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DOCTORAL THESIS ABSTRACT
**INFLUENCES OF PROMOTIONAL JOURNALISM ON
CONSUMERS ATTITUDES**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the scientific endeavor undertaken in the present research is to analyze the nature and possible types of influences of promotional journalism on media consumers attitude regarding the product, brand and stimulus. In this respect, in the paper both the framework of the research and the phased approach of achieving it are present.

Concern for defining and analyzing the influence of promotional journalism – a not yet recognized practice and unassumed by any field (e.g. marketing, public relations, journalism, communication sciences) especially since there are countries where it's prohibited (e.g. Slovenia, Russia, The United Kingdom) is specific to marketing research, but it can also be of interest to experts in the following fields: marketing, journalism, public relations, communication sciences, sociology and psychology.

The problem identified in articles and studies of specialized literature are referring to practicing a new type of journalism – *promotional journalism* (Hardt, 1996; Erjavec, 2004) – result of the media representing the interests of organizations and public figures, interested in promoting products, services or their own person, in order to improve their reputation, image or for stimulating sales.

Promotional journalism, manifested by specific elements and practices, is not identified as such by readers, being perceived as part of an editorial (specific journalism material). Because of this fact, it is possible that its influence on readers be different if instead it would be presented and labeled as such.

Although promotional journalism specific materials are apparently informative or utilitarian, the main purpose of these is to influence the conative component of readers, which follows the birth of a favorable attitude towards the message, product, brand (here referred to as a brand under which a product/service is sold/produced) or the promoted person. In this context the main function of the media becomes one of promoting products, services or persons, making use of an apparent objectivity and the expertise of their representatives to facilitate reaching marketing and/or public relations objectives. In this sense the media channel is used by marketers as a promotional tool, counting on objectivity as an “interface” and the impartiality of journalists and reader beliefs about them.

The dual modality in which mass-media reports itself to readers is on the one hand represented by their quality as a *target-market* meaning consumers/current users/potential users of products and services or fans of promoted persons, and on the other hand a target audience, meaning readers of advertisements and promoting organizations, institutions or public persons inserted in media content.

Although some studies were based upon readers being able to recognize a hybrid message by at least an external characteristic, their results have showed that these texts have a significant impact on readers (Cameron & Curtin, 1995) due to their perception as parts of the editorial content of publications, which can mean that promotion journalism whose presence is not acknowledged by readers nor identified by specific traits, makes use of media functions (e.g. information, forming of opinions, education, utilitarian), pursuing specific marketing/public relations goals.

Readers, most of the time are not paying attention to this becoming almost “immune” to the exposure of advertising messages either they are expecting from specialized publications that the two types of content to be clearly separated and labeled.

Thus, the research problem identified following the research on specialized literature and fashion magazines publication market in Romania has outlined the hidden character of this practice by the lack of proper labeling content specific materials their presentation as editorial content and development of special characteristics, species and publication techniques.

However, if the actors involved in the creation and publishing of promotional journalism specific materials can be seen as a tool in achieving marketing or public relations objectives whose results are analyzed in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, the effect of exposing readers in their double quality – as consumers of the products or services advertised and the target audience for messages - their attitude is of interest for researchers and civil society alike.

However, the purpose of this study is not to judge this practice and the actors involved through ethics or lawfulness, but to identify, describe, analyze and interpret the nature and possible influences of exposing media consumers to promotional journalism specific materials regarding their attitude on the product, brand and stimulus, on the three key component (cognitive, affective, conative).

The research topic of this paper captures the scope, purpose and objectives through it and summarizes key aspects of the specific problem, highlighting one of the main concerns of marketers who want to know even predicatively the effects of the actions on the chosen target audience and their contribution in achieving the proposed goals.

In order to fulfill the purpose of research, the following objectives were established: (i) defining the independent variable, e.g. the concept of promotional journalism and the description of the conceptual and methodological framework, (ii) creating a research tool which will allow the identification, coding and analysis of promotional journalism specific material and hence operationalizing it, (iii) identification, describing, analysis and interpretation of the nature and possible types of influences existent in the levels of the two considered variables (promotional journalism and consumer behavior) by the completion of a research experiment.

In this regard, doctoral research followed a path dictated by the complexity of the research problem and difficulty in identifying, and measuring promotional journalism as an independent variable. Therefore to ensure the best possible knowledge for the studied reality and to identify answers to the presented problems, the use of a basic and fundamental explicative-applicative research was considered adequate.

The mixed approach of research problematic required taking into consideration the following perspectives: (i) philosophical, by anchoring the problem into the philosophy of specific research areas in order to identify the fundamental parts of the research, ensuring the validity and credibility of the undertaken activities; (ii) conceptual through identifying and selecting reference meanings and linking them with the theme and problematics of research, so that they can be operationalized with the established methodology; (iii) methodological, by analyzing and adapting the reference methodology identified in specialized literature regarding similar studies for creating a specific strategy and toolbox.

As a methodological system the pragmatic interdisciplinary model was used (Singer and Churchman, cited: Zait, Spalanzani 2006, 129) in order to clarify basic and complementary

suppositions of the reference theory using synthetic constructions having an interdisciplinary and holistic character. The overall research approach was an individualized one (oriented towards particular system components in order to capture the diversity, specificity and differentiate them) and diachronic variations while watching variables (method of repetitive investigation). Through theoretical orientations of the reference domain, the methodology used was a critical one, emphasizing to underline the contradictory and dysfunctional aspects of promotional journalism both at a theoretical and practical level.

The option for choosing to build a research strategy was based upon the complex character of the problem, the subject and the objectives of research, but also the nature of the studied problematics, which, through its difficulty has imposed the use of several methods, techniques and instruments.

Thus, the result of combining methodological elements was to build a specific know-how which will serve to fulfill the proposed objectives.

Research strategy, through methodological aspects of the established approach can be described as being: (i) inductive; (ii) longitudinal (through analysis over a set period of time and comparison of the obtained results); (iii) mixed (qualitative and quantitative).

The research strategy has followed the phasing of the proposed established steps, containing specific methodological elements (Zait; Spalanzani 2006, 139): (i) *data collection* (secondary research; analysis and application of the analysis grid and coding scheme – in case of content analysis – and questionnaires, in the investigation and survey based experiment); (ii) *data processing* (logical analysis and interpretation of theories, statements and ideas of specialized literature; promotional journalism specific materials coding scheme; statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics); (iii) *design and verification of hypothesis* (content analysis, questionnaire-based survey, experiment, statistical tests); (iv) *generalization and theoretical building* (studies of specialized literature; content analysis – qualitative and quantitative component).

In order to achieve the proposed goals and objectives, the research toolbox used included the following: (i) analysis and synthesis of fundamental ideas from specialized literature; (ii) the grid for the analysis of qualitative content, developed upon analytical models and fundamental ideas identified in specialized works; (iii) the coding scheme created with the purpose of achieving the quantitative component of content analysis, which will allow the identification, codification and analysis of promotional journalism specific materials; (iv) survey based investigation, conducted in order to provide information to support experiment based research; (v) questionnaire used as instrument for the survey based investigation on a sample basis; (vi) experimental type research, which is aimed to identify the nature and possible influence types of promotional journalism on the attitudes of consumers; (vii) questionnaire, used as an instrument for the experimental type research, applied before and after exposure to the stimulus; (viii) marketing stimulus used in conducting the research experiment, in which two distinct journalistic materials were used: (a) for the experimental groups where the promotional journalism specific brands are present; (b) for the control group, at the level of which characteristics of professional journalism can be identified and the deontological principles and the main purpose that of informing are respected.

The thesis is divided into three chapters – the first aimed at clarifying the conceptual and methodological reference, the second presents the operationalizing of promotional journalism specific materials and the third experimental research.

In order to build a specific know-how regarding the studied issues in the first chapter: (i) the promotional journalism concept was defined by reference to specialized literature and the results of the content analysis; (ii) conceptual boundaries were established with common characteristics and presentation of common and distinct characteristics between the analyzed concept and related concepts; (iii) theoretical and practical characteristics of promotional journalism were identified along with the presentation of specific species and publication techniques.

The creation and validation of the research toolbox in view of operationalizing promotional journalism has been attributed in a specific chapter of the thesis (the second chapter) both from reasons regarding their importance reported to the studied issues and reaching the established research objectives and its absence in specialized literature.

The third chapter presents the implementation of the research as an experiment through which the nature and possible effects of consumer exposure to specific materials regarding their attitude on product, brand, and stimulus were identified in order to test the formulated specific hypothesis.

Presenting the results of the research concludes with a section on limits, conclusions and contributions to future research directions and knowledge.

References are listed by type the biggest part being studies and specialized articles, followed by books and web addresses of consulted works. Regarding the Annexes, the sheer volume of data and specific information on the conducted research has imposed a selection process, taking into account the criteria of importance and necessity of their presence reported in the thesis, so that part of the Annexes is available on electronic format (the CD attached to the printed thesis).

The study of specialized works had the main purpose of identifying and systematization of the main theoretical concepts, theories, statements and fundamental ideas, but also to serve the methodology of the proposed research and to ensure both describe reality and patterns of operationalization and measurement the variable considered, using a multidisciplinary approach. Also, in order to identify theoretical and practical features of promotional journalism, a qualitative analysis was performed over two hundred units selected from the content of *Elle Romania*, in 2001-2003.

For the identification, coding and analysis of promotional journalism specific materials a specific research toolbox has been created (the coding scheme), which was applied in order to validate it, on fifty-one units of analysis selected from a distinct number and a supplement of the magazine *Elle Romania* (from 2001-2002).

The results of the content analysis (both qualitative and quantitative) contributed to the understanding of the studied reality, clarification of the conceptual framework of reference and the creation of a specific toolbox, which will facilitate future methodological approaches in the field.

Also in regard of the research issues, as shown in the results of the performed content analysis, promotional journalism specific practices are not just hidden by inserting advertising or

promotional content into the editorial, but converted to such content, where many of its brands can be identified.

The lack of specific labeling of promotional journalism materials, accompanied by the presence of advertorials and prints in the same number, can apparently offer safety to consumers regarding the separation of the two types of content, but an in-depth analysis of media products reveals the fact that the development of this practice strengthens the confusion not only on the receptive level but also at the interpretative one.

And because the media continues to play an important role in the formation of beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of consumers, the realization processes, perception and interpretation of content can be influenced, in terms of the field of study, not only the cognitive dimension of attitude, but especially the affective and conative ones.

Therefore, for the actors involved in this process of creating and publishing promotional journalism specific materials, it is a priority to use this promotional instrument to transform purchasing decisions into the acts of purchasing and consumption.

In order to identify and analyze the nature and possible types of influences of promotional journalism on consumer attitudes it was necessary to conduct an investigation based on both survey and experimental type of research.

Thus, survey based results provided relevant information in the formation and organization of experimental based research referring to the formation of experimental groups, their profile, choosing the material used as a stimulus and its species.

To analyze the relationship between the two considered variables, a set of assumptions was built, both on a system of premises and the results obtained from preliminary research to achieve the same task.

The results obtained after experimental researches were made and statistical tests contained in the IBM SPSS Statistics software have allowed the verification of established hypothesis, achieving the outlined objectives and purpose, being regarded as considerable for the completion of the conceptual and methodological reference framework , also in identifying, analyzing and interpreting the nature and possible types of influences of promotional journalism on consumer attitudes regarding the product, brand and stimulus.

Thus, the results of the experimental type research can be summarized as follows:

A. The following assessments can be made on *consumer attitudes regarding the stimulus*:

- (i) the magazine which published a specialized article on beauty products is regarded as an important factor in assessing the credibility of the information contained therein;
- (ii) the selection of products presented in the fashion magazine is considered to be objective in relation to similar existent products in the industry;
- (iii) specialized information presented in fashion magazines are seen as useful regarding testing and buying decisions of beauty products;
- (iv) recommendations of specialized editors regarding testing and purchasing beauty products are seen as important in relation to the choices made by the subjects thereof;
- (v) only positive evaluations of specialized editors presented in fashion magazines on beauty products are considered objectives by the target subjects;

(vi) specialized editors sharing opinions regarding beauty products presented in fashion magazines justifies the selection of products made by them and reinforces the subject's opinion regarding the products qualities.

B. The following assessments can be made on *consumer attitudes regarding the product and stimulus*:

(i) differences exist, before and after the exposure to the stimulus of the subjects, regarding their usage of new generic beauty products;

(ii) there is a link between increasing levels of knowledge regarding the presented products in the reading material, after exposure to the stimulus, and the modification of the conative dimension of the subject's attitudes regarding them;

(iii) there are differences, before and after the exposure to the stimulus of the subjects, regarding their conative, affective and cognitive attitudes;

(iv) there is a difference, before and after the exposure of the subjects to the stimulus regarding their intentions of testing, replacing and recommending the beauty products presented in the reading material.

Although the approach taken has involved establishing the purpose and objectives of research, studies of specialized literature and using a specific methodology, created and adapted to the studied problems and considered reality, this has not ensured the absence of possible errors and specific limits to any research of this type.

The main limitations of research were rated as having: (i) a limited number of studies on the subject of research; (ii) lack of unanimity regarding the terminology and meanings attributed to the concept of promotional journalism; (iii) lack of a research toolbox which to allow the identification, codification and analyzing its specific material; (iv) lack of pre-testing and external validation of the specifically created toolbox; (v) the use of convenience samples and their partial representation; (vi) including supplements in the content analysis; (vii) verifying hypothesis based upon experimental research and applying simple statistical tests without identifying causal relations between the variables.

For the development of the conceptual and methodological reference framework specific to promotional journalism, but also to extend research regarding its influence on consumer's attitudes, the following research directions will be required: (i) ongoing study of specialized literature, taking into consideration all the areas involved; (ii) testing and validating research instruments used to achieve content analysis considering a representative unit number and different media products; (iii) using a sample of subjects, both to conduct a survey based inquiry, and also experimental type research, which will respect the analyzed publication's media consumers profile; (iv) testing and validating research instruments used to conduct survey-based inquiries and experimental type research; (v) making scientific observations in not only the editorial offices of niche publications for identifying, analyzing and interpreting creation and publishing techniques of promotional journalism specific materials; (vi) conducting in-depth interviews with the actors involved in this process in order to understand their interests and opinions on the impact of practicing promotional journalism and its impact on consumer attitudes.

However in the context of studies in this area and methodological development identified in specialized literature, this works contribution in this area of knowledge can be regarded as

significant, considering the following aspects: (i) clarification of the conceptual framework and enriching it through specific information; (ii) methodological development, by creating a toolbox useful for identifying, coding and analyzing materials specific to promotional journalism and its influence on consumers attitudes; (iii) identifying, describing and analyzing the nature and possible types of influences on exposing media consumers to materials specific to promotional journalism on their attitude on the product, brand and stimulus through an experimental research.

Regarding managerial implications of the obtained results following this research, they can be found among all the actors involved in specific issues and topics: (i) marketing specialist and related fields – researchers, theoreticians and practitioners – through contributions to the conceptual and methodological framework, but also through results of experimental research; (ii) media representatives – journalists, marketing agents, managers – by defining, describing and analyzing theoretical and practical elements of promotional journalism and its influences on the attitudes of media consumers; (iii) media consumers, through which by conceptual clarifying and experimental research results, contribute to their education in regarding identification, reception and interpretation of the messages present in media products.

Key concepts: promotional journalism, attitude, consumers, marketing, media, promotion, public relations