

Saying that “advertisements lie” is a heuristic for the universal attitude of consumers towards advertising. Why are the advertising audiences, despite the universality of this declaration, still vulnerable to manipulation by advertisers? Should we blame the asymmetry of information, the lack of knowledge about the techniques of manipulation in advertising, or perhaps a set of personality traits of a consumer identifying their susceptibility for persuasion? Asymmetry of information, as a general assumption, e.g. in marketing communication, signifies an uneven distribution of resources held by the participants of the market relationships. It is a situation where a kind of game is being played, in which the rules are imposed by the party who is “better equipped” with knowledge. In the environment of traditional media for one-way marketing communication, the awareness of the existence of asymmetry seems widespread. This is different, however, in the environment of the Internet, where the dynamic development of technology seems to be always one step ahead of the e-consumers, as far as the possible techniques of manipulation and the information advantage over them are concerned.

The project’s basic research assumption was that all the main and detailed functions of advertising can be explained in terms of asymmetry of information, expressed both as a creative form and as a way of organization and transmission of media. A consequence of the asymmetry of information can be manipulating the behavior of a potential buyer by exerting hidden impact on the recipients (buyers) at every stage of their market behaviors.

In the cognitive dimension, the main objective of the project is to identify and assess the extent, forms and nature of manipulating market e-consumers’ behavior using asymmetry of information. The project concerns the Internet environment and hypermedia marketing communication. The research focus on the environment of virtual communication stems from several important reasons. The adopted objective is an important and extensive scientific task. The title issue is a proposal for a new recognition of the subject matter of advertising by reference to two new modules: asymmetry of information and social manipulation. The focus of the research on the Internet environment – online advertising and e-consumer behavior – will allow precise diagnosis of the subject matter, the use of an interdisciplinary approach and shall propose future research in both environments of marketing communication, also at the international level. Online communication is already 30-40% of all advertising markets in developed countries in 2018 and has shown a continuous upward trend.

The main objective of the project is to identify and assess the extent, forms and nature of manipulating market behavior of e-consumers using asymmetry of information. The main assumption is that the network environment creates a belief in every participant of the marketing communication that they have an informational advantage over the other party. It refers to the characteristics, assumptions and consequences of the marketing communication model in a hypermedia computer environment by D. L. Hoffman and T. P. Novak.

The research project will consist of three stages, which will test the individual elements of the marketing communication between the advertiser as an entrepreneur using online advertising and the recipient (e-consumer), in addition to the content of advertising messages in the specific context of communication. The purpose of the first phase of the research conducted using a representative sample of Polish Internet users by means of the CAWI method will be the users’ awareness of manipulation in online advertising, their subjective sense of asymmetry of information and the level of trust in commercial information and other consumers’ opinions published on the Internet. We assume that e-consumers are not aware of the level of manipulation of the content in online advertising, and thus have a greater level of trust towards online advertising than advertising in the traditional media. Therefore, they have a sense of an informational advantage, caused primarily by the opportunity to get acquainted with the opinions of other Internet users, the availability of price comparison and of giving online feedback. The second phase of the research will take the form of in-depth interviews with Polish entrepreneurs using online advertising. We assume that entrepreneurs consciously use advertising tools with a manipulative intent (buzz marketing, retargeting and others) and that thanks to the extensive possibilities of consumers’ online behavior and targeting capabilities they use their informational advantage consciously. The third stage of the study – in the form of an experiment – is intended to verify the internal conditions of susceptibility to persuasion in online advertising and an analysis of the factors influencing proper recognition of manipulating content included in marketing messages on the Internet.

The planned research project is of great importance to science because of the ability to provide information on the scale and level of understanding of the phenomenon of manipulation in online advertising. The results obtained in the planned study will also be significant for the public sphere and business practice, e.g. enterprises for whom advertising is a system of communicating their attributes to the environment, and often, through the asymmetry of information, this can transform into the manipulation of potential buyers’ market behavior. This is an issue of spreading the awareness of the negative aspects of marketing orientation and at the same time a chance to make a contribution to the development of Internet regulations, consumer protection, and the promotion of good practices and business ethics.