

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EARLY PANDEMIC ADVERTISING

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine early pandemic commercials and show the main changes in their focus from the point of view of communication. In terms of the contents, COVID-19 lockdown, heroism of health care workers, social distancing, online learning, remote work, and the strong shift towards online communication are underlined with an enormous stress put on such values as family, helping each other and being together in these difficult times. Characteristic nonverbal components of commercials referring to the pandemic situation include, for example, sentimental piano music, dimmed colours, a specific style of filming, or showing ordinary people as actors. Finally, it is noticed that some ad makers decide to use the sense of humour in their spots. In conclusion, the coronavirus pandemic and its effects can be easily observed on every level of an advertising message.

Key words: advertising, pandemic commercials,

Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2 causing COVID-19, a highly infectious respiratory illness, soon led to the global pandemic. This, in turn, resulted in the introduction of serious social restrictions in a huge number of countries around the world, which brought sudden and unprecedented consequences in virtually all spheres of human existence. The reflection of the new (recommended) lifestyle became almost immediately seen in advertising, which has always been said to mirror the reality.

Generally, the term advertising includes ‘the techniques and practices used to bring products, services, opinions, or causes to public notice for the purpose of persuading the public to respond in a certain way toward what is advertised’ (IS1).

The same definition clarifies, however, that ‘most advertising involves promoting a good that is for sale, but similar methods are used to encourage people to drive safely, to support various charities, or to vote for political candidates, among many other examples’ (IS1), which is usually called campaign or social campaign. Regarding the main message, showing safe ways of behaviour, appreciating healthcare workers and the departure from product oriented advertisements moved pandemic-influenced advertising more towards social campaigns. The most observable changes concerned the narrative and focus of ads. Stay-at-home message and social distancing have influenced the way commercial were perceived by customers all over the world but also how they were created. A new way of filming, unusual colour choice, or replacing physically attractive actors with more ordinary looking ones resulted in a fresh approach to what an advertisement nature is. Even the type of music accompanying the spots changed, which enhanced the meaning of the main message and the surprising but justified use of sense of humour redefined the main goal of advertising.

Quantitative drop and restrictions in advertising

When the pandemic hit in Europe, at the early spring of 2020, there began observable changes in advertising. First of all, a number of brands decided to stop broadcasting TV spots for some time. As it was estimated, ‘in the first half of 2020 TV ad spend dropped 15.3% in the U.S. and 10.1% across France, Germany, Italy and U.K., compared with the previous year’ (IS2). Additionally, the changes were induced not only by conscience and sensitivity of ad makers but also legal regulations. Facebook, for instance, announced its own rules on ads dealing with what was called ‘controversial content’ and advertising which used crisis situations or controversial political or social issues for commercial purposes was banned or limited. More specifically, from 19th August 2020, Facebook ads for medical or COVID-19 related items with high demand such as hand sanitizers, non-medical face masks or surface disinfectant wipes were temporarily limited, whereas COVID-19 tests or medical face masks were temporarily banned because they were associated with exploitation. Moreover, ads which gave the impression that rush is needed when it comes to the purchase of a range of COVID-19 related products or intentionally evoked fear in order to promote such goods were also not allowed (IS3). It was a challenge for ad makers to refer to new reality in an appropriate way. The brands needed to consider the newly established pandemic protocols and most of them had to adjust the way their advertising message was presented. Some brands responded almost immediately with the focus shift towards health and safety related issues, which aimed at building trust among consumers. The new advertising objectives concentrated on the psychological and sociological aspects of the new reality and aimed, above all,

at raising awareness and promoting recommended behaviours. Their goal was to demonstrate the scale of the problem which the whole world has been struggling with and to mildly suggest some steps that should be taken in order to prevent the virus from spreading. Nevertheless, the biggest influence of the pandemic situation was seen mainly in the very message of advertisements.

Communicating values

As a result of the pandemic, a set of strict regulations affecting social life was introduced. Nationwide lockdowns, job losses, or quarantine forced people to actually stay home. In consequence, the global economic and family situation of millions of people around the world was dramatically changed. Now, they needed to verify their lifestyle concerning schooling, working, and socializing. Children stopped going to school and started online learning, adults no longer commuted to work but instead stayed home performing home office, private and professional meeting were cancelled and social distancing discouraged from encounters in person. All of the changes, which had an immense impact on reality and everyday life functioning, were quickly reflected in advertisements. The picture below is a shot from Budweiser commercial *One Team*, in which, for example, a teacher performing online classes from her living room is shown (see Picture 1).



Picture 1. A shot from a spot for Budweiser *One Team* (IS4)

Importantly, the presented life scenes were far from perfect, idealized images which used to be a part of TV commercials. This time, what could be seen was struggling with too short charger cable for a mobile phone, striking funny poses in order to get better signal, being tired of spending the whole day looking into the computer screen, having problems with small children playing in the house and

interrupting home office duties or, finally, communicating with friends and family members via online communicators. The underlying message was that there are safe ways to work, learn, meet and talk to one another, and in between the lines the welfare of the general public was stressed with special emphasis put on the role and heroism of health care workers.

The Budweiser spot *One team* underlines the role of first responders and medical workers (see Picture 2). They are referred to as ‘the warriors’ and the ‘the angels’, and presented while working for the benefit of the whole society.



Picture 2. A shot from a spot for Budweiser *One Team* (IS4)

Similarly, McDonald’s spot *Most important meals* highlights the importance of nurses’ and doctors’ work by stating: ‘After billions and billions, THESE are the most important meals we’ve ever served’ and declaring that some free meals for them will be offered (IS5). The spot finishes with a line: ‘It’s our honor to serve you’, appreciating the courage and sacrifice of those at the front lines (see Picture 3).



Picture 3. A shot from a spot for McDonald’s *Most important meals* (IS5)

What can be seen in another commercial, is an indirect way of paying tribute to healthcare workers. Small gestures and selfless acts recorded by ordinary people were a part of Lay's #Joygivers spot. Among others, there was a short amateur video of a man standing on a ladder, painting a mural depicting a doctor wearing a blue apron and a face mask, with boxer gloves and huge angel wings (see Picture 4). The message here was very meaningful and strong.



Picture 4. A shot from a spot for Lay's #Joygivers (IS6)

At this point, an already iconic campaign by Uber should be referred to. The spot *Thank you for not riding* became a classic example of the 'pandemic' advertising as it includes all the changes which were introduced when COVID-19 pandemic hit. In the spot, it was avoided to mention the service, instead, there appeared an unprecedented message of thanking the consumers for actually not using its product. The slice-of-life technique was used to present people at different stages of their lives and in a variety of everyday situations. The viewer could see, for instance, pregnant women, the elderly, infants, children, lonely people, tired parents, experiencing a whole array of emotions, such as fear, loneliness, despair, struggle but also hope, peace or happiness. Thanks to the varied group of actors, it was easy to identify with some of them and with their problems which happened while being stuck at home as a result of lockdown. Some new daily routines were shown, for instance, talking to friends and family members via Internet, carefully washing the groceries, inventing new ways of spending that much time at home – dancing, exercising, or

simply missing the loved ones. In terms of narrative, there was no voiceover and the scenes were unconnected. The only verbal message appeared at the very end of the spot, which ended with a powerful slogan ‘Stay home for those who can’t’, discouraging to any rides or even leaving the house for the sake of those who cannot afford to stay home. And the final words said ‘Thank you for not riding with Uber’ (IS7). The background sentimental piano music and the amateur-like way of filming made the spot exceptionally powerful and appealing.

Nonverbal aspects of pandemic-influenced advertising

Regarding the structure and content of ads, their basic components underwent a substantial shift as well. Typically, as air time is expensive and the viewer attention is fleeting, a TV commercial last up to 30 seconds (there are also 60- and 90-second spots, but they are rare). Due to the time limit, the structure is schematic and stereotypes are frequently used to help in quick understanding of the presented action (Brierly, 2002; Kowalewska, 2018). The spot usually tells a story focused around a promoted product, which ends with a brand name and logo. Most spots are accompanied with catchy or well-known music, which makes them more memorable and appealing. What additionally helps to make the ad stand out is the use of interesting pictures with vivid and contrasting colours (Ogilvy, 1983), whereas the way of filming is dynamic with frequent close-ups. When it comes to the actors, they typically embody the current beauty standard or represent experts, celebrities or other well-know people (Byrne and Breen, 2003; Tellis, 2004). Regardless of the type of the promoted products, sense of humour is frequently present. As soon as lockdowns began in March 2020, the change in all the above mentioned aspects has been visible.

One of the most noticeable changes was music. It is well know that music is crucial in setting an appropriate tone and that people respond emotionally to music’s expressive properties. At the start of the pandemic, in an ad for a product music was no longer lively and fast. In fact, it was mostly gentle, sentimental, with an emotional touch. In commercials influenced by pandemic, most often classical, instrumental music with prevailing piano tracks was used. The somber tones provoked to think and reflect on what really matters in life and allowed to take a step back. The TV/Internet spots, which with this purposive use of appealing music succeeded in evoking melancholy and nostalgia the most are, for example, Uber *Thank you for not riding* (IS7), Budweiser *One team* (IS4), or Apple *Creativity goes on* (IS8).

The atmosphere of the presented scenes was strongly accented with the use of specific colours. Lively colours were replaced with dark hues, which gave an impression of gloom and dreariness as in the spot for Bank of America *A Commencement for America* (see Picture 5).



Picture 5. A shot from a spot for Bank of America *A Commencement for America* (IS9)

Even if the action took place in a daytime, there were no vivid, sharp colours that would be expected, but rather soft and dimmed, like in the spot for United Nations (IS10). Regardless of the object presented, everything seemed to be gray, black, as if a bit faded (see Picture 6). The lack of good contrast and low saturation made attention be directed to other components of the message, such as the values, which were underlined, or the general overtone.



Picture 6. A shot from a spot for United Nations *We are at home to protect you* (IS10).

Some brands took a step a further and decided to broadcast black and white spots. Nike, for instance, in the spot *Play for the world* showed a number of people exercising in their living-rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, driveways, and basements (see Picture 7) trying to stay in shape despite lockdown.



Picture 7. A shot from a black and white spot for Nike *Play for the world* (IS11)

The fact that all the pictures were monochromatic and presented along with meaningful slogans in white in between the clips helped to create a powerful message, which was additionally enhanced with nostalgic piano music.

Another feature of advertising which clearly changed under the influence of the COVID pandemic was the way of filming. These were no longer dynamically changing pictures and numerous close-ups accompanied with fast music, which used to be popular in TV spots. Since spring 2020, the impact of lockdown on a city landscape has been accented in a number of ads. Frequently, longer shots with an aerial view of empty and motionless cities were provided, showing public places, such as streets, sidewalks, promenades, which disturbingly ceased to be crowded. Combined with sentimental, instrumental music, this new way of shooting created a reflective mood. A promotional spot for Kołobrzeg entitled *City of silence* accurately illustrates the trend. Kołobrzeg is a Polish city by sea side, third the most popular tourist destination in summer in Poland. It tends to be crowded regardless of the time of the year. Here, filmed at the beginning of national lockdown from the a bird's eye view perspective, it looks absolutely motionless and quiet (see Picture 8). The fact that there are hardly any people in the streets is so unnatural for the place that, despite soft and delicate music in the background, it makes the viewer feel uncomfortable and anxious.



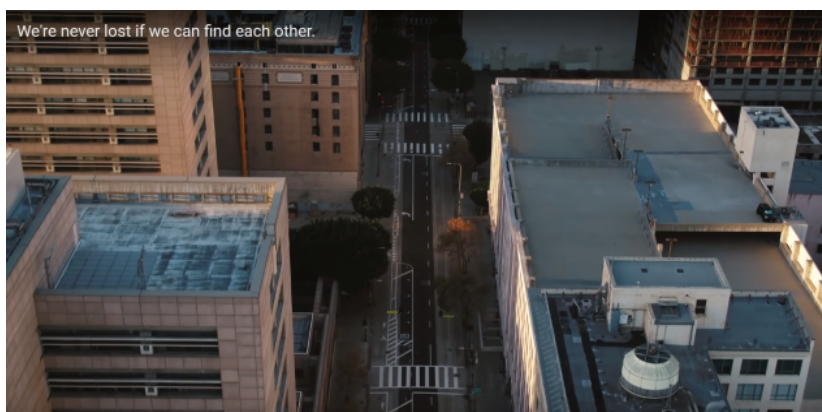
Picture 8. A shot from a promotional spot for Kołobrzeg *City of silence* (IS12)

In the picture above, Kołobrzeg city hall is captured from a top perspective with the adjacent market square, which magnifies the feeling of isolation and seclusion. Similarly, a Facebook commercial *We never lost if we can find each other* fits well into pandemic trends in advertising. It shows landmarks from a few capital cities, for instance, a spire in Rome, or the Eiffel Tower in Paris, undisturbed by any tourists or passersby. The emptiness of public spaces is illustrated with images of depopulated buses, subways, school corridors, playgrounds, airports and other facilities (see Picture 9).



Picture 9. A shot from a spot for Facebook *We never lost if we can find each other* (IS13)

In the same spot, the bird's eye view perspective discussed above is also used to show awkwardly empty streets (see Picture 10). The spot finishes with a recommendation 'It's time to stay home for us'.



Picture 10. A shot from a spot for Facebook *We never lost if we can find each other* (IS13)

This filming technique can be noticed in multiple commercials, such as Budweiser *One team* (IS4), United Nations *We are at home to protect you* (IS10), and many more. Generally, the aerial view can be translated into a metaphorical dimension. In the pandemic, the reality has changed beyond imagination, but still, physically, everything stayed the way it used to be, it is just the perspective that is new. Like in these pictures.

As far as filming techniques untypical for commercials are concerned, there is another direction ad makers chose to follow. Some companies decided to make their commercial by using shots which often looked like homemade production. The spots were created by an apparently unedited and loosely connected short amateur videos. It can be observed in spots for Budweiser *One Team* (IS4), Lay's *#Joygivers* (IS6), Uber *Thank you for not riding* (IS7), Apple *Creativity goes on* (IS8) (see Picture 1, 4, 13 and 14). Many a times unpolished, poor sound and image quality videos added authenticity and seemed honest in the viewers' eyes.

As well as the changes in the way of filming, there was a novelty in terms of the heroes in commercials. The most frequently pictured types of people in TV commercial were experts, models, film actors and actresses. Enrolling celebrities to endorse the product has always been a popular strategy and basically all actors represented the most desired type of beauty and perfection. As one of advertising goals is to enchant, seduce and evoke desire, both men and women, regardless of the type, were good looking and attractive. However, with the onset of social isolation, when online learning and remote working started to be a daily routine, the characters changes into parents tired of taking care of children while working at the same time (see Picture 11), brave doctors, nurses, and other health care workers (see Picture 2), the elderly who need help, but, above all, common people representing 'just like us' type (see Picture 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16).



Picture 11. A shot from a spot for T-mobile *Jesteśmy dla Ciebie* (IS14)

What is of particular interest is that fact that in terms of physical appearance, the actors were far from being perfect and certainly failed to meet the criteria of current beauty standards. They looked like ordinary people; women without makeup, with

their imperfect hair (referred to as quarantine hair), men with long beards, with some additional pounds sometimes, wearing casual clothes, representing every age, size, shape, and nationality to show that everybody was equal in the face of pandemic. A furniture brand Sherlock showed a slightly overweight man lying on a couch under a blanket and watching television (see Picture 12). In the first shots he was compared to Ilya Oblomov, the main character from Ivan Goncharov's novel about a man who rarely left his room or bed and was incapable of making important decisions or taking any meaningful actions. The playful punch line was: 'History changes, heroes stay. Stay home' (IS15).



Picture 12. A shot from a spot for Sherlock *Heroes stay home* (IS15)

The uplifting message and the sense of humour

As it has been said before, the sudden and forced changes of a lifestyle brought serious disruption into daily routine of millions of households. Taking into consideration the fact that the vast majority of the today's population has never experienced such isolation and that the economic predictions for the future left people worried and insecure, it is understandable that under such pressure a decline in mental health began to be repeatedly observed at all the age and gender groups across nations. Being aware of this difficult situation, a number of brands decided to part from a traditional way of advertising and instead of focusing on products and their qualities, they moved towards bringing joy and relief by introducing sense of humour into advertisements. The videos featured common people trying to deal with problems caused by lockdown but also supporting and reminding others that they can count on their support. What is typical of them is the use of amateur videos instead of professional ones. Naturally, the quality of the picture is rather average due to low resolution or poor contrast but it is the emotional load that is of top priority.

This type of advertising is well illustrated by the spot for Lays crisps *#Joygivers*. It is a reminder that people should support one another not only materially but also

mentally and emotionally. The spot presents, for example, people creatively spending time with their children at home, a man who receives a small gift with a note from a neighbour, a girl leaving flowers in front of strangers' houses, or a man playing a saxophone on his terrace in order to bring some joy to other peoples' lives. In one of the shots, there is a dancing postman at the closed front door seen as if through the door viewer (see Picture 13).



Picture 13. A shot from a spot for Lay's #Joygivers (IS6)

And one of them shows ladies, probably neighbours, doing physical exercises together but at a safe distance with one of them conducting the training through a megaphone.



Picture 14. A shot from a spot for Lay's #Joygivers (IS6)

In the spot, there is cheerful background music and a soft narrator voice underlines how important such small gestures are, and how one can change other people's perspectives in an easy way.

Burger King commercial *Stay Home of the Whopper*, for instance, was designed to make the viewer feel uplifted and morally supported in the time of uncertainty. It encourages to order a meal by an app and stay on a couch and so become a national hero by helping mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The verbal message ‘Your country needs you...’ alludes clearly to the wartime, but the phrase finishes with the following words: ‘... to stay on your couch and order in’. Then the voiceover continues: ‘Do your part and we’ll do ours. Order through the Burger King app and the delivery fees are on us. So staying home doesn’t just make us all safer, it makes you a couch po-ta-triots’ (IS16). The coined word *couch po-ta-triots* means that keeping to social distancing and following pandemic rules is an expression of patriotism.



Picture 15. A shot from a spot for Burger King *Stay Home of the Whopper* (IS16)

Additionally, the brand salutes first responders on the frontline and healthcare workers as by buying their products one provides free food for essential workers, especially nurses. In technical terms, heroic music and special lighting create an elevated or even heroic mood. Again, actors playing in the spot are ordinary-looking, of different gender and race, wearing casual clothes, lazing at home. It was stressed that it had never been so easy to fulfill a social duty and become a national hero, just by staying on a couch and ordering a burger by an app.

It is not unusual that Heineken uses sense of humour in its commercials. Nevertheless, the funny moments in the spot *Connections* are closely related to the new online socializing phenomenon. Heineken’s commercial focuses on people having technical difficulties with electronic devices or not being able to use them properly, which results in some funny situations. What is particularly amusing, is that a viewer can easily relate to those moments of struggling with computers, laptops, mobile phones, and other devices thanks to which it was possible to get connected during lockdown. In the picture below (see Picture 16), there is a woman sitting on the floor next to a kitchen table, because the length of the charger cable does not let her sit in a more comfortable position, which is a reflection of daily pandemic life.



Picture 16. A shot from a spot for Heineken *Connections* (IS17)

Despite the presented difficulties and lack of physical contact, the overtone of the ad is positive and heartwarming as the electronic devices enable to stay in touch and enjoy time together even if not personally. The cheerful and upbeat music in the background corresponds well with the atmosphere of friendship and love. The ad ends with a catchy and reassuring phrase: ‘It’s not the best get-together, but it’s the best way to get together’ and tag ‘socialize responsibly’ (IS17), which reminds people that even though they would like to meet face-to-face with their friends and family they have to be responsible and use ways to communicate at a distance. Finally, it is worth mentioning that in Heineken’s spot there appear actors of all races and genders, who look like ordinary people caring more about their relations than their appearance.

The last example to be discussed is Netflix commercial *The Spoiler Billboard*. It took the form which resembled a social campaign against going out in the times of lockdown. The commercial was targeted mainly at young Netflix users, for whom the need to meet their peers was the strongest and the moral obligation to stay home the weakest. The aim was to discourage people from going out by putting up billboards filled with spoilers from Netflix Originals in gathering spaces. The copy body said ‘Some people still think it is ok to go out and chill, spoiling it for us all, so we took an extreme measure: we spoil their favourite Netflix shows’ (IS18). The caption stated ‘If the virus doesn’t stop you from going out... The spoilers will’.



Picture 17. A shot from a spot for Netflix *The Spoiler Billboard* (IS18)

In order to play fair, however, ad makers warned people just before they boarded the ride into town with huge billboards containing spoiler alerts saying ‘Gathering spaces might contain the ending of your favourite series’ (see Picture 18).



Picture 18. A shot from a spot for Netflix *The Spoiler Billboard* (IS18)

Final remarks

Concluding, the paper aimed at highlighting the changes in advertisements which were introduced under the influence of COVID-19 pandemic. It was noticed that the changes included not only technical aspects, such as the way of filming or the choice of music but also the very message itself. Generally, what can be observed, is the shift of focus from money and prestige oriented messages towards promoting more basic values, such as human relations, family bonds, togetherness and helping one another. In this respect, advertisements become more social and educational. Contentwise, some brands focused on adding an element of this ‘new reality’ to prove that their product is up-to-date, others included slogans and information educating people about the disease and recommended preventive behaviours. There were also numerous ads whose main goal was to spread positivity and highlight the temporariness of the situation. Hopefully, this shift from consumerism towards values connected with being together and appreciation of bonds between people rather than the possession of material goods will be continued after the pandemic as well.

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