



The impact of advertising on social processes

Olga Pavlovskaya¹ · Daria Kurenova² · Gulsina Murtazina³  · Olga Kolosova^{4,5}

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Abstract

In modern information society, advertising remains essential for the formation of social norms, value systems, and public consciousness, especially in the conditions of a pandemic. Despite the availability of a wide range of literature devoted to various aspects of advertising, the investigation of its influence on the processes occurring in society is still relevant. Previous researches in this field focused primarily on consumer behaviour influence techniques, the effectiveness of various marketing channels, and new forms of advertising centred at increasing trust among the target audience. The purpose of this study was to uncover how advertising impacts social processes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research methodology included system analysis (for comprehensive study of coronavirus-related advertisements) and comparative analysis (to review Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian advertising strategies and identify dominant ones). The examination of coronavirus-related advertisements revealed a shift from advertising directed at increasing consumption towards its reduction. A comparative analysis of samples from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine showed that the advertising market is closely related to the government and often appeals to negative emotions in all countries under consideration. However, their influence strategies are somewhat different. Belarus and Ukraine tend to apply provocative methods to attract the viewer's attention. In contrast, the Russian advertising industry prefers using the TV appeal of socially significant persons and emotionally neutral outdoor advertisements with information on the proper rules of conduct. The results of this study can be applied by officials for developing information policies especially those related to pandemic and other extraordinary circumstances.

Keywords Advertising · Social process · Increasing consumption · Pandemic · Provocation-based strategy

✉ Gulsina Murtazina
gulsina.murtazina@rambler.ru

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

1 Introduction

In modern information society, advertising, as one of the main components of social communication, remains essential for the formation of social norms, value systems, and public consciousness (Key and Czaplewski 2017). The Third Wave Information Society is, as a rule, guided by what advertising offers it in all its multiple forms, types, and manifestations. If any advertising type loses its influence on the audience, its new modification or an innovative channel for content delivery appears almost instantly. Direct advertising is being actively replaced by indirect, mediated, hidden, contextual, and native (Van Dijck et al. 2018). By using the latest developments in the field of information and communication technologies, advertising successfully follows the consumer from printed press to websites, from television to social networks. The issues of controlling the behaviour of the audience, as well as the manipulation of people's consciousness, are permanently relevant for advertising as a social institution (De Mooij 2018).

Advertising plays an important role in forming new values and attitudes during periods of active social transformation (Alalwan 2018). Now, exactly such a time humanity is experiencing in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. Everything changes—the traditional way of life and even established habits. Responding to the consumers' demands and being at the same time its product and agent, advertising is forced to change its messages radically. It advocates for not offering new goods and services, but rather for self-isolation and consumption reduction to the minimum possible level (Cinelli et al. 2020). Within the pandemic outbreak, cosmopolitanism and globalism are losing their attractiveness. Instead of traveling, people massively return to their homelands so that the problems of urbanization are realized more vividly. Only now we are beginning to get a sense of goods of prime necessity and distinguish them from less important ones. What has been advertised and actively promoted for a long time becomes unnecessary. Live communication is replaced by social distancing; the entertainment industry is losing its ground; education and many types of intellectual work go into remote mode (Berger 2020). At the same time, limited availability of technology and access to reliable information sources due to various social and societal factors, sometimes referred to as the digital divide or digital gap, manifested itself at a critical juncture in the public health crisis (Ramsetty and Adams 2020).

During an emergency, the management of social processes falls primarily on the government. However, as practice shows, the state actively uses the potential of advertising to influence individual and mass consciousness, promote its fundamental ideas, and form the necessary public opinion and behaviours that will meet the goals defined by the authorities (Shareef et al. 2019). All mentioned above determines the relevance of research on advertising in pandemic conditions.

1.1 Literature review

Blocking and social distancing to combat the COVID-19 virus have caused serious disruptions in consumer behaviour as physical consumption is limited in time and place. The boundaries between work and personal life are blurring: people work from home, study at home and relax at home, and since the consumer cannot go to the store or organization, they must come to the buyer themselves. Consumers have adapted to house arrest for a long period of time and are applying new technologies that facilitate work, study and consumption, including information, in a more convenient way, therefore, the use of digital technologies has changed the existing habits of consumption of goods and information. Government policies also impose new consumption habits (Sheth 2020).

Various aspects of advertising as a complex phenomenon tightly connected with a wide range of human sciences (marketing, economics, management, sociology, psychology, philosophy, cultural studies, philology, etc.) are in the focus of many Russian and foreign researchers. Numerous studies investigate the advertising effectiveness (Kehinde et al. 2016; Weber and Schweiger 2017), technologies (Polukarov et al. 2016; Borisov 2017), its influence on consumer behaviour (Habib et al. 2015; Oboznaya 2017; Haider and Shakib 2018) and on the formation of consumers' attitudes (Rai 2013; Arnaud et al. 2018; Subroto and Samidi 2018), its psychological effects (Pechmann and Catlin 2016; Torres 2020), and novel marketing channels (Knoll 2016; Pütter 2017; Yang et al. 2017). Particular attention is paid to new types of advertising: the so-called green advertising based on an ecological approach (Mkik et al. 2017) and native advertising, which is believed consumer-friendly due to the lack of obvious pressure on the client (Laursen 2017). Another often studied point is public service advertising as a cultural phenomenon and its potential to influence society (Vinichenko 2017; Agrba 2018).

Particularly important in the context of this research are works that consider the role and place of advertising in modern society (Golovanova 2017) and the interaction between society and advertising (Subramanian 2017). As Golovanova (2017) points out, advertising daily and massively affects the absolute majority of the population. It contributes to the formation of consumer preferences and participates in the formation of certain standards of thinking and social behaviour of various population segments worldwide (Golovanova 2017).

Due to the pandemic and quarantine restrictions, people have begun to turn to social networks more often for updates, information and advice. Therefore, the importance of advertising on social media has increased, which not only spreads information about health, but also has the ability to change the attitude of the population towards the virus and security measures in a pandemic. Governments, media buyers, and the health sector around the world in other countries are trying to use social media advertising to disseminate health information, which can help minimize the number of coronavirus cases (Habes et al. 2020).

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the term infodemic has been coined to describe the dangers of misinformation when dealing with disease outbreaks, since rumors and misinformation, knowing or unconscious, intentional or unintentional, can dramatically accelerate the epidemic process by influencing and fragmenting

social responses. For example, in 2020, CNN anticipated a rumor of a possible lockdown of Lombardy in northern Italy to prevent pandemics by publishing news a few hours before the Italian Prime Minister's official announcement. As a result, people flooded public transport, train stations and airports, trains and planes, trying to escape from Lombardy to the southern regions of the country before the quarantine was imposed, undermining the government's initiative to contain the epidemic and intensifying the infection. Thus, the case of the COVID-19 epidemic shows the critical impact of the new information environment, because the dissemination of information can greatly affect human behavior and reduce the effectiveness of measures and countermeasures taken by the governments of countries under various threats, primarily under the threat of a pandemic (Cinelli et al. 2020). Many scholars are deeply interested in the specifics of advertising influence on the formation of a consumer society in Russia (Abramov 2016; Pechkurov 2018, 2019). When analyzing the peculiarities of Russian advertisements, Pechkurov (2018, 2019) especially highlights the philosophical aspects of conspicuous consumption. He indicates that it is most clearly manifested in societies characterized by the severance of social relations and the absence of distinct cultural values, standards, norms, and rules of behaviour (like those of the post-Soviet space). Pechkurov (2018) also denotes that under these conditions, such a consumer lifestyle is formed, when the consumed goods and services as symbols of success, prestige, and high social status turn a "prestigious" lifestyle into the object of one's life. In his opinion, it is advertising that causes a decisive impact on the formation of demonstrative consumer behaviour (Pechkurov 2019). In addition, semiotic linguistic studies of advertising discourse were carried out to increase the possibilities of advertising in shaping consumer behavior of the population (Kurenova et al. 2020). Thus, for a considerable period of time, the main task of advertising both globally and in Russia (as in other post-Soviet countries) was to increase the overall consumption, including excessive and demonstrative ones. This goal determined the formation of advertising strategic plans, requiring subsequent allocation of considerable sums of money from the budgets (De Vries et al. 2017).

Notwithstanding the foregoing, consumption stimulation cannot be the only purpose of advertising. Nowadays, advertising tools are increasingly used to solve acute social problems (Golovanova 2017). These include such a global challenge as the COVID-19 pandemic. The advertising market was forced to react to new conditions, rebuilding on the fly and thereby modifying traditional technologies and practices. The new reality requires radical changes in advertising strategies, analysis of which is believed to become a promising research area (Habes et al. 2020).

The examination of advertising strategies for influencing society carried out in this study is based on a series of scientific publications by the Russian researcher Tumskiy. He comprehensively reviews the use of provocation-based advertising strategies and their impact on consumers' behaviour (Tumskiy 2017, 2018, 2019). Tumskiy notes that provocations in advertising appeal to our emotions, causing a wide range of negative feelings like irritation, fear, anger, and disgust, i.e., they create a situation of psychological discomfort. At the same time, the effectiveness of provocative advertisements increases significantly as their content leaves a deep imprint on our emotional state. A specific attention Tumskiy (2018) pays to positive

provocation, by which the researcher means “a complex form of social interaction aimed at realizing the covert intent of the subject to impose new social conditions on the object and encourage it to commit mutually beneficial actions” (Tumskiy 2018, p. 38).

1.2 Problem statement

Despite the availability of a wide range of literature devoted to various aspects of advertising, the investigation of its influence on the processes occurring in society is still relevant. Preliminary work in this field focused primarily on consumer behaviour influence techniques (motivation to purchase goods and services), the effectiveness of various marketing channels, and new forms of advertising centred at increasing trust among the target audience. Nevertheless, the lightning speed of changes in the life of the current society necessitates a systematic study of factors that have caused them. These include, first of all, the advertising itself, as it contributes to the formation of new social norms, values, orientations, attitudes, and rules of conduct.

The aim of the present study is to analyse the impact of advertising on social processes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The achievement of this goal requires the following tasks to be done:

- study the specifics of investigation of society-advertising interaction in the scientific literature;
- analyse advertising trends arisen in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, to trace the transition from advertisements aimed at shaping consumption to those restraining it;
- conduct a comparative analysis of Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian advertisements and identify their common and distinctive features;
- find out the functions and reasons for using provocative pandemic-related advertisements.

The object of the study is an advertisement that appeared in connection with the COVID-19 outbreak. The subject is the specificity of advertisements' impact on social processes.

2 Methods and materials

Advertising research requires well-designed, well-controlled and well-executed projects in which incentives, patterns and measures are methodologically correctly combined to provide a genuine and meaningful contribution to theory and practice. An erroneous or inappropriate decision on any of the issues discussed can completely negate the results and thus make the research results questionable (Geuens and De Pelsmacker 2017).

In order to solve the research tasks and achieve the goal established, a set of scientific methods was used:

- theoretical methods (analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, comparison, and analogy were applied to clarify the state of knowledge on the impact of pandemic-related advertisements on social processes, determine the conceptual and categorical apparatus, generalize and systematize scientific provisions);
- special methods (system analysis was used for a comprehensive study of advertisements that appeared in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic; the comparative analysis was applied to examine Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian advertisements and clarify their dominant strategies with reference to their socio-cultural and political background).

Such a complex approach contributed to a comprehensive investigation of the selected research material represented by examples of Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian coronavirus-related advertisements. This choice of countries was motivated by their historical and cultural closeness (three post-Soviet Slavic countries with similar national mentality). The study covered the period from March to May 2020, as during this time, restrictive measures to combat the pandemic were imposed, and the first examples of pandemic-related advertisements appeared. Even though the quarantine severity varied across the considered countries, the transition of advertising to COVID-19 topics occurred in each of them simultaneously and generally was based on the same scenario. In fact, advertising began to transmit the governments' intentions to form new rules of social behaviour (social distancing, self-isolation, travel and activity restriction, consumption reduction, minimization of live communication, mandatory online-learning, and overall transition to the online mode during work). This is quite understandable as the role of the major client of advertising shifted from the business, which has been hit by quarantine, to the state.

The study focused on the analysis of outdoor and TV advertising as these two types are supposed to cover the largest audience, i.e., imply maximum involvement and versatility. As a rule, government agencies work with TV and outdoor advertising if it becomes necessary to convey socially significant information to the population.

3 Results

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, large Russian advertising companies have actively engaged in conveying new rules of conduct. These activities were predominantly coordinated by federal and regional government bodies and government-controlled organizations, including, for instance, the Coordination Council to Combat the Spread of Coronavirus Disease (Russia) and the All-Russia People's Front (or ONF—a public organization personally patronized by President Vladimir Putin).

Back in March 2020, one of the largest Russian outdoor advertising operators, Gallery, voluntarily and gratuitously provided coordination councils in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other regional centres with about six hundred outdoor LED screens for broadcasting guidelines for safe physical distancing. Another Russian outdoor advertising operator Maer Group proceeded similarly. At the request of the ONF, it has begun informing the population about the disease symptoms



Fig. 1 Russian outdoor advertisement with COVID-19 preventive measures. (1) *How to keep yourself and others safe?* (2) *Avoid contact with people having flu-like symptoms*



Fig. 2 Russian outdoor advertisement promoting self-isolation. (1) *Travelers arriving from states with high COVID-19 infection rates must self-quarantine for two weeks* (color figure online)

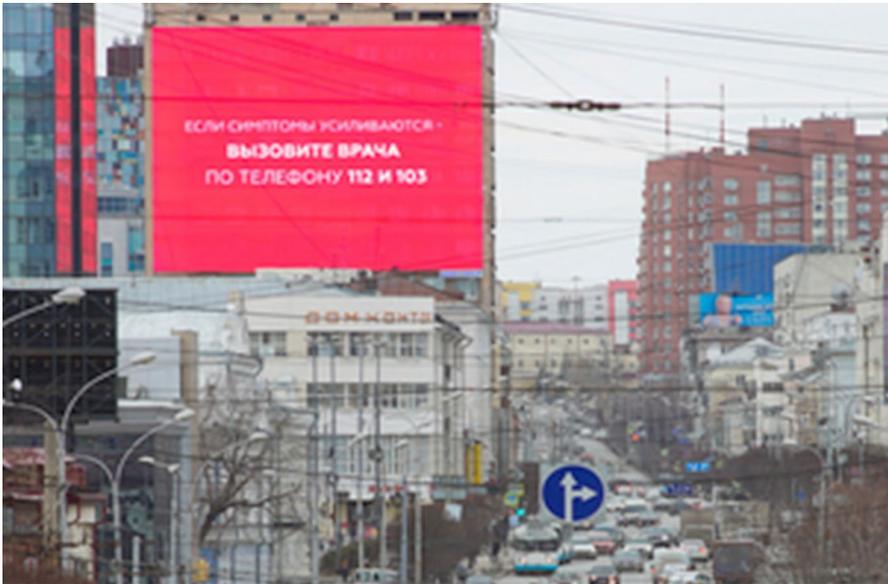


Fig. 3 Russian outdoor advertisement with recommendations in case of COVID-19 infection. (1) Symptoms worsen? Call a doctor: 112 or 103 (color figure online)

and preventive measures via out-of-home advertisements and willingly assumed the responsibility for coordinating the volunteer movements. Examples of street advertisements in Russian cities are shown in Figs. 1, 2 and 3.

TV advertising in Russia has also joined the government's campaign to combat the pandemic. Thus, 17 major television channels (namely, Channel One, Russia 24, Russia 1, Russia-Culture, NTV, TV3, Friday!, Domashniy, TNT, TNT4, 2×2, Che, CTC, CTC Kids, CTC Love, Super, and Match TV) joined the global movement with the #stayathome hashtag (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68fT2pJ6BGw>). Within the framework of this project, almost all TV commercials were replaced by appeals from Russian popular TV hosts and media personalities. In an encouraging manner, they asked the viewing audience to stay at home during the quarantine and take care of themselves. What is more, by filming these video messages at home, Russian TV stars seek to set a good example for others.

A similar strategy was applied by Belarusian outdoor advertising companies. They appeal to responsibility, altruism, empathy, and call for doctors' support (Figs. 4 and 5).

Aside from that, Belarus state TV channel ONT has launched an advertisement "Coronavirus. Love your grandmother from a distance!" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aFUZ3FpVJw>), the content of which boils down to the following. A little girl is sitting beside her grandmother and suddenly sneezes. Looking at the child, the grandmother kindly says, "Bless you, darling," then sneezes too and unexpectedly explodes and disappears like a balloon. This 27-s video reminds the

**«ПОДДЕРЖИТЕ
ВРАЧЕЙ —
ВСТРЕЧАЙТЕСЬ
С ДРУЗЬЯМИ
ОНЛАЙН»**

**ДМИТРИЙ
КОЛДУН**

ПЕВЕЦ

#БЕЛАРУСЫРАЗАМ
#СПАСИБОВРАЧАМ
#ВСЕБУДЕТХОРОШО
#БЕРЕГИСЕБЯ
#МЫВМЕСТЕ
#ПОДВИГВРАЧЕЙ



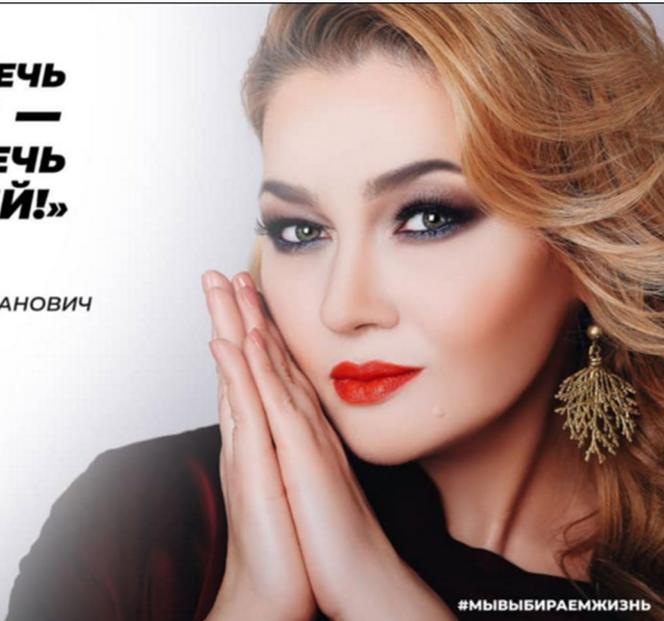
Fig. 4 Belarusian outdoor advertisement. (1) *Help the doctors—meet online!*—Dmitry Koldun, singer. (2) #Belarusianstogether; #thanksthedoctors; #itsgonnabefine; #takecareofyourself; #weareretogether; #doctorsheroes

**«ПОБЕРЕЧЬ
СЕБЯ —
ПОБЕРЕЧЬ
ВРАЧЕЙ!»**

АНАСТАСИЯ ТИХАНОВИЧ

ПЕВИЦА

#БЕЛАРУСЫРАЗАМ
#СПАСИБОВРАЧАМ
#ВСЕБУДЕТХОРОШО
#БЕРЕГИСЕБЯ
#МЫВМЕСТЕ
#ПОДВИГВРАЧЕЙ



#МЫВЫБИРАЕМЖИЗНЬ

Fig. 5 Belarusian outdoor advertisement. (1) *Take care of yourself—take care of doctors!*—Anastasia Tihanovich, singer



Fig. 6 Ukrainian outdoor advertisement promoting self-isolation (located in Kyiv). (1) #stoproaming

viewer that children may be asymptomatic carriers of the coronavirus disease, which can be especially dangerous for older adults.

The quarantine start in Kyiv was also marked by the appearance of provocative outdoor advertisements (Fig. 6). Dozens of billboards around the city present the Kyiv Mayor Vitalii Klychko (the world-famous boxer) with a rolled-up sleeve showing his fist. The slogan nearby says: “#stoproaming.” This banner was placed on the panels of ten leading Ukrainian advertising companies on a free-of-charge basis. Its provocative nature lies in the joking warning, utterance familiarity, and the use of colloquialism “roaming,” which altogether causes the feeling of light bewilderment and indignation.

Even though this non-standard and bordering on cynicism form of advertisement may provoke the perplexity and shock (especially the view of exploded granny), such an unusual idea, as conceived by the creators, was intended to force the audience to strictly comply with the quarantine restrictions. Violations of ethical norms and dark humour are considered acceptable by advertising developers since they allow one to achieve advertising goals (in our case, the compliance with the state-required behavioural patterns) in the best way possible.

The reason for resorting to provocative advertising most likely stems from the desire of Alexander Lukashenko and Vitalii Klychko, on whose order the advertisements were created, to demonstrate the image of a strong, stern, somewhat rustic and not burdened with reflection political leader. In this context, it is worth recalling the statement of Alexander Lukashenko that “the tractor will heal everyone,” meaning labour on the ground an effective treatment from coronavirus (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygm3ymuAqI8>).

Russian advertising industry prefers more emotionally neutral strategies, which, however, also appeal to such emotions as fear. This can be easily confirmed just by paying more close attention to the bolded words “*how to keep safe*,” “*call a doctor*,” and “*self-quarantine for two weeks*” in Figs. 1, 2 and 3, as well as the use of red and black colours in Figs. 2 and 3. It is important to note that under the pandemic conditions, Russian advertising has demonstrated a clear intention to avoid provocations, which distinguishes it from Belarus and Ukraine. Recommendations, behaviour algorithms, and appeals in Russian advertisements are addressed, first of all, to sober-minded people. The analysed samples practically do not go beyond the traditional information posters and official recommendations given by celebrities in TV advertisements provided by the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation.

4 Discussion

This study was based on the understanding of advertising as a process of transmitting information from a subject (it can be anyone: a large state or interstate institution, the owner of a certain brand, a representative of a microbusiness, etc.) to an Object (target audience), which are affected by the amount of information held by the recipient and the recipient’s ability to process the available information (Subroto and Samidi 2018; Berger 2020).

As numerous scientific studies show, the main purpose of advertising is to generate a strong desire to purchase the product on offer. In other words, advertising is aimed at motivating and stimulating consumption (Oboznaya 2017; Pechkurov 2018; Haider and Shakib 2018). Thus, it becomes clear that advertising is a powerful tool that inspires consumers, influences their behavior and shapes social policy. First, it awakens the desire to have a specific product, then in various ways inspires the consumer to purchase it (Oboznaya 2017; Alalwan 2018).

No less important than the awareness of the advertising objectives is an understanding of its impact on the population’s life satisfaction (Torres 2020). A research team from the University of Warwick led by Andrew Oswald has compared survey data on the life satisfaction of more than 900,000 citizens of 27 European countries with data on annual advertising spending in those nations. The researchers have found an inverse connection between these two: the higher a country’s advertising spend was in one year, the less satisfied its citizens were a year or two later. In light of this, researchers have assumed that advertising contributes to the formation of a sense of permanent dissatisfaction and worrying about one’s relative status. It is recognized to prompt us to measure ourselves against others. The emotional advantages of such social comparisons are quite uncertain, as it is noted that unregulated advertising volumes lead to lower levels of life satisfaction (Torres 2020). The findings of Russian researchers fully confirm this point of view (Abramov 2016; Pechkurov 2019).

The assertion of Oboznaya (2017) that advertising largely forms consumer values, and not universal ones seems too categorical. The potential of advertising as a powerful factor of influence in terms of the formation of universal human values has not yet been fully disclosed. This fact determines the relevance of scientific research

in this area (De Vries et al. 2017). If to speak of public service announcements, this study is in line with the judgment of Agrba (2018) that they are among the most effective tools for working with people. These advertisements make it possible to inform the broadest population masses about pressing problems affecting everyone and propose their solution options. Public service announcements reflect current social challenges and are addressed both to each individual and nation as a whole. The ability to touch a person's deepest heartstrings makes these announcements a universal instrument of influence (Agrba 2018).

Somewhat controversial seems to be the thesis of Agrba (2018) and Shareef et al. (2019) that the main task of public announcements is a positive impact on the personality that can make a person happier. Advertising in general and public announcements in particular are not intended to make a person happy or unhappy. They pursue purely pragmatic tasks, such as influencing individuals or social groups and modelling processes in society in accordance with the strategic direction set by a specific client. The target audience in the advertising paradigm is considered mainly not in the subject, but in the object relation. If before the COVID-19 pandemic, advertising was faced with the task of increasing consumption (up to excessive and demonstrative), then with the transition to quarantine, the advertising market began to promote completely opposite values (Cinelli et al. 2020). Now the issues of forming a positive emotional background are no longer a priority for advertising creators. As the analysis shows, advertising that appeared at this time appeals mainly to negative emotions, not being afraid to use provocative strategies that cause fear, irritation and shock among the audience. Moreover, the formation of negative emotional background and psychological oppression, which can provoke depression and phobias, is the leading advertising strategy associated with the coronavirus. This study is of the opinion that the activation of moral and ethical impulses of the individual and society is at the periphery of advertising functions (Sheth 2020; Habes et al. 2020).

5 Conclusions

The study findings allow one to draw the conclusion that advertising, as one of the main components of social communication, has a significant impact on social processes and can model the behaviour of individuals and social groups. Advertisements are able to determine social development vectors, set priorities, and influence the dynamics of social changes.

The examination of advertisements that appeared in connection with the imposed quarantine measures unveiled the transition from consumption enhancement (including excessive and demonstrative) to its radical decrease. Advertising companies, coordinating their activities with various government bodies and government-controlled organizations, directed all their efforts to modify the model of public behaviour and introduce its new norms, rules, and standards. The new social order presupposed not only restraining consumption processes but also introduced

limitations concerning all types of social activity with a simultaneous increase in control. It implied fundamental changes in the communication processes, while advertising, responding to new requests from the government, become the main channel for broadcasting information regarding the rules of conduct under the current circumstances.

The comparative analysis of Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian pandemic-related advertisements revealed both similar and distinctive features. The common was represented by close relations between the considered field and the state (government bodies are the main clients), as well as the appeal of advertising to negative emotions (primarily to fear). Even when an advertisement was maximally informational, it still intended to create a negative background.

Despite this, the strategies of influence and the general style of out-of-home advertisements in the studied countries differed. Belarusian and Ukrainian advertisements demonstrated the use of provocative strategies bordering on cynicism. From the standpoint of the ordering party, the feelings of shock and bewilderment experienced by the target audience increased the advertisement's effectiveness. The use of provocation-based practices during the pandemic outbreak raised serious doubts concerning the ethical side of such advertisements. Russian advertising specialists took a slightly different path. As the main strategies, they chose the TV appeal of socially significant persons perceived as influencers, and emotionally neutral outdoor advertisements providing information about the norms of conduct. These differences in advertising strategies might result from distinct political backgrounds and relationships between society and the state in the countries selected for analysis.

The results of this study can be applied by officials in various countries for developing information policies especially those related to pandemic and other extraordinary circumstances.

This study is limited to the comparative analysis of Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian pandemic-related advertisements. There's room for further researches of COVID-19-related information policies and advertising messages in other countries and regions.

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Availability of data and materials Data will be available on request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Authors and Affiliations

Olga Pavlovskaya¹ · Daria Kurenova² · Gulsina Murtazina³  · Olga Kolosova^{4,5}

¹ Department of Russian Language and Speech Communication, Kuban State Agrarian University, Krasnodar, Russian Federation

² Department of Marketing and Business Communications, Federal State Budgetary Educational Institution of Higher Education “Kuban State Technological University”, Krasnodar, Russian Federation

³ Department of Social Technologies and Mass Communications in Sport, Lesgaft National State University of Physical Education, Sport and Health, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation

⁴ Department of Marketing, State University of Management, Moscow, Russian Federation

⁵ Department Sociology and Advertising Communications, Russian State University named by A.N. Kosygina (Technology, Design, Art), Moscow, Russian Federation