

# TRADITIONAL CULTURAL CAPITAL ELEMENTS IN ADVERTISING – CASE STUDY: NAPOLACT AND COVALACT

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## ABSTRACT

The advertising of Romanian brands has known a sterling ‘invasion’ of traditional themed messages. One of the most prominent adverts belongs to the ‘Undelelm de la Bunica` brand, which took off in the 1998. The creators of this brand were the ones that set a trend of using traditional themed messages in the field of advertising.

The communist era has forced a fake, populist traditional image to justify its political discourse. In a society fed up with such traditional populist messages, a new brand that uses the idyllic ‘Bunica (Grandma)` appears. ‘Undelelm de la Bunica` brings forth the childhood existence of the grandmother that makes food better than ‘mama makes it’, using only natural and trustworthy ingredients

Even though the basic message was not clearly traditional, the ‘bunica` was closely linked to the world of the typical Romanian grandmother, with ties to traditions, rituals and, most importantly, to the rural world. ‘Bunica` has started a race of ‘authenticity’ in publicity, a race in which other brands like ‘Boromir’, ‘Pate Ardealul’, ‘Napolact’, ‘Covalact` and so on, entered. From the years of 2000, the national brands’ marketing messages have begun to introduce new and more complex traditional symbols in their communication strategies. Good examples of such elements are the usage of the collocations ‘traditional (traditional)’, ‘ca la țară (from the rural village)’, of images or symbols from the local folklore ornaments, of brand characters which ‘conjure’ tradition.

The main purpose of this paper is to identify the relations between traditional cultural capital elements, the brand’s communication efforts and the receiving public. For the research conducted in this article, two local dairy brands, with tradition in Romania, have been chosen. The data analyzed is collected from secondary sources.

**Keywords:** local brands, traditional cultural capital, traditional message, traditional branding

## INTRODUCTION

The usage of traditional cultural capital elements has become a common practice in the domains of advertising and marketing in Romania, especially in fields such as dairy and other aliment products. The entirety of traditional cultural capital includes traditional motifs, people, places, songs, buildings and even people, so it is quite difficult to pin-point the exact element that is the selling point of tradition. To better understand the essence of the traditional message, it is necessary to mention that the traditional values, motifs, myths, songs, and stories have had their birthplace in the Romanian village.

Hence, the importance that traditional cultural values, as part of the cultural heritage, have in the heart of many Romanian citizens, as many of them have grown up or have or had relatives in rural Romania.

While there are many factors pertaining to the traditional cultural capital that can be used in product branding, I have chosen the communication strategy of two dairy local brands with history on the Romanian market, Napolact and Covalact. These two brands will be compared in names of their social media activity and their popularity among consumers. For this purpose, most of the data analyzed is taken from already existing studies or articles and from tools that measure the social media activity of said brands. The two brands chosen for the comparison are part of the few brands that have remained standing after the fall of the communism. They are named after the counties of origin, Covalact standing for Covasna county and Napolact for Cluj-Napoca county. Another common thing is their marketing strategy, both brands' communication strategy focusing on, straightforwardly or in a roundabout way, the tradition of consumption, tradition of production, brand with tradition on the market. This type of message tries to inspire trust, authenticity and truth, the core values of the archaic peasant [1].

When we take into account tradition, we are referring to the lat. *traditum* [2], which means all that is transmitted from one generation to another. In the case of the Romanian traditional culture studied in this paper, tradition refers to the body of transmitted archaic behaviours and values, traditional artistic elements such as colors, symbols and motifs, everyday works practices and behaviour. Each of these elements can be found together or separate, in the traditional message adopted by local brands in their communication strategy, but in a much-simplified form due to monetary or time constraints. This translates in a traditional message which's only purpose is to bring to surface feelings of nostalgia bought forth by the food prepared by a motherly figure by using simplified visual elements, such as national costumes, rural planes, traditional motifs, or indirect references to the traditional realm, such as out of context songs or folklore music in the background.

Although in the present days the traditional branding, as well as the traditional message are a common practice used by all sorts of companies from

IT, bricolage and cleaning to food and dairy products, it is a new practice in the history of advertising in the post-communist Romania. The first traditional branding exercise was brought in Romania by a marketing company in collaboration with foreign producers. They understood that *tradition* was an asset to bring value to the brand by winning the trust of the consumers [3], by creating strong solidarity with the brand [3].

With the admission of Romania to the European Union in 2007, the traditional message started to gain political support, a series of projects meant to salvage the local economy being put in action. Labels like „made in Romania” (*fabricat în România*), the vernacular or traditional have become, overnight, the lifebelt and image of the Romanian economy [3].

## METHODOLOGY

The article was written after reading about traditional branding in the book of Florin Dumitrescu, *Tradiții la superofertă*. Even though I had seen traditional elements being employed in the image of different brands, I had decided to write about this fact only after reading the book. The data collected for this article was taken from two main sources, F. Dumitrescu's book and the activity of the two brands on social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube. I have also taken statistics of the social media performance of the two brands from websites such as socialblade.com andrivaliq.com, which offer free statistics.

To compare their actual influence on the consumer in terms of sales, I have tried to find them of the Bucharest Stock Market, from where they were un-listed. Also, a detailed and fair comparison between the sales of the two brands seems close to impossible since both were brought by bigger international dairy companies, namely Napolact was bought by FrieslandCampina in 2004 and Covalact by Lactalis in 2017. A short visit on the website risco.ro, which showcases the financial situation of several companies, shows that Covalact has stopped reporting its financial performances since 2017, while Napolact had no financial reports whatsoever.

The social media analysis was conducted using two methods, firstly by comparing the number of followers or subscribers, and secondly, by comparing the engagement on the social pages of the followers of the two brands. Engagement is understood as the number of reactions, likes or dislikes, shares and comments, while the engagement rate takes the overall engagement data, calculating the ratio by taking into account the brand's activity on the social media platform and the number of followers or subscribers. It is important to mention that to check the data, one has to register on the platforms.

## **Tradition in Marketing strategy**

The Romanian market abounds of traditional messages, being them on-line, on TV, or the printed mediums. In this article I am focussing on the use of traditional messages in the social media only. The use of traditional messages brings out the Romanian's longing for long passed times belonging to an 'illo tempore' to which they have no access to [4], but which is relieved, partially, through these references; through traditional humour [3] – which is an important part of the substratum of the Romanian culture. Elements of traditional branding that evoke such feelings are labels like *Fabricat în România* (Made in Romania), *Lapte din inima Ardealului* (Milk from the heart of Ardeal), *Mândru Brand Românesc* (Proud Romanian Brand), brand characters like *Coana Chiva* (Missis Chiva), the *Rom* communication messages and the *Unirea* brand character, Dorel. In this article I will discuss two main ways in which tradition intertwines with marketing, namely, nostalgia and intrinsic Romanian humor.

### **Nostalgia – a weapon of the traditional message**

The taste for the past represents, for the marketing agencies, an exploitable resource by bringing back on the market, even if it is in name only, products inaccessible to today's consumer. An interesting fact is that this nostalgic is not only lived by those who once have known such times, but also by those who have inherited these nostalgia feelings from stories told by family members. This demand for traditional products is a result of the communist and post-communist policies and actions.

The invasion of the post-communist Romanian market of western European products after the fall of communism came as a result of people's starving for west-European standards. But from 2007, when Romania became an EU member, bringing with it a series of regulations that made it difficult to procure dairy and food from peasants because it did not respect a series of EU regulations [5], an autochthon movement brings to surface the importance of the products made locally. Since then, traditional branding has started to have a booming success in Romania. With the renewed taste for the country food, the Romanian people have started to again pay attention to and want the natural, traditional healthy food from the countryside, food that they have once traded for the *western dream*. This new respect and nostalgia for the „village taste” is being transmitted to the new generations, creating a kind of nostalgic contagion for the traditional, natural Romanian taste.

To satisfy this vacuum, several marketing agencies appeal to the national imagery of naturalness and trust: the grandparents, nature, the specific animals of the traditional Romanian household let to roam freely on the local plains, the village household, the autochthon.

This increasingly violent race for the traditional image of the vernacular and ethnic is beginning to alter itself into a cultural model where ‘cool’ or ‘in fashion’ translates itself by the opposition between handmade and industrial and by the creation of a new self, the ‘authentic self’, which consumes only natural, traditional products [3].

### **Traditional humor and the communication strategies**

Even if it does not belong to the traditional imagery, the local humor is an important and defining element of the Romanian traditional culture. Because of that, the marketing people have started to use separately or combined, the traditional humor with the traditional image to attract and gain the Romanian consumer’s trust. This humor can be observed at *Coana Chiva* from the *Civalact de Țară* brand, when she uses the ‘prea bun, prea ca la țară’(Too good, too like the countryside – this expression is meant to emphasize the closeness between the natural, traditional taste, which is the taste of the Romanian village, and the taste of the brands’ own products) expression, the interactions between her and the ‘science people’ from the city that make the milk in a laboratory, the *Pate Ardealul* (Ardealul pâté) ads, where several Romanian peasants share the traditional pâté with city folks and launch the term *fainoshag*, which has no meaning in the Romanian dictionary, but is meant to emphasize the naturalness and close to the origins taste [3].

Even if not all brands have a brand character like *Coana Chiva*, which is the embodiment of the village missus that likes to higgle, all ads that use humor, bring into light Romanian local traits and the quality of their ‘traditional’ products, compared to the industrial ones. *Coana Chiva* uses an expression like too rigid, too limp, to sour, to sweet and so on to describe the industrial taste, while the *Pate Ardealul* brand uses the known slowness of the *ardelean* people to express the attention to every detail in the manufacturing process of the pâté: ‘It takes me eight hours to spread the pâté. How long do you take to spread it? Me, I take 24 hours.’.

Using these humorous techniques, the brands manage to shrink the distance between the brand and the consumer, while promising the creation of a natural, traditional product: ‘Natural, Homemade, Tasty, Known and with local Identity, from here’ compare to ‘Artificial, Industrial, Unsavoury, Unknown, Foreign, from another place’ [6].

### **The trust in tradition**

According to the data gathered by Dumitrescu F., brands that have a communication strategy focused on a traditional message are perceived by the consumers closer to them, more trustworthy. That is gained by their attempt to come closer to the authentic taste through the products quality and the brands marketing strategy. Another is the situation when it comes to social media

reactions to the communication campaigns of the two brands, namely Napolact and Covalact. A more scrupulous analysis shows us that the communication strategy plays only a part in the image built by a company in the consumers' minds. Other important factors to take into account that has an important impact on the image of the brands are geo-location, political stances and economical decisions.

## Comparative analysis

As I have mentioned before, in this article I intend to compare two local dairy brands, Napolact and Covalact in regards to their communication strategies and its impact on the consumers. I have chosen these two brands because both of them have a long history on the Romanian market and both make use of traditional messages and traditional branding:

- The Napolact brand emphasizes the geo-local origin of its raw material, the milk from the heart of Ardeal (*Lapte din inima Ardealului*), which is bought from local farmers. This is emphasized by the transition from the urban plane to the rural one. The final location is always in the countryside, surrounded by nature and mountains, with a haystack nearby, the symbol of the mountain rural planes. Aside from the ads that can be found both on TV and on the social platform, other mediums of communication present on social media are the usage of pictures with nature, products surrounded by nature, hay, video recipes, babies drinking the Napolact milk, all with the intent to induce trust, naturalness, closeness to the origins. The Napolact brand has included in its portfolio a chain of Bio dairy products, also from the heart of Ardeal, to emphasize more its devotion to the health of the consumer.

- The Covalact brand makes use of the *Coana Chiva* brand character, the embodiment of the peasant woman, hefty, strict and with attention to detail when it comes to the food served on her table. By using the collocation 'too good, too like the countryside', she emphasizes the authentical recipe used in preparing the products, to suit the taste of Romanians. The brand uses in its advertising campaigns other symbols such as carols, traditional magic spells called 'descântec' or other symbols. Its main social media activities show *Coana Chiva* placed in a rural household. The Covalact brand has also launched a chain of Bio products, but it has not emphasized them as much as Napolact.

For this article I have compared types of social media content creation, numbers of follows, subscriptions, likes, comments, and other interactions with the content created. The first social media outlet bought into comparison is YouTube with the ads played also on TV, and on their Facebook pages. The difference between the TV ads and the YouTube ones is that the former allows for instant feedback translated in likes/dislikes and positive/negative comments.

With the help of the platform socialblade.com, I was able to compare the two brands in terms of engagement. According to socialblade.com, Covalact has better

engagement with more views, likes and a bigger pool of subscribers, compared to Napolact (Table 1\*\*\*).

Napolact [7]					Covalact [8]				
Total subs.	Subs. For last 30 days	Total video views	Views per last 30 days	Eng. on last 30 days [10]	Total subs.	Subs. for last 30 days	Total video views	Views per last 30 days	Eng. on last 30 days [10]
5.63 K	120	15,788,737	425,27 K	65*	12.6 K	200	20,960,576	4.527 M	0**

Table 1

Legend: subs. = subscribers., Comm. = comments, Eng. = engagement.

\* 490% more than the previous month

\*\* 100% less than the previous month

\*\*\* The Views and Subscriber information were taken from soocialbakers.com, while the likes, dislikes and like/dislike ration were calculated by me.

When it comes to the Facebook page, Napolact is better positioned at audience engagement translated in reactions, comments or shares. To analyze the Facebook pages of the two brands I have used the tools provided by rivaliq.com. On Facebook, I took into account both the engagement rate, the evolution of engagement and the number of followers and their evolution in the past 30 days. The data on both brands can be consulted in Table 2.

Napolact [9]					Covalact [9]				
Total followers	New followers in the last 30 days	Total Eng. on last 30 days	Eng. rate on last 30 days	Total post s on last 30 days	Total followers	New followers in the last 30 days	Total Eng. on last 30 days	Eng. rate on last 30 days	Total post s on last 30 days
267 273	+ 0.1%	2414 *	0.056% **	16	90 733	0	316** *	0.044 %	8

Table 2

Legend: Eng. Rate = engagement rate, Eng. = Engagement,

\* A drop of 50.1%

\*\* A drop of 75.1%

\*\*\* An increase of 14.9%

The engagement rate on Facebook might be higher than the one on You Tube mostly because Facebook is a communication platform. But that does not explain why Napolact is better ranked on Facebook than You Tube, and for such

information a more detailed analysis is required. It is clear though that the brand character *Coana Chiva* has won over the hearts of consumers, while Napolact has gained their trust with their emphasis on the care they hold for the naturalness and origin of the raw materials.

## CONCLUSIONS

After an analysis of the content posted by the two brands, it is easy to observe that the same video content can be viewed both on Facebook and YouTube. What is interesting though, is that the same video content has higher appreciation on Facebook compared to YouTube. That might be because the main target, the target identified by Dumitrescu Florin as the housewife [3], mostly finds information on Facebook pages or groups and not on YouTube. A good example for that are the Facebook groups dedicated to young mothers, amateur cooks and so on, which gather more information together, while YouTube only offers more of a separate content.

After analyzing and comparing the activity of the two brands on social media, one can understand the importance of using traditional messages in the communication campaign, as well as the importance of traditional branding in building the image of a brand. As Florin Dumitrescu [3] mentions in his books, as well as Xuchang Li and Ting Liu mention in their study [11], the usage of traditional cultural elements when it comes to food packaging, brings forth a series of emotions embedded in those symbols and are meant to show that the product respects ‘the laws of nature’ [11], the traditional way of doing things [3], is closer to the truth [1].

Using traditional branding and traditional messages, several local brands, but not only, have managed to convince the consumers of their stated desire to give them healthy, natural, and traditional products, that respect the recipe transmitted from old generation. But if there is discordance between the message/ stated intentions and their actual actions, consumers tend to punish the brand. Such an example can be found in the case of Napolact. The brand Napolact uses the catchphrase *Milk from the heart of Ardeal*, and when the main company Friesland Campina, closed some of its local milk collecting plants, the Romanian director of the company had to attend a press conference where he explained that the milk for Napolact was still brought from Romanian farms, but they had to buy milk from Hungary for the other brands. There were also several articles, and YouTube comments stating that the *Milk from the heart of Ardeal* was actually coming from Hungary. In other words, even if the traditional is a good selling point, consumers pay a lot of attention to the coherence between the actions and the statements of a brand.

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