

# THE EVOLUTION OF KAUFLAND COMMUNICATION STRATEGY IN ROMANIA DURING THE PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

Retailers strove to find a way to better communicate with consumers between 2020 and 2021. The pandemic raised some walls against their struggles because of people's fear, distrust, and new demands. In the first stage of this unusual lifestyle, buyers looked for new manners of living and even surviving. Then, they tried to adapt to unexpected opportunities to alleviate their daily existence. This study aims to analyse the evolution of Kaufland communication in terms of strategy between March 16, 2020, and December 2021. We wanted to find out how a specific retailer organized its communication in Romania during the pandemic, because taking into consideration that Kaufland is quite successful in the local market, meets most clients' demands, whose opinion about their products is usually positive. Concerning research methods, we conducted a multimodal discourse analysis focused on online ads delivered on Instagram, investigating them at the extralinguistic and linguistic levels. The study aimed to compare the lockdown and the post-lockdown Instagram campaigns to reveal such issues: global and local aspects, the balance between the rational and emotional approach of the retailer, tone of voice, and even main topics. Our purpose consisted in comparing the first pandemic year with the second one when consumers started learning how to deal with this new challenge in their life. The research outcomes confirmed that Kaufland re-considered its position in the Romanian virtual community, helping people to better cope with unexpected hardships in their lives by using corporate social responsibility communication strategies and an emotional approach in most advertising campaigns.

## KEYWORDS

retailers, pandemic, consumer behaviour, advertising, communication

## CLASSIFICATION

JEL: M37

## **INTRODUCTION**

This research aims to provide information regarding the communication strategies of one of the most popular retailers in Romania during the pandemic when consumers' behaviour changed for many reasons. At that moment, public institutions, the Government, and the Ministry of Health in Romania first reacted rather hectically while common people were most vulnerable and needed any help. Analysing Kaufland's communication strategies and tactics, this article underlined the way the economic role of this retailer turned into a strong social one due to their initiatives to meet customers' needs. When discussing the context of this research, many factors entirely motivate such topics as the global situation regarding crisis management, the sanitary restrictions, the market development, and the psychological obstacles.

The worldwide reaction to the pandemic was quite homogeneous because it was an answer to a high level of fear and insecurity. Mass media and social media kept informing people worldwide, tracking the number of patients and the deceased. The government's decisions were similar: closing city gates, then the borders, isolating citizens, and elaborating sanitary protocols. Hence, the consequences of this crisis occurred almost the same everywhere, as Naeem stated: 'The outbreak of Covid-19 has brought changes to social, professional and psychological routines, such as financial hardship, self-isolation and stress, loss of jobs and physical and psychological health issues.' [1; p.282] By all means, the collapse of the sanitary system triggered the abovementioned consequences upon society; even if the crisis was global, the fear was individual. Ordinary citizens gradually became so afraid of the virus that they had no hope for their future since they were surrounded by confusion and fears. Schleper et al. [2] stated that many waves of this virus triggered similar reactions in the world: 'The global COVID-19 pandemic has caused severe economic shocks in many countries. Containment and mitigation measures taken by many governments around the world aiming to avoid the breakdown of health systems have led to regional and national lockdowns in different waves' [2; p.193].

The 'social-distancing' demanded from population discipline, calm and rational behaviour. The most difficult control was buyers' behaviour in supermarkets, buses, stores, markets, or public spaces. The harder they obeyed the restrictions, the more they put their lives in danger. This was the moment when the concept of a 'viable supply chain' was embraced. The term was launched by Ivanov [3] and described to which extent positive changes with resilience and sustainability can ease the effects of shocks in society.

In this context, retailers reacted differently within this already prolonged interval regarding communication strategy, online shopping, buyers' health protection, social responsibilities involvement, and even the efficient reorganization of the in-store supermarket space. There were markets where this process was quite smooth, for example, in Greece, whereas, in other countries, such as Romania, the process encountered some obstacles. Accordingly, Anastasiadou et al. asserted: 'At the same time Greek supermarkets seemed not to have any problems with wholesales and handled the situation better' [4, p.901]. In other countries, such as Sweden, consumers perceived this new organizational attempt of retailers, yet not always for good, which justified their tendency to stockpile without any apparent reason. Therefore, buyers became sensitive to prices, quantity, product display, and ingredients necessary for in-home cooking. According to Mead et al. [5], consumers' decision to acquire goods has been influenced by numerous factors simply because they fear for their own life and safety.

Consequently, the sanitary crisis led to deep changes in consumers' behaviour since they connected shopping with many references to their lifestyle, including those on social, private, and even professional levels. This situation was observed worldwide, and consumers experienced real challenges in adapting to the new circumstances offered by supermarkets: 'Changes in social behaviour are not limited to personal behaviour, but it seems that various

areas of life are affected, including consumer behaviour, and this time, across the world' [2; p.894]. Tormala [6] stated that psychological certainty, this feeling of being safe, has strongly influenced behaviours and attitudes.

This article's goal consists of presenting how these two ideas of resilience and sustainability were born in the supermarkets' politics, using the case of the Kaufland retail chain. Until then, Romania was not so well-known for their people's involvement in supporting causes, activism, and even corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns. Before the pandemic, brands chose to represent their interests in various areas, and their communication generated integrated communication campaigns. Sustainable and responsible behaviour of consumers does not represent a regular attitude compared to other countries. Besides, long-term strategies were mostly dedicated to digitalizing buying, ordering products, and paying online. Another strong reason for researching crisis communication of a retailer relies on the fact that many scholars analysed particular contexts and markets. Still, they usually concentrated on well-developed countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, Netherland, Italy, and France. Unlike these, Romania has always been perceived as a traditional country with an older population, usually living in the countryside or small cities, presenting a huge gap between Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers. Most articles and books published during the 2020 and 2022 focused on educational adaptation to the online system of teaching, teleworking, information technology progress [7], psychological impact on consumers [8], and major shifts in sustainable customer behaviour [9]. Analysing how a supermarket has changed its communication strategies, initially supported by traditional advertising and not by sophisticated social media, stands now a step forward to outline its social role in society. Furthermore, this study brings to light the moment of launching a new era of retailing in Romania because Kaufland took the opportunity to implement revolutionary technological tools immediately adopted by competitors.

The research questions of this article are meant to clarify its purposes and highlight its relevance in the field of communication studies and business. Therefore, in the present article's main body, we aim to answer the following questions: (i) To what extent did Kaufland Romania adapt the communication to the pandemic context using Instagram as the main platform? (ii) What are the main linguistic features of Kaufland communication on the Instagram page firstly between March 16 and December 2020, and last, but not least, throughout 2021? (iii) Which are the relevant topics embraced by Kaufland messages on an Instagram platform during the same interval? (iv) Which are the most obvious features of the extralinguistic level regarding Kaufland communication, by unveiling cultural landmarks and visual representations of the brand?

As for the main objectives of this article, we should consider the context of conducting this qualitative research, the abovementioned questions, and the relevance of approaching this topic for the Romanian market. In this regard, this article's first objective is to investigate to which extent Kaufland's image considerably shifted its business role into social help by understanding consumers' needs during the pandemic. The next purpose of this research focuses on analysing how Kaufland communication adapted to the pandemic context, especially on Instagram, a social media platform intensively embraced by brands and influencers in Romania. Last, but not least, this research aims to unfold the way Kaufland communicates on a linguistic level compared with the extralinguistic one, given that Instagram is a platform explicitly conveying both verbal and visual information.

Moreover, this study responds to the necessity of examining the retailers' reaction to the Romanian market with some specific characteristics: a very high level of consumption, a low level of digital education among seniors, and a rejection of E-commerce. The present study's main goal is to understand the Kaufland adaptation to the pandemic condition and its switch

from a simple economic factor to a social one by volunteering for people, looking for innovative solutions, and empowering other brands to do the same thing. The specific contribution to this field of research, based on the pandemic strategies of doing business, arises from comparing those two levels of communication by applying multimodal discourse analysis. Instagram is a virtual platform, most likely by Romanians, after Facebook. According to Mediafactbook 2021 [11], Instagram users represent 61 % of the online population in Romania, which justifies both the brands and the consumers orientation towards this one. Hence, researching intense interactivity on Instagram during the pandemic provides us with a better comprehension of the new Kaufland communication strategies.

Despite the unpredictable situation, retailers have strongly developed on three crucial levels: the technological and organizational one, the strategical one in terms of communication, and the adaptation to consumers' needs to whom they pay special attention. Firstly, to be more specific, the way Kaufland organized its services in the last 2 years proved high standards of employees, and the supermarket fought against chaos or panic on the shelves or between their products. The supermarket prioritized its business according to each stage of the health crisis, thus displaying the goods not monthly, as usual, but weekly. They ensured a better flow of customers along the aisles, always signalling the legal distances. While discussing the fact that employees worked all this time efficiently, Valtorta et al. also investigated the psychological consequences of such efforts, which generated, in their opinion, burnout, and dehumanization of employees at the supermarket [12].

Nevertheless, this approach has calmly inspired buyers and employees to take the attitude, reconfiguring the entire context of in-store shopping. Technology convinced traditional Romanians to transition from direct in-store shopping to online purchases, building trust step by step to protect their lives. Romanians still appreciated mostly peasants' local products regarding vegetables, fruits, dairy, or meat and suddenly had to accept only supermarkets offer as a measure of safety. Thus, Kaufland created its new brand significantly, named *I want from Romania*, described on the supermarket site page as 'a manifesto of our tradition and culture. This is Romania that we have known ever since we were born, from our grandparents' stories, from the fields full of love, from our heroes' courage, from your eyes.' Kaufland has used technology not only to provide buyers with another way to fill their shopping baskets but also to keep them connected to their roots and local gastronomy to make them feel comfortable at home. The highest risk experienced by the worldwide population during the pandemic was the industrialization of life due to remote work, isolation, de-socialization, and delivery services (usually scheduled). This was another form of globalization, but Kaufland invited Romanians to return to their origins, perceived as memories and life beyond the Covid-19 virus.

Secondly, the Kaufland communication strategy has been continuously updated from one phase to another in one of the pandemic contexts. While focusing on the frame of this study, there is no doubt that this supermarket has communicated differently in the following timespans. They look as follows: in the lockdown, in the first 2 months between March and May 2020; during relative restrictions until January 2021 when the vaccination campaign started, and, finally, in 2021, when people got used to a pandemic routine of virus waves. During the lockdown, Kaufland experienced the highest level of its crisis reflected in communication, as it happened to other retailers worldwide. Communication tactics were meant to fight against panic buying behaviour that had two consequences: on the one hand, this destabilized the balance of daily supermarket routine and, on the other, triggered huge sales because of people stockpiling supplies [13]. When moving to the next strategy stage, Kaufland invested in social responsibility campaigns, being perceived as a reliable partner, not only as a supplier. This time, their advertising and press releases highlighted the retailer's concerns regarding buyers' apprehensions and lifestyles. In a recent article, Feyaerts and Heyvaert entitled this business

approach of the supermarket *humanized business communication*, outlining the main values associated with the brand: empathy, solidarity, sympathy, support, trustworthiness, and, last, but not least, fully engaged [14]. In this stage, the communication strategy relied on a detailed knowledge of consumer behaviours, whose fears, needs, and emotions were released to high pressure and had to be effectively controlled. After January 2021, once people's hopes suddenly increased due to the distribution of the anti-COVID-19 vaccines, social media stands for the third pillar that ensures retailers a coherence of their voice regardless of the virus waves. This level of interaction is quite visible in Romania on Instagram because Kaufland shifts to consumer-oriented interaction from product- and brand-oriented messages.

Regarding consumers' adaptation to these new behaviours of safe buying and online satisfaction, retailers constantly investigated their reactions and interactions on social media. Their behaviour was chaotic at the pandemic's beginning, considering that the unpredictable future leads them to fear, defence, and individualistic feelings. Supermarkets had to deal with this general confusion and tendency to spend more and empty the shelves as buyers would have prepared for a biological 3<sup>rd</sup> World War. Before the pandemic, compulsive buying was associated with a hedonist attitude, with consumerism since people satisfy their psychological or social pleasures. According to Naeem [1, 15], impulsive buying has become one of the best ways to characterize the COVID-19 pandemic in consumer behaviour. Hence, from commodities, such as groceries, and hygiene products, buyers' attention quickly focused on fashion (new categories of in-house clothing), furniture, construction or renovation materials, and quick food delivery. The extent to which Kaufland runs its communication mostly on Instagram and Facebook in Romania certainly displays adapting to customers' tendencies and trends and discovering their interests and needs for interaction. According to Jefferson and Tanton, digital content marketing is meant to activate strong emotional connections, substitute face-to-face socialization, and support consumers with every click. In this case, it is not about simple sales, marketing offers, or tactics, but about building trust and empowering brand values lately so much humanized [16].

This study dedicated to the communication strategies of a supermarket, which caters to the Romanian consumers' needs, is organized as follows. The next section, after the introduction, explains the context of e-commerce evolution in Romania before and after the pandemic, which is quite relevant to understanding consumers' behaviour online. The literature review is paid considerable attention in the next 3 sections. The third section discusses consumer behaviour before and during the pandemic globally. The next one moves to the issue we are interested in regarding the retailers' involvement in supporting consumers during the pandemic. This part emphasizes the role of the *signalling theory* elaborated by Spence [10]. The last stage of the scientific literature refers to the social media role in communication campaigns, seen not only as means of promoting brands but also as a real chance to integrate people into virtual communities and, this way, to get over self-isolation and pandemic fears. In the rest of the article, we present the methodology and the results displayed on both the linguistic and the extralinguistic levels. In the end, the study reveals the discussions and the research conclusions, all consisting of the main stages of Kaufland communication strategies, their limitations, and the possible development of the article in the future.

## **THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON E-COMMERCE IN ROMANIA**

Before March 2020, electronic commerce was frequently associated in Romania with special events such as Black Friday, food delivery (at work, usually not from the restaurant), and digitalized generation, mostly Millennials and Z Generation. Besides, E-commerce was strongly meant to facilitate some activities, such as travel, bills payment in some cases (not always user-friendly), business investments, and entrepreneurship. For some loyal customers,

e-shopping had started earlier, once they looked for global brands to purchase their goods from international E-commerce giants such as e-Bay, Amazon, and Vivre. This generation was already used to Internet banking before mobile applications were considered user-friendly since they operated with complicated devices at that time, available online on computers. Once selling and buying platforms appeared (OLX.ro, Publi24.ro), customers started paying more attention to electronics from eMag, the oldest successful E-commerce platform in Romania, and other brands developing such opportunities. As Rohm and Swaminathan state, online shopping comes up with a huge advantage in terms of flexibility, time management, discounts, and product diversity [17]. In comparison, in-store buying creates that synergy between buyers and products and reveals the sensory dimension of every brand.

During the pandemic, E-commerce became more than a necessity because many people used it as a single solution to buy groceries, especially while they had to spend time either in quarantine or isolation. As a result, their confidence in online shopping has significantly grown, even if the context was far from being a happy one. So, the main concern in E-commerce, which was the security system during the purchase, has been overcome. Since then, this category of sceptic buyers has strongly come to consider E-commerce a viable opportunity to solve daily needs. On their part, banks and online financial platforms like Revolut went into a process of better organization, further tightening security checks by updating SmartToken.

Following Kaufland in the previous year, 2021, there is no doubt that the supermarket team, either we refer to the marketing one or the management, has considerably evolved since they localized the communication so much, they created a local brand and were the first to react in front of the deep changes caused by the health crisis.

## **CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC**

What deserves further consideration for this research consists of a brief comparison between consumers' behaviour before and during the pandemic. A few factors marked the main differences: the consumption level, the attitude toward E-commerce, and the loyalty toward brands. Before 2020, humanity strove to fulfil wishes and dreams by any means, and consumerism was a form of freedom or even an aspiration. Nothing could hinder them from consumption, and brands fought for people's loyalty by looking for strategies adapted to their dreams and self-projection. Brands focused so much on consumers' personalities and beliefs, on campaign insight, and less on CSR. The shopping experiences fulfilled consumption dreams and brought about satisfaction. According to Ritzer, consumption at such a large scale implies a spectacular view of reality that removes consumers from day-to-day common life: 'Through simulation, cathedrals of consumption can mimic, and render even more spectacular, natural environments, fictional settings and historical monuments' [18; p.441]. Mall and shopping centres were metaphorically depicted as 'cathedrals of consumption, considering their philosophy, architecture, and, last but not least, the time perception. Consumption was not a necessity but a pleasure.

During the pandemic, consumers became vulnerable because they risked contamination or even death while being provided with the main supplies, sanitary purchases, or other mandatory acquisitions for common needs. According to Brimmer et al. [19], the decision factors for vulnerability are the following: medical conditions, social stability, and economic or financial status, the latter helping people cope with their needs through long-term survival strategies. Locked in their houses, they returned to old habits, focused on cooking, using more online delivery, or learned how to get products by utilizing diverse applications. Before the pandemic, customers concentrated on brands' credibility and image built by efficient campaigns, while since January 2021, people have given up subjective perceptions of the mandatory products.

The gap between delivering promised goods and concerns about Covid infestation during shopping is quite obvious, as Bove stated: 'However, whereas in pre-COVID-19, consumers' were concerns about the seller's credibility to deliver upon the promise, now the informational gap is around the physical risk of asymptomatic transmission from both front-line staff and other customers who will share the service' [20; p.1186]. Last but not least, Anastasiadou et al. [2] underlined a strong reality that changed consumers' behaviour during the first stages of the pandemic: people completely disregarded Chinese products, as decreasing the level of credibility and quick association with SARS-COV-2.

## **RETAILERS' INVOLVEMENT IN SUPPORTING CONSUMERS DURING THE PANDEMIC**

Considering that vulnerable people need more help than other social categories for many reasons, such as health problems, psychological barriers, and even social support, the pandemic created several opportunities to involve brands and supermarkets in social responsibility activities.

This time, their efficiency was a necessity and a solution to the entire context. As Breitbarth et al. state: "Since the food supply is essential, solutions must be developed to circumvent supermarkets as a potential source of infection for vulnerable populations. In the future, other pandemics or epidemics may reveal different vulnerable population groups" [21; p.228]. The brands whose role was crucial during the lockdown and relaxation measures belong to such categories of products and services: supermarkets, banks, delivery food, communication, Internet providers, media, and online platforms. Almost all these categories, apart from giants' providers of Internet and online resources, were faced with two problems: firstly, employees' safety during their work and, secondly, the emergence of new consumers' needs under these circumstances. Consequently, the concept of resilience found its place in this context, strongly associated with the ability to adapt, respond, and come up with innovative solutions to the ongoing crisis, according to well-known scholars [22].

As for supermarkets, they did not stop their activity because they moved to online applications, thus connecting people more attractively and safely. Strategies launched by supermarkets to overcome consumers' fears during the pandemic were called *signalling theory* by Spence in 1974 [10]. The word, signal' refers to stimuli meant to indicate the values and hidden qualities of the respective brand that diminish the consumers' uncertainty and specify the extent to which providers communicate most positively. According to Donath, this concept' is to alter the receiver's beliefs or behaviours in ways that benefit the signaller' [23]. After the Covid virus was considered one of the most dangerous enemies in this world, retailers focused so much on positive messages, safety headlines of campaigns, encouraging slogans, and urged patience and compliance with government restriction rules. At this moment, retailers were perceived as social actors whose main mission was to represent customers' protection. Carrefour Romania created a buying application entitled Bringo, whose role was to satisfy clients' needs under safe circumstances. Bringo's message recreates the off-store atmosphere online by telling such words: 'You buy like you're in the store' Auchan launched a platform of delivery whose message is very persuasive and turns the store from a simple supermarket into a real help, efficient buyer considering this idea of handing over the baton: 'We do your shopping. Auchan called himself the professional buyer, and Lola Market became a virtual space for successfully online shopping.

At the end of this brief analysis regarding the supermarket's role, while supporting consumers during the pandemic, we reach Fairlie and Fossen's statement: 'Overall, the patterns of sales losses and growth indicate a shift from in-store purchases to online purchases, and from restaurants to grocery stores' [24; p.5].

## **SOCIAL MEDIA ROLE IN COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS**

The Internet enables people to gain power through technology, which has completely changed the world, knowledge being not a privilege anymore, but hunting among information or disinformation. In the beginning, when clicking a website, users were mere witnesses to a virtual catalogue that was displayed and updated as quickly as possible. Yet, their attitude was passive, not intrusive or risky for brands and companies. Although, Internet policies were not entirely applied and ethically controlled as they were supposed to be. In other words, the Internet was perceived as a collective voice not that much focused on specific desires and needs but relied on consumers' segmentation. Users found their voice once social media turn them from passive witnesses into active players, always able to generate intriguing, challenging, or, why not, creative content. Social media's emergence in people's life in the 21st century has entirely changed communication styles in many fields, such as business, advertising, marketing, entrepreneurship, psychology, and even private relationships [25].

For some scholars such as Shang et al. [26], online communication, including blogging, vlogging, and different platforms of interactive messages (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, Whatsapp, Snapchat, etc.) stands for innovative word-of-mouth, or, in our view, as a door-to-door communication, the same way as marketing. For a few decades already, Internet has become one of the most important factors of globalization since the cyberworld has no limits and it can be incredibly well organized in communities for simple, informal interactions or informal/professional relationships. This communication overcomes the real geographical space and brings people closer, given their interests. Thus, according to Rheingold, who anticipated this online (r)evolution, the Internet might be defined as a social aggregation of people carrying out public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace [27].

The main characteristics of social media consist of dialogical communication, volatility, interaction, building new connections, bonding communities, as we discovered, and processing the information quite quickly. According to Grewal and Levy [28], social media has been steadily adapting businesses to people's needs and knowledge, absorbing their curiosities and learning how to be successful and efficient. Technology, in this case, social platforms, has started a strong competition providing consumers with diverse and performant tools available both on apps, android, and desktops. However, as mentioned earlier, in terms of technology, the progress was the solution to this incredible change of communication direction: from simply providing one-sided information to letting consumers engage and interact with the content [29].

Furthermore, social media could be considered at least a means of integrating marketing communication once consumers participate in virtual events, competitions, generating-content activities, and brand capital evaluations. Leismester et al. [30] highlighted that virtual or cyberspace could be organized in non-commercial and commercial communities, the latter being often associated with brand community since this is rooted in strong values mirroring consumers' personalities. Every brand relies on its consumers' loyalty, and social media platforms have become the appropriate space to be influenced by an opinion leader who deserves the other members' trust. In social media, emotional reactions cannot always be prevented also never entirely controlled. However, a brand should benefit from its community dynamics to gain customers' attention. As a result, virtual communities dedicated to a brand might be a reason of concern for this because of the possible negative comments against the brand itself, which can destabilize the very relationship among consumers as well [31]. Yet, consumers' involvement in brand communities might be regarded as brand loyalty since users constantly express their views towards products, services, and any message delivered on social media, thus triggering an emotional or cognitive attitude.



In addition, social media advertising has emerged as a new form of advertising meant to get more traffic and better mark out products' qualities [32]. As did pop-ups, banners, and other online ads, without annoying users anymore, this kind of advertising takes consumers' attention by storm, yields their involvement, and produces qualitative content. Considering the qualities, this new form of brand promotion accounts for a new name: *native advertising* [33]. Lately, native advertisements have conquered the market, mostly responsible for effective campaigns because they stir users' involvement, attention, and emotional commitment towards the brands.

In the context of empowering social media in advertising, it is equally important in this study to understand the background of Romanian Internet users in general, particularly during the pandemic. Bărgăoanu and Cheregi rigorously demonstrated that the technology emerges as a soft power instrument, mandatory for developing the economy even in the post-pandemic world, just as in any country worldwide. Society's evolution in an era of disruptive changes will be decided by technology, which will most likely become a real advantage for the Romanian future [34]. However, Romania is framed as a tech-nation, as the abovementioned scholars pointed out, being a destination for I.T. investors, having one of the best Broadband Internet speeds, numerous young people choosing this career (Millennials, Gen Z), and, finally, launching projects supported by the Government and private sectors as well. At the international level, the criterium of digital abilities situated Romania in the 50th place in the IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking, 2021. Romania decreased from 2019 to 2021, from 46 to 50, which lends more significance to the context of this global study in terms of health crisis and consumers' behaviour.

In other words, users were more oriented to daily and basic needs and not to improve their abilities or aspire to the next levels of the following features characterizing digital competitiveness: knowledge, technology, and future readiness.

In Romania, scholars investigated the impact of social media on life improvement during the pandemic, underlining the functional and emotional level of day-to-day existence. Conducting research focused on the Instagram role in people's routines in 2020, Balaban and Spoaller revealed paradoxical outcomes. On the one hand, this social platform did not positively affect self-esteem and life satisfaction but considerably decreased loneliness [35]. According to our researchers, sharing their life on Instagram often entrusts this platform with a high level of expressing emotions: 'Posting pictures and stories on Instagram made our respondents feel like a part of a community and thus made them feel less lonely' [35, p.14].

Consequently, retailers, and in our study, Kaufland, have started communicating steadily to entertain consumers' community and diversify the respective strategy, as the current research will demonstrate further.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate the Kaufland communication strategies applied in Romania in the online environment, respectively, on the Instagram account between March 16 and December 2021. Hence, I conducted a multimodal discourse analysis to investigate Kaufland's communication in such circumstances. According to Teun A. Van Dijk, one of the most prominent discourse analysis scholars, 'the notion of discourse is essentially fuzzy' [36, p.1]. Language is only the first level of communication, whereas a careful perspective on any message reveals many layers of conveying some information. Therefore, analysing how Kaufland communicated on Instagram involves a double approach: firstly, a visual one and, secondly, a linguistic one. In this context, Berger's statement regarding the evolution of this concept enriches the range of theories that debates discourse analysis: 'When discourse analysts started analysing complex texts such as Facebook, they had to deal

with words, images, photographs, and videos. The term they use for this kind of analysis is multimodal discourse analysis – dealing with different modes of communication’ [37; p.598].

The main research question of this article refers to the extent to which the supermarket adapted its communication to the pandemic using the Instagram social media platform. Their multimodal discourse was the best qualitative approach to pay enough attention to the brand capital, made up of advertisements, comments, and posts related to Kaufland products. Therefore, this research followed and adapted Halliday’s theory [38] that divided the discourse analysis into Extralinguistic and Linguistic levels. Regarding the Extralinguistic level, the main items taken into consideration are the culture and situation-related context. In this case, the situation is almost the same: the pandemic crisis. The linguistic level is represented by content levels (semantics and lexicogrammar, which can be translated into the main topics of the slogans or headlines) and the expression levels (phonology, graphology, and gestures). This theory can be easily adapted to Kaufland communication on Instagram by framing the multimodal discourse according to the following items presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Multimodal levels of discourse analysis.

<b>Extralinguistic level</b>	<b>Linguistic level</b>
1. The Romanian cultural landmarks	1. The content levels (the topic of Kaufland communication)
2. The landmarks of diverse situations during Kaufland’s campaigns on Instagram	2. The tone of voice
3. The Design and chromatics of Instagram-posts	3. The lexical field of brand messages

Consequently, we analysed the Romanian Instagram account belonging to Kaufland Romania based on visual aspects often representing the extralinguistic level of communication, on the one hand, and the linguistic characteristics such as vocabulary, syntax, repetitive words, and tone of voice, on the other hand.

## RESULTS

### THE LINGUISTIC LEVEL

The first dimension of the multimodal discourse analysis under discussion refers to the linguistic level provided by the communication on Instagram firstly, between March 16 and December 2020, and last, but not least, throughout 2021. The comparison is relevant for a better understanding of Kaufland’s strategic communication in terms of dynamics and adaptation to the pandemic context. The topic of all Instagram posts, especially in the first 3 months (published every other day if not days after the lockdown), focused on several directions: gratitude, implication, help, safety, celebration, prevention, nutrition, and gastronomy. When the lockdown started in Romania, the message was very strong and clear, highlighting responsibility and solidarity using such sentences and campaign slogans: *Responsibility makes the difference*. During the Easter holiday, the topic was changed from gratitude and implication to celebration and happiness despite all the restrictions caused by the lockdown. As for the tone of voice, the Insta-analysis displayed three categories: the serious and responsible one in most cases, the friendly and joyful one during Easter celebration or spring beginnings, and the relaxed one while advising consumers to adapt their new style of life to the pandemic. Ultimately the lexical level fulfilled this linguistic approach of multimodal discourse analysis. The specific outcomes emerge from the hashtags used by Kaufland during the campaigns, on the one hand, and the rich Instagram messages posted at that time, on the other hand. Among the most relevant hashtags revealed by the research, the following seem to be outstanding:



Instagram posts came to be well-known through their diversity, either from an emotional viewpoint or from a functional perspective, describing mostly the campaigns' topic. Certainly, each Insta-picture was simultaneously accompanied by many hashtags. Here are some associations of messages delivered between June 2020 and 2021 (Table 2).

Even if the Kaufland Instagram hashtags appeal to the Romanian market, they use English to synthesize messages. During a week, each post has at least 3 or even 4 hashtags describing the variety of communication. Over 20 hashtags observed food quality (#delicious, #mozzarella, #cheese, #spinach, #waffles, #strawberry, #goudacheese, #perfectsandwich, etc.), and 10 of them underlined moment of consumption (#breakfast, #dinner, #Sunday, #breakfastideas, #morning). In contrast, the rest paid attention to Kaufland services (#KClassic, #Socheap, # So simple).

Considering that after May 2020, Kaufland daily posted at least one social media message on Instagram, it is obvious that their communication strategy was emotional, using their products to improve consumers' attitudes towards life. Messages ignore any pandemic context, focusing on consumers feeling extremely sensitive, vulnerable, and lonely. Somehow, the linguistic level marked out a new context of daily existence characterized by creativity, self-esteem, joy, and high intrinsic motivation; at least, this is what they meant. Hashtags are relevant landmarks of the lexical field, as they also happened in the lockdown stage.

In 2021, Instagram topics were quite diverse, presenting offers, recipes, rational native advertising, but also design of meals, lunches, organization of specific events, such as celebrations, anniversaries (Christmas, Easter, June 1), and even festivals (Untold). The retailer invests so much in creativity and emotional involvement. Recently, Kaufland has supported sustainability in some campaigns, focusing on recycling. In this context, the tone of voice remains the same, familiar and very friendly. As for the lexical field, in 2021, such semantic fields as aesthetic, entertainment, creativity, and beauty were the main aspects highlighted by hashtags and posts.

**Table 2.** Hashtags vs. Instagram topics.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topics</b>	<b>Hashtags</b>
4. 08.2020	A plateful of bruschetta	#relax, #summermood, #kauflandvibes
6.08.2020	Royal Nuts presented in their package	#healthyfood, #kauflandvibes, # goodprice, #Kclassic
2.09.2020	Canned herring	#kauflandromania, #oferta, #fish, #salatacuhering, #foodphotography, #tasty, #foodlover, #fishlovers, #saladlover, #rețete, #goodmood, #salatenextlevel, #raisethesalatbar.
24.10.2020	Kaufland anniversary campaign	#15aniDeKaufland, #FacemdinPovesteRealitate
18.11.2020	A reel presenting Christmas celebration by dancing	#poftădeviață, #poftădeviațădelicioasă, #sărăbătoridepoveste, #poftădedelicatese, #poftădepromoții, #spiritulsărbătorilor.
12.01.2021	A pot with potatoes cooked after traditional recipe	#kaufland, #romanianfood, #gustulcopilăriei, #delicios, #comfortfood, #foodie
4.03.2021	Breakfast with tarts	#Kaufland, #desertlovers, #thesweetlife, #sweettreat, #freshfood, #bestdayever, #breakfastideas, #relaxtime, #feelingmyself, #bestfoodfeed, #moodoftheday.

## THE EXTRALINGUISTIC LEVEL

The second dimension of our research method refers to the extralinguistic level, which is less generous regarding information and details. Regarding Romanian cultural landmarks or local identity, the German retailer—initially approached the sanitary crisis globally, at least in lockdown. Kaufland wove the local visual symbols with the global ones. For instance, in the first two weeks of lockdown, the red colour as a background of posts reminded us of Red Cross advertisements. Ads were simple, explaining the new sanitary prevention advice meant to re-organize people's life. Around the Easter celebration, the local identity drew consumers' attention by posting visual representations of Romanian traditions: the painted eggs, Easter sweet bread, and the new perspective of Easter family lunch. Besides the partnership with the Royal Foundation, Margaret of Romania stands for another sign of national history. At the end of lockdown, the retailer prepared the target for normality, inviting them to enjoy other activities such as watching a movie at home while ordering or cooking a pizza from Kaufland. As for the landmarks that framed or outlined diverse situations of the crisis, Kaufland's Instagram posts unveiled the entire evolution of the pandemic crisis.

Consequently, ads set forth the stockpiling and urged to recover people's trust and stop this excessive buying attitude. Then, Kaufland emphasized its pioneering stage when it decided to deliver for free and activated volunteers to help seniors. Posts insisted so much on new pandemic rules, communicating a guide of staying healthy and safe. Then, the most frequent posts tackled the pandemic lifestyle, looking for solutions to ease the transition from a dynamic life to a static one.

Right after the lockdown, we discovered that Romanian cultural landmarks were completely overlooked in some contexts. In 4 campaigns, the Romanian issues were absent. In the other 4, the landmarks remind us of the international gastronomy, such as the German, the Italian, the Portuguese, and the French. Regarding the national references, Kaufland bears the sign of localized campaigns by using Romanian artist's names (Smiley), athletes (Cristina Neagu), traditional food (recipes), popular graphic design on plates, traditional Romanian dishes (chopping boards, the wooden pestle and mortar, wooden spoons, rolling pins, and clay pie dishes) and ingredients (berries, coriander, garlic, parsley, and dill). The situations when Kaufland become part of people's lives are related to consumption moments or significant period such as morning, breakfast, Sunday, lunch, dinner, celebration, or, why not, movie time. Visual landscapes were similar between November 2020 and December 2021, referring to representations of national gastronomy, traditions, and even family. Over 2021, the international approach was also paid enough attention (French, Swiss, Italian lifestyle). When it comes to chromatics, there is a real difference between lockdown advertising and post-lockdown brand advertising. In the first case, the composition of each Insta-ad was quite balanced, and chromatics followed the classic expectations of the menu.

In contrast, after May 16, 2020, the brand delighted consumers by using an explosion of vivid colours. Colours were meant to endow loyal consumers with a motivational vibe by focusing so much on food combination and creativity in terms of cooking. In both pre-and post-lockdown timespan, Kaufland ads delivered on Instagram prompted a dynamic perspective of dishes, goods, and table design, which helped consumers re-build their life, inspired more by social media. Still, in lockdown, chromatics was also associated with health crisis (red with the campaign #ajut -#Ihelp), or category of food (vegetables with green and yellow), meat (red and brown), fruits (multicolour). From June to December 2020, the extralinguistic level was progressively diversified in layout, chromatics, and product display.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Our research synthesis is a chronological one, on the one hand, and a comparative one, on the other. The latter perspective refers to the results triggered by the linguistic versus the extralinguistic level. Kaufland reacted quickly, learning how to cope with this challenge from one day to another. So, the retailer understood its social role from the very first moment of lockdown, supporting consumers and providing them not only with supplies but also with trust and encouragement. Coming up with solutions to adapt on the go, the retailer became a real partner, giving the supportive message, the initiative of partnership with Glovo, and the volunteering program. Certainly, Kaufland's attitude triggered a chain reaction in the market and hindered consumers from experiencing panic. However, the Kaufland discourse was not homogeneous because it did not establish a balance between the extralinguistic and linguistic levels. The latter one more strove to encourage people, provide information, come up with strong solutions and appeal to people's sense of humanity. Nevertheless, the topic, the tone of voice, and even the pandemic situations developed by the retailer Instagram campaigns accounted for the most-active behaviour and turned the advertising message into a CSR one.

Quite after the lockdown, Kaufland gave up on its social role, focusing on its psychological support, given the optimistic messages at the linguistic level and the diversity of topics at the visual one. Hence, consumers were invited to be part of this new communication strategy by providing them with recipes and unleashing their creativity and emotions. As a result, the retailer became a daily partner of consumers' usual activities, acting as a witness to their entire routine. In 2021, ads did not concentrate on marketing issues, such as discounts and offers or catalogues, but on special moments of pleasure, such as the joy of an exquisite dessert. Paying so much attention to colours, creative meals, atmosphere, festivals, and social media ads ultimately urged people to live their lives. Therefore, this step corresponds to the well-promised direction based on the hashtag #it'sdoingourselvesgoodtomorrow transmitted on March 15 and May 15, 2020. The positive tone of voice, the idea of changing the world's perception, and even the lexical field reflect the desire to accelerate the process of returning to the pre-pandemic life when cooking, recipes, fresh vegetables, and delicious food stand for serious subjects to be discussed.

Compared to the first stage of the multimodal discourse analysis, in the second phase, the message is quite homogeneous at the linguistic level, in terms of lexical field, topic, and tone of voice, since the entire strategy is based on escapism, on release from the fear of the virus. As for the balance between the extralinguistic and linguistic aspects, one can notice an obvious correspondence because the positive tone and the topics are specific to the Romanian contexts and traditions in most cases.

Investigating all these communication stages of Kaufland campaigns running on Instagram between March 16, 2020, and December 31, 2021, several strategies stand out as a result of properly facing the pandemic crisis, thus underlining the novelty of this article. Firstly, the retailer re-considered its position in the community, helping people better cope with unexpected changes and hardships. Therefore, Kaufland got involved in social responsibilities campaigns and conveyed messages regarding people's safety, sustainability, and even education in terms of nutrition.

To summarize, there is no doubt that Kaufland proved the ability not only to re-connect itself as a brand with its buyers, but also the supermarket can be considered a pioneer in Romania due to its social initiatives under such difficult circumstances. The verbal or visual Instagram posts concern establishing people's psychological balance, teaching them how to stay calm, and recommending patience. The adaptation to the entire context of experiencing life under such pressure of the virus was completely fulfilled by organizing the messages according to the following criteria: the moment of sanitary crisis, which was not dramatically approached,

and private life, always relevant to the brand. We can recognize Feyaerts and Heyvaert's theory [14] regarding *humanized business communication* in terms of personalizing every message in this adaptation process to the local market overwhelmed by the crisis. The supermarket brand was supportive and empathetic, convincing us that it strove to help people overcome their fears, as Singh et al. stated [13]. However, consumerism has been replaced by rational behaviour, adopting two tactics: in-store and virtual communication. This time, Ritzer's view [18] on consumption as a pleasure turned into a well-managed necessity, which strongly influenced other retailers regarding organization and time efficiency.

Regarding management implications, Kaufland has become a brand easily empowered with trust. Therefore, it is considered an example for other retailers who found it more difficult to understand that their communication strategy did not properly appeal to their buyers in such a crisis. Given Kaufland-inspired innovations with no hesitations in-store, on virtual applications, and on social platforms, other brands have started thinking of positive changes, understanding their role not as a simple food supplier but as psychological support and educational factor.

At that moment, retailers considered creating mobile shopping applications to become user-friendly and capable of displaying their catalogues of goods, supporting the change in consumer behaviour. An illustrative example is Bringo from Carrefour, whose accessible interface instantly drew customers' attention. Beyond all these, every supermarket updated its front site page, adding the possibility to create a personal account, make an online list of articles and schedule the delivery date. That was the time when delivery jobs and preparing shopping baskets required more employees than before. Maybe this is a step to a hybridized shopping and a differentiation between off- and online duties in a supermarket.

In the beginning, Kaufland volunteered with special delivery services addressing the elderly living alone or being sick. Later, however, they extended this practice by signing contracts with delivery companies such as Glovo, Tazz, and Food Panda, to give customers larger access even with a small shopping list. In this context of discovering new resources in purchase facilities, supermarkets have triggered tight competition based on E-commerce strategies. We can call it a second era of entering the local market because retailers are faced with new challenges created by the pandemic yet raising consumer expectations in the years to come. Nevertheless, Kaufland took these chances of establishing partnerships with delivery companies, reaching their customers by all means, and transforming a global crisis into opportunities for more resilient and sustainable food systems. Supermarkets supported the local economy, more brand images were appreciated, and the level of loyalty increased.

When the lockdown partially ended, consumers were willing to accept new challenges related to communication, weaving offline with online behaviour. This is the stage at which the retailer develops more the linguistic level by connecting its offers with consumers' psychological needs. Even if E-commerce was associated with life protection and comfort, Kaufland aimed to build a further level of trust based on emotions, special occasions, and even phantasy described as gastronomic journeys worldwide. It is worth mentioning that rituals, traditions, and even local celebrations (National Day, June 1) deserved special attention, and extended campaigns entirely focused on cultural insights regardless of the stage of the pandemic.

Finally, in the last phase of this research, in 2021 respectively, Kaufland's strategy relied on creative tactics meant to keep alive consumers' initiatives by inviting them to come up with their recipes and adding some special ingredients from Kaufland. At this level, Kaufland became a community of people experiencing fascinating activities and enjoying little moments for themselves. There is nothing about marketing, but all about human feelings, achievements, and, why not, self-development.

This research also presents certain limits regarding the lack of organization of all Kaufland Instagram advertisements (delivered between March 15, 2020, and December 2021) on specific criteria that might generate a further detailed quantitative approach. Some aspects cannot be generalized to other cultures because of the local aspects and different attitudes and behaviour of genuine customers. Furthermore, Instagram is just one of Kaufland's social media platforms, and this aspect minimizes the validity of the present study. Therefore, we invite other researchers to explore other directions of this topic by coming up with some suggestions. For instance, this study would have been more valuable if it had benefited from some interviews with Kaufland employees, managers, and customers to get a first-hand insight into the efficiency of this campaign. Thus, a better perspective on the entire role of Kaufland virtual communication would have been achieved by gathering data from offline interaction as well because it would have eliminated the research subjectivity.

Consequently, the present research might be extended through a comparative approach between the pandemic and the after-pandemic communication of this retailer on the Romanian market and even comparing it with other countries. Another possibility would be to analyze this topic in the same context and gather data from the same social media platform (Instagram) but from another market to unveil other localization or glocalization strategies provided by the supermarket during the pandemic. Afterward, all data could be compared with the Romanian communication tactics, and some strategies might be recognized as global ones, while others as local.

At the end of this study, one of the assumptions would be that retailers' communication has been mostly transformed into a hybridized one, given that social media has already developed rational and emotional strategies to successfully appeal to customers.

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