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The COVID-19 pandemic impact on the TV commercials content in European countries

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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACT ON THE TV COMMERCIALS CONTENT IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Abstract. The outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic has strongly affected different issues of everyday life. The pandemic has changed consumer attitudes and behavior. Consequently, during COVID-19, businesses had to decide how to organize the advertising campaigns and what content should be addressed to consumers. Considering the limited number of articles concerning these issues, it seems important to evaluate the impact of the global health crisis on advertising messages in different countries. The main objective of this paper is to assess TV commercial campaigns implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the specific epidemic situation in the selected countries. The research methodology was based on the observation, a qualitative method of collecting data obtained through monitoring the content of TV commercials aired during the afternoon, before or after the main news service. The research was conducted in May 2020 and in May 2021 in five selected European countries affected to varying degrees by the coronavirus pandemic. The research results allowed evaluation of the advertising messages in terms of their content and values exposed. The findings indicate that the number of COVID-related TV commercials is not correlated with the number of patients and deaths from COVID-19. The themes appearing the most often in the TV commercials in the studied period were the #StayAtHome idea, family and friends, the aspect of safety during the crisis, and brands' special offers. The tone of the advertisements was usually uplifting and hopeful, trying to cheer the stressed societies. From a theoretical perspective, the research results show the advertising strategy issues in specific conditions in different European countries. These findings concerning TV commercial strategy during a pandemic crisis could provide references for other countries, especially in Europe. The research results could be useful for marketing managers in developing strategies concerning the successful planning of TV commercials in crisis periods in European countries.

Keywords: consumer, coronavirus, COVID-related content, Europe, SARS-CoV-2, TV advertisement, TV-commercial

Introduction. In the current market conditions, the importance of marketing communication is more and more frequently emphasized by the literature on the subject as well as in business practice (Keller, 2001; Kotler and Keller, 2009; Fill, 2005; de Pelsmacker et al., 2013; Kliatchko, 2005; Finne and Gronroos, 2017; Shimp, 2007). The main functions of marketing communication include building brand awareness and knowledge about products, informing about product characteristics, price and sales promotions, creating consumers' needs, influencing purchase decisions, and increasing brand loyalty (Grebosz-Krawczyk and Siuda, 2020).

Brand managers could choose from a multitude of marketing communication tools. Communication mix should be diverse and adapted to numerous factors, such as brand and product type, target market, brand and product life-cycle stage, main objectives of brand's communication, and external situation

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(Metzker et al., 2021). The last element is essential in changing environmental conditions. An example of a factor that significantly could influence the perception of the brands, especially in the context of their social responsibility, is the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., the tourism sector) (Chebli et al., 2021).

This study focuses on the TV commercials content in the COVID-19 global pandemic, including the specific epidemic situation in different countries. Considering the limited number of the articles concerning these issues (Taylor, 2021; Gangadharbatla, 2021; Deng et al., 2020; Jimenez-Sanchez et al., 2020; Blanco-Herrero et al., 2021; Machová et al., 2021; Ozsomer et al., 2022), this work evaluates the impact that the global health crisis on brands' messages in different countries. The main objective of this paper is to assess TV commercial campaigns implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the specific epidemic situation in the selected countries. Special attention was paid to:

- the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the TV commercial content in European countries;
- the themes and issues covered in COVID-related TV commercials.

The promotional content in five EU states was examined for aspects of the global pandemic and specific themes referring to the coronavirus crisis using the observation method.

The first part of the paper explains the importance of advertising in brand communication strategy and its modification during the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, this study presents the research methodology and the results of analyses of the real examples of TV advertising campaigns implemented in five European countries. In the final part, the paper points out the main research conclusions concerning the modification of advertising in terms of its content and the values exposed. It indicates study limitations and proposes directions for further research.

Literature Review. Advertising is «any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor» (Keller, 2013). As a non-personal form, advertising uses various media as a communication channel, e.g., TV, press, the Internet, and billboards. Advertising allows for repetition of the chosen message and regular distribution of specific content to the existing and potential consumers (Darley, 2016).

Nowadays, advertising plays an essential role in raising brand awareness, creating the brand image by combining the name and other brand elements with specific associations and values, building positive brand attitudes and brand loyalty, legitimizing the brand in the minds of consumers but also notifying the audience about new products, new point-of-sale, and current sales promotions or increasing the awareness of certain elements in the offer (Praxmarer and Gierl, 2009; Amaldoss and He, 2010; Petrovici et al., 2019; Nye et al., 2008). The effectiveness of the commercials is significantly determined by the advertisement content and quality of media (Nysveen and Breivik, 2005; Yoon and Kim, 2001).

During COVID-19, companies had to decide how to use TV advertising and what message should be addressed to consumers. The main aspect of determining is whether to include the themes related to the pandemic in the content of brand messages or whether to continue communication without mentioning the coronavirus threat.

The review of the accessible literature concerning advertising during the Covid-19 pandemic was performed in February 2022 using the Web of Science database. Table 1 presents the literature review results.

The research results were reviewed. The first review was based on the abstract evaluation, and the total number of articles included in the further literature review equaled 18. The criteria for excluding the rest of the identified sources were based on the research's main subject and research questions. The research concerning advertising during the COVID-19 pandemic has not been sufficiently developed, giving the authors a chance to fulfill the existing gap in this area. The number of similar studies is limited because of the recent pandemic event. Noteworthy here, the majority of the studies concerns online advertising, especially on social media. Part of the publication concerns advertisements for government and health organizations.

Table 1. Selection criteria for literature review

Selection criteria	Number of identified articles after elimination of duplicates
Advertising OR advertisement AND pandemic OR Covid-19 OR coronavirus – in title	50
Advertising OR advertisement AND pandemic OR Covid-19 OR coronavirus – as keywords	41
In total	53
Verification of abstracts in terms of the leading subject of research – TV advertising and the COVID-19 pandemic	18

Sources: developed by the authors based on WHO (2022).

2020-2021 are challenging times for the advertising industry (Taylor, 2021). Gangadharbatla (2021) assumed when economic systems experience shocks of such epic proportions as the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers in an applied field like advertising have an opportunity to develop existing knowledge and to search for new issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the perception of consumer goods changed, and, as a consequence, companies tried to evoke positive feelings towards brands by modifying, among other, the nature of the advertising message. Many brands tried to adapt the advertising content to the pandemic by introducing health, community and helping themes (Balis, 2020). Deng et al. (2020) noted that most ads published on the global scale during the COVID-19 pandemic used a transformational strategy focusing on the social aspect of limiting community spread instead of an informational approach. Some ads also employed a narrative message strategy that used storytelling to transport and persuade viewers. Jimenez-Sanchez et al. (2020) stated that during the pandemic period, the ads informed about what companies do during the COVID-19 crisis, supported the #StayAtHome campaign, encouraged society, expressed gratitude towards professionals and citizens, and focused on the return after the pandemic. The lockdown and the pandemic affected health advertising. Blanco-Herrero et al. (2021) observed that during the lockdown related to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were more health advertisements than after and during the same period in 2019. The health advertisements had the strongest presence immediately during the pre-lockdown phase and advertisers adapted to the unexpected circumstances. Ozsomer et al. (2022) indicated that during the pandemic period, advertising could play a role in encouraging desirable health behaviors and promoting consumer welfare. Pacheco-Baldo (2021) confirmed the similarities and differences in some Spanish and American television advertisements broadcast at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research results showed that the main goal of studied commercials in both countries was to comfort the audience and not to promote the product clearly. Besides, the latest research results suggest that using authenticity appeals during a COVID-19 pandemic could effectively reduce consumers' perceived uncertainty and generate positive consumer evaluations (Park, 2022).

Methodology and research methods. The main objective of this paper is to assess TV commercial campaigns implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the specific epidemic situation in the selected countries. To reach this goal, the following two research questions were defined:

Q1: What impact does the COVID-19 pandemic have on the TV commercials content in European countries?

Q2: What themes and issues are covered in COVID-related TV commercials?

The research was conducted based on observation, a qualitative method of collecting data obtained through monitoring the content of TV advertisements. Five TV channels from five different European countries were chosen as a target. The TV channels from France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Poland were selected for observation due to the different severity of the Covid-19 pandemic in these countries

(assessed based on the daily number of deaths). The authors decided to concentrate on specific commercial breaks on each channel, observed during a narrow time scope at the beginning of May 2020 (the commercials were aired during the afternoon, before or after the main news service). The high visibility of news dictated this choice in the afternoon hours. Table 2 demonstrates the chosen countries and channels.

Table 2. TV channels selected for the study

Country	TV channel	Date and time of observation
France	France2	03.05.2020, 16h15
Germany	RTL	04.05.2020, 20h00
Italy	RAI 1	03.05.2020, 19h25
Spain	La Sexta	03.05.2020, 21h00
Poland	Polsat	02.05.2020, 20h05

Sources: developed by the authors.

The observation was aimed at finding out the percentage of advertisements related to the pandemic situation in the whole commercial break and identifying the themes in those ads. Therefore, besides the name and sector of a given brand, the duration of its promotional video was noted along with the presence of such aspects as safety, unity, family, #StayAtHome idea or charity actions in each ad. Table 3 shows the subjects studied during observation.

Table 3. Subjects studied in the TV commercials

Subjects								
special offer	#StayAt Home	family, friends	helping others	heroism	safety	care for employees	unity	brand's charity works

Sources: developed by the authors.

Results. Observation of advertisements aired on five different channels enabled the authors to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the TV commercials in five European countries. At first, the authors attempted to determine the ratio of COVID-related videos in the commercial breaks to those not connected to the coronavirus. Table 4 presents the numbers of studied advertisements on each regarded channel.

Table 4. Number of COVID-related and non-COVID-related advertisements in the observed commercial breaks on chosen TV channels

Country	TV channel	Total number of ads	No. of ads with the COVID-19 theme	No. of ads without the COVID-19 theme	Percentage of COVID-related ads in the block
France	France2	17	8	9	47.1%
Germany	RTL	11	5	6	45.5%
Italy	RAI 1	13	4	9	30.8%
Spain	La Sexta	14	7	7	50.0%
Poland	Polsat	12	8	4	66.7%
TOTAL		67	32	35	47.8%

Sources: developed by the authors.

During the research, a total of 67 TV advertisements were observed. The number of videos in each commercial break was comparable in all the countries (from 11 in Germany to 17 in France). The authors recorded the overall count of 32 COVID-related ads on all of the observed channels. This result yields 47.8% of the total promotional content being connected to the coronavirus crisis.

Noteworthy here that in most countries, less than half of the advertisements touch on the topic of the pandemic. The exception was observed in the case of Poland, where 8 out of 12 videos referred to the current crisis. It is quite surprising as Poland was one of the EU states least affected by the virus at that time, especially compared to Spain and Italy. Moreover, it is Italy where the influence of the pandemic situation is the least visible in the brands' communication – less than 1/3 of the commercials presented the content connected to the current health crisis. Such findings might seem unexpected, especially when analyzed in the context of the data regarding the fatalities in each country in question.

Figure 1 depicts the daily number of deaths caused by SARS-CoV-2 or other COVID-induced complications (WHO, 2021). The beginning of May was the time of the situation's relative improvement after the peak of the first wave of the pandemic. However, it has to be underlined that Italy, France, and Spain had just started recovering after the dramatic outbreak of March and April. During the worst period, Italy and Spain noted 800-900 COVID-related deaths each day, while in France, the daily results soared to 1100. At the same time, the situation in Germany was significantly better, with approximately 250 daily deaths during the first wave's peak. In comparison, Poland survived the first wave almost unscathed. Thus, between March and June, the number of daily deaths caused by the pandemic had not exceeded 30, and the number of daily new cases did not surpass 500 (WHO, 2021).

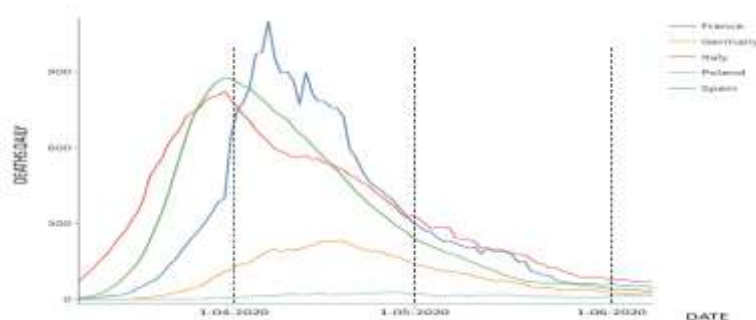


Figure 1. Number of daily deaths related to COVID-19 by country in the analyzed period
Sources: developed by the authors based on (WHO, 2022).

Still, it is Poland where 2/3 of TV advertisements include the topic of COVID-19 in a certain way. It might be caused by the fact that the associations with the pandemic were not that traumatic for most Polish people. On the other hand, the citizens of other countries more affected by the virus might have wanted to unwind slightly from the stress of the last months without being exposed to the reminders of COVID-19 while watching commercials. The other factor might be the quick introduction of lockdown procedures in Poland, which were surprisingly well received at the beginning by the citizens. Polish people were ready to give up their everyday life to prevent the tragedy seen in other countries. Therefore pandemic themes in advertising might not have been a reminder of painful experiences but rather a motivation for unity against the health threat.

In this context, one might also find it interesting that it was Italy where the pandemic aspect was the least used in advertising. At the same time, France and Spain were the countries with the second and third results regarding the percentage of COVID-related ads (47.1% and 50%, respectively). Finding the underlying cause of such a situation could pose the next challenge for researchers.

The research results confirm the conclusions of previous studies by Blanco-Herrero et al. (2021), Ozsomer et al. (2022), and Pacheco-Baldo (2021). They stated that the COVID-19 pandemic would affect the brand communication strategies of companies.

The next aspect analyzed was the percentage of the airtime dedicated to the COVID-related advertisements. Figure 2 shows the results observed for each country. It has to be noted that these percentages are not identical to those showing the number of ads. In France, Germany, Spain, and Poland, the messages containing the topic of pandemics were usually longer than the others, while in Italy, these spots were usually shorter (Table 5).

Table 5. Airtime of COVID-related and non-COVID-related ads by country

Country	TV channel	Time overall	COVID-related ads airtime	Non-COVID ads airtime
France	France2	6:53	3:31	3:22
Germany	RTL	5:04	2:48	2:16
Italy	RAI 1	4:41	1:08	3:33
Spain	La Sexta	6:17	3:40	2:37
Poland	Polsat	4:26	3:26	1:00

Source: developed by the authors.

Similarly, as in the case of the number of ads, the Polish TV channel was observed to contain the most COVID-related content despite Poland being the least affected by the virus at that time. More than ¾ of the analyzed commercial time in the country was devoted to the ads that brought up the topic of the pandemic threat. In comparison, less than ¼ of the airtime in the Italian channel was dedicated to the content associated with COVID-19. In the other three analyzed countries, the commercials referring to the epidemic situation took up slightly more than a half of the total ad's airtime, with Spain's result exceeding 58% and 51% in France. It could be noted that the percentage of airtime was higher than the numerical proportion of pandemic to non-pandemic ads (with the exclusion of Italy). That indicates the content showing coronavirus themes (at least some of them) tended to be slightly longer than the COVID-free spots.

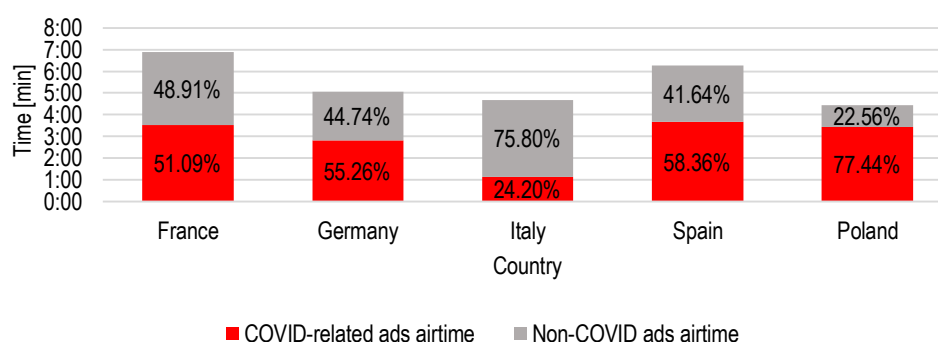


Figure 2. Airtime of COVID-related and non-COVID-related ads in %

Sources: developed by the authors.

The observation was also aimed at defining the themes and issues most frequently appearing in the COVID-related ads. Based on previous observation, the authors defined nine themes to look for in the

analyzed promotional content: brand's special offer for the times of pandemic, #StayAtHome idea, family and friends, helping others, the heroism of people fighting with COVID, general safety, care for brand's employees, society's unity against the threat and brand's charity works supporting those affected by the disease. Each of the videos has been examined to verify those issues' presence. Figure 3 shows the findings, including the number of mentions of each theme and the country where it was used.

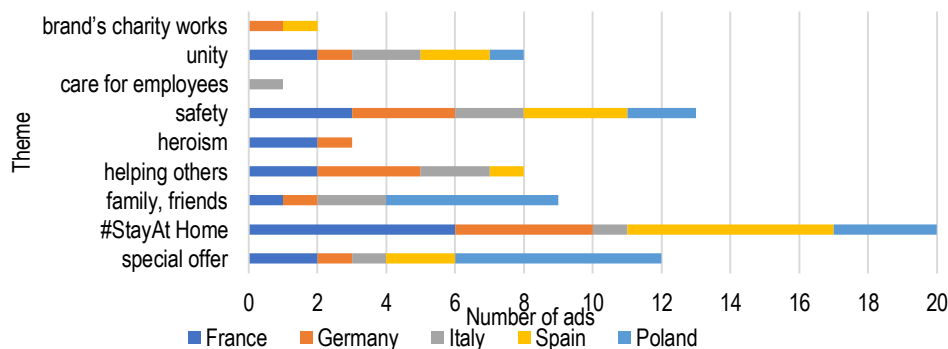


Figure 3. The theme of COVID-related ads by country

Source: developed by the authors.

The chart observed 32 COVID-related advertisements and 20 mentions of the #StayAtHome idea. It was the most popular theme in France, Spain (6 mentions both) and Germany (4 mentions). While such a result is understandable in the countries that had just survived the dramatic outcomes of the first pandemic wave, it is surprising that Italian ads, where the beginning of spring had also been devastating, depict the lockdown recommendation just once. Numerous videos present the issue of safety (13 mentions) and special offers prepared for the times of COVID restriction (12 mentions). The latter was especially visible in Poland, where 6 out of 8 pandemic-related commercials described the new options available, especially via online shopping. Other popular themes included family and friends (and contacting them via Internet or telephone during lockdown), helping others, and the need for unity of societies in those challenging times.

The most often used such topics in their advertising campaigns were telecommunication (mobile and Internet providers), banks and insurance companies, and gastronomic services (delivery and restaurant chains).

In general, most COVID-related advertisements were kept in a hopeful tone with a fair share of emotional, moving content that confirmed the findings of Ozsomer et al. (2022). COVID-related commercials were bringing up the topics of separation from family, yearning for contact, and the necessity of solidarity with those affected and in danger. The picture often appearing on screen was the scene depicting family members or friends connecting via various Internet communicators, e.g., to celebrate birthdays, especially focusing on older generations using such technology for the first time in their lives. The research results confirmed the studies by Deng et al. (2020) underlined a transformational strategy with a focus on the social aspect of commercials presented during the pandemic period, as well as the studies of Jimenez-Sanchez et al. (2020), who stated that during the pandemic period the ads inform about what companies do during the COVID-19 crisis, support of the #StayAtHome campaign, encourage society, express gratitude towards professionals and citizens, and focus on the return after the pandemic.

In May 2021, the research was repeated in similar conditions. However, no advertisement referring to COVID-19 was broadcast during the analyzed period. It may be because the public is tired of the COVID-

19 pandemic, and advertisers are avoiding related topics. It could explain the conclusions concerning Italy with a limited number of COVID-related commercials in the difficult moments for its inhabitants.

Conclusions. The outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic has strongly influenced multiple aspects of everyday life. Many countries introduced more or less rigorous lockdown regulations. In turn, people had to adjust to the new way of living, slowly coming to terms with the fact that it would not be a short one-off. Work, school, meetings, and also shopping moved to the Internet. Such a situation became a challenge for marketers worldwide. One of the crucial decisions was whether to include the pandemic-related topic in the brands' communication content.

The paper presents the research aimed at assessing the impact of COVID-19 on advertising in Europe, using the example of TV ads in five EU countries. The findings indicated that in Poland, where the pandemic themes in the commercials were the most popular, despite being the least affected among the observed states in this period, both in terms of the number of COVID-related ads per one commercial break as well as in terms of percentage of airtime taken up by those videos. In comparison, those results were the lowest in Italy, one of the countries that had suffered the most during the first wave of the pandemic. The themes often appearing in the ads were the #StayAtHome idea, family and friends, the aspect of safety during the crisis, and brands' special offers. The tone of the advertisements was usually uplifting and hopeful, trying to cheer the stressed societies.

To sum up, it might be stated that the new pandemic reality has, in fact, influenced the way brands advertise their products and services – many commercials included the themes referring to the pandemic. The degree of influence is dependent on the country. However, the findings have shown that marketers from countries in a similar situation (after a dramatic first wave) had a different approach to placing the COVID-related content in their promotional messages. Interestingly, in the same period, after one year, the Covid-19 themes were not exposed in TV commercials. It confirms the tiredness of public opinion with pandemic topics and directs the advertisers' attention to other areas.

From a theoretical perspective, the research results show the TV advertising strategy in specific conditions in different European countries. From a managerial perspective, the study results could be used by marketers to develop TV advertising strategies in crisis periods.

This study has a few limitations that create further directions for the research. Firstly, our sample was relatively small (only 5 TV stations in 5 countries), and secondly, it concentrated only on two periods of the COVID-19 pandemic. An interesting idea for future research might be to compare retrospectively the commercials aired during different moments of the pandemic crisis in more countries. Moreover, another study could attempt to explain the impact of COVID-related advertising on consumers, their perceptions of brands, and purchase decisions. Finally, an expert study with marketers' participation might try to distinguish the reasoning behind deciding on using (or not) the pandemic themes in ads.

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Вплив пандемії COVID-19 на телевізійний рекламний контент: на прикладі країн Європи
Спалах глобальної пандемії COVID-19 значно вплинув на повсякденне життя, ставлення та поведінку споживачів. Встановлено, що під час COVID-19, перед бізнесом постало питання реорганізації рекламних кампаній та контенту адресованого споживачам. Аналіз наукової літератури з означеної тематики засвідчив обмежену кількість наукових напрацювань, присвячених дослідженню впливу глобальної кризи в охороні здоров'я на телевізійний рекламний контент. Головною метою даної роботи є оцінка телевізійних рекламних кампаній, реалізованих під час пандемії COVID-19,

включаючи конкретну епідемічну ситуацію в окремих країнах. Методологічна основа даного дослідження заснована на методах спостереження, якісного збору даних, отриманих шляхом моніторингу контенту телевізійних роликів, які вийшли в ефір у другій половині дня, до або після головної служби новин. Дослідження проводилося у травні 2020 та 2021 років у п'яти країнах Європи, які в різному ступені постраждали від пандемії коронавірусу. За результатами дослідження було оцінено контент та цінності рекламних повідомлень. Отримані результати свідчать про відсутність кореляції між кількістю телевізійних роликів, пов'язаних з COVID, числом пацієнтів і смертей від COVID-19. У ході дослідження встановлено, що тематика телевізійних роликів, які найчастіше з'являлися у досліджуваний період, були: компанія *#StayAtHome*, сім'я та друзі, безпека під час кризи та спеціальні пропозиції брендів. При цьому тон реклами, як правило, був піднесеним і обнадійливим, який підбадьорював суспільство. З теоретичної точки зору результати дослідження розкривають проблематику рекламної стратегії під час пандемії COVID-19 у різних країнах Європи. Висновки щодо стратегії телевізійної реклами під час пандемічної кризи можуть слугувати рекомендаціями для інших країн, особливо Європи. Результати дослідження мають практичне значення та можуть бути корисними менеджерам з маркетингу при розробці стратегій успішного планування телевізійної реклами в кризові періоди в країнах Європи.

Ключові слова: споживач, коронавірус, контент, пов'язаний з COVID, Європа, SARS-CoV-2, телереклама, телевізійні рекламні ролики.