BUILDING CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT AND LOYALTY WHILE TRAVERSING THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY IN THE ONLINE SPACE

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Purpose: The overriding goal of the considerations is to recognize the phenomena occurring when the buyer traverses the customer journey in the online space and their importance in building his commitment and loyalty.

Design/methodology/approach: Dynamic technological progress significantly influences the course of consumer's decision-making processes. Brands are looking for more and more touchpoints on the customer's journey in order to be able to smoothly surround the recipient with messages. As part of the considerations, it was examined how the forms and tools of marketing communication can support marketing activities at individual stages of the customer journey.

Findings: The presented publication classifies online marketing communication tools and indicates their links with the various stages of purchasing, the 5A model and building an active consumer attitude towards the brand.

Research limitations/implications: The article contains a preliminary study. In the future it is planned to conduct additional quantitative and qualitative research. The study will help to perform a comprehensive analysis of the application being discussed.

Practical implications: The right choice of forms and tools of marketing communication not only determines the purchase, but also builds the commitment and loyalty of the buyer, who may ultimately become a brand advocate. Therefore, it is particularly important to have a holistic approach to the dialogue with the consumer and to understand the mechanisms influencing his decisions.

Originality/value: Although the topic of e-commerce appears in academic publications, only a few of them relate these devices to the customer journey. This paper comprehensively deals with this topic and focuses on the relationship between online customer journey, the 5A model and the promotion mix tools.

Keywords: Customer Journey, Consumer Loyalty, E-Commerce, Market Communication, Buyer Behaviour.

Category of the paper: Technical paper, Conceptual paper.

1. Introduction

The mechanisms of consumer behaviour in the e-commerce market are becoming increasingly advanced thanks to the use of the latest technologies. However, in order to be able to consider how much influence technology has on the market, it is necessary to delve into the basic consumer decision-making processes taking place among many competing alternatives. The actions of buyers in the online marketplace, as in the real space, are determined by personality, life attitudes, beliefs and motivation, and culture, socio-economic status, pressure from the society or reference group in which they reside, among other factors (Doyle, 2016; Singh, Duhan, 2016; Mishra, 2020). All these factors in the final conclusion contribute to the outcome of the final shopping experience in the virtual world. The decisions and actions that the customer takes during the purchase process in this case can be referred to as the customer journey (Følstad, Kvale, 2018) in the online space. Despite numerous studies and analyzes of its course, the knowledge about its relationship with the optimization of sales processes and the proper design of the experience of visiting the store is still insufficient. This is due, among other things, to the dynamically progressing digital transformation, which constantly reshapes the purchasing habits of buyers (Sanak-Kosmowska, 2018).

The Internet and the digital age have fundamentally changed the way companies approach marketing tools, which have had to respond to new challenges from customers regarding convenience and speed of purchase, customisation of assortment and its price, as well as the way marketing communications are carried out. At the same time, the Internet provides the possibility of quick and wide access to information, the ability to interact harmoniously with the brand and the constant striving to improve the usability of the website interface [UI], as well as the user experience [UX]. Undoubtedly, the focus on the needs and expectations of the recipients means that the customer journey is increasingly controlled, automated and optimised thanks to dedicated algorithms.

The main objective of this article is to identify the phenomena occurring during the customer journey in the online space and their importance in building his involvement and loyalty. The paper also classifies online marketing communication tools and shows how they are related to particular shopping stages, the 5A model and building an active attitude of the consumer towards the brand.

2. Marketing communication in the online space

In the world literature, many scientific and business publications in the field of management sciences have been devoted to the subject of the customer journey (e.g. Blokdyk, 2020). The models proposed by researchers usually focus on identifying the buyer's needs, searching for information, comparing variants, selecting the most optimal method of meeting the needs and post-purchase assessment (Engel, Blackwell, Kollat, 1978; Lamb, Hair, McDaniel, 2011). It should be highlighted that consumer purchase behaviour is a particularly important topic in the context of marketing activities, because by definition they are supposed to aim at diagnosing consumer needs and preferences and their fulfilment by means of particular marketing-mix tools. This issue becomes even more important in the case of the online environment, where it is possible to precisely track customer behaviour and flexibly adapt marketing communication instruments to his individual needs and preferences. Indeed, digital technologies have significantly changed the face of the global economy in recent decades (Siebel, 2019; Hinterhuber, 2021; Upadrista, 2021) and continue to contribute to dynamic market transformation (Kotler et al., 2022). The processes of fulfilling buyers' needs are now mainly based on services, information and integration, which determine the factors that create value and profit. Overshadowed by thriving services and economic transformation, a key role for the aforementioned services is e-commerce (Chaffey et al., 2019; Wirtz, 2021; Kingsnorth, 2022). In fact, since its inception, the concept of benefits and specificities of e-commerce operation have become the focus not only of market practitioners but also of scientists (Roberts, Zahay, 2017).

For the purpose of this article, a bibliometric analysis of scientific articles available in Web of Science and Scopus databases was performed. Articles were searched for that dealt with both the customer journey and e-commerce. The number of records was only 64 in Web of Science and 90 in Scopus[1]. The total number of citations in the respective databases is 915 and 887, giving an average number of citations per article of 14.3 in Web of Science and 9.85 in Scopus. The h-index for this subject is 13. This indicates a significant shortage of scientific articles in this area, while at the same time the interest of the recipients is relatively high. This suggests the existence of a still undeveloped research gap and the need for further research and consideration in this area.

The development of the internet, as a particularly important medium nowadays, has contributed, among other things, to a decline in interest in traditional forms of marketing communication (Gołąb-Andrzejak, 2016). This is because new media offer brands advantages in the form of, among other things:

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- personalization of sales activities,
- the possibility of comparing various product variants and assortments of different manufacturers,
- easy measurability of the effectiveness and efficiency of conducted campaigns,
- opportunities to reach audiences beyond regional and national borders,
- possibility of scaling the business,
- ability to quickly extend the assortment and expand the offer.

Consumers, especially in the online environment, move very fluidly between marketing messages and the customer journey. The movement of the consumer at such a rapid pace determines the company to adapt as quickly as possible to the current trends and expectations. For this purpose, enterprises use an appropriately selected set of forms and tools of marketing communication. The forms of marketing communication in the online environment are identical to those in traditional media [personal promotion; advertising; public relations and additional promotion]. However, there are differences between the specific tools used in the virtual space (Table 1).

Table 1.
Classification of forms and tools of marketing communication in the online environment

The marketing communication dimension	Form of marketing communication	Examples of tools
Interpersonal communication	**Personal promotion**	- chats - comments - live streaming - newsgroups - messages by e-mail - chatbots
Mass communication	Advertising	- website - mobile applications - advertising on social networking sites - display advertising - search engine advertising - newsletters - video marketing - sponsored articles - push notifications
	Public relations	- social media profiles - blogs - influencer marketing - website positioning - customer reviews - online events - workshops and webinars - sponsorship

Cont. Table 1.

Marketing research	**Additional promotion**	• online sales • free samples with order • freebies to order • online coupons and codes • competitions & sweepstakes • virtual stamps
	A priori research	• Research on buyer preferences • Website testing • Comparative testing of advertising
	A posteriori research	• Ads and posts statistics • Web analytics • Research on effectiveness and efficiency of actions taken • Customer satisfaction surveys

Source: own study.

It should also be emphasised that marketing research cannot be treated as a separate element of marketing communication, but only as a complement to it. They support the preparation and evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of individual promotion tools (Bajak, 2021). Research is particularly important in the online environment, which provides the opportunity to control, automate and optimise activities in real time. This is because conducting marketing communication in such conditions requires its adaptation to the contextual situation, as well as compliance with the needs and expectations of buyers subjected to behavioural analysis and segmentation.

3. Trends on the e-commerce market in Poland

In 2020, the global e-commerce market reached 4.2 trillion US dollars. According to the data, this is as much as 25% more than in 2019. On the other hand, in 2022, the global e-commerce is predicted to exceed $5 trillion for the first time, which will account for more than a fifth of total retail sales (eMarketer report: Global Ecommerce Forecast, 2022). The data provided by the ecommercedg (Statista, 2022) website shows that Polish e-commerce is in 20th place when it comes to market size. It is estimated that in 2021 the e-commerce market reached over 120 billion PLN (interaktywnie.com, 2022).

According to Gemius' report (2021) "Ecommerce in Poland" as many as 77 percent of Internet users have shopped online at least once. According to another research by Mediapanel (2021) the number of internet users in 2021 reached almost 30 million, which would mean that less than 23 million people have shopped online at least once. Gemius (2021) reports that e-consumers include all groups of internet users. However, online shoppers are rarely the youngest, aged 15-24 (16%), and the largest group are Internet users aged 35-49, accounting for 34% of all Internet users. Throughout Poland in 2021, online shoppers most often decided

to buy: clothes (including accessories), shoes, cosmetics, books, CDs, films, audio/video devices. Due to the pandemic situation, the percentage of online purchases of cinema or theatre tickets dropped dramatically. Interestingly, 75% of online shoppers declare that they shop online on Polish e-commerce websites (Gemius, 2021).

Among the factors encouraging people to shop online are above all the availability of online shops 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, no need to go to the shop and unlimited time to choose products. Among the negative problems associated with Polish e-commerce, Internet users declare the long waiting time for delivery, intrusive ads for products seen before and high delivery costs. On the other hand, motives that would encourage Internet users to buy more often include lower delivery costs, lower prices than in traditional shops and a discount dedicated to online shoppers (Gemius, 2021).

According to practitioners of the e-commerce market, certain trends can also be identified that are taking place among online shoppers (Raport interaktywnie.com, 2021):

- J. Pieńkowska-Olczak, CEO of PayU – notes that online spending is growing every year in every shopping category, while the number of new consumers buying online is increasing all the time. She emphasises the fact that the internet has allowed companies to adapt more quickly to the outbreak of the global pandemic. Also, forecasts predict that the e-commerce market may double in value within years.

- President of the Chamber of Electronic Commerce – P. Sass-Staniszewska emphasises the fact that the dynamics of change in e-commerce can be called a revolution. A revolution that changed the perception of consumer behaviour and, as a result, business had to undergo a digital transformation and adapt to new realities. An important aspect and unquestionable trend in online shopping is the 24/7 availability – more than ¾ of respondents indicated this possibility as the most important advantage over traditional shopping.

- B. Wójcik, Sales Manager at Genius, mentions the importance of smartphones in the purchasing process of Poles as an important determinant – 76% of online shoppers are those who have made purchases at the m-commerce level. However, the relative reluctance of shoppers to this solution is caused by the inadaptation of websites to this type of device. Companies in the industry should develop facilities corresponding to the smartphone in the near future.

- The managing director of GSL Poland – T. Zwiercan, mentions two main determinants thanks to which Poles want to buy online: convenience and on time. Time is characterised as punctuality and reliability of delivery, and convenience is understood as personalised delivery to the final consumer.

It is also worth pointing out the ability to monitor user behaviour on the Internet. Personal data and permissions to track users' online activities have become the currency that consumers pay for the possibility to participate fully in social life. Nowadays, the lack of marketing consents is tantamount to a kind of digital exclusion (Surma, 2017). A report published by Cisco

(2019) indicates that in exchange for purchasing benefits, consumers are willing to provide sensitive data about themselves. For example, as many as 61% of respondents would agree to share information about their past purchases and health status in order to receive personalised product offers. A similar number of people surveyed (60%) would share their location to access consumer promotions at shops near them.

4. Online touchpoints with the consumer

A brand's marketing communication consists of both short, one-way messages sent by the brand as well as engaging messages designed to lead to two-way interactions with the recipient (Verhoef et al., 2015). Moreover, each individual communication channel represents a separate touchpoint (Royal, Hall, 2016) through which the relationship with the consumer is built. The brand should coordinate them seamlessly, adjusting the tools, media, and forms and content of marketing communication to align them with the other elements of the marketing mix (Hajduk, 2019). As a result, a multidimensional consumer-brand interaction experience is created, which often crosses the real and virtual worlds (Bajak, 2022). These environments interpenetrate and complement each other, engaging the recipient in a relationship with the brand. The multitude of channels of transmission, makes marketing communication take on an increasingly holistic structure. The brand-consumer dialogue starts to go more and more beyond the models adopted so far, such as, for example, mass communication (see Lasswell 1948; Katz, Lazarsfeld 1955), communication in a hypermedia computer environment (see Hoffman, Novak, 1996), or the spherical model of marketing communication (see Szymoniuk, 2017). For nowadays, marketing communication is often no longer a series of disconnected messages reaching the consumer from different sources, but is a continuous, systematised and harmonised process of continuous dialogue in which different media intermingle (Figure 1).
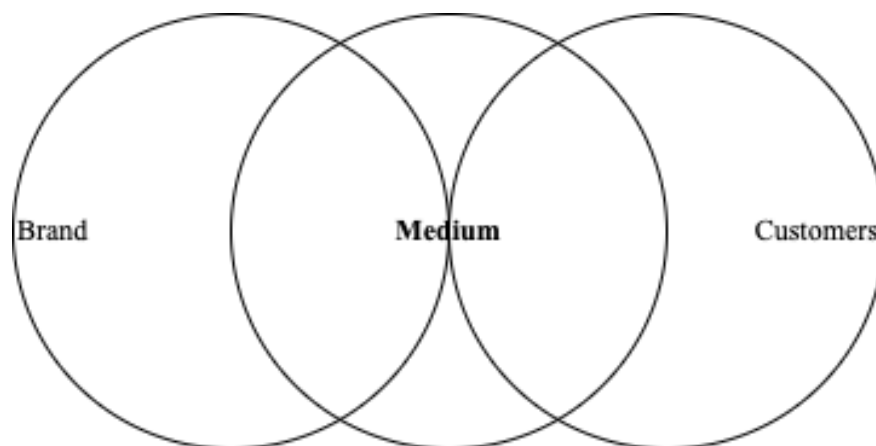

Figure 1. A model of permanent marketing communication. Source: own study.

It should be noted that despite the use of different message channels and forms of marketing communication, it is very important to maintain consistency in communication. The brand should seamlessly manage all its touchpoints where it conducts dialogue with the consumer (Moriarty, Schultz, 2012). This is because it enables the creation of harmonious experiences that build the impression of a unified communication environment (Rogala, Pilarczyk, 2020). At the same time, it is essential to be reliable, deliver on promises and share values (Grönroos, 1994) in order to create mutual commitment, cooperation and strengthen trust that forms the foundation of brand loyalty (Hunt et al., 2006). Communication focused on delivering value and creating relationships coincides with current trends in marketing communication (see Doyle, 2008; Kleczek, 2012; Marinov, 2020, Sugai, 2021) and the concept of H2H (human-to-human) marketing. This concept places the participants in market exchange in an equivalent position and focuses on cooperation that ensures the maximisation of market benefits for each party (Kotler et al., 2020). In this view, maintaining a dialogue with consumers is supposed to lead to arousing their interest in shared values and building their commitment and loyalty. The Internet creates an environment conducive to the realisation of these assumptions, thanks to the possibility of managing touchpoints and the global integration of recipients, while personalising activities. The result is a mutual network of relations between the community gathered around the brand, who share their emotions and experiences, mutually reinforcing their attachment and loyalty.

5. The online customer journey

Before a consumer makes a purchase, an intensive decision-making process takes place in his mind. In its generalised form, it can be divided into five basic stages (Engel, Blackwell, Kollat, 1978; Lamb, Hair, McDaniel, 2011):

1. need recognition – identification of requirements and preferences concerning the product and the purpose of its purchase,
2. information search – searching for ways of satisfying the need and data on particular alternatives,
3. evaluation of alternatives – comparison of various possibilities of satisfying the need on the basis of the acquired knowledge,
4. purchase – selection of the best option and making its purchase,
5. post-purchase evaluation – gathering experiences resulting from product consumption and its assessment.

It is worth noting that nowadays most of the touchpoints with the brand are on the Internet and it is the information obtained online that has a large impact on the outcome of the process. This is because the brand tries to actively accompany the consumer during the decision-making

process (Kaczorowska-Spychalska, 2017; Smilansky, 2018) and, through marketing communication tools, not only persuade him to buy its products, but also build his commitment and, consequently, loyalty (Figure 2).
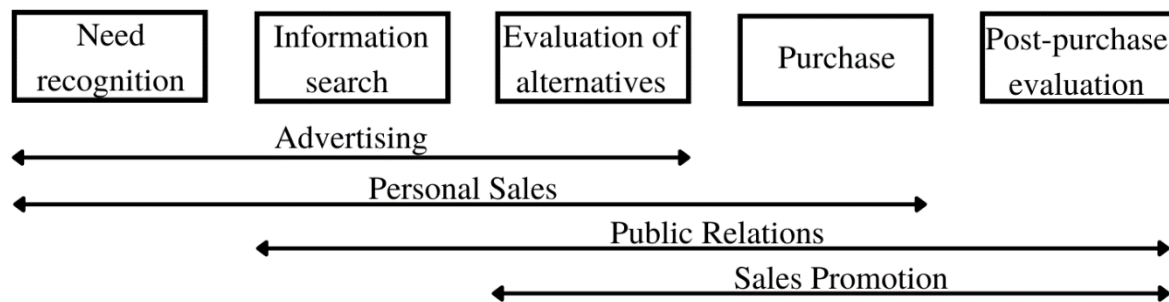

Figure 2. Example set of marketing communication forms used on customer journey. Source: own study.

This approach was theoretically framed by the 5A path model (Kotler, Kartajayi, & Setiawan, 2017), which illustrates five consumer behaviors that the brand should strive to evoke during the purchasing process. This is, respectively:

1. aware – familiarizing the consumer with the brand and arousing his interest in it,
2. appeal – createng the desired brand image and building the foundations of customer relations,
3. ask – responding to the buyer's doubts, conducting a dialogue with them and educating about the product range,
4. act – encouraging the consumer to buy by using direct incentives for him to do so,
5. advocate – engaging the client to provide information about the brand and participate in the process of its creation.

In the online environment, in order to guide the consumer through the purchasing process by triggering the above-mentioned behaviors, it is necessary to influence him through a package of various marketing communication tools (Table 2).

Table 2.
Customer journey in the online space

Purchase steps of the customer				
Recognizing the need	Search for information	Assessment of the options	Making a purchase	Post-purchase behavior
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Model 5A				
Aware	Appeal	Ask	Act	Advocate
↑	↑	↑	↑	↑

Cont. Table 2.

Online enterprise marketing communication				
Search engine and social media advertising; building ranges	Use of influencers; attractive activities in a virtual environment, e.g real-time marketing	Possibility to consult virtual assistants; access to online reviews and rating	Price reductions and purchase bonuses for purchases and other online promotions; retargeting	Providing bonuses for providing opinions of the internet; competitions for the participants; virtual loyalty programme
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
The consumer's attitude on the mark				
Awareness	Liking	Conviction	Trust	Devotion

Source: own study.

The correct use of the composition of tools and means of communication allows not only to successfully guide the consumer through the customer journey, but also to develop in him/her the desired attitudes towards the brand. In the first steps the brand should be presented to him so that he gets to know it (awareness). Next, it is important to arouse the recipient's affinity with the brand by showing its distinctive features and emphasising the attractiveness of the offer (liking). Later, efforts should be made to persuade the buyer of the brand's superiority over the competition (conviction). Making a purchase, in turn, should be a stimulus that forms and strengthens the attachment to it (trust). The final stage revolves around convincing the consumer to spread his opinion about the brand and to co-create it (devotion).

6. Summary

The online space creates an optimal environment for controlling, automating and optimising the communication process, which enables holistic support for the consumer at each stage of the customer journey (Figure 3). As a result, their behaviour and reactions during the purchase process are shaped - from building brand awareness, through dialogue with the brand, to taking action in the form of purchase and advocacy among other Internet users. A properly coordinated composition of promotion tools used on the web creates an integrated and comprehensive experience of constant interaction with the brand, which builds buyer engagement. The buyer travels from getting to know the brand through liking, belief and trust to devotion. By becoming a loyal and active user, he or she simultaneously contributes to value co-creation, actively participating in shaping not only the brand's marketing communication, but also other marketing-mix tools. At the same time, each such consumer is an important element of the network of relations in the community focused around the brand, which by sharing their experiences and emotions mutually reinforces their attachment and devotion.
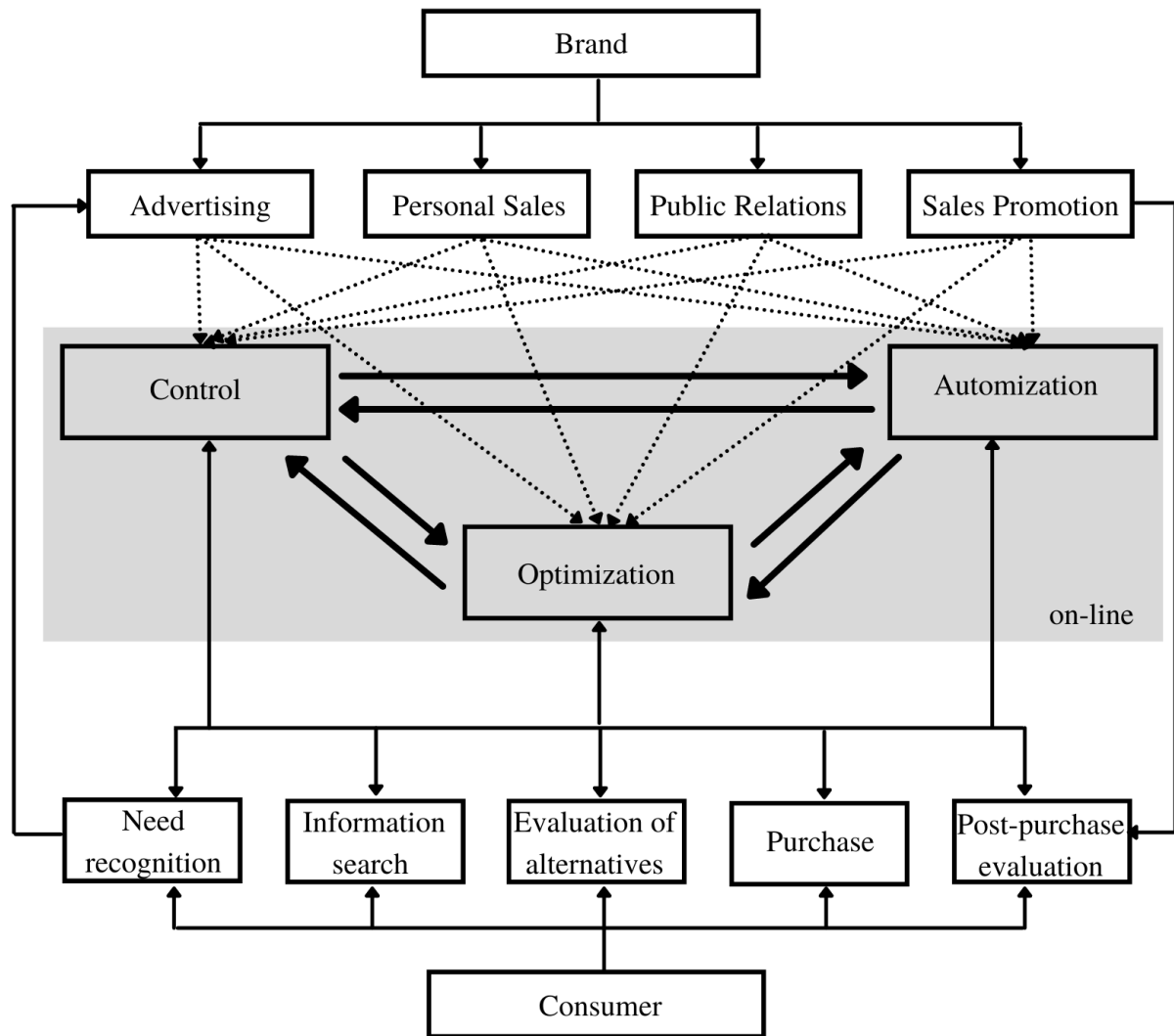
Figure 3. The relationship between the forms of marketing communication and customer journey. Source: own study.

The subject of influencing the purchase process of the customer online with the use of a package of various forms and tools of marketing communication is an area that still requires further study and development. It is important to carry out further deliberations and analyses aimed at detailed identification of consumer behaviour and preferences on the customer journey. This will allow more effective management of their purchasing behaviour and effective shaping of attitudes towards the brand. The work presented here focuses on creating customer engagement and loyalty using touchpoints. In the future, however, it is necessary to adopt a more integrated perspective on the topic. To this end, quantitative and qualitative research is planned. In addition, solutions used by leading brands will be analysed. This will make it possible to combine scientific knowledge with market practice and, from a business perspective, will further enhance the usefulness of the considerations and models presented.

Acknowledgements

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