marketplace and the unwillingness of business and government to deal with important consumer needs and demands” (Garman, 1991, p. 26). In his view, consumers were asking for a balance between them and the sellers in the marketplace. Brobeck argued that there is a distinction between consumerism and the consumer movement in which he included all who work on behalf of the consumer interests. He defined the movement as “nonprofit advocacy groups and individual advocates who seek to advance the consumer interest by ‘reforming’ governmental and/or corporate policies and practices” (Brobeck, 1990, p. 16).

A conclusion, people who differ but are part of the consumer movement all share a common goal that serves the general idea of consumer sovereignty. It has to do with the power of the consumer. Sadly, few of the definitions dare specifically mention this. The cause of this may be found in that as the people gathered in a movement are different but share a common interest to coexist, such is the case with the various definitions of consumerism, they may be different but need to share at least one common idea.

## **2.2. The mainstream concept**

A second approach to define or rather connote a negative meaning of the term is its connection with excessive materialism. It could be argued that this is the connection that the general public makes when asked to define consumerism. This view is not without grounds. The term was first used to describe the negative aspect of materialism before it was used with reference to the consumer movement. *The Waste Makers*, a Vance Packard best seller in the 1960, depicts excited businessmen who “caught a glimpse of the potentialities inherent in endlessly expanding the wants of people under consumerism. . .” (Packard, 1960, p.24). Godfrey came to the conclusion that “Consumerism has become the guiding force of our economy” (Godfrey, 1962, 213). It is now obvious that the association of consumerism with the consumer movement is antedated by these references. Other scientists use the term with reference to the marketing concept of the years, which in general suggests that each business should aim at customer satisfaction. To them consumerism is defined “as the organized efforts of consumers seeking redress, restitution and remedy for

dissatisfaction they have accumulated in the acquisition of their standard of living.” (Buskirk&Rothe, 1970, p.62).

If we jump forward to the late 1980s we would be able to observe an even more extreme view on consumerism. A publication in the European Community on consumer policy reads: “Consumer policy is too often dismissed as the concern of an affluent society preoccupied with material things. It is too often identified with “consumerism”- the frivolous accumulation of goods for their own sake” (Lawlor, 1988, p. 9). This position firmly convicts consumerism of being inherent to people who are materialistic or confers consumerism the same status as materialism. Even the Pope John Paul II spoke against wanting more in his encyclical in 1991 *Centesimus Annus* “It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards “having” rather than “being”, and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself” (Vatican.va). *Newsweek*’s report on *Centesimus Annus* paraphrased the Pope’s address as “Consumerism . . . can be as soulless as communism” (Woodward, 1991, p. 56). This quite radical reading on consumerism may well be attributed to the still existing tensions between East and West. Nevertheless, it depicts the rising wave of negative associations with consumerism. Although John Paul’s encyclical condemned materialism it was not the first time the Church used consumerism in this way. According to Swagler (1994) and Mayer (1989) in 1976 Rev. McEwen referred to a Catholic group, “Call to Action”, which was making consumerism equal to excessive materialism in the mid-1970s. The early 1990s continued to lash consumerism. Coontz criticized the American family “Certainly, modern consumerism seems to violate traditional American values about the work ethic, self-restraint and participation in voluntary associations” (Coontz, 1992, p. 169). Later, she further attacked consumerism as “eating away at family time, neighborhood cohesion and public solidarities” (Coontz 1992, 178-179).

In addition to these negative associations with consumerism, in 1999 Naomi Klein published her bestseller *No logo: taking aim at the brand bullies*. In it she stood behind the anti-globalization movement giving examples of sweatshops in the Americas and Asia. The book ends with the conclusion contrasting consumerism and citizenship with regard to globalization. The late 1990s and early 2000 also saw studies of consumerism in this respect (Slater 1997), (Nava et al. 1997), (Lee 2000), (Schor and Holt 2000), to name a few.

The 2000s saw studies that addressed the same issue with the term “anti-consumerism” (Zavestoski, 2001); (Litter, 2005); (Littler&Binkley, 2008). Although one of the first academic critics of consumerism, Thorstein Veblen, more than a century ago condemned consumerism, saying “It is here called “waste” because this expenditure does not serve human life or human well-being on the whole, not because it is waste or misdirection of effort or expenditure as viewed from the standpoint of the individual consumer who

chooses it.” (Veblen, 1899, p. 46) However, it was not until the 2000s that more studies on the subject emerged.

Taking a different tack, the Cambridge dictionary offers three main definitions of consumerism:

1. The state of an advanced industrial society in which a lot of goods are bought and sold;
2. The situation when too much attention is given to buying and owning things, often things that are not really necessary;
3. The protection of customers from dishonest business activities and advertising, from unsafe products, etc. (www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com)

The Merriam Webster dictionary narrows it down to just two:

1. the theory that an increasing consumption of goods is economically desirable and also: a preoccupation with and an inclination toward the buying of consumer goods;
2. the promotion of the consumer's interests (www.merriam-webster.com)

The Britannica dictionary also offers two definitions specifying that the term is often used in a disapproving manner:

1. The belief that it is good for people to spend a lot of money on goods and services;
2. The actions of people who spend a lot of money on goods and services. (concerns about increasing consumerism among teenagers) (www.britannica.com)

Here the latter definition presents the negative connotation.

The Longman dictionary offers only two definitions, as well:

1. The belief that it is good to buy and use a lot of goods and services – often used to show disapproval;
2. Actions to protect people from unfair prices, advertising that is not true etc. (www.ldoceonline.com)

What we could conclude from all these definitions is that the two sides of the term that were analyzed in the literature review are present in the dictionaries' definitions, as well. In addition, the term advertising is mentioned twice – in the definitions by the Cambridge and Longman dictionaries. The connection between advertising and consumerism in its negative connotation has been an subject for many studies throughout the years. But before we analyze this it would be appropriate to briefly discuss the premises for the emergence of the term.

### 2.3. Causes for consumerism

In this section, consumerism would be studied in its second definition referring to the promotion of the consumer's interests. Most likely, each of us has experienced consumer dissatisfaction with a product or service to some extent. Perhaps due to its flawed characteristics that have not conformed to our expectations. As a result, we may have experienced frustration or bitterness because we have been promised a lot but what the advertisement or what the salesperson had promised did not come to fruition. This may very well be regarded as the driving force behind consumerism and the consumer movement.

Back in the 1970s there were two major opposing theories on the role of the consumer in the marketplace (Buskirk&Rothe, 1970). The first one viewed the consumer as king. It was his choice and his money in the market that alone made the decisions of what and how much to buy. These decisions were decisive as to whether the producers would succeed or fail. This concept was and is still referred to as consumer sovereignty since the consumer plays a key role in the whole process. This theoretical approach would be in unison with the marketing concept since the consumer is regarded as the leading force and his purchases should determine who would be successful in the market.

The opposing theory suggests that the consumer is merely a pawn in the whole process. It is marketing, advertising and the skilled behavioral psychologists that are able to deceive the consumer to such an extent that he is incapable of making an intelligent and sound choice. He is not able to think rationally and his vote through buying products or services exercised upon who is producing what does not count. As a consequence, the consumer does not play a decisive role in the process.

Looking at the big picture both theories are valid to some extent. However, we should be aware of several variables that play an important role and are more or less interdependent:

1. The type of the purchased product;
2. The frequency of purchase;
3. The information source.

If a product costs a substantial amount of money it would take time for the consumer to make his choice while thinking rationally. For instance, if we were buying a house we would search over the internet for various options. Then we would discuss the selected ones with our family, relatives or friends to narrow down the choice. After that, we would start visiting the properties to inspect them, to speak to the neighbours, to see the amenities nearby and so on. Then comes the question of how to pay, cash, loan, or mortgage. The whole process may take from several months to up to a year or even more. On the other hand, we would not spend as much time thinking it over if buying a pack of gum.

Most likely, we would base our choice on irrational or emotional thinking and pick up whatever brand we deemed most alluring.

The frequency of purchase represents how often an item is being bought. If it is often, as opposed to rarely or for the first time, then the user has substantial knowledge of its characteristics due to his previous experience with it. Consequently, he would be able to judge its effectiveness and if it has lived up to his expectations. When a consumer buys products on regular basis rather than rarely or once in a lifetime, he would exhibit a more rational behavior, which would serve the market process appropriately. In essence, this is in unison with the marketing concept where the consumer plays a vital role in the decision-making process of who would be successful in the marketplace.

The third variable, the information source, is dependent on the frequency of purchase. If a consumer buys a product for the first time, he would lack information from previous use and would not therefore be able to exert rational behavior. In this case, his own experience is negligible. Another means of information would be his family, friends or peer group. A key role of whose advice to take into consideration is trust. We tend to trust mostly our family and friends but not to the exclusion of others. We could also follow the advice of people who we deem trustworthy or in other words opinion leaders. This is the case of the variety of social networks influencers, whom we will discuss further in the following sections. A third information source is and has always been advertising and we are far from seeing the end of advertising as some writers on public relations have prophesized (Ries, 2004). What is important to note is that it is often that advertising uses emotional appeals to influence consumers. Thus, even some products that we would spend time studying might be bought rather quickly, since consumers express irrational behavior.

In addition, there are several factors, which are also interdependent that serve as catalysts for consumerism in its both meanings, protecting consumer rights and excessive materialism. There is general affluence, which incorporates high incomes, a higher educational level and an increased leisure time. If consumers were to attain a high income they would be able to afford not only the essential commodities but also indulge themselves. This represents a freedom of choice, a stronger purchasing power but might also lead to excessive buying. A higher educational level may grant a customer the ability to think critically and most importantly rationally. In this case the consumer would be able to carefully consider any product or service he wishes to purchase and would not be that susceptible to emotional appeals on behalf of advertising, in other words would think irrationally. The increased leisure time would mean that a consumer might be able to spend more time gathering information before making a purchase. He would surf the internet, use search engines, use product forums, browse social networks, talk to family and friends and thus make an informed decision.

The second catalyst is inflation. For producers it would mean that the same product would be sold for an increased price. However, when consumers might



perceive the increased price with increased product quality. Of course, when this is not the case it would contribute to frustration which is one of the major causes for the consumerist movement.

The variety of products and services and customers' demands for product improvement also serve as a catalyst for customer dissatisfaction. People have been conditioned to expect high results from technology since the moon landings, organ transplants, plane transportation, personalized computers, the internet, smartphones, social networks, automated cars, to name a few. However, all these inventions only serve to point out the still average level of technical proficiency of some of today's products or services. It would not make sense for a car owner that people fly in rockets but his brand new car's trunk fills with water when it rains ([Ford owners club, 2009](#)). It is apparent that customers seek better quality in products despite the fact that some of the companies lack the economic and technical ability to provide it.

Consumerism might also be caused by feelings of discrimination. It does not have to be connected with only buying products or services but may also apply in the sphere of education ([Ananiev, 2019](#)).

Evidence that consumerism, as a movement, has played its role is that so many companies have customer service. Customer satisfaction is essential and the companies which prosper are the ones that pay attention to what their customers have to say. This is the reason why, from the dawn of social networks, companies started opening their business social network profiles to keep in touch with their customers. Currently, there is not a respectable business that does not have a profile on at least several social networks, depending on the region within which it is operating.

Perhaps the most significant catalyst for the consumer movement was President J. F. Kennedy's directive to the Consumer Advisory Council in 1962. In it he said: "Additional legislative and administrative action is required, however, if the federal government is to meet its responsibility to consumers in the exercise of their rights. These rights include:

- The right to safety;
- The right to be informed;
- The right to choose;
- The right to be heard." ([Consumer Advisory Council, 1963](#), pp. 5-8)

It is evidence that it is not without the combined efforts of the public and the government that changes regarding consumer rights are possible. Ampovska analyzes the causes and effects of feeling of injustice and the tort liability for damages ([Ampovska, 2020](#)). It all starts with the single individual, who may be disappointed with the quality of a product. Then this energy has to accumulate through spreading the word and eventually find additional people, who are

willing to stand behind a call for damages to be paid. Once it reaches critical mass, joint customer efforts may result in signing a petition, law suits or even taking to the streets.

### **3. Consumerism and social networks**

Customers have always wanted to be heard with regard to any problems they might have had with products or services. This suggests the need for an industry or a company ombudsman. In the late 1960s companies in the US started paying attention to this fact. Perhaps one of the oldest recorded cases of a company that tried to get in touch with its customers may be the Whirlpool Corporation, which in 1967 established a 24-hour “cool line” (Appliance Maker Comes Clean, 1969, p. 100). It enabled owners of the company’s products to call a customer service director at any time. This direct communication contact was set to greatly enhance the company’s relationship with its customers, since it represented the first step towards solving their problems. It is also a fine example of the ombudsman concept.

Currently, companies connect with their customers via a number of channels. Some of the most often used include:

1. Telephone – Its benefits are far-reaching and have been proven since the time of the consumerist movement in the 1960s. However, we should note that certain demographics are more inclined to use this channel than others. According to a customer communication review (Customer service channels, 2022) nearly 40% of the people over the age of 56 prefer phone calls to other channels of communication. It was the second choice for people aged 40-55 and a third for the younger demographic. This channel is also very suitable for safer connections that require billing and bank operations.
2. Email – There are over 4.2 billion email users worldwide in 2022 (Number of Email Users Worldwide, 2020) and the number is expected to grow up to 4.5 billion in 2024. This channel offers an immense reach and has proven its uses through the years in connecting with customers. Email is a very good choice because through it people and companies are able to connect in an asynchronous manner. For instance, if the operators are busy servicing another customer we could always write an email rather than having to wait for an unknown period of time on the phone. In addition, email leaves a digital trace that could always be used to remind us or even, as a final measure, to back up our suit with evidence.
3. Live chat – This option offers the positive characteristics of the previous two. It does not consume customers’ time, since they do not have to wait on the phone for the operator and they still receive a faster response than if they have sent an email. Another positive feature is

that customers are much more likely to give a positive feedback after a live chat than when having been served by an email support (Customer service channels, 2022).

4. Self-service – This lets customers solve their own problems without waiting for response on behalf of the company. Indeed, no matter whether it is phone, email, chat or other, customer service channels require action on the company’s side in order for the consumer to connect and eventually have his/her questions answered. Data shows that customers appreciate this option, as well “Across industries, fully 81% of all customers attempt to take care of matters themselves before reaching out to a live representative.” (Kick-Ass Customer Service, 2017). Self-service need not be just a document with answered questions. It may be included in a blog, a webinar, or a video-library.
5. Social networks – There are a lot of social network channels across the internet. It depends on the region in which the company is operating, whether it is just a city, nationally, internationally or globally. Due to intercultural characteristics, various nationalities have preference toward one social network over the other. For instance, India is the leader as far as Facebook and Instagram are concerned, with almost 330 million and 230 million active users respectively. Germany is 10<sup>th</sup> on Instagram with nearly 30 million active users but is not in the top 10 on Facebook, which would suggest that Instagram is more popular in Germany than Facebook (Global social media statistics, 2022). Social network preference is age-dependent, as well as gender-dependent. On a global scale Tiktok is most popular among young females aged 16-24 with almost 10% of that demographic, compared to males 55-64 with almost 2% of that demographic. However, this is not the case as far as Facebook is concerned. The latter segment prefers it with almost 20% of the demographic over to 7.9% for the 16-24 female demographic. (TikTok Gains 8 New Users Every Second, 2022).

A study from Statista reveals how customers perceive social networks with regards to their connection with a company. When asked the question “Do you have a more favorable view of brands that respond to customer service questions or complaints on social media?” globally 59% replied positively (Do you have a more favorable view of brands that respond to customer service questions or complaints on social media, 2022). This would not only suggest but urge respectable businesses not only to support one or several social network profiles but to be active on them, as well. In addition to aiding customers, this channel is also favourable for showcasing products and maintaining a high public image.

Other possible customer service channels are:

- Video chats – They are very useful when it comes to sharing a screen and thus aiding the customer, especially in highly technical

conversations. During the Covid pandemic this channel was on the rise for use in digital banking (5 reasons why video calling with customers is here to stay, 2021);

- Communities and forums – This is perhaps one of the oldest forms of digital social networks where users share their experience, ask and answer questions. In addition, many forums are maintained by companies. This platform saves the energy of the support teams and gives consumers a chance to solve their own problems together as a group, thus discussing products or services, developing their knowledge and forming new connections.
- Mobile messaging – Although currently this channel is mainly used by businesses as a promotional tool, it also serves to help customers. It may include text messaging, as well as connecting through WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger. Usually, the tone is friendly and in 1<sup>st</sup> person. The easy conversation may be of use for companies in the delivery business.

One of the main channels that companies use in order to connect with their audience is social networks. This is a natural consequence of their inherent characteristics. According to Ellison and Boyd “a social network site is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site.” (Ellison&Boyd, 2013, p. 9). This definition is to be studied for the purposes of the two-way communication between companies or organizations and customers, while bearing in mind the two main conceptions of consumerism – serving consumer interests and its meaning of excessive buying.

Social networks can positively serve both parties, if used in the proper manner. The first part of the definition would mean that whoever the user is, a person, a business or an organization, they would have entered specific information of themselves, thus creating a public profile on a social network. This would present the user’s face. Of course, there might always be speculations over the credibility of the profile. In just a few months in 2021, Facebook was reported to have removed over 1.7 billion fake accounts (How fake social media profiles are fueling scams and getting people "duped out of money", 2021). As a result, companies and customers need to be aware of that fact and do not jump to conclusions whenever they might receive a disturbing message.

The second part of the definition would mean that users are able to share content within the social network or over other networks and internet spaces. This represents the viral effect of the social networks communication where news or a story may be shared by users or business profiles, so as to resemble the spread of a virus. This has its benefits, especially on behalf of the businesses, since if they create an interesting marketing communication, such as advertising, it may

be shared and re-shared by users and the company does not have to pay anything for it. This effect is usually referred to as “earned media”. Of course, the rule also applies for any advertising, news or information as a whole on behalf of the companies. Whenever customers are dissatisfied by a company’s product or service, they could always share their story over the internet and social networks. Despite the quality of the information, social networks help the rapid spread of the word. In addition, it is important to note that in a world of information there is always misinformation, represented in this case by the fake news. Both companies and customers should be quick not to judge any information over the internet or over any other media for that matter.

The third part of the definition deals with “user generated content” and interacting with it. Both companies or organizations and customers may be regarded as users of social networks. The slight difference is that the latter is not able to create his personal business profile or page. This functionality of social networks is widely used on behalf of companies and organizations to promote their products or services. This is promotion manifests mainly in advertising and/or sales promotion. The interaction is left to the people or customers. They can also like, share, re-share and comment. The most frequently used marketing communications across the social networks is an object of analysis of the next sections. By doing so, we would be able to observe what part consumerism plays in them.

#### **4. Marketing communications and consumerism on social networks**

##### **4.1. Advertising on social networks**

Assuming most social networks resemble one another in that their users have entered information, such as name, date of birth, gender, profile picture, education, work and beliefs and are able to interact with other users by liking, commenting and sharing, objects of analysis in the following sections would be two of the most famous social networks Facebook and Instagram. Several studies have examined the effectiveness of Facebook and Instagram advertising and its relation to consumer behavior (Wiese et. al. 2020), (Belanche at. At., 2019), (Wulandari&Darma, 2020), (Vangelov, 2019). Kaftandzhiev (2008) describes advertising as a persuading marketing communication which presents products or services by a known advertiser and is placed over various media. This is a suitable definition for the purpose of this paper. The goals of advertising are to convey information and/or form an opinion. Targeted Facebook and Instagram advertising present advertisements to users based on their online behaviour on these social networks. This brings a certain degree of relevance to the ads with regard to the customer targeted. There have been several actions on behalf regulatory organs in order to prevent Facebook from abusing consumer information, perhaps the largest one being Cambridge Analytica. An investigation by the Guardian and the Observer in 2018,

indicated that over 87 million US customer profiles have been attacked and robbed of personal information. This scandal resonated in Europe leading to the decision by the Belgium court to ban Facebook from gathering user information from third-party websites. All this is indicative of legislative acts on behalf of the consumer, which is in unison with the consumerist movement from the 1960s. In addition, each user is able to opt out of specific ads on Facebook and Instagram, by simply clicking the “options” button on the ad itself and choosing “Hide ads from this advertiser” from the menu.

Facebook and Instagram, and other social networks, present an opportunity for the consumers to interact with advertisements, as well. Options such as, like, comment and share are some of the possibilities indicating customers again have the rights which President Kennedy addressed in 1962: The right to safety, which is represented by the legislative acts; The right to be informed, which is the informative function of the advertising; The right to choose – the options presented by the ad and/or the option to opt out of it; The right to be heard, which is represented by the comments section below the ad. The last right is perhaps the strongest one, when it comes to expressing one’s opinion over the product or service advertised, which is again in unison with the consumerist movement ideas and with the rational behaviour of consumers, since they have time to think it over, gather information of the product or service and analyze the pros and cons.

On the other hand, advertising on Facebook and Instagram may lead to excessive buying, which is the second perception of consumerism (Kaya&Kimzan, 2019), (Kedward, 2019). This is especially so, when advertising uses emotional appeals, which incite customers to think irrationally, rather than rationally. Discussed in the previous sections the second theory by Buskirk and Rothe in 1970 suggests that advertising uses behavioral psychologists in order to make the consumer think in an irrational manner, so that his vote in buying does not count and consequentially he does not play a decisive role in the buying process.

The two most important benefits that consumers receive from advertising are the utilitarian or functional and the emotional (Shimp and Andrews, 2013). The first one is in use when thinking rationally and seeking to satisfy mainly one’s information needs. The emotional appeals (irrational) tend to satisfy consumer’s aesthetic, pleasurable and hedonic needs (Cutler and Javalgi, 1993). Pollay’s categorization of rational and emotional appeals (1983) is still sound today. Some of the most frequently used emotional appeals in advertising are humour, happiness, enjoyment, adventure, family, sex, youth, freedom, status and tradition. According to a survey by IPA (the UK-based Institute of Practitioners in Advertising) advertisements using emotional appeals perform twice as well as those using rational ones (Emotional Ads Work Best, 2010).

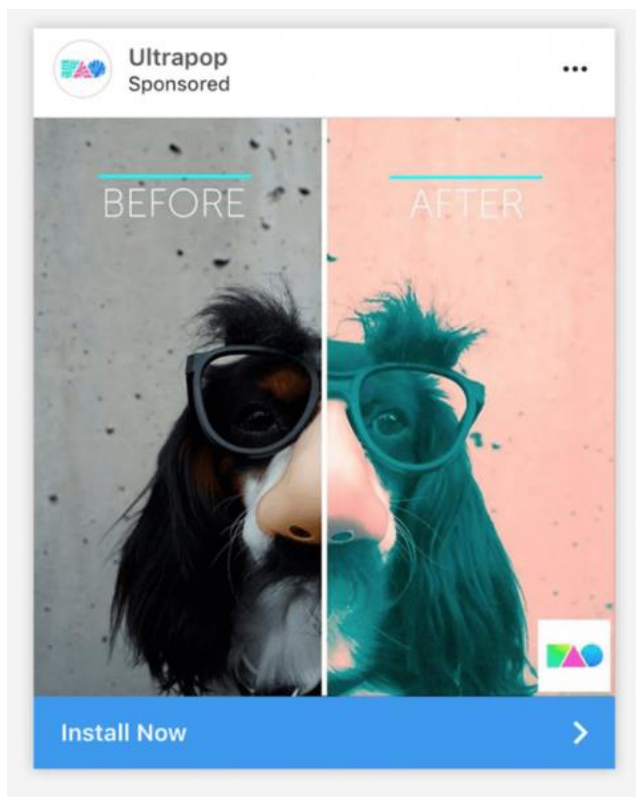


Figure 1. Instagram ad of Ultrapop colour filters

Figure 1 displays and Instagram ad of Ultrapop intense colour filters. It is a pop art photo editor that combines colour filters and effects designed for iPad. The advertisement attracts consumers' attention by using the humour appeal through showing a before and after photo of a cute dog that resembles a real-life person – glasses, eyebrows, a nose. The intense humour effect is very likely to make people click on the “install now” button and buy this service.



Figure 2 Instagram ad of Soladey

Figure 2 shows an Instagram ad of Soladey – a revolutionary toothbrush that is activated by light. Instead of approaching the audience with statistical or scientific information on how the toothbrush performs and what its characteristics are, the admen have chosen to use the emotional appeal of happiness. The advertising title “Goodbye toothpaste. A new clean is here” suggests a sigh of a relief that is further reinforced by the happy smile of the model. One could only perceive this ad with positive emotions and is more probable to click on the “shop now” call to action button.





Figure 3 Facebook ad of Tentsile

When advertising the tree hammock by Tentsile (figure 3), the marketing specialists have chosen to use the comparison method. On the upper left-hand corner is the original large, safe and comfortable hammock. It can fit several people with children. They are shown in a relaxed pose, smiling while enjoying the beautiful day in nature. In the lower right-hand corner there is the fake hammock with a single person that is barely fitting in it and obviously not satisfied with his choice. The admen have used the emotional appeal of pleasure to outline the properties of the first item to the second. The advertising text reinforces this by talking about an “increase in reports and complaints” most probably by aggravated consumers. A scared emoji is used to further develop the grim narrative of the fake hammocks.

**PUMA**  
Sponsored

Designed for risk takers and head turners, this dynamic silhouette challenges the standards of conventional athletic design.

**BORN TO PROVOKE**

PUMA.COM  
Made From A Mold? Never.

Shop N...

The advertisement features a pair of white sneakers with pink and black accents. The background is a light pink gradient. The Puma logo is visible in the top right corner of the ad area.

Figure 4 A Facebook ad of Puma


The advertised sneakers by Puma on Facebook are no ordinary ones. They are designed for customers who are risk takers but also head turners. The emotional appeal in use here is the one of adventure. The ad title “Born to provoke” further promotes this sentiment by suggesting that whoever wears this model of sneakers would be provoked to show his best and become an extraordinary athlete.

 **Pela Case**  
Sponsored • Paid for by Pela Case

🙌 HANDS UP FOR PLASTIC FREE JULY!! 🙌

The 5 easiest things you can do to kick plastic this summer are:

- 1) Ditch single use water bottles.
- 2) Say no to to-go coffee cups...they are plastic lined!...



**Hands up if you're trying  
to go plastic-free**

PELACASE.COM  
100% Compostable Phone Cases for the Planet!  
World's First 100% Compostable, Eco-Friendly iPhone  
and Android phone cases working towards plastic free...

[Learn More](#)

Figure 5 A Facebook ad of Pela Case

The American-based phone case manufacturer has decided to go green and raise awareness over the impact of using plastic on the planet. Besides the production of compostable phone cases for iPhone and Android devices, the company stands behind a noble cause. The social advertisement (figure 5) depicts a cute otter in its natural habitat that votes for plastic-free marketplace. The emotional appeal is the ecological one. It would prompt consumers to click on the “learn more” call-to-action button and find out more ways of going plastic-free.

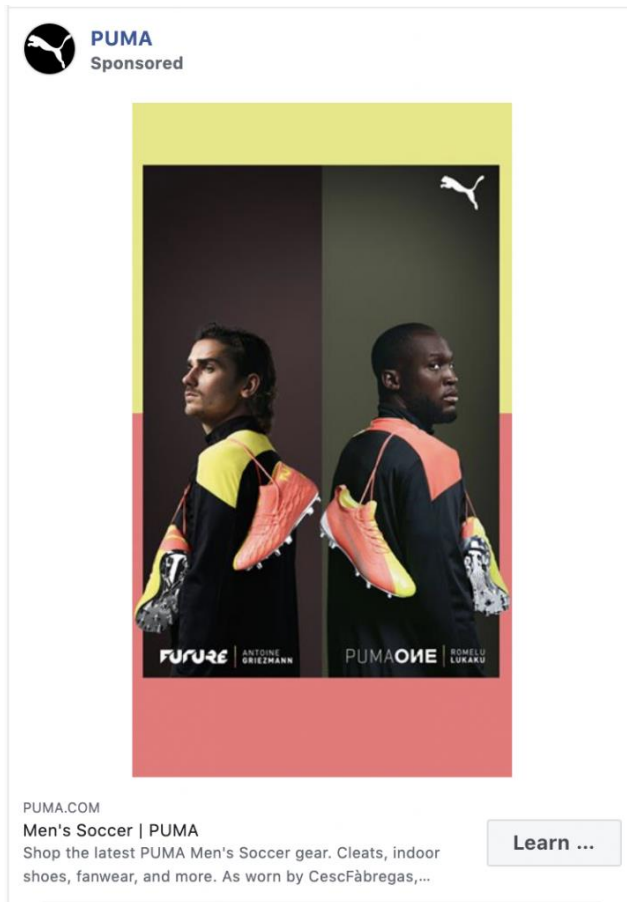


Figure 6 A Puma Facebook ad

The Puma men's soccer gear Facebook ad (figure 6) gently rubs on consumers' aspirations to be better at what they do. Through obtaining products from the new collection they would be able to become famous football players, like the ones depicted in the ad. This has to do with status, which is an emotional appeal in itself. Even if consumers do not wish to be on the field they could always buy indoor shoes, as the ad text suggests, in order to be loyal fans and feel closer to the football stars.

#### 4.2. Consumerism and influencers on social networks

The past decade has seen a rise in the influencer marketing world, one of the most popular forms of online marketing. The worldwide market size has increased almost tenfold, being 1.7 billion US dollars in 2016 and more nearly 14 billion US dollars in 2021 (Influencer marketing market size worldwide from 2016 to 2021, 2021). Defined as opinion leaders, influencers bask in public attention and often realize substantial incomes. However, the notion of

the opinion leaders is not new. Katz and Lasersfeld (1955, p. 34) define them as “capable of influencing other people in their very environment”. Trust is a key component that an influencer has to build a relationship between himself and his audience.

One of the prerequisites of using influencers for social network advertising is their ability to shorten the distance between consumers and the brand. This aids in creating stronger connections and turning moderate consumers into loyal ones. The active participation on behalf of the audience and their dialogue with the influencers gives them a sense of belonging, which according to marketing specialists is key for brand loyalty. In addition, whilst communicating, consumers are able to express their opinions of the product or service, thus being in unison with the consumerist movement ideas. The brand and its markets are no longer created only by the company but with their clients who are co-creators (Solis, 2015). If businesses are to reach their goals, they should treat their customers as partners, who are able to make decisions for the future of the company.

In addition to aiding consumerism in the sense of protecting consumers’ interests, influencers on social networks are also capable of promoting a product or service in order to influence consumers’ choice. This is in unison with the second theory of Buskirk and Rothe in that consumers do not play a decisive role in the market process, since they are influenced by the marketing communication. As discussed in the previous section, this is enabled through the emotional appeals. The one that is constantly in use is the community appeal. It suggests that people have a sense of belonging and feel better and are rewarded by being a part of a larger group. This is represented by the hundreds of thousands or sometimes hundreds of millions of influencer followers.



Figure 7 a FitTea promotion on Instagram

The famous TV reality star and model Kylie Jenner is promoting FitTea (figure 7). This is an example of an obvious sponsored post and the followers are able to spot the advertising immediately. The influencer stands behind the brand in an efficient manner, since she is a model and most models are fit. The emotional appeal is the one of nurture and consumers are likely to buy the product because it is promoted by a celebrity who is associated with a healthy life.



Figure 8 An Instagram advertisement of AGT and Dunkin Donuts

While promoting the “America’s Got Talent” TV show (figure 8), the famous model Heidi Klum is found to promote Dunkin Donuts, as well. This is a well-played product placement. The followers’ comments are ones of happiness and love, judging from the emojis used. This is a fine example of the emotional appeals and eventually associates them positively with the brand.



Figure 9 An Instagram advertisement of Piaget

The famous actor Ryan Reynolds is promoting the luxury watch brand “Piaget” (figure 9). Lux is associated with a higher social status, which is an emotional appeal. The actor attests the brand’s quality by posing in casual yet formal clothes. He is smiling, a sign of happiness – another emotional appeal. This is a fine example of a more subtle advertising and if it had not been for the text in the comments section, which mentions the make and model, we would not have been able to tell whether he was promoting a watch or a garment.



Figure 10 An Instagram advertisement of Mammoth Mountain

Singer Pink is promoting Mammoth Mountain via an Instagram post (figure 10). She is on the chair lift along with her family. They are all smiling and obviously enjoying the sunny weather and the resort. The advertisement is even subtler than the previous one and using the emotional appeal of happiness. Which skier would not want to hit the slopes in such a wonderful day?

## **5. Conclusion**

Consumerism, as a term, has evolved throughout the years. From the 1960s, when it meant protecting consumers' interests to present day when it is used to describe excessive buying. The causes for consumerism in its initial meaning vary from feeling dissatisfied with the product's qualities to aggravation with the business's unwillingness to respond to customers' inquiries. The second notion of consumerism, excessive buying, is a consequence of factors such as higher incomes, more leisure time and higher education. Online advertising and social networks also play an important part when it comes to consumers shopping habits and expression of opinions. It is here that businesses can find out more about their customers and also receive feedback on their products and/or services. It is through interacting with the businesses on social networks by liking, sharing and commenting that consumers exercise their rights. The various examples from advertising on Facebook and Instagram shed light on how this marketing communication is able to promote messages while influencing consumers' choice. It is thanks to the emotional appeals that advertising is able to do so. If conventional image advertising fails in reaching its goals, influencers are to the rescue. Being opinion leaders and having hundreds and millions of followers, influencers are able to convey the brand's message or philosophy in a much more subtle manner. Thus, consumers are less aggravated by intrusive advertising and are more likely to get involved with the brand and its products or services.



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