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# SOCIAL DIMENSION OF ENGAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITY CREATION<sup>1</sup>

**Summary:** The role of the socialization function of brand communication is increasing, and the key process from the perspective of branding is to sustain the interactions between participants of communication processes (among customers and brands). The level of interactivity is one of the criteria for the choice of the media which are used in the branding communication. The aim of the article is to draw attention to the social dimension of customers engagement in the process of virtual brand community creation. The article presents factors of social dimension which need to be taken into consideration in the process of creation and management of virtual brand community. Network paradigm, symbolic interactionism, and relationship marketing are presented as an analytical background to explain and describe the customer interaction and consumer engagement.

**Keywords:** brand, engagement, virtual community.

**JEL Classification:** Z13, M31.

## Introduction

The last decades have brought lots of changes in brand management. At the beginning of 1990s a brand was just perceived as an another part of a augmented product level. In that period of time papers published focused mostly on product decisions, e.g. new product development; product testing; the role of the product managers; the product management system. Branding was considered to be a tactical tool for selling products. Transactional approach towards brand management was observed and predominant in the literature. Brands were being per-

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ceived and used to increase the impact on customer behaviours preserving and embedding the patterns of customers buying behaviours towards the products. Branding performance was being analysed as another part of strictly internal management processes. Particularly only brand management teams were believed to possess the absolute control and the strongest influence in the development and success of brand on the market.

At the end of 1990s brands started to be more open to customer. Internet played the vital role, especially development of Internet Communication Technology (ICT) which has changed the branding process. Increasingly customers were involved into brand creation process. Companies developed brands using interactions among customers in social media. Brands ads were inspired more and more frequently by customer experience with branded products usage e.g. private movies uploaded to YouTube. Social media allowed to create brand communities (brand fanpages on Facebook) and finally in XXI century branding have transitioned from being developed by the companies to being developed by the consumers [Veloutsou, Guzmán, 2017, p. 3]. Brand co-creation process was observed where the role of consumers was constantly growing whereas in the past it was conventionally thought as passive recipients of value [Agrawal, Rahman, 2015, p. 144].

The value of brand equity was always a goal of branding. But there is at least one crucial difference in achieving it now and in the past – before ICT era. In the past brand management teams were especially focused on the highest brand presence in media and on getting good awareness results in recognition and recall tests. Currently importance is putted on the processes of customer involvement, commitment, participation in constituting brand engagement. The reason for the change lies in different patterns of media consumption – traditional media (TV, radio, press) and social ones. Nowadays, individuals spend a lot of time in various social media and interact online with other consumers. Generally, the role of social media in the social communication systematically grows and explains why brand managers are more watchful to the problem of interaction. Interaction seems to be the most important phenomenon for branding, which should be permanently analysed to reveal how brands could create the customer engagement to achieve high value of customer-based brand equity [Tolba, Hassan, 2009, p. 357; Risitano et al., 2017, pp. 1884-1885]. With its roots in relationship marketing the consumer engagement offers a further enhancement of the current theoretisations around consumer and brand relationships. Its added value lies in supporting the increasingly interactive nature of consumer relationships, while extending their scope beyond core purchase situations [Dessart, Veloutsou, Morgan-Thomas, 2015, p. 28].

In the last decade social communication, and especially marketing communication, was characterized by a lack of linearity of the transmission process between the sender to the receiver. The receiver of the transmitted content is active and critical towards delivered messages. Managers deal with the dynamic development of media enabling dialogue between the sender and the receiver (e.g. social media). The role of the socialization function of brand communication is increasing. The key process from the perspective of effectiveness and efficiency of branding is to sustain the interactions between participants of communication processes (among customers and brands). The level of interactivity is one of the critical criteria for choosing the media which are used in the branding communication.

The aim of the article is to draw attention to the social dimension of customers engagement in the process of virtual brand community creation. Factors of social dimension have been presented, which need to be taken into consideration in the process of creation and management of virtual brand community.

The first part of the article focuses on the concept of interaction as a key for engagement phenomenon. Network paradigm, symbolic interactionism, and relationship marketing are presented as an analytical background to explain and describe the customer interaction and consumer engagement. The next part of the article presents brand engagement phenomenon. There are definitions of the notion and descriptions of engagement dimensions. The third part focuses on the social dimension of engagement as a vital element to create virtual brand community.

The considerations presented in the article are the result of the analysis of literature in the area of branding, social interactions, network intakes in management sciences and the concept of symbolic interactionism.

## **1. The concept of interaction on the basis of the network paradigm and symbolic interactionism<sup>2</sup>**

On the basis of classical theory of economics, the assumption is made that each entity is autonomous, externally uncoordinated and independent in decisions and actions. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the realities of the market game, it is easy to prove that this assumption is only a procedure enabling simplification of analysis and modelling processes of selected economic phenomena both on the micro- and macroeconomic scale. Market players operate in a complex

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<sup>2</sup> This part uses fragments of the author's previous publications of interaction, the network paradigm and symbolic interactionism [Witczak, 2017, pp. 249-258].

world of horizontal and vertical relationships. That is why the popularity of using the network paradigm to describe phenomena on the grounds of many disciplines in social sciences is growing.

The network paradigm is based on the theory of structuralism, where every action is conditioned by the structures within each human acts. An element of the network paradigm is the existence of a specific structural order in the social network. Three analytical levels of the social network can be indicated: relations, structure, and position.

On the level of relations, the subject of analysis is the quality of the relationship from the perspective of its impact on the efficiency of social network entities. The quality of the relationship is conditioned by the accumulated experience of the entity gained from the operation in a given network, the higher level of trust among other entities, which is a consequence of the entity's compliance with the accepted standards in force in a given social network.

The analytical plane of the network structure concerns the system of ties around a given network entity. The built-up system of ties creates a flow of information channel and a common repository for a given community knowledge. However, on the plane of position, the location of a given entity in the network and its impact on the system are analysed. The position in the network depends on the number and density of connections with other network entities.

From the perspective of the presented analytical field, it is important to indicate the factors conditioning the creation, function or regression of network phenomena within a given structure. The central concept is the interaction, which is the original phenomenon for the social network. There is no social network without interaction, there are only alienated and unrelated entities, creating conditions for the emergence of network phenomena.

Interaction appears within a specific context created by the nature of the relationship, structure, and position of a given entity in a given social network. Interaction means the interaction of individuals/objects with each other [Florenthal, Shoham, 2010, p. 29]. The term derives from the theory of symbolic interactionism, where interaction is a mechanism of shaping social structures in the process of continuous exchange and evolution of the meanings of used symbols (including words, characters). Interactions determine the formation and functioning of social groups. This research approach, initiated by H. Blumer [2007] in 1937 focuses on the analysis of processes of mutual interactions, analysed in the convention of exchange of symbolic meanings. Interactions take place between conscious entities that are constantly interpreting the situation. As a consequence of interaction, the personalities and principles of functioning of social groups shape.

Depending on the situation, the way of interpretation, the unit of interaction and the purpose of interaction, we can distinguish five forms of interaction:

- focused – occurring at a specific time, when at least two entities meet and expect that interaction will allow them to get to know each other better;
- unfocused (spontaneous) – involving entities that have not known each other;
- symbolic – interpreting the mutual behaviours of social network entities;
- direct – involving entities who contact directly and stay close to each other;
- transactional – involving exchanges of goods and values between entities [Woźniak, 2009, p. 70-71].

The identified forms of interaction can be the subject of the diagnosis of the network development stage. The position of individual entities operating in it and form the strength of mutual relations. An important area of branding research is the analysis of individual forms of interaction, which includes their potential to create a message of high value in building awareness and recognition of the brand.

Interaction in this article is understood as every form of the brand's influence on the consumer using the available communication tools offered by media. Interaction is a prime element of engagement. At the stage of building brand value, the intensity of interaction is a catalyst for shaping a high level of brand engagement.

## **2. Brand engagement – nature of the notion, dimensions**

Attitudes, opinions, and consumer behaviour, as well as communication activities of enterprises in media, are the subject of increasing interest of researchers. Analysis of the literature on the subject indicates the increase in interest of shaping the interactions between the consumer and the brand [Witczak, 2016a, pp. 371-380]. The interaction process is the foundation of the analysed phenomena in terms of consumer engagement in the message. At the stage of building brand value, the intensity of interactions is a kind of catalyst for shaping a high level of brand engagement.

In general consumer engagement is viewed in literature and practice both as a strategic imperative for establishing and sustaining competitive advantage, and as a valuable predictor of business performance [Hollebeek, Juric, Tang, 2017, pp. 204-210]. Consumer engagement is particularly important for the paradigm of relationship marketing and the concept of service-dominant logic, where consumers are perceived as a proactive co-creators of interactions. Customer en-

agement is highly interactive and forms the basis for shaping the desired lasting and strong relationships in the form of trust and loyalty to the company's offer.

In the literature on the psychology of organizational behaviour, engagement is defined as a comprehensive, unobservable construct expressing the individual's readiness to take action because of the importance of the perceived stimulus. The elements conditioning engagement and their importance are assigned to a specific object or situation from the perspective of individual needs, interests, values, and beliefs. The presented definition of engagement refers to the personal potential of consumer engagement. In measuring the personal level of consumer engagement, character traits that influence consumer behaviour are also taken into account. The results of the research indicate that the variables affecting the consumer personal engagement are their character traits: extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience [Islam, Rahman, Hollebeek, 2017, pp. 513-514].

Personal consumer engagement is a moderating variable in relation to brand engagement. Brand engagement is defined as a willingness to actively participate and interact with the brand, towards which the attitudes, opinions (positive/negative), as well as the brand's importance to the consumer (high/low). Consumer engagement depends on the nature of client's interaction with various contact/contact points (physical/virtual) with the brand [Islam, Rahman, 2016, p. 219].

Consumer brand engagement is defined also as a cognitive, affective, and behavioural commitment to an active relationship with the brand [Dessart, Veloutsou, Morgan-Thomas, 2015, p. 28]. Engagement with the brand is analysed in three dimensions: cognitive (information about the brand); affective (emotions, feelings and moods related/caused by the brand); behavioural (behaviours towards the brand, e.g. recommendations) [Witczak, 2016a, pp. 371-380; Heinenon, 2018, pp. 147-169]. Recently, within the framework of the conducted research on brand engagement, another dimension has been identified and introduced, namely the social dimension. The social dimension refers to the phenomenon of building a network of relations within the consumers' belonging to various groups/communities interested in a given brand.

The social dimension of engagement with the brand is gaining importance particularly in the framework of conceptualization based on the network paradigm and relationship marketing. The social dimension is the object of exemplifying the enterprises communication activities which are conducted in social media. An active Internet user is characterized by the potential to trigger and shape relations in created networks of connections between other objects (consumers, brands). Internet users often shape the network of connections between the brand and other consumers constituting virtual brand community [Witczak, 2017, pp. 249-258].

### **3. The social dimension of engagement in the road to a virtual brand community**

The dramatic technology-LED changes in the marketplace academics and managers are interested in understanding the implications of social media and creation of virtual brand communities. People have increasingly based their societal identity on consumptive role, related their identity to the brands they consume, and developed fairly defined consumer identities. These developments have compelled organizations to embrace these virtual brand communities, and by 2012, some 50 percent of the top 100 global brands established virtual brand community [Wirtz et al., 2013, p. 224].

Virtual brand community could be defined as “a specialized, non-geographically bound online community, based on social communications and relationships among a brand’s consumers” [Valck, Bruggen, Wierenga, 2009, p. 185]. A brand as common consumer interests leads to the emergence of virtual communities, which strengthens the level of individual consumers’ engagement with the brand. Activity in virtual brand community provides numerous individual gratifications which determine customers brand engagement [Hollebeek, Juric, Tang, 2017, pp. 204-210]:

- comprises instrumental (utilitarian) value arising from engaging in specific community practices reflecting more cognitive and rational consumer motivations;
- self-discovery based on consumers’ intrinsic need for self-exploration and learning (e.g. discovering one’s tastes and preferences through social interactions) by sharing experiences with consumers with a similar area of interests [Vivek et al., 2014, pp. 407-409];
- connectivity is centred upon individuals’ desire to meet with like-minded others and receive companionship and social support, sharing thoughts with group members [Gummerus et al., 2012, p. 876];
- entertainment value reflects a consumer’s desire to get enjoyment from contact with the community;
- social enhancement by means of engaging with virtual brand communities, including by gaining other members’ acceptance or approval, or enhancing one’s status within the community;
- positive association with favourable community behaviours, including helping other community members, participating in joint activities to enhance value for oneself and others, and to conduct of offline member meetings;
- customer identity expression – individual identity is built in the process of expression, articulation of opinions, and views among other community members [Witczak, 2016b, pp. 194-203].

Brand community members develop affinity, social bonds and a level of empowerment resulting from their community engagement practices. Finally, it's also a powerful, highly interactive engagement platform for consumer-consumer and consumer-brand interactions. Virtual brand community provides an environment where community members, through individual or collaborative efforts, (co-)create values for themselves, other members and especially for brands [Hollebeek, Juric, Tang, 2017, pp. 204-210].

As regards to the above-mentioned the social dimension of brand engagement plays the vital role in shaping virtual brand community. The social dimension of brand engagement in virtual community is defined as interactions between consumers on brand profiles [Vivek et al., 2014, pp. 407-409; Gambetti, Graffigna, Biraghi, 2012, pp. 681-682]. Consumers interactions are to be found in particular activities or behaviours, which develop specific brand-related practices. Practices are comprehensible not only by the executor but also by potential observers sharing the knowledge, emotions of the particular practice. Community practices are thus predicted to foster enhanced inter-member interactivity [Hollebeek, Juric, Tang, 2017, pp. 204-210]. Practices which allow to enhance the social level of brand engagement in virtual communities are [Hollebeek, Juric, Tang, 2017, p. 208]:

- welcome – the way new consumers are accepted into the group;
- standards – rules and guidelines (formal and informal) of acceptable behaviours in the group;
- help – the scope and form of assistance provided to members of the community in specific (related and unrelated to the brand) issues or queries (e.g. regarding the use of the group);
- appreciating – showing gratitude and satisfaction to the community and/or specific members of the community;
- understanding – support and acceptance for the feelings of other community members regarding the brand or other group members;
- rooting relationships – online or offline interactions between community members that go beyond the brand; developed relationships (e.g. friendships) between community members that can be maintained as part of offline meetings, brand events;
- celebration – recording and commemoration of important events related to members, brand or community, e.g. milestones – the community has a large number of members;
- ranking – participation of individual members in creation, development, and maintenance of a virtual community – role in the group, position/status of individual members.

Virtual brand community plays an important role in creating and co-creating experiences with other members gathered around the given brand. According to the literature, consumers who are highly engaged with a brand show positive behavioural intentions. Virtual brand experience could be considered as antecedents of behavioural intentions and could play a important role in branding outcomes in form of the intent to re-purchase and to share the information about the brand. So virtual brand community is a platform creating brand associations which have positive influence on consumer's choice, preferences, and intentions of purchase, their willingness to pay a brand premium price, to accept brand extensions (i.e. marketing strategy in which a firm uses the same brand in a different product category) and to recommend the brand to others [Risitano et al., 2017, pp. 1884-1885].

## **Conclusions**

The growing importance of social media in marketing communication, one of the key issue related to building brand value (brand equity) is the ability of the company to conduct activities that will strongly engage consumers. The high level of consumer engagement in the brand's activities has a significant impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of the company's promotional activities. Having an engaged consumer base is quickly becoming one of the key objectives of many marketing professionals. The reportedly positive implications of engagement for consumer behaviour and brand performance were noticed [Desart, Veloutsou, Morgan-Thomas, 2015, p. 28]. Engagement positively influences the formation of desired consumer behaviour towards the brand (among others: strengthening the attributes of the brand in the recipient's awareness, raising the level of distinguishing itself from the competition). Building consumer engagement with the brand is a key variable in shaping desired patterns of brand consumption [Gamliel et al., 2013, p. 119]. The analysis of the literature on the subject indicates a significant relationship between the increase in brand engagement and the level of satisfaction, as well as sales and brand loyalty [Rohm, Kaltcheva, Milne, 2013, p. 296].

The consumer's engagement with the brand is conditioned by the company ability to create network of relationships with consumers that will shape the right type of relationship, within the brand-focused structure and the desired position within the inter-relationships. The creation of a desirable system of connections at the level of interactions between brand and consumers is conditioned by the

company ability to shape desirable attitudes, opinions, and consumer behaviour towards the brand.

The social dimension in the analysis of brand engagement derives from the need to extend it beyond the interactions arising within a consumer-brand dyad. Interactions appearing at the consumer-consumer level are of significant importance for building brand equity due to increase of the potential to influence the cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of consumer engagement with the brand.

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## SPOŁECZNY WYMIAR ZAANGAŻOWANIA W BUDOWANIU WIRTUALNEJ SPOŁECZNOŚCI MARKI

**Streszczenie:** Znaczenie funkcji socjalizacyjnej w komunikacji marki rośnie, a kluczowym procesem z perspektywy zarządzania marką jest podtrzymywanie interakcji pomiędzy uczestnikami procesów komunikacyjnych (pomiędzy klientami i marką). Poziom interaktywności jest jednym z kryteriów wyboru mediów wykorzystywanych w komunikacji marki. Interakcja wydaje się kluczowym zjawiskiem w zarządzaniu marką w obszarze budowania kapitału marki. Źródło zaangażowania konsumenta odnajdujemy w koncepcji marketingu relacji, a analiza zaangażowania stanowi rozwój teorii w obszarze relacji między konsumentami i marką. Wartością dodaną rozwoju teorii z obszaru

zaangażowania konsumenta wobec marki jest pogłębienie analizy interaktywnego charakteru relacji z konsumentami poprzez poszerzenie jego zakresu o zjawiska pozazakupowe. Celem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na społeczny wymiar zaangażowania klientów w procesie tworzenia społeczności wirtualnej marki. W opracowaniu przedstawiono czynniki o wymiarze społecznym, które należy wziąć pod uwagę w procesie tworzenia i zarządzania wirtualną społecznością marki. Paradygmat sieci, symboliczny interakcjonizm oraz marketing relacji są przedstawiane jako płaszczyzny analityczne dla wyjaśnienia i opisanego interakcji z klientem w budowaniu zaangażowania konsumenta wobec marki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** marka, zaangażowanie, społeczność wirtualna.