

UNIVERSITATEA DE VEST DIN TIMIȘOARA
DOMENIUL: MARKETING

**Understanding the complexity of the modern
consumer journey**

SUMMARY OF HABILITATION THESIS

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Summary

The habilitation thesis entitled “Understanding the Complexity of the Modern Consumer Journey” aims to synthesize and critically reflect upon the principal contributions made to both scientific research and academic practice following the conferral of the doctoral degree in Marketing. The doctoral title was awarded pursuant to Order No. 6508/19.12.2012 issued by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth, and Sports, on the basis of the doctoral dissertation entitled “Decisions and Experiences of Online Buyers,” supervised by Professor Costinel Dobre, PhD, and publicly defended on September 25, 2012, at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, West University of Timișoara. In addition, the thesis outlines strategic directions for the continued development of research, teaching, and professional engagement in the forthcoming stages of my academic career.

The habilitation thesis is structured into four main sections. The introductory chapter outlines the relevance and significance of the core research directions that have shaped my academic trajectory. The most substantial section is dedicated to an in-depth presentation of my key scientific contributions, selected based on their scholarly impact and visibility within the field. Particular emphasis is placed on the analysis of the interplay between branding activities conducted across online and offline environments, consumer profiles, and the behavioral patterns of the contemporary consumer, in relation to both mass-market and luxury product categories. The final two sections offer a synthesis of prospective research avenues and teaching activities, highlighting past academic accomplishments and strategic plans for my future scholarly and professional development.

To begin, I presented a series of arguments highlighting the importance and relevance of the research topics I have pursued over the past 13 years of my academic career. The rationale behind the selection of these research themes is grounded in the strategic priorities identified by leading professional associations such as the Marketing Science Institute, the American Marketing Association (AMA), and ESOMAR. Additionally, I drew upon the thematic focus of *Special Issues* published in prestigious international marketing journals—indexed in the red and yellow zones of the Clarivate Analytics database—as further justification for the alignment of my work with contemporary research imperatives in the field.

The chapter entitled *Core Research Portfolio* presents the most significant contributions to the following key areas of scholarly interest:

- 1) The first research direction represents the core focus of my scientific contributions and constitutes a natural continuation of the research trajectory initiated through my doctoral thesis, *“Decisions and Experiences of the Online Buyers.”* A significant part of my publication activity has been devoted to understanding consumer experiences within online marketing environments and the dynamics of consumer–brand relationships. The findings of my research underscore both the opportunity and necessity of integrating social media platforms, mobile applications, and podcasts into brand development strategies. The use of these digital marketing channels contributes to the enhancement and consolidation of brand equity—reflected in brand awareness, engagement, perceived brand value, and consumer loyalty—and ultimately influences purchase intention and actual buying behavior.

Furthermore, I outline four key contributions that advance both the theory and practice of marketing, as follows:

- Grounded in the Interpersonal Deception Theory (IDT) and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), the first scientific contribution ¹ proposes a novel research framework for identifying deceptive reviews. The study evaluates the variables that influence consumers’ purchase intentions after exposure to deceptive reviews and introduces a set of deception cues that can be integrated into the theoretical framework of interpersonal communication. The research comprises both qualitative and quantitative studies. The first phase involves sentiment and lexical analysis of 1,000 online reviews, while the second phase is based on a survey conducted on a sample of U.S. respondents. To interpret the results, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed, alongside a process-based mediation–moderation analysis. The findings highlight deceptive characteristics that cannot be dissimulated by reviewing consumers, thus supporting their legitimacy, based on review valence, authenticity, formalism, and analytical writing. The findings also underscore the central role of consumer suspicion regarding ulterior motives, revealing both direct and mediating effects on emotional responses and behavioral intentions, including brand trust and purchase intention. This study contributes with novel theoretical insights that facilitate the adaptation of

¹ Petrescu, M., Kitchen, P., Dobre, C., Ben Mrad, S., **Milovan-Ciuta, A.**, Goldring, D. and Fiedler, A. (2022), "Innocent until proven guilty: suspicion of deception in online reviews", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 56 No. 4, pp. 1184-1209. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-10-2019-0776>, WOS:000782134700001

the Interpersonal Deception Theory (IDT) and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) to the specific context of written digital communication.

- The second scientific contribution² integrates theoretical perspectives derived from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and its extensions, in conjunction with consumption value theory, to examine the influence of perceived value dimensions of mobile shopping applications on users' intentions for continued usage and recommendation. A quantitative online study was conducted on a sample of 459 Romanian consumers to investigate how various facets of perceived value associated with mobile shopping applications of fashion brands influence both the intention to continue using the app and the intention to recommend it. The sampling process employed a mixed non-probability sampling approach, combining convenience sampling with the snowball method. The research hypotheses were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and path analysis. The study confirms the existence of significant positive relationships between the independent variables—such as perceived ubiquity, app-provided incentives, and epistemic value—and the dependent variable, namely, the intention to continue using branded mobile shopping applications. The study also highlights significant correlations between perceived hedonic value and social value, on the one hand, and both the intention to continue using and the intention to recommend branded mobile applications, on the other.
- The third scientific contribution³ expands on the limited research regarding consumer attitudes towards advertisements they are exposed to while listening to podcasts. The study investigates how explicit product placements and brand mentions by podcast hosts influence consumers' behavioral intentions toward the brand. The results of an online survey, conducted with a sample of 512 podcast listeners exposed to brand-related marketing content, analyzed using PLS-SEM, revealed that attitudes toward the podcast host, attitudes toward sponsored content, and parasocial relationships directly influence brand attitude and brand recall. Furthermore, the study highlighted

² Dobre, C., Milovan, A. M., Preda, G., Naghi, R. (2023). Post-purchase behaviour triggers in branded mobile shopping apps. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, ISSN 0263-4503, Vol. 41, Issue 3, pp. 344-359, <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-08-2022-0357>, WOS:000933174300001

³ Milovan, A.M.; Dobre, C; Moisescu, O. (2025). Boosting brand behavioral intentions via integrated explicit product placements in podcasts, *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 189, 115129 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.115129> WOS:001394936700001

that these factors subsequently influence consumers' purchase intentions toward the brand.

- The fourth scientific contribution⁴ is based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) Theory, and empirical findings to investigate the impact of social media marketing (SMM) on brand awareness (BA), consumer brand engagement (CBE), and purchase intention in emerging economies. Data were collected through a self-administered online survey conducted with a sample of 1,808 social media users from North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Romania, and Ukraine. Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to evaluate the theoretical model, and a multi-group analysis was applied to explore the differences across countries. The results indicate that social media marketing (SMM) has a positive impact on brand awareness, brand engagement, and purchase intention, while country moderates the relationship between brand engagement and purchase intention. The study reveals differences across countries in terms of the impact of SMM on brand engagement and purchase intention. The research highlights the influence of social media on brand communication, providing insights into consumer behavior and helping companies develop effective social media marketing strategies based on similarities and differences across emerging economies. The varying levels of brand engagement and their diverse effects on purchase intention underscore the need to focus on the motivations behind brand engagement on social media and the types of content preferred by consumers in each country.
- 2) The second research direction focuses on identifying the antecedents of the consumer-brand relationship in the context of luxury brands, both offline and online, and encompasses the following two key themes:
- Investigating⁵ the roles of escapism, conformity, and individual cultural values in shaping attitudes toward luxury brands, through the integration of Social Comparison Theory and Self-Determination Theory. Based on survey data collected in the United States (526 respondents) and Colombia (521 respondents), the research employs

⁴ Zeqiri, J., Koku, P.S., Dobre, C., Milovan, A.-M., Hasani, V.V. and Paientko, T. (2025), "The impact of social media marketing on brand awareness, brand engagement and purchase intention in emerging economies", *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, Vol. 43 No. 1, pp. 28-49. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-06-2023-0248> WOS:001268352500001

⁵ Petrescu, M.; Siqueira, J. R.; Dobre, C.; Mrad, S. B.; Milovan, A. M.; Kara, A. (2025). Social comparison and self-determination in luxury consumption motivations, *Psychology & Marketing*, vol. 42 (2), pp. 292-310. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.22126> WOS:001326578800001

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to examine the complex factors influencing luxury consumption. The results show that escapism and conformity, complementary motivations grounded in Social Comparison Theory and Self-Determination Theory, positively influence attitudes toward luxury brands. Furthermore, individual cultural values, such as self-image enhancement orientation and the consumer's tendency toward self-transcendence, moderate the relationships between these motivations and consumer attitudes. The intercultural comparison highlights differences in the influence of cultural values on luxury consumption between the two distinct cultures. The fsQCA results reveal distinct configurations of motivations and values sufficient to drive positive attitudes toward luxury brands.

- Exploring ⁶ how consumers from the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts perceive the compatibility between social media marketing and luxury brands. While brands capitalize on the time consumers spend on social media to better serve and communicate with them, the unique characteristics of luxury may make companies hesitant to adopt this communication channel. For this research, data were collected from 303 Romanian luxury consumers, using a self-administered questionnaire posted on the Facebook page entitled *Do You Like Luxury?* For data analysis, statistical tests were employed, including Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), linear regression, and the independent samples t-test. The research indicates that for Millennials and Generation Z, luxury brands are compatible with social media platforms as marketing channels. Even in cases where this compatibility is perceived as low, managers can still utilize digital technologies to highlight the exclusivity, emotions, and sensory experiences inherent to luxury. Unlike other studies that have focused on only a few dimensions, this research proposes a multidimensional approach to the perceived value of luxury and social media marketing. Moreover, it is one of the few studies that focus on consumers from Eastern Europe.

The synthesis of my research activities conducted after obtaining the doctoral degree includes the co-authorship of a book that was awarded the title of *“Best Economic Book*

⁶ Dobre, C., **Milovan, A. M.**, Duțu, C., Preda, G., Agapie, A. (2021). The Common Values of Social Media Marketing and Luxury Brands. The Millennials and Generation Z Perspective. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, ISSN 0718-1876, Vol. 16, Issue 7, pp. 2532-2553, <https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer16070139>, WOS: 000737562900001, <https://www.mdpi.com/0718-1876/16/7/139>

Published in 2019” by the **Romanian Association of Economics Faculties** (AFER), as well as a book chapter accepted for publication by the prestigious international publisher Springer (currently in press). In addition, I have published 19 scientific articles, 7 of which appeared in journals indexed in Clarivate’s Web of Science, and have presented multiple papers at international academic conferences. One of these was recognized as *Best Conference Paper* in the Product and Brand Management Track at the 2024 AMA Winter Academic Conference. These achievements underscore the relevance and impact of my scientific contributions.

This habilitation thesis also outlines future research directions, ensuring the continuity and relevance of my academic and professional activities. The proposed topics are highly current and innovative, both at national and international levels.

The section entitled *Teaching Activity: Past, Present & Future Directions* highlights my mentoring and supervisory abilities, which are essential for guiding students and early-career researchers. In addition, this part includes my teaching competencies to reflect the quality of instruction and the capacity to effectively transmit knowledge. The forth part of the thesis provides a concise overview of my academic trajectory in higher education, the pedagogical training courses I have undertaken to enhance my skills as an educator and mentor, as well as the subjects I have introduced or further developed at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, West University of Timișoara (e.g., Online Store Management, Public Relations, Consumer Behavior, Creative Strategies in Advertising). Furthermore, I have emphasized my teaching experience at international universities and with international student cohorts. Finally, I have outlined future directions for the development of my teaching activity and for enhancing the marketing curriculum within my home institution.

The habilitation thesis ends with a list of references that includes both the candidate’s scientific publications and the scholarly works cited therein.

The structure of the thesis provides a comprehensive overview of the candidate’s scientific contributions from 2012 to 2025, substantiating the premises, results, and conclusions presented throughout the document.