

# DIGITOPTIA

Marketing and Media Communication in the Present

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# DIGITOPIA

*Marketing and Media Communication in the Present*

**Edited by:**

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“Digitopia - Marketing and Media Communication in the Present” delves into the profound shifts brought about by digital transformation in the realms of marketing and media communication. As society undergoes rapid technological advancements and digital platforms proliferate, this publication offers a necessary examination of the resulting changes. Authored by a collective of educators and PhD students from the Faculty of Media of the Pan-European University, the book presents a comprehensive analysis of current trends and their impact on individuals, society, and the media landscape.

The studies within this volume traverse a myriad of themes, reflecting the dynamic nature of the online environment. Key topics include the evolving role of media within democratic societies, the transformation of consumer behavior influenced by digital trends, and the advent of new communication forms facilitated by technologies such as virtual reality and algorithmic patterns. The exploration extends to ethical considerations, commodification, and societal needs, all of which are redefined in the digital age.

A significant focus of the publication is the interconnectedness fostered by digital spaces, crossing geo-graphical, cultural, and generational divides. This interconnectedness accelerates information dissemination, fosters interaction, and births new social dynamics and identities. However, it also raises critical issues of accountability, authenticity, and ethical integration, crucial for media and marketing professionals navigating this landscape.

Through a multidisciplinary lens, “Digitopia” explores how digital technologies reshape communication’s content, form, and societal impact. The scholarly contributions, comprising analytical work, empirical research, and theoretical insights, expand understanding of digital communication’s possibilities and constraints. This book aims to provoke deeper reflection on contemporary marketing and media communication trends, inspiring both professional and public discourse and innovation in navigating the digital space.

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# FOREWORD

The dynamically changing environment of contemporary society is largely shaped by digital transformation, which is reshaping every aspect of our personal and professional lives. Modern marketing and media communication has undergone radical changes over the last decade, driven by the advent of new technologies, the rise of digital platforms and the overall globalization of information flows. The online space today is a complex network where different types of communication intersect - from written, to visual, to audiovisual and interactive. This digital ecosystem is also creating new opportunities but also challenges and questions that are being addressed by contemporary scientific research.

The publication before you reflects the need for deeper exploration of these changes and their impact on individuals, society and the media themselves. The collective of authors, made up of teachers and PhD students from the Pan-European College, brings together in their work a cross-section of current trends and analyses that are essential for understanding the phenomenon of digital communication. Within the individual studies, it is possible to trace the exploration of diverse themes that reflect the diversity and dynamics of the online environment. Contributions deal with the role of media in a democratic society, the transformation of consumer behaviour under the influence of digital trends, new forms of communication or the use of modern technologies such as virtual reality or algorithmic patterns. An important aspect of the research is also the question of ethics, commodification and social needs, which are exposed to new interpretative frameworks in the digital era.

One of the central phenomena that the exploration of digital space has brought about is the significant interconnectedness of individuals and communities across geographical, cultural and generational boundaries. It is the online environment that enables the rapid dissemination of information, interaction with each other, as well as the emergence of new social dynamics and identities. At the same time, however, it emphasises issues of accountability, authenticity and ethical integration, which are crucial for media and marketing professionals. Current debates are shifting from traditional forms of advertising and communication to complex strategies using personalized data, algorithms, as well as emotional and value frameworks that influence users' perceptions of reality and decision-making processes.

The publication thus offers a comprehensive view of how digital technologies are reshaping not only the content and form of communication itself, but also its societal implications. The scholarly contributions in this volume are the result of analytical work, empirical research, and theoretical reflection, which together contribute to expanding knowledge about the possibilities and limits of digital communication. Thanks to the multidisciplinary approach of the collective of authors, new perspectives open up in understanding the media space, its risks, opportunities and responsibilities that are inextricably linked to the digital era.

We believe that this book will contribute to a deeper reflection on current trends and issues in the field of marketing and media communication and will inspire not only the professional but also the public to further research, debate and innovative approaches in the field of digital space.

Soňa Chovanová Supeková

# MEDIA AND POLITICIANS: CONFLICT ZONE IN THE DEMOCRATIC ENVIRONMENT OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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## ABSTRACT

*The study examines the media landscape in Slovakia, focusing on conflicts and attacks by politicians on media workers and the media itself. Based on numerous incidents involving politicians and the media since the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic, it is evident that politicians often view the media and media freedom not as a responsible and necessary service to citizens in a democracy, but as a problematic aspect of the democratic environment. The study analyzes the conflicts involving three prime ministers—Vladimír Mečiar, Robert Fico, and Igor Matovič—highlighting their authoritarian approaches to the media in various forms. A separate chapter addresses the ongoing efforts to control the public media system to politically appropriate these media. The study concludes by interpreting these conflicts as part of the broader problematic relationship between politics and the media in the current era, significantly influenced by the digital environment.*

**Key words:** media, politicians, conflict, independent, freedom of speech

## INTRODUCTION

Just minutes after the assassination of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico on May 15, 2024, former deputy speakers of parliament, Andrej Danko (SNS) and Ľuboš Blaha (SMER-SD), launched accusations against the media. Ľuboš Blaha stated, “I want to express my severe disgust at what you have been doing here in recent years. You, the liberal media, the political opposition, what kind of hatred you spread against Robert Fico, you built gallows for him” (Vančo, M. SME; online, cited 7/15/2024).

This incident was not the beginning of a witch hunt against the media but a continuation of long-term attacks by Slovak political representatives against journalists and their work. Our study examines several conflicts between public power and the media that have occurred during Slovakia’s more than thirty-year history.

The aim of our study is to highlight the non-standard and conflicting relationship between the media and Slovak politicians. The historical context allows us to explore the nature of power, the origins of conflicts, the misunderstanding of the media's role in society by politicians, and the use of power tools and attacks to undermine the democratic role of the media.

Interestingly, the political actors discussed in this study (Slovak prime ministers V. Mečiar, R. Fico, and I. Matovič) initially presented themselves as defenders of freedom of speech and the media's right to criticize politics. However, over time, their rhetoric shifted, and the media became the target of their attacks. Efforts to control the media by the state or related business groups are a common tactic of autocrats, as seen with European politicians like Silvio Berlusconi and Viktor Orbán. Moisés Naím notes that this is a typical phenomenon of populist democracies at the end of the 20th century and in the early 21st century (Naím, 2022). Slovakia is no exception.

After the fall of socialism, the Slovak media environment gradually developed into a relatively standard one in terms of legislation. Slovakia incorporated the right to freedom of speech and media into its founding document, the Constitution of the Slovak Republic in 1992, and all subsequent legal regulations and amendments concerning the media (Tušer, Kamenská; 2014, current Acts 264/2022 on Media Services and 265/2022 on Publishers of Publications).

While media freedom is a natural part of democratic legislation, J. Mchangama points out in his book "Freedom of Speech" that there is a difference between what the laws declare and what political power perceives as freedom of speech. Censorship does not have to be ideological or political; it can also operate on an economic basis or through mafia-like "recommendations" that occur behind the scenes between media owners and political representatives (Mchangama, 2022). This practice was made visible by Silvio Berlusconi and was also evident during R. Fico's fourth government, when several private television stations changed their chief news editors to create "less critical" news coverage of the government.

The relationship between political representation and the media in Slovakia has not always been based on democratic principles of respect for media work. From the beginning, relations between politicians and some media have often been conflictual. Notable examples include Vladimír Mečiar's attempts to control public media and destroy the media environment, conflicts over the kidnapping of the president's son, Robert Fico's attacks on journalists during his governments, and Igor Matovič's inability to endure criticism during the corona crisis.

Some events are almost anecdotal, while others are terrifying examples of authoritarian approaches to power and its relationship with the media. Verbal attacks on media workers have led to a decrease in the credibility of the media as a whole and an increase in trust in conspiracy media. The persecution of journalists and lawsuits against the media have been complemented by efforts to oligarchize the media space and repeated attempts to control and politicize public media. Intimidation of journalists in Slovakia culminated in the hired murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak.

Our research focuses not on the specific cases of politicians, their media coverage, and the processing or non-processing by law enforcement authorities and courts, but on the verbalized attitudes of politicians towards the media and the conflicting clashes between democratically elected politicians and the working media according to legislative rules. We will not deal with specific lawsuits against newspapers but with the atmosphere created by verbal attacks on journalists. Such attacks could be understood as traditional "media-political" folklore that appears in democracies, but they are efforts to attack the media, typical of authoritarian governments and autocratic regimes of originally democratic states, to reduce their critical impact, silence freedom of speech, and create an ideological media environment. A special chapter in this regard is given to public media, where significantly more political attacks take place directly or indirectly, with power exerted through appointed (democratically elected by the government majority) directors.

We assume that the new perception of the contemporary world has been significantly influenced by the media change caused by social networks. Aren't the results of elections in various countries with a tendency towards populism, the perception of politics in different parts of the world as a "reality show," or hyper-consumerist hedonism (Lipovetsky, 2007) to some extent influenced by the fact that we look at the world through a screen?

In recent years, we have seen a deviation from the traditional values of the democratic world: populist parties and autocratic leaders are winning free elections in various countries, efforts to regulate and restrict freedom of speech and the media can be seen in several countries, and there is an increase in conservatism at the declarative level of power institutions, contrasting with the growing escape into individualized consumption. Disrespect for world institutions such as the WHO during the pandemic and the UN in resolving/not resolving military conflicts can also be seen as questioning the victory of liberal democracy, which Francis Fukuyama presented in his study “The End of History and the Last Man” (Fukuyama, 2002). The elusive and unclear fluidity of modernity, named by Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman, 2020), has caused upheavals in the basic pillars of the modern, Enlightenment perception of the world. The digital universe has obviously changed communication models, and the new information sphere is not only changing technology but also our reality (Floridi, 2019). The possibility of communicating outside the content management system creates a media reality without content management systems, completely open to any opinions (Deuze, 2023).

In this context, politicians’ attacks on journalists, the media, and the entire media system in Slovakia are just one piece of the rise of populism and the activities of democratically elected politicians with autocratic features. Attacks on the media are efforts to suppress criticism

## **METHODOLOGY**

In our research, we have included several conflict situations that relate to the relationship between politicians and the media during the thirty years since its establishment after the fall of communism. It is a selection *pars pro toto*, it does not include all conflicts, but only some events that vary in time, protagonists in political public life, and periods.

The first openly conflicting relationship was Vladimír Mečiar’s relationship with the media in the 1990s. From the governments of Robert Fico, there is undoubtedly a memorable attack in which R. Fico attacked the Slovak media and called journalists anti-Slovak prostitutes, which, like one of Mečiar’s statements about a journalist, got into media jargon. The third conflicting prime minister in our selection is Prime Minister I. Matovič, who repeatedly attacked journalists and called them, for example, “wise men.”

Since public television and radio have a special position in the media system, we have also included the specific topic of public media and conflict zones between politicians and this media institution.

A much wider list would undoubtedly be the list of conflicting topics that we did not include in the project. I will mention at least some of them: from this point of view, the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak is not a direct conflict between political power and the media, although we can consider it part of the hostility of a part of society intertwined with politics towards media work. The conflict between the probable client and the journalist was based more on the uncovering of economic crime and the connection between power, money, and the judiciary. Similarly, we do not perceive the conflict over the private television Markíza in 1998 (and the subsequent long-term disputes and legal wrangling), in which politicians were also involved, as a line of conflict between politicians and the media. Similarly, we did not include other media events in the selection (such as the oligarchization of the media, Penta’s entry into the media space, changes in the SME daily, and the establishment of the N daily) and others.

At this point, it is important to add one important note to the methodological part. Although the term denoting the media is also declared legislatively (the Media Services Act of 2022), at the same time, the boundaries of what is considered a medium today are very vague. In addition to standard media that exist on the basis of a license (television, radio) or meeting the conditions applicable to periodicals (including media websites), there is a large part of media communication circumventing legislative practice – various blogs, science broadcasts, internet radios, websites that behave as media of a mostly opinionated nature, but their content also moves at the level of interest pages, associations, clubs, and “non-media.” They are often broadcasters and creators of a conspiracy character.

The political scene uses the word media very loosely, while they do not always specify what type they mean when they refer to the media and journalists. But when they specify, then usually by the word media, the media mean such media that operate on the basis of legal regulations and represent more of a news and opinion-news line of the media environment (R. Fico most often talks about the SME daily, Aktuality, Denník N, TV Markíza news as hostile media), i.e., not entertainment media or specialized interest media.

However, when generalizing, the public also becomes an object of political manipulation, when one of the most important functions of the media – to inform truthfully – becomes a victim of verbal attacks by the authorities, which dishonors the profession of journalist and the media as a whole in the eyes of the public. Likewise, the attempt to legitimize non-media (often erroneously referred to as alternative media) by providing them with statements by politicians in public office causes the legitimacy of standard media to be questioned.

In the following, we will analyze the relationship between political power and the media through four case studies.

## CASE STUDY 1: VLADIMÍR MEČIAR AND HIS ATTACKS ON THE MEDIA COMMUNITY

Vladimír Mečiar's political career was marked by several controversial events, including attacks on journalists and efforts to control the media. During his tenure as Prime Minister from 1990 to 1998, Mečiar frequently encountered criticism from opposition media, to which he responded with aggressive verbal attacks directed at the journalistic community. Journalists who disagreed with his autocratic management of the state were excluded from official press discussions, and many found themselves in unpleasant or even life-threatening situations.

Before the 1992 elections, Mečiar promoted the idea of free media and supported the work of journalists. He stated, "Our journalistic community is the one that is growing, forming, germinating, gaining new experience and new strength, at the moment it is also hungry for the truth... He doesn't give me anything either, and that's good. I have a good relationship with her" (Leško, 1996). However, Mečiar's later statements towards the media had a mostly negative connotation, with efforts to disparage journalistic work and reduce the relevance of their professionalism. According to Mečiar, journalists "quack because they can," "go beyond the boundaries of decency and the rule of law," and manipulate public opinion "according to their egoistic, complex small human interests" (Leško, 1996). Verbal attacks were part of Mečiar's strategy to intimidate and discredit journalists.

Mečiar's rhetoric towards journalists also provoked criticism from international organizations and other countries. In 1997, the international organization Reporters Without Borders described the behavior of Prime Minister Mečiar as "sensitive to criticism." In a 380-page brochure, the organization also described the situation in Slovakia, noting that the independent and opposition press were not invited to press briefings of government bodies under Mečiar's administration and that journalists had problems accessing official information. The report classified these events as legal, administrative, and economic pressures (TASR, 1998).

At the end of 1996, the Press and Information Department of the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic (TIO ÚV) revoked the accreditation of four journalists, preventing them from participating in press conferences on government meetings. One of them was Dušan Valko from TV Markíza, who later said in an interview for the SME daily that his accreditation was revoked because he did not confirm what Mečiar said (Pankovčínová, 1996). Mečiar claimed that President Kováč called selected journalists and convinced them that Mečiar was seriously ill, a claim that journalists denied.

In January 1997, specifically on January 25, the chairman of the HZDS, Vladimír Mečiar, entered a meeting of the Republic Board of Directors of the HZDS (RP HZDS) in Detva. Journalists, including Dušan Valko, were waiting for him in the parking lot. As soon as Mečiar saw Valko, he became angry. "You are not ashamed to stand in front of my eyes, you useless snot. You will be gypsy about me, lie in public," the Prime Minister shouted at the journalist, adding a threat: "I'm going to hit you with one so that God won't help you!" (Šimončíč, 1997).

Mečiar remained silent about the attack, although the video was broadcast on television. Later, Oľga Keltošová from HZDS publicly commented on it, blaming journalist Valko for causing the skirmish by allegedly visiting the president.

On January 15, 1999, during a farewell ceremony for the murdered ex-minister Ján Ducký in Bratislava, Mečiar physically attacked TV Prima journalist Vladimír Mišauer. Although no longer prime minister, Mečiar was still a significant political figure as the chairman of the HZDS. According to Mišauer, the conflict erupted quickly and unexpectedly. "I photographed Vladimír Mečiar from a distance of about three meters, as he was talking to Milan Čič by the car. I managed to take about two shots when Mečiar saw me, ran out, and with the

words ‘I’m going to you like that’ and other vulgar expressions, he started attacking me. I don’t remember everything because I was shocked by it. I just remember that Ivan Gašparovič, who was standing next to him, tried to calm the situation. Some people, I think they were security guards, then pulled Mečiar away from me,” Mišauer told SME. He claimed Mečiar attacked him for no reason, as he was merely taking pictures from a distance.

This was not the first time Mišauer had a conflict with Mečiar. According to idnes.cz, Mišauer had previously been physically insulted by Mečiar’s spokesperson during a pre-election visit by top model Claudia Schiffer to Slovakia (iDnes, 1999). Despite no longer being prime minister, Mečiar’s influence over police forces was evident, as they did not intervene during the incident. TV Prima filed a lawsuit against the police for their inappropriate reaction, and the police president later publicly apologized to Mišauer and the journalists, closing the case.

Mečiar’s most aggressive attack occurred on November 13, 2002, when he, as the chairman of the HZDS, attacked TV JOJ journalist Ľuboslav Choluj. Mečiar grabbed Choluj by the neck and swore at him vulgarly in response to a question about the funding for Villa Elektra. The incident happened on Slovak Radio shortly before a pre-election round table recording. When Choluj asked his question, Mečiar turned sharply and, with the words “You will ask me again, I will hit you so hard that you will not come to your senses,” tried to hit Choluj in the face. Although JOJ TV recorded the entire incident, Mečiar denied attacking anyone or using vulgar language when leaving Slovak Radio (SITA, 2002).

About four hours after the incident, the HZDS issued an official statement claiming that Choluj attacked Mečiar by kicking him in the heel. According to the movement’s spokesperson, Žaneta Pittnerová, “Here the editor of TV JOJ Ľuboslav Choluj approached the chairman of the HZDS Vladimír Mečiar from behind and kicked him in the heel. Without explaining what this behavior meant, without introducing himself and stating what medium he works for, he said: ‘Where did you get the money for Elektra?’ Vladimír Mečiar turned around and defended himself against a physical attack by a journalist. We assume that the media present dealt only with the defense of the HZDS chairman and not with the journalist’s attack” (SITA, 2002).

Choluj commented on this statement for the SITA agency, saying, “The whole incident will be broadcast by TV JOJ in Noviny at 7:30 p.m. There the audience will have the opportunity to see how it really was.” He added that the incident was witnessed not only by the camera of TV JOJ but also by the news crew of Hungarian Television, which also filmed the event.

In its statement, HZDS further evaluated the incident as a result of constantly escalating attacks by the media, serving the party’s political rivals, on HZDS representatives. “The actions of some Slovak journalists exceed the basic rules of ethics and good morals. It can also be argued that the escalating media pressure on HZDS representatives borders on exceeding the law,” said Pittnerová (SITA, 2002).

## **CASE STUDY 2: ROBERT FICO AND HIS STATEMENTS TO JOURNALISTS**

Like Vladimír Mečiar, Robert Fico publicly supported freedom of speech and free media before winning the mandate of prime minister. As a member of the opposition for the SĽĽ party, he gave a speech before the rally for the rescue of Markíza TV in 1998, in which he claimed that the media had the right to criticize. “We understand freedom of speech not only as the dissemination of positive information. Freedom of speech also means the dissemination of critical and sometimes shocking information. That is why it is necessary to preserve Markíza so that it spreads information in a way that is understood by the whole of Europe and not by part of the political spectrum in Slovakia” (Novotný, 2019).

However, since he took office as prime minister in 2006, his rhetoric has changed. In public appearances, press conferences, and later on his social media profiles, he has expressed himself unflatteringly, even vulgarly, towards a critical part of the journalistic community. Over the years, he has described journalists as prostitutes (Kernová, 2016), hyenas (SITA, 2008), comedians (SITA, 2018), slimy snakes (TASR, 2007), or spiritual homeless people (.týždeň, 2007). According to him, journalists are the “biggest criminals” who have done more evil than a hundred tornadoes (SITA, 2019).

In addition to verbal attacks, he also expresses his dislike for selected media by ignoring them. He often does not answer journalists’ questions, reacts offensively, does not invite selected media to his press confer-

ences, and does not engage with them. During his first government, he reacted this way to the SME dailies, Pravda, and TA3 television. Later, the target of his hostility most often became Denník N, TV Markíza, and the SME daily. In 2017, he even said that the SME daily and Denník N were waging jihad against him (Kernová, 2017).

In October 2008, at a press conference, Prime Minister Robert Fico called journalists from the dailies Sme, Pravda, Hospodárske noviny, and Nový Čas “idiots.” This was not a general designation but an allusion to specific media outlets that were critical of the individual steps of his government. He reproached them for informing the public about his trip to Vietnam, the reconstruction of buildings at the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, the embassy in Belarus, and the financial crisis. “You are attacking the government of the Slovak Republic in a boorish, idiotic way. Lies, lies, and lies,” said the Prime Minister after the government meeting. “I ask you to be at least a little bit correct about this government. I have the feeling that the communist press was more accommodating to dissidents than you are accommodating to the democratic government of Slovakia,” he added. According to him, only an idiot can write on the first page that hundreds of people are losing their jobs due to the world crisis, and on the other hand, only “an idiot can write that Fico is chasing a deal for J&T for more than a billion” (Ruttkayová, 2007).

The statement that resonated most with the public was Fico’s description of journalists as “dirty anti-Slovak prostitutes.” This address was a reaction to the so-called Evka case during the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2016. The Evka case involved overpriced cultural events accompanying the Slovak Presidency. After whistleblowers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, Zuzana Hlávková and Pavel Szalai, came forward, Minister Miroslav Lajčák, nominated by Smer, became the target of criticism.

Robert Fico defended his minister at a press conference on November 22, 2016. He appeared in front of journalists with Minister Lajčák and began his monologue by assuring that he was speaking with a clear head and without emotions. However, he evaluated the media coverage and the public interest in this case negatively, especially criticizing the work of journalists. “Some of you are dirty anti-Slovak prostitutes and I stand by this expression,” said Prime Minister Robert Fico. “What has been happening in recent days is not a coincidence, it is a targeted attack against the successful Slovak presidency,” Fico added.

According to him, journalists “on the principle of one woman said” make stories. “It is not possible for you to lie and damage the Slovak presidency on a daily basis,” Fico said. “I have nothing against you going after us, but you don’t inform, you are fighting this government.” “I am the Prime Minister and it is my duty to protect my people.” He claimed that Lajčák was praised everywhere and the Slovak presidency was assessed as a great success. At the beginning, Fico asked journalists not to write that he had lost his temper and said everything calmly. In Slovakia, he read that Lajčák was “a criminal, he broke the law, everything stolen and embezzled.” Fico then left the press conference and let Lajčák answer questions (Tódová, 2016).

The designation of journalists attracted the attention of many foreign media, not only to the Prime Minister’s statements but also to the case itself. In an article entitled “Slovak Prime Minister Tells Journalists They Are Dirty Prostitutes,” Reuters also wrote that Fico had bad relations with the media, which were critical of him, and that he refused to answer questions from some journalists and filed lawsuits against them. The Reuters report was picked up by dozens of media outlets around the world. With the headline “Slovak Prime Minister Calls Journalists Dirty Anti-Slovak Prostitutes,” it was published in the British The Guardian. It was also picked up by Yahoo! News, Business Insider, and many others. Fico’s quote and the mention of the current Slovak case reached neighboring and many other countries around the world, including Russia, Lithuania, Canada, and Japan (Kernová, 2016).

After the assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in 2018, Fico was reproached for defamatory statements against journalists. Editor-in-chief Matúš Kostolný wrote that after the murder, he told Fico to his face that he was responsible for the atmosphere that preceded the murder. “For years, he attacked journalists and turned them into targets. I told him that he was politically responsible for the murder because, despite the threats, Ján Kuciak was not protected” (Kostolný, 2024).

In 2018, Robert Fico resigned and later, as a member of the opposition, moved part of his agenda from press conferences to his Facebook profile. Harsh statements against journalists moderated for some time, but he did not stop ignoring selected titles. Derogatory statements towards journalists and their work returned

in full force before the parliamentary elections in 2023. This is confirmed by research from the Ján Kuciak Investigative Center (ICJK). According to their findings, Robert Fico and other members of the Smer party, which won the election, were the biggest disseminators of attacks on journalists and the media before the elections. According to the ICJK, out of the posts of political figures on Facebook that dishonored the work of journalists, the eight most successful (in terms of interactions) belonged to Robert Fico. In these posts, he mostly accused the media of cooperating with the opposition, President Čaputová, and connected them with non-governmental organizations. However, two days after the September elections, Fico spoke out in favor of “normal working and pleasant relations” with journalists. This vision lasted only the first few days after the start of his fourth government, composed of his Smer, Hlas, and SNS parties (Katushka, 2023).

After winning the 2023 elections, he outraged the journalistic community by deciding not to allow selected media to enter the government office. “Until the decision is made, they will be unwanted guests at the government office.” According to him, this measure applied to Markíza TV, Denník N, the SME daily, and Aktuality. Fico openly called these media hostile because, according to him, they spread hatred against Smer (Szalay, 2023).

In May 2024, Robert Fico himself became the target of an assassination attempt. Since then, he has appeared in public only a few times, leaving no room for journalistic questions. If he answers, it is only very austerely. At his first briefing in Devín on July 5, where Prime Minister Fico wanted to take a picture of himself in rye, he responded to journalists’ questions simply. For example, when asked by an editor from TV Markíza “how does he feel,” he replied: “Mr. editor, if I knew that you are asking honestly and not for commercial reasons, I would like to answer” (Kern, 2024).

### **CASE STUDY 3: IGOR MATOVIČ AND COMPARISONS TO HITLER’S JOURNALISTS**

Igor Matovič, the leader of the victorious OĽANO movement, became the Prime Minister of the fourteenth government of the Slovak Republic. Initially, it was assumed that Matovič would handle the journalistic community with more respect than his predecessor, Robert Fico, who had been criticized for his statements towards journalists. However, during his tenure from 2020 to 2023, Matovič frequently attacked the media, using derogatory language similar to Fico. He served as Prime Minister for two years before transitioning to the role of Minister of Finance.

As the chairman of the strongest coalition movement, Matovič often displayed a very informal and jovial demeanor. After his resignation, he frequently portrayed himself as a victim, and it was not surprising that he also viewed journalists as aggressors and the cause of his political downfall. In May 2020, he posted on Facebook, accusing “the opposition, various wisecrackers, and media owned by oligarchs” of deploying insidious policies against his government during challenging times. According to Matovič, the media and other named groups were responsible for his government’s failures, and his comments further compromised their property relations.

In June 2022, Igor Matovič ranked at the bottom of the credibility list of politicians in Slovakia, compiled by the Focus agency for TV Markíza. Only 11 percent of respondents expressed confidence in him, while 88 percent distrusted him. When journalists asked him about his low ranking, Matovič unexpectedly compared his situation to the Holocaust, claiming that journalists had made him a “Jew of the 21st century.” He stated, “Just like the Jews during Nazi Germany, they were to blame for everything because Hitler pointed the finger at them. Many people in Slovakia wanted to point to someone who would be to blame for everything, either during the corona crisis or later. Many of you have succeeded. I take it that when it is cloudy tomorrow, I will be guilty of that as well.” The Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities rejected his statement.

A few months later, Matovič again used a comparison with the Second World War. He likened Slovak journalists to those who served Adolf Hitler. During a parliamentary session on September 29, 2022, he said, “This happened in the 30s of the last century - then those journalists were a little different. But even Hitler had exactly such journalists who had formulas and had written exactly how to manipulate public opinion. And in the end, they got their way. They spread lies, and a lie repeated a hundred times at the end became the truth.”

Following these remarks, the editors-in-chief of Slovak media issued a joint statement condemning Matovič’s attacks on the media community. They stated:

“Igor Matovič talks about journalists as progressive fascists. He says that Hitler also had journalists who blindly helped him and suggests as if we were working for someone similar today. He accuses us of corruption and abuses the memory of our murdered colleague Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. After Mečiar’s slaps and Fico’s dirty anti-Slovak prostitutes, Matovič had the opportunity to change the government’s approach to the media. But he continues to escalate his attacks on journalists. He compares his criticism of the media to fascist totalitarianism and himself to the victims of the Holocaust. Hitler murdered millions of people because of their origins and beliefs. Matovič is not a victim or a person in danger of life. He is just another politician who fails to serve the public and lies.”

Later, OĽaNO chairman Igor Matovič addressed the statement in a Facebook post. He claimed that many honest journalists felt offended by his words, and therefore he wanted to apologize to them. However, he added that there was actually nothing to apologize for, but he decided to do so because of external pressure. “However, who I do not intend to apologize to are those with whom I hit a nail on the head. People who are just hiding behind the status of a journalist, even though they can’t handle the alphabet of their mission,” he said. Additionally, he wrote that even among journalists “you have harm,” referring to corruption and manipulators of the truth, without mentioning specific editors or names.

After a debate on Radio Express with Braňo Závodský, Matovič decided to be specific. “I will publish specific journalists who can be bought. So I immediately accepted the direct challenge (Braňo Závodský) and said that I would put corrupt journalists in line with the ranks.” This act has not yet taken place.

#### **CASE STUDY 4: POLITICIANS AND PUBLIC MEDIA**

Slovak public media after 1989 have been characterized by frequent changes in management. The post-revolutionary transition aimed at modernization and consolidation of public broadcasting, but often changes were driven by political pressures and efforts to control the public space. Since 1990, 25 people have changed in the management of the media over 34 years.

The selection of CEOs in Slovakia is significantly influenced by the political scene, as they are elected in ways that reflect political nominations disguised as democratic elections, such as voting in the National Council. This politicization raises concerns about the independence and objectivity of public service media. Similar trends are observed in other Central and Eastern European countries, such as Hungary and Poland, where public broadcasters face accusations of becoming tools of state propaganda with significant political influence on editorial decisions.

Frequent changes in the leadership of Slovakia’s public media reflect deeper problems related to political interference and the fight for media independence. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach, including legal reforms, institutional changes, and a commitment to the values of public service broadcasting. Some directors served for only a few months and were forced to leave after direct political interventions. For example, Marián Kleis was the director from March to September 1992 and had to leave because he canceled the regular speeches of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar. His successor, Peter Malec, held office from October 1992 to November 1993 and resigned after pressure from the National Council and criticism over a satirical program broadcast.

Other directors also faced conflicts with state leadership and efforts to influence broadcasting, compounded by uneconomical and opaque financing of programs and contracts for advertising space. Changes in the operation of the public law complex were noticeable after the elections in June 2010, when the new government prepared a law merging Slovak Radio with Slovak Television at the end of 2010. According to the law, Slovak Television ceased to exist as an independent public institution at midnight on December 31, 2010, and its director, Štefan Nižňanský, was replaced. A similar legislative change occurred in 2024, when the government removed director Ľuboš Machaj by changing the law and replacing RTVS with a new public institution, STVR. Each legislative change also brought changes in news management.

During Václav Mika’s tenure as general director of RTVS, several controversial decisions raised suspicions of political pressure on the news. For example, in 2014, several experienced news editors were fired, which many saw as an attempt to silence critical voices and change the editorial line to favor the ruling coalition. This situation sparked a broad public debate about the independence of RTVS and its ability to perform

its public service function.

Similarly, during Jaroslav Rezník's leadership, RTVS came into conflict with its own journalists. In 2018, several news editors resigned, citing growing political pressure and interference in their work. These events highlighted the vulnerability of public bodies to external pressures, especially if the rules of their independence are not clearly defined and respected.

These events had a direct impact on the functioning of public television in Slovakia, its credibility, and its position in the eyes of the public. The role of RTVS (now STVR) is to provide impartial, objective, and balanced information and cultural content that serves the public interest. Unlike commercial media, whose primary goal is to generate profit for their owners, public television has a duty to cover a wide range of topics and interests, reflect the diversity of society, and contribute to its cultural and democratic development.

The financing of public television in Slovakia directly from the state budget after the abolition of concession fees in 2023 is a key factor affecting its ability to fulfill its public service mission. However, the current funding model is prone to political interference, undermining the independence and credibility of this institution. The ideal situation would require stable and politically independent funding, sufficient for public television in Slovakia to compete with commercial media while providing quality and impartial content. Political interventions in the past have shown that public service can be threatened, highlighting the need for reforms to ensure its independence and credibility in the eyes of the public.

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION: WHY THE MEDIA ARE A SUITABLE TARGET FOR POLITICAL ATTACKS**

The relationship between politicians and the media in Slovakia is not unique. Similar conflicts exist between the journalistic community and politicians in other countries. In the surrounding V4 countries, we see elements of media oligarchization, efforts to control the public space, or ostracization of critical journalists, which can be perceived as the twilight of democracy (Naím, 2022; Appelbaum, 2020).

The media are a convenient target for populist politicians for several reasons. Although politicians often talk about the media in very general terms, the media are not a homogeneous group. They are a heterogeneous mixture of often competing business entities and do not represent a specific and close-knit force. Politicians accuse the media as if it were a homogeneous group, creating a "media monster" conspiratorially controlled by secret money from abroad. This mythical enemy, however, lacks real economic power and legislative influence that would inspire public respect.

All three Slovak prime ministers demonized the media as if they were a rebellious group working against the state's interests ("anti-Slovak prostitutes") and thus threatening order. This rhetoric often includes references to agents of mysterious forces, such as Americans or the mythical figure of G. Soros, enhancing the conspiracy model of politicians' attacks on the media.

In the current post-factual era, politicians do not prioritize factual correctness but speak to their supporters with emotions and passions, seeking an enemy. They try to communicate in the language of their widest voter base, the common language of the street. The freedom of social networks and the ability to claim anything without editorial oversight help them significantly. Politicians bypass the media and build a fan base that does not expect analytical approaches but rather an escalation of political attacks, skirmishes, and passions.

While there have been several verbal (and in the case of V. Mečiar, also physical) attacks on journalists, these are unequal confrontations. A politician is a representative of power who rules through the forces of power, while a journalist represents only one part of civil society.

A deeper and historically conditioned part of creating an aggressive attitude towards the media as spreaders of lies stems from the era of socialist Czechoslovakia. From 1948 to 1989, the media were part of the ideological pressure of the communist regime, and most information was perceived as propaganda. Even ordinary citizens and members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia knew there was a significant gap between what was reported in newspapers and on television and the reality. For many decades, the media were not seen as representatives of truth, civil society, or moral values. During socialism, the media consciously defended the lies and ideology of the socialist state and were not independent or credible.

Politicians, perhaps unconsciously, use this legacy of a deceptive past: the idea of “don’t trust the media” has been carried over from the subconscious of socialism to the present day. Accusing the media of lying is a common way to discredit journalistic work. Additionally, there is a segment of conspiracy or alternative media that handle the topic of truth in a peculiar way, often spreading false claims or historical relativism. Credibility and freedom of the media, along with a return to freedom of speech, were among the basic demands of November 1989.

Even though journalists sign joint petitions, they remain in a competitive position with each other, often seeking competitive advantages through non-public, private tips and recommendations. It should also be noted that while journalists represent the brand externally, they are employees under economic pressure from their owners, who are often part of the economic and power elite. This economic influence affects content creation, as seen in the events at Slovak private televisions Markíza and JOJ after September 2023, which led to the departure of several journalists and presenters. The oligarchization of the media is a way to directly influence them politically.

From the perspective of conflicts between journalists and political power in Slovakia, these are systemic conflicts inherent in authoritarian-type democracies that have emerged in the 21st century. Although Slovak legislation is de jure democratic and meets the requirements of the European Union, de facto work in the media environment on political and political-economic topics is frequently subject to conflicts between the government and the media. The social atmosphere allows for the possibility of making claims with impunity.

These conflicts are not factual but are often political attacks against revealing corruption and personal connections. They can be understood as intimidation of individuals and the media as a whole.

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# INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS AND THEIR IMPACT ON SHOPPING BEHAVIOUR YOUNG SLOVAK WOMEN IN THE FIELD OF FASHION AND BEAUTY

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper examines the impact of Slovak Instagram influencers in the field of fashion and beauty on the shopping behaviour and decision-making of young women aged 18 to 24 in Slovakia, who represent a significant group of users of this platform. It examines the dynamics of the impact of paid collaborations on the social network Instagram, the ability of influencers to set trends and influence the sale of promoted products and services. The work determines the level of consumer satisfaction with the purchase influenced by the influencer and the subsequent use of the products. The extended theoretical part deals with relevant communication theories (e.g. Two-Step Flow, Theory of Use and Satisfaction, Parasocial Interaction, Credibility of the Source, Social Comparison), consumer behaviour, concepts such as authenticity and eWOM in the context of influencer marketing and the specifics of the Slovak digital environment. The empirical part presents the results of an online questionnaire survey among 101 young women and online interviews with 4 Slovak influencers. The results confirm the considerable influence of female influencers, while emphasizing the importance of authenticity and trust. The conclusion formulates recommendations for consumers, influencers, brands and educational institutions to promote critical thinking and responsible behaviour in the online space.*

**Key words:** Influencer marketing, consumer behaviour, fashion, beauty, social networks.

## INTRODUCTION

The integration of social media into everyday life has fundamentally transformed the landscape of communication and advertising, with platforms like Instagram becoming pivotal in shaping consumer behaviour. Among these platforms, Instagram stands out as a visual-centric medium, fostering the emergence of influencers as new-age opinion leaders who wield significant power over their followers. Particularly in the domains of fashion and beauty, these influencers have become trendsetters, driving consumption patterns and shaping perceptions of style and aesthetics. This paper focuses on the impact of Slovak Instagram influencers on the

shopping behaviour of young Slovak women aged 18 to 24, a demographic that is both highly active on Instagram and highly receptive to influencer marketing (KEPIOS, 2023). While global trends in influencer marketing have been well-documented, research specific to Slovakia remains limited, offering a unique opportunity to explore the nuances of this phenomenon within a localized context. Drawing on established communication theories such as the Two-Step Flow, Uses and Gratifications, Parasocial Interaction, and Source Credibility, this study examines how influencers affect purchasing decisions, shape consumer satisfaction, and foster trust within their audiences. By combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the research provides insights into the motivations, attitudes, and behaviours of both young consumers and influencers, with the aim of advancing understanding in the field of influencer marketing. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the intersection of social media, consumer psychology, and digital marketing while offering practical recommendations to stakeholders navigating the rapidly evolving digital ecosystem.

## **Theoretical background**

### ***Communication in the digital age***

Contemporary communication is shaped by digital technologies and social media, which blur the boundaries between online and offline interactions (Lieberman & Schroeder, 2020). Platforms such as Instagram provide space for self-presentation (Goffman, 1959; Schau & Gilly, 2003) and the creation of complex social networks. These platforms function as next-generation mass media that not only convey content but also actively shape perceptions of reality and societal norms (McLuhan, 1994). Offering a customer a product, even if it is of high quality, and expecting them to automatically buy it is not enough. While product quality is a prerequisite for success, it is not enough on its own. Communicating effectively with customers is key, and service providers in particular - often based on expertise - cannot rely solely on their expertise (Janouch, 2020). In general, if you are not able to make the right contact with your customers, understand their needs and adapt your communication to them, you will find it difficult to convince and engage them, which can weaken you significantly in a competitive environment. Customer skills and knowledge are often more important than formal education and expertise alone. Within the modern marketing approach, there are a number of ways to reach customers, one of which is content marketing. Contemporary content marketing can be implemented in a variety of ways. According to Baker (2021), content marketing on social media will continue to be one of the most important forms, because with over 4 billion social media users worldwide, it is obvious why companies are investing heavily in this area of marketing. There are a wide range of platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Snapchat) that offer different options for creating and sharing content such as photos, live broadcasts, pre-recorded videos or stories.

### ***User motivation and media selection***

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G) explains why people actively seek out and use specific media. Instead of passively receiving content, users choose media that meet their specific needs and bring them satisfaction (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). In the context of Instagram and influencer following, these needs may include information gathering (about fashion, beauty, products), entertainment, relaxation, escape from reality, social interaction (feeling of belonging to the influencer's community), reinforcing personal identity, or habit (Whiting & Williams, 2013; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Understanding these motivations is crucial for analysing the relationship between followers and influencers.

### ***Influencer as a source and information channel***

The Two-Step Flow Theory, originally formulated for traditional mass media, is also applied in the digital environment. It suggests that media content often does not reach the masses directly, but through opinion leaders, who filter, interpret, and disseminate the information in their social networks (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Lazarsfeld & Katz, 2005). Influencers on Instagram play this role – they receive information (e.g. about new trends, products from brands) and convey it to their followers, thus influencing their opinions and behaviour. Their recommendations function as a form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is perceived as more credible than traditional advertising and has a significant impact on purchasing decisions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

### ***Credibility, trust and relationship with the Influencer***

An influencer's persuasiveness and influence are closely related to their perceived credibility. The Source Credibility Model identifies three key dimensions: expertise (perceived knowledge and experience in a given field), trustworthiness (perceived sincerity, objectivity, and honesty of the source), and attractiveness (physical attractiveness, sympathy, similarity to the follower) (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Ohanian, 1990). Influencers who are perceived as experts (e.g., in fashion, makeup), trustworthy (authentic, transparent about collaborations), and attractive (both physically and personally) have a greater potential to influence the attitudes and behaviours of their followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Authenticity is also an important aspect, perceived as sincerity and loyalty to oneself. In the context of influencer marketing, it refers to the consistency between an influencer's personal values and the content they share, including sponsored posts (Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2015). Authentic influencers build stronger trust and audience engagement.

The media nature of Instagram allows for the emergence of parasocial interaction (PSI) – the illusion of a direct, reciprocal relationship between the follower and the influencer, although communication is predominantly one-way (Horton & Wohl, 1956). By sharing personal moments, direct communication in comments or stories, influencers support this feeling of closeness and friendship. A stronger PSI can lead to higher trust, loyalty, and willingness to accept influencer recommendations (Labrecque, 2014; Sokolová & Kefi, 2020). This relationship can also be strengthened by social identity mechanisms, where followers identify with the influencer or the community around them based on shared interests, values, or lifestyles (Abrams, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

### ***Social comparison and consumer behaviour***

Instagram as a visual platform is an ideal environment for social comparison (Social Comparison Theory), a process in which individuals evaluate their own opinions, abilities, and attributes by comparing themselves to others (Festinger, 1954). Followers are often compared to idealized images of influencers (their appearance, lifestyle, possessions), which can lead to so-called “upward comparison” (comparing oneself to someone perceived as ‘better’). This comparison can affect their self-assessment, mood, body image, but also their desire to imitate the influencer and buy the products they use in an attempt to get closer to the ideal presented (Vogel et al., 2014; Chae, 2018).

Consumer behaviour is a complex process involving recognizing a need, searching for information, evaluating alternatives, the purchase itself, and post-purchase evaluation (Wienholtz, 2019). Influencers can intervene in several stages of this process – draw attention to new products (recognizing the need), provide information and reviews (search for information, evaluate alternatives) and directly encourage purchase through recommendations, discount codes or links.

### ***Wider media context***

When analysing the impact of influencers, it's also helpful to keep broader media theories in mind. The aforementioned theory “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1994) reminds and refers to the fact that the Instagram platform itself, with its emphasis on visual content, short formats (stories, reels) and algorithms, influences the way information is perceived. The propaganda model (Herman & Chomsky, 2002) encourages a critical look at the economic interests behind influencer marketing, and the possible distortion of information in favour of advertisers. More than half of the world's population already uses the internet. However, due to the oversaturation of the online market, so-called banner blindness has emerged, which consists in consciously or subconsciously ignoring ads on social networks, search engines and the like. So, logically, marketers started thinking of new ways to engage and reach users. And so content produced by authentic personalities, or influencers, came into being. However, influencer marketing is not such a novelty, as several years ago, traditional media started to promote products through celebrities (Kramárová, ecake.sk). The concepts of influencer marketing and social media are intrinsically linked: influencers need the publicity provided by social media platforms to gain notoriety, and these platforms achieve at least part of their appeal through the content that influencers post on them (Haenlein et al., 2020). Influencer marketing, i.e. marketing through influencers on social media, has become a popular approach for businesses to reach potential customers and promote

products and brands. It is a unique and continuously growing phenomenon that has attracted increasing attention from practitioners as well as aroused the need for further research. Influencer marketing is, in terms of official classification, a new marketing approach that has flourished in recent years due to the increase in interactions between influencers and followers on social media (Farivar & Wang, 2022). Thus, it is evident that the popularity of influencer marketing has increased among marketers in recent years, mainly due to the growth and development of social media. More and more marketers are turning to influencers to help them combat ad blocking, leverage creative content in an authentic way, increase engagement, and reach millennials and Generation Z audiences in particular, who avidly follow social media celebrities and genuinely trust them (ANA, 2018).

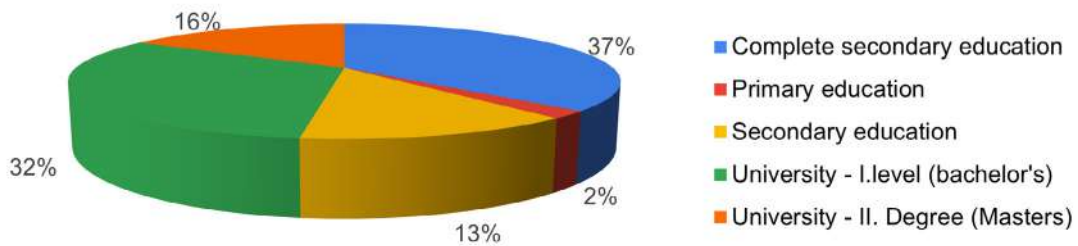
These theoretical frameworks provide a comprehensive view of the mechanisms through which Instagram fashion and beauty influencers influence young women’s shopping behaviour, from motivation to follow them, to building trust and relationship, to psychological processes of comparison and decision-making.

**Research methodology**

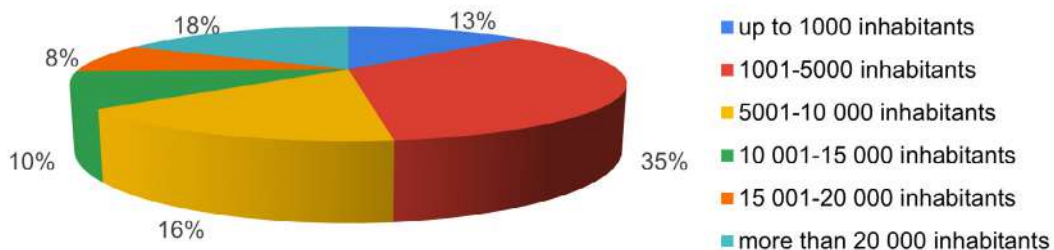
The survey was conducted to answer the research question whether Slovak Instagram influencers in the field of fashion and beauty have a significant impact on the shopping behaviour of young Slovak women (18-24 years old). A mixed research design combining quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection was chosen.

**Survey sample**

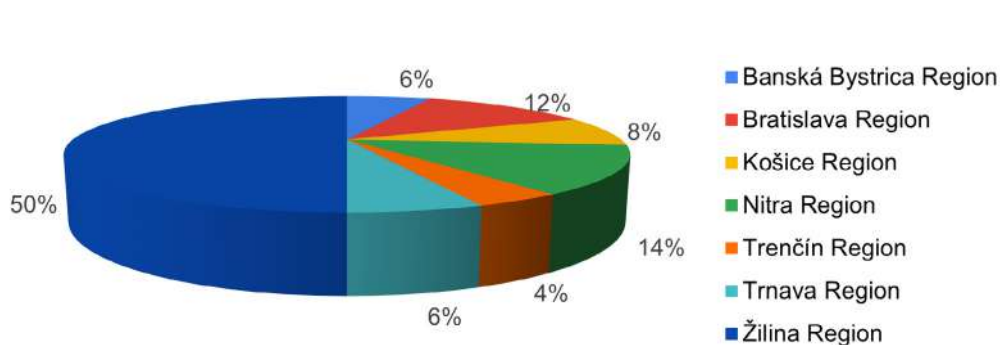
The research sample consisted of 101 respondents aged 18-24, Slovak, active Instagram users, selected by the method of deliberate selection.



**Figure 1: Degree of educational attainment of respondents**



**Figure 2: Percentage of respondents' towns and villages.**



**Figure 3: Percentage of individual regions of residence of respondents.**

In Figure 1, we can see that the largest group by education were respondents with a secondary education, 37%, and 32% were respondents with a first degree. Figure 2 documents the structure of the respondents according to their place of residence and Figure 3 documents the structure of the respondents of the questionnaire according to the county in which the respondent's place of residence is located. With regard to the local survey, respondents from Žilina region predominate in 50%.

### **Online questionnaire**

Primary quantitative data were collected through an online questionnaire (Google Forms) distributed via social networks and e-mails. The questionnaire was anonymous and the respondents were informed about the purpose of the research. It included sections focused on Instagram usage, consumer behaviour (interest in categories, knowledge of influencers, perceived influence measured by a 10-point Likert scale), specific purchases influenced by the influencer, and demographics. Likert scales are a commonly used tool for measuring attitudes, although they may have some limitations (Jamieson, 2023). Manipulation control was also used to verify understanding (Hoewe, 2017), such as a question to name specific influencers.

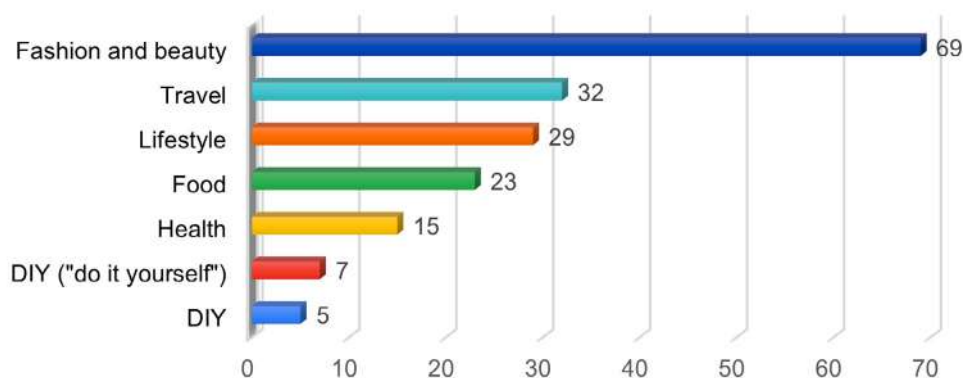
### **Online Interviews**

Qualitative data were obtained through online interviews (in the form of questions sent via Instagram) with influencers operating in Slovakia in the field of fashion and beauty. Of the 15 influencers contacted, four provided answers. The questions concerned their self-definition (related to social identity (Abrams, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the perception of one's own activity and "niche", the path to influencing, sources of inspiration, the perceived power to influence purchasing decisions and the criteria for choosing collaborations (influenced by factors such as relevance, authenticity, brand values, etc.).

## **RESULTS**

### **Results of the questionnaire**

Of the 101 respondents, 97% had an Instagram account. The majority (77.6%) use repeating 5-10 times a day. Most often,



*Figure 4: Preference for categories followed on Instagram.*

they follow 101-500 accounts and have 101-500 followers. Influencers make up 11-50% of the monitored accounts for a third of respondents (33.7%). The closest category on Instagram for almost 70% of respondents was fashion and beauty. They were very interested in this category. Between fashion and beauty, they preferred fashion (65.3%).



Figure 5: Measured measures of influencers' influence on her followers' purchasing decisions.

The most frequently named influencers were Jana Hrmová, Lucia Almaksus, Zuzana Plačková, Tatiana Žideková and Martina Hornáková. The respondents attributed the greatest power to influence purchases to Zuzana Plačková, followed by Jana Hrmová and Tatiana Žideková. Respondents believed that influencers have a very high power to influence the purchasing decisions of followers (39.8% rated the power as 10/10). They also rated the degree of influence on their own purchasing decisions highly, although with a greater variance (20.4% rated 10/10).

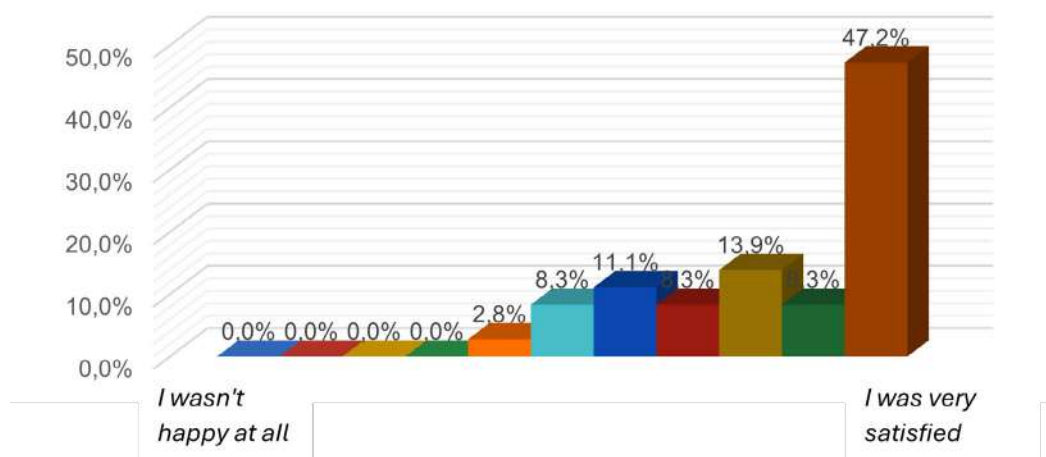


Figure 6: Degree of satisfaction with the purchase of followers after being referred by an influencer.

Almost 37% cited a specific example of a purchase influenced by an influencer, most often it was cosmetics, clothing (sportswear, leggings), hair products. They were mostly very satisfied with these purchases (47.2% rated 10/10). However, the answers to the question of whether they would buy the product without a recommendation were scattered.

### Results of interviews with influencers

The responding influencers defined themselves in different ways. Some did not explicitly have a defined “niche”, focusing more on lifestyle, self-development or authentic sharing, others primarily focused on fashion. They perceived their work as self-expression, work, an opportunity to inspire and help. The path to influencing was often spontaneous. They drew their sense of fashion and beauty from a variety of sources, including social media. All of them confirmed that they have the power to influence young women’s purchasing decisions, emphasizing responsibility and the effort to recommend only proven products. They saw the greatest influence in the products they themselves believe in and use. The key attributes when choosing

a collaboration were personal satisfaction with the product/service, authenticity, alignment with values, and relevance to the audience.

### Discussion

The results of the study confirm the significant influence of Slovak Instagram influencers in the field of fashion and beauty on the shopping behaviour of the target group of young women (18-24 years old). The findings correspond to the theory of the two-step flow of communication (Lazarsfeld & Katz, 2005) and the concept of eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), where influencers act as a trustworthy source of information and recommendations for their audience. The high level of Instagram uses and follow-up of female influencers in this demographic creates a breeding ground for influencer marketing, while motivations can stem from the pursuit of information, entertainment or social interaction (U&G Theory).

The dominance of the fashion and beauty category confirms the visual nature of Instagram (McLuhan, 1994) and its use to meet needs related to aesthetics and trend information. The names of the most frequently mentioned and influential influencers point to the existence of established personalities on the Slovak scene, whose influence can be strengthened by perceived credibility (Ohanian, 1990) and parasocial relationships (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

A high level of satisfaction with products purchased on a recommendation suggests that perceived credibility and parasocial relationship can positively influence product ratings. At the same time, the power of influencer marketing in initiating a purchase may also be related to the mechanisms of social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Chae, 2018), where female consumers buy products in an attempt to imitate or get closer to the influencer.

Interviews with female influencers revealed an emphasis on authenticity (Moulard et al., 2015) and personal experience as key factors in choosing collaborations, which can build trust in female followers (Amin, Hussein, & Kellawi, 2022). However, the tension between authenticity and commercial interests remains an inherent part of influencer marketing, as the propaganda model points out (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

Limits of the study: The research has its limitations, especially a smaller, deliberately selected sample that does not represent the entire population of young Slovak women. Focusing only on women and relying on self-testimony can also affect results. Nevertheless, the study provides valuable insight into the issue in the Slovak context.

### Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the significant role Slovak Instagram influencers play in shaping the shopping behaviour of young women aged 18 to 24 in the domains of fashion and beauty. By leveraging their perceived credibility, authenticity, and parasocial relationships, influencers act as powerful intermediaries between brands and consumers, effectively driving product awareness and purchase decisions. The research underscores the importance of authenticity and trust as key factors in the influencer-follower dynamic, while also revealing the psychological mechanisms, such as social comparison, that underpin influencer marketing's effectiveness. However, the study also draws attention to the ethical and commercial tensions inherent in influencer-brand collaborations, emphasizing the need for greater transparency and responsibility among influencers and brands alike. For young consumers, the findings underscore the importance of fostering critical media literacy and awareness of the persuasive nature of influencer content. For influencers, the results point to the value of maintaining authenticity and ethical practices to build sustainable relationships with their audience. Brands are encouraged to prioritize responsible marketing strategies that align with consumer values. Lastly, the integration of media literacy and critical thinking into educational curricula is advocated to empower young individuals to navigate the complexities of social media marketing effectively. These findings have important practical implications:

1. For female users: It is essential to develop critical thinking when consuming content on social networks, be aware of the commercial nature of many posts and regulate the time spent online.
2. For influencers: It is important to be aware of the responsibility associated with influencing the audience, choose collaborations ethically, transparently and in accordance with their own values.
3. For brands: They should be responsible for the products they promote through influencers and pay attention to the ethical aspects of collaboration.

4. For the education system: It is necessary to integrate the topics of media literacy, critical thinking, the pitfalls of social networks and the impact of advertising on consumer behaviour into teaching. Understanding the dynamics of influencer marketing on Instagram and its implications is crucial for navigating the current digital landscape. Further research on more representative samples and using more diverse methods is needed for a deeper examination of this complex issue in Slovakia.

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# COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING AND FEMVERTISING

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## ABSTRACT

*This study analyses the issue of the commodification of women in the contemporary advertising industry and explores the phenomenon of femvertising as a potential counterbalance to traditional sexist portrayals. The thesis identifies the main forms of objectification of women in advertisements and their negative impacts on the formation of gender stereotypes, women's self-image and the overall social climate. Through a qualitative analysis of advertising content and the current legal framework, it highlights the inadequacy of current regulatory mechanisms in the Slovak environment. The research reveals the ambivalence of femvertising, which, despite its proclaimed emancipatory goals, can slide into femwashing in a commercial context. The study proposes an ethical framework for the portrayal of women in the advertising industry and highlights the need for active involvement of all stakeholders, including consumers, regulators and advertisers, in the transformation process.*

**Key words:** Commodification, femvertising, advertising, sexism, marketing, fem washing, empowerment marketing, pink washing

## INTRODUCTION

The status of women in society has gone through long ups and downs over the centuries, depending on cultural and religious beliefs, economic conditions, legal frameworks, political systems, social movements, women's level of education and access to educational institutions, military conflicts, family structures, technological advances, and many other factors. To say that the status of women has continuously evolved over time towards being better and more equal to men would be a very untrue and lame statement. Societies all over the globe are going through their up and downs and with that the position of women in society is changing. Women, for example, are the most vulnerable group when it comes to war conflicts.

We are living in the 21st century, where, at first glance, it seems that the status of women is already on a par with men, that we have achieved comparable results, that gender stereotypes have disappeared and that women can enjoy the same rights as men. But unfortunately this is not the case. Every day we see attacks on women's integrity in the form of sexist advertisements, hidden messages in campaigns that relegate women to the category of commodity, of object.

The intention of this thesis is to look at the current manifestations of the commodification of women and the female body, the use of the female object as an excellent tool to promote not only goods that are closely related to women, such as perfumes, cosmetics, fashion, but also goods that are completely unrelated, such as tires, toilet paper, cleaning products, etc. We set out to explore the reasons why, even in the 21st century, there is still a trend dating back to the 1970s-80s, when the promotion of violence against women in advertising was also widely accepted.

Another aim of the thesis is the concrete analysis of such advertisements, their effects on the female soul. We will also look at the counterpart, the backlash against women in the form of femvertising, which is advertising that takes pride in the opposite, or feminist, message embedded in the advertisement. Femvertising has undeniable positives, but there are also criticisms that denounce companies that use the feminist narrative

for their visibility. All of this can result in what is known as femwashing, similar to what is known as greenwashing.

### ***Objectives of the thesis***

Our aim is to identify and categorize the main forms of commodification of women in contemporary advertising, to analyse the effects of commodification on the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. To examine the impact of commodification on the value orientations and self-image of the recipients, especially women and adolescents. We also go in search of and want to propose an ethical framework for the responsible portrayal of women in the advertising industry. In this thesis, we have asked the following research questions.

### ***Main research question:***

How is the commodification of women manifested in contemporary Slovak/European advertising and what are its consequences?

### ***Secondary research questions:***

How do advertising agencies and advertisers reflect the ethical aspects of the portrayal of women?  
What are the specifics of the commodification of women in the Slovak advertising space?

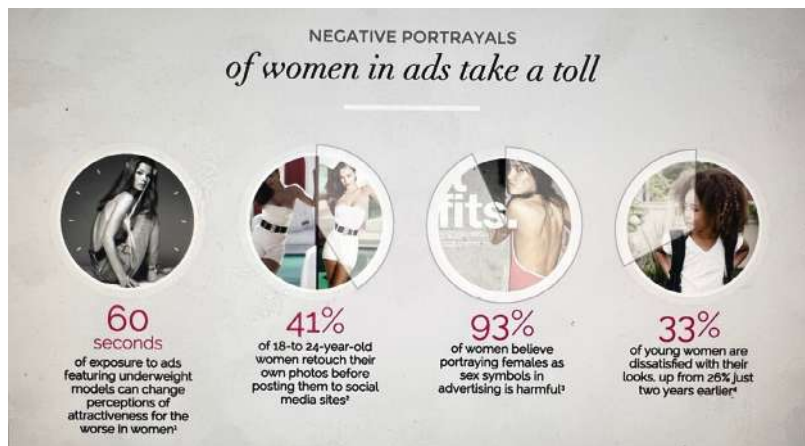
## **1. DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM**

### **1.1 Defining the issue of commodification in the context of the advertising industry**

Commodification is the process by which the human body, identity becomes a tradable commodity, that is, it becomes a commodity, an object of trade. In the advertising industry, it is the transformation of the female body into a tool for selling products close to women, or on the contrary, products that are not at all related to their everyday consumer goods, but which the female body sells well.

We already know from history that in the 1960s to the 1980s the female body was used to sell and promote all kinds of goods. "Sex sells" was used as a principle of advertising strategies that showed excellent economic results. It took quite a number of years to decades when women and interest groups, mostly women, started to get annoyed with this way of selling. Gradually, various instruments, guidelines and even laws began to be introduced in the various countries to prohibit sexist advertising. It was very rigid at first, as the idea that 'sex sells', that is, that sex sells, was confirmed in those days and advertising agencies naturally did not want to move away from this model. They countered with artistic freedom, looking for the line between the ethical and the unethical. Since these were adult women and not girls and underage children, it was very difficult to impose any kind of prohibitions. Arguments against the imposition of measures were always met with the argument that the performers, adults and women in their own right, had voluntarily signed a contract and that they had voluntarily consented to the use of their bodies for advertising purposes. The argument that some advertisements were offensive to female recipients did not hold water, as the advertising agencies countered with a lack of female consumers' sense of humour, or by being too uptight.

The forms of commodification and sexualisation of the female body went through different periods, from the classic sexualisation of the whole female body, to the fragmentation of the body, i.e. the depiction of individual parts instead of the whole figure, whereby a woman shed her identity and replaced herself with only partial pieces of the body, such as breasts, legs, crotch, mouth, etc. The female body became infantilised and hypersexualised.



## 1.2 The historical context of the objectification and commodification of women in the media

As mentioned earlier, the origins of the use of female characters in advertising began at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in print media. In earlier years, societies were more prudish, with women being confined to the home or used as labourers. It was only at the turn of the century, with the technological evolution of media from print to television and digital platforms, that the trend of the commodification of women gradually began to recede in the more developed and democratic countries. This change was brought about by key historical periods such as the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the conservative turn of the 1980s, the post-modern era, the transition from socialist depictions of women to Western models after 1989, and the impact of globalization on the unification of advertising images of women in different cultural contexts.



**Fig. 2:** An advertisement for a visit to the dentist, with a sexist double entendre subtext :” I recommend two squirts every day.“

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 The concept of gender stereotypes and their reproduction in the media**

A gender stereotype represents simplistic, unreflected and uncritical preconceptions about the roles, functions and characteristics of men and women in society. Gender stereotypes are unrealistic images of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ idealised and expected patterns that accompany us in all spheres of life. The Slovak National Centre for Human Rights defines gender stereotypes as: General ideas about the qualities and characteristics that men and women should have, and about the roles that men and women should occupy in private and public life. By their reproduction, they create an appearance of naturalness and commonplace.

Gender stereotypes are created and perpetuated through social structures such as the family, upbringing and education, culture - traditions, ideas and customs, religion, the media and language. Gender stereotypes are thus considered as natural norms to which we give the impression of ‘normality’ by adhering. By breaking them, one runs the risk of being condemned or even labelled as ‘abnormal’.<sup>1</sup>

### **2.2 Male gaze Its application in the advertising industry**

The theory of the male gaze, or male optics, has its roots in the revolutionary work of the British film theorist and pioneer of feminist criticism Laura Mulvey, who published her groundbreaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in 1975. In this work, Mulvey, drawing on the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, analysed the film industry and identified a structural tendency within it to portray the world from the perspective of the heterosexual male. Her well-known work, an analysis of the film *Citizen Kane*, seeks a psychoanalytic diagnosis from one of the greatest icons of world cinema.

Her work was written during the period of second wave feminism, when cultural representations of women and their social implications were being critically reassessed. Mulvey, a philosopher, argued that the dominant language of film not only reflects but also reinforces the patriarchal structures of society through visual codes.

The basic tenet of this theory is that the woman figures as a passive object of visual pleasure, while the man is active and is the bearer and carrier of this gaze.

### **2.3 Representation and objectification of women**

This dichotomous relationship manifests itself in three levels of the gaze: the gaze of the camera (often dominated by men), the gaze of the characters within the work (predominantly male), and the gaze of the viewer who is constructed to identify with the male perspective. In this context, the woman is reduced to “being-seen,” thus becoming the bearer of visual pleasure for the male audience. This objectification reinforces power structures in which the female body is constructed as an object possessed by male desire and control.

The concept of the male gaze, originally developed by Mulvey for the analysis of the film medium, has also found fruitful application in the critical examination of the advertising industry. This transfer is natural, as advertising employs similar visual strategies and narrative structures as film. In the advertising context, however, the male gaze is often heightened and intensified as the commercial intent of advertising pushes for an even more explicit use of the female body as a tool to attract attention.

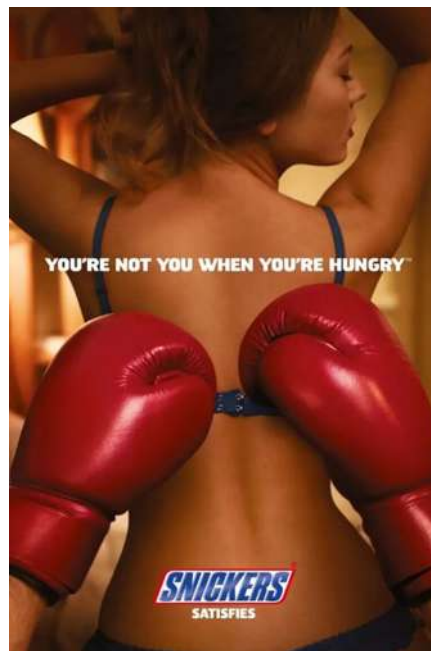
The visual rhetoric of the male gaze is manifested in advertising photography and video production through specific compositional and staging techniques. These include strategic camera placement that often privileges the view of the female body from the position of the male observer, lighting that emphasizes the rounded curves of the female body, the posing of models in submissive and sexually challenging positions, or the use of post-production editing to achieve unrealistic body proportions. These technical practices are underpinned by the narrative structure of the advertisements, in which women often figure as passive objects or ‘trophies’ for purchasing the advertised product, while men act as active protagonists of the story.

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1. <https://www.gender.gov.sk/dokumenty/narodne-akcne-plany/>



*Figure 3: Dolce and Gabbana advertisement that uses explicit violence against women. A woman in the position of being raped is surrounded by three male macho-men.*



*Figure 4: SNICKERS advertisement which uses the fragmentation of a woman when her semi-naked body is touched by a man's boxing gloves.*

The fragmentation of the female body represents a particularly significant technique of the male gaze in advertising production. This technique consists in showing isolated parts of the female body - legs, lips, eyes, chest, half-naked back - separated from the whole person. Such visual deconstruction has a dehumanizing effect, reducing the woman to a set of bodily fragments for visual consumption. Advertisements for cosmetics, perfumes, alcohol or even the automotive industry often use this technique, visually associating the fragmented female body with the advertised product. This practice symbolically expresses the commodification of the female body, with parts of it functioning as visual 'parts' in a commercial narrative.

A particularly interesting aspect of male gaze theory is the concept of internalisation, whereby women adopt an objectifying view of their own bodies. Through repeated exposure to the media, women are socialized not only to be objects of the male gaze, but to view themselves through the eyes of an imaginary male observer. This phenomenon, aptly summed up by John Berger with the phrase 'men act and women show', leads to self-objectification and the constant monitoring of one's own appearance. In the advertising industry,

this mechanism manifests itself in campaigns that encourage women to buy products in order to achieve a 'desirable' appearance to the male eye, thus paradoxically becoming complicit in their own objectification.

In response to the critique of the male gaze, alternative concepts such as the 'female gaze' or the 'queer gaze' have developed in academic discourse and artistic practice. The female gaze, conceptualised by theorists such as Jill Soloway (American filmmaker, screenwriter, producer and prominent theorist in the field of gender studies), or the renowned American film theorist and professor Mary Ann Doan (who specialises in feminist film theory, gender studies and semiotics) represent not just a simple inversion of gender roles, but a fundamentally different way of seeing and portraying that emphasizes empathy, bodily experience, and the complex subjectivity of the persons portrayed. These alternative perspectives are gradually beginning to permeate the advertising industry, where they represent not only a more ethically responsible but often commercially successful approach to visual communication that resonates with contemporary audiences demanding more authentic and diverse representations.

### **3. THE RISKS OF THE COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING**

The commodification of women in the advertising industry poses a number of serious risks that go beyond the individual and have wider societal implications. These include serious psychological and health risks, the prevalence of eating disorders (increased incidence of anorexia, bulimia), increasing pervasive dissatisfaction with women's own bodies, declining self-esteem, the incidence of clinical depression, anxiety disorders, increasing tolerance of gendered domestic violence, and the legitimisation of objectification.

And not only that.

Commodification also has serious economic and occupational impacts, such as discrimination against women in the workplace. Research has shown that women in professions where emphasis is placed on physical appearance are perceived as less competent and therefore have less access to career positions.

#### **3.1 Economic consequences of commodification**

From an economic point of view, women have to invest up to 40% more than men to maintain their beauty and youthfulness, which places a heavy economic burden on them. This is commonly referred to as the 'beauty tax', which men do not pay because they do not have to address the beauty gap. Among other things, human capital is wasted in society, as women are discouraged from entering certain sectors by the under-representation of the technical and scientific sectors.

#### **3.2 Cultural, social and psychological implications**

The commodification of women in advertising narratives also has more serious implications in women's personal lives. The woman is reduced to a sexual object, and her full potential is limited. Some research shows that the objectification and commodification of women also contributes to the distortion of partner relationships.

By attacking all women for always being beautiful and young, advertisements undermine women's intergenerational solidarity, thus creating a fabricated antagonism between women of different generations.

The concept of the beauty gap - the gap between perceived and ideal beauty - is becoming very topical, especially with the rise of social networks. Longitudinal studies conducted in Slovak and Czech settings document that girls internalise these idealised images from an early age. Commercial depictions of the female body create an artificial standard of beauty that most women cannot achieve, leading to chronic dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem and, in extreme cases, the development of eating disorders. The advertising industry thus creates a vicious circle in which they explicitly work with women's fears and insecurities.

### 3.3 Ethical and moral issues

We can also look at the problem of the accepted commodification of women from an ethical perspective: The dehumanization of women in society. The objectifying view of women portrays women as tools and not as human beings.

Collectively, the dignity of women as such is diminished, if only due to the fact that many models voluntarily consent to the undignified “use” of their bodies. Their individual consent goes beyond an individual decision and interferes with the collective perception of woman as such.

Dominant advertising companies argue for the great economic efficiency of sexist advertisements and thus directly justify their actions, putting short-term profit above the overall well-being of society. The commodification of women in advertising has far-reaching consequences. It seriously undermines mental health, social cohesion and gender equality.

By repeatedly portraying certain gender patterns, it creates normative expectations about how women should behave, dress or express themselves. For example, in the Slovak advertising space, several dominant stereotypes of femininity can be identified: the perfect mother and housewife, the sex object, the emotionally unstable being incapable of rational thought, or the technically unfit person dependent on male help. Advertising narratives often define ‘ideal femininity’ in terms of submissiveness, a focus on appearance and care for others.



*Figure 5: Dolce and Gabbana advertisement that uses female nudity. Not to mention the clear elements of violence, male dominance and the use of firearms and knives.*

## 4. LEGAL ASPECTS OF THE COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING

### 4.1 Current legal framework for advertising regulation

Many European democracies have set out to combat discrimination as such.

The legal regulation of the portrayal of women in advertising in the Slovak environment is based on a number of legislative norms. The primary instrument is Act No. 147/2001 Coll. on Advertising, which in its § 3 explicitly prohibits advertising “which is contrary to good morals, presents products in a way that denigrates human dignity or which is contrary to the principle of equal treatment.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite this wording, the practical application of the law to sexist advertisements is problematic, as terms such as “good manners” are often subject to subjective interpretation.

2. [https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/zz/2001-147#google\\_vignette](https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/zz/2001-147#google_vignette)

Other relevant legal norms are Act No 308/2000 Coll. on Broadcasting and Retransmission, which regulates audiovisual media services, and the Anti-Discrimination Act (Act No 365/2004 Coll.), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. Of particular relevance in the European context is the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (2010/13/EU), which regulates standards for audiovisual commercial communications, including advertising.<sup>3</sup>

However, it is regrettable to note that an analysis of the decisions of the Broadcasting and Retransmission Council reveals that complaints about sexist content in advertisements are often rejected on the grounds that they do not meet the legal criteria for intervention. This approach contrasts with the practice in some Western European countries, where regulators apply stricter standards when assessing gender stereotyping and objectification.



*Fig. 6: A specific example of a commodified advertisement posted on social media on 4.4.2025, where a photograph from the film *Daisies* by director Věra Chytilová was used for a campaign called: *TWO WITH ONE CLICK!* Two young women are used for pre-sale with a sexist subtext: *You get two (women) for one click!* Director Chytilová, who was known for her strong feminist views, would certainly not have approved of this advert and would not have given her consent to it in her lifetime.*

## 4.2 Self-regulation of the advertising industry

A key role in the self-regulation of the advertising industry in Slovakia is played by the Advertising Council (ACR), an independent organisation established in 1995. The RPR publishes and administers the Code of Ethics for Advertising Practice, which explicitly regulates issues related to the portrayal of human dignity and gender discrimination. Article 11(1) of the Code states that “advertising must not contain claims and visual presentations that violate general standards of decency and morality.” Further, “*Advertising must avoid the use of puns, crude slang or ambiguous expressions that are sexist, discriminatory, offensive or degrading with regard to their sexual or other connotations.*”<sup>4</sup>

The strength of the self-regulatory system is its flexibility and ability to respond quickly to changing social attitudes and values. Weaknesses include low enforceability of decisions and potential conflicts of interest, as funding for the RPR is provided by entities in the advertising industry. An analysis of RPR decisions in sexist advertising cases over the last decade suggests a gradual shift towards stricter judgements, reflecting changing social sensitivities.

In addition to the work of the RPR, other self-regulatory initiatives are emerging, such as the Sexist Kix<sup>5</sup> project, which monitors and publicly highlights sexist advertisements, and the Gender Equality Standard programme developed by the Institute for Work and Family Research.

4. <https://rpr.sk/sk/eticky-kodex/>

5. <https://www.sexistickykix.sk/>



*Figure 7. An example of a controversial advertisement of beer where the text is in sharp contrast to a photograph of a woman with a paper bag over her face and wearing a bra. The text reads: "We would never use a pretty face to sell our beer."*

### 4.3 Comparison of regulatory mechanisms in different countries

The Scandinavian countries, in particular Sweden and Norway, apply much stricter standards when assessing sexist content. Sweden's Reklam ombudsmannen (Advertising Ombudsman) regularly bans advertisements that stereotype gender roles or objectify the female body, even if these advertisements do not contain explicitly sexual content.

France passed groundbreaking legislation in 2017 that requires digitally altered photographs in advertisements to carry a "retouchée" (altered) warning. This measure aims to increase transparency in the advertising industry and mitigate the negative impact of unrealistic depictions on women's self-image. Other European countries, including Spain and Italy, are considering similar measures.

In the UK, in 2019, the UK regulator Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)<sup>6</sup> issued new guidelines banning harmful gender stereotypes in advertising. These guidelines are considered some of the most progressive in Europe, as they ban not only explicitly sexist depictions, but also more subtle forms of stereotyping, such as depicting parents of different genders in stereotypical roles.

In contrast to European countries, the United States takes a more liberal approach to advertising regulation, with a greater emphasis on self-regulation through organisations such as the National Advertising Division. This difference reflects a different cultural and legal context, where the right to freedom of expression has traditionally been interpreted more broadly.

A very interesting and decidedly unusual trend in the regulation of sexist advertising is the adoption of city ordinances that prohibit sexist outdoor advertising in urban spaces. Cities such as Paris, London, Geneva and Berlin have introduced such measures to protect public space from objectifying depictions of women. In Slovakia, similar initiatives at municipal level are not yet in place, which could provide scope for future regulatory innovation.

6. <https://www.asa.org.uk/>

## 5. FEMVERTISING AND EMPOWERMENT MARKETING IN THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY

### 5.1 Femvertising as an innovative advertising approach

Femvertising is an innovative advertising approach that was created by combining the English words “feminism” and “advertising”. The concept began to take shape around 2010 as a reaction to traditional advertising strategies that often objectified women and reinforced gender stereotypes. The basic principle of femvertising is the use of advertising space to communicate empowering messages for women while promoting commercial products.



*Figure 8: Let her fly to the Chase of Dreams. Rashna Abdi: Inclusivity is Femvertising Done The Right Way, 2019, Online: <https://aurora.dawn.com/news/1143662/inclusivity-is-femvertising-done-the-right-way>*

Although the term itself is relatively new, its roots can be found in the progressive advertising campaigns of the 1990s. Dove made history with its groundbreaking 2004 campaign, Campaign for Real Beauty, which began to feature women of different shapes, sizes and ethnicities, significantly disrupting the then-dominant trend of presenting exclusively thin European models. In Slovakia, the first signs of femvertising began to appear around 2015, when some brands started experimenting with less stereotypical depictions of women.

### 5.2 Key characteristics of femvertising

The basic elements of femvertising are authentic portrayals of women that avoid digital editing and manipulation through Photoshop and other filters and applications. Many of these advertisements challenge old gender stereotypes and depict women in activities that were until recently considered purely masculine.

They promote female strength, independence, and use a narrative that depicts overcoming obstacles and challenging limiting societal expectations. An example is Avon’s ‘Strength is Beautiful’ campaign, which featured stories of strong women, including female athletes and activists.



*Figure 9: Dove's campaign, My beauty-My say, 2017  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_XOa7zVqxA4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_XOa7zVqxA4)*

Perhaps the most important moment of femvertising is inclusion and diversity. This approach emphasises the representation of women of different ages and races. Physical constitution, social status or sexual orientation. It thus breaks down the stereotype of the ideal of female beauty, which is presented as a young beautiful white woman with no obvious physiognomic deviations.



*Fig. 10: The visual for Dove's All Women Are Beautiful campaign. The photograph features women of different ages, ethnicities and sexual orientations. Not a single women has been retouched.*

### **5.3 Critical perspectives on femvertising- aka femwashing**

Alongside the positive elements of femvertising, there have of course also been critical voices that compare the movement as similar to greenwashing in the environmental field. This phenomenon occurs when corporations use feminist messages as a marketing tool without a real commitment to gender equality.

In Slovakia, this criticism is also linked to the question of authenticity - some brands adopt femvertising only during specific occasions (such as International Women's Day), while their regular communication continues to reproduce traditional gender stereotypes.

### **5.4 Impact of femvertising on consumer behaviour**

Research conducted in the Slovak environment suggests that femvertising has a measurable positive impact on brand perception, especially among younger generations. A study conducted by the University of Economics in Bratislava in 2021 found that 68% of female respondents aged 18-34 prefer brands that promote positive female role models and gender equality. Up to 72% of women surveyed said they would be willing to pay a higher price for products from brands that actively promote gender equality.

The impact on brand loyalty is also an important aspect - female consumers are more likely to form an emotional connection with brands that resonate with their values and identity. Research conducted by 2muse in 2022, which examined Slovak consumer behaviour, showed that up to 63% of respondents remembered specific femvertising campaigns even a year after they aired, while the recall rate of conventional ads was only 28%.

### **5.5. Empowerment marketing**

Empowerment marketing is a broader marketing philosophy that goes beyond gender and focuses on empowering consumers through positive, inclusive and empowering marketing messages. While femvertising specifically targets women, empowerment marketing can target a variety of groups including ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, people with disabilities or the elderly.

The concept of empowerment marketing draws on several theoretical traditions including positive psychology, social marketing and consumer-based value theory. At its core is the belief that marketing can and should contribute to consumers' personal growth and wellbeing, rather than profiting from their insecurities and fears, as is the case with most beauty campaigns, which encourage women and older women alike to feel that they are old and not very pretty.

An example of this is the Raiffeisen Bank campaign, which with the tagline "You're good for more" encouraged the clients' potential and made them feel more powerful.

Some of the larger and more established firms are also taking a community empowerment approach and are encouraging people to feel a sense of belonging to their immediate community. Instead of focusing on selling a specific product, empowerment marketers focus on the fact that even by selling, for example, a toothbrush from Curaprox, they are encouraging customers to feel good about valuing their health and a healthy body, and the value of self-acceptance.



*Figure 11: A representation of the various categories of women, ethnic backgrounds, and age groups in the DOVE recruitment initiative.*

## **5.6 Concrete examples of femvertising and empowerment marketing**

Unilever launched the Campaign for Real Beauty in 2004. Today it is considered one of the first successful femvertising campaigns. This campaign used ordinary women of different ages, body types and ethnicities instead of professional models, to show that a woman's beauty comes in thousands of forms. Dove "Campaign for Real Beauty".

## **5.7 Research and studies on the effectiveness of femvertising and empowerment marketing abroad**

"Research by the SheKnows Institution in 2016 showed that 52% of women bought products because they liked how the advertising portrayed women. 43% of female respondents said they followed a brand on social media because they supported women, and 46% shared content from brands that supported women." (SheKnows Media, "Femvertising Survey Results," 2016)

## **6. The future of empowerment marketing and femvertising in Slovakia**

Marketing is a very vibrant field that has to respond to an ever-changing and dynamic market literally on a daily basis. Thanks to artificial intelligence, there are tools that can instantly evaluate and personalise empowering messages to specific segments. And not only that. They won't just target a specific customer, but also a specific location. For example, not all products are bought the same in Bratislava as they are in Orava, for example. Not all foreign marketing and well-functioning empowerment campaigns reflect our local Slovak conditions.

### **6.1 Problems of applying femvertising in Slovakia**

Slovakia is a relatively conservative and Catholic society applying traditional gender stereotypes. A large part of society is very sceptical about various feminist and activist movements. Consider also the never ending very heated arguments about abortion rights, hatred towards LGBT+ groups. Rurally, the population does not want to allow the traditional perception of gender roles to be disturbed.

There are also risks when the ill-considered decision to use femvertising could degenerate into pink-washing, i.e. using women's issues for marketing effect only. Slovakia is a small and by no means progressive country that is also afraid of experimentation. Traditional companies will definitely not risk their customer base to support women or the LGBT+ community. Moreover, the ratio of rural to urban population in Slovakia is not that large and thus advertising companies must realise that by experimenting, they could lose a relatively large part of the rural population.

But the future of femvertising may not be fundamentally unrealistic. It is necessary to find the right tone for communication, to strike the right balance between progressive values and respect for local specificities.

## **7. STRATEGIES AND MEASURES AGAINST THE COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING**

### **7.1 Immediate defensive strategies and consumer responses**

At first glance, it might seem that the fight against the commodification of women in advertising is a foregone conclusion. Perpetuated stereotypes linger in the minds of many advertising agency creative directors, and with the current percentage of women CEOs (who make up only 3% of the total number of CEOs in advertising companies), they may continue to form a barrier to the application of regulations and guidelines for many years or even decades to come.

However, active consumer resistance may be the first swallow in the boycott and feedback loop. Simply refusing to buy products promoted by sexist advertisements can lead to the withdrawal of the advertisement. A form of self-defence for women affected by sexist advertising is to publish and criticise the content on social media with relevant hashtags (#SexistickyKix, #Let'sStopCommodification). The rapid mobilisation of the public through social media often has an immediate effect.

The most effective form of defence against sexist ads is of course actively filing complaints with the Advertising Council and the Slovak Trade Inspection in cases of blatant sexism.

### **7.2 Strengthening ethical consumer communities**

Support groups that fight against objectification in advertising and media play a key role in creating a healthier media environment. Civic initiatives, academic groups, feminist collectives, media watchdogs, using a variety of strategies such as media monitoring, systematic monitoring of advertisements, films and other media content, organising workshops and lectures on recognising objectification, public education, various campaigns and petitions against problematic advertisements. Of course, also providing legal advice on filing complaints about inappropriate advertisements.

Among the best known organisations in Slovakia and the Czech Republic are: *Hradecké ženy proti sexistické reklame (Hradec Women Against Sexist Advertising)*<sup>8</sup>, *Stop vulgaritám (Stop Vulgarities)*<sup>9</sup>, *Ženy ženám (Women to Women)*<sup>10</sup>, *Aspekt*<sup>11</sup> and *Možnosť voľby (Option of Choice)*<sup>12</sup>.

### **7.4 Long-term transformation of the advertising industry**

Effective defence against the commodification of women in advertising requires a coordinated approach at all levels - from individual consumer activism, through systemic regulation, to a profound transformation

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8. [https://www.idnes.cz/hradec-kralove/zpravy/demonstrace-proti-sexisticke-reklame-a-vulgarite-v-hradci-kralove.A141210\\_150124\\_hradec-zpravy\\_pos](https://www.idnes.cz/hradec-kralove/zpravy/demonstrace-proti-sexisticke-reklame-a-vulgarite-v-hradci-kralove.A141210_150124_hradec-zpravy_pos)

9. [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/revue/spolecnost/david-novotny-v-rozhovoru-pro-magazin-dnes.A140429\\_144953\\_lidicky\\_nh](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/revue/spolecnost/david-novotny-v-rozhovoru-pro-magazin-dnes.A140429_144953_lidicky_nh)

10. <https://www.zenyzenam.com/>

11. <https://www.aspekt.sk/>

12. <https://moznostvolby.sk/>

of the advertising industry itself. A key element is engaging the men in advertising agencies themselves in addressing the issue and providing them with compelling arguments for why ethical portrayals of women are not only morally right, but also economically beneficial to their clients and agencies.

The most effective arguments for men in the advertising industry are data and financial results - research clearly shows that modern audiences, especially younger generations, respond more positively to ads that respect the dignity of women. At the same time, it is important to create space for empathy, for example through workshops where men see the impact of sexist ads on the women around them - their daughters, partners or colleagues.

For women, in turn, building solidarity and mutual support, rejecting internalised sexism and believing that they have the right to demand dignified portrayals in the media is crucial. Every consumer response, every comment shared and every rejection of a sexist product is a step towards change that is not only possible but, with a concerted effort, relatively quickly achievable.

### **Book resources**

BEUVOIR, S. Druhé pohlavie, 1967, Praha: Orbis. 410 p.

CVIKOVÁ, J. JURÁŇOVÁ, J., KOBOVÁ, L.. 2005, Žena nie je tovar. Bratislava: Aspekt. 433 p. ISBN: 80+85549-50-6.

HANÁKOVÁ, P. 2007, Pandořina skříňka, anebo co feministky provedly filmu? Praha: Nakladatelství Academia. 136 p. ISBN 9788020015518.

JARKOVSKÁ, L. a LIŠKOVÁ, K. 2023. Feministkou snadno a rychle: Příručka argumentu pro debaty s rodinou a přáteli. Praha: Euromedia Group, a.s. 232 s.. ISBN: 9-788024-287409.

PEREZ, C.C., 2020. Neviditelné ženy, Jak data a výzkumy utvářejí svět pro muže. Brno: Host.. 2020, 465 p. zISBN: 978-80-275-1868-5.

### Online resources

<https://www.prnewsonline.com/prnewsblog/femvertising/>

<https://aurora.dawn.com/news/1143662/inclusivity-is-femvertising-done-the-right-way>

<https://shequal.com.au/2021/07/01/lets-get-real-about-femvertising/>

<https://feminisminindia.com/2017/05/30/femvertising-corporates-feminism/>

<https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/how-ads-empower-women-are-boosting-sales-and-bettering-industry-160539/>

### Web Resources

Alliance of Women of Slovakia: <https://alianciazien.wordpress.com/>

European Institute for Gender Equality: <https://eige.europa.eu/>

Advertising Council of Slovakia: <https://rpr.sk/sk/>

UN Women: <https://www.unwomen.org/en>

The Advertising Standard Authority: [www.asa.org.uk](http://www.asa.org.uk)

[www.zenyzenam.com](http://www.zenyzenam.com)

[www.aspekt.sk](http://www.aspekt.sk)

[www.moznostvolby.sk](http://www.moznostvolby.sk)

# HOW DO DIFFERENT GENERATIONS DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN HUMAN-CREATED AND AI-GENERATED VISUALS?

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## ABSTRACT

*Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly permeating various aspects of our lives, including visual content creation, and is a growing phenomenon. With the expansion of sophisticated generative models, the distinction between algorithmically created content and human creativity is becoming increasingly subtle. The present study aims to investigate intergenerational differences in the ability to identify AI-generated visual output. As part of a quantitative research design, a questionnaire survey was conducted, presenting respondents from Generations X, Y and Z with a series of visual stimuli - a parity of AI-generated images and traditional human-created photographs. The primary objective was to empirically verify the hypothesis that Generation Z, characterized by native interaction with digital technologies, exhibits a significantly higher rate of accuracy in recognizing AI-generated visual content compared to previous generations.*

**Key words:** Artificial intelligence, AI, Generation X, Generation Y, Generation Z, Generative artificial intelligence

## 1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Artificial intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a dynamically developing field of computer science with the potential to radically change the way we interact with technology and the world around us. As stated by Ertel (2025), AI is the ability of digital computers or computer-controlled robots to solve problems that are typically associated with higher intellectual data-processing abilities in humans. In the article by Pannu (2015) Tremendous contributions have been made to various fields by AI techniques from the last two decades. "AI-based tools are being used to improve customer experience, increase the efficiency of supply chains, and generate insights from large volumes of data. In addition, artificial intelligence is being used to develop intelligent assistants that can have conversations with people and help them make decisions." (Aydin, Karaarslan, 2023) These models go beyond mere analysis, learning internal patterns in data and independently generating new, often complex outputs such as images, text and music, opening new frontiers in creative activities." (Schmidhuber, 2015) As She and Cetinic (2022) mention in their article, the results of research on "AI and art" can be broadly divided into two areas: studies on the application of AI to the analysis and creation of new art, and studies on the application of AI to the analysis and creation of existing art. Regarding the generation of images using AI, Yadav (2024) also commented in his article where he mentions that the user can set parameters such as image resolution, style strength, and number of iterations for the algorithm to create an image with a distinctive artistic style. DeepArt also provides the ability to generate entirely new images without a reference style image. Pise et al. (2024) said: "It is as if the image generator functions as a bridge between the eloquence of words and the eloquence of images, inviting creators to embark on a journey of limitless imagination."

Artificial intelligence and its ability to create images and other forms of art in a virtually perfect form, brings us to the question, what is actually real? Démuth (2020) comments on this topic by suggesting that

AI generates works based on algorithms without the real emotional involvement that is often key for human artists when they put personal experiences and emotions into their works. This can lead to a loss of originality and a reduction in the artistic value of these works. Gruber (2020) in turn mentions that AI lacks the true ability to feel and experience emotions, which can significantly affect its ability to create art that resonates on a deeper, emotional level with human beings. Generative AI and its discernment of whether it is a human creation is becoming an increasing problem. In the words of Ha et al. (2024), Distinguishing AI generated images from human art is a challenging problem whose impact is growing over time. Range of Human AI Image Detectors. Humans will vary significantly in their ability to identify human art vs AI images, depending on their knowledge and experience in producing art. As it is mentioned by Steele (2025), AI images have quickly evolved from laughably bizarre to frighteningly believable, and there are big consequences to not being able to tell authentically created images from those generated by artificial intelligence.

In the context of the increasing difficulty of differentiating human-created visual content and AI, it is relevant to consider how this challenge is perceived by different generations whose different technological backgrounds may have influenced their perception of the digital world. These generational differences can be attributed to distinct historical events, financial instability, social experiences, and technological advancements that have shaped each generation's upbringing and development (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al., 2020; Puiu, 2017; Wiedmer, 2015).

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, as reported by Chan and Lee (2023), is the first generation to grow up with constant access to digital technology and social media, leading to their digital and technoholic mindset. Also in relation to this assertion, Turner (2015) stated that constant access to the digital environment is an important aspect that should not be underestimated. As Chan and Lee (2024) stated, Generation Z is likely to embrace artificial intelligence in a variety of areas from work to everyday life due to its potential to increase their efficiency, connectivity and access to information.

Generation Y, also known as millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, as reported by Bencsik et al. (2016), grew up in a time of rapid development of the internet and digital technologies. However, "They were not born into the digital world, but migrated from the analog world to the digital world." (Howell, 2012; Levickaite, 2010; Naumovska, 2017; Wiedmer, 2015) For example, as Chovanova Supekova et al. (2023) state about Generation Y and Z, both generations are growing up and coming of age in the 21st century and are exposed to digitalization and digital transformation from early childhood. "In contrast, Gen X, born between 1960 and 1980, was raised during a time of economic uncertainty, marked by a shift towards individualism and self-reliance. " (Wiedmer, 2015) As it was mentioned by Zemke et al. (2020), they value work-life balance and are considered "digital immigrants," who confidently use technology despite not growing up with it. Also as said Alanzi et al. (2023), Gen X, for instance, might exhibit a mix of curiosity and skepticism about the efficacy of AI. "Different from Generation Z or millennials, Generation X faces unique challenges in understanding modern technology due to their limited experience with technology during their youth." (Dhahir, 2024)

## 2 METHODOLOGY

In order to apply theoretical insights from domestic and international literature that point to differences in the perception of digital content across generations and the increasing sophistication of generative AI in visual production, we decided to adopt a quantitative research approach using an online questionnaire.

For this research, the following hypotheses were established:

**H1:** Generation Z respondents achieve statistically significantly higher accuracy in AI-generated image recognition compared to Generation X and Generation Y respondents.

**H2:** Generation Y respondents will achieve statistically significantly higher accuracy in AI-generated image recognition compared to Generation X respondents.

**H3:** Respondents show statistically significantly lower success in recognizing whether a painting-style image is AI-generated or human-created, compared to other types of images.

A total of 343 respondents divided into three generations participated in the survey: Generation Z (n = 173), Generation Y (n = 89) and Generation X (n = 81). The age range of respondents matched the definitions

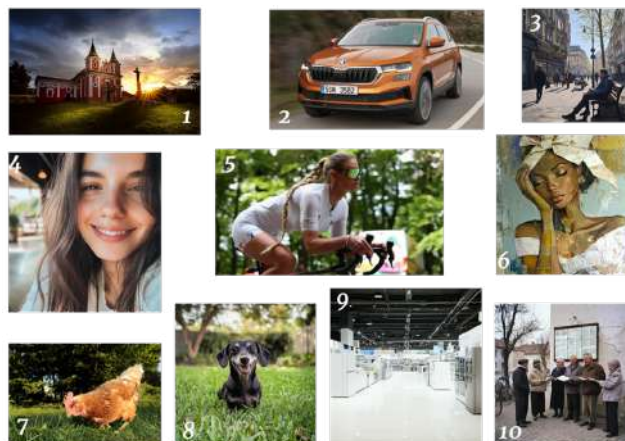
of each generation.

The research instrument consisted of an online questionnaire created in the Google Forms platform and included ten visual stimuli. Six of these images were generated by artificial intelligence and four were human-generated photographs. The selection of images included different categories such as landscapes, portraits, animals, photographs of people in various daily activities, and shots of shops (both paintings and photographs). This diverse selection was intended to allow examination of possible differences in recognition success depending on the type of image.

The data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire to which respondents were provided with a link. At the beginning of the questionnaire, background information about the research and instructions for completing the questionnaire were provided. Each respondent viewed 10 images and was asked to indicate for each image whether they believed it was an image created by artificial intelligence or a human. The questionnaire took less than one minute to complete as respondents were only asked to tick one of two options for each image. We observed that respondents viewed participation in the survey positively, with some families even making it an informal.

### 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned above in the methodology, our survey consisted of 10 images (Picture no. 1) for which respondents selected HUMAN/ SMALL INTELLIGENCE.



**Picture no. 1 PICTURES USED FOR RESEARCH**  
*Source: Own processing*

Based on the respondents' answers, we found the individual success rates of the answers. The average percentage success in correctly classifying images (AI vs. human) for each generation was as follows:

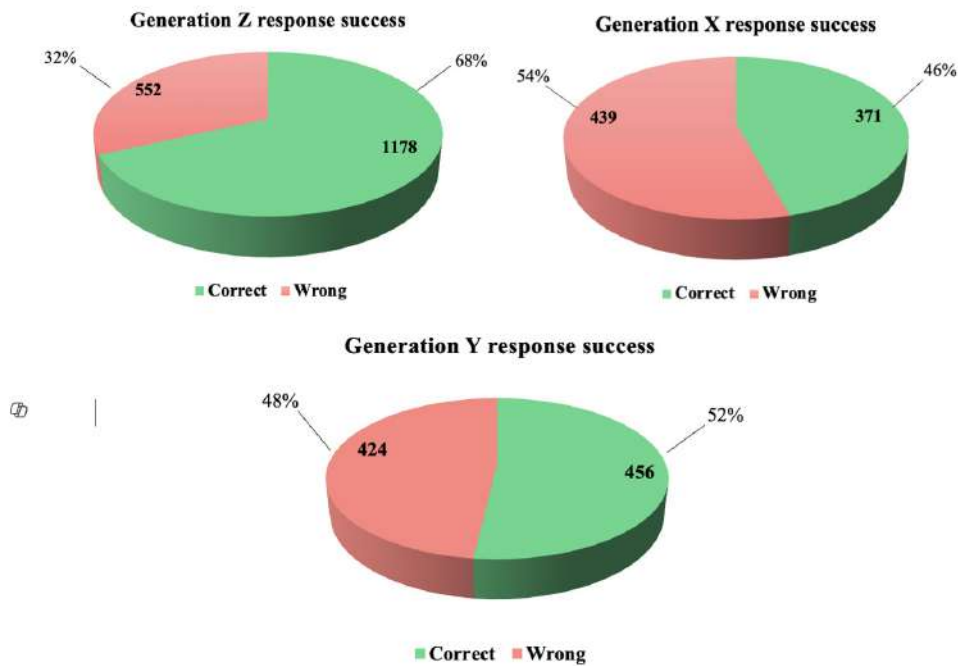
- **Generation Z: 68%**
- **Generation Y: 52%**
- **Generation X: 46%**

These initial results suggest that there are differences in recognition ability between the generations studied. Respondents from Generation Z demonstrated the highest average success rate, followed by Generation Y and with the lowest success rate Generation X. For the visuals please see Chart no.1.

The first hypothesis, which focuses on Generation Z respondents achieving statistically significantly higher accuracy in recognizing AI-generated images compared to Generation X and Generation Y respondents. The measured success rates (68% for Z > 52% for Y and 46% for X) indicate that this hypothesis was confirmed and Generation Z achieved higher average accuracy in AI image recognition compared to the remaining generations studied.

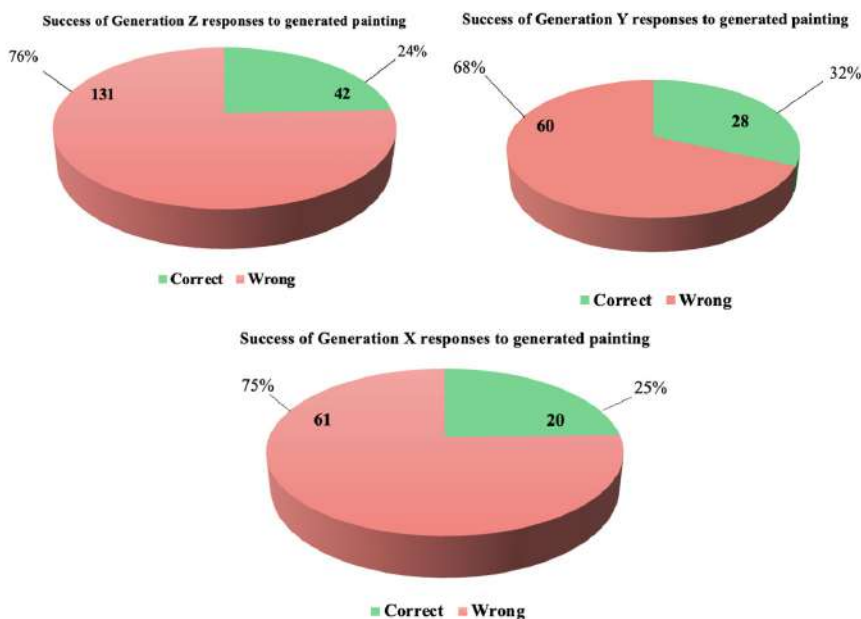
The measured average percentage success rates further confirm the second hypothesis, which predicted that Generation Y respondents would achieve higher accuracy in recognizing AI-generated images compared

to Generation X respondents. With an average success rate of 52% for Generation Y and 46% for Generation X, the results show that Generation Y was indeed more successful in this task.



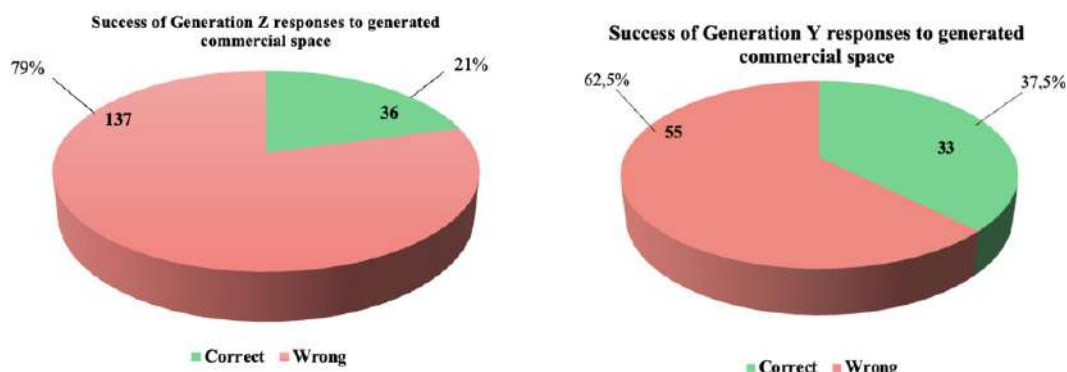
**Chart no. 1 RESPONSE SUCCESS BY GENERATIONS**  
 Source: Own processing

The results regarding the third hypothesis, which assumed a specific problem in the recognition of the AI-generated painting (Picture 6 in “Picture no.1”) compared to the real painting, confirmed this assumption. An analysis of recognition success rates for the different types of pictures showed that across all three generations studied, respondents achieved the lowest average success rate for the very picture that fell into the painting category. In this case, the rate of incorrect responses ranged from approximately 68-75% across generations, which significantly exceeded the error rate for other types of pictures. This suggests that the visual characteristics of paintings, potentially combined with AI’s ability to generate compelling artistic styles, posed the greatest challenge for respondents in distinguishing them.



**Chart no. 2 SUCCES OF RESPONSES TO GENERATED PAITING BY GENERATIONS**  
 Source: Own processing

Further scrutiny of the responses revealed an interesting pattern of error rates for a specific type of image - the depiction of a store interior. For Generation Z, up to 79% of respondents incorrectly identified whether the image was an AI-generated image or a photo of the store, the second highest error rate after paintings. A similarly high error rate was seen for Generation Y, where 63% of respondents incorrectly answered for this type of image, also among the higher error rates for their responses, although paintings were still the most challenging for them. For both Generation Z and Generation Y, this question with a picture of a shop space was among those with higher error rates. In comparison, the error rates for the other questions were around 20% for Generation Z and 43% for Generation Y, highlighting the distinct difficulties in distinguishing AI from reality just for the store space depiction.



**Chart no. 3 SUCCESS OF RESPONSES TO GENERATED COMMERCIAL SPACE BY GEN Z AND GEN Y**  
Source: Own processing

In summary, the results of our research confirmed all three stated hypotheses. Generation Z demonstrated a significantly higher ability to recognize AI-generated images, followed by Generation Y and then Generation X. An interesting specific finding was the significant difficulty across all generations in distinguishing AI paintings from real paintings, and also the increased error rate for Generation Z and Y in depicting the store space. These findings suggest a complex interaction between age, visual style, and content type in people's ability to detect artificially created visuals, which opens the door for a deeper discussion of the possible causes of these differences and their broader implications.

## 4 CONCLUSION

The main objective of this research was to investigate the ability of three generations (X, Y and Z) to distinguish between human-generated visual content and artificial intelligence. The results found clearly show generational differences, with Generation Z consistently achieving higher success rates compared to Generation Y and Generation X. This difference may be partly explained by Generation Z's earlier and more intense exposure to digital technologies and online visual content, which may have provided them with a more intuitive understanding of the characteristics of AI-generated images.

In addition to generational differences, we also identified specific types of visual content that presented challenges for all age groups. Paintings, in particular, proved particularly difficult to distinguish, suggesting that AI is now capable of creating compelling artistic styles that are challenging to distinguish from human creations. The increased error rates in recognizing images of commercial spaces for Generation Z and Y suggest that certain complex scenes may contain subtle AI artifacts that are, paradoxically, less apparent to younger generations.

The implications of these findings are relevant to a variety of areas, including media literacy and countering misinformation. As the sophistication of generative AI grows, the ability to recognize artificially created content will become increasingly important.

For future research, we recommend expanding the sample of respondents to increase the generalizability of the results. Future studies should focus on a deeper understanding of the cognitive strategies used in AI detection and the development of tools and methods to improve this ability. Investigating differences in AI detection between professionals (e.g., artists) and the general population could also provide valuable insights.

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# VIRTUAL REALITY AS A TECHNOLOGICAL TOOL FOR ENHANCING EXPERIENCE INTENSITY IN REAL ESTATE PROJECT COMMUNICATION

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## ABSTRACT

*The effort to provide the most intense experience when selecting a new home is no longer constrained by significant technological limitations as it was in the past. Currently, real estate developers are actively utilizing cutting-edge technologies, including augmented and virtual reality, in their marketing communication. This paper presents an analysis of VR as a specific technology and its application in various real estate projects. The findings highlight the diversity of approaches and underscore the importance of strategic marketing communication planning, including the selection of appropriate tools, their timing, and practical implementation.*

**Key words:** virtual reality, VR, real estate, construction, real estate marketing

## INTRODUCTION

Marketing communication, as a broad and complex system of formats, procedures, and tools used to convey a message from the communicator to the recipient, plays a crucial role in the real estate development sector, particularly in its presentational, promotional, and sales functions. To understand the specificity of marketing approaches in real estate development, it is essential to address fundamental questions posed by Denis McQuail in *Introduction to Mass Communication Theory* (1999): “Who communicates with whom? Why do we communicate? How does communication take place? What is the content of the communication? What are its consequences?” These questions remain crucial, as the communication of real estate projects entails unique characteristics. According to McQuail, media often serve as a source of entertainment and shape leisure activities. Given that the primary objective of marketing communication in real estate projects is to increase awareness and drive sales, the element of entertainment and an extraordinary experience is of paramount importance.

McQuail’s definition of communication, as quoted from Gerbner (1967), “social interaction through messages,” remains highly relevant. When presenting residential, commercial, or public spaces, the emphasis is on interaction, immersive experience, and a deeper understanding of the offered product. However, we must also consider the perspectives of industry professionals and their customers. Philip Kotler, in his description of marketing culture, highlights the declining trust and loyalty of customers as a consequence of corporate scandals involving major firms in the US and Europe, such as Enron, WorldCom, Lernout & Hauspie, and Ahold. Kotler asserts that businesses must find new ways to regain customer and employee trust by ensuring truthful advertising and corporate responsibility.

Virtual reality (VR) is a digital tool that, on its own, is insufficient; it must be integrated into a comprehensive strategic business plan and marketing communication framework. VR is an advanced human-computer interaction interface that simulates a realistic environment (Zheng, 1998). Users can navigate and interact with this environment from different perspectives without requiring traditional input commands. These features make VR particularly valuable in the real estate industry. The ability to present spaces of planned or early-stage developments in a virtual setting provides a significant competitive advantage and answers critical questions: How do we define a product that does not yet exist? How do we deliver an experience to the recipient? What exactly are we offering?

Kotler's concept of relationship marketing offers one possible answer. This marketing approach, endorsed by numerous theorists, including Kotler and Wong (2007), emphasizes relationships at various levels—economic, social, technical, and legal—to build customer loyalty. From a potential buyer's perspective, what greater benefit could there be than experiencing their future home in advance, walking through the apartment, and feeling a sense of home before making a purchase?

This paper examines the application of virtual reality technology in the Slovak real estate market in 2024 and 2025. Specifically, it analyzes the adoption of a commercial VR solution named Molly, provided by Woow Studio. This technology is widely used across Central Europe by numerous real estate businesses and private investors. As a digital solution, it operates within internet browsers on computers, tablets, and mobile devices, limiting physical movement within the environment. The motion effect is simulated, like a video game, integrating virtual apartment interiors with real-world surroundings. Although classified as virtual reality, it incorporates elements of augmented reality (AR), which overlays virtual objects onto real-world environments (Azuma, 1997). In real estate applications, however, the primary focus is on creating fully synthetic virtual environments complemented by real-world elements such as exterior views.

VR technology enables users to experience interactive environments that simulate reality or create entirely new spaces. The primary focus is on user experience and interaction with the virtual world while suspending skepticism about the technology's authenticity. The key factor is the quality of experience, ensuring that the "reality" responds appropriately to user actions. VR represents not only a technological innovation but also a new approach to human-technology interaction (Machover & Tice, 1994). In real estate development, VR facilitates immersive and interactive environments, allowing architects, engineers, and investors to visualize and simulate projects before physical construction. It enhances project planning efficiency, minimizes errors, and enables participants to understand spatial relationships and design elements more effectively (Wang, 2018). However, its primary function remains presentation—enhancing the future homeowner's experience by showcasing apartment details, materials, color schemes, textures, lighting conditions, and customizable interior features.

The history of VR technology dates back to the 1960s when Ivan Sutherland published *The Ultimate Display* (Sutherland, 1965), laying the theoretical foundations for VR. In subsequent years, he developed the first computer-controlled headset with internal motion-tracking sensors. By the 1980s, VR technology had advanced significantly, with VPL Research, led by Jaron Lanier, introducing the first commercial data glove for virtual interaction. In the 1990s, VR applications extended into art and theater, exploring the relationship between virtual and real-world experiences. Despite its initial futuristic perception, VR often referenced historical and natural themes, as seen in Char Davies' work *Osmose* (Dixon, 2006).

Today, VR technology is undergoing a major transformation (Kenwright, 2019). Advances in science and technology have made VR more accessible and portable. The development of lightweight, affordable VR headsets has expanded its use in education, medicine, and entertainment. In education, VR enhances learning and skill development through interactive experiences. In medicine, it is used for surgical simulations and rehabilitation therapy. In entertainment, VR gaming and immersive simulations are gaining popularity. The affordability of VR is evident, with basic cardboard headsets available for as little as \$10.

## **Objectives, Methodology, and Research**

This paper examines the application of a specific VR technology in Slovak real estate development projects. The technology provider, Woow Studio s.r.o., offers the Molly VR service commercially across Central Europe. The study focuses on three residential projects: Millhaus, Florian Residence, and Bory Na Hrádzi, all

located in Bratislava and developed by Slovak companies Immocap a.s., Alto Real Estate j.s.a., and Penta Real Estate s.r.o. While all projects use the same VR technology on their websites, differences arise from strategic goals and marketing approaches.

The research, conducted from March 10–14, 2025, analyzed the following four areas:

- **Website Implementation:** Examined the placement and graphical presentation of VR functionality, including call-to-action buttons, color differentiation, and overall emphasis on the feature.
- **Apartment Selection:** Evaluated whether developers provided direct access to specific apartment views, including implementation and visualization techniques.
- **Apartment Details:** Assessed the level of detail in floor plans, orientation, exterior views, and furnishing proposals.
- **Interior Presentation:** Analyzed the entry point of virtual tours, focus on key design elements, furnishings, and the realism of exterior views.

By systematically defining these criteria, this research provides insights into how developers utilize VR technology to enhance marketing communication in the real estate sector.

### Project Millhaus

The Millhaus residential project, developed by the Immocap group, is marketed as urban housing in the Mlynské Nivy district. With 149 residential units, it ranks as a mid-sized development within the capital city of Slovakia. The project’s marketing communication is based on the narrative: “Move forward, be closer,” emphasizing both the proximity to the city center and the prospective buyer’s progression within the urban zone or personal life situation.



*Preview of selected call to action approaches used for VR on Millhaus project. Source: Own research*

### Website

The central theme of the Millhaus project website is a large-format static visualization of the project. The primary menu is traditionally positioned in the top bar, with two call-to-action (CTA) buttons: “Housing Offer” and “Virtual Tour.” The content area also highlights a key message through a prominent colored section stating: “Planned completion in autumn 2026.”

A button inviting users to the virtual tour is placed at the homepage’s forefront, alongside the housing offer button. Notably, the “Virtual Tour” label lacks any accompanying symbols, pictograms, or virtual reality (VR) graphics, relying solely on text. However, the button is centrally positioned and holds a dominant function—arguably the most prominent in this section of the website. The homepage, in addition to these functions and the main menu, also provides an option for direct phone contact with the developer. Overall, the virtual tour entrance function plays a leading role across all viewing versions, including desktops and mobile devices.

### Selection of a specific apartment

While subtle differences in the approaches of various real estate residential projects are observable on their homepage layouts, more significant distinctions become evident upon entering the virtual reality environment. Typically, the initial phase of selecting a specific apartment displays the building as a whole, with

broader and narrower spatial relationships, as well as its location and massing. Users can move their cursor to choose a specific unit and navigate through the space.

In the case of Millhaus, an additional but non-functional step was observed: a button labeled “Move Closer” appears at the bottom of the virtual tour window. One crucial distinction of the Millhaus project is that it uniquely utilizes an embedded window directly within its website. Other projects redirect users to a new, standalone window when accessing the virtual tour. Millhaus integrates the tour within the original browser window, while still offering full functionality, including project rotation, spatial navigation, and unit selection. Like other projects, it uses color-coded indicators—green, blue, and red—to denote unit status. Users can also explore interior spaces and three exterior viewpoints for better project perception. However, the exterior perspective is relatively understated, slightly diminishing the overall user experience. Enhancing its prominence or offering it as an independent feature, as seen in the Florian Residence project, could be beneficial.

#### Apartment Detail View

Millhaus stands out from competitors in its use of dynamic movements, animations that zoom into selected units, and realistic detailing—not only for external views of the project but also for floor plans and virtual reality walkthroughs. Upon selecting a unit, the view automatically aligns correctly, offering a realistic sense of orientation, including cardinal directions. Users can then choose to explore additional materials, technical drawings with dimensions, alternative apartment layouts, or enter virtual reality directly. If the communication strategy aimed to maximize users’ time on the website, this objective was achieved successfully. Each step presents multiple options, creating an interactive experience reminiscent of a video game—even before entering the virtual apartment tour.

#### Interior View

Our study focused on key factors in assessing the use of virtual reality as a sales support tool. Three essential aspects of VR interior representation were examined: entry point, design, and window view. In Millhaus, the entry point is set at the apartment’s front door, but the wide-angle perspective provides a sense of spaciousness, material usage, a glimpse into adjacent rooms, and a partial window view. This execution effectively utilizes the opportunity offered by virtual reality. The Millhaus VR interior successfully meets all three key criteria without requiring additional movement within the unit—directly at the entry point.

### **Florian Residence Project**

The Florian Residence project, developed by Alto Real Estate, carries the slogan “Urban living for a lifetime,” emphasizing location and functionality. Its marketing messaging highlights quality materials, modern technology, and a prime location in Bratislava’s Old Town, leveraging its proximity to landmarks such as the Slovak Radio Building, the National Bank of Slovakia, and the Blumenthal Church.



*Preview of selected call to action approaches used for VR on Florian Residence project. Source: Own research*

### Website

Like Millhaus, Florian Residence features a primary menu bar at the bottom of the page and a highlighted milestone announcement—“Completion in autumn 2025.” A key difference is its use of a pop-up banner: whereas Millhaus employs it for direct contact with a sales representative, Florian Residence uses it to offer financial incentives for purchasing an apartment. In terms of CTA prioritization, Florian Residence places two separate buttons for virtual reality tours—one for exterior and one for interior VR exploration. Unlike Millhaus, Florian Residence incorporates a globe icon next to “View Apartment in VR” and “View Exterior in VR,” though the association of this symbol with virtual tours is debatable.

### Apartment Detail View

A major contrast between Florian Residence and Millhaus is evident in their approach to displaying apartment details. Millhaus employs dynamic animations and immersive zooming, while Florian Residence provides static images with basic information. Essential technical details, such as apartment dimensions, floor plans, and solar orientation, are missing. Instead, Florian Residence includes a “Enter VR” button to enhance the virtual experience but lacks detailed visualization of unit specifications.

### Interior View

The entry point, design, and initial viewpoint within the Florian Residence VR tour do not effectively showcase the apartment’s advantages. The default viewing angle does not highlight any significant features, lacks an emotional appeal, and presents the window too distantly. Revising the entry point or adjusting the perspective could better communicate the project’s benefits.

## **Bory Bývanie na Hrádzi Project**

This large-scale development is part of the broader Bory Bývanie initiative, branded under the narrative “Carefree games on the embankment,” promoting family-oriented living with civic amenities and public spaces. The project emphasizes affordability while maintaining a certain standard of living.



*Preview of selected call to action approaches used for VR on Bory Bývanie na Hrádzi project. Source: Own research*

### Website

The website aligns with the broader Bory Bývanie concept, featuring a top-menu bar and a hamburger menu for additional options. Unlike Millhaus and Florian Residence, it does not use a highlighted content area for milestone announcements or contact options. The virtual tour buttons are placed at the bottom, alongside the “About Living in Bory” button. Unique among the studied projects, Bory na Hrádzi includes a pictogram in its CTA button.

### Selection of a Specific Apartment

The process of selecting a specific apartment or residential unit differs slightly from observed competing projects due to the scale of the development. Upon entering the virtual reality environment—in a separate new window—the entire current phase of the project is displayed. In the first step, the user must select a specific building before choosing the desired apartment. Despite the seemingly broad range of available units, this approach complicates spatial orientation within the virtual environment, on the website, and in relation to the

real-world surroundings. Moreover, the virtual space lacks any reference points, making it difficult for users to determine their exact location, the orientation of cardinal directions, and other key spatial aspects. Only in the next step does the user proceed to the apartment selection, where these orientation features remain absent.

#### Apartment Details

The most significant observed shortcoming of the *Bývanie na Hrádzi* project is the presentation of apartment details. Basic visualized information—such as the floor plan, floor level, orientation, and layout—is entirely missing. After selecting a specific unit, the user is presented with a preview panel in a side menu, displaying the apartment's area, number of rooms, and floor level, along with an option to enter a virtual tour, which is indicated only by a VR pictogram. At this stage, the screen offers two options to navigate back: either to the overall model of the *Bývanie na Hrádzi* development phase or to the specific building—in this case, Object A2. Both navigation and execution appear highly technical, almost project-oriented, lacking a communicative dimension that would emphasize engagement with the end user.

#### Interior

As in other examined projects, the entry point in *Bývanie na Hrádzi* is the apartment's front door. This solution represents a compromise between showcasing the unit's layout and design. However, the specific apartment's layout does not allow for an optimal view of the entire space. As a result, the initial view is divided, partly showing the hallway and a wall-mounted coat rack—a design element. While the rendering is appropriate for the project, the initial view lacks emotional appeal and the overall sense of home. It appears that the project developers did not fully recognize the significance of a strong first impression when introducing prospective buyers to the apartment.

#### Conclusion

Virtual reality represents a revolutionary tool in real estate marketing, providing an immersive experience of planned developments. Our study examined how developers integrate VR into their communication strategies and identified areas for improvement. While significant investments are made in VR, its application is predominantly for presentation rather than interactive engagement. For example, Florian Residence heavily markets its prime location but does not incorporate it into its VR experience, while Bory *Bývanie na Hrádzi* promotes public spaces yet does not showcase them effectively in VR.

The success of VR in real estate hinges not on the technology itself but on strategic implementation within the overall marketing narrative. Future campaigns should consider VR's unique capabilities to maximize engagement and communicate project benefits effectively.

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# PATTERNS: HUMANE SIDE OF COMPUTER SCIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

*Coming from building architecture, the concept of a pattern showed to have much greater applicability. As operative ideas that can be composed with each other to build a greater whole, patterns found their home in computer science—at conference on pattern languages of programs (PLoP conferences). Versatility of the opportunities software development offers for the application of patterns, and how software is close to people and pure ideas, as well as inclusiveness of these conferences, attracted, supported, and embraced all kinds of patterns outside software development. A particular example of this are drama patterns, which, eventually, started giving back to software development and understanding of the idea of patterns as such. Currently, there are three major PLoP conferences that are still active—PLoP, EuroPLoP, and AsianPLoP—and they all adapted their names to include practices and people, reaffirming them as conferences on pattern languages of programs, people, and practices. Computer science is usually perceived as a very technical discipline. However, there is a humane side to it and it's open to all: patterns.*

**Key words:** pattern, pattern language, people, drama, software

## 1 DRAMA PATTERNS

Imagine you are preparing a drama play on the motives of Lewis Carroll's novel on Alice, Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There. Alice gets to Wonderland through a mirror (not shown in the play) and she finds herself in a room with many doors.<sup>1</sup> She tries them one by one hoping that one of them will bring her back home, but each door gets her just into another bizarre situation unrelated to other ones. One of them is a fashion studio with mannequins and a fashion designer. When Alice enters the fashion studio, she and the fashion designer end up in the front part of the stage, while the mannequins remain in its back part. Instead of helping Alice to find her way back home, the fashion designer tries to sell her a hat. Frantically searching for her wallet, Alice finds out she doesn't have it with her. At that moment, Alice freezes with a sigh and surprised face expression, while mannequins approach her shaking her and calling upon her to wake up. Alice exclaims "a-ha," as she remembers she forgot her wallet at home, the mannequins get back and become still again.

The rooms Alice is wandering through are loosely coupled situations. There is a need to connect them, but without affecting what happens in each situation. This conflict of contradicting forces is resolved by introducing a room with many doors as a frame situation that associates the separate situations. Alice represents a transitioner whose transitions trigger the separate situations. This is a drama pattern (Vranić and Vranić, 2019) called Loosely Coupled Situations (Vranić et al., 2020). It repeats in many different plays and movies, but it's always different. One of the instances of this pattern can be seen in the famous movie Four Rooms (1995). The movie consists of four independent stories each of which takes place in one of four different hotel rooms. The stories are triggered by the bellhop, who acts as a transitioner, entering the room.

Having Alice and the fashion designer set in the front part of the stage, while the mannequins remain in its back part introduces two perspectives by splitting the stage by depth (it can be also split horizontally or vertically). This is another drama pattern called Two Perspectives (Vranić et al., 2020). that resolves the

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This is a play created by the author of this paper called Alice (Vranić et al., 2020).

following conflict: two perspectives need to be shown simultaneously, but there is only one stage. Use of split screen can be encountered in many movies. For example, in *Run Lola Run* (1998), act one, Manni is shown in the left part of the screen, and Lola running to save him in the right part of the screen.

When Alice is searching for her wallet, she becomes frantic. The fashion designer provokes her to act like this, which creates the following conflict: the provoker requests something from the frantic person, but the frantic person is unable to provide that. This is resolved by having the frantic person use all the efforts to provide what the provoker requested, albeit unsuccessfully. This is yet another drama pattern called *Frantic* (Vranić et al., 2020). The same pattern occurs in *The Immigrant* (1917), in the scene in which Charlie Chaplin, eating in a restaurant, notices what happens to those who have no money to pay for their meal and starts frantically searching for the money in his pockets.

At the culmination of her frantic search for her wallet, Alice freezes with a sigh and surprised face expression, which creates the following conflict: there is a need to emphasize an act made by the important character, but, in real time, this doesn't last sufficiently long to be observable. This conflict is resolved by prolonging the act made by the important character by freezing the scene for a sufficient time. This is yet another drama pattern called *Freeze What's Important* (Vranić et al., 2020). The same pattern occurs once more with mannequins freezing again. It can also be seen in *Cleopatra* (1963), in the scene in which Queen Cleopatra stands motionless like a statue on an elevated place, while the people surrounding her are very dynamic. As soon as Cleopatra starts moving and going down, the people quiet down and become motionless.

This is a sequence of drama patterns. Each drama pattern generates a dramatic element as a resolution of the conflict of the contradicting forces in the corresponding dramatic situation (Honišek and Vranić, 2020). Soon after, another conflict arises asking for another pattern to resolve it, as stated by Vranić (2023):

Conflicts are like fire. Wild and violent. But they are alive. Patterns stem their power of making everything more alive from conflicts of contradicting forces. They balance them like an acrobat balances two weights walking across a tightrope on a verge of falling to one or the other side. Each step brings a need of establishing another balance. This is how living things grow: resolving one problem creates other, smaller problems to be resolved.

The idea of patterns is much more general. Although the idea of patterns came from building architecture, where it was first proposed by Christopher Alexander (Alexander et al., 1968), who elaborated it further during the next decade (Alexander et al., 1977; Alexander, 1979), it flourished nowhere else as it did in computer science. We'll take a look at how it spread from there to other fields—and drama in particular (Section 2), as well as how drama patterns gave back to patterns in computer science and beyond (Section 3). Then we'll see how the conferences on pattern languages of programs, people, and practices provide a humane environment for research of patterns (Section 4), with a summary and outlook (Section 5).

## 2 FROM COMPUTER SCIENCE TO DRAMA

The 1st Conference on Pattern Languages of Programs in 1994 was the official moment the patterns entered computer science. *Design Patterns: Elements of Reusable Object-Oriented Software* (Gamma et al., 1995) is considered to be the first book on design patterns, where design is meant as software design, although it was arguably preceded by Coplien's book on C++ idioms (Coplien, 1992), which later were recasted as patterns Coplien (1998). Pattern-oriented software architecture pursued further the idea of establishing a pattern language of software design (Buschmann et al., 1995; Schmidt et al., 2000; Michael Kircher, 2001; Buschmann et al., 2007b,a).

That software systems copy the communication structures of the organizations that produce them has been known for a long time (Conway, 1968). This opened a whole new area for patterns in software development: the one of organizational patterns (Coplien and Harrison, 2004; Ambler, 1998; Sutherland et al., 2019; Coplien and Harrison, 2018; Cockburn, 2006, 2008)<sup>2</sup>. Organizational patterns can be used to establish and maintain organizations that develop software based on the experience from best software development projects.

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2. Cockburn tends to call patterns strategies.

Higher level design patterns are sometimes denoted as architectural patterns (with architecture meaning of software architecture). Analysis patterns are also distinguished. There are also security patterns. All these patterns are collectively called software patterns.

The participants of software development play their roles much like in any other kind of drama, Of course, their intention is not to perform in front of the audience. They are delivering software, after all. Nevertheless, it could be fun to watch them—at least as a reality show.

In drama, the actors do the same, only with no intention to deliver any other artifact than the organization they established as such. What they use to build good drama is just a special kind of organizational patterns: drama patterns. Just like software developers, they might not be aware they're building their organization with patterns. In fact, most of people are not aware of patterns—be it in software, drama, or elsewhere. Some two dozen of drama patterns have been documented (Vranić and Vranić, 2019; Vranić et al., 2020; Honíšek and Vranić, 2020) and actively applied them with tremendously diverse participants: small children (Vranić and Vranić, 2019), computer science conference participants (Vranić et al., 2024, 2023c, 2019, 2023b; Vranić and Vranić, 2024b; Vranić et al., 2022), computer science research seminar participants (Vranić et al., 2023a; Vranić, 2019), students in various fields including acting (Vranić and Vranić, 2021, 2024d), and even seniors within the university of the third age (provided by Pan-European University). Drama patterns formed a major part of Creative Written and Oral Expression, a university courses for computer science students established and taught by the author of this paper from 2022 to 2024<sup>3</sup>. The author continues to use drama patterns in several courses for media students.

### 3 BACK TO COMPUTER SCIENCE AND BEYOND

Drama patterns open a plethora of possibilities of experiencing seemingly unrelated things including programming (Vranić et al., 2023b; Vranić, 2024b; Vranić and Vranić, 2024c), organizing people in software development (Vranić et al., 2020, 2023c), or adopting patterns by analogy (Vranić and Vranić, 2024b). There is an idea that they could even enable experiencing how nonlinear systems work (Vranić and Vranić, 2024b).

For example, design patterns, which are not easy to understand from their descriptions, can be dramatized. A straightforward way is literal dramatization, with people playing objects taking roles in design patterns and interacting through them. But it's much more effective—and fun—to do this metaphorically. Visitor is one of the most difficult to understand design patterns. It resolves situations when there is a need to extend some elements with new operations, but without having to actually change their program code. It does that by adding a kind of a back door to call new operations provided separately in visitor objects. Now recall the Loosely Coupled Situations drama pattern. The transitioner enters different situations and changes what's happening there. Isn't this like a visitor object adapting the behavior of elements in the Visitor design pattern? Having students play this situation in an actual story such as Alice will ensure they could never forget the essence of this design pattern.

Trying drama patterns showed to improve capabilities in applying organizational patterns of software development (Vranić et al., 2020, 2023c). In a playful way, drama patterns show how to actually apply a pattern, how to improve a pattern, how to modify a pattern, how to incept a higher level pattern, how to retract a pattern, and how to compose patterns.

Games can be seen as drama that embraces its “readers” within itself. They play their roles within the framework of the game by which they effectively build drama pieces. Sometimes, they even record them for others to watch. Good drama is made of drama patterns. Good games are made of game patterns. As Vranić and Vranić (2023) point out, there are some similarities between drama and game patterns even on a pattern-to-pattern level: the Fast Travel pattern resembles the Loosely Coupled Situations pattern in how it enables to switch quickly between otherwise unrelated or distant places. These game patterns have also been published at the PLoP conference. Last year, Barney, who published numerous game patterns (Barney, 2020a) and maintains many more in his pattern library (Barney, 2020b), joined the PLoP conference, too (Barney, 2024).

Patterns for dealing with typical situations at creative writing classes (Vranić, 2024a; Vranić and Vranić, 2024a) are yet another kind of organizational patterns. They are naturally related to drama patterns as they can

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3. [is.stuba.sk/katalog/syllabus.pl?predmet=401408](https://is.stuba.sk/katalog/syllabus.pl?predmet=401408)

be used to organize and stimulate writing drama scenarios. On the other hand, drama patterns can and have been used by the author of this paper to support collaborative scenario writing. Scenes are first played, usually in different variants, and then written down.

The insight that drama patterns provide is much more general. It applies to a pattern as a concept. With drama patterns, people become part of them and literally feel the conflicts of contradicting forces. This is a good exercise for all pattern practitioners and researchers no matter which area they target.

#### **4 HUMANE ENVIRONMENT FOR RESEARCH OF PATTERNS**

Numerous patterns and pattern languages have been published so far at the original conference on pattern Languages of programs (PLoP) and other such conferences (commonly known as PLoP conferences): EuroPLoP, AsianPLoP, ScrumPLoP, VikingPLoP, ChiliPLoP, SugarloafPLoP... All these were computer science conferences, but they embraced and supported patterns from other fields. Thus, just Iba and his collaborators have created more than thirty pattern languages covering the fields of learning, collaboration, presentation, project design, change making, disaster prevention, well-being, beauty in everyday life, living well with dementia, cooking, etc. (Iba and Isaku, 2016) most of which were published at PLoP conferences. Iba school of pattern languages grew with the support of computer scientists. And support at PLoP conferences is extensive and intensive. It is true that a conference to cover this kind of pattern languages was established by the Portland Urban Architecture Research Lab (PUARL) in 2009 (Portland Urban Architecture Research Lab, 2025a), but it was organized only five times with the last conference taking place in 2018 (Portland Urban Architecture Research Lab, 2025b). Also, there was another conference called Pursuit of Pattern Languages for Societal Change conference (PURPLESOC) (Danube University Krems, 2019), but it also had a short life. It was organized only three times: in 2014, 2015, and 2017. It doesn't seem that either of these conferences involved shepherding and writers' workshops, which are an essential part of PLoP conferences from their beginning.

In fact, shepherding and writers' workshops are what makes PLoP conferences humane and what made possible transposing the idea of patterns outside computer science. Shepherding could be seen as a form of open peer reviewing, but it is much more than that. A shepherd, appointed by the program chair among the program committee members and other volunteering experts in the field, carefully and patiently advises the author or authors on how to improve the paper, guiding and protecting them as good shepherds do with their sheep.

During shepherding, which takes two months or more, shepherds share their thoughts with their sheep several times, leading to several revisions of their papers. Many authors outside computer science had shepherds from computer science. By this, the understanding of patterns was effectively transferred from computer science to other fields.

At the conference, each paper is discussed in a writers' workshop. This technique which has been in use by writers in the USA from nineteenth century (Gabriel, 2002), was brought to PLoP conferences by Gabriel. He tried it first in 1994 at the Hillside Group retreat at Sequoia Seminars in Boulder Creek, California. Later the same year, the Hillside Group organized the first PLoP conference and writers' workshops have been an indispensable part of PLoP conferences ever since. For a detailed explanation on how are writers' workshops performed one may have a look at the corresponding pattern language (Gabriel, 2022; Coplien and Woolf, 1999), but the core idea is simple. A group of authors (and possibly other participants) discusses each others papers so that the author of the paper being discussed is just listening. This is as if the author or authors were watching a TV show where a panel discusses their paper. As a TV show of that kind, a writers' workshop is lead by a moderator. The atmosphere should be constructive. Praising the author for good aspects of the paper is as important as critique. Critique should be backed by suggestions for improvement.

At PLoP conferences, writers' workshops commonly involve people with very different background. Computer scientists sit together with managers, social scientists, culinary experts, sports experts, literary scientists, psychologists, pedagogists, media experts, game designers—and, of course, writers, poets, playwrights, and drama and creative writing teachers. And they're all carefully reading each other's papers so they can help improve them.

It is important to notice that—unlike other technical disciplines—software development operates at

the level of ideas. No cumbersome construction material of any kind is involved. Albeit it requires a rigor in expressing the ideas as programs so that they can be executed, it offers versatile opportunities for their application. While the idea of patterns came from building architecture, their application there is very hierarchical with limited possibilities for composition. Thus, while setting apart the rooms in a house to reside in different cities makes no sense, this is exactly what happens to the layers of a software system when it becomes distributed using the Broker pattern. Actually, one of the research problems in software patterns is how to identify additional meaningful sequences of their application (Matovič and Vranić, 2025, 2024, 2023; Waseeb et al., 2020; Waseeb and Vranić, 2022).

In all but simplest cases of software development, close collaboration of a large number of people is inevitable. And they all collaborate to—express ideas. Patterns are actually ideas. Operative ideas. What other environment than software development—and computer science in general—is more appropriate for them to be explored?

## 5 SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

Coming from building architecture, the concept of a pattern showed to have much greater applicability. As operative ideas that can be composed with each other to build a greater whole, patterns found their home in computer science—at conference on pattern languages of programs (PLoP conferences). Versatility of the opportunities software development offers for the application of patterns, and how software is close to people and pure ideas, as well as inclusiveness of these conferences, attracted, supported, and embraced all kinds of patterns outside software development.

A particular example of this are drama patterns, which were inspired by organizational patterns of software development. They showed to be very effective and efficient for building drama plays in very different settings: with small children, computer science conference participants, computer science research seminar participants, students in various fields including acting, and even seniors within the university of the third age. Eventually, they started giving back to software development and understanding the idea of patterns as such. Several metaphorical dramatizations of design patterns have been tried so far. Trying drama patterns showed to improve capabilities in applying organizational patterns of software development. Furthermore, trying drama patterns is a good exercise for all pattern practitioners and researchers no matter which area they target that enables them to gain an instant insight into the concept of a pattern as they become part of them and literally feel the conflicts of contradicting forces.

Currently, there are three major PLoP conferences that are still active—PLoP, EuroPloP, and AsianPloP—and they all adapted their names to include practices and people, reaffirming them as conferences on pattern languages of programs, people, and practices. Computer science is usually perceived as a very technical discipline. However, there is a humane side to it and it's open to all: patterns.

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# MARKETING AND THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT - MARVEL'S MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR SHOWCASING DIVERSITY.

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the marketing strategies of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in presenting diversity and inclusivity in its films. It analyzes how Marvel uses digital environments, social media, and targeted campaigns to promote films featuring diverse heroes such as Black Panther, Captain Marvel, and Shang-Chi. The thesis examines the impact of these strategies on public opinion, sales, and fan engagement, while also exploring the controversies associated with representation in popular culture. The results suggest that inclusive marketing not only broadens target audiences but also shapes debates about diversity in the entertainment industry.*

**Key words:** Marvel Cinematic Universe, Diversity, Marketing Strategies, Social Media

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) represents one of the most significant and profitable film franchises of our time, profoundly influencing global pop culture and shaping media discourse. Since its inception in 2008, Marvel has continually adapted to changing audience preferences, with one of the most striking trends of the last decade being the increasing emphasis on diversity and inclusivity. With the increasing societal demand for the representation of diverse identities, diversity has become not only an ethical and cultural issue, but also a key element of marketing strategy.

In a digital marketing environment where brands are actively engaging with audiences through social media, interactive content and targeted advertising campaigns, Marvel is effectively using these tools to communicate its commitment to inclusivity. Films such as Black Panther (2018), Captain Marvel (2019), and Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021) are examples of thoughtful marketing strategies that target different demographics and build a strong fan base through personalized content.

Marvel Studios doesn't just rely on traditional forms of advertising in its marketing strategy, but actively harnesses the power of its fan base. This approach, known as 'fan-marketing', involves engaging fans in promotion through content sharing, social media interaction and the creation of custom content, thereby increasing awareness of upcoming titles and fostering brand loyalty.

One example of this approach is the campaign for Captain America: Civil War, where fans were encouraged to join #TeamCap or #TeamIronMan. This challenge led to massive fan engagement on social media, with fans creating and sharing content supporting their chosen team, organically spreading the promotion of the film (Fidan, 2021).

Marvel also uses interactive campaigns to engage fans in discovering new information. While promoting the Secret Invasion series, mysterious images were posted on Twitter that disappeared after a short time. Fans who managed to capture them were able to piece them together into a map leading to an exclusive trailer, creating a sense of exclusivity and involvement in the mystery (Craig, 2024).

This study examines Marvel's marketing strategies for portraying diversity in the digital environment. It

examines what tools and communication channels Marvel uses to reach different audiences and what impact these strategies have on brand perception, the financial success of films, and the debate about representation in pop culture. It also assesses whether Marvel is genuinely promoting inclusivity or whether this is primarily a marketing exercise.

## **2. EVOLUTION OF DIVERSITY IN THE MCU**

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has seen a significant shift in its portrayal of diversity since its inception in 2008. In the early stages, it was dominated mainly by white male heroes such as Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.) and Captain America (Chris Evans). However, as time progressed, the MCU began to actively incorporate more diverse characters, reflecting broader societal changes and increasing demands for representation in the media.

In the study “On Diversity Issues After Phase 4 of the Marvel Cinematic Universe”, the author states that there was an increase in racial diversity in the MCU after Phase 4. New characters and actors from different ethnic groups began to be more represented, which contributed to a wider range of identities and experiences portrayed in the films.

For example, *Black Panther* (2018) introduced the African American hero T’Challa (played by Chadwick Boseman) and became a cultural phenomenon that highlighted the importance of African culture and identity. Similarly, the title *Captain Marvel* (2019) introduced the character of Carol Danvers (Brie Larson), which was a significant step for the MCU as it was the first ever film with a female protagonist. These films not only saw commercial success, but also sparked a global discussion about the representation of women and minorities in superhero stories.

Despite these advances, challenges have also emerged. Some fans and critics have argued that diversity efforts are often superficial or motivated by commercial interests. The study “Fandom, Racism, and the Myth of Diversity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe” discusses how some depictions of diversity can seem inauthentic or like a marketing ploy, leading to questions about true inclusivity in the MCU. In the study, the author goes on to point out that some efforts to promote diversity in the MCU may be perceived as superficial and primarily motivated by commercial interests, rather than an authentic promotion of inclusivity. With Marvel actively using diversity as a marketing tool, the question creeps in as to whether this is a genuine effort at change or just a strategy to attract a wider audience. This process involves the portrayal of various minorities, which can give the impression that representation is, in some cases, more about meeting certain “market expectations” than it is about creating deep and complex characters. Some critics argue that this superficiality can be seen particularly in characters who are portrayed through stereotypes, which can reduce their authenticity and value to the target audience. Although Marvel, through characters such as *Black Panther*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Shang-Chi*, offers important steps towards inclusivity, there is still a risk that these characters are presented in templates that avoid deeper depictions of cultural and historical contexts.

The perception of these characters is also influenced by interaction with fans, who often appreciate them but also criticize them for their lack of depth or complexity. While Marvel has crafted a powerful story about diversity, this story still faces questions about the authenticity and value of these representations. The study shows that the MCU is at a point where it must balance diversity and marketing to prevent diversity from becoming a temporary trend with no lasting impact on societal perceptions (Furtakova, 2023).

## **3. KEY MARKETING CAMPAIGNS RELATED TO DIVERSITY IN THE MCU**

Marvel’s marketing campaigns are integral to its success, especially in showcasing diversity in the MCU. This trend has been particularly evident with three key films: *Black Panther* (2018), *Captain Marvel* (2019), and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021). These films have not only pushed the boundaries of representation of different ethnic groups, but have also introduced unique marketing strategies to support their commercial success.

### **3.1. Black Panther (2018)**

“Black Panther” was groundbreaking not only in its content, but also in its marketing strategy to reach African-American audiences and emphasize African culture. Marvel invested approximately \$140 million in advertising, which included collaborating with popular rapper Kendrick Lamar on the soundtrack and presenting teasers during major sporting events with high viewership by African-American audiences. In addition, the #BlackPantherChallenge initiative was created to encourage people to fund tickets for children from less privileged backgrounds, resulting in approximately \$900,000 being raised through various GoFundMe campaigns (Nelsen, 2019).

### **3.2. Captain Marvel (2019)**

“Captain Marvel” introduced the first female superhero in a lead role within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The marketing campaign emphasized female empowerment and worked with various brands to reach a wide audience. For example, Adidas launched limited edition sneakers inspired by the Captain Marvel character, highlighting the connection between sports and strong female role models (Marvel Cinematic Universe Wiki, n.d.).

To promote the film, Marvel Studios also partnered with Alaska Airlines, which unveiled a special edition Boeing 737-800 aircraft featuring graphics of main character Carol Danvers. This aircraft, registration N531AS, began flying on the entire Alaska Airlines route network, including flights to Hawaii, giving the film significant international visibility. The aircraft, which was themed to promote the film, is dominated by visual elements associated with the main character. The fuselage of the aircraft is in Captain Marvel’s iconic colours - red, blue and gold - while the side of the aircraft features a large-scale depiction of the heroine herself in her signature suit. On the tail of the aircraft is a star symbol representing the Captain Marvel emblem. Upon boarding, passengers see the official logo of the film, instantly putting them in a themed atmosphere. Another creative element is the Goose the cat, which is displayed on the wings of the plane as a surprising visual detail for the passengers. This character plays a prominent role in the film, and its presence on the plane adds playfulness and fan value to the campaign. The overall design of the aircraft is designed to reflect Captain Marvel’s strength and determination, emphasizing her status as a pilot and superheroine who inspires new generations (Alaska Airlines, 2019).

This collaboration represented a successful merger between the entertainment industry and the airline, reaching passengers directly while reinforcing the Captain Marvel brand as a symbol of strength and inspiration.

### **3.3. Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021)**

“Shang-Chi” was Marvel’s first film with an Asian protagonist. Its release during the COVID-19 pandemic presented a challenge to traditional marketing approaches. Marvel focused on digital platforms and social media to create awareness of the film. The official trailer was released just four months before the premiere, which was unusual compared to previous films. Despite the limitations associated with pandemics, the film was met with a positive response and achieved commercial success (Kimp.io, 2021).

## **4. USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS AND DIGITAL STRATEGIES**

In promoting “Black Panther,” Marvel emphasized the celebration of African culture and heritage. Exclusive behind-the-scenes glimpses, interviews with the filmmakers and actors were shared on social media, reinforcing authenticity and fan engagement. The hashtag #WakandaForever went viral and symbolised pride and unity, contributing to the massive online spread of content related to the film. According to GeekWire, the film generated more than 35 million tweets, with the most used hashtags being #BlackPanther, #WakandaForever and #Wakanda.

For Captain Marvel, the use of social media was a key aspect, as this engagement led to a strong connection between the film and its fans. One of the main strategies was to create viral campaigns and interactive content that invited fans to actively engage. On platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, Marvel

shared special content such as teasers from the film, exclusive photos from the set and stories about the character Carol Danvers.

In addition, Marvel created hashtags such as #HigherFurtherFaster, which fans used to share their own posts and opinion on the film, which managed to foster a worldwide discussion about Captain Marvel. Marvel also tapped influencers and ambassadors who shared content related to the film to help expand its reach. Special videos regularly appeared on Twitter and Instagram Stories highlighting the film's themes of strength, female empowerment and courage.

Also, Marvel launched contests and challenges that allowed fans to win tickets to premieres, exclusive merchandise and other prizes. These activities not only encouraged community engagement, but also created a personal connection between fans and the film.

In promoting "Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings," Marvel faced challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected its marketing strategy. The studio focused on building anticipation through social media, where it shared trailers, exclusive footage and interacted with fans. Despite these efforts, some fans expressed concerns about the film's lack of promotion compared to other MCU titles, leading to discussions about possible racial bias in marketing practices (Hirwani, 2021).

## **5. AUDIENCE IMPACT AND COMMERCIAL SUCCESS**

Marvel Studios has achieved significant commercial success and positive audience response through *Black Panther* (2018), *Captain Marvel* (2019) and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021).

### **5.1. Black Panther (2018)**

*Black Panther* became a groundbreaking film within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), as it was the first film with a predominantly black cast and director Ryan Coogler. The film was praised for its authentic depiction of African culture, strong acting performances, and complex characters. It achieved high ratings from critics and audiences alike on Rotten Tomatoes, making it one of the MCU's top-rated films. In addition, it received several Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, and won three awards, including Best Original Score, Best Costume Design, and Best Production Design. Actress Lupita Nyong'o later stated that before the film's release, there was concern about its success due to the myth that "black films" were not commercially successful (Herrero, 2024). Commercially, the film earned over \$1.3 billion worldwide, surpassing expectations and becoming one of the MCU's most successful films. Its success debunked the myth that films with black protagonists cannot achieve global commercial success.

### **5.2. Captain Marvel (2019)**

*Captain Marvel* has unveiled the first female superhero in a lead role within the MCU, portrayed by Brie Larson. The film was a commercial success, with worldwide sales exceeding \$1.1 billion, making it one of the highest-grossing films of 2019. On Rotten Tomatoes, it achieved a rating of 79% from critics and 45% from audiences, indicating mixed reactions from audiences. Still, the film was praised for Brie Larson's performance and for empowering female characters in the superhero genre.

### **5.3. Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021)**

*Shang-Chi* was the first MCU film to feature an Asian protagonist, portrayed by Simu Liu. The film was praised for its authentic depiction of Asian culture, choreography of fight scenes, and humor. It earned \$94.5 million in the US during its four-day opening weekend, exceeding expectations and indicating strong audience interest. The film grossed more than \$432 million worldwide, becoming the ninth highest-grossing film of 2021 and surpassing expectations despite the theatrical constraints caused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On Rotten Tomatoes, the film achieved a 91% rating from critics and a 98% rating from audiences, indicating its positive reception.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The success of these films proves that diversity and inclusion in superhero stories can lead to significant commercial success and positive audience reception. Black Panther, Captain Marvel, and Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings not only expanded the representation of different cultures and genders in mainstream cinema, but also opened the door for more stories featuring diverse characters within the MCU.

At the same time, the films have shown that representation is not only socially but also economically important. Their success at the cinema box office has disproved stereotypes that films with diverse casts have limited market opportunities. On the contrary, it was their focus on inclusivity and reaching a wider audience that played a key role in their commercial results.

This trend suggests that in the future, diversity in the Hollywood industry will be not only expected, but a necessary element of success. Marvel Studios' strategic approach has shown that authentic representation of different cultural and social groups can not only shape social discourse, but also encourage new generations of viewers to feel represented and inspired. The examples of these three films thus serve as proof that inclusive stories not only have artistic and emotional value, but also long-term financial potential for the film industry.

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# ETHICS IN MODERN FILMS: CHARACTER MORALITY AND ITS IMPACT ON AUDIENCES

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## ABSTRACT

*Modern films and TV series increasingly portray characters with morally ambiguous traits, raising questions among viewers about the boundaries between good and evil. This shift from the traditional black-and-white portrayal of characters to more complex figures caught in ethical dilemmas offers a new perspective on moral values and their perception in real life. Films such as Breaking Bad or Joker illustrate how characters performing unethical actions for personal motives can provoke empathetic responses and cognitive dissonance, forcing viewers to reassess their own moral beliefs. Furthermore, exposure to such dilemmas can influence the behavior and value system of viewers, especially younger generations whose psychological development is sensitive to media content. This paper explores the impact of morally ambiguous characters on viewers' values from a psychological, cultural, and ethical standpoint. It also discusses the influence of film ratings on protecting minors from inappropriate content and the ways in which films can affect the formation of societal values and behaviors.*

## INTRODUCTION

Ethics is generally not a term directly associated with the research or analysis of audiovisual narrative works, at least not in the context of character perception and the shaping of everyday human values.

In contemporary cinematography, there is a noticeable shift from the traditionally black-and-white perception of characters, which divided them into “good” and “evil,” towards morally ambiguous characters who lie on the borderline between these two extremes. This phenomenon is most evident in modern films and TV series, where protagonists are often confronted with ethical dilemmas that do not offer clear answers. The moral ambiguity of these characters challenges viewers to rethink their ideas about what is right or wrong and may also influence their perception of ethical and moral values in everyday life, or even question them.

In the book *Film and Ethics: What Would You Have Done?* (2013), the authors labeled film as a form of “low art” since film is considered a product for generating profit by utilizing various tools to attract popularity, such as unnecessary inclusion of sex and violence. However, the treatment of these topics greatly varies when considering the cultural aspects of the countries in which they are produced. For example, Indian films are designed to appeal to a wide range of viewers of different ages, social classes, caste groups, and ethno-religious backgrounds, so sensitive topics like sexuality, communism, or other political ideologies must be approached cautiously to avoid offense (Miller, 2013).

## Influencing the Viewer

The fear of influence based on audiovisual works is especially prevalent in the context of minors. Many films or books are commonly labeled as unsuitable for young audiences. This label can be understood in multiple ways. Examples include films like *The Conjuring* (2013), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015). Although these are three fundamentally different films, they share one thing in common—their

age rating of 18+, often labeled as R. These films receive such a rating because they contain the following criteria:

**1. Violence and Brutality:**

Films like *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) feature intense violent scenes that can have a traumatizing effect on young people. This type of content is often considered unsuitable for minors because it may encourage or incite violence.

**2. Sexual Content and Explicit Scenes:**

*Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015) deals with sexual themes and includes explicit sexual scenes. Due to the nature of these scenes, these films are labeled as inappropriate for young audiences to prevent early exposure to content that may influence their understanding and perception of intimate relationships.

**3. Psychological and Emotional Impact:**

Films like *The Conjuring* (2013) belong to the horror genre and focus on terrifying and paranormal phenomena, which can have a strong emotional impact on younger viewers. Fear, tension, and horror can be traumatizing for children or teenagers and may affect their mental health.

This rating system is designed to protect the development of minors from early exposure to themes they may not yet be able to process adequately, preventing potential negative impacts on their emotional and psychological growth.

## **Psychological Mechanisms of Perceiving Moral Ambiguity in Characters**

From a psychological perspective, it is fascinating how morally ambiguous characters can evoke feelings of compassion while also creating tension. This paradox is a key factor contributing to the increased interest in these characters. Research in cognitive psychology shows that viewers, when watching such characters, are forced to process various, often contradictory, aspects of the character. This process can trigger cognitive dissonance, which is understood as a psychological state of tension that occurs when an individual holds conflicting beliefs, opinions, or values that contradict each other. This state generates psychological discomfort, which the individual tries to alleviate by adjusting their beliefs or behavior to achieve internal balance (Festinger, 1957). This conflict creates tension because the viewer must process these contradictory aspects and decide how to evaluate them in line with their own values and beliefs. Ultimately, this process leads to introspection regarding one's own values, morality, and decision-making.

## **Moral Ambiguity in Media**

Moral ambiguity in characters refers to the ability of characters to perform morally questionable acts that are presented in the context of their humanity and sympathetic traits. Such characters challenge viewers to consider whether their actions should be justified or condemned. These characters are not clearly “good” or “evil,” but instead exist in the gray zone between these two extremes. This type of character is common in modern cinema and television, where writers strive to create characters that are not only realistic but also complex.

A notable example is the character of Walter White from the TV series *Breaking Bad* (2008). He is a classic example of moral ambiguity. At the beginning of the story, the viewer sees him as a character who makes illegal decisions based on a strong moral motive—after being diagnosed with lung cancer, he decides to secure his family's financial future after his death. However, as time progresses, his decisions become increasingly selfish and unethical. This way, the series allows the viewer to see his character as someone capable of committing morally questionable acts but still attempting to justify and defend his decisions. This dynamic presents a challenge for the viewer: to what extent is morality flexible depending on the circumstances? This type of character often forces the viewer to reflect on their own moral beliefs and values. While at the beginning it may be easy to sympathize with his goals, as his decisions become more controversial, it raises questions about the ethical boundary between “good” and “evil” motives. The viewer is faced with deciding whether to justify Walter White's actions based on his personal situation or condemn him for his deeds.

## **Impact on Viewers**

Exposing viewers to moral dilemmas can have a strong impact on their value systems. For younger viewers, who are in the process of developing these systems, characters like Walter White in *Breaking Bad* can serve as models showing that morality is not always black and white. These characters provide space for viewers to consider the complexity of the situations people find themselves in and perhaps reassess what they consider right or wrong in real life. Watching characters navigate complex moral decisions can lead to a shift in how viewers perceive their own responses to similar dilemmas in real life.

## **Conclusion**

Morally ambiguous characters not only serve as a powerful tool for stimulating cognitive dissonance but also offer opportunities for deep introspection and changes in the viewer's value and ethical system. In this way, they allow us to better understand that morality is not black and white, but often exists in the gray area where different values and beliefs intersect. For this reason, these characters are an integral part of modern cinema, which does not just offer a passive viewing experience but challenges viewers to reconsider their own attitudes and beliefs.

## **Can Films Change Society's Views and Values?**

Films have the power not only to reflect but also to shape our societal values and moral norms. Through the depiction of various ethical dilemmas and conflicts, they can become an important tool for thinking about what is right and wrong, what is just, and where the boundaries of moral principles lie. Filmmaking offers us not just entertainment, but also a space for reflection on our values, attitudes, and decisions that affect not only us but also our society as a whole.

## **Examples of Films that Influence Views on Justice, Revenge, and Antiheroes:**

### **1. Batman – The Cost of Justice**

In Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy, we constantly encounter the tension between justice and revenge. Batman, while trying to protect Gotham, often uses methods that are not entirely in line with laws and ethical norms. This conflict raises doubts in him about where the line is between what is just and what might be unjustifiable, even though his ultimate goal is good. The film poses the question: Can justice be achieved at the cost of violating moral principles? And where does what we consider "right" begin and end?

### **2. Kill Bill – Revenge as a Moral Dilemma**

The film *Kill Bill* deeply explores the theme of revenge as the driving force of the main character, Beatrix Kiddo, who decides to take bloody revenge on those who wronged her. Although her motivation comes from deep personal suffering, the film also shows how dangerous the never-ending cycle of vengeance can be. Is revenge truly justifiable if the one carrying it out feels entitled to it? And what happens when this cycle of violence never stops? *Kill Bill* challenges us to think about the moral boundaries between justice and vigilante justice when doing the "right" thing requires unethical acts.

### **3. Joker – The Antihero as a Tragic Figure**

The 2019 film *Joker* presents a character who appears as an antihero, yet simultaneously evokes a strong sense of sympathy. This film does not focus only on depicting the Joker as a villain but shows him as a complex, tragic character who faces his own moral dilemmas. His story forces us to ask whether it is possible to sympathize with a character defined by negative traits when they are also enduring unbearable pain, which is hard to ignore. *Joker* encourages us to reflect on whether bad actions can be justified if something deeper, such as trauma or unpredictable circumstances, contributes to the creation of evil.

**The Influence of Media on Empathy – Mechanisms that Lead Us to Feel Sympathy for Fictional Characters**

One of the most fascinating aspects of watching films is the ability of viewers to identify with characters experiencing moral dilemmas. This process is strongly based on empathy – the ability to empathize with the

feelings of others. It is intriguing that, even though these are fictional characters, viewers can experience their suffering, joy, or moral conflict as though they were real people. Identifying with the character, understanding their motives, or watching their development throughout the plot leads to emotional tension that viewers experience while watching. This emotional process forces the viewer to contemplate moral questions, but it also influences the perception of similar situations in real life. Sympathy for the characters can lead to a deeper understanding of human nature, which can also affect our behavior and attitudes in the real world.

### **Cultural Differences in Depicting Morality in Films**

Films created in different cultures often reflect distinct value systems, and these differences are also reflected in the moral dilemmas presented in the stories. Western cinema, especially Hollywood, emphasizes individualism, personal freedom, and justice achieved through direct conflict between good and evil. Eastern films, on the other hand, often focus on collective values, harmony, and emotional, sometimes philosophical, issues related to moral decisions. This difference in films can influence how viewers identify with characters and their decisions.

#### **Defining the Difference:**

- **Hollywood** – Film production in the USA, primarily in Hollywood, often relies on a clear distinction between good and evil. Hero characters fight against evil, which is usually represented by sinister, ruthless enemies. This type of film, such as Avengers, depicts a battle between light and darkness within the ideals of justice and honor.
- **European Cinema** – Films from Europe, particularly from countries like France, Spain, or Italy, tend to portray moral dilemmas and complex characters. European filmmakers often do not depict characters as unequivocally “good” or “evil,” but rather focus on the complexity of human motivations and their moral ambiguity.
- **Asian Cinema** – Films from Asia often deal with complex moral questions within a larger social and philosophical context. Japanese films, such as Rashomon (1950) by Akira Kurosawa, depict the relativity of truth and justice depending on different perspectives. This film shows how truth can change depending on who is telling the story, showing the viewer that neither truth nor justice are absolute.

### **Film Ratings vs. Real Influence on Viewers**

Film as a medium has a huge influence on viewers, especially in the case of children and adolescents. The age rating system is created to protect young people from content that could affect their psyche and behavior. In many countries, different forms of film ratings are used, such as the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) system in the USA or PEGI (Pan-European Game Information) for video games in Europe. These ratings are designed to help viewers – and especially parents – decide which films are appropriate for their children.

The question, however, is: are these ratings truly effective in preventing undesirable influences on viewers? Ratings and age restrictions may not be sufficient because young people often find ways to bypass these restrictions, and many parents may not be fully aware of the content of films. Furthermore, not all viewers may understand the significance of ratings, leading to incorrect film choices.

The discussion on the influence of media on viewers’ behavior remains highly polarized. While some experts argue that violent films and television programs may have a direct impact on aggressive behavior, others believe that films are simply a mirror of society and more often stimulate discussions about important societal issues. Violent films may act as catalysts for discussions on moral dilemmas, where viewers can gain a better understanding of ethical questions such as the death penalty, war, or decision-making in extreme situations. In this sense, media can serve as a tool to enhance critical thinking and debate on complex moral questions. For example, the film *The Hate U Give* (2018) shows how art can evoke strong emotional reactions that lead to improved moral empathy and understanding of human tragedies. However, the opposite can also happen: exposure to violence in media may lead to real changes in viewers’ behavior. Prolonged viewing of violent films and television programs may dull viewers’ sensitivity to real-life violence, meaning they may become less sensitive to the suffering of others or begin to perceive violence as a normal and acceptable response

to problems. On the other hand, there are studies suggesting that violent films can influence viewers, but this influence is often temporary and depends on individual factors such as age, gender, family environment, and personal experiences.

## **Case Study: Ethical Dilemmas in The Dark Knight**

### **Introduction**

The Dark Knight (2008), directed by Christopher Nolan, is often regarded as one of the best and most profound superhero films. Beyond its dynamic action and compelling characters, the film delves into serious philosophical and ethical dilemmas central to its narrative. This case study will focus on the ethical dilemma faced by the main character, Batman (Christian Bale), during his confrontation with the Joker (Heath Ledger). The analysis will examine how the characters' decisions impact moral values and the consequences they have for individuals and society.

### **Case Description**

In The Dark Knight, Batman is confronted with a significant dilemma: how to protect Gotham City from the chaos and anarchy spread by the Joker, who constantly tests his moral principles. The Joker continually challenges Batman to choose between two bad options, each with serious ethical consequences. In one of the film's most famous scenes, the Joker presents a decision that will determine the life or death of innocent Gotham residents.

Additionally, Batman faces dilemmas related to his own identity crisis. Is Batman still a hero if he resorts to unethical methods, such as mass surveillance and breaking the law in the name of a greater good?

### **Identification of the Ethical Dilemma**

The ethical dilemma Batman faces involves choosing between maintaining his own morality and justice, and adopting unethical methods to achieve the greater good. The Joker, as a chaotic figure, represents the opposite of Batman—his goal is not to help but to destroy all established rules and norms. In this way, the Joker becomes a mirror of Batman's own moral dilemmas.

Throughout the story, Batman faces several decisions involving non-standard methods of problem-solving. This dilemma is most apparent when the Joker presents the choice of two boats, each filled with explosives—one containing prisoners and the other containing innocent civilians. Both boats have the option to detonate the other, forcing the characters into a moral choice between saving their own lives or the lives of others.

### **Analysis of the Characters' Reactions**

Batman finds himself in a situation where he must make a decision that is expected of him to protect Gotham, yet he must also confront questions about his own morality. On the one hand, he is determined to uphold his principles—never to kill, never to sink to the level of the Joker. On the other hand, he must face the question of whether it is morally justifiable to break his beliefs in order to achieve a greater good.

The Joker, on the other hand, challenges Batman to abandon his principles and make a "final" decision that will mean the complete destruction of justice. His goal is to provoke Batman, demonstrating that he, too, is capable of morally questionable actions. At the end of the film, Batman chooses to take responsibility for all the negative consequences of his actions and begins to see himself as the "Dark Knight," bearing the guilt for things he did not do.

### **Discussion of the Consequences of Decisions**

The decisions Batman makes throughout the film have a profound impact on his character and the overall story. On the one hand, he is willing to violate his principles in order to save innocent lives. On the other hand, this act triggers another dilemma—the destruction of the integrity of justice, which ultimately leads him to become an "enemy" in the eyes of the public. This moral conflict is reflected in the character of Harvey Dent, who chooses to abandon justice and take the law into his own hands, punishing criminals using his version of justice.

A significant consequence of Batman's decisions is that he becomes a symbol who must bear the guilt

for actions he did not initiate—he becomes a victim of his own morality. This illustrates that decisions in the realm of ethics can have immense, unforeseen consequences.

### **Conclusion**

The case of *The Dark Knight* shows that ethical dilemmas are not always black and white, and decisions that may seem unethical can, in certain situations, be necessary for achieving the greater good. Batman's journey is a clear example of how a hero can find himself on the line between justice and the abuse of power. Ultimately, the film shows that even the most significant moral decisions can lead to doubts about what is right and what is wrong. Based on this, we can confirm that different opinions, stances, and values have a strong ethical and educational potential. On one hand, we may be concerned about cultural worries and the psychologically harmful and ideologically manipulative effects of cinematic works. Films and series dealing with complex moral dilemmas have the ability to influence our values and beliefs. They show that morality is not always black and white and that characters' decisions are often shaped by their personal circumstances. Morally ambiguous characters who face tough decisions challenge us to reflect on our own values. These characters and situations are not just tools for creating tension but also stimulate discussion about what is right and what is wrong.

The influence of films on viewers, especially younger generations, is undeniable. Through cinematic narratives, viewers are confronted with ethical dilemmas that force them to reassess what justice, revenge, or ethical decisions mean in the broader society. In this way, films not only reflect the values of society but also contribute to shaping them.

Empathy, created between the viewer and characters experiencing moral conflicts, is another important aspect. This emotional experience leads to a better understanding of human nature and can influence our behavior and decision-making in real life.

Moreover, films from different cultures focus on different value systems. While Western cinema often emphasizes individualism and justice achieved through direct confrontations between good and evil, Eastern films focus more on collective values and philosophical questions regarding moral decisions. These differences can influence how viewers perceive ethics and morality.

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# THE NEEDS OF SOCIETY AND MEDIA

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## ABSTRACT

*The starting point of theoretical research is society as a specific historical system whose functioning determines both the origin and development of various economic, social, and spiritual needs. On the other hand, it determines the ways, content, and forms of their satisfaction. We cannot avoid the current political context, because the subject of the research is the current policy. This is especially true when studying legal and political issues, institutions and mechanisms for their functioning. The system of political parties is an organic component of the social system and significantly affects its functioning and the overall character of social life.*

**Keywords:** the needs, society, media

## INTRODUCTION

Mass media play a crucial role in modern society, primarily through the fulfillment of a wide range of individual and collective needs. A key theoretical approach in this context is the Uses and Gratifications Theory, developed by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch (1973). This theory posits that media are not consumed passively; rather, audiences actively seek out media content based on specific motivations and expectations.

Unlike traditional media effects theories—which viewed the audience as a passive recipient—the uses and gratifications approach emphasizes the active role of the media consumer, who selects media and content in order to satisfy particular needs (McQuail, 1987). Based on this theory, the needs fulfilled by media consumption can be categorized into several key areas:

### Categories of Media - Gratified Needs

#### 1) Informational Needs

These include the desire for up-to-date news, factual knowledge, analysis, and expert opinions that help individuals navigate the political, social, and economic world around them. In this sense, media act as a primary source of knowledge and a tool for societal orientation. As Schramm (1963) observed, the informational function of media is crucial for decision-making in a democratic society.

#### 2) Personal Identity Needs

Media help individuals form and reinforce personal values, attitudes, and beliefs. By engaging with stories, life experiences, and diverse perspectives, individuals shape their identity and test their place within society (McQuail, 1987). Media thus serve as a mirror of cultural and moral norms.

#### 3) Social Integration and Interaction Needs

Media content is often used as a means of initiating or maintaining social relationships. Social media platforms, online forums, and even traditional television programs provide common ground for social interaction. According to Katz et al. (1973), media serve as a “social integrator,” helping individuals feel connected to the broader community.

#### 4) Entertainment Needs

Media offer relaxation, emotional release, and an escape from daily routines and stress. These needs are most commonly fulfilled through entertainment formats such as films, series, music, comedy, and games. McQuail (1987) argues that the entertainment function of media is just as legitimate as the informational one, as emotional experiences and leisure are integral aspects of human life.

### 5) Needs for Control and Orientation

This category includes the desire for advice, instructions, or recommendations that assist in personal or professional decision-making. Media are used as advisory tools through content such as reviews, instructional videos, and guidance-based programs.

### Definition of Needs (General and Media Context)

A need can be defined as a state of deficiency or desire that motivates an individual to take action in order to restore balance or achieve satisfaction.

“A need is a state of tension that motivates an organism to engage in activity aimed at reducing or eliminating the tension.” (Maslow, 1943) Abraham Maslow, in his well-known hierarchy of needs, categorized human needs into five levels, arranged in ascending order from the most basic to the most complex:

Physiological needs

Safety needs

Social needs

Esteem needs

Self-actualization

In the media context, needs are seen as the reasons why people seek out specific media content. As Katz & Blumler & Gurevitch (1973) explain:

“People use media to satisfy a wide range of needs, such as information, identity, integration, social interaction, and entertainment.” Thus, media act as tools for fulfilling not only biological but also psychological and social needs. Needs in the Digital Environment

In the digital age, the nature of human needs and the ways they are satisfied through media have significantly evolved. The internet, social media, mobile technologies, and on-demand platforms have transformed media from one-way channels into interactive, participatory ecosystems.

The internet has dramatically increased the speed and accessibility of information. Platforms like Google, YouTube, Wikipedia, and news apps allow users to fulfill informational needs instantly and across multiple formats (text, video, audio).

In digital environments, individuals use media to construct, express, and validate their identity. This is particularly visible on social networks (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Reddit), where users share opinions, lifestyle choices, and affiliations.

Digital media provide spaces for identity experimentation, especially for youth exploring gender, subcultures, or political beliefs.

Digital media allow continuous, real-time interaction through messaging apps, comment sections, video calls, and social networking. Platforms such as Facebook, Discord, WhatsApp, and Snapchat fulfill the need for belonging and interpersonal communication.

For many users, social media are not just communication tools but essential extensions of their social life.

Streaming services (e.g., Netflix, Spotify), video games (e.g., Fortnite, Minecraft), and meme culture offer rich, personalized entertainment. Algorithms suggest content tailored to individual preferences, making the satisfaction of entertainment needs both efficient and addictive.

In the digital environment, users curate their own entertainment experience with minimal effort.

Digital tools empower users to control media use and participate in content creation. From writing blogs to uploading TikToks or leaving reviews, the user is not just a consumer but also a contributor.

This shift fulfills needs related to agency, competence, and self-expression—all crucial in modern digital identities.

In the digital environment, needs are not only fulfilled faster and more efficiently but also in more interactive and self-directed ways. The traditional boundaries between content producers and consumers are blurred, giving individuals unprecedented control over how they meet their psychological, social, and informational needs through media.

The increased attention the social sciences give to the study of the way of life means increased intensity in new research of human needs. The issue of the human needs was already addressed in the past by the ancient

authors Plato in his Constitution and Aristotle in the Athenian Constitution. Indeed, human needs have triggered the need for a state. Each of us has many needs, but no one is able to satisfy all of them by themselves.

“The needs are the metaphorical red thread of human history and the behavioural background of each of us at the same time. We should therefore know what the needs are, how they emerge, and how they affect our behaviour” (Gál & Alan, 1987).

It is understandable that living conditions greatly influence the form of human activities, the way of their realization and means. Needs are decisive for the internal content of the activities – the purpose for which they are carried out.

There is a considerable difference between people’s values and desires. There may even be a contradiction between what I say I appreciate and what I really do appreciate. What is the unifying starting point for understanding human resources? This exactly is the field of human needs. “We are talking about the need to remove the lack of stimuli and conditions necessary for existence, everyday life, and thus for self-fulfilment and personal development. However, we encounter some problems here. A simple example: even a healthy person has a need to be healthy. It seems to us, therefore, justified not to address the need only to remove the perceived lack. The notion of need is wider. A person is aware not only of what he lacks here and now but also of what he is heading for or intending to pursue. A healthy person feels the need for health not because of its lack, but because good health is a condition for further existence” (Gál & Alan, 1987).

Problems of needs have been addressed so far by psychology and by economics. Other social sciences were more or less satisfied with the take-over or the combination of both approaches. The psychological concept is characterized by accentuating the motivational function. A need is generally manifested as a state of lacking something important to a person’s life and results in a motivating activity to overcome this insufficiency. Needs are complex structures. They have a content aspect that expresses what is needed, what is lacking, or in a surplus. In addition, they contain an emotional aspect in which the individual dislikes the lack or excess. The third is an aspect of will aiming to remove the unpleasant state.

A need is a state of the subject that reflects the contradiction between what is given and what the subject deems to be necessary for their life. At the same time, it is a state that encourages the entity to take action to address various insufficiencies.

We can say, “the need not only reflects an objective state of the organism, but also the subjective feeling and the awareness of the particular state. It has a tremendous effect on the individual as well as on mankind. It is the happiness and the tragedy of man that the satisfaction of one’s needs ensues in the emergence of many other needs, that the increasing degree of satisfaction of the needs simultaneously accelerates the appearance of others. However, this statement does not apply indiscriminately and for all the needs. In addition, individual needs have a different meaning for a person, varying depending on their living conditions” (Gál & Alan, 1987).

The general classification of basic needs:

- a) primary, i.e. elementary, lower, biological;
- b) secondary, i.e., developmental, higher, socio-cultural.

An important distinguishing criterion is the origin of the needs. Primary needs are innate. They belong to the biological equipment of a human being as a biological species.

On the contrary, secondary needs are acquired, an individual gains them through socialization, and their content and the degree of adoption depend mainly on given social conditions. In the literature, other distinguishing features are often added to this basic criterion. A limited number of primary needs is highlighted, with the difference of a virtually unlimited number of secondary needs. Emphasis is on the immediate urgency of primary needs, the non-fulfilment of which the individual immediately registers and their fulfilment is virtually no longer possible to be postponed. Secondary needs, on the other hand, are much more complicated in terms of human awareness and their satisfaction can be delayed for a variety of reasons.

The homeostatic character of primary needs and their fulfilment is desirable only to an optimal state. There are no internal limits for secondary needs. In this respect, their borders are practically unlimited.

The orientation of primary needs on things and their consumption is often highlighted, while secondary needs are focused on activities and relationships to ensure their satisfaction. However, it has to be remembered that there is considerable inconsistency among the specialists in the field, which makes it difficult to apply the

results of the psychological aspect of the problem.

The primary needs are not only biogenic ones, but also a number of psychogenic and even sociogenic needs. At the same time, they often make up a foundation that reduces the higher needs. One important and open issue is the relationship between organic and social needs. Social needs are often perceived as an evolutionary continuation of organic needs, as a product of the natural development of the deepening socialization of life. Another tendency in this psychological aspect rigorously distinguishes organic needs from the social ones. In particular, it is highlighted that even the lowest human needs are fundamentally socially irreversible or modified. Even Napoleon knew that the greatest enemy of his soldiers was not the hostile army, but their own hunger. Humans can be brought to an animalistic state by famine. This fact points to the mutual differences between lower and higher needs.

Organic needs are internal, focused on the preservation of the subject. Higher needs are also characterized by identifying with internal requirements and higher social interests. Unlike animals, a human is characterized by being born in the biological sense, but becoming a human in the sense of the psychosocial in the process of humanization and socialization. People acquire their human heritage accumulated in society. There is a bond between nature and society, but in the sense of a reversal of their relationship, and that individual theories may infer the abovementioned categories from the natural ones. In this sense, the categories of needs are often replaced by concepts of inclination, instincts, and motives.

Most of the needs of modern society are so socially mediated that their original biological basis plays an increasingly diminishing role. Similarly, the relationship between needs and activities has also been complicated. Psychological understanding of needs implies a simplified idea of the immediate ability of an individual, who feels the lack of need, to satisfy it by their own activities. The immediate link of needs and activities does not apply in society. The complex structure of social ties and the social security system is also much mediated in this field. The psychological notion of needs cannot pay enough attention to the fact that the satisfaction of many needs, with the continuous socialisation of the subject, outweighs its individual possibilities. The share of socially secured needs is growing significantly.

From the point of view of psychology, emphasizing the motivational function of needs also emphasizes the importance of an objective knowledge. Especially in higher human needs, the gap between their objective form and subjective reflection is widening. This fact is essential for sociological and economic knowledge, while psychology puts it down as less important.

Economic understanding of needs focuses mostly on material production. In this case, the needs in particular play a role as the driving force of economic development. Economic definitions characterize needs as hierarchically structured, inherited and acquired dispositions, the satisfaction of which is conditioned by the reproduction of man as a member of a particular society. The economic encyclopaedia characterizes the need in the most general sense of the word as the feeling of something desirable or necessary.

Thus, economics has already dealt with the problem of the origin of human needs and their immediate relationship with man (in terms of the emotional aspect). The needs in economics appear in a certain whole, abstracted from concrete bearers. Their existence, size, structural diversity, and urgency are proven by consumption. This corresponds to the basic economic division of material and non-material, respectively economic and non-economic needs. The first of these can be satisfied with material utility values and the attention of economics focuses on them. The definition of the second group is rather vague and characterized in a simplified way – they are obtained otherwise.

Economic thinking also classifies needs as individual and group. The first division includes all the needs of members of the company, whose satisfaction are the conditions created for the development of the individual and mental abilities of the members of society.

The second group includes all the needs arising from the organized life of society as a whole, which makes the variety of bodies of administration, security, defence, and others, necessary. Satisfaction of individual needs is indispensable for the preservation and development of an individual, satisfying group needs is necessary for the well-functioning of an organized society. The definition of group needs explicitly eliminates the psychological bond of the need to an individual. Economic understanding of needs does not underestimate the problem of the real bearer. Individual and group needs are only relevant in connection to the mechanism of economic reproduction of society. In terms of the economic approach to needs, we must not forget about the

characteristics of the economic, i.e. real needs.

We understand the economic needs as those that are necessary to ensure the standard of living and material growth. With real needs, we can truly meet people's demands in terms of the realistic socio-economic system.

The economic definition of needs largely outweighs the psychological characteristics, but at the same time raises objections of a different nature. By putting the material needs at the centre of its attention, it inadvertently trivialises and distorts the importance and the specifications of non-material needs. Ignoring the genesis of needs also means a problem of their identification. Economics perceives needs in the form of formulated economic requirements. Economic goals can only be set after political decisions.

In the absence of scientific criteria, we risk a certain absolutisation of the economic approach to needs. The importance of consumption is increasing as a measure of needs. The offer to the consumer begins to produce new needs by itself and thus becomes a goal, not a means of developing an individual or a social system.

The sociologic possibilities and concepts of needs. Sociology has been widely underrated over the last decade. Only the end of this century has enabled this scientific branch to create its own approach to needs. The possibility of constructing a sociological concept of needs has offered results obtained through a system approach in social sciences.

A need is understood to be a lack of conditions and elements necessary to preservation and development of the given system. This deficiency creates internal tension in the given system as a source of activity to eliminate the deficiency. The new situation has made it possible to combine the needs and interests that belong to the whole society, group, or individual. Part of individual needs becomes social needs based on their cognition and willingness to recognize them. Even a relatively frequent individual need does not have to become a social need. The society can take an indifferent or a negative attitude towards an individual need. The need for drugs in drug addicts can be used as an example.

The main issues of such a sociological concept of needs should be the problems of social recognition and acknowledgement of needs, the mechanism of their formulation, the establishment of scientific criteria, the analysis of the social consequences of potential disproportions between the existence of needs and their satisfaction.

Most social sciences put the needs into a proper categorical apparatus. However, there is also the avoidance or criticism of this problem from the positions of naturalization and structural functionalism. We can mention two representatives. Malinowski, a British scientist of Polish origin, has created a naturalistic theory of culture, according to which the whole society is superstructure existing over basic biological needs. Needs are in the form of cultural responses that enable society to meet these basic needs. Subsequently, the basic need for metabolism corresponds to the cultural supply response; the basic need for reproduction produces the cultural reaction of the relationship, the basic need for health ensues into the cultural reaction of hygiene. The author describes these reactions as cultural imperatives, the most important of which is the need for social control, education, economic, and political organization. The leading American representative of structural functionalism T. Parsons argues that society does not exist to meet the individual needs; it is the individual that serves to satisfy the needs of society. If a society meets the needs of an individual, it is only in order to avoid serious failures in its system. A certain degree of satisfaction of individual needs is Parson's functional prerequisite for running the company. It is not the only condition.

In addition, the society needs a system of normative order through which the life of the population is organized. There is also a need for management and decision-making related to the means by which it can deal with the violation of its standards. Moreover, there is a need for integration that is implemented through a system of socialization and the need for a certain system of services that individuals perform in the context of social organization.

These facts describe the features of society and express two tendencies:

- a) tendency towards self-esteem,
- b) tendency towards homeostatic balance.

The concept of the social system is so rigid that it does not leave room for socially transforming activity and excludes social movements. The notion of a society that meets more and more human needs is in complete contradiction to the concept of structural functionalism.

Based on these facts we can say that humanistic and civilization development is progressive only if it is possible to preserve and develop the diversity of cultures of individual societies, each presenting irreplaceable wisdom, the experience that man acquires in dialogue with nature. From this point of view, it is necessary to consider the processes of homogenization and differentiation in relation to the way of life. The fundamental human rights in today's society include the right to freedom and the right to information, but those are changing with the shift in communication, with the new media. "Every old medium was new, and every new medium became old. This is a well-known fact. However, the process and causes of the emergence of a new media are less clear" (Brečka & et all, 2009).

A number of factors, including economic factors (media availability), communication and social skills of users, or their ability of critical analysis, influences new media, the birth of a favourite media, technologically or technically superior one. When marketing a product – in this case a media – the market does not decide on its promotion or its functionality but the interests of potential users and their real needs. It is here to achieve satisfaction in an individual in the interests and needs of the individual, and the desire for a given medium is so strong that they sacrifice their routine habits and stereotypes and reorient themselves to a new product for new skills or knowledge. However, it is unnecessary to make a deeper cross-section in the media development forecast, because there already have been futuristic visions that have not been successfully completed in history.

Let us ask, however, how and why new media are created? A clear and satisfactory answer is for a long discussion, but let us try to get closer to the new media as defined by A. Sekota (2006):

- "the maximum use of sophisticated computing,
- flexible hybrid character,
- the possibility of interactivity,
- public and private functions,
- a low level of regulation,
- interconnection" (Sekota, 2006).

The media have great potential, but on the other hand, they also have negative aspects related to threats and their subsequent prevention. Therefore, the benefits of new media must be reflected from a wider perspective. Social and technical disciplines include the ethics of the media as well as ethics and morality in the media world as the object of its exploration. The most important part of the study is the content of the text combined with the behaviour and experience of the individual, and hence the responsibility of the media for the behaviour of people.

The media affect the behaviour of an individual in these disciplines: Psychology – the influence of the media on people, their attitudinal orientations, and representation of models. Sociology – responds to the media in terms of their existence within society, as well as how media is influencing the behaviour of people.

Politology – deals with the legal aspects of the media, the media policy, which means that the media is understood as a means to achieve medial goals.

Economy – reflects the relationship of the consumer / client versus media / media content as a product.

Linguistics – the centre of its interest is the clarity of media content.

Apart from the listed disciplines, the media is also a subject of study for philosophy, aesthetics, ethics, history, and so on.

Modern media influences not only the individual, but also the creation of public opinion and therefore it is directly related to objectivity and truth. Public opinion has its own dynamism, expressing its own ideas, which can be changed and adapted, so that public opinion is changing and shaping. This process is possible through thoughtful methods

and various means, so its subjectivity can be determined. According to P. Dinka "general judgments (opinions) may not be true just because they are general" (Dinka, 2008).

The unethical aspects caused by the media themselves – the political context or control of media by interest groups – can get to the public through that very media. In a context of a change in values in Slovak media practice after 1989, E. Poláková and Z. Masaryková describe this phenomenon in a concise way: "In the competitive media environment, not the ethics of media work was the first, but the profit" (Poláková & Masaryková, 2011). The tabloid phenomenon gradually controls the

recipients and the public, therefore the mind thus loses the ability to perceive the boundary between abuse and constructive criticism.

The paper of P. Dinka presents the work of the media and the situation of the media environment and its culture. In the context of discourses on the ethical aspects of modern media, it would be appropriate and expedient to evaluate each medium individually with

a focus on the assessment aspect, since apart from the common features, each medium has its own specificity. In general, we can rely on E. Polák's view that "from the point of view of the relationship of ethics of communication and media ethics, the distinctive aspect is the difference between mysterious and ignorant lies, half-truths, and the concealment of truth" (Poláková, 2011).

New media bear some social responsibility, ethical regulation, or self-regulation of media creators with regard to the reflection of ethical aspects, in which we look not only at concrete phenomena, but also at the consequences of these phenomena, manifesting themselves in the viewer, reader, listener, mobile phone or internet user.

## CONCLUSION

### How Media Enter Our Needs in the Contemporary Era

In today's digital age, media play a crucial role in shaping our needs and behaviors. Various modern theories and research demonstrate how media affect our psychological, social, and informational needs.

#### Uses and Gratifications Theory

This theory states that individuals actively seek media to satisfy specific needs. According to research by Lee and Wang (2023), users of the Mastodon platform pursue gratifications such as control over their information and protection from data mining. This shows that new types of media can fulfill needs that traditional media could not (Lee & Wang, 2023).

"Users prefer Mastodon because it gives them a greater sense of control over content exposure and personal data privacy." (Lee & Wang, 2023)

#### Digital Media and Emotional Needs

Luo (2020) found that among university students, entertainment and perceived pleasure were primary motivations for digital media use, while seeking information was not the most significant reason.

"Pleasure-seeking was prioritized over informational use in daily digital media interactions." (Luo, 2020)

#### Media Influence on Perception of Reality

Ruddock (2020) explains that digital media shape our worldview by presenting selective information that influences opinions and beliefs.

"Digital media reinforce certain worldviews through algorithmic filtering and content repetition." (Ruddock, 2020)

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# CASE STUDY: MARKETING COMMUNICATION FOR ALMA MATER 2024

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## ABSTRACT

*Event marketing is an effective communication tool that strengthens organizational identity through interactive experiences. In education, it helps universities build relationships with potential students and reduce brain drain. In 2024, Slovakia's Ministry of Education launched the ALMA MATER fairs to showcase domestic universities and scholarship programs. The first year confirmed strong student interest and achieved key goals—raising awareness, supporting scholarships, and directly connecting schools with students. The study also explores secondary school students' perceptions of higher education in Slovakia and their attitudes toward studying domestically. The survey helped identify key areas for improvement, including expanding regional coverage, enhancing employer involvement, improving communication strategies, and introducing more interactive elements.*

**Keywords:** event marketing, education marketing, ALMA MATER

## INTRODUCTION

Event marketing serves as a strategic communication tool that enables institutions to cultivate relationships with the public through immersive and interactive experiences. A well-structured event not only reinforces the identity of an organization but also enhances awareness of its mission among its target audience. As Eckerstein (2002) emphasizes, “event marketing is one of the few marketing tools that can convey the values of an organization through the direct experience of participants.” This direct engagement fosters deeper emotional connections and increases the memorability of institutional messages when compared to traditional advertising methods.

Experiential marketing, in which events play a central role, has emerged as a vital approach to shaping brand perceptions. Seturi (2023) affirms that “well-planned events can significantly impact the perception of a brand and strengthen its identity through interactive experiences.” The efficacy of event marketing is contingent upon a synergy between content, promotional strategies, and audience engagement. A critical determinant of success is the selection of appropriate communication channels, as different target groups respond variably to online and offline marketing approaches.

In the realm of higher education, marketing is not merely an auxiliary function but an integral component of institutional strategy. Education, as a cornerstone of societal and economic development, requires targeted communication efforts that extend beyond conventional advertising. (Neus, 2020) Universities, as key drivers of innovation, research, and technological progress, rely on effective marketing to sustain engagement with students and stakeholders.

Despite its significance, the Slovak higher education system has encountered persistent challenges, notably the phenomenon of “brain drain,” wherein talented students pursue their academic careers abroad. This migration of human capital imposes long-term consequences on national intellectual resources and economic

competitiveness, as many graduates do not return to Slovakia upon completing their studies. Addressing this issue necessitates strategic initiatives that elevate the appeal of domestic universities, ensuring that they remain competitive within the global higher education landscape.

### **Starting Points for ALMA MATER**

Recent statistics from the OECD and the Ministry of Education, Research, Development, and Youth of the Slovak Republic indicate a growing trend of Slovak students opting to pursue higher education abroad (CVTISR, 2025). The most frequent destinations include the Czech Republic, Austria, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. Key drivers of this trend involve the perceived higher quality of education, better financial conditions, broader opportunities for practical employment, and the international prestige associated with foreign universities. This phenomenon raises concerns about the competitiveness of Slovak higher education institutions and prompts discussions on measures that could enhance their appeal to domestic students.

In response to these challenges, the Ministry of Education initiated a series of higher education fairs under the title ALMA MATER 2024, financed through the Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Slovak Republic. The primary objectives of this project were to showcase domestic universities to a broader audience, highlight their advantages in comparison with foreign institutions, and reinforce their role in the national academic landscape. A crucial component of the initiative was the promotion of the scholarship program “I study at home, Slovakia will reward me” (in original: *Študujem doma, Slovensko ma odmeni!*), designed to provide financial support to talented students as an incentive for them to pursue their education within Slovakia.

This case study examines the effectiveness and impact of ALMA MATER 2024, specifically in shaping students’ decisions regarding university selection. Data collected directly at the fairs provided valuable insight into student attitudes toward studying in Slovakia, helping to assess the degree to which the initiative fulfilled its intended objectives. The concluding analysis of this research will determine the extent to which ALMA MATER 2024 succeeded in strengthening Slovak higher education’s attractiveness and what further measures could enhance its strategic marketing efforts. Ultimately, the fundamental question remains whether such initiatives can effectively influence students’ choices and mitigate the ongoing outflow of talent abroad.

### **Objectives and Importance**

The primary mission of the ALMA MATER 2024 project, as outlined by the Ministry of Education, Research, Development, and Youth of the Slovak Republic, was to provide students with a comprehensive overview of educational opportunities at Slovak universities and enhance their motivation to pursue higher education domestically. A central component of this initiative was the introduction of the “I study at home, Slovakia will reward me” scholarship program, aimed at financially supporting talented students to encourage their continued academic engagement within Slovakia (MinEdu, 2024).

Beyond its core mission, ALMA MATER 2024 sought to establish a dynamic platform for direct interaction between students, representatives of universities, academics, and professionals across various fields. This exchange was instrumental in gathering valuable data on the factors influencing student decision-making regarding university selection. By leveraging these insights, the ministry aimed to bolster the positioning of Slovak universities within the competitive landscape of higher education and enhance their international appeal. Additionally, secondary objectives included elevating the prestige of Slovak universities and fostering deeper collaboration between academia, the public sphere, and the private sector.

The execution of ALMA MATER 2024 required a multi-phase organizational process encompassing conceptual development, logistical planning, venue selection, institutional coordination, and event implementation. The Ministry of Education spearheaded this endeavor, financing it through the Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Slovak Republic. The overarching aim was to design an event capable of effectively engaging prospective university students and equipping them with relevant information regarding academic opportunities within Slovakia.

The key operational tasks of ALMA MATER 2024 included:

- Venue Selection – Ensuring accessibility for students across diverse regions, with fairs hosted in eight regional cities.

- **Institutional Coordination** – Facilitating participation from universities, faculties, and other academic entities to present study programs effectively.
- **Media and Information Campaign** – Implementing widespread promotional efforts to maximize student awareness and attendance.
- **Technical and Logistical Support** – Managing exhibition spaces, coordinating presentations, distributing informational materials, and organizing event personnel.

Each fair was carefully structured to reflect the evolving needs and expectations of students, incorporating findings from previous surveys and institutional feedback. The events were scheduled between February and April 2024 in eight strategic locations across Slovakia (Trnava, Trenčín, Banská Bystrica, Nitra, Žilina, Prešov, Košice, and Bratislava), ensuring equitable regional participation while minimizing travel burdens on attendees. Venue selection was driven by considerations of accessibility, capacity, and suitability for interactive university exhibitions.

The program framework of ALMA MATER 2024 featured university presentations, expert discussions, workshops, and interactive panels designed to maximize engagement and information dissemination. Representatives from participating institutions showcased their faculties, study programs, and international opportunities, while attendees received direct insights into the “I study at home, Slovakia will reward me” scholarship initiative. Furthermore, students had the opportunity to engage in panel discussions with current university students, seek individual consultations with academic representatives, and participate in workshops simulating lecture formats, entrance exams, and university environments.

A critical element of the fairs was the collection of feedback through questionnaires, enabling participants to express their preferences and perspectives on higher education in Slovakia. The high turnout and active student participation underscored significant interest in this form of academic outreach.

To ensure broad visibility, the Ministry’s Department of Communication and Marketing executed a multi-channel promotional strategy spanning traditional and digital media. Outreach efforts included press conferences, collaborations with leading news outlets, and dedicated campaigns on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, regional school administrators and county governors were engaged to facilitate localized dissemination of event information, further amplifying student awareness.

The ALMA MATER 2024 project represented a significant step toward strengthening the domestic higher education system by creating direct pathways for prospective students to explore academic opportunities within Slovakia. Its effectiveness and long-term impact on student decision-making remain central to this study’s evaluation, informing future strategies aimed at enhancing the global competitiveness of Slovak universities.

## **Questionnaire and its Analysis**

One of the primary objectives of the ALMA MATER 2024 fairs was not only to showcase the study opportunities available at Slovak universities but also to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the decision-making factors influencing prospective students. To achieve this, the Ministry of Education, Research, Development, and Youth of the Slovak Republic initiated a questionnaire survey designed to collect data on secondary school students’ preferences, attitudes toward higher education, and factors determining their choice between domestic and international study programs.

The questionnaire was voluntary, allowing students to complete it directly at the fairs. It included a combination of open-ended questions and multiple-choice responses, ensuring a balanced mix of qualitative and quantitative insights. A total of 2,427 students participated, providing valuable data regarding their academic inclinations and perceptions of Slovak and foreign universities.

### **Participant Demographics**

The survey respondents were categorized into three main groups based on the type of secondary school they attended:

45% were students enrolled in grammar schools (gymnázia),

47% attended secondary vocational schools (SOŠ),

8% came from other types of educational institutions, including art schools, bilingual grammar schools, conservatories, and international programs.

These figures indicate that the event successfully reached a diverse student population, with grammar school and vocational school students contributing nearly equally to the survey. This distribution is crucial for future fair planning, as the educational aspirations and career trajectories of these groups differ significantly—grammar school students tend to focus on academic pathways, whereas vocational school students often consider practical fields that facilitate faster entry into the labor market.

#### Domestic vs. International Study Preferences

A key aspect of the survey was assessing students' intentions regarding higher education location. The results revealed the following preferences:

- 53.8% of students expressed a preference for studying in Slovakia,
- 46.2% were actively considering studying abroad.

While Slovak universities still appeal to a slight majority of domestic students, the relatively high percentage of those interested in foreign institutions underscores the ongoing challenge of retaining talent within the country. This trend highlights the need for strategic interventions aimed at improving the competitiveness of the Slovak higher education system.

#### Factors Influencing University Choice

Students who favored foreign universities cited the following key advantages:

- Higher quality of teaching and academic prestige,
  - Improved study conditions,
  - Better employment prospects upon graduation,
  - Attractive financial aid and scholarship opportunities,
  - Greater emphasis on practical training and international collaborations.
- Conversely, students who preferred Slovak universities emphasized benefits such as:
- Accessibility of education in the native language,
  - Proximity to home and family,
  - Lower financial costs compared to studying abroad,
  - Emotional connection to Slovakia and long-term career prospects in the domestic market.

These insights provide critical feedback for Slovak universities and policymakers, indicating that efforts to enhance the academic quality, infrastructure, and career-linked offerings of domestic institutions could significantly influence student retention.

#### Impact of the Scholarship Program

A focal point of ALMA MATER 2024 was the presentation of the scholarship program “I study at home, Slovakia will reward me”, designed to financially support talented students and encourage them to pursue their education in Slovakia. The survey data indicated the following awareness levels:

50% of students learned about the scholarship program directly at the fairs,

50% had already received information through other sources, such as university websites, school portals, social media, and recommendations from teachers and parents.

These findings demonstrate the pivotal role of in-person engagement in conveying scholarship information, reinforcing the importance of integrating such promotional efforts within future educational fairs.

The survey further highlighted the most influential factors shaping students' scholarship decisions, including:

- Financial support amount,
- Eligibility criteria,
- Scholarship duration and usability throughout the study period,
- Compatibility with other forms of financial assistance.

Given these insights, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education and universities invest in more effective communication strategies regarding scholarship opportunities. Potential improvements include targeted online campaigns, interactive digital platforms, and enhanced outreach via social media to ensure that financial aid options are widely recognized by prospective students.

#### Key Takeaways and Policy Recommendations

The questionnaire results provide valuable empirical data on high school students' motivations and preferences regarding higher education. The key findings are as follows:

The ALMA MATER fairs engaged a broad spectrum of students, with grammar school and vocational school attendees participating in almost equal proportions.

While over half of respondents preferred studying in Slovakia, a significant portion (46.2%) expressed interest in pursuing education abroad, emphasizing the urgency of improving domestic academic competitiveness.

The scholarship program played a critical role in student decision-making, with 50% of respondents learning about it through ALMA MATER.

These findings offer valuable guidance for both event organizers and educational policymakers. To enhance the attractiveness of Slovak universities, recommended strategies include:

- Expanding financial aid programs,
- Improving academic and research infrastructure,
- Strengthening industry partnerships and internship opportunities,
- Launching more effective promotional campaigns for study programs and scholarships.

Through such measures, Slovakia can reinforce its position as a competitive higher education provider, ensuring that talented students opt to study domestically rather than seeking opportunities abroad.

## Conclusion

The ALMA MATER 2024 trade fairs represented a pivotal initiative by the Ministry of Education, Research, Development, and Youth of the Slovak Republic, aimed at strengthening domestic higher education and encouraging young students to pursue their academic careers in Slovakia. The inaugural year of this initiative demonstrated substantial student interest in university-related information and scholarship opportunities, affirming the relevance of such events within the Slovak educational landscape.

The ALMA MATER 2024 project was designed with several strategic objectives, which were largely accomplished:

Enhancing awareness of Slovak universities – Institutions were provided with a platform to present themselves to a broad audience, enabling students to acquire comprehensive insights into study programs and admission requirements.

Promotion of the scholarship program “I study at home, Slovakia will reward me” – The program was effectively introduced, confirming that financial support serves as a significant motivational factor for students in selecting a domestic university.

Facilitating direct communication between students and university representatives – The engagement of universities allowed for interactive discussions, positively influencing students’ decision-making processes.

Gathering empirical data through a questionnaire survey – A total of 2,427 questionnaires were collected, providing valuable insights into student preferences and motivations.

Despite the successful execution of the event, several challenges and areas for improvement were identified, which will be instrumental in enhancing the effectiveness of future fairs.

### Identified Challenges and Recommendations

The analysis highlights several key recommendations for improving subsequent ALMA MATER fairs:

1. Expanding regional coverage – Although fairs were conducted in eight regional cities, extending outreach to smaller towns could bridge information gaps and ensure broader accessibility to university opportunities.
2. Increasing employer engagement – Future fairs could allocate greater space for employers to facilitate connections between higher education and labor market demands, strengthening employability prospects.
3. Optimizing information dissemination – Survey results indicate that most students learned about scholarship opportunities directly at the fairs, yet online platforms and social media could serve as more efficient tools for reaching a wider audience.
4. Enhancing interactive components – Incorporating practical workshops, simulated lectures, and mock entrance exams could increase student engagement, making fairs more dynamic and appealing.

## Final Reflections

Based on the collected data and overall student feedback, it is evident that ALMA MATER 2024 successfully fulfilled its intended purpose and demonstrated significant potential for future expansion. Beyond its informational role, the project contributed to motivating students to remain in Slovakia for their academic and professional careers.

Moving forward, a systematic approach to improving fair organization, strengthening digital and interactive elements, and aligning initiatives with evolving student and labor market needs will be essential. The Ministry of Education may consider developing a long-term strategic framework to sustain these efforts, ensuring the continued growth and prestige of domestic universities.

Ultimately, ALMA MATER 2024 can be regarded as a high-impact educational project, laying the foundation for further advancements in promoting Slovak higher education. As emphasized earlier in this study, event marketing enhances direct engagement with target audiences, and the ALMA MATER fairs reaffirmed that facilitating personal interaction between secondary school students and prospective universities fosters positive experiences and informed decision-making.

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# MARKETING AND DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT: A CASE STUDY OF SUCCSES OF LC SIGNS

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## ABSTRACT

*In today's world, social media is deeply integrated into our daily lives. Not only as a source of entertainment but also as a tool for generating profit. With its vast audience and an algorithm that delivers diverse types of videos, brands have the opportunity to promote their products virally without incurring high costs. A perfect example is the Chinese company LC Signs, which, through humorous videos, has achieved not only millions of views but also organic advertising in the form of user-generated remixes of their content. On TikTok, their LED screen profile has become part of pop culture, and this article explores how they achieved this success. To analyze this phenomenon, we will use the observational method, which provides a comprehensive overview of the content development not only of LC Signs but also of other brands that actively engage on TikTok.*

**Keywords:** Social media, Tik-Tok, digital marketing

## INTRODUCTION

Viral marketing can be achieved by just one person. Marketing is a key factor in ensuring a company's strong economic performance. Its development and strategies are continuously evolving and adapting to current societal and technological conditions. Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, marketing was considered a highly costly investment, accessible only to the wealthy. Advertising space was locked behind paywalls (Ecommercebridge, online). However, with the rise of social media, opportunities for low-cost promotion emerged. As a result, in 2025, a Chinese LED panel store has become known to millions worldwide, despite filming its videos on a phone in a warehouse. Their results speak for themselves: over 1 million followers and more than 12 million views in just a few months (TikTok, online). Although their content creation history is far longer and it has demonstrated that, the type of content published on social media significantly impacts its success. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon, which this article will explore in detail.

### What is TikTok?

In a world where content targeting plays an increasingly important role, capturing the right audience is becoming more challenging. On social media platforms owned by Meta, it has become common practice that achieving rapid success largely depends on paid promotion (Business of Apps, online).

TikTok disrupted Meta's dominance by introducing short-form videos along with an advanced algorithm. This algorithm precisely targets content to specific users and entire communities. As a result, brands and creators can achieve high view counts without investing additional financial resources. As one of the fastest-growing social media platforms in the world, TikTok has become a key channel for marketing activities. Its algorithm allows every creator to start on an equal footing, presenting a unique opportunity for both businesses and individuals to reach their target audience (TikTok, online).

Every month, TikTok attracts 1.2 billion users over the age of 18 (Brian Dean, 2023). According to 2022 data, one in four Slovaks has a TikTok account, spending nearly an hour a day watching videos (Neopublic, online).

## **From a Dance App to Changing Content Consumption**

TikTok began its journey in 2016 as the app Douyin, which was initially designed solely for the Chinese market (Neopublic, online). In 2017, however, it underwent a rebranding to TikTok and quickly expanded globally under this new name. A key feature was its impact on the U.S. market, where the app Musical.ly had a strong presence. Musical.ly focused on similar content to TikTok, but due to the international success and capital of ByteDance, the company behind TikTok, it acquired Musical.ly in 2017. Both apps operated simultaneously until August 2018, when they were merged. Users of Musical.ly were automatically transferred to TikTok, marking the beginning of TikTok's true global success (DEBORAH D'SOUZA, 2023). Today, TikTok ranks 6th in daily users. However, if we exclude messaging apps, TikTok ranks 4th with 1.2 billion daily users.

As Eagle (2023) notes, TikTok's algorithm tracks engagement metrics such as comments, shares, likes, and replays to determine the potential of videos going viral. This ability to organically spread content is a key factor that makes TikTok attractive for marketing. Companies can reach a broad audience with minimal advertising costs through TikTok.

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## **For You and Your Next Customers**

The TikTok app interface includes two main pages for browsing videos. The primary page is called "For You," or "Pre teba," where videos are displayed based on an algorithm's selection for the user. It is often referred to as the FYP (For You Page), and this is where users spend most of their time. For creators, this page is a priority because it offers the opportunity to attract new followers and engage returning viewers. The second page is titled "Followed," or "Sledujem," where users can find videos from creators they have followed in the past. However, compared to the "For You" page, the viewing percentage on this page is significantly lower, which is why we do not place as much emphasis on this section (Dave Jorgenson, 2021).

Videos on TikTok go viral when the algorithm selects them to be shared on the "For You" page. "Viral" means that the video becomes truly popular, gaining numerous views, likes, and shares. TikTok assumes that videos on the FYP will catch your attention and keep you engaged for longer periods of time.

A key element of TikTok is its ability to tailor content to the preferences of individual users. The algorithm analyzes interactions such as watch time, repeat views, and the use of hashtags to ensure the content is maximally relevant to the target audience. In this way, TikTok not only enhances the user experience but also helps brands reach a highly specific target group (TikTok, online).

## **The First Seconds Are Key to Success**

The way videos are consumed on TikTok has completely changed creators' approach to conceptualizing content. Since users only spend a few seconds on each video, the so-called "hook" at the beginning has become crucial. This hook is designed to capture the viewer's attention and keep them watching for as long as possible. As a result, the artistic and dramatic aspects of such videos are often compromised, as it's impossible to create emotionally slow-paced introductions. Additionally, introductory intros or opening titles have almost completely disappeared.

Dave Jorgenson, in his discussion of TikTok video creation, states the following: "When people enjoy what you're creating, and it's the result of your own creative process, it's hard to stop. In the worst case, TikTok allows you to create something original and new every day. In the best case, TikTok lets you create something original and new every day and get millions of free internet points and views." (Dave Jorgenson, 2021, p. 5) The "hook" refers to the first few seconds of the video that should capture the viewer's attention to prevent them from skipping the video.

There are several ways to incorporate this into content creation. For creators posting funny videos or sketches, the best approach is to include text either describing the video or using the traditional phrase "Watch until the end." For DIY videos or content related to technology, creators often tap into viewers' curiosity. At the time of writing this thesis, a trend emerged where creators would tease the viewer in ranking videos, suggesting they wouldn't believe the last point or that it would be the most helpful. However, this is often misleading because the video would end after the fourth point, or the last point would be a mere link without any added value. While this tactic might work for short-term attention retention, it does not foster long-term engagement or build loyal audiences who will watch our videos regularly.

The success of a video depends on the compelling introduction, as seen in the analysis of content from the author's TikTok account. This was confirmed by observing our own content. A vlog from the 24 Hours of Spa racing weekend, which otherwise offered an interesting perspective from a visitor's point of view, lacked an optimal opening shot and sound quality. As a result, the video did not exceed 10,000 views. On the other hand, a video about an unusual accident from a lesser-known championship achieved better results. By using a quick introduction and showing the accident immediately, we captured the viewers' attention, and they continued watching the video. The average watch time reached an excellent 51.4 seconds for 101,000 viewers. More than 3.39% of viewers watched the entire 2-minute video. Despite the seemingly low technical complexity of videos on this social network, we still need to be mindful of the fundamental aspects of audiovisual creation that we apply to every video (TikTok, online).

### **Although They Can't Hear Us, They Understand Us**

In today's world, it is essential to subtitle videos to maintain attention and engage viewers. Manual subtitling, even for short videos, is extremely time-consuming, which is why we use subtitle programs powered by artificial intelligence that can automatically generate subtitles in the chosen language. In our case, we use the Captions app, which offers several subscription options. For our purposes, the basic plan is sufficient. This plan provides access to most of the program's features, including the ability to adjust the position, shape, font, and color of the subtitles.

By adding subtitles, our videos become more accessible to viewers with hearing impairments (Captions, online). Currently, the subtitle program is not flawless, so it is recommended to review and correct its results. Additionally, we must be mindful of the subtitle placement, given TikTok's specific layout. It's important to ensure the text is legible and doesn't cover critical parts of the video or get obscured by the app's graphic elements. Once we are satisfied with the results, we can proceed to upload the video to our channel.

### **Research**

The best example of how TikTok marketing can bring a brand even greater impact than a paid marketing campaign is the profile of LC Signs. On their account @lcsign\_lightbox, they showcase their products, which are LED advertising panels. The first video on this account was posted on July 5, 2023, and it focused solely on the competitive advantages of the LED panel compared to its competitors. No special visual elements or comedic aspects were used. As of January 24, 2025, this first video has reached 30.7 thousand views, but the following series of videos with the same concept failed to exceed 10 thousand views. (TikTok, online)

The first sign of creative modification came on July 13, when the host introduced himself as Tony. His real name is Zhu Yu, and he was chosen for this role due to his knowledge of English. (People's Daily Online, online) This video, which introduces the host without any other conceptual changes, currently has 4.3 million views, a significant jump compared to the previous videos on this profile. (TikTok, online) At present, we do not have detailed historical statistics for an external profile on TikTok, and therefore, we cannot determine if these views are organic, paid advertisements, or retrospective views from fans of this profile. Based on the views of the remaining videos, which lacked further conceptual adjustments, and their relatively low view counts, we are inclined to believe that this is either a paid advertisement or the result of fan-driven retrospective viewing.

In the following period, the @lcsign\_lightbox profile continued posting several videos daily, but their view counts no longer exceeded 5 thousand views. (TikTok, online)

On January 30, 2024, the first significant spike in views occurred when a foreign character appeared in the video—someone audiences were not accustomed to. This moment of surprise increased interactions with the content and indicated that the audience responded positively to the comedic aspect of promotional videos. (TikTok, online) Still, the focus remained primarily on product promotion, with only small verbal jokes or changes in accents.

By October 29, we observed signs of a sketch-like format, with a choreographed performance aimed at entertaining the viewers at the beginning. The audience responded positively to this shift. (StudioBinder, online) The video reached 1.3 million views and 63 thousand likes. This new style brought regular view counts

above 20 thousand users. However, on November 24, the profile introduced a video “stitch,” which is the combination of an external video with the creator’s own content, resulting in unprecedented effects. Thanks to the funny combination of popular and absurd videos at the beginning, followed by humorous references to the benefits of LC products, these videos became exceptionally popular. The first video achieved 2.9 million views and nearly 300 thousand reactions, indicating a 10% interaction rate with the audience. After this video, Tony and LC Signs became TikTok superstars, with their most successful video reaching 16.3 million views and generating thousands of TikTok edits that not only feature Tony’s face but also further promote LC Signs products. (TikTok, online)

### **Views = Revenue**

Thanks to this marketing strategy, the profile, which has been dedicated to promoting LED advertising banners from the very beginning, has managed to amass over 700,000 followers and nearly 8 million likes. The success did not stop at social media presentation but also translated into sales and brand awareness. According to Google Trends data, there was a significant rise in searches for LC Signs towards the end of the year. Between December 22 and January 18, the interest level increased by 100 search points. Looking at the countries where interest is highest, it is evident that this Chinese company is being searched in markets in North America, South Africa, Europe, and Oceania.

Since LC Signs is a Chinese company, its sales data and archives are not publicly available. However, according to the Ensun website, it is estimated that the company manufactures approximately 10,000 banners monthly. (Ensun, online) Additionally, according to an interview conducted by People’s Daily Online with Zhu Yu (Tony), sales have reached \$1.8 million since the beginning of the year. Sales for the previous year were around \$800,000, which clearly shows exponential growth. This is a clear and undeniable example of how social media promotion has positively impacted sales and brand awareness, which, in the case of this type of product, would have been nearly unattainable through traditional marketing methods. (People’s Daily Online, online)

### **It’s Funny, Because It’s Unethical**

Upon observing these videos, there is a clear trend that violates TikTok’s creator guidelines. It is also evident that the app itself has not set up its algorithm to enforce its community guidelines. The For You Feed channel is the primary source for getting views and reaching new audiences. The algorithm promotes videos, but it often features content that contains sexual, offensive, or racially hateful material. TikTok’s own guidelines state:

“Hate Speech and Behavior - Certain content that uses stereotypes, innuendos, or indirect statements that may implicitly degrade protected groups.”

In the case of LC Signs’ success, we observed that videos where moderator Tony parodies members of the LGBTI community or marginalized groups tend to achieve the highest number of views. People are entertained by how Tony takes context from these groups’ videos and turns it against them, often in a fair manner. However, these videos indirectly perpetuate stereotypes or hatred. The initial factor in their popularity is the fact that the videos are created by members of the affected groups.

In our observation, we also witnessed several instances of these videos being created as like farms or rage bait. That means content intended to shock, provoke, and encourage interaction. LC Signs often just places the context of these videos into the real world, which is why they seem humorous. However, there have been several cases where the profile deliberately promoted body-shaming, using mockery of obese people for promotional purposes. Again, this was a reaction to videos originally posted by these groups themselves.

The only original content intended to parody (and, of course, promote) is the mockery of politicians or people from certain countries. Here, the moderator tries to mimic stereotypical behaviors of a given politician or national group. A positive point, enhancing communication with customers and building trust, is the ability of the moderator to communicate in his native language. With the help of a teleprompter, he can speak in many global languages, such as Spanish, Italian, and German, further expanding his global reach.

## Conclusion

Promoting a brand and its products on social media has become an integral part of modern marketing strategies. However, when it comes to TikTok, brands need to carefully consider how they want to communicate. Many brands choose to adopt a serious communication approach, but this type of strategy has limited success on this platform. TikTok users are primarily looking for engaging or, ideally, humorous content that provides them with a quick dopamine hit. As a result, more and more profiles are opting to collaborate with creators whose task is to produce entertaining content for platforms like Instagram Reels and TikTok. This approach often differs greatly from a brand's traditional marketing communication.

This strategy is necessary because, to achieve high view counts and reach thousands of potential new customers with minimal costs, brands must come up with unconventional content that often breaks conventional communication rules. However, where a brand sets its line, beyond which it will not cross, is a personal decision. The LC Signs profile, in the case studied, has set this line very boldly and managed to profit from it without facing cancel culture or boycotts. However, it's important to note that this is an exceptional risk to a brand's reputation, and traditional brands may not be able to handle it. Therefore, such an aggressive marketing strategy is not a universal key to success, and each brand should carefully consider what type of communication is appropriate for them.

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# DIGITOPIA

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