

Specific Issues in Teaching Consumer Psychology and Marketing Communication in the Context of New Challenges and Information Literacy

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Abstract

In recent years, we have been increasingly confronted with misinformation, hoaxes, and harmful, artificially created fake news. Negative socio-economic developments (including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and their ensuing consequences (societal polarisation, heightened aggression, distrust, and a generally hostile atmosphere) have created a fertile breeding ground for their proliferation. Misinformation and disinformation also challenge the teaching of consumer psychology and marketing communication. One of the primary reasons for this is the alarming trend of people rejecting scientific knowledge, losing trust in scientists and doctors, and turning to alternative sources of information. This scepticism extends to various aspects, including climate change, European Union policies, and other matters. From the consumer psychology standpoint, this represents a significant concern, as disinformation directly hinders the realisation of sustainable development goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda. This paper aims to underscore the specific challenges in teaching modern consumer psychology and propose novel pedagogical approaches that simultaneously enhance information literacy.

Keywords: Consumer psychology, Marketing communication, Information literacy, 2030 Agenda, Sustainable development goals

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1 Changes and New Challenges of Consumer Psychology and Marketing Communication

Consumer psychology and marketing communication are two dynamic fields that have the greatest impact on consumer behaviour in the market for products and services. They are subject to constant change and are developing rapidly. The greatest challenge for consumer psychology is the discrepancy between consumerism and anti-consumerism, also reflected in new teaching strategies.

Consumerism, characterised by an excessive preoccupation with consumption, has permeated various aspects of modern life. In a consumerist paradigm, individuals' attention centres on acquiring goods and services, driven by the belief that our lives are merely a sequence of problems resolvable through personal responsibility and professional solutions. This mindset equates life management with running a small business, emphasising the pursuit of material acquisitions to address perceived deficiencies (Rischins & Dawson, 1992; Shaw & Aldridge, 2003; Stearns, 2006; Consumer Society, 2021). Nowadays, society is stuck in a state where we are constantly flooded with information, and it is impossible to maintain distance from marketing communication tools that promote and increase consumption. As disseminators of information, the media (television, radio, newspapers, and online media) are occupied by commercial advertisements, which leads to an unstoppable flow of commerce into society. Individuals seek their identity, purpose, and meaning of life by purchasing a particular product, which is significantly supported by the commercial activity of various institutions and implemented through the media (Hasyim, 2017; Mladá, 2021).

Marketing communication, particularly promotional techniques, profoundly influence consumer opinions and behaviour by shaping the emotional landscape of their decision-making process. Decades of research have revealed that many factors, including personality traits, temperament, psychological tendencies, social dynamics, cultural norms, societal expectations, and others, sway purchasing decisions. However, the cornerstone of consumer behaviour lies in the interplay of personality psychology, prior experiences, and emotional engagement (Fazio et al., 1982; Higgins, 1996; Clegg, 2001; Fitzsimons et al., 2002; Fazio & Olson, 2003; Jain & Posavac, 2004; Krishna et al., 2004; Dijksterhuis et al., 2005; Jacob et al., 2011; Singh & Verma, 2017; Jaeger et al., 2018; etc.).

This is confirmed by over 400 billion dollars spent worldwide advertising each year. If marketing communication, especially advertising, did not work, companies would never spend such high sums on marketing activities. Hand in hand with such a massive sphere of influence should go the responsibility for what consumer behaviour marketing communication creates or strengthens because it is the only way to a long-term sustainable society and environment (Paulík, 2021).

Fashion trends and rapid technological development primarily drive consumer society. Products quickly morally wear out and go out of fashion before they stop working. Consumers do not buy new things because they need them but because they want them, even though

the "old" could still serve them reliably. The average lifespan of products (until the purchase of a new one) is shortening; for example, for clothing, it is one year; for mobile phones, it is about two years; we buy cars for about 4 years, and so on. The result of consumer society is excessive waste generation, including food waste (Fišerová et al., 2018).

The key to long-term to permanent sustainability is, therefore, a gradual transition to anti-consumerism. Anti-consumerism is a trend that represents the opposite of consumerism. It focuses on reducing excessive consumption and waste production, reducing factors damaging the environment, promoting quality over quick and easy profit, and regulating unethical business. As a socio-political ideology, anti-consumerism challenges the notion of limitless consumption and the pursuit of material possessions. It serves as a counterpoint to materialism, often associated with consumerism's emphasis on acquiring and accumulating wealth. While materialism promotes amassing material possessions, anti-consumerism rejects such behaviour. However, complete rejection of consumption is not feasible, as material goods are essential for our existence. Therefore, instead of using the term "anti-materialism," which implies a complete denial of material needs, the term "anti-consumerism" is more appropriate to convey the opposition to excessive and wasteful consumption (Fišerová et al., 2018). For instance, an anti-consumerist approach to clothing purchases would involve considering real needs, reducing shopping frequency, making thoughtful purchasing decisions, and opting for second-hand clothing when necessary. An extreme anti-materialist, on the other hand, might even choose to own no clothes at all. For most consumers in developed countries, an important consumption goal is to achieve a sense of happiness. It is, therefore, an interesting finding that materialism, that is, the belief that the acquisition of material products is the main source of happiness and life satisfaction, is, in fact, associated with reduced subjective well-being.

A study on the relationship between anti-consumerism and subjective well-being was conducted in 2016. Since anti-consumerism counters materialism, and materialism exhibits a negative association with well-being, the hypothesis posited a positive impact of anti-consumerism on subjective well-being. The findings unveiled a growing inclination among consumers to pursue behaviours that enhance their subjective well-being. For instance, they increasingly prioritise experiences like trips, sightseeing tours, and skydiving over material possessions. Furthermore, consumers who align with anti-consumption values are more likely to engage in environmentally conscious behaviours (Lee & Ahn, 2016).

1.1 Specific Issues of Consumer Psychology and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Anti-consumerism is gaining increasing prominence through consumers and the influence of governments, municipalities, non-profit organisations, various institutions, and, notably, the media. A growing portion of society recognises the detrimental effects of our prevalent

lifestyle, not just on the environment but also on the quality of life and social interactions (Binkley & Littler, 2011).

The following trends also emerge from the ideas of anti-consumerism:

- Green marketing,
- Corporate social responsibility (CSR),
- Zero-waste or low-waste lifestyle
- Support of local producers and service providers,
- Shared economy,
- Sustainability and reduction of food waste,
- Environmental protection,
- Experiential marketing,
- Social marketing,
- Partnership marketing.

One of the primary roles of consumer psychology and marketing communication today should be to contribute to protecting the environment and the sustainable development of life on Earth. Sustainability and sustainable development are inextricably linked to the environment and environmental problems. Sustainability is currently a concept that we encounter daily in the most diverse areas of our lives. We read about sustainability problems in newspapers and books, we hear about them in the news and speeches of local and foreign politicians and various associations and organisations, we monitor the behaviour of small and large businesses, which often confuse marketing campaigns with corporate social responsibility, we watch shows, movies and series inspired by environmental problems, we monitor the gradual emergence of "green" stores and "green" consumers, gradual changes in our shopping behaviour, in short, sustainability problems and environmental problems are now an integral part of our daily lives.

We have been aware of environmental concerns for quite some time. We are not just grappling with the notion of sustainability; we are also confronted with many frequently discussed issues: global warming, climate change, melting glaciers, water, ocean, and air pollution, excessive waste production, greenhouse effect, environmental damage, and others. Whether we lean towards the theory that humans directly contribute to climate change or to the notion that it is only an indirect influence, one thing we cannot deny is that by our activities and everyday functioning, we damage or contribute to the damage of the environment.

At the end of November 2019, the European Parliament declared a climate emergency in the European Union. We are undeniably facing various interconnected environmental challenges that have and will have consequences for the lives of (not only) people around the world (Ivanegová, 2020).

Efforts to protect the environment and raise awareness of sustainability issues have been turbulent. In 1983, the United Nations established the World Commission on Environment and Development, which focused on environmental problems. This commission, also known

as the Brundtland Commission, published a report in 1987 entitled *Our Common Future* (Ivanegová, 2020). It deals with the problem of economic development that can be sustainable without destroying non-renewable natural resources and the environment. This report, which politicians and environmental experts prepared, contains the first and most frequently quoted definition of sustainable development: „Sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs “(WCED, 1987).

36 years have passed since the publication of the Brundtland Report, which means that the future that the report is talking about is happening now. Many activists and researchers are, therefore, rightly asking why we are still discussing sustainability and doing so little to reverse the unfavourable development. The answers are not easy to find; the current situation is probably closely linked to developed countries' lifestyles and how the current generation is educated. Although more and more people are aware of the need to protect the environment and deal with environmental issues and sustainability, many people turn a blind eye to the current situation, or it does not seem severe enough to them. They are unwilling to change their lives or give up at least part of their comfort.

For decades (since the 1980s), the United Nations has been leading the way in addressing environmental issues and promoting sustainable practices. World leaders met in New York in September 2000 and agreed to work together to fight poverty and achieve essential goals by 2015. These goals, called the Millennium Development Goals, aimed to make the world a better place for everyone (UN, 2015).

In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted at a special UN summit in New York. It sets a general framework for countries worldwide to eliminate poverty and achieve sustainable development by 2030. It is based on the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 and builds on them. The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the most comprehensive set of global goals for achieving sustainable development to date. The fundamental principles of the 2030 Agenda are transformation, integration, and universality (UN, 2015).

There are seven years left to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The Social Progress Index (2020) report (Green et al., 2020) states that if the current trend does not change, the goals will not be achieved before 2082. The COVID-19 pandemic further delays achieving the goals by one decade to 2092, meaning a delay of more than 60 years.

Several experts are concerned about whether we can achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda. They call for radical changes in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. They believe our inability to address the worsening environmental problems stems from the fact that entire generations have been led to unsustainability, even within education. For example, they cite the excessive use of plastic bags (recently available in supermarkets and stores for free) and plastic packaging, excessive use of private vehicles, a consumerist lifestyle, excessive consumption of fast food, and more (Urenje, 2021).

The task of education in consumer psychology and marketing communication, and the disciplines themselves, is the theoretical and practical implementation of knowledge by the 2030 Agenda.

1.2 The Fragile Bond between Consumer Psychology, Marketing Communication, and Information Literacy

In recent years and months, we have been increasingly exposed to fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the rapid development of social media and artificial intelligence have created fertile breeding ground for the spread of all sorts of unsubstantiated claims and information, especially in the online space. In the past few years, many studies have tried to explain why even educated persons with higher-than-average intelligence are susceptible to believing unsubstantiated information. Respondents of many of these studies were teachers, and the results are alarming (e.g., Kowalski & Taylor, 2009; Swami et al., 2011; Ballová Mikušková, 2018; Čavojová et al., 2020). In our research, we found out that vocational teachers, like the rest of the population, are susceptible to believing hoaxes, misinformation, and disinformation, and they cannot distinguish between facts and opinions (Kollár Rybanská, 2023).

Current research offers several explanations for why people believe in unsubstantiated information, the most common of which are:

1. Confirmation bias - people tend to seek information that supports and confirms their existing beliefs and ignore information that contradicts them. When, for example, disinformation coincides with someone's beliefs and worldview, there is a high probability that they will believe it because they will not be inclined to verify the information further. Search engine algorithms also support confirmation bias. This phenomenon was intensively studied in the 1990s (e.g., Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998).
2. Lack of critical thinking or underdeveloped critical thinking - some people may have insufficient ability to think critically, or they may not have/have not had the opportunity to develop their critical thinking, because of which they cannot assess the credibility of the information they encounter. They cannot recognise the so-called "red flags" or assess the credibility and reliability of sources (Yaqub et al., 2014; Wineburg & McGrew, 2019).
3. Emotional appeals - some disinformation may contain emotional appeals (e.g., injured or dead people or animals, attacks on human dignity, negative emotional stimuli such as anger, fear, sadness, crying, despair, suffering, etc.), which affect a person's mood and emotional experience in a similar way to marketing communications.

4. Trust in authorities - in the 1980s, research showed that people are more likely to believe information presented by an authority. This phenomenon is also known as the "halo effect".
5. Lack of information literacy or lack of information - there are many examples of hoaxes and false information that persist in societies and communities where access to accurate information is limited (e.g., in authoritarian regimes) (Marcellino et al., 2021), or recipients do not have sufficiently developed information literacy for various reasons.

Consumer psychology delves into understanding consumer behaviour and the factors that influence their purchasing decisions. Now, we know that if we can reach consumers' emotions and evoke an emotional response, we can be sure to arouse their attention and interest. Many people have lower emotional stability and higher levels of empathy, so messages with emotional appeals can convince recipients very quickly (Ghanem et al., 2018).

The main task of consumer psychology and marketing communication in the context under study is to provide consumers with enough information about the functioning of the market and the promotion of products so that they can make the right decisions on the market, to be able to see the background of marketing communication techniques, to be not easily deceived, and to be able to assess the quality of the offered products and services reliably.

Information literacy encompasses finding, evaluating, and using information effectively. It empowers individuals to make informed decisions, solve problems, and participate actively in society. The connection between information literacy and consumer psychology lies in their shared goal of promoting informed decision-making. Information literacy equips consumers with the skills to navigate the vast sea of information, enabling them to critically assess the credibility and relevance of sources before making choices. Similarly, consumer psychology sheds light on the psychological factors that shape consumer behaviour, helping individuals understand how perceptions, emotions, and motivations influence purchasing decisions.

2 New Challenges in Teaching of Consumer Psychology and Marketing Communication

Simply put, it can be said that the teaching of consumer psychology and marketing communication has always been mainly about helping students understand how the decision-making process works and how emotions influence our purchasing behaviour in the products and services market. The importance of informed decision-making has always been emphasised. Today, we are in a situation where even educators themselves have problems distinguishing between true and false information. This raises the question of how to teach students how to work with information correctly when educators themselves often cannot do so. The situation is further complicated by negative social and economic development

and the rapid development of social media. Information literacy should be developed in conjunction with internet literacy.

Modern consumer psychology studies how people think, feel, and behave in the marketplace. It is a complex and ever-changing field, but several problems have been identified mainly in recent years.

One problem is that consumers are increasingly flooded with information. This can lead to information overload, making it difficult for consumers to make informed decisions. Additionally, the information consumers are exposed to is often biased or misleading, which can further confuse them. Another problem is that consumers are impulsive, primarily because of the limitless possibilities of shopping and social media, which make it easier than ever to make purchases immediately. Additionally, consumers are often exposed to marketing promotions designed to trigger emotional responses, such as fear, movement, or excitement, which can further cloud their judgment.

Finally, consumers are increasingly susceptible to manipulation. This is because they are often unaware of marketers' psychological techniques to influence their behaviour. They are often motivated by emotions, such as greed or envy, making them more susceptible to persuasion. These problems can have several negative consequences for consumers and for the whole society. For example, they can lead to overspending, impulse purchases, and even addiction. They can also make consumers more susceptible to fraud and scams.

We formulated three fundamental new problems that influence the education process in consumer psychology and marketing communication:

- The rise of misinformation and disinformation: The quick reproduction of online information sources has made it difficult for consumers to distinguish between credible and misleading information. Misinformation and disinformation can significantly impact consumer behaviour, leading to irrational decisions, harmful purchases, and social polarisation and unrest. Consumer psychology educators play a crucial role in understanding how misinformation spreads and developing strategies to promote media literacy and critical thinking skills among students.
- The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI): AI rapidly transforms the consumer landscape, influencing everything from product recommendations to personalised marketing campaigns. While AI offers potential benefits, it raises concerns about manipulation, privacy, and algorithmic bias. Educators in the field of consumer psychology need to teach students how to work with AI and develop frameworks for responsible AI implementation.
- The rise of consumer groups that reject scientific knowledge relates to the rise of misinformation and disinformation that has many reasons (from essential effort to sell scams to hybrid war efforts). Social media also strengthen the formation of groups of consumers without sufficient education in specific fields of knowledge (law, medicine, physics, etc.) who are, on the other hand, very confident and are susceptible to falling for hoaxes and disinformation. Consumer psychology educators

play a crucial role in developing strategies to promote social media literacy among students.

- Addressing these new problems in consumer psychology requires a multidisciplinary approach, combining insights from psychology, marketing, sociology, and data science. By understanding the challenges and opportunities presented by these emerging trends, consumer psychologists and educators can contribute to a more informed, responsible, and sustainable consumer landscape.

3 Conclusion

Consumer psychology constantly evolves as new technologies, societal trends, and consumer behaviours emerge. Several new challenges in recent years require consumer psychologists and educators to adapt their research practices and educational methods.

Consumers are more susceptible to believing hoaxes, misinformation, and disinformation because, as research has shown, it depends not so much on intelligence and education but probably on other factors we must uncover. Subsequently, a three-year study will be conducted to monitor personality characteristics, mental health, life satisfaction, and other psychological, personality, and socioeconomic factors that could explain why we are susceptible to unsubstantiated beliefs. Suppose we succeed and uncover the factors that influence the tendency of people to believe hoaxes. In that case, we can set better, more targeted, and addressed education not only in consumer psychology and marketing communication.

We presume that algorithms and heuristics, such as specific scenarios of procedures, organising thinking and problem-solving for more efficient and rational work, could also help teach consumer psychology and marketing communication.

“DITOR” heuristics (Zelina, 1996) (English acronym = DICEI) appears as the best procedure for teaching and learning in the field of consumer psychology and marketing communication. DICEI procedure:

D – define = A good definition of the problem can help the basic understanding of the topic.

I – inform = find information, study many sources, and compare them. Do not forget to inform yourself about the authors of the information (Are they scientists? What do we know about them?).

C – create solutions = creative work, cooperation with others, brainstorming, buzz groups, etc.

E – evaluate = evaluate not only acquired solutions but also information and authors of information (if you already did it in step 2, do it again).

I – implement = concrete projects and realisation of solutions.

We believe it is essential to focus not on lecturing theory but on involving students in solving real-world problems. We should move to a teaching system where students study the materials independently and then use their acquired knowledge to solve the tasks set in class, like how it works at universities such as Harvard and Yale.

Teaching should also emphasise verifying information. It is no longer enough to verify only the information itself but also the authors from whom we obtained the information. It is crucial to determine whether they are scientists, teachers, or otherwise relevant authors, their reputation in their field, and how the established professional community accepts them.

Recent years have shown us that avoiding alternative media and opinions is not good. On the contrary, we should incorporate them into the educational process and show how disinformation works, how it spreads, and how we can identify it. Argumentation should be an integral part of consumer psychology and marketing communication.

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