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**EATING HEALTHY OR JUST FEELING GOOD?FOOD**  
**COMMERCIALS AND THE ROMANIAN MARKET**

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*Abstract*

The present paper aims to approach food and drink commercials running on Romanian TV channels with a view to establish the message sent to viewers of different ages. This medium has been chosen precisely because the voice of television is a constant presence in the majority of Romanian homes. Food consumption trends are an issue of both national and international importance, taking into consideration the numerous mass of vulnerable people. The emphasis is laid on the consumer’s sense of self or the social environment, and the purpose of food in ads goes very many times beyond the necessity of providing the body with the nutrients it needs. The method of work is semiotic and stylistic analysis, thus revealing linguistic, paralinguistic and stylistic devices used by advertisers in order to get everyone’s attention. With a view to getting the audience’s attention, advertisers use complex devices, which include language, music, characters of the “story”, society, etc. Very often food and drink are perceived as symbols and nobody can deny the existence of a “language” of food and beverages (certain linguistic symbols when describing what one consumes).

The interaction of text and context, the combination of images, language, symbols – all these elements are directed to a precise goal, that of making the commercial emotional in one way or another (irrespective of the correctness of the message from an ethical point of view) and enticing potential consumers to buy food and drinks which are not all the time good for health.

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**Keywords:** Romanian food commercials, semiotic and stylistic approach, ethic, message



## **1. Introduction**

As human beings are socially situated entities, all the time they are engaged in the process of making sense of their lives, their environment, etc. The mass media is an institution that is able to satisfy needs such as those relating to personal identity or relationship, as they form a natural part of humanized environment. The voice of television is a perpetual presence in the majority of Romanian homes; therefore, the quality of the marketed food is an issue of no little importance. Romanians watch television every day – over 80% of Romanian people watch TV, and they prefer the news, movies and HD products (Cerban, 2015). They watch TV, on average, 3.3 hours a day during the working days and about 4 hours a day during the weekend. Considering the fact that in front of the TV, viewers watch about six commercials for food per hour (Mediafax, 2011), it is a matter of concern whether they refer to products which contain a high quantity of sugar, fat, salt, cholesterol or not. On the one hand, it is about the nutritional quality of the products; on the other hand, the message that accompanies the presentation is an item of major interest. Food consumption trends is an issue of international relevance, especially because the mass of vulnerable people who watch TV is considerable. No matter the time of the day when commercials are watched, consumption behaviours are influenced. Children are said to be more vulnerable; nevertheless, adults are a vulnerable category as well, taking into account their efforts to face the requirements of a more and more stressful society. Their self-control becomes less obedient, especially after a long day at work and, under these circumstances, they become easy preys. As the purpose of food goes many times beyond the necessity of providing the body with the nutrients it needs, the message of instant gratification, or of status enhancement (competition, leadership or trend-setting positions) etc. is just a proof that mass media needs are oriented to the consumer's sense of self or the social environment (Weiss, 1971).

## **2. Problem Statement**

### **2.1. Advertising – A Power of Contemporary Society**

It is well-known that advertisement industry holds a special power in nowadays society, as it is responsible for the existence of a social and cultural environment which sometimes makes it difficult for viewers to make the healthiest decisions. More broadly viewed, if one considers the universe as an undivided whole, and, as a consequence, life as a category that is to be taken as it is in its complexity and dynamics (Jeder, 2014), commercials are to be viewed as part of a more comprehensive cultural phenomenon. They are complex messages, involving elements such as: a number of shots, dialogue, music, narrative structure, sound effects, power of human voices and, last but not least, editorial manipulation.

The research question of the present paper is rendered evident by the title itself, therefore our hypothesis is that the majority of the ads running on Romanian TV channels transmit messages of eating for comfort / fun / etc., no matter if the products are healthy or not. More and more cases of obesity have created the fear of a threat called “obesity epidemic” and advertising appears to be a real problem when the promoted products are unhealthy food and drinks. The issue at stake is that advertising is effective – it associates positive images and experiences with unhealthy products.

## **2.2. Consumers' Diet between Healthy and Unhealthy Choices**

Unhealthy food advertised on TV urges consumers to adopt an unbalanced diet, thus contributing to the limitation of general life quality and to the rise of the number of people who suffer from chronic diseases such as obesity, stroke, cancer, diabetes, etc. A worrying issue is the increasing human intake generated by pleasure and not by the body's need. Highlighting food availability and palatability may drive consumers towards binge eating, defined as "the consumption of an amount of food that is definitely larger than what most individuals would eat under similar circumstances, while experiencing a sense of lack of control over eating"(American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Diet quality mirrors a dietary plan in line with the necessary micro and macronutrients which are needed by a healthy organism and by its growth and development. Very many times products which are considered unhealthy (butter, alcohol, rich desserts, etc) are promoted on the bases of taste and class, while items of food which are currently viewed as healthy (yoghurt, cereals or vegetables) are popularized not so much for the fact that they are healthy, but because they have a good taste (Lehrer, 1990).Studies have shown that there is an automatic and direct causal link between food advertising and greater snack consumption (Harris et al., 2009) which definitely can influence the obesity epidemic. The only way to fight against such influences is becoming aware of the negative consequences upon human health. There seems to be a prevalence of commercials for calorie-dense low-nutrient foods running on Romanian TV channels, therefore one might highlight the ethical side of such enterprises. Here, the task of educators is immense, as they are an important social power(Jeder, 2013). The element of originality of this research resides in the application of semiotic and stylistic analysis to a part of the Romanian media products with the aim of rendering evident a trend in dietary changes dictated by commercials.

## **3. Research Questions**

Especially because of the very common object advertised, and also because it is one of vital importance for people's health, the message of the commercials promoting it is essential, because very many times there are other basic expectations to be fulfilled by it. Therefore, in order to explore this side which is not hidden at all in ads, there have been proposed the following questions for the present research:

- Which are the categories of products whose commercials convey the "healthy eating" message? (we will identify the kind of expectations they fulfil)
- Which are the products whose advertisements aim towards the idea of gratification irrespective of the fact that they might not be good for people's health? (there will be highlighted the type of gratification they offer)
- What semiotic and stylistic devices can be noticed in the ads for food and drinks under discussion? (there will be explored the most commonly used techniques and their anticipated effect)

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study is to highlight through semiotic and stylistic analysis the message of the food commercials running on Romanian TV channels. Such commercials make unhealthy food and drinks appear normal for both children and adult viewers. Very many times ads focus on sensory connections to food, thus creating and normalizing the so-called “hedonic hunger”, that is a person’s imperative need to eat or even overeat when their body has no longer need of food.

The study focuses on the commercials which ran on Romanian TV channels in the period June 2015 – December 2016. The criterion of selection was the product advertised, which had to be either an item of food or beverage. .

#### **5. Research Methods**

Ads can be said to fulfil a need for linguistic play; sometimes phrases from them become incorporated in everyday speech, the slogans having the merit of being memorable, catchy, using metaphors, alliteration, rhyme, or, on the contrary, using extremely simple but compelling words. Playfulness is an essential characteristic of postmodernism (Featherstone, 1991); the playful mixing of codes in commercials creates another reality where irony and playfulness prove that certainty breaks down, where nothing can be completely mastered. Thus, the research methods are used with a view to identify connotations, underlying conventions, differences (oppositions), figures of speech, as well as phonological and syntactic devices. Componential analysis places emphasis on the culturally important characteristics which are vital to fully understand the message conveyed.

##### **5.1. Semiotics and Advertising**

In order to get people’s attention, advertising uses complex devices, which include language, characters of the “story”, music, situation, society, etc. Beside language itself, a special role is played by the context, that is, everything that is connected with the combination of pictures and language. The semiotic approach in the present study is based on the Charles Sanders Peirce’s theory of signs, in accordance with which signs are divided into three categories: icons, indexes and symbols. Food and drink preferences are not guided just on the basis of availability or personal liking; they are also filled with meaning. It is an undeniable fact that very often food and drink are perceived as symbols and that there is a language of food and beverages (i.e. certain linguistic symbols can be used when describing what one consumes).

##### **5.2. Stylistics and Advertising**

It is true that the linguistic side of the commercial is enhanced by the visual and audio parts; nevertheless, one should never neglect the power of words as one can very often come across prosodic features which lay stress on the general message as well. The new 7 Days Bake Rolls are described as “baked, not fried; super tasty, super crispy, with three delicious flavours [...]”; the new 7 Days Bake Rolls – maximum of pleasure” (“coapte, nu prăjite; super gustoase, super crocante, în trei arome delicioase [...]”; noile 7 Days Bake Rolls – maximum de plăcere”). The rhyming parallel constructions (*baked, not fried; super tasty, super crispy*) offer dynamism to the description, which will culminate with the climactic

superlative construction *maximum of pleasure*. In analysing the corpus of commercials, Stephen Ullmann's theory of expressiveness as well as the theory of the three levels of stylistic analysis have been used. The support of the theory of expressiveness is the concept of choice without which the linguist finds it impossible to speak about style. Speaking about choice, mention should be made of the internal construction of the ad entitled "Grandma's Shelf" ("Raftul bunicii"). It consists of a three-scene black and white drawing in flour, the first one showing a field of wheat (the source of flour) and the way home, the second one presenting a family scene with the whole family around grandmother who cooked some cakes (the destination of the product being bringing the family together), and the third one, which renders the climactic moment, the scene in which grandma makes a sign with her hand which is meant show her trust in the high quality of the product. It is obvious that the choice of drawing the three scenes was intended as a gradation which culminates in the recognition of the product's high quality. According to [Stephen Ullmann \(1964\)](#) there are the three levels of stylistic analysis: phonological, semantic and syntactic; they all are of great importance although Ullmann views semantic choice to be major (as metaphors and metonymies are all the time influenced by the connection between literal and transferred meaning). Intertextuality operates at the semantic level as well, and its aim is to let consumers discover meanings. Including them in the creation of meaning represents a superior level of communication, the advertiser managing to create an emotional bond between the promoted brand and the viewers. The slogan of *Star Wars*, "May the Force Be with You," will be metamorphosed in "May Mozza Be with You" ("Mozza fie cu tine"), in the ad for Delaco Mozzarella. Syntactically speaking, short phrases are doubled by background music, thus highlighting dynamism and making the ad surprising and memorable.

## 6. Findings

Out of the about 120 commercials repeatedly broadcast in the period June 2015- December 2016, one can notice the prevalence of those sending positive messages to indulging into "guilty" pleasures such as snacks, sweets and sweetened drinks. This category of commercials uses appeals to taste and they share themes such as fun and humour (which reflects cultural values such as enjoyment) or having time for friends and family after work (which reflects cultural values such as keeping up custom and tradition). This last theme is present in those commercials which convey ideas about a healthy diet as well. Both categories of products are presented in terms of taste, but in the case of the healthy products there is also mentioned the importance to people's health. Items of food which are generally considered not to be good for health because of their supposed high level of calories/ cholesterol/ salt/ sugar (snacks, rich desserts, ham, mayonnaise, salami, alcoholic drinks, sweetened drinks etc) appeal to values not connected to the basic value of food. The ads to alcoholic drinks appeal especially to class, elegance and aristocratic tastes.

The category of commercials promoting healthy products include: mineral water (Borsec, Dorna, Bucovina, Hera), autochthonous dairy products (Covalact, Hochland, Albalact, Fulga etc), meat products (Pate Ardealul, Edenia Nuggets), flour varieties (Grandma's Shelf - Raftul Bunicii", in which grandmother stands for the joy of eating at home with the dear ones) healthy meals (Belvita Breakfast Biscuits with a high concentration of starch). There haven't been found any commercials for fresh fruit and vegetables. The only vegetables advertised are Bonduelle tinned peas and Edenia frozen vegetables. Under such circumstances, the decision of the National Audiovisual Council of Romania, the institution

which regulates the audio visual domain, to broadcast a series of warning messages with a view to promote a healthy lifestyle, represents a pale attempt to urge people to eat fruit and vegetables, to drink at enough liquids, to do physical activity, to respect the main meals of the day and to avoid excessive intake of salt, sugar and fats. It is true that the ad to Hochland hard cheese presents the product eaten together with fresh salad, but even so, there are few such cases. At the colour symbolism level, green is predominant in this category of commercials, symbolizing nature, balance and vitality. The peas provided by Edenia seem to spread the idea of naturalness through a humorous sequence at a restaurant. The slogan “Edenia – Unaltered Tastes” (“Edenia – Gusturi Netunate”) catches the viewer’s attention through the semantic choice “unaltered” (“netunate”) in an informal register of language. The young woman who is eating out with a man who ordered vegetables loses one tooth and one breast (altered, that is to say, artificially enlarged by silicone), the humorous scene urging the consumer towards what is natural. Another product from Edenia are the peas which, because of the richness and fertility of the soil they grow in and also because of the gardeners’ skill to freeze them immediately after gathering), preserve the freshness of nature, visually conveyed through the green of nature (trees in the background), of the peas and the pea-pods. The slogan “I know what I eat” (“Știu ce mănânc”) highlights the idea of conscious choice when one cares about one’s health. The semantic trait common to such ads is [+Joy] (especially generated by quality) – as in the slogan for “Hochland – The Joy of Taste” (“Hochland – Bucuria Gustului”), [+Care] (mainly deriving from affection – as in the slogan “For Goodies Prepared with Love” (“Pentru bunătăți pe care le prepari cu dragoste”).

The second category, which transmits messages such as enjoying pleasurable moments in life by consuming unhealthy food and drinks, is represented by ads to the following categories of products: snacks (Lays, Chio Chips, 7 Days Bake Rolls, Pizzetti etc.), sweets (Merci chocolate, 7 Days Double Max, 7 Days “Cool” Gym, 7 Days “Cool” SPA, Twix, Nesquick, Snickers, MMMs, Kinder varieties, Oreo biscuits), sweetened drinks (Pepsi, Coca Cola, Santal, etc.), alcoholic drinks (different types of beer, vodka, wine, etc. The semantic features common to these ads are [+Fun], and [+Excitement] – as shown by slogans such as “Taste the Feeling”, “The Intense Taste of Amusement” (“Gustul Intens al Distracției”), “Lays Taste Conquers the Evenings in front of the TV” (“Gustul Lays cucerește serile la TV”) – which point to non-deferred gratifications). The main techniques used are story-telling, merging the fictional and the real world, product endorsement, visual effects and sometimes premium offers (such as free toys).

Advertisers attempt to allocate a “healthy” connotation to such products, redefining them in terms of nutritional qualities. Pizzetti snacks are made of “*real* bread, *real* cheese and tomatoes”, the repeated epithet “real”, doubled by images of these ingredients having as purpose the persuasion of the consumers to try them.

Beside repetition, figures of speech such as metaphor (“Taste the Feeling”) and metonymy can be come across in commercials: - the Coca Cola bottle at the end of the commercial has light decorations on it, metonymically speaking of the joy of Christmas. At the semantic level there appear foreign words (“Merci”, “nuggets”) and deformations of language difficult to translate, which are meant to catch the consumer’s attention.

## 7. Conclusion

It is true that TV is just one of the ways in which marketers allure buyers to indulge into unhealthy eating habits – there are also internet websites and games, billboards, product placement in shows, movies, video games, stores, etc; however, the importance of the message conveyed through TV commercials is not to be belittled, especially because of their complexity. Commercials to nutrient-dense foods, such as fresh fruits or vegetables, whole grains or low-fat dairy are rarely or never present (no fresh fruit or vegetables commercials at all on any of the Romanian TV channels). One discovers a diverse typology of foods very rich in calories, fat, sugar and salt and added-sugar drinks (fast food, candy, chips, desserts, sugar-sweetened drinks and yoghurts. There are no commercials to fresh fruit or vegetables, and the few of them presenting a healthy life-style share the correct nutrition appeal. It is well-known that people develop eating habits and taste preferences when still very young and they are encouraged by such advertisements to remain stable while adult, therefore the more repeated and positive messaging, the more dangerous the enterprise. Maybe it is not the place here to raise awareness of the danger, still it remains a neuralgic pain of our contemporary society. The social and emotional appeal of such ads equates consuming with positive feelings.

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