

The Significance and Evaluation of Selected Online Communication Tools – A Comparative Analysis of Young Consumers from Poland, Croatia and China

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Abstract

Purpose: The main goal of the article is to verify the significance of and evaluate selected online communication tools among young people in three culturally and technologically different countries – Poland, Croatia and China.

Design/methodology/approach: The research was conducted using a paper survey questionnaire and CATI methods, on the research sample N=2199, in three countries: Poland (N=502), Croatia (N=955) and China (N=742). The study analyzed selected online tools classified into five groups regarding: 1. the value and convenience for the customer, 2. security and trust, 3. consumer service, 4. belonging and engagement, 5. added value. The tools qualified for each of the groups have been tested in terms of weight and assessment of their importance for a group of young people.

Findings: The obtained results indicate which of the online communication methods are, in the opinion of young people, the most important and thus the most expected by this segment of customers.

Research limitations/implications: The limitation of the research is that it was conducted among representatives of the narrowed territory of the studied countries, hence the results obtained may be charac-

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teristic of these parts of Poland, Croatia and China. The findings are a valuable source of knowledge for practical implications for companies operating in the segment of young consumers allowing to select the best online communication tools with these clients in Poland, Croatia and China.

Originality/value: Digital marketing brings many new possibilities of communication with clients for enterprises; however, for success, it is important to correctly match the online tools to the target group. The conducted research allowed prioritizing the importance of individual online communication tools in the process of creating relationships with young consumers in each of the analyzed countries. The classification of tools for building relationships at the behavioral and affective levels was original in the study. Moreover, the comparison of research results obtained from culturally and technologically diverse countries is of great value for the studied area.

Keywords: young consumers, digital marketing, online communication tools, online relationship.

JEL: M31, D83

Znaczenie i ocena wybranych narzędzi komunikacji online – analiza porównawcza młodych konsumentów z Polski, Chorwacji i Chin

Streszczenie

Cel: weryfikacja znaczenia i ocena wybranych narzędzi komunikacji online wśród młodych ludzi z trzech odmiennych kulturowo i technologicznie krajów – Polski, Chorwacji i Chin.

Metodologia: badania przeprowadzono za pomocą papierowego kwestionariusza ankietowego oraz metod CATI, na próbie badawczej $N = 2199$, w trzech krajach: Polsce ($N = 502$), Chorwacji ($N = 955$) i Chinach ($N = 742$). W badaniu przeanalizowano wybrane narzędzia internetowe podzielone na pięć grup pod względem: 1) wartości i wygody dla klienta, 2) bezpieczeństwa i zaufania, 3) obsługi konsumenta, 4) przynależności i zaangażowania, 5) wartości dodanej. Narzędzia zakwalifikowane do każdej z grup zostały przetestowane pod względem wagi i oceny ich znaczenia dla grupy młodych ludzi.

Wyniki: otrzymane wyniki wskazują, która z metod komunikacji online jest zdaniem młodych osób najważniejsza, a przez to najbardziej oczekiwana przez ten segment klientów.

Ograniczenia/implikacje badawcze: ograniczenie badań wynika z przeprowadzenia go wśród przedstawicieli zawężonego terytorium badanych krajów, stąd uzyskane wyniki mogą być charakterystyczne dla tych części Polski, Chorwacji i Chin. Wyniki stanowią cenne źródło wiedzy o praktycznych implikacjach dla firm działających w segmencie młodych konsumentów, pozwalające na wybór najlepszych narzędzi komunikacji online z tymi klientami w Polsce, Chorwacji i Chinach.

Oryginalność/wartość: marketing cyfrowy niesie ze sobą wiele nowych możliwości komunikacji z klientami dla przedsiębiorstw, by jednak osiągnąć sukces ważne jest prawidłowe dopasowanie narzędzi online do grupy docelowej. Przeprowadzone badania pozwoliły na uszeregowanie wagi poszczególnych narzędzi komunikacji online w procesie tworzenia relacji z młodymi konsumentami w każdym z analizowanych krajów. Oryginalna była klasyfikacja narzędzi do budowania relacji na poziomie behawioralnym i afektywnym. Duże znaczenie dla badanego obszaru ma również porównanie wyników badań uzyskanych z krajów różnicowanych kulturowo i technologicznie.

Słowa kluczowe: młody konsument, marketing cyfrowy, narzędzia komunikacji online, relacje online.

1. Introduction

Competing in the modern market is becoming more and more complex and complicated, which is why companies pay more attention to building relationships with consumers instead of focusing on individual transactions. Despite the rapid acceleration of information technology development and acceptance of online communication, for many people communication with the company via the internet or online shopping is still perceived as risky and uncertain. According to Chang et al. (2013), the lack of trust is a major barrier to adopting e-commerce. To manage this risk, online buyers aim to build relationships and look for marketplace signals to identify the best relationship partners before purchasing (Kozlenkova et al., 2017). The availability of diverse online tools allows the company to communicate with the client in a highly diverse way; however, achieving online success as well as effectively building relationships with consumers in a virtual environment largely depends on the knowledge of the target group and its preferences (Perju-Mitran & Budacia, 2015). The article attempts to classify selected online tools considered important for building relationships with consumers.

The study focused on a group of young people, defined as people aged 15–24. The delimitation of the research for this group of people was based on the fact that young people are strongly influenced by new technologies, as they often do not remember the world without access to the internet. This segment of young people is an important participant in market processes because of its significant size and its prospective economic potential. In addition, young people have a growing influence on shopping decisions for themselves and for family shopping. Bearing in mind that factors like the culture and technological development of a country may determine the perception of individual online communication tools, the study was conducted in three countries differentiated under these factors: Poland, Croatia and China.

The main goal of the article is to verify the significance and evaluation of selected online communication tools among young people in three culturally and technologically different countries. The following specific objectives were subordinated to the achievement of the main goal: 1) List and classification of online communication tools that create relationships on the behavioral and affective levels; 2) Verification of the significance of selected online communication tools for young consumers in each country; 3) Identification of the gap between the expectations of young consumers and their evaluation of the activities of enterprises in using the online communication tool in each country; 4) Identification of similarities and differences in significance and evaluation of selected online communication tools between the examined countries.

2. Selected Online Communication Tools

Relationships that are developed on the internet can be as strong and deep as the ones in offline settings (Kozlenkova et al., 2017). It may be crucial to choose the appropriate communication and customer service tools. The analysis of the literature allowed the authors to propose the division of online communication tools into five groups (Figure 1) which are an important area for a client when building relationships with the company in an online environment. Each group of the proposed model has been assigned individual tools that enterprises should consider.

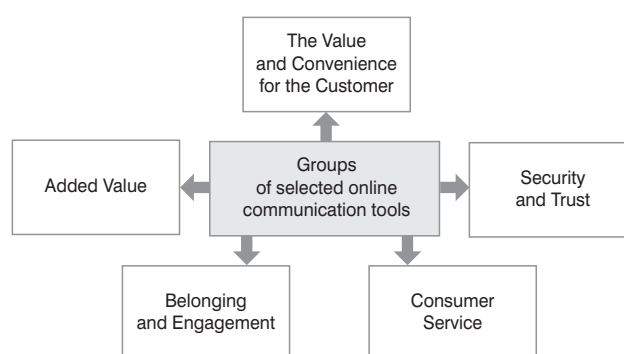


Fig. 1. Groups of selected online communication tools. Source: Own study.

The first specified group of tools used for building relationships with consumers is activities that **create value and provide convenience for the customer (VCC)**. The company's website is one of the basic communication tools considered today as an almost obligatory form of communication. Nowadays a website with only basic information is no longer sufficient, because a website should be characterized by its intuitive, visually attractive and multi-tasking character to enable effective online communication with customers (Rahimnia & Hassanzadeh, 2013). Due to the dynamic development of mobile devices and technologies (Malaquias & Hwang, 2016), consumers are increasingly communicating and making purchases in a mobile way (Hsieh, 2014). When consumers use this form of communication based on connections to wireless service providers (e.g. 3G, 4G, 5G), they expect the information/transactions to be handled anytime and anywhere.

The great convenience associated with the time and place of communication with companies using mobile devices makes it necessary to create mobile websites that are intuitive and easy to use with a smartphone or tablet (Sanakulov & Karjaluoto, 2015). E-commerce defined as "trading of goods or services over computer networks such as the internet" (Eurostat,

2017) allowed companies to offer customers value in the form of convenience of buying a wide range of products available at hand. A modern customer becoming a prosumer expects the possibility of customizing products that will be tailored to his or her expectations (Kassim & Abdullah, 2010). In addition, various payment and delivery options convenient for the customer are also important factors in supplier selection (Blut, 2016). Fast online payment systems influence not only the convenience of purchase, but also in the case of mobile payments significantly reduce the time to complete the transaction.

Due to its complex and uncertain nature, the use of the internet is perceived as highly risky. That is why activities building **security and trust (ST)** (being the second selected group of communication tools) become fundamental (Ha & Stoel, 2009). The trust built online can be considered in three areas: (1) trust in technology (the internet); (2) trust in a particular vendor; and (3) trust in other third parties (McCole et al., 2010). While the traditional concept of trust is primarily concerned with trust in a business partner, in the online environment the foundation becomes trust in the technological infrastructure, which deals with transaction integrity, authentication, confidentiality, and non-repudiation. The level of technological trust concerns the perceived ability of the internet to perform the task it is supposed to, as well as the speed, reliability and availability of the system; security systems and data confidentiality may also be relevant (Eastlick, 2006). The second area of online trust is the relationship of consumers with the company. This kind of trust is a major factor for customers to decide whether to buy products from online stores or not (Fortes et al., 2017). Oliveira et al., (2017) measured three dimensions of customer trust in online vendors (competence, integrity and benevolence) and found that customers with high trust demonstrated a higher intention to engage in e-commerce. Decisions regarding the trustworthiness of an e-vendor may be the result of accumulated transactions in the past but also result from the company's reputation and transparency on the internet. Thus, a high position in search engines and providing complete and reliable information on products and services on the website are of key importance. Trust in third parties in the context of online purchases includes institutions and other third party guarantors that actually provide certificates, pledging integrity, ability and quality (Luo, 2002). Third parties may also include opinions of other clients provided by recommendation systems.

A wide variety of offers available on the internet as well as the uncertainty of many consumers about online contacts increase the importance of **customer service tools (CS)**. This refers to service level during and after sale, and return policies (Blut, 2016). The quality of service is identified with the quick response and ease of obtaining the information needed. That is why companies in the online environment usually use tools such as instant messenger, easy email contact and social network websites (Turel

& Connelly, 2013). Website language options also facilitate and improve customer service. A communication tool that allows the company to stay in touch with the customer is a newsletter, which periodically sends information about special offers and price discounts.

Another group are tools that enable a sense of **belonging and customer engagement (BE)**. The first tool used by marketers includes using social media to communicate with customers (Hanson et al., 2019). Social networks communities make it possible for online customers to interact with both the brand company and with other customers in order to solve a problem or reach a goal. Social media provides both official information and an interactively dyadic communication environment that encourages customers to use and be a part of it (Habibi et al., 2014). A special kind of social media that is an important online tool are blogs, which are an effective way to develop high quality and meaningful content (Castronovo & Huang, 2012). Blogs enable organizations to engage with customers and create a two-way interaction and a real dialog. This tool is an excellent way for companies to stay in touch with clients and to obtain feedback while building relationships (Safko, 2012). Research shows that consumers' positive experience in social media generates positive word of mouth (Klein et al., 2016), and an interesting content generates consumer engagement (Meire et al., 2019). It also confirms that online reviews are an important source of information for purchasing decisions (Pelletier & Collier, 2018). Customer belonging is also built by personalized communication on the web and sending emails with special offers. Individualized email content, e.g. for birthdays or other important events, increases communication between companies and customers (Dehkordi et al., 2012), facilitates brand encounters and deepens relationships.

The last classified group includes tools that provide **added value (AV)** to customers. The first tool of this group is a loyalty program, which positively affects relations between the company and the consumer through two main mechanisms: gratitude and status (Steinhoff & Palmatier, 2014). According to the reciprocity principle, receiving a reward from a company awakens the gratitude of target customers and provides them with a sense of superiority over other "ordinary" customers (Henderson et al., 2011). The sense of uniqueness of consumers also builds access to a unique content not available to everyone. Another factor that affects relationships, which is considered an added value by customers, is access to tools enabling co-creation of the offer. The ability to propose your own version of the product, its functionality or appearance strongly engages customers and makes products more valuable for customers. Luo et al. (2015) found that the participation in co-creation of projects on social media platforms improve the relationship of consumers with a brand, and a user with other users. The tool that also creates added value for clients are competitions organized by companies, in which participants can compete, build their status and win rewards. Unlike traditional advertising, advergames are interactive and engaging, and their use is related to positive marketing

outcomes (Catalán et al., 2018). Researchers often refer to advergaming in terms of blurring the boundaries between entertainment and commercial messages (Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2016). The development of the mobile devices market has increased the potential of mobile applications. Mobile applications are powerful tools to communicate with and stay close to their customers at all times, and allow for sending personalized and real-time location-based offers. Mobile applications effectively stimulate communication, while the benefits of using apps encourage consumers to share their personal information (e.g. location data) (Steinhoff et al., 2019).

3. Characteristics of Poland, Croatia and China

One of the key factors that influences customers' expectations and perception is the culture, which can be defined as characteristics that create a national society's profile, inclusive of norms, values, and institutions (Griffith et al., 2014). To check the differences and similarities in the assessment of online communication tools in diverse cultural conditions, the study covered three culturally different countries: Poland, Croatia and China. When comparing these countries using Hofstede's 6D model (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010) and technology development, numerous differences emerge.

Today, as the most populous country in the world, China has the largest number of internet users. The Chinese internet market is growing at a phenomenal rate in tandem with its booming economy. In June 2019, China achieved 829 million internet users (58.4% of Chinese population), which makes it the country with the largest internet population in the world (Internet World Stats, 2019). The strongest increase has been among mobile internet users who access the internet on smartphones, which is highly popular in China. According to Statistics Poland, the percentage of internet users in Poland grew to 77.5% in 2018, i.e. 30 million Poles, while Croatia achieved 91.5% internet users (4 million people) (Statistics Poland, 2019).

Cultural diversity based on Hofstede's model includes 6 dimensions. The values for individual areas for each of the analyzed countries are presented in Figure 2. In his research, Gong (2009) emphasizes that among these cultural dimensions, two of them have a particular impact on online consumer behavior: individualism/collectivism and uncertainty avoidance. Taking into account the research area of the article in the characteristics of countries, the authors will focus their attention only on these two dimensions.

The Chinese culture is characterized by a low level of uncertainty avoidance (30), which is less of a threat factor than in European countries. New, unknown or uncertain situations do not pose a major obstacle to the daily lives of Chinese people. For this reason, for Chinese consumers, factors that are related to security and trust are less important than for the Polish and Croatian cultures. Poland and Croatia are characterized

by a high level of uncertainty avoidance, 90 and 80 respectively), which means that for consumers the tools related to the security, completeness and reliability of information about products or services as well as data confidentiality are very important. The results translate into a crucial role of trust in the relationship between consumers and the company offering e-services. Consumers from Poland and Croatia tend to look for information confirming the credibility and reliability of companies they are to enter into relations with. Therefore, recommendations and opinions of other users, and certificates obtained by the company will be relevant.

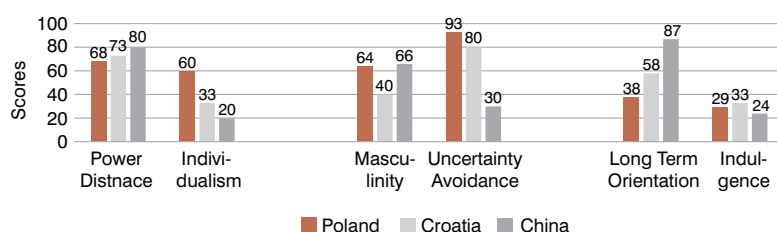


Fig. 2. Country comparison by Hofstede's 6D Model©. Source: Own compilation based on <https://www.hofstede-insights.com>, accessed on 15 November 2019.

Collectivism is a view typical of the Chinese (20) and Croatian (33) cultures, which in dealing with companies creates more intimate relationships, which is why consumers become more loyal than in individualistic cultures (Furrer et al., 2000). For Chinese and Croatian consumers, important online tools are material elements related to an attractive and intuitive website, the proper functioning of the website, a wide range of products, the reliability of the technology used, the feeling of personal satisfaction and the possibility of additional benefits through reward systems. Unlike China and Croatia, Poland is characterized by individualism (60), which in practice can translate into the expectation of matching the offer to individual needs and convenience in making online purchases (Radziszewska, 2015). E-commerce websites dedicated to Polish consumers should guarantee the possibility of individual treatment, as well as facilitate purchasing methods reducing the risk to a minimum.

4. Research Sample

The study was based on a questionnaire survey and conducted on a group of young people aged 15–24 in three countries: Poland, Croatia and China. The research was conducted in 2017–2019 using the CATI and PAPI methods. Data was obtained from a specialist online platform: SurveyMonkey.com (in Croatia)

and Sojump.com (in China). In Poland, the surveys were conducted in a traditional paper manner. Territorially, the survey was conducted in: Poland in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship; Croatia in Zagreb; China in the Guangdong province. After rejecting incorrectly completed surveys, the following number of surveys was included in the study: N=502 for Poland; N=955 for Croatia; N=742 for China. Data analysis was conducted using the built-in statistical function in the back-end of Sojump.com, SurveyMonkey.com and Excel.

5. Research Methodology

The analysis of the literature allowed specifying five groups of tools included in the study. Each group was assigned individual tools, whose classification is included in Table 1.

1. The Value and Convenience for the Customer (VCC)	2. Security and Trust (ST)	3. Consumer Service (CS)
a) wide range of products available online b) attractive and intuitive website c) mobile website d) customizing products e) wide range of delivery f) easy payment methods	a) security systems and data confidentiality b) complete and reliable information on the website c) high positioning online d) recommendation systems e) reliability of technology	a) easy email contact b) quick response c) availability of instant Messenger d) free and easy product returns e) information about special offers in a newsletter f) language options of the website
4. Belonging and Engagement (BE)	5. Added Value (AV)	
a) social network communities built around the brand b) online word of mouth c) business blogs and newsgroups d) personalization of communication on the web e) sending emails with a specially customized offer	a) customer rewards systems e.g., loyalty programs b) advergaming, competitions c) access to unique content and resources d) free online applications provided by the company e) the tools offered by the company to co-create the offer	

Tab. 1. Groups of selected online communication tools. Source: Own study.

To collect data to achieve the study purpose, the survey questionnaire included all identified online communication tools. To analyze which of them are mostly preferred and how young people evaluate their previous use by companies, the respondents were asked to assign a weight to each of the tools indicated in the questionnaire and to assess the companies whose services they used most frequently in terms of using those tools on a Likert

scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 was the lowest rating and 5 the highest). To gain knowledge about the respondents' preferences, the arithmetic mean of the results obtained was used.

6. Results

The collected results were the basis for the calculation of the arithmetic average weight (indicating the importance of individual determinants for respondents in individual countries) and assessment (allowing finding answers, as respondents evaluated each of the identified groups of tools) for each group of tools (Figure 3). The combination of both obtained results enabled the calculation of the gap that exists between how respondents would like companies to communicate with them online and how they assess the current use of individual groups of tools.

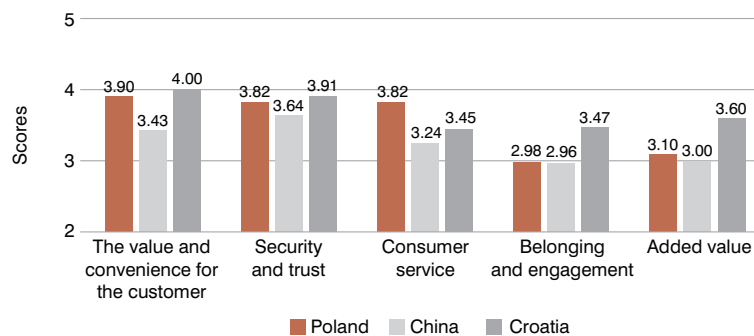


Fig. 3. Weight of the online communication tool groups. Source: The research survey.

The analysis of the groups of tools indicates that in each of the countries one of the three most important factor groups was considered: ST (average weight for Poland: 3.82; Croatia: 3.91; China: 3.64) and VCC (average weight for Poland: 3.90; Croatia: 4.00; China: 3.43). The third most important group was indicated as follows: Poland and China – CS (3.82 and 3.24 respectively), Croatia – AV (3.6). The respondents considered the least important group of tools in Poland and China – BE (2.98 and 2.69 respectively), while in Croatia – CS (3.45). It should also be noted that China is the country with the most gaps between expectations and operations of companies, as this situation applies to all groups of tools except the BE group. In Poland, unmet expectations relate to three groups: ST, AV, CS. The analysis of the gap level in Poland shows that the discrepancies constituting the difference between the weight and the assessment of individual areas are small, as

they oscillate in the range of 0.13–0.04 points. In Croatia, the gap was identified only in the ST group. It should be noted that in this country this gap assumed the highest value of the divergences recorded in all countries, at 0.63 points. In the next part of the considerations, specific tools will be analyzed in detail in each of the studied groups (see Table 2).

		POLAND		CHINA		CROATIA	
		WEIGHT	ASSESS	WEIGHT	ASSESS	WEIGHT	ASSESS
The Value and Convenience for the Customer		3.90	3.96	3.43	3.20	4.00	4.05
a.	wide range of products available online	3.77	3.92	3.51	3.29	4.33	4.33
b.	attractive and intuitive website	4.32	4.23	3.50	3.05	4.00	4.33
c.	mobile website	3.95	4.12	3.53	3.39	4.00	4.00
d.	customizing products	4.07	4.15	3.41	3.05	4.33	5.00
e.	wide range of delivery	3.76	3.67	3.19	3.14	4.00	3.33
f.	easy payment methods	3.51	3.64	3.42	3.31	3.33	3.33
Security and Trust		3.82	3.78	3.64	3.18	3.91	3.28
a.	security systems and data confidentiality	4.35	4.02	4.02	3.35	4.67	3.33
b.	complete and reliable information on the website	4.39	4.19	4.03	3.32	3.67	2.67
c.	high positioning online	3.91	3.83	2.98	2.99	4.33	3.33
d.	recommendation	3.63	3.66	3.37	3.06	4.00	3.67
e.	reliability of technology	2.81	3.19	3.78	3.17	3.33	2.67
Consumer Service		3.82	3.69	3.24	3.12	3.45	4.02
a.	easy email contact	3.42	3.30	2.97	2.96	2.33	4.33
b.	quick response	4.00	3.86	3.28	3.09	4.00	4.33
c.	availability of instant messenger	4.12	3.72	3.26	3.15	3.67	4.00

Table cont.

		POLAND		CHINA		CROATIA	
		WEIGHT	ASSESS	WEIGHT	ASSESS	WEIGHT	ASSESS
d.	free and easy product returns	4.34	3.89	3.65	3.27	4.33	4.00
e.	information about special offers in a newsletter	3.28	3.61	3.03	3.11	2.67	3.67
f.	language options of the website	3.74	3.78	3.25	3.12	3.67	3.77
Belonging and Engagement		2.98	3.11	2.69	3.01	3.47	4.20
a.	social network communities built around the brand	3.25	3.24	2.99	3.10	4.33	5.00
b.	online word of mouth	2.93	3.24	2.97	3.07	3.00	3.67
c.	business blogs and newsgroups	2.79	2.94	2.79	2.85	3.67	4.67
d.	personalization of communication on the web	2.90	3.07	3.03	3.05	2.67	3.67
e.	sending emails with a specially customized offer	3.01	3.05	3.01	2.97	3.67	4.00
Added Value		3.10	3.07	3.00	2.93	3.60	3.67
a.	customer rewards systems e.g., loyalty programs	3.76	3.52	3.12	2.98	4.33	3.67
b.	advergaming, competitions	3.38	3.34	2.86	2.85	4.00	4.00
c.	access to unique content and resources	2.50	2.70	3.07	2.93	3.33	4.67
d.	free online applications provided by the company	2.73	2.85	2.91	2.94	2.67	3.67
e.	the tools offered by the company to co-create the offer	3.10	2.94	3.04	2.96	3.67	2.33

Tab. 2. Mean significance and evaluation of tested online communication tools. Source: The research survey.

The first analyzed group, including online communication tools classified as VCC regarding purchase, consists of six instruments. The obtained results indicate that the most important activity for Polish young consumers is an attractive and intuitive website (4.32 points) and the possibility of customizing the product (4.07). In Croatia, the wide range of products available online (4.33) and product customization (4.33) were considered the most important. This observation confirms the features of culture characteristic of Poland and Croatia, i.e. individuality and the desire to stand out through the purchased products. Young people in China, similarly to Croatia, considered the most important to be a wide range of offers available on the web (3.51) and matching websites to mobile devices (3.53).

In the second analyzed group of tools classified as ST in each country, one of the most important was security and data confidentiality systems (Poland: 4.35; Croatia: 4.67; China: 4.02). Additionally, in Poland and China two leading tools were found to include complete and reliable information about products/services on the company's website (appropriate 4.39; 4.03), while in Croatia respondents pointed to high positioning online (4.33). It should be noted that in the group of these tools there are numerous gaps between weight and evaluation. In Croatia, this observation applies to all analyzed tools.

The analysis of the results obtained in the CS group indicates that the respondents considered free and easy ways to return the goods the most important. The obtained results show that in each country there is a gap between the importance of the analyzed instrument for young people and how they assess its application by companies. This may indicate problems with returning goods or the need to pay additional fees. A quick response from the company was ranked second in terms of importance in this group in Croatia and China (4.00 and 3.28 respectively), while in Poland the availability of instant messenger (4.13) was ranked second.

Within the analyzed BE group, the importance of most communication instruments was assessed at a fairly low level, which may suggest the lack of willingness to engage in the life of brands and companies. The tools that have been recognized as one of the most important in the three countries within this group concern sending emails with a specially customized offer. In addition, in Poland and Croatia the importance of creating social network communities centered around the company was pointed out (3.25 and 4.33 respectively). The comparison of the weight and evaluation of individual activities indicates that the expectations of young consumers in this area are well met.

In the last analyzed group of tools called AV, customer reward systems were considered the most important in all countries. It is worth emphasizing, however, that this tool using e.g. loyalty systems has also been rated below the allocated weight in all countries. This situation may mean that the loyalty programs implemented by companies do not fully meet the expectations of respondents.

7. Conclusions

The conducted research allowed prioritizing the importance of individual online communication tools in the process of creating relationships with young consumers in each of the analyzed countries. The common tools which are the most important for all countries refer to security and reliable information on the website and systems and data confidentiality. In order to fulfill the expectations in this area, companies need to develop specialist security software and simultaneously make e-customers from Poland, Croatia and China more aware about the functionality of such security mechanisms.

The confrontation of initiatives taken by enterprises in order to acquire and build lasting relationships with the young consumer with the expectations of potential buyers has allowed the verification of the correctness of existing activities of companies. The obtained research results showed that the elements which, according to young people, determine the strength of relations with the company are used by enterprises, and in most cases are quite well evaluated. Young people in Poland gave the highest rating to online stores for providing a wide range of products available online, as well as for using security systems and data confidentiality; in Croatia the best rated were: social network communities built around the brand and customizing products; in China, mobile website and security systems and data confidentiality received the highest marks. On the other hand, in Poland the lowest rating was assigned to access to unique content and resources and free online applications provided by the company; in Croatia: the tools offered by the company to co-create the offer and complete and reliable information on the website; in China: advergaming/competitions and business blogs/newsgroups.

The information obtained can be a valuable direction for companies to improve their online relationship-building activities. In future research directions, the study group can be extended to a different age category. This would allow identification of important online communication tools in other segments and the answer to the question of whether these results would be different from those obtained in the young people segment. In future studies, the scope of the study can also be extended to representative groups for the whole country. Currently conducted research was carried out in narrowed areas of three countries, which may constitute its limitation, as the obtained results may be characteristic for these parts of Poland, Croatia and China.

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