

## WHO DESTROYS OUR SPIRITUAL CHRISTMAS?

**Nela Șteliac, Dumitru Șteliac**

*Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania*

*"Taras Sevcenko" Highschool, Sighetu Marmației, Romania*

*nela.steliac@econ.ubbcluj.ro*

*steliacdumitru@yahoo.com*

**Abstract:** *One of the greatest religious celebrations of the Christian world is Christmas whose significance is so well-known. In recent years, Christmas preparations have begun to take place long before the great holiday, even in October. In order to maximize their turnovers and profits, manufacturers and retailers aim to attract more and more customers during winter holidays. In order to convince them, retailers use a new type of marketing - sensory marketing - based on senses. Sensory marketing stimulates consumerism which is felt more intensely during winter holidays. Yet, it negatively influences the perception of Christmas. Because of the stress and the pressure generated by certain habits, many Christians no longer feel that specific joy they used to sometime in the past. The explanation is the removal of Christians from the essence of the celebration, and the strong link with Santa Claus, a character found in all advertisements, malls and shops. What we have pursued in this paper is to bring some consumerist aspects of Christmas to attention, using some statistical data in this respect. Actually, the latter have revealed an expected situation, namely: total retail sales are the highest in December; the amounts in absolute sizes spent at Christmas are much higher in developed countries, whereas the share of amounts spent at Christmas in total monthly incomes is high both in developed countries and in other countries with a lower development level. It should also be noted that there is a certain connection between the level of Christmas spending and the global index of religiousness in certain countries. Differences among countries relating Christmas spending are determined by a number of factors such as: countries' level of economic development, populations' standards of living, cultural differences on traditions and customs, the mimesis of western consumers' behaviours etc. The market for Christmas decorations and ornaments is world-dominated by China.*

**Keywords:** *Christmas; consumerism; sensory marketing; Christmas spending.*

**JEL Classification:** *E21; L81; M31; Z12.*

### Introduction

Christmas is one of the most beautiful and popular periods of the year for the entire Christian world. It is a feast of joy and peace of mind when "all roads lead home". On that day, Christian families come together under the sign of love, happiness, generosity and tolerance; miracles do happen; peace, happiness, and understanding slowly come; the world "contracts" and the notions of time and space disappear. Since to many adults Christmas means reliving the past, more beautiful times, to the little ones, however, Christmas is the most anticipated day of the year due to the abundance of presents.

Lately, however, many Christians have claimed that the old magic of Christmas has vanished, having been destroyed by the "crazy unwanted race" imposed by the current society: the modern/consumer society. It makes people feel the Christmas "fever" of preparations much more intensely, tiring them much too early, thus reducing the old joy specific to this holiday. The pressure created by the "chase" for gifts and shopping turns the Christmas period into a frustrating, tiring and stressful one. In fact, Christmas being a source of stress for many people is scientifically demonstrated by a number of specialists (Holmes & Rahe; Kasser & Sheldon, Hairon; etc.).

Actually nowadays, Christmas along with other great religious holidays is increasingly moving away from its significance, from Christian spirituality in general. Due to consumerism - regarded as a global phenomenon which has given rise to a new "relaxation" way for people and with the "pilgrimages" through supermarkets that have replaced the walks in the parks - one forgets about what Christmas really means: the birth of Jesus Christ. Spiritual emotion is most often replaced by sensations. Yet, the latter is a wrong way of living since the disappearance of stimuli (Santa, lights, globes, Christmas trees, food, presents, etc.) leads to the immediate disappearance of joy. All the more so, in Christmas offers, the importance of Christ is lowered until it totally disappears ([www.crestinortodox.ro](http://www.crestinortodox.ro)). Christmas has thus become the climax of the year, when consumer materialism is in contrast to Christian values (Belk, 1995). Many people perceive the period prior to Christmas as a time of increased social pressures and demands, especially when presents are bought (Miyazaki, 1993).

Without the belief of having reached all the economic issues of the celebration, this paper attempts to bring to attention only some of these, especially regarded via consumerism. Objective reasons related to the size of this work have limited our research. Nevertheless, in order to capture the important issues, we have resorted to a series of relevant statistical data published on some sites in the field, as well as a series of information in the online press.

### **About Consumerist Christmas**

The notion of consumer society was first used in the 1920's and was then widely used in the sixth to eighth decades of the last century. It is characterized by an exaggerated consumption of goods generated by pleasure or emotion, and where "hunting for items" is replaced by "hunting for brand names". In many cases, consumption in such a society is "dictated" by impulse, not by necessity, in the end meeting not only the needs of consumers, but also the needs of producers through a new type of marketing, sensory marketing, also called "shopping experience" ([www.strategic.ro](http://www.strategic.ro)). The latter is based on the emotional relationship between a consumer and a product and involves the senses of customers, thus affecting their behaviours (Krishna, 2010, p. 2).

Sensory marketing "is trying hard to improve the sensitive, tactile and visual, sound and olfactory features of products and sales areas. Sensitivity and emotion have become objects of marketing research designed on one hand to differentiate brands within a hypercompetitive universe, and on the other hand to promise a "sensitive, emotional adventure" to the hyper consumer in search of varied sensations and sensory comfort" (Lipovetski, 2007, p.37).

In fact, in order to ensure customer satisfaction and attract customer loyalty, most companies and retailers offer a real customer experience where senses play a major role (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). In the name of consumer loyalty, currently there is, as Lipovetsky says, a certain "inflation for what is new". In the ongoing competition to market new products or models, this inflation is actually generated by the deliberate "obsolescence" of products by manufacturers. Therefore, there is an acceleration of the process of launching new products via fashion. In fact, novelty produces pleasure, and pleasure maintains consumption, thus forming that "snowball" with every pleasure felt by the consumption of what is new.

And when does consumerism become more evident if not during the great religious celebrations, especially Christmas, when every buyer is "forced or stressed" to consume more than they need? Under such circumstances, could we not include the Christmas celebration in the category of holidays (which Lipovetsky spoke about in his work *"Paradoxical Happiness: an Essay on Hyperconsumption Society"*) which no longer mean evoking the past, but hedonising the present? The current pattern of consumer behaviour tends to support such a statement.

Nowadays, entering the Christmas atmosphere takes place much earlier, in October, as a result of special offers promoted by retailers or televisions. For instance, advertisements are designed to inspire people the idea that the road to happiness is just the consumption of goods. From this point of view, Christmas has become a shopping feast, slowly forgetting that it actually means the Birth of Christ. People no longer look forward to going to church, but to malls to be opened for a new shopping frenzy ([www.infocs.ro](http://www.infocs.ro)). Malls and general stores gain strength and stand out as the most favourable place to celebrate Christmas, even more than church itself, which suggests the degree of materialism and secularism (Schmidt, 1991, p. 18). In fact, material accumulation becomes even more obvious during holidays, when shops become the place of living, of meeting, and pleasures for most people (Liiceanu, 2005). As the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Anglican Church (Reverend Justin Welby) says, consumerism ends up destroying the spirit of Christmas ([www.ziare.com](http://www.ziare.com)).

Consumerist Christmas is therefore the creation of marketing and advertisements. In such advertisements, the celebration is linked to Santa Claus (dressed in red and white) and not to Jesus Christ. The link dates back to the interwar period as a result of Coca-Cola's advertising efforts to boost sales during winter time. The image of Santa Claus (the 1931 creation of artist Haddon Sundblom for Coca-Cola) has significantly increased the profits of many producers. Among them there have been film and music producers who have used the Santa Claus character and its symbolic image. Basically, at present, Santa Claus sells almost anything, anywhere and for anyone, being a lay representation of Christmas ([wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org)). We actually refer to, as Patriarch Daniel says, a secularized and commercial Santa Claus, a symbol of consumerism and individualistic materialism. Advertising agencies and inventors of products associated with it use the plump old man up to exhaustion to increase their profits. Santa Claus is now a trademark and a commodity ([www.gandul.info](http://www.gandul.info)). Via commercialism, films and music, Christmas has become an indicator of the American culture ([russiarobinson.wordpress.com](http://russiarobinson.wordpress.com)) that has "spoiled" other countries as well. Christmas time is a key element to the US economy, as about 1/6 of the total retail sales is reached then (Kasser & Sheldon, 2002, p. 314).

Consumerist perception of Christmas exists in many countries, not only in the US. This is also highlighted by a study by the British market research company YouGov

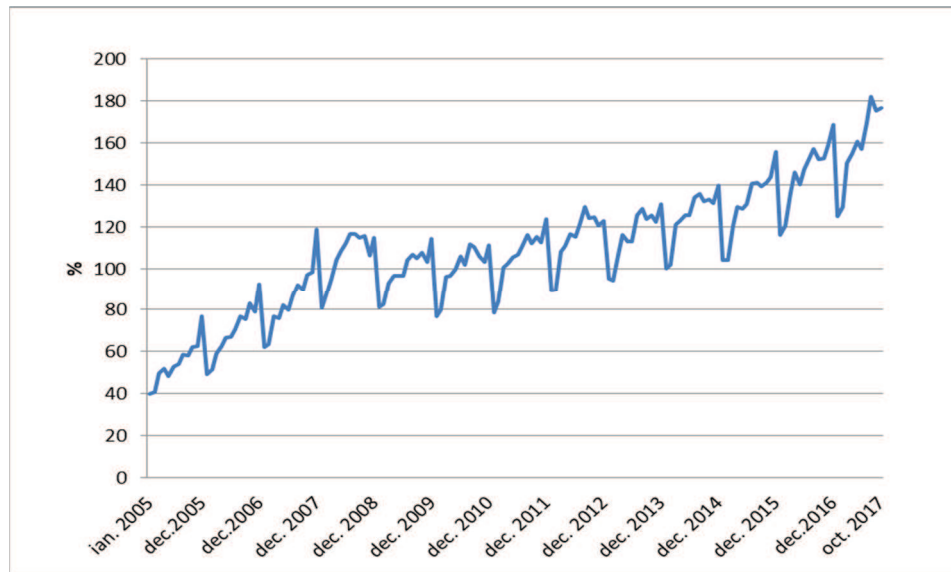
in 2016, in several western countries. The results of the study reveal that, although all westerners enjoy Christmas, family reunions and friends, Christmas meals and presents, still their attitudes are different. Thus, 81% of the Spanish and 77% of the British believe that the Christmas celebration has become too materialistic, being a consumerism exercise. The same is true for 66% of the French. However, compared to the French (42%), the Germans (68%) seem to be the most eager to celebrate the day ([www.cotidianul.ro](http://www.cotidianul.ro)).

Nevertheless, what exactly contributes in the unaltered preservation of the joy and happiness of this holiday for certain Christians? The study carried out by Kasser & Sheldon (2002) highlights that family and faith greatly contribute in people's well-being during Christmas, while the secular materialistic issues of the celebration contribute to a lesser extent in the joy of Christmas, actually being associated with less happiness, more stress and unpleasant emotions. The same results were obtained by Mutz by the study carried out in eleven European countries and published in 2016. He states that reducing life satisfaction during Christmas is the result of financial concerns that reflect materialistic activities during the period. Mutz also claims that Christian religious affiliation moderates the way Christmas is experienced. According to him, Christian practitioners do not suffer from reduced life satisfaction before Christmas (Mutz, 2016, p. 1352).

### **How much is spent at Christmas?**

In most Christian religion countries, there is a significant increase in the volume of products sold at this time of the year. From this perspective, it is enough to note the status of total sales of Romania's retail sales (see Figure 1). According to the chart, with few exceptions (including for the year 2017 for which there were no official data about the last two months at the time of writing this paper), it is noted that the highest level of turnover indices is reported in December.

Of course, from the perspective of sales specific to the Christmas season, there may be more or less significant differences among countries. These differences can largely be attributed to the level of countries' development, living standards and cultural differences. In this respect, the status of total sales at European Christmas markets is eloquent, regarded as the charm of winter holidays and the most visited tourist attractions in this period (see Table 1). According to Table 1, Germany clearly outranks the other countries, with total sales of over 2 billion Pounds due to the large number of Christmas markets (2234), some of them with traditions of hundreds of years old, as well as to the large number of visitors (270 million). Then, there is France with total sales of over 690 million Pounds and 78 million visitors in 273 markets. Ranking third is the UK with 342.5 million Pounds and only 30 Christmas markets, but with 24 million visitors. Switzerland, though, raking third by the number of Christmas markets, however, only ranks 8<sup>th</sup> in terms of the total money cashed and 11<sup>th</sup> in terms of the number of people who have visited the Christmas markets. The last two ranking positions are held by the Czech Republic and Sweden, both in terms of total revenues, number of organized markets and number of visitors. It must be said that many of the Christmas markets organized in Europe have traditions of hundreds of years old.



**Figure 1:** Value indices of turnover in total wholesale trade (reference year 2010)  
 Source: prepared by the author based on INSSE TEMPO-ONLINE

**Table 1:** Christmas markets: number, sales, visitors, by countries, 2014

Country	Sales (million Pounds)	Markets		Visitors	
		Number	Ranking	Number (million)	Ranking
Germany	2,092.9	2,234	1	270	1
France	697.9	273	2	78	2
UK	324.5	30	5	24	3
Austria	250.9	49	4	21	4
Belgium	148.7	20	7	12	6
Netherlands	139.9	9	11	9.9	7
Italy	128.4	27	6	13	5
Switzerland	108.0	56	3	8.2	11
Ireland (Republic)	93.7	14	9	8.9	8
Denmark	90.6	8	12	8.3	10
Finland	76.0	8	12	7.5	12
Norway	73.0	7	14	7.1	14
Poland	71.4	11	10	8.5	9
Spain	62.7	15	8	7.3	13
Czech Republic	50.7	6	15	5.6	15
Sweden	41.1	5	16	4.4	16

Source: [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com)

Over time, a series of studies have been made on the level of spending typical of the Christmas period, and the results reveal a somewhat expected situation with Christian people in western developed countries allocating a much more consistent budget in the absolute amount for this holiday compared to Christian families in less

developed countries. Moreover, where faith is stronger and traditions and customs are followed more, usually the budget for Christmas is higher in total monthly incomes. Thus, according to the ING special report called "Christmas Spending League" performed for 2015, the planned Christmas spending (in absolute and relative sizes) was:

**Table 2:** Average Christmas spending, absolute and relative sizes

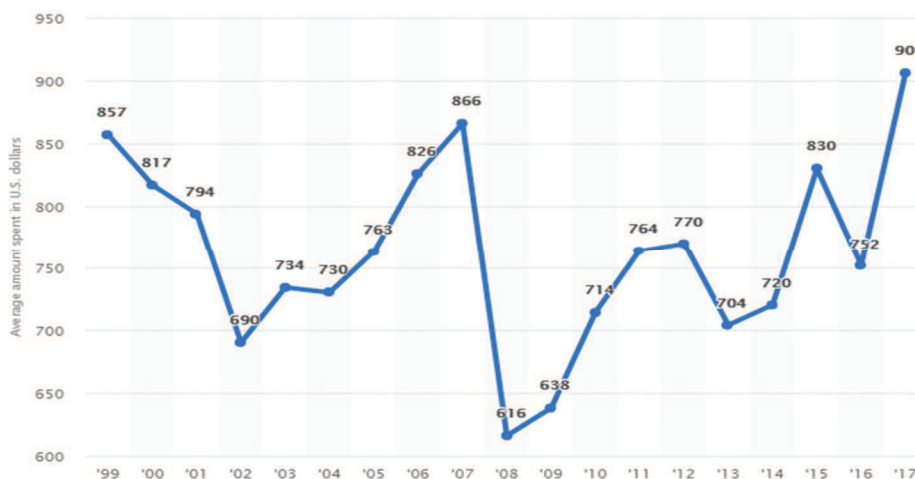
Country	Average amount spent (Euros)	Percentage of net average monthly income	Net average monthly income (Euros)	Undecided about how much to spend at Christmas
UK	420	15 %	2,810	42 %
Luxembourg	300	9 %	3,188	45 %
Austria	250	11 %	2,320	38 %
France	250	11 %	2,224	42 %
Germany	200	9 %	2,315	37 %
Italy	200	12 %	1,736	40 %
Spain	200	12 %	1,679	46 %
Czech Republic	180	25 %	726	39 %
Belgium	150	7 %	2,233	50 %
Romania	110	32 %	346	40 %
Poland	70	11 %	634	50 %
Netherlands	40	1 %	2,794	41 %
USA	360	15 %	2,361	33 %
Australia	200	7 %	2,920	44 %

Source: <http://www.revistabiz.ro/romanii-in-top-ul-cheltuielilor-de-craciun/>

According to the above table, whereas 60% of the surveyed Romanians stated the allocated budget (110 Euros), Romania reported a sum of approximately 4 times lower than that in the UK - at the top of the list. This is not surprising if we take into account the Romanians' average monthly incomes of only 346 Euros, based on which Romania ranked last. The share in total revenues, however, ranked our country first. The explanation is easy considering another ranking of Romania (25<sup>th</sup> in the world) in the top of the most faithful peoples in the world (a 77% global index of religiousness). This last ranking was conducted in 2014 by WIN-Gallup International in the "Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism" survey ([www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)).

According to the share of Christmas spending in monthly incomes, Romania was followed by the Czech Republic with a 25% share, the United Kingdom and the US with 15% each, the latter having an absolute amount of 360 Euros. The Netherlands, with a higher level of development than other central or eastern European countries (the Czech Republic, Romania, Poland), but with a Global Religiosity Index (GRI) of only 26% (for 2014) ranked last. However, the Czech Republic surprisingly ranked second in terms of the share, although according to WIN-Gallup International, the index of religiosity was rather low, of only 23%. Similarly, the UK also ranked ahead of countries with a higher index. In contrast, Poland, with a 86% global index of religiosity for 2014, ranked according to the table above, after countries such as Italy

(GRI-74%), the UK (GRI-30%), the USA (GRI-56%), Spain (GRI-37%) and the Czech Republic. The Italians were also willing to allocate less for the Christmas budget compared to the British and the Americans, although Italy's GRI was higher. What can be said is that the link between the index of religiosity and the share of Christmas spending in monthly incomes is generally confirmed, but there are exceptions, too. On the other hand, the standard of living could also explain a certain connection with the level and share of Christmas spending. Additionally, there may be other psychological explanations (material shortages throughout the year, the desire to buy more during the holiday season, the pleasure of Christmas shopping, etc.). And there are also (more or less strong) traditions or even cultural differences. Another recent international study emphasizes some changes in the share of Christmas spending in total monthly earnings. Thus, according to the "Ferratum 2017 International Christmas Barometer", Mexico ranks first with 34.6% (that is 17.1% more than the average of all countries surveyed). It was closely followed by Romania with 31.9% (about 280 Euros). Ranking next, with percentages above the average of 17.5%, were in order: Spain (29.6%), Brazil (28.2%), Bulgaria (24%), New Zealand (23.6%), Australia (22.4%), the UK (22.1%), Poland (21.2%), the Czech Republic (20.2%) and Canada (18.4%). Under the average of the participating countries there were Estonia (17.3%), Latvia (17%), Sweden (14.6%), Croatia (14.4%), Norway (13.4%), Finland (12.3%), and last, Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands, all with the same percentage (11.9%). If we refer to the categories of goods that money is spent on during this time of the year, then clothes, toys, sweets and delicacies are on top, with 17.5%, 13.7% and 12%, respectively. On the opposite side were wellness & spa services (2.8%), as well as music accessories (1.1%) ([www.click.ro](http://www.click.ro)). From the comparison of data about the countries participating in the two studies mentioned above, we notice important changes in countries such as: the UK, Australia, Spain, Poland, the Netherlands. These countries reported higher figures last year compared to 2015.

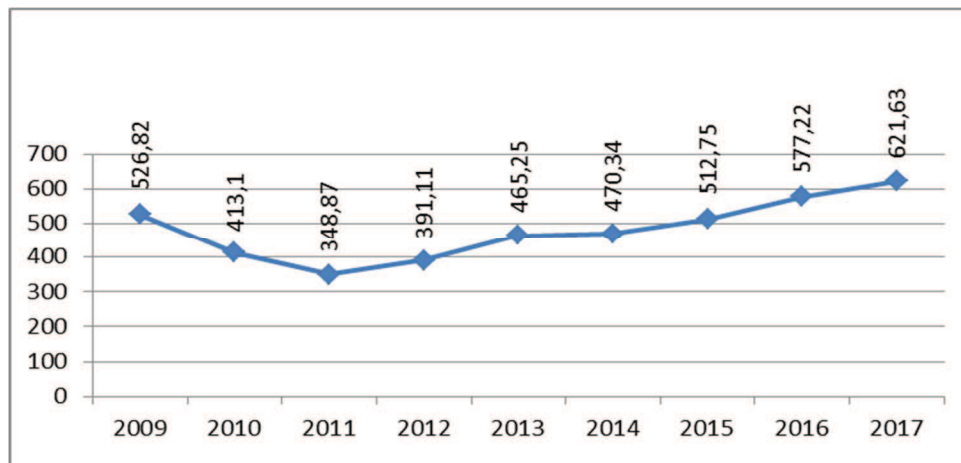


**Figure 2:** Evolution of amounts allocated for buying presents – the USA  
Source: [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com)

Let us not forget that Christmas presents cannot be missing on the shopping list. A statistic of the development of the amounts allocated to buying Christmas presents for the US population reveals a certain fluctuation for the period 1999-2017. As expected, 2008 is characterized by the lowest budget level allocated by the Americans to buying presents (Figure 2).

As to Romania, according to some studies ("*Holiday Shopping*"), conducted in several consecutive years by the MEDNET Marketing Research Center in the urban area, the Lei progress of the budget for Christmas presents was according to Figure 3.

The situation reflects a natural evolution of the surveyed period, with a decrease in the spending for 2009-2011 (when the economic and financial crisis was strongly felt).



**Figure 3:** Evolution of amounts allocated for buying Christmas presents – the urban area

Source: MEDNET Marketing Research Center

### Who provides Christmas decorations and ornaments?

Once Christmas has become commercial, the industry of Christmas decorations and ornaments too has increased. Worldwide, paradoxically, though not predominantly of Christian religion, the Chinese still manage to dominate the market with about 60% of world production. It is about 600 producers in Yiwu (China), a town 300 km away from Shanghai. They offer a wide assortment range, ranging from artificial trees to the well-known Santa Claus hats. The city also hosts the Yiwu International Fair, regarded by the United Nations as the world's largest wholesale area (spread over an area of 4 million square meters), where about 400,000 Christmas products can be seen, ranging from toy reindeer, shiny bells, inflatable toys and other objects that then end up in the homes of the Americans and Europeans ([www.totb.ro](http://www.totb.ro)). 30% of the orders received by the Chinese producers come from the US ([abcnews.go.com](http://abcnews.go.com)).

In Romania, there are currently few producers who make Christmas ornaments and decorations, and this is due to the invasion of Chinese products with more attractive



prices. It is also the case of Christmas globes that are abundantly replaced by the Chinese plastic ones, more resistant and cheaper than those made of glass. In the country, there are only few factories that produce handmade glass globes. They produce more for the foreign market and less for the domestic market. Romanian artists are world-renowned for their talent because they make special silver and platinum plated glass globes that are mostly used to decorate the fir trees in Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, France and the USA. The patterns and colours are in harmony with the preferences of each foreign market segment. For example, the Prodiglob Clasic factory in Cluj makes more vivid and colourful designs for the US market, while for the European market, globes must have classic designs, with pictures of reindeer, Santa Claus and snowmen, and the colours must be purple, blue, white, red or green. There are also small Christmas-themed orders that the factory makes for various US collectors ([www.mediafax.ro](http://www.mediafax.ro)).

## Conclusions

The materialistic and hedonistic sides of Christmas are becoming more and more obvious today. Current consumerism makes Christmas felt more at the sensory level, less spiritually. Preparations are usually made on behalf of Santa Claus (the main character supporting consumerism) and not Christ, often forgetting the essence of the holiday. For these reasons, Christmas is the reason for the largest retail sales, significant amounts are allocated to Christmas shopping. There are, however, more or less significant differences from one country to another, explained by the standard of living, traditions, habits, the power of faith, cultural and psychological differences, etc. Worldwide, the industry of Christmas decorations and ornaments is dominated by producers of a non-Christian country.

## References

1. Belk, R. (1995), *Collecting as luxury consumption - effects on individuals and households*, Journal of Economic Psychology, 16(3), pp. 477–490.
2. Belk, R. (2001), *Objects, subjects, and mediations in consumption*, In D. Miller (Ed.), *Consumption critical concepts in the social science*, retrieved from <http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=viKte9NK5tgC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=belk>, accessed on 14.02.2018
3. Carrier, J. (1993), *The rituals of Christmas giving*, in D. Miller (ed.), *Unwrapping Christmas* (Clarendon Press, Oxford), pp. 55–74.
4. Hairon, N. (2008), *How Christmas festivities and pressures can damage health and well-being*, Nursing Times, 104(50–51), pp. 33–34.
5. Holmes, T., & Rahe, R. (1967), *Social readjustment rating scale*, Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 11(2), pp. 213–218.
6. Kasser, T., Sheldon, K.M. (2002), *What makes for a Merry Christmas?*, Journal of Happiness Studies 3, pp. 313–329
7. Krishna, A. (2010), *Sensory marketing: Research on sensuality of products*, Routledge, New York
8. Liiceanu, A. (2005), *Crăciunul pandemic*, Dilema veche, nr. 101, online: <http://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/tema-saptamanii/articol/craciunul-pandemic>, accessed 25.02.2018
9. Lipovetsky, G. (2007), *Fericirea paradoxală: eseu asupra societății de hiperconsum*, trad. de Mihai Ungurean, Polirom, Iași

10. Miyazaki, A. (1993), *How many shopping days until Christmas—a preliminary investigation of time pressures, deadlines, and planning levels on holiday gift purchases*, *Advances in Consumer Research*, 20, pp. 331–335
11. Mutz, M. (2016), *Christmas and subjective well-being: A research note*. *Applied Research Quality Life*, vol. 11, Issue 4, pp. 1341-1356
12. Pine, B. J., Gilmore, J. H. (1999), *The experience economy: Work is theatre and every business a stage*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston
13. Schmidt, L. E. (1991), *The commercialization of the calendar: American Holidays and the culture of consumption, 1870-1930*, *The Journal of American History*, 78(3), pp. 887-916.
14. <http://www.infocs.ro/cine-a-furat-craciunul-mai-este-loc-de-hristos-in-sarbatoare-de-azi-a-craciunului/>, accessed 14.02.2018
15. <https://www.totb.ro/foto-orasul-din-china-unde-se-produc-60-din-decoratiile-de-craciun-din-lume/>, accessed 2.02.2018
16. <http://www.mediafax.ro/social/reportaj-fabrica-din-cluj-unde-se-pregateste-craciunul-globuri-cu-modele-3d-pictate-manual-exportate-in-europa-si-sua-foto-13470182>, accessed 4.02.2018
17. <https://www.click.ro/news/lume/cel-mai-mare-sondaj-international-de-craciun-realizat-de-ferratum-compara-comportamentele>, accessed 3.02.2018
18. <https://www.crestinortodox.ro/editoriale/cum-furam-singuri-craciunul-143058.html>, accessed 13.02.2018
19. <https://www.cotidianul.ro/craciunul-o-mare-afacere-in-vremuri-de-austeritate>, accessed 13.02.2018
20. <http://www.strategic.ro/publicitate/marketing-senzorial.html>, accessed 13.02.2018
21. <https://russiaronobinson.wordpress.com/2013/12/02/christmas-the-holiday-of-cultural-consumerism/>, accessed 14.02.2018
22. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/files/2015/04/WIN.GALLUP-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUSITY-INDEX.pdf>, accessed 17.02.2018
23. <http://www.revistabiz.ro/romanii-in-top-ul-cheltuielilor-de-craciun/>, accessed 16.02.2018
24. [https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moș\\_Crăciun#cite\\_note-rra-9](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moș_Crăciun#cite_note-rra-9), accessed 22.02.2018
25. <http://www.gandul.info/magazin/mos-craciun-cel-comercial-luat-la-ochi-de-patriarhia-romana-ce-spune-pf-daniel-5195967>, accessed 22.02.2018
26. <http://www.ziare.com/europa/marea-britanie/biserica-blameaza-consumerismul-nu-va-faceti-viata-mizerabila-de-craciun-cumparand-cadouri-1267277>, accessed 26.02.2018
27. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/inside-chinas-christmas-village-worlds-decorations/story?id=51489220>, accessed 2.02.2018
28. [www.romednet.com](http://www.romednet.com), accessed 12.02.2018
29. [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com), accessed 12.02.2018