

# Digital Marketing Communication from the Perspective of Individual Consumers: A Cross-Country Comparison

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The main objective of this article is to identify social media (SM) usage in communication between individual consumers and producers in different countries. The considerations in the article are focused on consumers' perspective.

**Research Design & Methods:** The article takes a deductive approach and the aim is to answer two research questions: For what purpose do consumers communicate with companies via SM? Does the frequency of using the most popular SM in the researched countries influence the range of using them in marketing communication? Three research techniques were used in the exploratory empirical study: FGI (pilot study), PAPI and CAWI (main study). The analysis is based on both literature studies and empirical data, collected in several countries (China, Poland, Turkey, the United States).

**Findings:** Results of the exploratory study showed that consumers from the researched countries communicate via SM with producers for different purposes. Some of them look for discounts and information about a product or brand, whilst others also take into account adverts presented by companies on SM, as well as information about company events.

**Implications & Recommendations:** As a result, the findings can be utilised by numerous different groups of stakeholders (such as companies and institutions), in particular companies using SM for marketing communication in foreign markets. The results showed the way of using social media by consumers and that is why they can be advice for producers how to use them in the communication with their customers.

**Contribution & Value Added:** The content of the article is significant, up to date, and original due to the fact that it focuses on current marketing communication issues.

**Article type:** research article

**Keywords:** communication; social media; consumers; cross-cultural comparison

**JEL codes:** M31, M37, M21

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## INTRODUCTION

New technologies – in particular the growth of the Internet – are the greatest and the fastest determinants of change in the way both individuals and companies act and interact in today's world (Ghezzi & Dramitinos, 2016).

The development of the Internet and the tools it has given rise to offer a host of possibilities for fast and efficient communication, as well as expanding relations between individuals and companies around the world. The Internet also gives the possibility of freely expressing one's opinions about other people, companies, or products (Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015; Erkan & Evans, 2016; Wang, Yeh, Chen, & Tsydypov, 2016; Gvili & Levy, 2018). The wide use of online communication tools contributes to the transition from traditional face-to-face communication to Internet communication. The *Social Presence Theory* (SPT) has been replaced (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) by the *Computer Mediated Communication Theory* (CMCT) (Walther, 1996). In the computer mediated communication the tools of the Internet allow users to conduct a dialogue between themselves and other users. This dialogue is possible not only between individual persons but also between individuals and companies. Previously, communication between companies and their potential customers was associated mainly with a monologue prepared by firms through the use of marketing communications tools (e.g. adverts, sales promotions, etc.). Nowadays, the Internet allows individuals to talk to companies directly and vice versa, in doing so, the characteristic of marketing communication has changed from being a one-way to becoming a two-way process.

A significant breakthrough in using the Internet and changes in the communication has been the development of social media (SM) (Barreto, 2014; Duffett, 2017), which to an even greater extent make users engaged in 'being' and functioning online. Social media allow users not only to maintain contact with friends, but also to gather information about the world events, and share information about products (brands, enterprises) and services, etc. (Chu & Kim, 2011; Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016; Gvili & Levy, 2018). Indeed, they are now the main instruments used to develop communication and conduct a dialogue between consumers (individual SM users) and companies (institutional SM users). Consumers are able to communicate with companies via Facebook for different purposes. Sometimes, they look for information about products and brands, including opinions from other users of Facebook (Ho, 2014; Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015; Davies, Musango, & Brent, 2016). In other situations they themselves give opinions about the products they have bought. What is more, individual customers very often share also their negative experiences about brands and in a matter of seconds such information can reach millions of consumers around the world (Bachleda & Berrada-Fathi, 2016; Wijaya, 2017). This can negatively influence the reputation and credibility of a given product to a significant degree (Ho, 2014; Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016; Rochlin, 2017).

Information about the diversity of social Internet tools in the international marketplace is very valuable for companies that want to use those platforms in the communication with their current or future customer (Tafesse & Wien, 2018). The usage of SM in the international context differs due to various determinants. One of the main reasons is associated with different preferences and habits of SM users in different countries and cultures (Ruleman, 2012; Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). The second one is connected with the

legal and political restrictions on SM usage in particular countries. In some countries there are strict controls on the usage of foreign SM (i.e. Facebook in China), but people can communicate via regional SM, which are sometimes the equivalent of international ones. One of the most popular and international social platforms is Facebook (Kemp, 2018), which is the medium with the greatest number of global active users, and plays an important role in the social market. It is a very significant tool in the development of communication for both individual and institutional users. However, as mentioned above, the world's regions differ in terms of the popularity and use of SM and Facebook is not the dominant platform in every country (Kemp, 2018). For example, in Asian countries where, instead of Facebook, Qzone is one of the most popular SM platforms.

In taking into account the continuous development of the digitalisation process and changes in marketing communication, the main purpose of this article is to identify the SM usage in communication between individual consumers and producers in different countries.

Three research techniques were used in the empirical (both qualitative and quantitative) research: FGI (*Focus Group Interview*) in the pilot study, PAPI (*Paper and Pen Personal Interview*) and CAWI (*Computer Assisted Web Interview*) in the main study. The analysis is based on both literature studies and empirical data, collected in several countries in order to identify similarities and differences among them (China, Poland, Turkey, the United States). The countries were chosen to identify a 'bridge' from East to West with regard to digital marketing communication.

The article is structured as follows: the first part of the article includes a short description of business models associated with digitalisation processes. Following this, marketing communication in the context of Social Presence Theory (SPT) and the Computer Mediated Communication Theory (CMCT) is presented, after which an overview of the literature on social media usage and its cultural context is given. Next, research methods and the results of the empirical study are described and analysed. Conclusions and implications are then presented and finally, study limitations and suggestions for future research are explained.

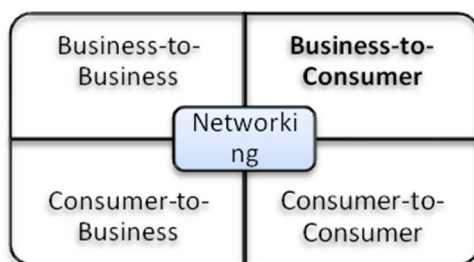
## LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT

### Business Models in the Context of Digitalization

Technological development, in particular the digitalisation process, has had a large impact on business relations between market actors – both individual and institutional. Nowadays not only can the division into B2B (Business-to-Business) and B2C (Business-to-Consumer) markets be observed, but also two more models of relations C2B (Consumer-to-Business) and C2C (Consumer-to-Consumer) continue to develop. They are, then, the end products of continued trends and the economic dimensions of digitalisation (Hüther, 2016) (Figure 1). These models impact different types of relations that already exist among market participants. For example, the B2B model forms the relationship and cooperation between businesses (companies) and, with regard to Industry 4.0, with real-time redesign of value chain, etc. SM development impacts the communication process between individual business representatives by making it faster, more efficient, and less expensive (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015; Valos, Habibi, Casidy, Driesener, & Maplestone, 2016).

The B2C model is mainly associated with marketing communication between institutional and individual actors, where the message sender is a company (usually a producer

of goods). The usage of mainstream marketing tools, like TV or press advertising, means that communication is one-way (Smith & Zook, 2016). However, the advent of SM transformed this process into two-way communication. In other words, SM platforms are tools which help both the individual and institutional users to conduct a dialogue; individuals can not only receive a message, but also respond to it instantly (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016; Ludwig & De Ruyter, 2016). What is more, digital consumers very often participate in the production process via SM, thus becoming a prosumer (an active consumer in the production process) (Chandler & Chen, 2015; Hofacker, Malthouse, & Sultan, 2016). Hütter (2016) states also that the B2C model is associated with smart living and smart-homes, networking and social media, real time information, etc. (He, Wang, & Akula, 2017). In turn, the C2C model pertains to developments of, for example, prosumer trends among consumers and sharing economy activities (Cabosky, 2016; Chung, 2017). Constant access to the Internet and its tools enable these new activities to develop among consumers. Finally, the C2B model includes mainly Big Data analytics. This model focuses on consumers who provide information to companies about their needs, preferences, and behaviour. For this article, I concentrate on the B2C model in the context of changes in marketing communication caused by the digitalisation developments.



**Figure 1. Business models as an effect of digitalisation**

Source: Hütter (2016).

### **Marketing Communication in the Light of Digitalisation and Communication Theory**

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) Theory was created on the basis of socio-cultural changes and innovations related to the development of the Internet and its tools, as well as new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), including the development of mobile telephony (Kim, Lin, & Sung, 2013). The evolution and intensification of CMC are also connected with a continuous increase in the number of new media (Internet media) users around the world (Kemp, 2018). Communication has become faster and cheaper, making it more possible on a larger scale (numerically and geographically) in the era of rapid growth, and allowing for the creation and use of new solutions in the form of mobile devices and Internet tools (Kemp, 2017; 2018). The use of the Internet enables the selection and application of many tools that provide a relatively easy access to a relevant segment of receivers (potential customers). One of the most popular instruments that operates via the Internet are social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube, Pinterest, Qzone, VKontakte) and Internet communicators (e.g. WhatsApp, Viber, Messenger, WeChat). The wide usage of the Internet communication tools contributes to the conversion of communication from face-to-face to Internet. As a result, *Social Presence*

*Theory*, as presented by Short, Williams and Christie (1976), is being replaced by *Computer Mediated Communication Theory* (Walther, 1996). According to SPT the media differ in their social presence, which is interpreted as visual, verbal, and physical presence of the participant (Short *et al.*, 1976). The authors claim that various communication media enable different levels of social presence experience for people who are involved in the communication process. In other words, the level of the social presence experience is related to the quality of the medium, for example, the number of different social signals or active non-verbal channels (Short *et al.*, 1976). Face to face (f2f) communication is characterised by the highest level of 'social presence' (involvement in the communication process), while it is much lower in the concept of CMC theory. The Internet and its tools (e.g. SM) play the role of the communication medium here (Walther, 1996; Haythornthwaite, Wellmani, & Garton, 1998). CMC participants can transfer a message quickly, without direct cost, and to many receivers at the same time (Smith & Zook, 2016). In CMC theory the use of SM reduces personal influences and their effects on the communication process because it is not direct (not f2f), but rather via the Internet (Walther, 1996; Lin & Lu, 2015).

In relation to the context of this article and CMC theory, both the sender and the receiver of the communication process are SM users, who communicate with one another regarding to information about products, brands, and services. Thus, here CMC theory is used as a background for a further literature review concerning the content of SM users' dialogue and discussion about goods and companies. In the traditional concept of marketing communication, the place of the sender is taken by a company (producer) and the receiver of the information is the audience (potential customers) (Smith & Zook, 2016; Finne & Grönroos, 2017). Within the context of CMC theory, the marketing communication process is connected with a dialogue, usually between a company – the producer of goods (institutional participant) – and individual SM users. Companies use Internet marketing communication tools as the equivalent of instruments of mainstream marketing (e.g. profiles on SM, adverts on SM, etc.) and increased SM usage has led to a proliferation of digital tools in the marketing communication, e.g. social advertising.

### **Social Media Usage and Cross Country Perspective**

The SM market is extremely large, and diversified. One of the latest reports on the topic, *Digital in 2018 report: We Are Social*, shows that over 42% of people are active SM users (Kemp, 2018). A SM platform choice is dependent on the communication/entertainment needs of individual users. Referring to the uses and gratification theory, Whiting and Williams (2013), identified ten most common uses and gratifications of SM, which are: 'social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others' (p. 368). When it comes to communication, individuals use SM for various purposes and these can be divided into interpersonal and marketing communication (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016; Ludwig & De Ruyter, 2016). For example, communicating with friends and relatives (Cabosky, 2016); conveying information about products among their users (Chu & Kim, 2011); gathering information about products, brands, etc. before purchasing (e.g. Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015; Erkan & Evans, 2016); sharing an opinion about goods, primarily when they appeared to be low quality (e.g. Balaji, Khong, & Chong, 2016), making contact with companies (via SM profiles) (Wang *et al.*, 2016; Ludwig & De Ruyter, 2016; Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016); and

belonging to fan groups (through SM profiles) of a particular company (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016; Finne & Grönroos, 2017; Mazurek, Korzyński, & Górka, 2019), etc.

SMs with the largest number of active users around the world include: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, Qzone, and Sina Weibo (Kemp, 2018). Possibilities of using them by developing ever newer functions maintains their popularity. Facebook makes it possible to convey different message formats, such as texts, photos, and videos, which can be accessed by friends or followers of a particular user (both individual and institutional) (Chu & Kim, 2011; Khan & Vong, 2014; Davies *et al.*, 2016; Niedermeier, Wang & Zhang, 2016). YouTube, Instagram, or blogs enable users to express themselves in the form of the written word, a video recording, or photos (Kim, Sin, & Tsai, 2014; Khan & Vong, 2014; Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, & Chang, 2015; Kusumasondjaja, 2018). The growing popularity of YouTube and the 'vlogosphere' is associated with changing trends, especially among younger generation, who prefer watching, listening or recording to writing or reading (Chiang & Hsiao, 2015).

However, the popularity and the degree of use of particular social platforms differ around the world and in part this is a consequence of political or legal limitations in the usage of so called international social services. For example, a high ranking of Qzone in the world ranking of SM is largely down to its usage in Asia as a legal alternative to the global market leader, Facebook – which is banned in China (Kemp, 2018). As such, due to the specificity of a particular SM and the researched area of their use in relation to communication processes, in the empirical part of the article Qzone in the Chinese group and Facebook in the other countries (Poland, Turkey and the United States) will be analysed.

Cross-country differences impact the way that people use the Internet and SM for the communication purposes (Furner & George, 2012; Kusumasondjaja, 2018). This is caused by different needs and values of people around the world. However, there are not many studies on how cultural distinctness influences perception and use of SM, as well as the attitude towards them (Suzuki & Takemura, 2013). More studies have been conducted in a similar area, related to interdependencies between different cultures and the ways and purposes of using the Internet. For example, research by Chau, Cole, Massey, Montoya-Weiss and O'Keefe (2002) show differences between Americans and Hong Kong citizens as far as the purpose of using the Internet is concerned. They found that Americans mainly use the Internet to search for information, whereas Hong Kong citizens used it to communicate socially and cultivate hobbies. Similar results were obtained in the research by Ko, Roberts and Cho (2006), where the influence of cultural differences on the motivation for using the Internet was measured. In that study, the American group valued motivators connected with comfort and searching for information highly, while for Korean respondents social interactions, as motivators for using the Internet, were more valuable. One of the few studies that looked into the issue of SM and cultural differences (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011) found that in cultures emphasizing individualistic values (e.g. the USA), SM are only used as entertainment and a way of spending free time, while in more collectivistic cultures (e.g. Korea) a tendency to receive a social support from social relations based on SM could be observed. Hsu, Tien, Lin and Chang (2015) researched the SM usage intention in five culturally distinct countries: Australia, Austria, Japan, Taiwan and the US. The results showed that for users from individualistic countries SM are mainly a source of information, while for the people from the collectivistic countries, socialisation and self-presentation were the main motivators.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Measurement Development and Data Collection

Methodologically, this article takes a deductive approach and the aim is to answer the research questions arising from the literature study:

1. For what purpose do consumers communicate with companies via SM?

This question was asked during the first stage of the research procedure, in particular during the pilot study which had a qualitative dimension. Participants were asked to indicate the most frequent communication activities via SM.

2. Does the frequency of using the most popular SM in the researched countries (Facebook in many countries, Qzone in China) influence the range of using them in marketing communication?

In the relation to the second RQ and on the basis of the literature review the research hypothesis was formulated:

**H1:** The frequency of using SM is related to the range of their usage in the marketing communication.

In the empirical study the author used three research techniques (both qualitative and quantitative) under the interview method: FGI (Focus Group Interview) in the pilot study, CAWI (*Computer Assisted Web Interview*) and PAPI (*Paper and Pen Personal Interview*) in the main study. During the FGI the author gathered the qualitative data regarding to the most frequent communication activities via SM among the participants. In the first measurement stage of main research, the response rate of CAWI was very low (3.5%) so the decision was taken to use the PAPI method instead. The measurement instrument was a standardised questionnaire prepared for the purpose of this research. The element differentiating the research questionnaire in particular markets was the language. In the preparation of the different language versions of the questionnaire a back translation procedure was used in order to eliminate any mistakes stemming from linguistic, lexical, or context differences (Craig & Douglas, 2006).

The empirical data was gathered in 2016 from a total of 1216 respondents from four countries: China (n=295), Poland (n=296), Turkey (n=395), and the United States (n=260). Regarding the sampling method the random selection was used in the part of the research with CAWI. But, the in part where PAPI was used the non-random sampling method was chosen. Designated research assistants gathered the questionnaires from the respondents in each market. Consequently, the sampling method applied influenced the interpretation of the results obtained and so in this case, they should not be fully generalised (see section on limitations of study, below).

### Respondent Profile

People who participated in the research were Internet and SM users (Facebook users in Poland, Turkey, the US and Qzone users in China). With regard to gender, in the Chinese and Polish group women made up the majority of respondents and accounted for circa 65%. In the American and Turkish groups no clear predominance of any gender was observed. Age-wise, the majority of respondents in each country fell in 21-30 years old range.

### Operationalization of Variables

The measures used in the study were developed on the basis of a pilot research project conducted by the author among SM users. Variables were operationalised in two ways. Firstly, in order to identify the frequency of SM usage, an analysis of the indicators of the structure of the respondents, who use it on an everyday basis, was conducted (*at least once a week, at least once a month; have account but do not use it or do not use that medium at all*). Cronbach Alpha results -0.78 – confirmed that the proposed scale was a reliable tool for measurement.

Secondly, in order to identify the relation between the frequency of using the most popular SM for communication purposes was made with the use of Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. This is applied in order to examine the strength of correlation between quantitative characteristics in the case of a small number of observations. The calculation was made separately for every studied group because of their distinctness as well, as the intention to identify differences between them. In order to identify the areas of communication activity via SM, the respondents were asked to determine the frequency of the behaviour by indicating the category – *very often, often, from time to time, rarely, very rarely, never*. Cronbach Alpha results -0.689 – confirmed that the proposed scale was a reliable tool for measurement.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The most popular communication activities via SM were identified during the pilot study, and then they were used in the main study. 34 SM users aged 21-30 participated in the pilot study, which was conducted in Poland, China, Turkey, and the United States. The author conducted two focus groups interviews (FGI) in Poland with a total of 14 participants, Skype conversations in the United States and Turkey (7 people in each country) and WeChat conversations in China with 6 people. Those focus groups and conversations (qualitative data) helped to identify the fifteen most frequent communication activities among participants. These are presented in Table 1 and coded as C<sub>1</sub> ... C<sub>15</sub>. Following this, the main research (with the use of CAWI and PAPI) participants were asked to indicate the frequencies of their communication activities via SM. The indicated reasons for using SM can be divided into two groups: interpersonal communication among individuals (C<sub>1</sub>,...,C<sub>7</sub>) and participation in marketing communication of individuals with companies (C<sub>8</sub>,...,C<sub>15</sub>).

The results, demonstrating relations between the frequency of using SM (Facebook in Poland, Turkey and the United States; Qzone in China) and communication activities, are presented by means of Spearman's correlation coefficients (Table 1).

The general results show many similarities among countries regarding interpersonal communication: there are many statistically significant correlations between the frequency of using SM and communication activities in Poland, Turkey and China, where it was found that the more people use SM, the more they participate in the communication with individuals (C<sub>1</sub>,...,C<sub>7</sub>). The smallest number of statistically significant relations was identified in the American group.



**Table 1. Relations between the frequency of using SM and the communication activities**

Communication activity via SM	Facebook			Qzone
	Poland n=296	Turkey n=395	United States n=260	China n=295
	R	R	R	R
C <sub>1</sub> - Maintaining contact with friends	<b>0.368*</b>	<b>0.181*</b>	<b>0.411*</b>	<b>0.161*</b>
C <sub>2</sub> - Maintaining contact with family	<b>0.120*</b>	<b>0.187*</b>	<b>0.382*</b>	<b>0.153*</b>
C <sub>3</sub> - Exchanging views and opinions on different topics with others	<b>0.239*</b>	<b>0.152*</b>	0.031	0.07
C <sub>4</sub> - Placing private photographs and films	<b>0.263*</b>	<b>0.241*</b>	<b>0.312*</b>	<b>0.20*</b>
C <sub>5</sub> - Recommending interesting websites to other SM users	<b>0.204*</b>	<b>0.182*</b>	<b>0.132*</b>	<b>0.16*</b>
C <sub>6</sub> - Looking for information about different products and brands	<b>0.127*</b>	<b>0.125*</b>	0.088	<b>0.143*</b>
C <sub>7</sub> - Asking SM friends for advice concerning purchase of product and brands	<b>0.165*</b>	<b>0.137*</b>	0.002	<b>0.186*</b>
C <sub>8</sub> - Expressing a positive opinion about good products and brands (after good experiences with the product or brand)	<b>0.127*</b>	0.076	-0.045	0.013
C <sub>9</sub> - Expressing a negative opinion when the purchased product is of low quality	<b>0.280*</b>	<b>0.159*</b>	-0.031	<b>0.135*</b>
C <sub>10</sub> - Making comments on the information posted by other users (both individuals and institutional)	<b>0.197*</b>	<b>0.230*</b>	<b>0.182*</b>	<b>0.15*</b>
C <sub>11</sub> - Watching advertisements placed by companies on SM	0.056	0.07	0.01	<b>0.192*</b>
C <sub>12</sub> - Being a fan of a brand or company to obtain discounts for purchasing products	<b>0.119*</b>	0.04	0.02	0.07
C <sub>13</sub> - Taking part in competitions organised by companies on SM	0.036	<b>0.13*</b>	0.04	<b>0.15*</b>
C <sub>14</sub> - Following companies' SM profiles, and 'liking it' guarantees the discounts	0.02	<b>0.17*</b>	0.08	<b>0.16*</b>
C <sub>15</sub> - Using promotions which are communicated by companies via SM	<b>0.17*</b>	<b>0.19*</b>	0.04	<b>0.172*</b>

R – Spearman Indicator; \* Correlation is significant at the level of  $p < 0.05$

Source: own study.

More varied results were obtained in the case of participants' engagement in marketing communication (C<sub>8</sub>,...,C<sub>15</sub>). With regard to expressing positive opinions about the products raised after good consumer experiences (C<sub>8</sub>), a statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) correlation was achieved only in the Polish group. By contrast, placing a negative opinion about products (brands or companies) on social platforms is much more often done among research participants (C<sub>9</sub>). In the Polish, Chinese and Turkish groups statistically significant correlations ( $p < 0.05$ ) were noted, and the highest results of the Spearman indicator (R) were obtained in the Polish group. When it came to commenting (i.e. taking part in Internet communication) on information placed by both individuals and companies (C<sub>10</sub>), statistically significant correlations ( $p < 0.05$ ) were obtained in each group. The

more respondents use SM, the more often they take part in such conversations. The highest score was achieved in the Turkish group ( $R = 0.230$ ). Watching advertisements placed by companies on SM ( $C_{11}$ ) was not a common activity for a majority of research participants. Only among Chinese Qzone users was a statistically significant correlation ( $p < 0.05$ ) identified ( $R = 0.192$ ). Poles were more eager (compared to the other groups) to become fans of companies' brands in order to receive a discount ( $C_{12}$ ), only in that group there was a statistically significant correlation ( $p < 0.05$ ) obtained, albeit at a low level ( $R = 0.119$ ). Competitions organised on companies' social media profiles ( $C_{13}$ ) were frequently used in Turkey and China, and the more these groups used SM (Facebook or Qzone), the more frequently they participated in such events. A further communication activity is 'liking' information presented on companies' SM profiles ( $C_{14}$ ). For this category, statistically significant correlations ( $p < 0.05$ ) were achieved in two out of the four researched groups (Turkey and China). Lastly, SM are effective as a tool of communication about companies' promotional campaigns ( $C_{15}$ ), with respondents in three groups having a positive attitude to marketing information presented on SM profiles, but not advertising. In these two groups, the more they used SM, the more often they took into account the promotional information presented on companies' profiles. With regard to the hypothesis (H1) formulated before the measurement, it should be stated that it is partially confirmed. The confirmation depends on the marketing communication activity via SM and a country. It should be emphasized that the H1 is not confirmed in the American group. The Chinese, Polish and Turkish groups are similar in the number of achieved correlations between the frequency of SM usage and particular marketing communication activity. The hypothesis was approved in all the countries in the relation to the  $C_{10}$  (*making comments on the information posted by other users - both individuals and institutional*).

The analysis done in both the theoretical and empirical parts of the article showed few differences among the researched countries in relation to the use of SM (Facebook, Qzone) for interpersonal and marketing communication purposes. Moreover, great importance of Facebook in Poland and Turkey, and Qzone in China should be highlighted. In a situation when a company would like to use SM for marketing communication in these markets it should make use of these services. Less statistically significant correlations were found in the case of the American group. These results show that American respondents use SM especially for interpersonal communication (communication with friends, family members, etc.). The results also confirm the assumptions of CMC theory, where consumers communicate via SM as Internet tools.

The results also confirmed the findings of the literature analysis, where it was found that consumers use SM for both interpersonal and marketing communication purposes. In this case the results can be compared to the achievements of e.g. Chu and Kim (2011), Kucukemiroglu and Kara (2015), Erkan and Evans (2016) or Finne and Grönroos (2017). The empirical research showed some new contexts and activities regarding the reasons for communication via SM, e.g. obtaining discounts for purchasing products by being a fan of a company or taking part in competitions organised by companies on SM. It has been found that there is not much difference among researched countries regarding interpersonal communication. All respondents communicate with their friends and relatives, and share private movies and photos via SM, etc. What is interesting, however, is that the presented

results have not confirmed the previous results obtained by, for example Ko *et al.* (2006) and Hsu *et al.* (2015), where people from collectivistic cultures had a higher tendency to build relations, and people from individualistic cultures treated SM as a source of gathering information. The reasons for this could be a relatively young age of respondents and the research limitations presented in the last section of this article. Young people have many cosmopolitan behaviours which are sometimes far from their cultural roots.

More differences among the respondents can be recognized in the scope of marketing communication. Americans are less involved in social marketing communication activities than Poles, the Chinese and Turks. Using the cross-cultural data, and comparing the obtained Spearman's correlation coefficients to the coefficients of cultural dimensions distinguished in the research done by Hofstede's team (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), it is worth noting that a higher degree of collectivism (and lower degree of individualism) is related to more frequent use of social marketing communication activities. The greatest number of interdependencies was obtained in the Chinese and Turkish groups, which are also characterised by the highest degree of collectivism (China - IDV=20, Turkey - IDV=37). Collectivistic cultures are characterised by acting in a group and emphasizing the achievements of a group over individual ones. Looking for information about products from other users and sharing experience and knowledge with them is related to collectivistic values. Moreover, when characterising collectivistic cultures, Hofstede *et al.* (2010, p. 117) state that their 'consumption patterns show dependence on others' and that a 'social network is the primary source of information'. These behaviours were also verified in the research presented in this article. However, it needs to be emphasized that the Polish group proved to be an exception. In the studies done by Hofstede, Poland was found to be a country with a moderate level of individualism (IDV=60), but the results of the primary research showed quite high involvement of Poles in social marketing communication activities. There is a discussion about the utility of Hofstede's results regarding an individual's behaviours, because they are based on national level constructs (Brewer & Venaik, 2012; De Mooij, 2013). However, because of the multi-national profile of respondents described in this article and existing differences among them, the purpose here was to show any connections with existing cultural dimensions (Zhang & Hao, 2018).

## CONCLUSIONS

Concluding the results of the study presented in the article it is worth noting that SM are very good sources of gathering information about both products and consumers. Furthermore, SM platforms are great tools of communication and conducting a dialogue (C<sub>10</sub>) between companies and current or potential customers (B2C market). The researched consumers in this article involve themselves in social dialogue with other SM users. This was indicated by the frequency they commented on posted information. However, the results also showed that SM users are more eager to express negative opinions than positive ones about products, brands, and companies (C<sub>9</sub>) on social platforms. In the presented study Poles were the most likely consumers to post such claims. The problem of the strong influence of negative opinions on the decision of other buyers confirmed the results of earlier studies (e.g. Balaji *et al.*, 2016). Useful advice for Polish companies which use SM in communication with customers is to be more sensitive and follow posts of SMs users very carefully. What is more, companies should react to negative posts immediately. Another finding

that could be of use for companies is that consumers are usually interested in social marketing communication to obtain a discount or take part in a promotion. Thus, the study findings are of great value for producers that want to use SM for marketing communication. The engagement of social media tools can be helpful in, on the one hand, advertising and informing customers (SM users) about products, promotions, events, etc., and, on the other hand, conducting a dialogue via SM with customers, answering questions, and quickly reacting to negative opinions and comments. In other words, SM platforms have a great potential to be a marketing communication tool in the international marketplace, but they have to be used properly and with adaptation to particular markets and clients.

There are some limitations to this article which should be highlighted. Firstly, the most efficient method of acquiring information would not be a quantitative questionnaire, but rather by qualitative research in which individual and institutional SM profiles would be analysed. This is because the answers given in questionnaires may differ slightly from actual SM usage patterns. The most effective method to minimise this risk is observational research. Some literature studies show that researching the SM usage is more effective when using qualitative methods (e.g. Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011). However, when undertaking a study across multiple national markets, this method generates considerable costs and, as a result, researchers often decide to apply only questionnaire methods. Another limitation issue is that the non-random sampling method and the sample size means there is a lack of possibility to extrapolate the results to whole populations.

This notwithstanding, research limitations are very often a stimulus to either continue a study or expand it, especially in relation to international activities. Further international-scale research on the utility of SM could be expanded and improved via random sampling and larger samples. For future research, it could be useful to identify product categories and ask respondents about their behaviour regarding marketing communication via SM. Such findings would bring more managerial implications for producers of particular goods.

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