

BRAND IMAGE MANAGEMENT IN CONTEXT OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING DEVELOPMENT

The main subject of this doctoral dissertation is the issue of virtual brand communities located in the social media and their role in the marketing activities of enterprises. The choice of the subject was conditioned by both cognitive and utilitarian objectives. The cognitive objective was motivated by the existence of a gap in research related to the topic of social media marketing, especially visible in the Polish literature of the subject. E-marketing is a relatively new concept, therefore aspects regarding companies' social media activities and their impact on brand image have not been sufficiently researched yet. The utilitarian objective arises from the lack of comprehensive guidelines for brands' representatives in social media, especially in the area of consumers' preferences regarding the way brand communities operates.

The main aim of the research was identification and assessment of phenomena occurring in virtual brand communities and their impact brand image management. During her work, the author pursued specific scientific objectives, connected with virtual brands communities' impact on the brand image in the eyes of the group participants, the types of virtual brand communities members and the impact of belonging to the virtual brand community on purchase decisions and the consumer loyalty. The author also fulfilled the utilitarian goal, referring to the guidelines for brand owners communicating with consumers via social media channels.

The author had defined a main thesis of the dissertation, stating that the phenomena occurring in virtual brand communities influence the brand image management. Additionally, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Participation in a virtual brand community influences the brand's image built in consumer's mind.

H2: Brand image depends on the type of information published on fanpages and the actions of brand's representatives.

H3: Membership in virtual brand community impacts the consumers' purchase decisions.

H4: Membership in virtual brand community impacts the consumers' loyalty towards the brand.

H5: Different types of brand community members might be distinguished on the basis of their reasons for joining the group, activity on the fanpage, etc.

H6: Creation of one's personal image is an important reason to join virtual brand communities.

H7: The information mostly sought by the community members are the information regarding sales and promotions as well as other users' opinions about the brand.

H8: Community members' activities co-create the brand image.

To complete the dissertation objectives the author performed two stages of empirical research: utilizing the method of virtual ethnography and the method of indirect communication with respondents. The first part consisted of a qualitative research conducted with the use of the virtual ethnography method, consisting of content analysis of selected virtual brand communities, functioning within social networks (non-participant observation). The main aim of this stage was the identification and assessment of consumers' and marketers' behaviors in those online groups. 23 Facebook Polish fanpages (or Polish-speaking subparts of global communities) were selected as the objects of observation. The second part of the study included quantitative research carried out by the survey technique with the use of online questionnaire (Web Panel Interview). The goal of this part was the identification and assessment of consumers' attitudes and behaviors in the virtual brand communities. The subject of the study were adult Polish Internet users - the questionnaire was completed by 650 people, constituting for a representative sample, obtained in the selection of respondents, based on the population distribution in terms of two variables: age (adults divided into six age ranges) and sex.

Results of the conducted research confirm the essential role of social media and virtual brand communities in modern marketing strategies. The findings proved existence of brand communities' potential in terms of communications with consumers, improving brand awareness, attracting new clients and building consumer loyalty.

In the times of ubiquitous Internet, enterprises should not underestimate the vast array of possibilities provided by the social media and fanpages. Efficiently managed online consumer groups have become an indispensable element of marketing strategies, therefore it can be said that one of the major questions the marketers have to answer is not whether to actively take part in virtual brand communities, but how to exploit them in the most profitable way.

By completion of the main cognitive objectives, the author has made an attempt to fill the research gap identification and assessment of phenomena occurring in virtual brand

communities and their role in brands' marketing activities. The emphasis was placed on previously insufficiently investigated aspects of fan groups members' activity level. The author has distinguished different types of community members, additionally the impact of such membership on purchase decisions and consumer loyalty has been evaluated.

According to the research findings, several practical guidelines for the marketers, regarding the use of social media marketing in creating and strengthening the brand image, have been presented. As a result of identifying consumers' preferences concerning manner of fanpage management, the author has elaborated a set of directions towards increasing social media activities' efficiency by adjusting them to the requirements of the modern market.