
The Role of Social Media in Firms' Marketing Communication in the Polish Market

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of the article is to present approaches to using social media in marketing campaigns, and in particular in the marketing communication used by companies on the Polish market.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The article is based on a research procedure including study of the literature and analysis of the results of qualitative empirical research conducted in 2022 on a sample of 152 companies. The research respondents were people in the selected companies responsible for using the internet in marketing or for maintaining contact with clients using new technologies.

Findings: Analysis of the results confirmed that one company in three uses a strategic approach to using social media in marketing campaigns, while one in five are in the process of developing such a strategy. Large companies (employing over 200 people) in particular assign a strategic dimension to social media. At the same time, it must be noted that the companies studied appreciate the role of social media, as almost half of them indicate that being active in such media increases interest in the firm and its offer.

Practical Implications: Bearing in mind the acceleration of the processes of virtualisation of marketing and consumer behaviours caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is still a need for companies operating on the market in Poland to increase their use of social media, in particular by assigning such action a strategic dimension. This also relates to making greater use of the potential of new media to stimulate the involvement of consumers in actions taken by companies.

Originality/Value: The value of the article is that it fills a research gap relating to identification of the approaches to using social media in marketing campaigns employed by companies operating on the Polish market.

Keywords: Internet, social media, marketing strategies and actions, COVID-19 pandemic.

JEL codes: M15, M2, M3.

Paper Type: Research paper.

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1. Introduction

The dynamic growth of social media platforms has resulted in social activity moving from the real world into the virtual world. The source of the social media phenomenon lies in the easier access to clients, the possibility to continuously monitor their attitudes and reactions to various stimuli, and to interact with them, answer their questions and solve their problems. Messages are sent in real time, which makes interaction and the sharing of information immediate. As a result, firms see social media platforms as a key tool in achieving success on the internet market (Ebrahim, 2020). Social media affect the way business is conducted, and COVID-19 only accelerated the development of new business models that include the important role of such media in shaping relations with clients. Social media are today the fastest developing marketing channel in the world as they are a very good solution to the challenges created by the market.

Above all they can serve as highly effective hybrid promotional tools, allowing managers to promote brands and firms' products using Social CRM and direct sales thanks to more efficient communication with clients that use social media platforms. These possibilities have resulted in a visibly more strategic approach to social media taken by firms and other organisations. Social media marketing is a dynamically developing form of internet marketing. Social media marketing (SMM) is a concept and form of internet marketing based on using social media platforms to communicate with the market in the commercial promotion of processes or events to attract potential online clients, which increases the effectiveness of action taken to achieve the firm's aims.

In this context, it is important to answer the question to what degree social media are used in marketing activities by companies operating on the Polish market. The research was undertaken to achieve the aim of the article, which is to demonstrate the approach to the use of social media in marketing activities, in particular in marketing communication by firms in Poland. In addition to the introduction, the article is divided into the following parts: the current state of research, research methodology, research results, discussion and conclusions, in which directions are given for further research on the issue discussed in the article. The article is based on a study of the literature and analysis of the results of empirical quantitative research conducted in 2022 on a sample of 152 firms.

2. Current State of Research

In accelerating digital transformation around the world, the pandemic resulted in an increase in the role of social media in achieving clearly defined business goals, including in marketing, such as: business brand awareness, promotion and effective management of brands, growth in sales, creating a brand community and building loyalty (Sanak-Kosmowska, 2018; Bartosik-Purgat, 2020; Hafez, 2021).

The above-mentioned goals can be achieved through the use of forms of communication based on the mechanisms of eWOM and recommendations. The effect of the spread of messages from user to user is that it resonates with people as it is seen as coming from a trusted, external source, which is treated by those who receive it as more reliable than messages broadcast by the brand or firm itself. For this reason, social media have become an important channel for presenting and reviewing products (Boon *et al.*, 2022)

It is also worth underlining that consumers themselves are ever more interested in information about companies on the internet, and over 20% of social media users very willingly follow brands that are present online (Raport Digital, 2022). The considerable role of social media in shaping consumers attitudes with regards to brands has meant that more user activity on such media results in more engagement in relations with a brand, as well as a more positive attitude and greater trust towards it. Of course, the influence of the community on the attitude towards the brand is moderated by the positive or negative image of the brand (Hammick, 2018).

Social media can be used in key areas of a firm's marketing management. With the enormous growth in the number of social media platforms, many organisations have begun to find very good ways of exploiting such sites to create strong relations and communication with users so as to engender friendly, close relations in the creation of online brand communities (Ibrahim and Aljarah, 2018). A behavioural manifestation of consumer engagement with a brand on social media is their participation in online discussions, their posts on internet forums and taking part in virtual communities of selected brands. Social media facilitate integrated customer service, which in the future will be ever more personalised, and it is assumed that a predictive approach will be applied (i.e. before a customer notices a problem or has a question, the firm will be ready to solve the problem) (Appel and Grewal, 2020).

The development of social commerce must also be highlighted, which allows customers to buy and sell products within a given social media platform. It is worth noting that during the COVID-19 pandemic, social internet commerce became an groundbreaking model for retail sales. The integration of e-commerce with social media became a powerful marketing tool allowing customers to become acquainted with products that in general they would not see on an e-commerce platform, also fundamentally changing their customary buying habits.

In addition, social media are an innovative tool that organisations use to create extremely strong public relations in the virtual world (Khan and Jan, 2015). The role of social media in shaping a firm's image and protecting its reputation must be appreciated, which is possible thanks to the ability to monitor posts on social media platforms, forums and blogs, and to quickly react to posts about the firm and its products. The potential of social media can also be used for research and

development, and therefore shape the innovativeness of the firm. Crowdsourcing platforms allow consumers to report their ideas and suggestions regarding new products and other aspects of the marketing offer. Sharing these ideas with the firm is of ever greater importance in the process of creating and developing new products.

The basis for achieving marketing goals using social media is correct management of such media within the firm, which requires employing social media specialists who know the mechanisms by which they function and their effect on social media platform users. The condition is that they be equipped with crucial competencies regarding communication not only with customers, but also with employees. These competencies not only include skills in using social media, but also the shaping of such media by skilful use of social media platforms, analysis of their content and creating content that matches the expectations of users.

Meeting these growing challenges requires appropriate communicative and social skills. In the social media specialist profession, these competencies cover a very broad area, including not only skills for conducting dialogue and reacting in a professional and matter-of-fact manner, but also covering psychological and marketing aspects that are vital for building relations and trust in users (Dubiel, 2019).

Social media specialists are also required to design various types of communicative campaigns, to optimise any action taken, and to monitor its progress and assess its effectiveness. Training is therefore important in: media and social communication studies, management and marketing, as well as psychology and sociology. Activity on social media should include relations both with customers and employees, which requires action in two areas, internal and external. To assess the scope and level of a firm's engagement on social media, analysis must be conducted of the form of activity on such media.

A key argument for the presence of a brand on social media is the benefits it can achieve from such activity. Apart from the undoubted social and image benefits (more effective communication with market participants, better customer service, brand positioning), it is important to underline the economic benefits resulting from a reduction in costs (Amulya, 2013). It has been shown that a brand's involvement with social media is positively linked to the firm's financial results (Yang, Lin, and Ross, 2016). What is more, brand involvement in social media strengthens the relation between the position of advertising in search results and the effectiveness of advertising in browsers. The higher the position of adverts in search results, the higher the click-through rate of such adverts and/or the conversion ratio. Emphasis is placed on the moderating role of brand engagement in social media in shaping the relation between the browser search result position of adverts and the effectiveness of such adverts (Yang, Lin, and Ross, 2016).

The effectiveness of adverts on social media depends on the adopted strategy, which can be based on a push approach, i.e., a firm uses social media (especially Instagram) to advertise their products, or a pull approach, when promotional streams flow in the opposite direction. The latter is due to the application being used to attract customers and offer promotions such as online discounts and coupons (Vieira, 2021). Those in charge of managing e-commerce platforms via social media should design their value offer, and especially their communication messages, according to the customer profile (individualist or collectivist), as this can be a key factor in engaging consumer eWOM (Gvili and Levy, 2018).

To effectively use the potential of social media, it is vital to integrate such media with the firm's business processes. Lack of integration creates a barrier for creating new business models and solutions based on using social media (Sumara *et al.*, 2012). Such integration requires the use of IT systems supported by Google Analytics, which makes it possible to create dashboards containing the necessary data and tools for monitoring the processes taking place on the market and in social media. In the light of the literature review, it is important to answer the following research questions:

Q1 What forms of activity do firms undertake on social media, and what changes have taken place in this field due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Q2 What tactics and tools are used by firms in managing social media platforms in order to increase user engagement?

Q3 What benefits do firms obtain from marketing activities on social media?

3. Research Methodology

The literature review revealed a research gap and demonstrated the need to find answers to the formulated research questions, which the empirical study is designed to provide. The empirical research aimed to identify the scope of the use of social media in marketing activities undertaken by firms operating on the Polish market.

The questionnaire survey was conducted in May and June 2022 on a nationwide sample of 152 firms. The study was designed to be non-exhaustive in character. The research covered 52 firms employing up to 49 employees, as well as 50 firms with between 50 and 200 employees, and 50 firms with above 200 employees. Due to the research aim, significant emphasis was placed on the process of recruiting participants for the quantitative study.

The respondents were people responsible for using the internet in marketing, or for maintaining contact with customers via new technologies. The selection of the CATI technique (computer-assisted telephone interviews) was dictated by the type of respondent and the character of their work. An advantage of this technique is that the interview can be conducted at a time that suits the respondent's preferences. Great emphasis was placed on the professionalism of the quantitative research by using a

standardised questionnaire prepared in cooperation with a research agency with specialist software. The interviews were conducted in the CATI studio at the ARC Rynek i Opinia research institute in Warsaw. The telephone numbers to the respondents were selected at random from a database of firms operating in such sectors as: industry, construction and refurbishment, trade, gastronomy, FMCG, transport and warehousing, IT, professional business services, consulting, finance and insurance. The firms that took part in the study also varied in terms of how long they had operated on the market.

Entities with a relatively short history (below 10 years) made up 4.6% of the research sample, older firms that had existed from 10 to 19 years – 12.5%, and firms that had been on the market for between 20 and 29 years – 25.0%. Entities that had existed for between 30 and 49 years made up 29.6% of the research sample, and the oldest entities in the study of over 50 years – 24.3%.

In terms of the size of locality where a given market entity was based, it must be indicated that the largest group was firms located in towns of between 10,000 and 50,000 inhabitants. These firms made up 22.4% of the study population. The structure of the sample according to the most important features is presented in Table 1.

The research tools were designed according to the principles governing the correct order of questions asked. The research was preceded by a pilot study using the same research technique as that used in the research itself. The responses were assessed to verify that the answers obtained were complete, and logical analysis was conducted of the answers provided. The study was performed as part of the internal research grant implemented at the Faculty of Management at the Wrocław University of Economics and Business.

Table 1. *Characteristics of research sample*

Characteristics	Distribution of responses
Sector the firm operates in	industry – 34.9%, construction and refurbishment – 15.8%, trade – 15.1%, transport and warehousing – 6.6%, IT – 2.6%, professional business services, consulting – 7.9, gastronomy – 5.9%, finance, insurance – 8.6%, FMCG – 2.6%
Number of employees	firms employing from 2 to 49 people – 34.2%, firms employing from 50 to 200 people – 32.9%, firms employing above 200 people – 32.9%
Number of years on the market	below 10 years – 4.6%, 10 to 19 years – 12.5%, 20 to 29 years – 25.0%, 30 to 49 years – 29.6%, 50 years and above – 24.3%; 4% of respondents did not provide an answer
Voivodship	dolnośląskie – 3.3%, kujawsko-pomorskie – 5.3%, lubelskie – 5.3%, lubuskie – 1.3%, łódzkie – 7.9%, małopolskie – 8.6%, mazowieckie – 17.7%, opolskie – 2.6%, podkarpackie – 3.3%, podlaskie – 3.3%, pomorskie – 4.6%, śląskie – 15.7%, świętokrzyskie – 6.6%, warmińsko-mazurskie – 2.0%, wielkopolskie – 11.2%, zachodniopomorskie – 1.3%

Size of locality	village – 17.1%, town to 10,000 inhabitants – 6.6%, town from 10,000 to 50,000 inhabitants – 22.4%, town from 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants – 10.5%, city from 100,000 to 200,000 inhabitants – 15.8%, city from 200,000 to 500,000 inhabitants – 11.2%, city above 500,000 inhabitants – 16.4%
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Source: Own elaboration based on CATI survey interviews.

4. Research Results

The high importance of social media for firms was confirmed by the fact that all the firms in the study declared that their profile is present on such media. Although only 9% have had a funpage for a significant period of time, that is for 10 years or more, with 50% of firms having such a page for between 5 and 9 years.

However, as many as 43% of firms have only had their profile on social media for between several months and 4 years. It can be seen that the size of a firm has an influence on how long it has used social media in its activity. It turns out that the best results in this respect are not only achieved by large firms employing over 200 employees, but also by small firms employing between 2 and 49 people. Meanwhile, medium-sized firms, i.e. those employing between 50 and 200 people, have been present on social media for the shortest period (Table 2). It can be presumed that the mechanism for starting and being active on social media is different for various types of firms, which is worth exploring by analysing the aims, forms and techniques of their activity on such media.

Table 2. Does the firm have its profile (funpage) on social media?

	Total	Firm size		
		Firm employing from 2 to 49 people	Firm employing from 50 to 200 people	Firm employing above 200 people
Yes, for 10 years or more	9%	12%	6%	10%
Yes, for between 5 and 9 years	47%	48%	42%	52%
Yes, for between several months and 4 years	43%	40%	52%	38%
No	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Own elaboration based on CATI survey interviews.

The decided majority of firms, over 90%, placed their profile on the most popular site, that is Facebook, with other sites including Instagram and LinkedIn, with on average one in three firms having their profile on these sites. It is worth noting here that activity on Instagram is at a similar level for both small and large firms. In the case of the professional site LinkedIn, however, there are significant differences between large and medium-sized firms, as 44% of large firms and only 20% of

medium-sized firms have such profiles. Meanwhile, the same percentage (38%) of large and small firms have a profile on Instagram, with fewer medium-sized firms declaring that they are active on this site (24%). More and more firms also appreciate the possibility of presenting themselves on Youtube, but these are mainly large firms (28%), while only limited numbers of small and medium-sized are present on the site, at 6% and 10% respectively.

Firms were motivated to place their profile social media sites mainly by the desire to build their image (4.56) and increase brand awareness (4.46), and to a lesser degree to increase sales (3.70) and customer loyalty (3.57). Among the reasons declared by firms for being present on social media, of even lower importance is the gathering of user remarks and opinions (3.33) and for customer service (3.14). It can be seen that the size of a firm has an influence on the importance of reasons for placing their profile on social media. Generally, the larger the firm, the greater the importance of these reasons, with the exception of sales goals, which in small firms are to a greater degree a reason for presence on social media (Table 3).

At this point, it must be emphasised that Polish firms are only at the beginning stage of using social media in their strategies, as only 12% admitted that they employ a social media specialist, and 38% of firms indicated that they do not even have defined tasks related to social media (Table 4). Social media is usually the responsibility of marketing departments, as indicated by 58% of large firms and one in three small and medium-sized firms.

Table 3. Factors important for firms in placing their profile on a social media site

	Total	Firm employing from 2 to 49 people	Firm employing from 50 to 200 people	Firm employing above 200 people
Building company image	4.56	4.40	5.53	4.92
Increasing customer loyalty	3.57	3.44	3.60	3.69
Customer service	3.14	3.18	3.02	3.20
Increasing brand awareness	4.46	4.42	4.27	4.73
Gathering user remarks and opinions	3.33	3.10	3.41	3.51
Increasing sales	3.70	4.06	3.60	3.40

Note: The basis for calculating the indicators is a scale of importance of 1-5, where 1 is low importance and 5 high importance.

Source: Own elaboration based on CATI survey interviews

The reason for this is the lack of a strategic approach to social media management in the majority of Polish firms. Only one in three firms have a clearly defined

marketing strategy for social media, while among small and medium-sized firms it is only one in four (Table 5).

Table 4. *Is there a position in the firm for the management of social media?*

	Total	Firm size		
		Firm employing from 2 to 49 people	Firm employing from 50 to 200 people	Firm employing above 200 people
No, the marketing department is responsible for social media	40%	29%	34%	58%
No, social media is the domain of the internet technology department	1%	0%	2%	2%
Yes, there is a social media specialist in the firm	12%	6%	14%	16%
The scope of tasks related to social media has not been defined	38%	54%	40%	18%
Other	9%	12%	10%	6%

Source: *Own elaboration based on CATI survey interviews.*

However, large firms stand out here, with every second firm having a social media management strategy. Nevertheless, modern firms are aware that creating a social media strategy is justified, as 20% declared that they are in the process of developing such a strategy.

Table 5. *Does the firm have a clearly defined social media marketing strategy?*

	Total	Firm size		
		Firm employing from 2 to 49 people	Firm employing from 50 to 200 people	Firm employing above 200 people
We are active on social media, but we do not have a clear strategy	48%	54%	50%	40%
We are in the process of developing such a strategy	20%	21%	26%	14%
We are active on social media according to a developed strategy	32%	25%	24%	46%

Source: *Own elaboration based on CATI survey interviews*

Among the firms in the study, an operational approach dominates, expressed in the forms of activity used on social media. The question arises, what are these forms and do they contribute to achieving the aims of the presence of the firm on social media? The research shows that they refer to various areas of marketing activity, above all to promoting products, which was indicated by 80% of the firms in the study, with this figure rising to 86% among large firms.

The second form of activity on social media most frequently indicated by firms is maintaining a funpage. In each study group, around 70% of firms declared that they maintain such a profile, and the differences between the different groups of firms in this respect are minimal, which proves that they are fully convinced of the legitimacy of such activity on today's market. It can be said that both the first and the second forms of activity indicated are extremely important in shaping a firm's image, which is judged through the lens of the products offered and well as the ability to communicate with customers via the funpage.

Use of a funpage facilitates the conducting of advertising and marketing activities, organising competitions and spreading information about the firm. These activities contribute to increasing brand awareness, one of the key aims of a firm's presence on social media.

In third place among the activities conducted by firms on social media were those related to shaping relations with customers. Over half of the firms declared that they use social media to inform customers about their offer and provide customer service. In particular, they listen to customers' suggestions and complaints, as well as comment on posts on social media and participate in discussions with users of these sites. Activities that confirm the premises declared by firms for placing their profile on a social media site include the gathering of user remarks and opinions, providing customer service and increasing customer loyalty.

It must be underlined that relatively greater activity in shaping relations with customers is observed in large firms, which stand out through their monitoring of the blog content of various users, an activity declared by 60% of such firms. Meanwhile, for small firms the figure is 29% and for medium-sized firms, 24%. However, no significant differences were observed between the groups of firms in the study as regards maintaining a company blog, with on average one in four firms in each group declaring such activity. This data is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. *What forms of activity does the firm conduct on social media?*

	Total	Firm size		
		Firm employing from 2 to 49 people	Firm employing from 50 to 200 people	Firm employing above 200 people
Maintaining a funpage	71%	69%	70%	74%
Sales of products	28%	33%	24%	28%

Providing information and customer service	54%	63%	40%	58%
Monitoring the blog content of various users	38%	29%	24%	60%
Commenting on posts and participating in discussions with users	57%	56%	48%	66%
Promoting products	80%	79%	74%	86%
Maintaining a company blog	24%	29%	22%	22%
Listening to customers' suggestions and complaints	57%	58%	48%	66%
Other	10%	10%	8%	12%

Source: Own elaboration based on CATI survey interviews.

Among the activities conducted on social media, the dominating function of promoting the firm has an influence on the type and character of content communicated via such media. These are mainly promotional functions, as 84% of firms underlined the importance of posting photos from important company events, an activity which was conducted in particular in large and medium-sized firms (88%), but also in small firms employing between 2 and 49 people.

It is also worth noting that firms ascribe greater importance to communicating information about products and conditions of sale (78% of indications) than to advertising messages themselves and information about promotions (68%). This is because social media make it possible to communicate more complete and more personalised information about the offer, which firms appreciate by using such possibilities. What is more, every second firm indicated that they use this channel for informing social media users about their goals and their directions for development. Although this was declared to a greater degree by large and medium-sized firms, small firms were not far behind.

Meanwhile, it is small firms that lead in informing potential customers about current trends in consumer behaviour, as declared by 44% of small firms, but only one in three of large and medium-sized firms. This may be the result of closer contact with customers in small firms, which encourages greater communication that can be more personalised (Table 7).

To increase the effectiveness of communication with the market, firms use various tactics to stimulate customers' interest. It must be noted that the activities which dominate in this respect are promotional activities related to creating the firm's image by promoting company events, seminars and advertising campaigns. They also include sharing messages, articles and opinions with social media users on topics related to the firm's offer and the forms of the firm's activity.

Table 7. What type of content does the firm communicate on social media?

	Total	Firm size		
		Firm employing from 2 to 49 people	Firm employing from 50 to 200 people	Firm employing above 200 people
Information about products and conditions of sale	78%	85%	70%	78%
Information about the firm's goals and directions for development	58%	48%	62%	64%
Information related to current trends in consumer behaviour	35%	44%	30%	30%
Advertising messages, information about promotions	68%	81%	72%	52%
Photos from important company events	84%	77%	88%	88%
Other	7%	4%	8%	10%

Source: Own elaboration based on CATI survey interviews.

Such social media tactics are indicated by around 70% of the firms in the study, even rising to around 80% of large firms. This demonstrates the belief in such forms and types of activity in shaping interest among social media users. It is also worth noting that on average every second firm, and even 68% of large firms, see the potential of social media and use the method of engaging their employees in sharing information about the firm, its products, events and successes with their friends. The WOM mechanism triggered in this way is ever more frequently assisted by the sourcing of customers' opinions about the offer in real time, although this is at present declared only by one in three firms.

However, as many as 42% of small firms declare such tactics due to their closer relations with customers. Activity on social media is also supported by competitions for customers, as declared by one in three firms, and 44% of medium-sized firms. Thanks to an awareness of the specifics of various social media platforms, firms claim that they vary their strategy depending on the type of site. This is especially true for large firms, with every second such firm adapting in such a way, while among small and medium-sized firms the ratio is only one in three (Table 8).

Firms today understand the importance of continuous communication with customers, as the decided majority of firms, around 60%, respond in real time to user remarks and messages, with this figure rising to 67% among small firms.

However, the percentage of large firms which state clearly that they respond in real time to opinions and messages posted by users is lower, at 54%.

Table 8. What tactics does the firm use to generate customer interest?

	Total	Firm size		
		Firm employing from 2 to 49 people	Firm employing from 50 to 200 people	Firm employing above 200 people
We engage our employees so that they share company content with their friends	52%	46%	42%	68%
We source customers' opinions about the offer in real time	34%	42%	26%	34%
We share messages, articles and opinions	66%	65%	56%	76%
We organise competitions for customers	36%	31%	44%	34%
We use photos to promote events, seminars and campaigns	74%	75%	66%	82%
We vary our strategy depending on the site	39%	33%	30%	54%
Other	9%	4%	14%	8%

Source: Own elaboration based on CATI survey interviews.

An important direction for a firm's activity on social media is to develop cooperation with customers in creating new products and other aspects of their market offer. This is a real challenge that can only be met by creating internet platforms that allow for such cooperation. Our research shows that on average every second firm has built an internet community around its brand, with this figure even rising to 66% for large firms.

However, it is rare for a firm to create a crowdsourcing platform for sourcing ideas from customers on new products or other features of the market offer. Even among large firms, this was indicated by only 4% of respondents. What is more, ideas sent in by customers are implemented by only one firm in three, but these are only used to modify the offer. Only 7% of the firms in the study stated that they used customer ideas to make fundamental changes to their offer.

Firms appreciate the role of social media in communicating with customers as almost every second firm indicated that being active on social media results in an increase in interest in the firm and its offer. Firms also point to other benefits of social media, such as forging strong relations with customers and other entities in

the immediate environment, and raising the credibility of the firm in the opinion of customers, as well as building an increase in trust in the firm.

Another perceived benefit for the firm is brand positioning, which was indicated by one firm in five. It can also be seen that firms have a problem in defining the benefits that they obtain thanks to social media, as 44% of firms, and even 56% of large firms, are aware of such benefits, but cannot name them specifically (Table 9). This indicates a direction for future analyses.

Table 9. *How do you perceive the benefits for your firm of using social media in communication with customers?*

	Total	Firm size		
		Firm employing from 2 to 49 people	Firm employing from 50 to 200 people	Firm employing above 200 people
An increase in interest in the firm and its offer	46%	54%	44%	40%
Brand positioning	22%	23%	18%	24%
Shaping strong relations with customers and other entities in the environment	14%	12%	14%	16%
Improving the firm's financial results	7%	12%	6%	4%
Increasing the credibility of the firm in the opinion of customers	13%	13%	14%	12%
Increase of trust in the firm	8%	8%	8%	8%
Product modification and development	3%	4%	2%	2%
Assessing customer reactions to marketing activities	9%	6%	6%	16%
Standing out from the competition	2%	4%	0%	2%
Other	44%	40%	36%	56%
I don't see any benefits	4%	4%	4%	4%

Source: Own elaboration based on CATI survey interviews.

At the same time, firms indicate to a considerably lesser degree such benefits of social media as learning about customers' reactions to marketing activities (9%), or the usefulness of information obtained via such media for product modification and development (3%). A very small percentage of the firms in the study (7%) indicated

an improvement in the firm's financial results, with this benefit being indicated more often by small firms (12%) than by large companies (4%). It is worth underlining that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the activity of firms on social media, a fact highlighted by one firm in three, while among the forms of such activity, an increase in customer service was indicated relatively often (19% of firms – Table 10).

Table 10. How did the pandemic affect the firm's use of social media?

	Total	Firm size		
		Firm employing from 2 to 49 people	Firm employing from 50 to 200 people	Firm employing above 200 people
It considerably increased the firm's activity on such media	33%	31%	26%	42%
It encouraged cooperation with influencers	3%	2%	0%	8%
It prompted the development of a strategy for activity on social media	14%	10%	14%	18%
It broadened the scope of customer service	19%	27%	8%	22%
It influenced the decision to buy software for monitoring results	3%	8%	0%	2%
Other	5%	4%	2%	8%
It did not have an marked effect on the use of such media	47%	44%	60%	38%

Source: Own elaboration based on CATI survey interviews.

The firms participating in the study also claimed that the pandemic had prompted them to develop a strategy for their activity on social media (14%), which should be considered as a key effect based on the belief in the effectiveness of using such media in marketing activities. However, a minimal percentage of firms (3%) indicated the influence of the pandemic on prompting cooperation with influencers.

5. Discussion

Social media are considered to be one of the main elements of ICT. In recent years there has been a high level of expectation and enthusiasm around the key role of

social media as one of the most important virtual channels for interacting with customers (Khan, 2022).

As part of the discussion of the empirical quantitative research results together with a review of the literature, it can be noted that the use of social media in marketing requires the adoption of a long time horizon. It is also necessary to conduct activities according to a formula consisting of recognising and understanding the mechanisms of how social media function, building a social media strategy and also defining policies and principles for listening in on dialogues conducted by customers on social media (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre, 2011). Meanwhile, it must be noted that only 32% of the firms in the study had a strategy for their presence on social media.

This is particularly worrying in the context of the fact that having a strategy lowers the risk of short-sightedness in management, linked to not noticing opportunities and threats, and also often narrowing the range of options considered by decision-makers (Czakon, 2020).

At the same time, it must be noted that only 12% of the firms in the study had specialists responsible only for conducting marketing activity on social media. Meanwhile, in firms that see the use of the internet in business as an opportunity for development, board members are appointed who are responsible for digital business transformation (Kalinowski, 2015).

The results of the study provide an answer to the first research question (Q1), as the main forms of activity undertaken by firms on social media include: promoting products, maintaining a funpage, commenting on user posts and participation in discussions, as well as listening to customers' suggestions and complaints. At the same time, it should be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic increased the activity of firms on social media. This was highlighted by one in three of the firms in the study.

A positive assessment must be made of the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic also prompted firms to develop strategies for their activity on social media, although this was indicated by only 14% of the firms studied. It should also be added that the increased activity of firms on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by a growth in interest among consumers in using such media in their decision-making processes (Mróz, 2021). During the lockdowns, social media sites enabled consumers to communicate, make transactions and carry out a range of various tasks, and also helped them to cope with the negative effect of isolation (Gudiño *et al.*, 2022).

Moving on to providing an answer to the second research question (Q2), it is important to underline – on the basis of the results of the empirical research – what tactics and tools are used by firms in managing social media platforms in order to increase user engagement. At the top of the list are the use of photos to promote

events, seminars and campaigns, as well as sharing messages and articles, and involving employees in passing on content about the firm to their friends. This means that there is a need to integrate external and internal marketing activities, aimed at satisfying needs and motivating employees, as well as building valuable relations with them.

In answering the third research question (Q3), it is worth noting that among the main benefits achieved from conducting marketing activities on social media, firms include: increasing interest in the firm and its offer, the possibility for brand positioning, as well as increasing the credibility of the firm and forming strong relations with customers and other entities in the immediate environment. It must be added that using the potential of social media in building relations between the brand and consumers requires not only learning about the profile of social media consumers, but also understanding their patterns of behaviour online (Sheth, 2018).

This knowledge should translate into greater customer engagement in relations with the firm, and as a consequence result in an increase in the set of values that are the subject of exchange between the firm and the customer.

6. Conclusions

In summing up, it must be emphasised that the virtualisation of marketing creates many possibilities in terms of building and deepening relations with customers, as well as engaging them in activities conducted by the firm. In particular, dynamically developing social media platforms have great potential in this respect. This is important in the context of the directions of development of contemporary marketing and the concept of customer engagement, as among the forms of engaging customers we should highlight recommendations given by customers, as well as cooperation with regards to the ideas they submit for developing the offer, and participation in studies into their needs and expectations (Żymkowska, Wiechoczek, Kieźel, and Żymkowski, 2018).

The development of social media, which creates new possibilities for cooperating with customers, leads to the development of the function fulfilled by consumers. As a result, the company-centred model of creating values is replaced by an open model, the basis for which is the creativity of people functioning as part of a complex network of relations (Kornberger, 2010).

Analysis of the empirical research results shows that firms operating on the Polish market understand the importance of social media in marketing activities, and in particular in marketing communication, however, their potential has not as yet been fully exploited. The contribution of the article to the discussion on the use of social media in marketing activities is the finding that among the firms in the study operating on the Polish market, an operational approach is applied to a greater degree in this area than a strategic one. This shows that while the firms in the study

are aware of the need to be active on social media, the majority of them do not have a strategy for their presence on social media.

In terms of the managerial implications resulting from the quantitative study, particular attention should be drawn to the need to listen more attentively to customers' suggestions and remarks, as well as increasing the degree of monitoring of content available online regarding the firm and its products.

Among the directions for further empirical research on the topic, it should be noted in particular that it is desirable to conduct research on firms operating in markets in other countries in order to identify the differences in the role assigned to social media in company marketing activities. It would also be interesting to include research on social media users in further studies. This would make it possible to compare customer expectations with the opinions of company representatives responsible for using the internet in marketing and for maintaining contact with customers via new technologies.

In order to capture the changes in the approach to using social media in marketing activities undertaken by firms operating on the Polish market, it would be justified to repeat the research on a similar sample of firms once the COVID-19 pandemic has finished.

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