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IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN FASHION BRAND MARKETING COMMUNICATION ON PRODUCT QUALITY EVALUATION

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Summary

Fashion is present in everyday life. It may significantly affect the various aspects of work and private life, too. On the other hand, social media have become the venues of exchanging points of views and exposing social status. This is the reason why fashion brands are willing to communicate with their stakeholders via social media. The impact of this channel on relationships with customers is still increasing. The aim of this article is to present the ways of social media usage by fashion brands and their impact on the evaluation of the quality of products from the consumers' perspective. Many authors treat product and service as unity in marketing science. Therefore, authors of this article decided to adapt the Grönroos model. The article was drawn up on the basis of an analysis of literature studies, reports and exploratory studies (a questionnaire completed by brand fans).

Keywords: fashion brands, social media, product quality, marketing communication.

1. Introduction

Fashion brands have a significant impact on society. Recently, however, their communication methods have been experiencing great changes due to increasing usage of social media. It may be stated that marketing communication, including social media, is the instrument of marketing which has been undergoing the most intensive evolution (Bajdak, 2013, p. 8). It is now a common way to improve both customer relations and brand awareness.

The fashion industry is an important branch of industry in Poland. According to the data provided by the Central Statistical Office of Poland concerning the retail

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sale in Poland from 2001 to 2010, the clothing segment was one of the fastest growing areas.

The analysis also shows that fashion has a great impact on social interests. Its visual character and essence are used to create and show social status. According to the report prepared by Socialbakers Agency, fashion is globally on the fifth position in terms of the users' involvement in the contents published by brands on Facebook (Socialbakers, 2012). Looking for inspiration, interesting styling and fashion world news, as many as 44% of the Internet users visit also fashion blogs (Roguski, 2013).

On the other hand, customers need products of good quality to show their social and material status. This is the cause of evaluating product quality before making a purchase decision.

The aim of this article is to provide the answer to the following question: "Does using social media by fashion brands influence the evaluation of products by consumers?". The authors also presented ways of social media usage by fashion brands. The analysis of the reports concerning the research area, literature studies, as well as the exploratory studies carried out by the authors (the analysis of the primary information source data and market observation) laid the foundations for this article.

2. Marketing communication

Communication is the connection between sender and receiver of the message. Within business relations, it is a connection between a customer and an enterprise. This communication is usually referred to as promotion – an integral part of marketing mix. Promotion means the set of activities and measures, by means of which the enterprise transmits the information characterizing the product and/or company to the market, shapes the consumers' needs, boosts and directs the demand and decreases its price elasticity. Ph. Kotler identifies it with promotion-mix, which is defined as a set of four instruments: advertising, sales promotion, personal sales and public relations (Buła, 2010, pp. 42–43). To communicate, an enterprise also needs a medium. Coding, decoding and feedback are the functions of this process (Marcinkiewicz, 2011, p. 111).

The characteristics of the process of marketing communication include:

- the contexts – both social and cultural,
- the continuous nature of the process,
- the usage of symbols and signs,
- the interaction,
- its complex character (Niestrój, 2002, p. 181).

In the communication process, the medium is a personal or non-personal channel. The personal channels are salespeople, door-to-door salespeople or opinion leaders. The non-personal means are predominantly mass media, the specific "climate" of the company's activity (architecture and interior design, lighting or

fragrance) and the events organized by its department of public relations. Decoding is the process of interpreting the message by the recipient. (Szeszycka, 1998).

As far as channels of marketing communication are concerned, there has been a significant increase in social media usage. It also concerns fashion brands. The usage of Facebook or other social media is growing year to year. We can also observe the increasing role of fashion bloggers who are becoming the leaders shaping the consumers' tastes.

3. Social media

D. Kaznowski (Królewski, 2013) defines social media as “means of communication which are subject to social control, which can be used on any scale and which include both the message contents and the possible points of view referring to information”. According to A. Kaplan and M. Haenlein, it is “a group of Internet applications based on the ideological and technological assumptions of Web 2.0”. Thus, among social media, there are social networking services and web portals.

The most intensive development of social media in Poland has been observed since 2010. One of first social media projects was *nasza-klasa.pl* (at present *Nk.pl*), which was established in 2006. New possibilities related to the new media allow for such a fast growth of social media. The aim of social media is to inform users and enhance their mutual communication. This interaction involves exchanging opinions, preparing contents and making use of the available resources. Within social media we can also observe a freedom of points of view presentation. Some social networking services also enable their users to distribute the contents to their own platforms, thus increasing the potential audience. What is more and more common, too, is the phenomenon of media convergence, determining the necessity to update knowledge and keep up with the social media trends.

Enterprises can use social media in many ways. Firstly, they are a place of carrying out researches and analyses, as well as obtaining the information about the structure and needs of the target groups. They are also a source of knowledge on the opinions about the brand and attitudes towards it. Moreover, the high intensity of the participation in social media makes the two-way communication with the company's stakeholders possible. Social media can be classified on the basis of the functions they have. We can distinguish the following types of social media (Królewski, 2013):

- **social media which enable exchanging opinions and views** – examples include: blogs, wiki services, Internet databases and citizen journalism;
- **social media which serve resource sharing** – examples include: YouTube, Flickr, Slideshare or Dropbox;
- **social media which support establishing and maintaining relations** – examples include: MySpace, Grono.net, Facebook or Nasza Klasa;
- **social media which focus on communication and discussion** –. examples include: Internet fora, messengers or chatrooms;

- **social media which enable informing and commenting on news** – examples include: microblogs (*e.g.* Twitter), alert services, livestream or livecast services;
- **social media which are oriented towards co-creation or cooperation** – examples include: Google Docs.

4. Product Quality

In today's highly competitive marketplace buyers rely heavily upon product cues such as price and brand image in order to deduce the quality of products they purchase (Paulins 2005; Oxoby & Finnigan, 2007).

A growing number of organizations use quality management as a strategic foundation for generating a competitive advantage (Reed, Lemak, & Mero, 2000) and improving business performance. Enterprises that have won quality awards generally outperform other companies with respect to both income measures (Hendricks & Singhal, 1997) and stock market value (Lemak & Reed, 1997). Quality practices have been shown to enhance organizational performance for both product and service organizations (Powell, 1995).

A quality concept is essentially a business philosophy, a company ideal, or a policy statement. The business philosophy can be contrasted with its implementation reflected in the activities and behaviours of an organization. Focusing on behaviours rather than philosophical notions makes it easier to operationalize the different quality constructs. This is an important step, as it helps to translate concepts into actions and thereby provide a better differentiation between organizations (Nilsson, Johnson & Gustafsson, 2001).

The marketing literature asserts that these cues are observable product or service characteristics that allow buyers to make inferences about the unobservable attributes of the offering, such as product durability or service quality, guiding buyers to determine the perceived quality of the offer (Chinomona, Okoumba & Poee, 2013, p. 464). Some studies, such as the one by Sweeney, Soutar, and Johnson (1999), identified the ease of use and suitability of product features in the context of individual needs as important contributors to product quality. In addition to that, aspects such as product flawlessness, durability, appearance and distinctiveness belong to attributes associated with product quality (Grewal, 1997; Miyazaki et al., 2005; Roest & Rindfleisch 2010; Bao, Bao & Sheng 2011).

A "product" is any tangible or intangible item that satisfies a need. It can be a material good, an intangible service, a combination of the above, a location, a person or an idea (Talloo, 2008, p. 169). According to Philip Kotler and Gary Armstrong, "broadly defined, 'products' also include services, events, persons, places, organizations, ideas or mixes of these. (...) Services are a form of product that consist of activities, benefits, or satisfactions offered for sale that are essentially intangible and do not result in the ownership of anything" (Kotler, Armstrong, 2010, p. 248). A product may also be defined as a bundle of utilities consisting a various product features and accompanying services (Jain, 2009, p. 158). As it has been indicated, in the marketing literature the product is equivalent with

service, which allows authors to adapt the Grönroos model in the product evaluation research.

In this study, product quality is defined as the consumer's judgment about a product overall excellence or superiority (Bei & Chiao, 2001). Furthermore, perceived quality correlates with consumer purchase intention.

Generalizing about quality across products has been difficult for managers and researchers. Specific or concrete intrinsic attributes differ widely across products, as do the attributes consumers use to infer quality. Obviously, attributes that signal quality of fruit juice are not the same as those indicating quality of washing machines or automobiles. Even within a product category, specific attributes may provide different signals about quality. Though the concrete attributes that signal quality differ across products, a higher level abstract dimension of quality can be generalized to categories of products. As attributes become more abstract (i.e. are higher in the means-end chains (Zeithaml, 1988), they become common to more alternatives.

Authors had chosen the Grönroos Perceived Service Quality model. Quality is a major tool in positioning products. It encompasses two key elements: 1) quality level – how it is made or perceived – and 2) quality consistency – how it performs over its life. In marketing terms, a product is anything that can be offered to a market to satisfy a want or need. In other words, a product is the item(s) or service(s) that you are offering your customers.

Ch. Grönroos (1984) presented a model according to which expectations are a function of market communications, image, word of mouth and consumer needs and learning, whereas experience is a product of technical and functional quality which is filtered through the image (Table 1). According to retail industry in marketing, not only a product is taken into consideration during product quality. There is a plenty of features which might have the influence on what customers think about the product: service quality, brand, shop design etc. This is the reason why in marketing can be said that service is a product and also the product is a service. The product is close connected to the service during the purchasing process.

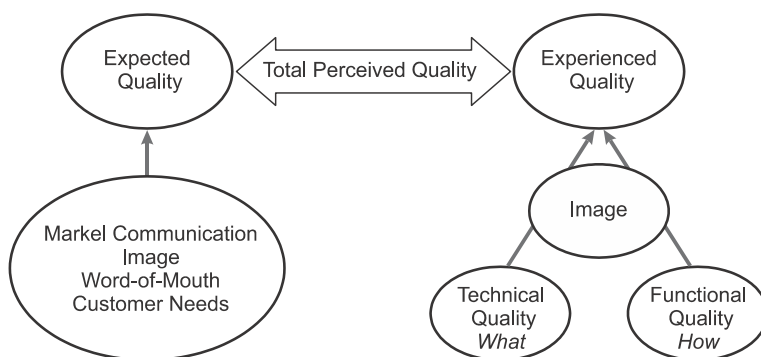


Figure 1. Grönroos' Perceived Service Quality model

Source: E. Gummesson, *Quality Management in Service Organizations*, ISQA, New York 1993, p. 229

In his model, Grönroos highlights also the role of the enterprise's image in the development of quality experienced by the consumer. A positive image of a brand (or a company) may be a kind of filter minimizing the negative impact of possible errors that can influence the consumer's view of quality (Bielawa, 2011).

5. Method

The authors used data gathered from Facebook users by means of an online questionnaire. The data was collected during the last week of February of 2015. The authors got responses from 70 customers. 1% of the examined were under 20 years old, 69% were aged between 21 and 30, 29% were aged between 31–45 and 1% were aged 46–60. According to the level of education 36% are students, 8% have secondary education and 56% have higher education. 37% of the examined customers were men and 63% of them were women. They live mostly in cities with population exceeding 200 000 (57%). 40% live in cities with population between 50 000 and 200 000 and 3% live in rural areas. The respondents were users of Facebook. It was necessary to observe any impact of social media on the evaluation of products.

At first, the authors examined the relationship between other variables in the Grönroos model to see if it is present in the examined group. The product and service are treated as unity in the marketing literature, which was indicated by many authors (Taloo, 2008, p. 169; Kotler, Armstrong, 2010, p. 248; Jain, 2009, p. 158). Therefore authors decided to adapt the Grönroos model in this research. The authors chose such material variables as technical quality, competence and physical evidence, as well as time of reaction as a functional quality. The authors also checked the significance of brand image. The respondents were asked to select whether certain characteristics are important or not when evaluating the product quality on the scale from 1 to 4 (1 – irrelevant, 2 – rather irrelevant, 3 – rather significant, 4 – significant).

6. Results

The results referring to the Grönroos model are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Survey's results referring to Grönroos model

| Characteristic | Irrelevant | Rather irrelevant | Rather significant | Significant |
|-------------------|------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| Technical quality | 3% | 1% | 29% | 67% |
| Competence | 11% | 16% | 50% | 23% |
| Physical evidence | 50% | 22% | 23% | 5% |
| Time of reaction | 51% | 19% | 18% | 12% |
| Brand image | 18% | 38% | 33% | 11% |

Source: the authors' own study

The results show that the most significant aspect for customers evaluating the product quality is its technical quality – e.g. the material it is made of (67%). Physical evidence was least important – 50% of respondents said it is irrelevant and only 5% indicated it as significant. The respondents could not clearly confirm or deny whether the brand image is important or not.

Table 2. The declared impact of social media communication on the evaluation of the products

| Characteristic | Irrelevant | Rather irrelevant | Rather significant | Significant |
|----------------|------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| FB usage | 63% | 24% | 13% | 0% |

Source: the authors' own study

The above table shows that most respondents do not think that the usage of social media by fashion brands can change their opinion on the product quality (87%). None of them think it may play a significant role in evaluating product quality, too. On the other hand, the fashion brands indicated as „good quality” use social media to communicate with their clients. Table 4 shows that 98% of brands mentioned as „good quality” have their profiles. Only 2% do not use this medium to create the brand image.

Table 3. The usage of social media by fashion brands indicated as “good quality”

| Use Facebook (have a brand profile) | Do not use Facebook (do not have a profile) |
|--|--|
| 98% | 2% |

Source: the authors' own study

Most respondents express their affinity towards some fashion brand profiles on Facebook by “liking” them. 61% of them were able to name at least one fashion brand fanpage they “like”. 39% said they do not follow any fashion brand profiles.

Table 4. The percentage of respondents who follow fashion brand profiles on FB and indicate them as “good quality”

| | |
|---|-----|
| Including individuals who do not follow any fashion brand profile | 13% |
| Excluding individuals who do not follow any fashion brand profile | 22% |

Source: the authors' own study

Table 5 and previous data show that most people do not show their preferences for the brands they think have good quality products by “liking” them. On the other hand, there are 22% of respondents who follow the profiles of brands they indicate as “good quality”.

7. Conclusions and discussion

The fashion industry affects many areas of social life. It might seem that communication related to such common products as clothes is easy. Its visual character also refers to a “visual culture” which characterizes today’s generation. The characteristics of products also give the opportunity to express brand values. It seems that social media are perfect for such communication. The intensive growth of their popularity has brought about the necessity to adapt to the new conditions in which companies have to function. The customers who use social media actively have new attitudes and habits.

However, the survey showed that the impact of social media communication on the evaluation of products quality by customers is minor. 63% of examined customers said that FB usage is not relevant in the evaluation of product quality. Most of examined think also that physical evidence, brand image and time of reaction have no impact on their opinion about the product quality. We still do not know if it is statistically significant and what is the direction of this dependence, too. The results presented in the article cannot be generalized and need further exploration.

Moreover, the survey has some limitations. First of all, customers were asked to say which of the brands they have ever bought can be considered „good quality”. Due to the complexity of question, some respondents could point out the brands they do not buy. Secondly, the survey is declaratory. It does not prove any behavioural aspects. The authors do not know if the respondents actually follow the mentioned brands profiles or not. Besides, the customers could not remember all the profiles they follow, which could significantly change the results. In order to allow for generalizations, the survey needs to be repeated on a greater sample and the overly complex questions have to be eliminated.

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WPŁYW WYKORZYSTANIA SOCIAL MEDIA W KOMUNIKACJI MARKETINGOWEJ MAREK MODOWYCH NA OCENĘ JAKOŚCI PRODUKTU

Moda jest elementem życia społecznego. Oddziałując na relacje społeczne może w znaczący sposób wpływać zarówno na życie zawodowe, jak i prywatne. Z drugiej strony, media społecznościowe stały się miejscem wymiany opinii oraz prezentowania statusu społecznego. Dlatego też marki modowe chętnie komunikują się ze swoimi interesariuszami poprzez media społecznościowe. Wpływ tego kanału na relacje pomiędzy klientami stale wzrasta. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zaprezentowanie sposobów wykorzystania mediów społecznościowych przez marki modowe oraz jego wpływu na ocenę jakości produktów z perspektywy konsumentów. Wielu badaczy problematyki marketingu traktuje na równie produkt i usługę, dlatego też zdecydowano się na zaadaptowanie modelu Grönroosa. Artykuł opiera się na analizie literatury, raportów oraz badaniu empirycznym (kwestionariusz ankietowy wypełniony przez fanów marki).

Słowa kluczowe: marki modowe, media społecznościowe, jakość produktu, komunikacja marketingowa.