



Emotional Branding and Seasonal Marketing in Television: Insights from Christmas advertising

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the communicative and symbolic dynamics of Christmas advertising, with a focus on how festive contexts shape emotional branding strategies in comparison to ordinary advertising. Building on theories of ritualized consumption and value orientations, the research investigates whether Christmas-themed commercials differ systematically in product categories, emotions, narratives, advertising formats, and conveyed values. A total of 200 commercials were collected from Italian public and private broadcasters in December 2024. The corpus was analyzed through systematic content analysis, using a codebook developed around five key variables: product category, dominant emotion (based on the Geneva Emotion Wheel), narrative strategy, advertising format and conveyed values (Schwartz's model). Chi-square tests of independence were applied to verify the significance of observed associations. Findings indicate that Christmas commercials predominantly employ emotional storytelling, emphasize positively valenced, low-control emotions, and favor the storytelling format over functional alternatives such as product-in-action. From a value perspective, they highlight conservation-oriented themes (e.g., tradition, stability, benevolence), while ordinary commercials lean more toward openness to change. Although differences in self-transcendence vs. self-enhancement did not reach the strict statistical threshold, residuals suggest a tendency toward prosocial orientations in Christmas advertising and individualistic ones in ordinary contexts. Finally, the results demonstrate that Christmas advertising operates as a ritualized communication system, where symbolic codes, emotions, and narratives converge to reinforce brand-consumer relationships. Beyond mere product promotion, festive advertising acts as a cultural performance that embeds brands within collective imaginaries and identity narratives. Implications for both theory and practice highlight the strategic potential of emotional branding in culturally saturated periods.

Keywords: Christmas advertising - Emotional branding - Seasonal marketing - Television commercials - Content analysis - Storytelling - Consumer values - Ritualized consumption

1. Festive Rituals and Emotional Branding: The Symbolic Power of Holiday Advertising

Holidays represent socially structured pauses from everyday life, enabling collective behaviors embedded in cultural codes (Belk, 1989). Traditionally, festivities - religious, cultural, or civic - activate ritual dynamics that shape symbolic, emotional, and relational experiences. In addition, festive occasions act as socio-cultural chronotopes (Bakhtin, 1981), framing expectations about what individuals are to feel, do, and communicate. During these

periods, consumption behaviors acquire symbolic meanings that transcend utilitarian needs, functioning instead as practices of identity and emotional bonding (Belk, 1987; Hasudungan and Saragih, 2024). Song et al. (2022) emphasize that ritualized consumption consists of repeated actions rich in symbolic value, providing behavioral guidance in highly regulated contexts. This makes festive periods ideal moments for brands to convey emotionally resonant messages that connect with shared cultural narratives. Brands

leverage consumers' emotional receptivity during holidays to position themselves within meaningful symbolic systems in both individual and social spheres. Festive rituals foster "momentary emotional communities" (Sherry and McGrath, 1989) where symbolic participation is intensified.

Within this framework, the role of emotional branding (EB) warrants specific investigation, as it represents a strategic approach that prioritizes the cultivation of emotional connections between brands and consumers over the communication of product attributes or functional benefits. This approach may serve persuasive, relational, and culturally embedded functions. By appealing to consumers' feelings, memories, values, and aspirations, EB aims to create a personal dialogue with consumers (Gobé, 2001), thus activating feelings of attachment, trust, and commitment in a way similar to interpersonal relationships (Fournier, 1998) and supports the emotionally driven consumer-brand attachment relationship (Thomson et al., 2005). Indeed, holidays provide fertile ground for reinforcing brand attachment, which is based on symbolic proximity and value alignment. As consumers become more attuned to emotional cues, brands can integrate themselves into their autobiographical memories (Escalas, 2004). Emotional branding thus serves not only persuasive aims but also fosters long-term relational connections (Fournier, 1998).

Among the different holidays, Christmas holds exceptional symbolic and commercial relevance: it is uniquely transgenerational, transmedia, and saturated with emotional and ritualistic content. Since Christmas embeds consumers within a web of traditions, expectations, and symbolic behaviors (Givi et al., 2023), brands can leverage it to convey warmth, nostalgia, and community through storytelling that draws on shared imagery and cultural memory (Horta, 2024). Nostalgia, a key emotional lever during holidays, enhances consumer-brand connection and purchase intentions (Holak & Havlena, 1998). By evoking childhood memories or traditional music, brands connect past and present, inserting themselves into consumers' identity narratives (Merchant & Ford, 2008), thus confirming that successful brands engage with

cultural myths, fostering shared identities and belonging (Holt, 2004).

In summary, the power of emotional branding during festive periods lies in its ability to resonate with cultural rituals and shared emotional repertoires. Christmas, as a complex cultural device, offers a unique communicative opportunity for brands to engage with consumers' identities and values not only economically but also symbolically.

Although emotional branding is globally widespread, few studies have systematically examined its application in seasonal marketing through comparative research on holiday versus regular advertising. To address this research gap, the present work investigates emerging trends in advertising communication – particularly regarding emotions, values, and strategic messaging – that characterize emotional marketing in both Christmas and ordinary (non-seasonal) advertisements (Cartwright et al., 2016) by using large samples from major Italian television broadcasters.

2. THE RESEARCH

2.1 Aims and research questions

Given the symbolic and communicative relevance that Christmas holds in the consumer landscape, and considering the widespread use of emotional advertising strategies, the present study aims to conduct an exploratory and comparative analysis between "Christmas-themed" commercials (i.e., those including visual or auditory references to the holiday) and "ordinary" commercials (i.e., those without any references). The general objective is to investigate the main communicative and emotional branding strategies across the two types of commercials, thus identifying potential differences in the design and execution of advertising messages.

In line with psychosocial literature concerning these matters, we aimed to address the following research questions and related hypotheses:

RQ1 - Are there differences in the most represented product categories between Christmas-themed and ordinary commercials?

H1. Christmas advertising is expected to give greater visibility to symbolic goods (e.g.,

perfumes, clothing, or toys) and retail-related content (e.g., stores and commercial chains), as these are closely associated with gift-giving and shared preparation rituals (Floch, 2002; Percy & Rosenbaum-Elliott, 2020). Conversely, ordinary ads are expected to feature more functional goods (such as food & beverage, household products, or pharmaceuticals) and institutional content (e.g., social or civic messages), which lend themselves to more informative and efficiency-oriented communication strategies (Kotler et al., 2010; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

RQ2 - Are there significant differences in the predominant emotions conveyed?

H2. It is hypothesized that Christmas commercials emphasize positive, low-control emotions such as tenderness, joy, and nostalgia, since these align within a highly codified ritual framework favoring shared and socially desirable affective states (Belk, 1989; Scherer, 2005). In ordinary contexts, a broader and more heterogeneous emotional distribution is expected, including neutral or negative emotions and high-control cognitive states, consistent with a less symbolically charged communication and more diversified persuasive goals (Achar et al., 2016).

RQ3 - Do the narrative strategies employed differ?

H3. Christmas advertising is expected to rely more frequently on emotional storytelling, which effectively triggers affective identification and symbolic engagement (Escalas, 2004; Belk, 1989). Ordinary commercials are instead expected to favor informative or surreal narratives, consistent with the functional clarity or stylistic experimentation typical of lower symbolic intensity environments (Deighton, Romer & McQueen, 1989; Kotler & Armstrong, 2018).

RQ4 - Are there significant differences in advertising formats?

H4. Christmas ads are expected to prefer formats particularly suited for building symbolic and emotional bonds, such as 'storytelling' and 'slice-of-life'. In ordinary contexts, greater use of functional formats such as 'testimonial' or 'product-in-action' is expected, consistent with more rational and explicit product-benefit presentations

(Appelbaum & Halliburton, 1993; Escalas, 2004).

RQ5 - Do the values emphasized by advertising messages differ?

H5. Christmas commercials are hypothesized to emphasize values related to conservation and self-transcendence (e.g., tradition, security, benevolence), consistent with the normative and integrative functions of festive rituals. Conversely, ordinary ads are expected to highlight values related to openness to change and self-enhancement (e.g., stimulation, hedonism, achievement), aligned with individualism and performance orientations (Gobé, 2001; Schwartz, 1999; Schwartz et al., 2012).

2.2 Procedure

To address the research questions, a total of 200 television commercials were collected. The sample was designed to ensure a balanced and representative overview through the following choices: a) commercials were broadcast on Rai 1 and Canale 5 – respectively, the main Italian public and private networks – between 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m.; b) two different days – December 2024, Saturday 14 and Tuesday 17 – were selected to capture a variety of communicative contexts, including both peak family-viewing times and routine weekday programming. Commercials were video-recorded directly from television, selecting the first advertising break of each two-hour time block, to obtain a sample distributed throughout the day.

All commercials were analyzed using content analysis, a systematic and replicable technique aimed at describing both the manifest and latent features of communication through the coding and categorization of observable units (Krippendorff, 2004). Drawing on the theoretical framework, the research objectives, and the hypotheses, a specifically designed codebook was developed; each commercial was manually coded according to six variables:

- 1) Christmas theme: ads were coded as i) Christmas-themed (n = 80) or ii) ordinary (n = 120), based on the presence or absence of semantic or audio-visual references to Christmas;
- 2) Product category: This variable was based on the distinction between functional and

- symbolic goods, drawing on the utilitarian/hedonic dichotomy proposed by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), McCracken's (1986) reflection on the cultural value of consumption, and the classification model by Percy and Elliott (2020). Spots were grouped into four categories:
- i. *Functional goods*, oriented toward practical, everyday purposes (e.g., food & beverage);
 - ii. *Symbolic goods*, related to personal identity, emotions, and relationships (e.g., clothing, footwear, and accessories);
 - iii. *Institutional content*, social, civic, or nonprofit communication (e.g., social advertising);
 - iv. *Distribution-related content* (retail outlets, associations, or entities not easily classifiable in direct value terms).
- 3) Dominant emotion: The theoretical framework adopted was the Geneva Emotion Wheel (GEW), developed by Scherer (2005; 2012). The GEW classifies emotions into 20 distinct families organized along two dimensions: valence (positive vs. negative) and perceived control (high vs. low). For each commercial, one predominant emotion was identified for each commercial, selected from the 20 options provided by the original GEW model, even adding the category "Neutral" when no emotion was found. Secondly, frequencies of emotions were aggregated according to the two theoretical dimensions—valence and control. Because all Christmas-themed ads exhibited positive valence, subsequent analyses focused on emotional valence only. The classification based on perceived regulatory control (Sacharin et al., 2012) was as follows:
- i. *high-control emotions*, e.g., leisure, pride, and joy;
 - ii. *low-control emotions*, including wonder, surprise, and nostalgia;
 - iii. *neutral spots*, with no identifiable emotion.
- 4) Plot structure. Based on the literature on the narrative advertising (Escalas, 2004; Deighton et al., 1989), each commercial was assigned a dominant narrative mode:
- i. emotional, built around engaging stories, relationships, and empathetic dynamics, designed to elicit affective involvement.
 - ii. informative/descriptive, emphasizing rational presentation of product features, benefits, and usage, with minimal emotional appeal.
 - iii. surreal, employing fantastical or metaphorical elements that depart from everyday reality to surprise or entertain.
 - iv. none, lacking identifiable narrative, emotional, or surreal elements and appearing fragmented or purely visual.
- 5) Advertising format: This variable was inspired by the framework proposed by Appelbaum and Halliburton (1993), which distinguishes between different modes of visual and narrative representation in advertising content. This means that format does not overlap with the narrative dimension; rather serves as the underlying communicative structure through which the content is conveyed and the viewer's experience is shaped:
- i. storytelling, a complete narrative structure with a beginning, development, and conclusion. The product may be integrated within the story or featured prominently at the end.
 - ii. slice of life, depiction of realistic everyday situations in which the product is naturally embedded.
 - iii. celebrity/testimonial endorsement, featuring a recognizable individual who directly endorses the product or message
 - iv. product in action, focused on the direct use or performance of the product, highlighting practical benefits or tangible outcomes, often through visual demonstrations or comparisons.
- 6) Conveyed values: based on Schwartz's model of basic human values (1992; 2012), values are organized within a circumplex structure composed of two overarching motivational dimensions: Openness to Change vs. Conservation and Self-Enhancement vs. Self-Transcendence. This structure allows for the interpretation of advertising content not only in thematic terms but also in relation to the

worldviews it promotes. After assigning a single dominant value to each spot, the frequencies were subsequently aggregated along the two main motivational dimensions. The first one was so coded:

- i. openness to change, emphasizing novelty, freedom, and creativity;
- ii. conservation, prioritizing stability, conformity, and respect for tradition.

The second one was so organized:

- i. Self-Enhancement, including values such as achievement and power;
- ii. Self-Transcendence, including universalism and benevolence, promoting altruism and social justice.

Coding was performed by two independent coders, achieving good to excellent intercoder reliability, with the lowest Cohen's K value of 0.70 for the variable "conveyed values".

Frequencies derived from the coding process were then analyzed using the chi-square test of independence, performed using the Jamovi software, to determine the statistical significance of the association between variable 1) and each other variables from 2) to 5). The chi-square test evaluates whether a statistically significant association exists between two categorical variables by comparing observed distributions with those expected under the assumption of independence. A significance level of $p \leq 0.01$ was adopted to minimize the risk of Type I errors (false positives) and ensure greater reliability in interpreting the results. In addition, to better understand the meaning of the chi-square test, a post hoc residuals analysis was conducted using the same software.

2.3 Results

H1

The analysis of the product category variable revealed a statistically significant difference between Christmas and regular commercials [$\chi^2(3) = 15.7; p = .001$]. Among Christmas commercials, functional sectors were most represented ($n = 47; 58.8\%$), followed by distribution-related sectors ($n = 22; 27.5\%$), symbolic sectors ($n = 9; 11.3\%$), and institutional sectors ($n = 2; 2.5\%$). Among regular commercials, the functional sector was predominant ($n = 82; 68.3\%$), followed by

symbolic ($n = 24; 20\%$), distribution-related ($n = 9; 7.5\%$), and institutional ($n = 5; 4.2\%$) sectors. The analysis of standardized residuals indicated a statistically significant difference only in the distribution-related category, which was overrepresented in Christmas commercials (residual = 3.83) and underrepresented in regular commercials (residual = -3.83).

Tab. 1 - Results of the chi-square test for the product category variable

Commercials		Product Category				Totale
		Functional	Symbolic	Institutional	Distribution-related	
Christmas	Osservato	47	9	2	22	80
	Atteso	51,6	13,2	2,80	12,4	80,0
	% di riga	58,8 %	11,3 %	2,5 %	27,5 %	100,0 %
Regular	Osservato	82	24	5	9	120
	Atteso	77,4	19,8	4,20	18,6	120,0
	% di riga	68,3 %	20,0 %	4,2 %	7,5 %	100,0 %
Totale	Osservato	129	33	7	31	200
	Atteso	129	33	7	31	200
	% di riga	64,5 %	16,5 %	3,5 %	15,5 %	100,0 %

Test χ^2			
	Valore	gdi	p
χ^2	15,7	3	0,001
N	200		

Commercials		Product Category			
		Functional	Symbolic	Institutional	Distribution-related
Christmas		-1.39	-1.63	-0.628	3.83
Regular		1.39	1.63	0.628	-3.83

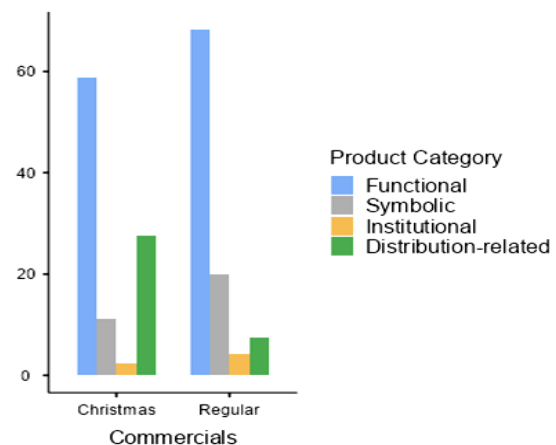


Fig. 1 - Percentage distribution of the product category variable across commercial types

The results partially confirm Hypothesis H1. The distribution-related category was significantly more represented in Christmas commercials than in regular ones, suggesting greater visibility of commerce- and distribution-related content during the holiday season. In contrast, the other hypothesized dimensions did not show statistically significant differences: although differing in absolute frequency between the two contexts,

the other categories did not display meaningful deviations according to standardized residuals.

H2

The analysis of perceived emotional control revealed a statistically significant difference between Christmas and regular commercials [$\chi^2(2) = 19.7; p < .001$]. Christmas commercials were almost evenly distributed between high-control emotions ($n = 42; 52.5\%$) and low-control emotions ($n = 38; 47.5\%$), with no instances of neutral-control emotions. Regular commercials showed greater heterogeneity: a predominance of high-control emotions ($n = 59; 49.2\%$), followed by low-control ($n = 37; 30.8\%$) and neutral-control emotions ($n = 24; 20\%$). The analysis of standardized residuals confirmed that these differences significantly contributed to the overall association. In particular, the neutral-control category was overrepresented in regular commercials (residual = +4.26) and completely absent in Christmas commercials (-4.26). A slight overrepresentation of low-control emotions was also found in Christmas commercials (2.39), with a corresponding underrepresentation in regular ones (-2.39), although with less pronounced values.

Table 2 - Results of the chi-square test for emotional control

Tabelle di Contingenza					
Commercials		Emotional Control			Totale
		High-control	Low-control	Neutral-control	
Christmas	Osservato	42	38	0	80
	Atteso	40.4	30.0	9.60	80.0
	% di riga	52.5 %	47.5 %	0.0 %	100.0 %
Regular	Osservato	59	37	24	120
	Atteso	60.6	45.0	14.40	120.0
	% di riga	49.2 %	30.8 %	20.0 %	100.0 %
Totale	Osservato	101	75	24	200
	Atteso	101	75	24	200
	% di riga	50.5 %	37.5 %	12.0 %	100.0 %

Test χ^2			
	Valore	gdl	p
χ^2	19.7	2	< .001
N	200		

Post Hoc Test (Standardized Residuals)			
Commercials	Emotional Control		
	High-control	Low-control	Neutral-control
Christmas	0.462	2.39	-4.26
Regular	-0.462	-2.39	4.26

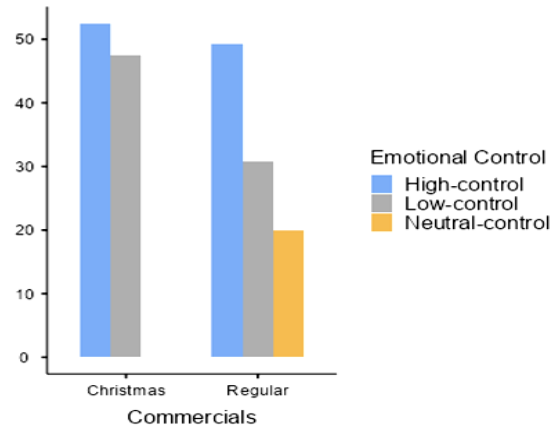


Fig. 2 - Percentage distribution of perceived control across commercial types

The results were consistent with H2: despite an overall balance between high- and low-control emotions in Christmas commercials, a statistically significant overrepresentation of low-control emotions emerged in the standardized residuals. In contrast, regular commercials displayed a broader emotional distribution in terms of perceived control. Alongside the predominance of high-control emotions, low- or neutral-control emotions were also present.

H3

The analysis of narrative strategies revealed a statistically significant difference between Christmas and regular commercials [$\chi^2(3) = 59.4; p < .001$]. In the Christmas commercials, the predominant narrative style was emotional ($n = 57; 73.3\%$), followed by informative/descriptive ($n = 20; 25\%$), surreal narratives ($n = 2; 2.5\%$), and a minimal presence of commercials with no identifiable narrative structure ($n = 1; 1.3\%$). In contrast, regular commercials were primarily characterized by an informative/descriptive style ($n = 76; 63.3\%$), with emotional narratives appeared far less frequently ($n = 21; 17.5\%$). A noticeable number of spots lacked a recognizable narrative structure ($n = 14; 11.7\%$) or employed surreal storytelling ($n = 9; 7.5\%$).

The analysis of standardized residuals confirmed that the most significant differences between the two groups concern three categories: emotional narratives were overrepresented in Christmas commercials (residual = 7.63) and underrepresented in regular ones (-7.63); informative/descriptive narratives displayed the opposite pattern (-

5.32 in Christmas, 5.32 in regular); finally, the absence of narrative was more frequent than expected in regular commercials (2.74) and less frequent in Christmas ones (-2.74). No significant deviations were observed for surreal narratives.

Tab. 3 – Results of the chi-square test for narrative strategies

Commercials		Narrative Strategies				Totale
		Emotional	Informative/Descriptive	Surreal	Absent	
Christmas	Osservato	57	20	2	1	80
	Atteso	31.2	38.4	4.40	6.00	80.0
	% di riga	71.3 %	25.0 %	2.5 %	1.3 %	100.0 %
Regular	Osservato	21	76	9	14	120
	Atteso	46.8	57.6	6.60	9.00	120.0
	% di riga	17.5 %	63.3 %	7.5 %	11.7 %	100.0 %
Totale	Osservato	78	96	11	15	200
	Atteso	78	96	11	15	200
	% di riga	39.0 %	48.0 %	5.5 %	7.5 %	100.0 %

Test χ^2			
	Valore	gdl	p
χ^2	59.4	3	< .001
N	200		

Post Hoc Test (Standardized Residuals)

Commercials		Narrative Strategies			
		Emotional	Informative/Descriptive	Surreal	Absent
Christmas		7.63	-5.32	-1.52	-2.74
Regular		-7.63	5.32	1.52	2.74

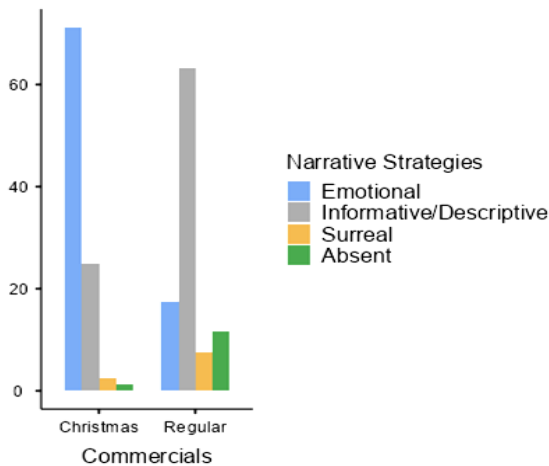


Fig. 3 – Percentage distribution of narrative strategies across commercial types

The results partially confirm Hypothesis H3. Christmas commercials made significantly greater use of emotional narratives, whereas regular advertisements more frequently relied on informative/ descriptive structures. Although surreal narratives were present in

both contexts, no statistically significant differences were observed, suggesting a marginal and non-distinctive use of this narrative mode.

Additionally, an unexpected but noteworthy difference emerged: the “None” category was significantly more frequent in regular commercials, thus confirming greater heterogeneity in advertising messages in non-seasonal contexts.

H4

The analysis of advertising format types revealed a statistically significant difference between Christmas and regular commercials [$\chi^2(3) = 40.0, p < .001$]. Among the Christmas commercials, the most prevalent formats were storytelling (n = 34; 42.5%), slice of life (n = 17; 21.3%), product in action (n = 17; 21.3%), and testimonial (n = 12; 15%).

The dominant format in regular commercials was product in action (n = 58; 48.3%), followed by slice of life (n = 28; 23.3%), testimonial (n = 26; 21.7%), and, lastly, storytelling (n = 8; 6.7%). The analysis of standardized residuals highlighted significant differences in two categories: storytelling was overrepresented in Christmas commercials (residual = 6.10) and underrepresented in regular ones (-6.10), whereas product in action followed the opposite trend, being underrepresented in Christmas spots (-3.88) and overrepresented in regular spots (3.88). The testimonial and slice-of-life formats did not exhibit statistically significant deviations.

Tab. 4 – Results of the chi-square test for format type

Commercials		Format Type				Totale
		Storytelling	Slice of life	Testimonial	Product in action	
Christmas	Osservato	34	17	12	17	80
	Atteso	16.8	18.0	15.2	30.0	80.0
	% di riga	42.5 %	21.3 %	15.0 %	21.3 %	100.0 %
Regular	Osservato	8	28	26	58	120
	Atteso	25.2	27.0	22.8	45.0	120.0
	% di riga	6.7 %	23.3 %	21.7 %	48.3 %	100.0 %
Totale	Osservato	42	45	38	75	200
	Atteso	42	45	38	75	200
	% di riga	21.0 %	22.5 %	19.0 %	37.5 %	100.0 %

Test χ^2			
	Valore	gdl	p
χ^2	40.0	3	< .001
N	200		

Post Hoc Test (Standardized Residuals)

Commercials	Format Type			
	Storytelling	Slice of life	Testimonial	Product in action
Christmas	6.10	-0.346	-1.18	-3.88
Regular	-6.10	0.346	1.18	3.88

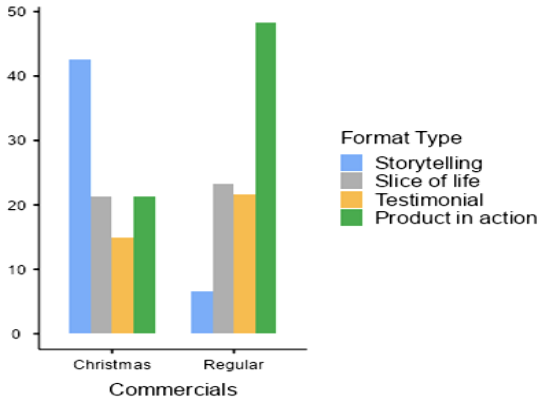


Fig. 4 - Percentage distribution of format type across commercial types

The results partially confirm Hypothesis 4 (H4). Christmas-themed commercials exhibited a significantly higher use of the storytelling format, whereas ordinary commercials relied more frequently on the product-in-action format, thus confirming the two main tendencies anticipated in the hypothesis. By contrast, no statistically significant difference was found for the slice-of-life format, and the testimonial format—although more common in ordinary commercials—did not contribute significantly to the observed difference. Overall, the data support the existence of differentiated formal choices in the construction of advertising messages across the two contexts, although only some of the hypothesized patterns receive full empirical confirmation.

H5

The analysis of the “openness to change” vs. “conservation” dimension revealed a statistically significant difference between Christmas-themed and ordinary commercials [$\chi^2(1) = 7.20, p = .007$]. In Christmas-themed commercials, values associated with conservation clearly prevail ($n = 59; 73.8\%$), whereas values linked to openness to change are less frequent ($n = 21; 26.3\%$). In ordinary commercials, the distribution was more balanced, with a slight predominance of conservation values ($n = 66; 55\%$) over openness values ($n = 54; 45\%$).

The analysis of standardized residuals confirmed that the differences between the two contexts are statistically significant: in Christmas-themed commercials, conservation values were overrepresented (residual = 2.68) while openness-to-change values were underrepresented (-2.68). The opposite pattern was observed in ordinary commercials, where openness-to-change values were overrepresented (2.68) and conservation values were underrepresented (-2.68).

Tab. 5 - Results of the chi-square test for the “openness to change” vs. “conservation” dimension

Tabella di Contingenza

Commercials		Dimension		Totale
		Openness to change	Conservation	
Christmas	Osservato	21	59	80
	Atteso	30.0	50.0	80.0
	% di riga	26.3 %	73.8 %	100.0 %
Regular	Osservato	54	66	120
	Atteso	45.0	75.0	120.0
	% di riga	45.0 %	55.0 %	100.0 %
Totale	Osservato	75	125	200
	Atteso	75	125	200
	% di riga	37.5 %	62.5 %	100.0 %

Test χ^2

	Valore	gdl	p
χ^2	7.20	1	0.007
N	200		

Post Hoc Test (Standardized Residuals)

Commercials	Dimension	
	Openness to change	Conservation
Christmas	-2.68	2.68
Regular	2.68	-2.68

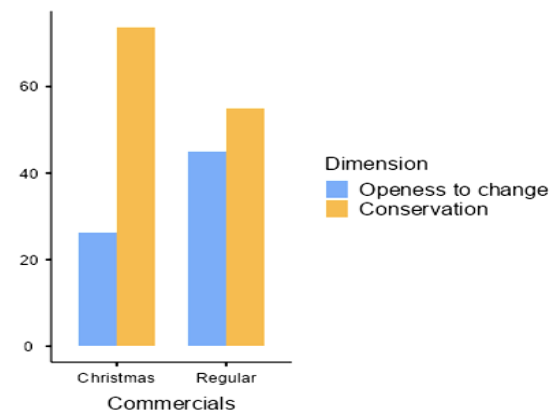


Fig. 5 - Percentage distribution of values across “openness to change” vs. “conservation” dimension by commercial types

In contrast, the analysis of the “self-enhancement” vs. “self-transcendence”

dimension did not reveal a statistically significant difference between Christmas-themed and ordinary commercials, according to the adopted criterion [$\chi^2(1) = 4.18, p = .041$]. Although the result did not meet the stricter threshold of $p \leq .01$, it remained below the conventional level of significance ($p < .05$), suggesting a potential trend worth considering. In Christmas-themed commercials ($n = 80$), values were distributed almost evenly between self-enhancement ($n = 39$; 48.8%) and self-transcendence ($n = 41$; 51.2%). In ordinary commercials ($n = 120$), by contrast, there was a clearer prevalence of self-enhancement values ($n = 76$; 63.3%) compared to self-transcendence values ($n = 44$; 36.3%).

The analysis of standardized residuals indicated a pattern consistent with the hypothesis: self-transcendence was overrepresented in Christmas-themed commercials (residual = 2.04) and underrepresented in ordinary ones (-2.04), while self-enhancement was overrepresented in ordinary ones (2.04) and underrepresented in Christmas-themed commercials (-2.04). However, the observed difference did not reach statistical significance, as the p-value remained above the predetermined threshold of .01.

Tab. 6 – Results of the chi-square test for the “self-enhancement” vs. “self-transcendence” dimension

Tabelle di Contingenza				
Commercials	Dimension		Totale	
	Self-enhancement	Self-transcendence		
Christmas	Osservato	39	41	80
	Atteso	46.0	34.0	80.0
	% di riga	48.8 %	51.2 %	100.0 %
Regular	Osservato	76	44	120
	Atteso	69.0	51.0	120.0
	% di riga	63.3 %	36.7 %	100.0 %
Totale	Osservato	115	85	200
	Atteso	115	85	200
	% di riga	57.5 %	42.5 %	100.0 %

Test χ^2			
	Valore	gdl	p
χ^2	4.18	1	0.041
N	200		

Post Hoc Test (Standardized Residuals)		
Commercials	Dimension	
	Self-enhancement	Self-transcendence
Christmas	-2.04	2.04
Regular	2.04	-2.04

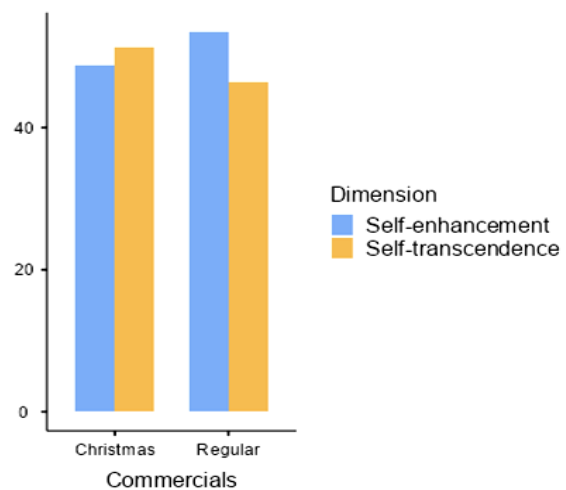


Fig. 6 – Percentage distribution of values across the “self-enhancement” vs. “self-transcendence” dimension by commercial types

The results partially confirm Hypothesis 5 (H5). With regard to the openness-to-change vs. conservation dimension, Christmas-themed commercials were characterized by a marked prevalence of conservation-related values, whereas ordinary commercials were more strongly oriented toward openness to change, in line with the initial prediction.

By contrast, the self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence dimension did not reach the predetermined significance threshold ($p = .041$) and therefore cannot be considered confirmed according to the adopted criterion. Standardized residuals indicated a tendency consistent with the hypothesis—greater representation of self-transcendence in Christmas-themed commercials and of self-enhancement in ordinary commercials—yet this pattern must be interpreted with caution, as it lacks sufficient statistical support.

3. DISCUSSION

This study offers an additional contribution to the psychosocial literature on seasonal marketing: grounded in the theoretical framework of emotional branding, it aimed to examine its application through systematic and comparative research on holiday versus regular advertising specifically. Both classic and more updated literature supported the selection of the variables used in the empirical section to proceed with content analysis of a wide sample of Italian advertising.

Globally, it confirms that the symbolic framework of the Christmas period systematically shapes advertising strategies, reinforcing the role of communication as a socially embedded practice. The results show significant differences between Christmas and ordinary advertisements across all six variables analyzed—branding strategies, emotional valence, narrative structures, communicative formats, conveyed values, and product categories—thus validating the assumption that advertising adapts to symbolic contexts.

Findings strongly support the first hypothesis on branding and emotions. Christmas advertising is dominated by implicit branding and positively valenced, low-control emotions. This aligns with literature on emotional branding in ritualized contexts, which emphasizes empathy, relational bonds, and symbolic codes (Fournier, 1998; Scherer, 2005). Emotions such as tenderness and joy not only capture attention but also reinforce brand-community bonds, acting as identity markers and fostering trust. Cases like a portrayal of intergenerational affection proposed by a supermarket or the nostalgic storytelling proposed by a Christmas cake exemplify this strategy. In contrast, ordinary advertising exhibits a broader emotional repertoire, including neutral, negative, and high-control emotions such as pride or amusement. This diversity reflects its orientation toward differentiation, rational product demonstration, and irony, highlighting advertising's greater freedom outside ritualized contexts.

Regarding the second hypothesis, statistically significant differences emerge only in retail distribution, which is over-represented in Christmas advertising and under-represented in ordinary contexts. Retail chains assume a cultural role that transcends product promotion, positioning themselves as “ritual agents” that accompany and legitimize festive practices. Their campaigns often focus on symbolic proximity – “Season’s greetings from...” – rather than on products, emphasizing the retailer’s social presence in the holiday season.

Other categories – functional, symbolic, and institutional – do not differ significantly. However, interpretative patterns are notable.

Functional goods dominate ordinary advertising, consistent with utilitarian logic (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Symbolic goods, such as perfumes or apparel, rely on storytelling strategies that blur category distinctions. Institutional communication, though quantitatively marginal, highlights reputational and value-based appeals, suggesting avenues for future research.

As for the third hypothesis, narrative analysis reveals that Christmas advertising overwhelmingly favors emotional storytelling, integrating brands into micro-narratives of family and community. Here, brands become creators of meaning, aligning with emotional branding paradigms (Fournier, 1998; Thomson, MacInnis & Park, 2005). Conversely, ordinary advertising relies more on informational and descriptive structures, consistent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Formats mirror this distinction: Christmas advertisements privilege storytelling and *slice-of-life* depictions, while ordinary contexts emphasize *product-in-action*. Testimonials, more frequent outside Christmas, provide identity anchoring in the absence of strong symbolic frames.

As for the fourth hypothesis, Christmas advertising emphasizes conservation-oriented values such as tradition, benevolence, and hedonism, resonating with the ritual’s normative function (Schwartz et al., 2012). Ordinary advertising, by contrast, balances conservation with openness to change, often stressing stimulation, achievement, and individual enhancement. Although differences in self-transcendence were not statistically significant, tendencies suggest that Christmas emphasizes relational and prosocial orientations, while ordinary contexts privilege individualistic goals.

As for the last hypothesis, the most striking difference lies not in isolated variables but in the systemic coherence of Christmas advertising. Positive low-control emotions, storytelling, implicit branding, conservation values, and retail dominance converge into a unified symbolic framework. Ordinary advertising, instead, is heterogeneous and fragmented, reflecting a competitive environment where multiple strategies coexist.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research demonstrates that advertising during highly symbolic periods such as Christmas, operates within a ritualized chronotope, where emotions, narratives, and values converge to construct coherent cultural messages. Christmas does not merely serve as a temporal backdrop but structures advertising communication into a ritual system characterized by positivity, relationality, and conservation-oriented values. The findings emphasize that advertising is not a neutral promotional practice but a cultural performance capable of ritualizing consumption. Christmas campaigns exemplify how brands shift from product promotion to meaning construction, embedding themselves in family rituals, collective imaginaries, and shared values. This supports theories of emotional branding (Fournier, 1998) and ritualized consumption (Belk, 1989; Rook, 1985).

The study also highlights the value of integrating validated coding frameworks (e.g., the Geneva Emotion Wheel, Schwartz's value model) with statistical analysis. The collection of 200 television commercials broadcast on both Rai 1 and Canale 5 - Italy's leading public and private networks - was intended to ensure a balanced and representative national sample. The inclusion of two distinct time frames (a weekend and a weekday) allowed the analysis to capture a broad range of communicative contexts, encompassing both peak family-viewing periods and routine weekday programming. This design choice strengthens the ecological validity of the findings by reflecting the heterogeneity of Italian television audiences and advertising schedules.

Despite limitations - such as sample size, contextual constraints, representativeness, and the inherent subjectivity of coding - the approach reveals both quantitative distinctions and interpretative nuances, offering a replicable methodology for further research.

For practitioners, the results underscore the strategic importance of aligning campaigns with symbolic contexts. During Christmas, effective advertising transcends product visibility, focusing instead on relational authenticity, emotional resonance, and

cultural alignment. Retailers, in particular, emerge as cultural agents rather than mere distributors, accompanying consumers through ritualized experiences.

Christmas advertising in Italy highlights warm emotions, family intimacy, and shared rituals, positioning products within dynamics of belonging and embedding brands in everyday life. This approach aligns with emotional branding strategies grounded in affective proximity and relational authenticity (Gobé, 2001). Such tendencies mirror key dimensions of Italian culture, which values continuity, tradition, and emotional closeness (Schwartz et al., 2012). However, while the use of positive emotions, nostalgia, and benevolent values is common across Western contexts where Christmas retains its ritual and identity-building functions (Holak & Havlena, 1998; Holt, 2004), cultural variations emerge in how these emotions are visually and narratively expressed. In Italy, emotional branding adopts a relational semiotic pattern centered on familial intimacy, whereas in the United Kingdom it often emphasizes communal diversity and inclusivity, and in the United States, individual success and happiness (Percy & Elliott, 2020). These insights suggest fruitful directions for future cross-cultural research on how emotional branding adapts to distinct symbolic and cultural frameworks.

In addition, further research could extend this analysis to other ritualized contexts (e.g., Valentine's Day, Easter) to examine how symbolic frameworks shape advertising globally. Exploring institutional advertising's role in festive contexts also offers promising opportunities.

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