



ORIGINAL PAPER

Advertising and Health in Romania

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Abstract

“Direct-to-consumer advertising” (DTC advertising) was first identified in relation to pharmaceuticals, and now it is used for a variety of other products. In the ‘80s the American pharmaceutical industry had proposed to change the marketing approach in order to include consumers (until then the dominant marketing strategy in pharmaceutical industry was geared only to physicians) and this change in approach had led to Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and FDA regulations of advertising in this sector (Mintzes et al., 2002). As many studies had proven (Gilbody, Wilson & Watt, 2005) DTC advertising can cultivate false faiths among public related to the existence of medication for any disease, leading to medicalisation of all aspects of people’s lives (Bonaccorso and Sturchio, 2002). This paper aims to test the impact of exposure to advertising for pharmaceutical products on Romanian consumers and to identify the way in which DTC is functioning in Romania. The methodology of the paper is based on triangulation of two main methods of research: thematic analysis of advertisements at two pharmaceutical products, on the one hand, and semi-directive interviews with twenty patients who had followed those advertisements. The results showed the existence of DTC’s impact on Romanian public. The respondents had declared that they could listen to the PG’s recommendations related to pharmaceutical products in “normal” circumstances but in a crisis case (accident, sudden illness) they would go to the pharmacy and ask for the pharmaceutical products they saw in the media. Only in the case of a lack of improvement for their situation they had declared that they would turn to the doctors and medical specialists.

Keywords: *Direct to Consumer advertising; pharmaceutical industry; audience; Romania; influence of advertising.*

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Introduction

The topic approached in this paper is a new one in Romania, namely the analysis of so-called “Direct to Consumer Advertising”. “Direct-to-consumer advertising” (also called “DTC advertising”) referred in the beginning at the marketing of pharmaceuticals (Mintzes et al., 2002), but now it is used also related to other products (Frosch, Krueger, Hornik, Cronholm, Barg, 2007). The existing literature (Huh et al., 2010) had pointed out that the beginning of this type of advertising was around the 1800s. In the last two hundred years the media and pharmaceutical industry have developed a rather strong symbiotic relationship (Adeoye, Bozic, 2007). Nowadays, newspapers, radio and TV stations and internet based their daily operation on advertising revenues (Conrad & Leiter, 2008) and pharmaceutical companies’ spending are higher than those from other industries group (Wilkes, Bell, Kravitz, 2000)

The present study had started from some common-sense questions, such as: What people think about the health system in Romania? How do they choose between two similar pharmaceutical products? Are there differences between pharmaceutical products for the same illness / disease or not? Do these ads at pharmaceutical products affect consumer behavior in any way? How the people choose the pharmaceutical products- e.g. by asking the doctors or as a result of TV viewing? Are people paying attention to the information about certain pharmaceutical products or not? What is the moment when they could ask a doctor’s or a pharmacist’s opinion about a particular pharmaceutical product?

In order to offer some answers at the above-mentioned questions a research project was made in Romania on the topic of “Direct to Consumer” (DTC) advertising in 2018-2019.

Theoretical framework

In 1981, for the first time in advertising history, the pharmaceutical industry aimed to change the marketing approach in order to include consumers of its products. Until then the marketing strategy of the pharmaceutical industry was focused only to physicians and medical-related facilities (clinics and hospitals) (Pines, 1999). But in 1985, Arthur Hull Hayes, a member of the Food and Drug Administration, had delivered a very clear message towards this (e.g. the pharmaceutical) industry: they could promote products to the public, but they had to fit the FDA’s existing standards (Wilkes, Bell, Kravitz, 2000: 114). These standards concerned the fact that all pharmaceutical products had to prove that they were safe and effective (Wilkes et al., 2000). Much more, the main authority regulating this activity was, at the beginning the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and, after some years, the US Food and Drug Administration (Wilkes et al., 2000: 114).

The “Direct to Consumer” advertising’s main trait refers to the fact that this type of messages can convince the people (the public) that there is a pill for any disease (Huh et al., 2004). In this way, this type of media messages contributes to medicalization of the ordinary illnesses. In other words, after a patient watches a direct to consumer advertising to a medicine, she or he can think that this pharmaceutical product will make him or her healthy again and will communicate that assessment or opinion to other people (including medical staff). Under those circumstances, the pharmaceutical company which is the producer of the pharmaceutical product and, also, has

commissioned the advertising of it, has the explicit obligation to openly and honestly communicate all details related to these products (Gahart, Duhamel, Dievler, Price, 2003).

But what was the situation with this type of advertising in Romania? There are few data available but one could start from the study made in 2011 by IRES about the Romanian National Council of Audiovisual. The data showed that 94% of the respondents knew that the Romanian TV stations had been sanctioned for misconduct and broadcasting wrong information (IRES, 2011). At the same time, from 35% of people who could indicate a clear sanction given by the National Council of Audiovisual only 2% had declared that this was made in order “to stop advertising at harmful products for the human health” (IRES, 2011). The same study showed that the people were not aware of TV ads’ viewing consequences: at the question “How frequently did your children ask you to buy certain foods after they have seen the commercials at them at TV?” only 5% of the respondents declared that this was “often” and “very often” (IRES, 2011).

In the last years there had been few situations when the National Council of the Audiovisual had taken direct action and intervened to stop the broadcasting of some ads at pharmaceutical products. One such case was related to “Supramax Mobil Gel”, when the National Council of Audiovisual had decided to apply a decision which banned the broadcast of the ad on the grounds that it infringed the “Audiovisual Law” and the regulations related to correct information of the public (Mediafax, 2013).

At the same time Romanians are somehow “prisoners” of the health system. A study from 2012 about public and private medical systems in Romania (MedLife & IMAS, 2012) showed that 70% of the Romanians did not intend to have a private health insurance (MedLife & IMAS, 2012). According to this study (MedLife & IMAS, 2012), in the last years, Romanians have changed their attitude regarding going to the doctor. There was an increase from 58% (in 2011) to 75% (in 2012) of the number of persons who did not go to routine medical checkups (MedLife & IMAS, 2012).

The research project

The present article uses a mixed methodology. The first method of research was the sociological interview, while the second one was the qualitative analysis of ads at two pharmaceutical products.

According to its canonical definition, the interview “is based on verbal communication and involves questions and answers [...]” (Chelcea, 2001: 267). Its main trait is conversation, that is, the dialogue between two persons (Chelcea, 2001: 267). The sample of respondents that had been interviewed had a volume of ten (10) people, all living in Bucharest.

As regards the second research method, the qualitative content analysis was applied on a sample of seven ads from Romanian media at two pharmaceutical products: three (3) ads for “Tantum Verde” and four (4) ads for “Faringosept” - both being pharmaceutical products recommended by pharmacists and doctors and used during flu and/or cold.

The period of time in which all data were collected was January 2018-January 2019.

Hypothesis of the research

Giving the fact we used two different methods we also have two different hypotheses which were put in a qualitative shape:

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H1 (The creative analysis hypothesis): The ads for pharmaceutical products (either “Tantum Green” or “Faringosept”) will clearly highlight the strengths of them.

H2: (The interview hypothesis): People will choose their pharmaceutical product taking into account the qualities of it as seen on TV ads (and only subsequently they will ask the doctors about this product).

The analysis of results

The qualitative analysis of advertising to pharmaceutical products

“Faringosept” advertising campaign

The commercial campaign for “Faringosept” was made by FrameBreed animation studio (Pantus, 2011). The drug manufacturer – “Terapia S.A.” – is one of the largest advertising clients of the television pharmaceutical market in Romania (Forbes, 2014). Other campaign for “Terapia S.A.” pharmaceuticals that have been broadcasted by the Romanian television stations were for “Artrocalcium”, “Aspacardin”, “Aspenter”, “Faringo Hot Drink”, “Fiobilin” and “Paduden” (Forbes, 2014).

The concept behind TV ads for “Faringosept” is a very simple and clear one, as Pantus (2011) had stressed: “Right in the middle of the music class our giraffe gets one of the classic cold symptoms: hoarseness. And because no one is so cruel that he or she wants to see disappointed giraffes, someone quickly gives a “Faringosept” to our giraffe-teachers to help her to get out from the difficult situation. And her’s trills begin to be heard again.”

According to the official statistics, between 2013 and 2014, the “Faringosept” brand had cumulated 2.031 GRP’30 at the level of the commercial target, an increase of up 44.1% in one year (Mediafactbook, 2014). The campaign for this pharmaceutical product was broadcasted by 14 television stations (Mediafactbook, 2016).

“Tantum Verde” advertising campaign

In this case the marketing strategy was different. Until 2011, “Tantum Green” was promoted through direct actions which were organised at the Bucharest underground stations. People who promoted it had weared hadfur caps, scarves and gloves in colors of the brand, and they had displayed boards with messages related to the pharmaceutical products: “Every sipper causes pains in my muscles”, “My throat is swollen like a balloon”, and “My head hurts as a result of the pain in my throat”. They also had distributed leaflets and flyers about “Tantrum Verde” to people passing through subway’s stations. The messages from the flyers and leaflets were similar with those from the boards: “Do you feel your throat burning or with thorns?” and “How strong is the burn in your throat?” Another campaign of this product was made between July and August 20, 2013 at the Black Sea seaside in a 30-seconds radio spot and its slogan was: “When your throat hurts take ‘Tantrum Verde’ and you get healthy again”.

Qualitative analysis of advertising at pharmaceutical products

The analysis of the creative stories for “Faringosept”

Creative Story 1 (“Faringosept”):

The story: During music class, the teacher (a giraffe) loses her voice. Her voice became hoarse as she sings. Pupils started to laugh in the class but she has a solution: she took a brown pill. And then...surprise! Her voice came back and he can go on with the teaching. The voice-over states: “When your throat hurts, take ‘Faringosept’! With an antibacterial role, it treats the causes, not just the effects. This medicine is given

without a prescription. Read the prospect carefully!” The ad ends with the image of the pill (which is positioned at the center of the image, right at the center of the visual focus) and above it is written: “An ankylosing effect”. From the perspective of colours used, it can be stated that the animals are very colorful and very real. At the same time, they are funny and similar to the cartoons seen during our childhood.

Creative Story 2 (“Faringosept”):

The story: In an apartment’s room, the members of a family are gathered together to listen a radio program. After the actors’ clothing and the radio set’s model, the viewers understand that the action takes place some years ago, around the 1980s. The narrative went on and presents an image taken from the Olympics with a gymnast who had taken a high mark and it was followed by a group of happy cheering Romanians citizens. The voice-over states: “Always someone made us shout until we lost our voice!” The next sequence presents an image from a rock concert, the image being focused on the attendands at this event. Finally, the closing sequence is from a football game where people were presented as enjoying the result. One of the football’s supporters showed clar that he has problems with his throat which is hurting. Again, the voice-over states: “From the beginning of the sore throat, take ‘Faringosept’.” The background text complements the image and the voice-over: “It stops the development of bacteria and can stop the worsening of the infection, and it speeds the healing.” The ad ends with the image of the pharmaceutical product (which is positioned at the center of the image, right at the center of the visual focus) and above it is written: “Faringosept. It gives voice to Romanians since 1963”. Around half of the images used in this ad are taken from the archive and mixed with new ones. Both color movie and black and white one were used in the ad.

Creative Story 3 (“Faringosept”):

The story: The first image is taken from the classical “Frankenstein” movie (1931), followed by a sequence from “King Kong” movie (1933), “The Shining” (1980) and “Psycho”. All sequences contain images of women who were screaming and in the end a voice-over said: “For over 50 years, ‘Faringosept’ is together with those who make themseves heard. Now this product is stronger than ever.” This time, the advertising presents only black and white images.

Creative Story 4 (“Faringosept”):

The story: The ad starts with a man in the foreground who puts his hand at his neck, a sign that something goes wrong. Then her goes and takes a box of “Faringosept” from a table. The “Faringosept” box was placed on an old book. The man took the book and started to read it. But what seemed to be a book turns out to be a photo album, with picture of him since he was a child. The next sequence presents a child who receives a pill of “Faringosept” from his mother. The final sequence of the ad presents the men, sitting on a couch with his wife and a child and they all look at the photo-album. The family is somewhat in the background, and their image is blurred, unclear, while at the front is the “Faringosept” box.

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The analysis of the creative stories for “Tantrum Verde”

Creative Story 1 (“Tantrum Verde”):

The story: The opening image presents a lot of pills, very similar one to another. The voice-over states: “There are a lot of pills for throat’s pain, some calm it, others fight against bacteria but the problems are not solved if you do not treat the inflammation of the throat.” In the next sequence a green pill appears in the image, and, as colour and shape, it is different from other pills. The voice-over states: “With the anti-inflammatory effect of banzidamine ‘Tantrum Verde’ calms pain, removes bacteria and much more, treats inflammation”. In the next sequence all other pills move in a circle around “Tantum Verde” pill. The voice-over states: “Fast and efficient. When your throat hurts ‘Tantum Verde’ will make you healthy again”. The image is now a graphic representation of the pharynx with three words written on it: pain, bacteria and inflammation. The voice-over continues: “‘Tantum verde’ contains benzidine and can be released without a prescription. Please read carefully the leaflet. If you experience any unpleasant symptoms, ask your doctor or pharmacist”. The ending sequence presents the image of the pharmaceutical product with a voice-over stating: “Do you have ‘Tantum Verde’ at your fingertips?” As regards the colours used, one could notice that, while other pills are pale red, pale yellow, only “Tantrum Verde” pill is a vivid green. And at the end of the ad is an image of all “Tantum verde” products.

Creative Story 2 (“Tantrum Verde”):

The story: It begins with a man dressed in green, a magician, who presents to the public the problem he faces and at which he has a solution. The voice-over presents the problem of our neck as: “Inflammation, difficulty in swallowing, harshness. Fortunately, for all of this there exists ‘Tantum Verde’”. The mise-en scene of this ad is more complex than in the first one. Here we have the magician who is dressed in green, as an allusion to the “Tantum Verde” pill. In the background an image of the throat of a person, surrounded by flames, a direct connection with discomfort, inflammation is presented. Then, only by using a stick (which is also branded in green) the magician manages to extinguish the flames. Once again, in the last image of the ad all the products from “Tantrum Verde” brand are presented, this time they are on a scene, under the lights of a reflector, like celebrities.

Creative Story 3 (“Tantrum Verde”):

The story: The opening sequence presents a family (husband and wife) in a room. The woman stands in a chair, having a scarf around her throat and her mimic shows pain. The husband takes care of his wife by giving her a traditional remedy against cold. In the second sequence a mother and her daughter are presented in the kitchen. The girl is crying and she also put her hands around her throat. In the next sequence a mother with her children are sit at the table. One of the children swallows the food with difficulty. In the last sequence a family (the parents and their two children) are presented in their living room. They are playing, and the father wears a scarf around his throat, a sign that something is not right. Mother turns around it gives to him a “Tantrum Verde” pill. The man shows instant recovery. The last image of the ad presents a balance. On its right plate there are honey and lemons (as symbols of natural remedies for flu or sore throat). On the second plate of the balance the “Tantum Verde” box is placed. The balance is not in equilibrium, the weight of “Tantrum Verde” being higher. All products from “Tantrum

Verde” brand are presented in the closing sequence. As regards the mise-en-scene, one could notice that the first three sequences were filmed using blurred images and different types of grey, while in the last sequence the vivid colors are used.

The analysis of interviews

In the case of the interviews we aimed to see if people buy pharmaceutical products (e.g. “Faringosept” and “Tantrum Verde”) and if they use them before they ask the doctor’s advice. Also, we attempted to understand the relevance of pharmaceutical products’ ads for the respondents and if those ads as they have been seen on media had an influence on the people’s decision to use a certain pharmaceutical product in case of a disease.

Our data showed that at the first question: “Can you tell us if you assess yourselves as a healthy person? When did you make the last analyzes? When was last time when you get ill?” almost all (eight from ten) respondents had declared that, in average, they made their last set of general health-related analysis six months ago and they assess their health condition as being good.

When asked: “Let’s talk a bit more about our national health system. What could you tell me about it? What do your dislikes about the Romanian medical / healthcare system at present?” all ten respondents complained about Romanian medical system. Some answers were extremely detailed: “You enter there [at the hospital or clinic] for a thing and you get out with a lot of other problems”; “The doctors are not interested to see the patients’ interests”; “(The physicians) behave as patients are simple objects”; “There is a poor organization of hospitals and old equipments which lasted for years and decades”. A respondent synthetically expresses the present situation of the medical system in Romania: “When you go at the doctor, first you wait he or she to finish drinking his or her coffee and after that you are treated as an object. When you go at the pharmacy, you are looking for certain products but they are missing and you discover that only after your spent a lot of time”.

At the question related to the ways of improving the Romanian medical system the answers were in the same line: it is difficult to figure out what could be done to stop the migration of medical staff, the hospitals’ buildings should be renovating and the new medical equipment should be used, there has to be a change in the doctors’ mentality as they have to respect the patient.

The next two questions were in direct connection with the information about “Tantum Verde” and “Faringosept”. All ten respondents knew those pharmaceutical products and use them when they have flu or they got a cold.

As regards the source of information about the pharmaceutical products our data showed that six respondents had obtained this information from TV ads, two people knew about them from their relatives and friends and other two people knew about “Tantrum Verde” and “Faringosept” only from their friends. The respondents had declared that they used them when they have viral infections or flu and they bought them from the pharmacy (and they did not borrow from others).

All the respondents agreed that when they have a flu or a cold first they did not go to the doctor and, instead, they use self-medication: “I use what I have in the house (we have a drawer with a lots of pills in a special compartment)”; “First I try all kinds of curative remedies: honey and lemon for sore throats”; “In the first days of a cold I drink tea and rarely take a pill”; “I think doctors tend to give you too many pills, some even expensive, which also affect your immune system”. All respondents had declared that

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they have read the prospects for “Faringosept” and “Tantrum Verde” before using them and they were able to present the therapeutic effects of each product.

As regards the frequency of using the pharmaceutical products of interest, our data showed that six people used frequently “Faringosept” and only four used “Tantum Verde” in the same situation.

When asked about self-medication, more exactly, what are the reasons for which they take the pills without a medical prescription, the respondents had declared that they did that because they have already consumed the pills, so they know what are the effects in case of a cold or flu. In addition, all had said that only if the illness persists they went to their General Practitioner.

All ten respondents have seen and have remembered the TV ad with the giraffe for “Faringosept”, but when asked about the other pharmaceutical product they mixed up the creative stories 2 and 3 for “Tantrum Verde” in a completely different plot.

The last three questions of the interview guide aimed to identify the situation in which respondents have asked their General Practitioner for a specific pharmaceutical product after they had seen an ad of it at TV. In this case seven respondents said that it depends very much when they went at their General Practitioners. At the same time, all respondents had declared that they will take into account the General Practitioner’s recommendations and, much more, they add, if the doctor will clearly explain the benefits of the products, they will follow his or her’s advice.

When asked what they will do in a pharmacy, all respondents said that they did not need any advice from the pharmacist: “I remember that I went at the pharmacy to buy a certain product but I spent ten minutes there just listening a poem about a competitor with the same active substances but which has higher price”; “Frequently the pharmacist recommends something different from what I want to buy and they even insist on selling their products. I think that they probably have a sales target for certain products and that is the reason for which they are doing that”.

Conclusions

In his analysis of the relation between media and society Bernays (2011) pointed out the fact that mass media can influence people’s perception of certain issues and, at the same time, it has the role to reconstruct these issues in the public space. If the newspapers publish fewer articles on a certain topic or a TV station covers some issues in a smaller number of programs one could conclude that the respective topic or problem is not as important as others (Frangi, Fletcher, 2002: 27). In the case of advertising this understanding of media-society relations has asked for different approaches in order to sell the same products for different segments of the public.

The present paper aimed to identify if we can speak about “Direct to Consumer” advertising at pharmaceutical products in Romania.

The data analysis pointed out similarities among the answers of the respondents included in the sample. At the beginning of the interviews the people were complaining about the Romanian medical system and the ways in which patients are treated by the medical staff. As a result of the general distrust towards (and even fear in) medical system people frequently use self-medication. Only if the situation does not improve they ask the opinion of a specialist (in general he or she was a General Practitioner). But even in this case they will follow her’s or his recommendation with caution, and only if they will understand the explanations related to the pharmaceutical product.

In the case of the two pharmaceutical products used in our analysis (“Faringosept” and “Tantrum Verde”) it was obvious that the advertising using a light and friendly approach was better understood and remembered by the audience. This was the case with the creative story 1 for “Faringosept”. The use of metaphors, of longer scripts and hidden symbols (as was case of creative stories 2 and 3 for “Tantrum Verde”) did not grant a better remembering of the ad or a better understanding of the message.

The present paper has certain limitation. First, it is based on a limited sample of respondents and the methods of research –both qualitative – did not allow the generalisation of the results at the level of the society. Secondly, the research project did not include a third segment – the medical staff, the doctors – who can offer their own opinions and assessments about the influence of TV ads on patients’ behaviour.

A possible way of improving the present study is change the approach to a quantitative one. More exactly it is possible to make a survey on the basis of two representative samples – a sample of patients and a sample of doctors. Also, the qualitative analysis of the ads at pharmaceutical products has to be made on a larger sample, which would include ads and commercials for different illnesses and not only those related to flu and cold.

Despite the above-mentioned limitations it is obvious that the topic of “Direct to Consumer” advertisements’ influence on Romanian audience deserves an increased attention in the future.

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Article Info

Received: April 09 2019

Accepted: September 10 2019
