Social Responsibility in Romanian Advertising during State of Emergency

Iasmina PETROVICI¹,
Simona BADER²,
Corina SIRB³

¹ Senior Lecturer Ph.D., West
University of Timisoara, Department
of Philosophy and Communication
Sciences, Timisoara, Romania, E-mail:
iasmipetrovici@yahoo.com

² Senior Lecturer Ph.D., West
University of Timisoara, Department
of Philosophy and Communication
Sciences, Timisoara, Romania, E-mail:
simona.bader@e-uvt.ro

³ Assistant Professor Ph.D, West
University of Timisoara, Department
of Philosophy and Communication
Sciences, Timisoara, Romania, E-mail:
corina.sirb@e-uvt.ro

Abstract: In what way were the messages conveyed in Romanian advertisements influenced by the state of emergency declared due to COVID-19 pandemic? What kind of visual and textual messages did advertisements deliver to the target audience in this unique social context? Were there any specifics regarding their narrative or visuals? Based on the aforementioned questions, our hypothesis is that some Romanian advertisements that were distributed during the state of emergency had a social responsibility message, which is rather uncommon in commercials. The first part of our study will underline the theoretical framework of this problem: defining and explaining social responsibility and its implications. The second part of the study will present our research. Its aim is to conduct a qualitative analysis of the advertising discourse from pragmatic, rhetoric and semiotic perspectives. The corpus of our research consists of several advertisements and campaigns that were most visible in the public sphere during the state of emergency, both online. We will start by identifying the visual elements, narrative techniques and argumentative strategies, explaining the way they function as an instrument to increase social responsibility. We will approach the message of the advertisements from a speech acts theory point of view, then undergo a process of identifying the argumentative tactics that are being used and, finally, we will conduct a semiotic analysis. In the end, we will underline a series of conclusions regarding the narrative and the visual specifics of the analysed contents and we will highlight some ethical aspects of the advertisements.

Keywords: *Advertising; advertisements; social responsibility; cause-related marketing, speech acts, visual communication.*

How to cite: Petrovici, I., Bader, S., & Sirb, C. (2020). Social Responsibility in Romanian Advertising during State of Emergency. *Postmodern Openings*, 11(4), 366-380. doi:10.18662/po/11.4/241

1. Introduction

The year 2020 will remain as the first one in which humankind was confronted consciously with a pandemic that affected all social domains including communication. Covid-19 virus changed the way we see the world and society, the way we think and obliged us to become more aware about the way we live our lives from now on. We may say that this virus could be assimilated with what (Taleb, 2008) called “black swan event” as “first, it is an outlier, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme ‘impact.’, given the magnitude and the effects at the individual and social level of the phenomenon. Third, in spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence after the fact, making it explainable and predictable” (Taleb, 2008). Beginning with March 2020, when the emergency state was declared, many advertisements changed, becoming not only incentives to consume but incentives to solidarity and responsibility as well.

In the last ten years, campaigns of social responsibility (CSR) were frequently used by companies both with the intention to improve their brand image in society and as a way to make profit. This concept is based on the belief that “companies have some responsibilities to society beyond that of making profits for the shareholders” (Caroll & Shabana, 2010). For some, CSR means “doing good and doing no harm” (Pearce et al., 2017). CSR’s “normative view is based on a perspective claiming that corporations, above any other consideration, ought to undertake social responsibilities as an ethical obligation to the society by large” (Marom & Lussier, 2020). Kotler and Lee (2005) established six categories for the great majority of social responsibility actions: 1. Cause Promotions, 2. Cause-related marketing, 3. Corporate social marketing, 4. Corporate philanthropy, 5. Community volunteering and 6. Socially responsible business practices. All of these were used during the emergency state in Romania 2020 with an emphasis on corporate social marketing by which companies aim to change attitude or certain behaviors. (Zsigmond, 2008).

“A firm’s genuine and authentic CSR will build stronger rapport among its customers and the general public, as they have built up strong expectation from leading brands, particularly their favorable brands, during the current crisis with regard to their efforts in combating the virus.” (He & Harris, 2020). It was a major paradigmatic swift: from showing off the idea of a limited social responsibility and connecting it with the brand, to the paradigm of showing a general responsibility, not only by classical CSR

means, but by enhancing the message of individual responsibility in limitation of spreading the virus. General messages apparently unrelated to the company benefits – such as wearing masks, or protection gloves, disinfection, social distance and even responsible shopping - were almost rules. E.g. recommendation for responsible shopping, that means shopping in reasonable quantities is in contradiction with all previous messages before and may appear in contradiction with the companies need for benefits. Meanwhile, at the beginning of pandemics irresponsible shopping due to all kind of anticipation (fear of poverty, fear of hunger, fear of isolation) lead to unexpected “lack of” products images (with empty shelters and huge queues in front of supermarkets. In this context, companies’ messages for limited shopping was a facet of the new paradigm of social responsibility having to submerge suggestions: a) buy less to let place for the others and b) empty shelters is an induced false image of poverty and we must be responsible all for avoiding social panic.

From the beginning of the state of emergency in March 2020, the communication objectives of many companies changed even if their specific instruments and tools remained the same. Classical CSR campaigns were related to punctual topics (helping, education, ecology, disadvantaged categories etc) and the main idea was “X company cares about a, b or c topic”. In the emergency state, this became “X company cares about you”, the public target generalized in a generic “you” not in a passive way but suggesting, persuading “taking care of yourself, you take care of all the others”. In these messages companies behave like corporate citizenship: „good corporate citizens just like human beings were to be good citizens” (Caroll & Brown, 2018).

Regarding the advertisements that were broadcasted during the mentioned period, the main messages mixed with commercials were such slogans like “keep the distance”, “wear the mask”, “wash your hands”. An initial advertisement message of “responsible shopping” was rapidly abandoned as supermarkets adapted and improved their supply and the first wave of compulsive anxious shopping passed away. Meanwhile, messages of safeness inside the companies were relieved (e.g. temperature check at the entrance, disinfections, banners with social distancing). In online media there appeared quite rapidly first hashtags specific for this communication milieu (e.g. #ajut – Kaufland) which became more numerous in the second wave of communication (e.g. #împreună – Profi, #puneumărul – Carrefour, #separațidarîmpreună – Timisoreana).

Another way of CSR that companies used was to publish press releases about their financial and logistic support for health system and for

vulnerable categories of population. According to the study of Kantar media, the medium watching time of TV raised with 22% during the lockdown period; this implies a proportional rise in exposure of all commercials and advertising and consequently a rise in spreading the messages of the new CSR paradigm. An analysis of the online journal *Piața* showed that seven of ten Romanians consider that brands should bring a positive perspective through their commercials and they should communicate about their way of helping day by day life. In the same were underline as necessities: the need of reassuring tone, implication of companies in the education of population and to not make profit on behalf of crisis (Vaschi, 2020).

In the following analysis, we will try to show that the discourse of the advertisements that were broadcast during the state of emergency tends to express the need for a re-evaluation of the codes of social ethics. In other words, we will identify both textual and visual elements that reveal the postmodern idea of rethinking the ethics of duty by means of social responsibility. (Bauman, 2000, p. 14)

Closely related to Bauman's theory, our study will focus on the idea of advertising's change of perspective in the name of social responsibility. This change is visible not only within advertisements messages - that switch from promotional to moral appeals, but also within social ethics, as the main discursive pillar is built on the idea that individual responsibility has the power to ensure social good.

Thus, we argue that in times of social crisis, advertising plays its role as opinion leader and tries to stir social movements and influence the course of global events.

2. A Pragmatic and Semiotic Analysis of Romanian Advertisements During State of Emergency

As stated in the first part of the paper, we think that the coronavirus pandemic has caused a shift in the way commercials with a CSR component are constructed. More precisely, their main distinct feature is setting the narrative focus on individual responsibility and placing the marketing message only in the background. To illustrate this, we will conduct a pragmatic and semiotic analysis of a few of the most prominent online and

offline campaigns running during the state of emergency. The pragmatic analysis will take into consideration the speech acts that are being used (having John Searle's taxonomy as a starting point), the argumentative tactics, and their role in the persuasive attempt to change individual behavior, with the use of Walton's (2007) contribution. We will also take into account Cook's (2011) work on the analysis of advertising discourse.

From a speech acts theory point of view, speaking a language is a form of social behavior, governed by a precise set of rules. (Searle, 1969). Moreover, according to the same philosopher every utterance that is produced in a communicative situation, be it personal or public, is an intentional social action that one part undergoes in order to cause some kind of effect on the audience. John Searle uses Austin's taxonomy of performative acts and simplifies it, thus proposing a set of only six types of speech acts: these are declarations, representatives, expressives, directives, and commissives (Searle, 1969, p. 82). Very concisely, "assertives" commit the speaker to something being the case, such as suggesting, putting forward, swearing, boasting, concluding; "directives" try to make the addressee perform a certain action, such as asking, ordering, requesting, inviting, advising, begging; "commissives" commit the speaker to doing something in the future, as in promising, planning, vowing, betting, opposing; "expressives" indicate how the speaker feels about the situation, as in thanking, apologizing, welcoming, deploring; finally, "declarations" – which are the most important type, as they are at the base of the ontology of social institutions (Searle, 2010, p. 59) – change the state of the world in an immediate way, such as firing an employee, declaring war etc.

We believe that the application of John Searle's speech acts theory in public communication is important for several reasons: (1) it regards the messages as states of social behavior; (2) in the given social interaction, both the speaker and the audience are guided by a set of rules which influence their expectations from the given instance of communication and (3) each message consists of several speech acts with certain persuasive effects upon the audience.

In the case of our analysis, it is crucial to see in what way the speakers – commercial companies – have succeeded to convey a message that is persuasive enough to cause a change of attitude and behavior at a n individual level. Thus, the questions that will guide the first level of analysis are: what kind of speech acts are being used? Why? What is their presumptive effect upon the audience? As for the argumentative tactics that are being used, we will try to answer the following questions: What argumentation schemes are being used? Is there an emotional or a rational

appeal? How is the argument constructed? To answer these questions, we will use the ideas presented by Walton (2007) in *Media argumentation. Dialectic, persuasion and rhetoric*.

We also want to underline the fact that our interpretation of the advertisements chosen for this case study takes into consideration Cook's (2001) remark about the fact that advertising discourse is unusual in being balanced between scientific, poetic and religious discourse as far as its function and use are concerned. This, it is not entirely cognitive, nor affective or conative, but it actually functions in between this trichotomy; although advertising's aim is mostly conative, its use of language, imagery and music is sometimes closer to poetic discourse, whether at times, its appeal to studies and figures is closer to scientific narrative.

Thus, it can be observed that the most prominent online and offline advertising campaigns that ran during the state of emergency had three common features:

1. Most of the messages are constructed around two main types of speech acts, whether they are direct (explicitly formulated) or indirect (implicit). The two are: (1) commissives, in those situations when the brand commits to certain values, mission or actions and (2) directives, when the brand asks a certain attitude or behavior from the target audience.

For example, the telecommunications brand Vodafone had two commercials running during the state of emergency. In the first one, called "Together we are stronger" (Vodafone, 2020a) the first speech acts are expressed as assertives, which is justified if we think at the fact their role is to set the context of communication – a moment of social crisis, that asks for solidarity. After setting the context, the commercial starts the appeal to the public with a series of implicit directives. "We have time to stay together, home, with our families", to support "the ones who fight" and "the ones who can't fight". Expressed in the form of assertives, these are actually directives. The use of the first person, plural instead of the third stresses the idea of solidarity, empathy and social action.

In their second advert, that ran under the title "The elderly need us" (Vodafone, 2020b) the most frequent speech act is directive, but, again, it is indirect (not explicitly stated). More clearly, whereas directives usually have a second person form, this time, the main message of this commercial is expressed as a commissive, in the first person: "We're staying home", but acts as a directive with the following meaning: we are asking our public to act responsibly and stay home in order to protect the most vulnerable. Again, the first person form is less commanding and sends the audience a message of solidarity. It is important to mention that, whereas the first advert is

entirely an appeal to individual responsibility, the second one discretely presents the brand as a solution that supports the cause – we can stay in touch with the elderly without direct contact, by means of the communications services offered by Vodafone.

Another commercial that ran during the state of emergency and had a powerful responsibility message was “We are safe at home”, by Lidl (LidlRomania, 2020). This time, the directive that also urges people to act responsibly and stay at home is expressed as an assertive: telling people that we are safe at home is not just expressing a fact, but is in fact a recommendation to act accordingly. This appeal to solidarity is later accompanied by an expressive speech act: giving thanks to all the people who are fighting for a good cause.

In other similar advertisements, ran by Ikea (2020), Orange (2020) and Kaufland, (2020), we can observe the same pattern of using implicit directives to make an appeal to empathy, solidarity and responsibility. The message that is being sent is that we are in this together and that staying home is the best way in which each of us can help.

2. The argumentative schemes used in the advertisements that ran during state of emergency are mainly emotional appeals, that, although not rational, have a clear argumentative structure: “Even an audience that responds to an emotional appeal to fear or pity (...) needs to be persuaded by orchestrating that appeal through forms of argumentation the audience can follow and respond to.” (Walton, 2007, p. 21)

All the above mentioned commercials make either an appeal to pity or an appeal to fear in order to convince the audience to act responsibly. Pity appeals are persuasive because they cause the audience to apply the following structure of reason: (1) the present situation makes specific groups of people vulnerable; (2) certain actions and behaviors can put these groups at risk; (3) if you feel sorry for them, one should refrain from producing those actions and behaviors. On the other hand, fear appeals can persuade in two ways: (1) by promising what one can gain if one stays away from a particular situation or (2) by warning the public about what one can lose if one faces a particular event. (Walton, 2007).

That being said, the argumentative schemes that are being used in the analyzed commercials are: (1) Appeal to fear: *If you don't stay at home, you put yourself and your elders at risk, so stay at home*; (2) Appeal to pity: *If you don't stay at home, doctors and workers that cannot leave their workplaces are at risk, so protect them and their families by staying at home*.

We believe that both of these tactics are actually a type of argument from consequence. We sketched the structure of this type of argumentative scheme in Figure 1. (see the figure below).

Figure 1 – Argument from consequence
Source – Authors' own conception

In our case, the event *A* mentioned in the premise would be leaving home during state of emergency. The bad consequences are more or less directly mentioned in the advertisements – the risks we put the elderly, the vulnerable, the doctors. Thus, the audience is asked to take into consideration the consequences of their individual actions upon the entire society, which makes the social responsibility message all the more powerful. It is important to mention the fact that the answers to the three critical thinking questions that could enforce or weaken an argument from consequences (the ones marked with a dotted line in figure 1) were constantly given by public authorities during the state of emergency. Thus, it was almost a fact that bad consequences will follow from disrespecting home isolation.

3. *Although they promote social solidarity, most of the messages of the advertisements that ran during the state of emergency function as appeals to individual empowerment and empathy.*

This is quite an interesting persuasive tactic. Even though it sounds like a paradox, the commercials promote the idea of solidarity and

togetherness, but actually expect individual responsibility. What is really interesting from a linguistic point of view is that this individual empowering is produced by the utterance of collective words: “together”, “us”, “we”. The vocabulary is one of inclusion and the effect is that once the problem is stated, every member of the audience feels that he can be a part of the solution. As far as empathy is concerned, from a discursive perspective, it is triggered by a specific vocabulary: “vulnerable”, “elderly”, “alone”, “at risk”, “first line”, “support”, “protect”, “care”. We believe that these words produce the intended persuasive effect both by means of repetition and being inserted in either fear or pity appeals.

Continuing the previous pragmatic perspective, the semiotic analysis that we will carry out in the following, strengthens our point of view, namely that the advertisements broadcast during the state of emergency in Romania contained pertinent messages about the need and importance of social responsibility in the period of the coronavirus pandemic. The semiotic analysis of the advertisements aims at detaching the meaning of the content of the messages transmitted through visual signs. Our approach starts from the premise that visual communication in advertisements, organized according to code systems, enunciative strategies and specific figurative devices has the role, on the one hand, to complete the messages related to narrative techniques and verbal argumentative strategies, giving more meaning to the content, and on the other hand, to attract the audience's attention and to persuade through the expressiveness of the visual elements. In addition, visual communication in advertisements, especially by organizing the symbolic content of advertising images, has a psychological, emotional and affective impact on the public (Barry, 1997, p. 37; Petrovici, 2014, p. 722), in this case, raising awareness of its responsiveness to situations of social responsibility. The semiotic analysis of the six commercials focuses on the content of symbolic messages transmitted through specific nonverbal and visual representations, such as characters, iconic signs, and symbols. In the context of the analysis, as we mentioned, we are mainly interested in the significance of the visual message of the advertisements from the perspective of transmitting the ethical value of social responsibility. We will reveal alongside the analysis of the visual discourse of the advertisements, both the common and the specific elements, in order to emphasize the recurrence of the use of symbols that function as cultural stereotypes to represent the semantic content.

The aforementioned advertisements last between 30-40 seconds, the narrative content being rendered through a series of visual and nonverbal representations. A common aspect of the Vodafone advertisement Together

we are stronger and the Ikea advertisement is the rendering in the very first frame of the city in the morning hours with almost deserted streets, the number of cars circulating being extremely low (distinguishing only one car in this Vodafone advertisement, many stationary cars in the parking lot and very few pedestrians), which suggests the need to stay at home, the effects of imposing a state of emergency in Romania and social distancing. Parallel with the static rendering of the city, we can see, in opposition, the extremely dynamic rendering of activities carried out in the perimeter of the home or at work, contrast expressed visually and by the predominantly neutral and cold color range associated with the city in a state of emergency (shades of gray, dark blue, brown, white) and warm colors associated with the home and the family environment (red, orange, yellow), where activities can be carried out "together".

In terms of color, in addition to the specific colors of the logo of each brand, there are mainly different shades of blue, red, pastel colors and black. Associated with the narrative context in which it appears in commercials, blue symbolizes protection, loyalty, order, law, meditation, peace; red expresses life, vitality, love, courage, enthusiasm, vigilance, but also danger, violence, aggression; yellow - dynamism, energy, optimism; pink - tenderness, affection; white - truth, purity, sincerity, medicine; black - mourning, sadness; brown - stability, security, strength, trust, authority, comfort; gray - maturity, intelligence, modesty, technology. (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 2009; Joannes, 2009). Thus, color symbolism in advertisements suggests, in accordance with the other symbolic visual elements and with the verbal messages, on the one hand, the state of emergency, and on the other hand, the idea of hope, solidarity, compassion.

In four of the ads, namely those belonging to the brands Vodafone, Orange, Ikea, characters of different ages are depicted, from newborns, children, adolescents and the elderly, which reflects all categories affected by the coronavirus pandemic crisis. With the exception of the Kaufland commercial, all the others are composed of sequences containing several frames that reflect characters of different ages performing specific activities, such as domestic activities (Vodafone and Ikea commercials), professional activities performed online or physically at the workplace, out of which the clearly distinguished are medical ones (in Vodafone and Lidl commercials), online education activities (in both Vodafone commercials), commercial activities (in Lidl commercial), volunteer activities (first Vodafone commercial). A common point of the advertisements is the visual representation of the house as a symbol of safety during the state of emergency, in the Ikea advertisement the emphasis falling, of course, on the

comfort provided by the furniture arrangement of the dwelling. In the first Vodafone advertisement and in the Ikea advertisement, the characters are represented carrying out extraprofessional activities in the (safe) perimeter of the house, such as various hobbies, the emphasis falling on the artistic and sports ones. Symbolically, the visual representation of hobbies expresses both, the passion for a certain recreational activity (games), sports or art (drawing, music, dance) and the therapeutic valences of these activities, aspects conveyed by facial expressions and body language of the characters (of all ages, from children to adults). Also, the emphasis and diversified rendering of hobbies (this being, moreover, a common theme in advertisements broadcast in Romania during the state of emergency) symbolically suggests their need in order to counteract the possible negative effects of isolation at home in the state of emergency. A common aspect of Vodafone, Orange and Lidl advertisements is the direct or indirect visual representation of the importance of digital technology, in this case especially mobile telecommunication devices, as a necessary means both in ensuring and maintaining interpersonal connections and for carrying out professional activities. The rendering in Vodafone and Orange commercials of the use of mobile telecommunication devices and new mobile applications (WFH solutions for business, online/ distance consulting, online/ distance learning, online shopping, etc.) emphasizes not only their paramount necessity in carrying out professional activities and to maintain interpersonal connections, but, subliminally, the usefulness of digital technology in a state of emergency. The facial expressions, gestures, behavior of the characters appearing in commercials express either worry, fear, confusion, bewilderment, insecurity, nervousness about the situation of the pandemic crisis (continuous movement, rigid facial expression, tight lips, tears, slightly frowning eyebrows in first Vodafone commercial and Lidl commercial), or the joy of spending more time in the family environment, of being able to keep in touch with family members, friends and the professional environment in a state of emergency (smile, shave, hug in Vodafone and Ikea commercials). We note that the representation of the family environment is idealized in the first Vodafone advertisement, insofar as it depicts characters whose gestures and facial expressions convey joy, enthusiasm, happiness and calm. However, this aspect is evened out in the second Vodafone advertisement, where the familiar environment is represented in a more realistic way, also rendered the compassion, affective and inter-relationship problems generated by the specific isolation conditions of the state of emergency.

The need for solidarity, individual and collective responsibility is reflected in advertisements also by the fact that the characters involved in medical activities wear adequate protective equipment, gloves and a mask. Also, the visual representation of the characters rendered through behavior, posture, gestures, facial expressions, direct interaction or mediated by digital technology, draws attention in the Vodafone, Orange, Ikea, Lidl ads on the need for individual and group responsibility.

In the first Vodafone advertisement, one of the visual symbols that stands out the most, obviously repeated nine times in different frames over the 39 seconds length of it, is the rainbow, in the penultimate frame of the advertisement two drawings are distinguished depicting a rainbow, placed at the level of the windows of a block of flats. We note that the visual repetitiveness of the rainbow in the 29-30 seconds of the commercial reinforces the verbal message - "We have time to be more together". In fact, it is a deliberate sophism of language, a fallacious argumentative strategy that emphasizes the call for solidarity by joyning improperly and grammatically incorrect the term "more" to the term "together". The rainbow has a multivalent symbolism, just like the sun, another symbol that appears in some frames next to it. Although a negative symbol in some cultures, in European culture and in this context, the rainbow expresses: hope, life, happiness, mediation, bridge, harmony, unity (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 2009, pp. 420-422). The heart (in the first Vodafone and Kaufland advertisements) is another cultural symbol that stands out, expressing life, vitality, health, love, compassion, and in the context of the advertisement it suggests the prevalence of life and love as fundamental human values in relation to other types of values. In the Kaufland advertisement, the call for solidarity and empathy as a necessary "common condition in a pandemic" (Habana et al., 2020, pp. 31-31) is expressed visually through graphic representations of individuals, whose continuous multiplication (from one individual in the first frame to twenty individuals in the penultimate frame) suggests not only the retailers involved in the social responsibility campaign (their logos being found symbolically at the level of the heart of the individuals in the foreground of the image), but also the need for social and group responsibility of each individual.

3. Conclusions

In our opinion, the 2020 pandemic changed the paradigm of CSR: whereas before the Covid-19 pandemic, CSR main purpose was to demonstrate that brands are implicated socially in certain fields and well-

defined issues, after the burst of the pandemic, social responsibility campaigns moved the focus of their narrative on individual responsibility, underlying the responsibility of each citizen for their own health and for keeping others safe.

A general characteristic of advertisements in this period was a kind of uniformization: the quasi unanimous presence of messages for the social self - individual and social responsibility regarding protection against spreading of pandemic, mixed with classical advertising means (e.g. showing the quality of a product, repetitive images of a brand, emphasizing the good report quality per price etc). It was a new way of advertising with the new paradigm of CSR implied in every advertisement. It is important to mention the fact that in all of the aforementioned advertisements, although it is not expressed explicitly, there is an implicit commissive speech act that the brand commits to the same values (empathy, responsibility, solidarity) that they ask from the target audience. We believe that this is an unwritten rule of advertising: anytime the brand asks for a certain attitude or behavior from the audience, it can be presumed that the organization it represents obliges themselves to act in the same manner, as a proof of trust and integrity. In other words, each individual is asked to act responsibly and make wise decisions for themselves, but only as a part of a social community. Both the verbal and the visual messages transmitted by the advertisements during the state of emergency contained pertinent messages regarding the importance of ethical values of solidarity, individual and social responsibility.

Thus, from a persuasive perspective, we are not dealing solely with a message of responsibility, but also of empowerment: in order for us to succeed as a society, it takes for each of us to bring his contribution. If in the case of other social causes, the individual act was artificially augmented for rhetorical reasons, this time, in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, each individual could actually influence the dynamics of the phenomenon by acting as a key link of the viral transmission chain.

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