IMPROVEMENT IN CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE CREATION OF VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITIES

POBOLJŠANJE KORISNIČKOG ISKUSTVA KREIRANJEM VIRTUALNIH ZAJEDNICA MARAKA

MARKET TRŽIŠTE

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to examine the principles of creating customer experience and analyze a novel application of such principles in virtual brand communities (VBC). The Glossier brand has been chosen for the case study of creating the VBC.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs quantitative comparison for the analysis of the social media content of the Glossier brand as part of virtual communities and qualitative semi-structured interviews to uncover how Lithuanian brands create VBCs and broaden the experience of brand users. The components of customer experience have been used as a core theoretical framework for identification based on textual or visual elements in VBCs.

Findings and Implications – Content analysis of social media has confirmed that the experience of VBCs is created by applying the components of customer experience. In order to attract customers, brands most frequently use emotional and sensory components, with relationship, lifestyle, pragmatic, and cognitive components used half as often. According to the informants, the sensory and emotional components were

Sažetak

Svrha – Cilj je rada preispitati principe kreiranja korisničkog iskustva i analizirati novu primjenu principa u virtualnim zajednicama maraka (VBC). Za studiju slučaja kreiranja virtualne zajednice marke korištena je marka Glossier.

Metodološki pristup – Temelji se na kvantitativnoj usporedbi koja analizira sadržaj o marki Glossier u društvenim medijima virtualnih zajednica i kvalitativnim polustrukturiranim intervjuima, a kako bi se otkrilo kako druge litavske marke stvaraju VBC-ove i proširuju iskustvo korisnika marke. Komponente korisničkog iskustva korištene su kao temeljni teorijski okvir za identifikaciju u skladu s tekstualnim ili vizualnim elementima u VBC-ima.

Rezultati i implikacije – Analiza sadržaja društvenih medija potvrdila je da se iskustvo virtualnih zajednica maraka stvara primjenom komponenti korisničkog iskustva. Za privlačenje potrošača marke uglavnom koriste emocionalne i osjetilne komponente. Međutim, upola manje koriste odnos, stil života, pragmatične i kognitivne komponente. Prema ispitanicima, osjetilna i emocionalna komponenta prihvaćene su kao najvažnije

recognized as most important for shaping customer experience in virtual communities. They agree that visual and hearing stimulation have the most decisive impact on creating customer experience through the sensory component. By contrast, touch, taste, and smell have a less significant effect on the stimulation of the sensory component.

Limitations – This paper is limited by the fact that the conducted analysis covers only the case of one brand, and the professionals' opinions might depend on their cultural background.

Originality – The study examines one of the fastest-growing consumer communication phenomena in virtual brand communities, which has not received sufficient attention of researchers.

Keywords – virtual brand communities, customer experience, brand, customer-brand touchpoints

za oblikovanje korisničkog iskustva u virtualnim zajednicama. Oni se slažu da vizualna i slušna stimulacija imaju odlučujući utjecaj na kreiranje korisničkog iskustva kroz osjetilnu komponentu. Nasuprot tome, dodir, okus i miris imaju manje snažan učinak na stimulaciju osjetilne komponente.

Ograničenja – Ograničenje rada proizlaze iz provedene analize koja pokriva samo slučaj jedne marke, a mišljenja stručnjaka mogu ovisiti o kulturološkoj pozadini.

Doprinos – Rad istražuje jedan od rastućih fenomena komunikacije potrošača u virtualnim zajednicama maraka kojemu nedostaje pozornost istraživača.

Ključne riječi – virtualne zajednice maraka, korisničko iskustvo, marka, dodirne točke korisnika s markom

1. INTRODUCTION

Rapid technological advances, market changes, and gradually increasing competition have driven businesses to abandon mass marketing strategies and start building a direct and deeply personal relationship with the customer. Such a close relationship encourages the customer to use or consume the products and services of a particular brand with other people, as part of a collective rather than an individual experience. A service or a product may become the core of the shared passion, leading to the formation of a virtual brand community (VBC). The geographically undefined VBC driven by values, social norms, and a strong sense of membership and attachment to the brand appears to be one of the strongest tools for marketers to gain a foothold in the market and bring together loyal brand ambassadors.

Given that the creation of virtual brand communities (VBCs) is a relatively new phenomenon in marketing, it has not yet been subject to extensive scientific analysis. Among the scholars researching it, Kaur, Paruthi, Islam, and Hollebeek (2020) investigated the role of VBC in consumer brand engagement; Alonso-Dos-Santos, Guardia, Campos, Calabuig-Moreno, and Ko (2018) explored the relationship between sponsorship and VBCs in sports; and Garay Tamajon and Morales Perez (2020) analyzed user engagement in festival VBCs. The lack of information on the principles of building virtual communities to improve customer experience hinders brands from developing an effective VBC-building strategy and thus enhancing the experience of brand users. The paper aims to explore the principles of customer experience creation and analyze the application of such principles in virtual brand communities. The Glossier brand has been chosen for the case study of VBC creation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Principles of creating customer experience

Pine II and Gilmore (2002) have explored the topic of experience marketing, stating that "the best way to market any offering is with an experience so engaging that potential customers cannot help but pay attention – and pay up by buying the company's offerings as a result." Experiences are formed throughout the customer life cycle, thus arising from engagement in stimuli, and can be real, desired, or virtual (Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt & Rogers, 2008).

Since goods and services tend to lose their uniqueness and value, experience created for the customer is considered a novel and unique way to compete with other brands and stand out. Experience marketing increases trust in the brand, customer satisfaction, and brand loyalty, brings higher profits, shapes customer behavior, and prolongs the customer-brand relationship (Havíř, 2017; Laškarin Ažić, Dlačić & Galičić, 2020). New marketing strategies such as experiential marketing, content marketing, or personalized customer experience marketing focus on providing a highly relevant and personalized customer experience.

Customer experience is a result of the interaction between a company, an organization, or a brand and the customer of the brand throughout their relationship. The interaction among these components consists of three parts, including customer-brand touchpoints, customer life cycle, and the components of customer experience (Rosenbaum, Otalora & Ramírez, 2017). During the customer life cycle, the customer interacts with the brand, which results in economic exchange and a relationship that has acquired a specific name in the world of marketing – relationship marketing, which seeks to involve and integrate customers, suppliers, and other infrastructure partners into business development and marketing activities, which in turn creates close interactive relationships (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Bazrkar, Hajimohammadi, Aramoon

& Aramoon, 2021). Relationship marketing embraces the relationship associations that the customer has with a brand, store, or individual retailer (Maheshwari & Kushwah, 2019). In the classic customer decision-making process, the customer first feels the need to solve an emerging problem, after which they start searching for information, evaluate alternatives to dealing with the problem, and finally make a purchase decision. However, for some time now, there has been a marked change in marketing strategies, with brands taking aggressive, proactive action ranging from the reaction stage to the customer response stage (Edelman & Singer, 2015). Companies create and redesign their customer decision-making process to attract and retain consumers by developing personal customer experiences rather successfully and meticulously, making it difficult for a customer to resist once the process is under way. Customer experience is subject to a comparison of the purchaser's expectations and the incentives arising from the interaction with the company and its offerings, in which the moments of customer-brand touchpoints are taken into accout (Gentile, Spiller & Noci, 2007). Gentile et al. (2007) presented their concept of customer experience as a multifaceted structure formed from individual components. Schmitt (1999) introduced the five strategic modules of experience: (1) sensory experiences (sense), (2) affective experiences (feel), (3) creative cognitive experiences (think), (4) physical experiences, behavior, and lifestyle (act) and (5) social identity experiences (relate), which have been transformed into components of customer experience and expanded to a (6) relationship component (Gentile et al., 2007). The sensory component represents an offering focused on providing customers with a sensory experience of goods designed to stimulate vision, hearing, touch, taste, smell, also giving rise to an aesthetic impression, excitement, satisfaction, and a sense of beauty. Sensory marketing aims to increase brand awareness and create a brand image by stimulating the customers' senses and associating the brand with the customer's image, lifestyle, and personality

(Agapito, Pinto & Mendes, 2012). The emotional component manifests itself in the brand offering by evoking an emotional experience in the customer and establishing an emotional relationship with the brand and the offered products. Martin, O'Neill, Hubbard, and Palmer (2008) distinguished three main types of emotions in customer behavior: (1) emotion as a psychological state, related to instinct; (2) emotion as the perception of the value of a particular event; (3) emotion developed in the course of the gained experience that relates to a specific event or occasion. This is what can be used to build the VBC. The cognitive component is accepted as the effort required for cognition and decision processing (Bertrandie & Zielke, 2017). Cognition, which allows people to evaluate, examine and compare different things, is prior knowledge gained by the customer. Therefore, some authors believe that the cognitive component is the first element of customer experience aimed at attracting customers through surprise, intrigue, provocation, with the goal of engaging their creative thinking during shopping or consumption to increase the flow of associations and ideas and thus fully involve customers in the shopping or consumption process (Bustamante & Rubio, 2017). The pragmatic component relates to customer experience in perceiving product-related information subjects such as product technology, the product market, or knowledge of using the product (Weerasinghe & Warnakulasooriya, 2019). The lifestyle component is designed to enrich the customers' life by focusing on physical experience, while showing them an alternative lifestyle or actions. A rational approach to changes in behavior is one of many options for varying behavior. However, it is a motivating, inspiring, and emotionally occurring phenomenon (Schmitt, 1999). The relationship component refers to customer experience that encompasses the individual and social context, relationships with other people, or the customer epitome. In the context of the relationship component, retail outlets have a great advantage in offering a human communication experience to their customers, thus expanding

the boundaries of daily personal socialization (Brocato, Voorhees & Baker, 2012). In creating a customer experience and incorporating all the components mentioned above, brands are more likely to create an invaluable experience together with the customer. Creating a unique customer experience fosters customer loyalty, which can be developed and strengthened through VBCs using the six components of customer experience introduced above (Gentile et al., 2007).

2.2. Theoretical aspects of creating virtual communities

A virtual community is defined as a group of individuals or business partners who interact for the common good, while their interactions are partially supported by or include technologies (Porter, 2004). Most virtual communities are found on social networking sites where community members express their opinions, post, comment, discuss, share tips or collaborate. In virtual communities, ideas and information are exchanged among virtual strangers or virtual friends. Freedom of self-expression, lack of central control, communication among a wide variety of people, and enormous volunteer efforts are only some of the features of such communities. Interaction among the participants of virtual communities takes place exactly as it does in the physical space except for two features distinguishing them from real life – such interaction is based only on the written language. Community participants communicate without additional descriptive aspects such as gender, identity, etc. (Malhotra, Gosain & Hars 1997). New technologies have facilitated the interaction of the real and the virtual world in which the use of experience marketing is provided to customers, many of whom have become members of the VBCs acting as a living manifesto of brand personality and customer engagement (McWilliam, 2000; Farhat, Mokhtar & Salleh 2020).

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) introduced the concept of brand community as a specific, geographically undefined community based on a structured set of social relationships among brand fans. Defined as such, the brand community is specific in that it is barely holistic, targeted at customers, and non-geographically bound. The content of such a community and the basis for the membership of its customer group remains entirely unclear. Although the definition of the brand community reveals the key characteristics of such a community, for this reason, Amine and Sitz (2004) proposed another, more comprehensive definition of the VBC, presenting it as a self-selected, non-hierarchical, and geographically undefined group of customers bound by values, social norms, and a strong sense of belonging to each other and the group as a whole in respect of their shared attachment to a particular brand.

2.3. Effect of virtual communities on the experience of customers using a brand

Creating a virtual community is becoming an inevitable step in customer-oriented marketing. Virtual communities involve their customers, encouraging them to create rich content and inter-communicate (Wu & Fang, 2010). Unlike the promotional messages communicated by the brand, customer-generated content, when properly used, helps to increase brand awareness. It encourages trust between customers and thus fosters trust in the brand itself. Customers who join the VBC learn about and familiarize themselves with the products, while also sharing their personal experiences gained from using such products. The customers of such communities turn to each other for quick advice and solutions to technical issues. Community members operate faster than the customer service center and can resolve problems immediately and more efficiently. The exchange of information in the virtual community transcends physical barriers and forms diverse content communication models, leading to a solid brand-customer relationship. Wu and Fang (2010) say that virtual communities provide a space for customers to interact and share information, which means that customers play a

significant role in generating new ideas through their knowledge of the brand and the sharing of experiences. The members of such communities are innovative thinkers. They are more likely to engage in the generation of new ideas (Wu & Fang, 2010) and implement open innovation (Elia, Petruzzelli & Urbinati, 2020).

Royo-Vela and Casamassima (2011) found that belonging to a VBC had a positive effect on customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, emotional attachment, brand trust and encouraged customers to defend the brand when criticized, thus reinforcing customer loyalty. Chantamas and Prasongsukarn (2017) believe that strong customer self-identification and relationship with a brand could be described as love arising between the brand and the customer. Self-identification with the brand also encompasses emotional attachment, making the relationship much more positive. Virtual brand communities, in this case, play an essential role in customer behavior and relationship formation. They support communication between customers and promote friendship, thus leading to a sense of community and collective self-identification with the brand.

The VBC is a powerful marketing communication tool that helps to reveal customer needs and develop customer loyalty to the brand (Chi, 2011). Creating customer experience through virtual communities is a relatively new phenomenon in Lithuania. Hence, it is essential to explore and find out how the components of customer experience have been employed for creating VBCs and how Lithuanian brands have used these components to improve brand experience and customer loyalty.

This study examines one of the fastest-growing consumer communication phenomena in virtual brand communities and consumer involvement in brand communication.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the extent to which the components of customer experience are used for creating virtual brand communities, the beauty brand Glossier, which was established in 2014 as a blog and has experienced success in this field, has been put forward as an example. In 2019, the value of Glossier exceeded USD 1.2 billion (WSJ, 2019), prompting a look at how the company achieved such results through direct-to-customer marketing efforts. Hence, the social media content of the Glossier brand as part of virtual communities has been observed and a quantitative comparison of the obtained data performed. The components of customer experience (Gentile et al., 2007) have been identified based on textual or visual elements (see Table 1). Having established Glossier's touchpoints with the virtual community, an analysis of the brand's content on Facebook and Instagram social networks was conducted from 1 January to 31 January 2020.

TABLE 1: Identifying the components of customer experience in textual and visual elements

Component	Component description	Component manifestation in textual elements	Component manifestation in visual elements
Sensory	Component stimulation affects customers' feelings, vision, hearing, touch, taste, smell and creates an aesthetic impression, excitement, satisfaction, and a sense of beauty.	Describes the product's appearance, texture, relief, and smell, identifies the taste.	Brand logo, primary colors, and product packaging or texture; customers; the result achieved by employing the product.
Emotional	Includes an affective system for creating moods, feelings, and emotions.	Adjectives, visual comparisons, funny phrases, or texts are used. Stories are told. Impressions and recommendations provided by other people are shared.	Bright or calm colors, associative photographs.
Cognitive	Encourages the customer to use personal creativity, problem-solving, thinking, and conscious psychological processes.	Product features and benefits are named, social responsibility is promoted, knowledge, specific facts are provided, customers are invited to share personal experiences.	Shared photos of other customers show the products at other customers' homes.
Pragmatic	Stimulates the customer's actions, includes all stages of the product life cycle (introduction to the market, product growth, maturity, decline), broadens the experience of using the product.	The customer is encouraged to act and arrive at a decision, news and official information on the brand are reported, product benefits are discussed, feedback is collected.	The result produced by the product, the real benefits of the product, and the abundance of product offers are depicted.
Lifestyle	Customer value and belief system and system validation adopt customer lifestyle and behavior principles.	Habit formation is discussed, lifestyle and behavioral habits of brand employees and other community members are shared, self-identification with customers contemplating customer-related situations, employing the elements of everyday life.	Moments of daily life, home environment, animals, images of everyday life situations familiar to customers (e.g., flying, airplane) are used.
Relationship	Includes the person and their social context, relationship with other people, or a personal ideal, promotes shared rather than individual consumers.	Customer thoughts, feedback, and impressions are used, established relationships between community members are introduced, discussions are appreciated.	Photos show people and other customers or depict images relating to the products applied in the customers' lives.

To uncover how Lithuanian brands create VBCs and broaden the experience of brand users, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the representatives of NewCrush and Tesonet brands, and of creative agencies IDEA and Pildyk responsible for brand communication and marketing. For ethical reasons, the responses of informants were coded and are not disclosed in the paper, with targeted selection of typical cases used to select informants (Robinson, 2014; Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). The selection criteria specified a Lithuanian company that communicates with customers in the social space and has created a private virtual community. The inductive content analysis method was selected for the examination of obtained data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Subcategories, categories, and topics were identified by analyzing content (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The content analysis approach was used to summarize the findings (Patton, 1990; Smaling, 2003). A similar approach was used in a study conducted by Akram and Kortam (2020), which examined the relationship between customer experience, customer engagement, and purchase intention in online settings.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Analyzing the content of the Glossier brand

A customer-focused brand must follow the consumer, which is why Glossier's profiles are found on all popular social networking platforms. Glossier's touchpoints with the VBC are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Glossier's touchpoints with the VBC

Platform – the touchpoint of Glossier and the virtual community	Number of virtual community members on the platform
Reddit https://www.reddit.com/r/glossier/	15.1 thousand
Twitter https://twitter.com/glossier https://twitter.com/IntoTheGloss	103.7 thousand (Glossier), 190.1 thousand (Into The Gloss)
Facebook private group "Into The Gloss: The Group"	18,627 members
Facebook https://www.facebook.com/intothegloss/ https://www.facebook.com/glossier/	95,459 likes (Into The Gloss) and 328,914 likes (Glossier)
Instagram https://www.instagram.com/glossier/ https://www.instagram.com/intothegloss/	2.7 million followers on @glossier and 842,000 followers on @intothegloss
Pinterest https://www.pinterest.com/glossiernyc/ https://www.pinterest.com/intothegloss/	58.5 thousand followers on Glossier 81.2 thousand followers on Into the Gloss
YouTube https://www.youtube.com/user/glossierTV https://www.youtube.com/user/IntoTheGlossMotion	151 thousand subscribers (Glossier TV) 159 thousand subscribers (Into The Gloss)
Internet website www.glossier.com	On average, 2.24 million visits to the website per month (https://www.similarweb.com/website/glossier.com)
Private Slack channel for the most loyal members of the community	~ 100 members

The brand has gathered the most significant number of customers on its @glossier platform as part of the Instagram social network, with more than 2.7 million Instagram users following brand communication (see Table 2). The Facebook page of Glossier's social network is the brand's second-largest touchpoint, bringing together 328,914 brand supporters. Thus, for the purpose of analyzing media content and determining the components of customer experience, two touchpoints on the social networks – the brand's Facebook and Instagram accounts – were selected. During this period, 37 posts were created on the Facebook and 31 on the Instagram account. Fourteen posts were found to be the same on both platforms. However, they differed in the upload date, with visualization and the generated audience response to the posts also varying. A total of 68 posts of the analyzed media content were examined.

Use of the sensory component in Glossier's communication. An analysis of media content covering 68 posts identified the use of the sensory component in 49 posts. All five elements of the sensory component were identified in the posts, most frequently stimulating the visual sensory element being stimulated most frequently. The posts include photos of promotional products dominated by brand identity colors, enabling the customer to identifyf the brand and related products quickly. The stimulation of touch, taste, and smell in the digital space is challenging due to a lack of physical contact with the brand. However, Glossier also employs parts of the sensory component introduced above. The brand's posts provide detailed descriptions of products specifying their consistency, while videos and photos are used to show the products and describe their smell or taste. In this way, the brand provides the customers with the possibility to imagine "touching" the product. Brand efforts to convey all five features of the sensory component, overcoming the virtual barrier, have produced a customer response. For instance, one of Glossier's most successful Instagram posts received 214,828 reviews, 39,482 likes, and 250 comments.

In comparison, the Facebook platform received 6,300 reviews and 73 reactions, thus providing an excellent example of how the sensory component can be used. For instance, an audio-visual post advertising a set of moisturizers for facial skin immediately covers two components – vision and hearing. Water and the sound of water splashing enhance the sensory element, thus allowing the customer to imagine moisture and water.

Use of the emotional component in Glossier's communication. The emotional component has been observed in 65 of the 68 posts covered in the analysis of the media content of Glossier's social networks. The use of the emotional component encompassing the customer's affective system in almost all posts suggests that the brand pays close attention to the stimulation of customers' emotions during communication by visual and textual means. As for visual aids, the stimulation of the emotional component is most pronounced in the application of various colors and associative photographs, the use of which helps a brand significantly to stand out from its competitors and has a considerable effect on people's moods and feelings or attitudes towards the advertised products (Singh, 2006). The emotional component of textual elements is clearly visible in humorous posts that make the customers smile or laugh. For instance, one of the posts published on the social network Facebook received as many as 2,200 likes, 733 reactions, and 314 shares.

Adjectives such as "fresh", "grainy", "rough", etc. used in posts as product descriptions allow the customer to understand the post better and feel the message being communicated. Some posts have been observed to employ customer-generated photos of brand products, which also have an impact on the customer's affective system. Customers observe the products used by other people, learn from their experiences and the results obtained, submit recommendations to build greater trust in the brand, while perceiving such situations as sincere word-of-mouth advertising, product acceptance, and

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confirmation that the products involved are worth trying. However, the emotional component in Glossier's communication is combined with the other customer experience components in different posts, usually in conjunction with the sensory or relationship component. The sensory component visually complements and influences the affective system, whereas the relationship component contributes to an impression of community acceptance.

Use of the cognitive component in Glossier's communication. The cognitive component, identified in 24 of the 68 posts selected for media content analysis, is most evident in textual elements such as informative posts in which the brand provides customers with precise information about product composition or detailed promotional posts describing product characteristics. Customers have a great affinity for such posts. The brand's most successful post used the cognitive component and collected as many as 46,860 likes and 168 comments on Instagram, with 78 reactions on Facebook.

Use of the pragmatic component in Glossier's communication. The analysis of media content and Glossier's posts on social media has found that 25 of 68 posts employed the pragmatic component of customer experience. As the pragmatic component seeks to stimulate customer actions at all stages of the product life cycle, the analyzed social media posts have identified component manifestations only. This component has most frequently appeared in official brand posts about new stores or products. The posts regarding the brand contained questions for customers with a view to obtaining their opinion on the products and collecting feedback.

As for visual content, the pragmatic component has been observed through customer-generated content demonstrating the product life cycle, that is, through the evaluation performed by customers after purchasing a product. The brand, applying the customer-generated content, promotes customer confidence in the brand, allows customers to take part in

a significant share of the brand, and ensures a longer-lasting relationship with the customer even after purchasing the product. Although the component has not been widely used in brand communication compared to other components, an important point to mention is that the brand claims to pay particular attention to customer service on Facebook and Instagram. The brand responds to any questions posed by customers in the comments or communicates with them through private messages, providing an answer in less than 24 hours. Thus, the brand ensures customer satisfaction with the product at all stages of the product life cycle.

Use of the lifestyle component in Glossier's communication. The lifestyle component has been observed in 28 of the 68 posts published by Glossier on Facebook and Instagram. One of the brand's main goals when using the lifestyle component is responding to customer values and beliefs. Knowing a customer on a personal level is a crucial point that allows the brand to deliberately select topics, situations and related photos matching the brand user's lifestyle. Media content analysis has revealed that Glossier knows their customer and integrates this component in almost every second post. The component manifests itself in the formation of habits and beauty routines, as well as everyday life situations and lifestyles. For instance, the brand's most successful post in this regard emphasizes customer values and the brand itself, claiming that the smell of perfume must not overshadow a girl's personality but rather highlight it. The phrase contained in the post – "You are the main ingredient" – received 75,681 likes and 405 comments on the social network Instagram.

Meanwhile, a similar post written on Facebook received 157 reactions, 17 comments, and was shared once. Facebook's audience was not as active in its response as in other posts, which may have been due to different posting dates and contextual circumstances possibly influenced by customer engagement. Glossier's Instagram platform received more than the

monthly average of likes for the post, which has been assessed as receiving an excellent customer reaction and high engagement in comments.

Use of the relationship component in Glossier's communication. The analysis of Glossier's social media content revealed the use of the relationship component in 37 of the 68 posts. Emily Weiss, CEO of the brand, was interviewed at the "Female Founders" conference[1], stating that Glossier was a direct customer-focused brand. The customer-brand relationship created by Glossier allowed the brand to develop a very personal relationship with its customers. Emily Weiss said that the brand was able to maintain contact with each of its customers, notifying them of special offers and making it easier for them to ask specific questions, learn about a particular product they would like to purchase or receive information about the inability of the brand to take appropriate action in the cases of missing relationship component or personal data. This confirms that the Glossier brand finds building customer relationships to be a highly relevant component, which is employed in two-thirds of their Facebook and Instagram posts, which frequently include customer feedback and user-generated content, and share information about the friendly relationship among members of the Glossier community. The customers are often invited to discuss different issues and the brand itself.

4.2. Analyzing typical cases of virtual brand community building

Content analysis of the answers provided by participants has identified the category of customer experience creation at brand touchpoints: "*Customer experience is anything created in the customer's mind at the brand touchpoint and may involve any customer-brand touchpoint.*"; "*… Whenever we are in contact with people, we strive to gain the best experience.*"; "*I should describe customer touchpoints considering all touchpoints in contact with the brand.*"

The informants were asked how they use the components of customer experience to develop a positive experience. Their responses highlight four components as the most commonly used in participant-driven brand communication: sensory, emotional, cognitive, and pragmatic. The sensory component is applied to engage all or some of the customer's senses: "*… we include all physical sensations and try to stimulate them*", "*… do not embrace taste, smell, and touch, because this is irrelevant to our product, but vision, I think, is acceptable.*" and "*almost always embrace vision and hearing … Taste and smell are very rare options.*"; "*Hearing has not been considered yet, but I see a great many opportunities to engage and stimulate it.*" With regard to the **sensory component**, the informants said that they tried to stimulate it mainly through visual aspects, including combinations of colors corresponding to brand identity. The most crucial point to mention is that the sensory component is stimulated through visual and auditory aspects. All informants agreed that the stimulation of the vision- and hearing-related elements of the sensory component was significant, but found touch, smell, and taste to be less important in times of digitalization, as they could only be stimulated through physical contact with the customer.

The relevance of **using the emotional component** was highlighted as an essential component by all informants: "*… we try and, I think, all companies must stimulate emotions*"; "*Exactly. … We want to provide entertainment, to make them smile and have fun. We strive to make anyone, from A to Z, smile.*"; "*… the fact is that we stimulate and try to stimulate.*"; "*An emotion stimulates memory; thus, if no emotion is provided by advertising, it is very ineffective because the emotion does not last.*"

Various emotions are used to achieve different results. For instance, a positive feeling of familiarity and nostalgia is always employed in order for the customer to feel an affinity towards a brand. The emotional component is stimulated by even the most minor details, such as writing an email, that is, in direct contact with the customer.

Informant stimulation of the **cognitive component of customer experience** is carried out through educational content in the brand's digital channels: "*Two aspects include educational blog posts and social network posts… The next point is the moment we ask for feedback.*"; "*We try to educate, enlighten and get people used to thinking that not everything advertised is good, appropriate and needs to be read, interested and selected.*" The informants find the cognitive element to be stimulated by activations and rational arguments, that is, bidding and discussing product quality and the benefits of innovation.

As for the use of the **pragmatic component**, they maintained that it should be employed to improve the product while conforming to customer feedback. "*Customer preferences are always considered… If, for instance, 2-3 comments on similar issues regarding inadequate functionality are made weekly, exploratory meetings are organized to discuss the urgency of implementing the required aspect.*" In order for customers to continue providing feedback, it is necessary to ensure the highest possible quality of customer service by constantly improving the functionality and convenience of the website, providing clear product descriptions to facilitate product comparisons and expanding product delivery options: "*We try to ensure convenience through testing because we find it very important.*" Guaranteeing customer convenience and a smooth journey through all the brand touchpoints to obtain an efficient customer experience is a relevant aspect: "*'… it rarely comes out…, but in the ideal case, the process takes place, and then we think of smoothness at all stages of the customer experience.*"

The **stimulation of the lifestyle component** is embraced in different ways, according to informants. Businesses strive to educate their customers about lifestyle habits, or vice versa, to match their lifestyles and provide helpful information facilitating the customers' daily routine: "*We try to adapt to the existing types of customer behavior and usually avoid new habits or changing traditions.*"

Brands strive to find a place in the customers' lives, with their product to complement the customers' lifestyle and habits: "*We think about our customer and the surrounding environment from visuals to text creation, consider the context and contemporary relevance and express the produced ideas in our external communication.*"

Not all brands stimulate the **relationship component** to broaden customer experience: "*These actions are inappropriate because we have hardly fully acknowledged our customer.*" Some argue that opinion formers are involved in stimulating this component: customers actively follow and engage with the content of opinion formers on a daily basis, hence seeking to be part of the content created by opinion formers. To stimulate the relationship component, the already existing communities are engaged, which makes it easier to find the target audience and communicate with customers to promote the product: "*Yes… We consider a person a social member of society.*"

Aspects of VBC building. The informants specified that creating a VBC requires a community manager responsible for answering questions about the brand. The critical point to mention is that the brand should engage in conversation with the customer and respond quickly and expeditiously, considering the human factor involved, to try and to solve the problem encountered by the customer, and broaden customer experience.

The informants agreed on the importance of community brand engagement in creating the VBC: "*When community members take part in product or content development, e.g. choosing the text inside a newly created beauty box, people start voting and feel involved, which really benefits the brand and lends it importance.*" In order to encourage interaction with the members of the virtual community, the brand asks customers to share their opinions on a variety of issues, takes them into consideration, includes or adjusts suggestions freely made by the brand and survey customers and asks fans to make decisions on content creation, such as "*… fan meetings are*

arranged"; "*We show that we see them and I think that matters to them and to us*." The brand needs to set clear rules on how much they should benefit from content and advertising in the VBC: "*a healthy proportion of helpful content is required, otherwise the community cannot function*." Finally, the brand needs to develop a content plan and strategy for maintaining activity in the community to encourage the engagement of both the brand and its customers: "*If the brand answers questions, etc., it's only a service channel*." The VBC benefits from receiving feedback from customers and increasing brand awareness because "*community members are involved in effective word-of-mouth communication*" and shape the brand's image.

VBC effect on customer experience. Building the VBC affects customer experience: "*from the sensory and logical points of view, VBCs affect customer experience*". The informants said that VBC customers may receive help from other customers to solve their issues or find missing information, feel a part of a larger group of people, develop relationships and experience emotions ultimately related to the brand community and the brand itself: "*VBCs convey a sense of 'belonging' and motivate people; therefore, the brand can take advantage of a customer's desire to belong to a social group and find all the answers*." VBCs affect customer experience when it comes to long-lasting products: "*In this case, shopping requires more thought, customers may delve deeper, look at customer opinions online and analyze feedback, which demonstrates that such brands have active virtual communities, which appear as one of the hygiene matters for having the VBC*." The brand finds it helpful to form a personal opinion or an expert image promoting customer loyalty, which encourages them to involve acquaintances in the community, thus boosting sales and turning the customer into the position of a brand ambassador – one in which the customer is engaged in product development, consumption, and advertising. The informants proposed to make VBCs more influential in supporting the existing customers than attracting new members. The VBC's effect on customer experience

is hardly reflected in sales, but "*...works in the long run*." Community customers become more forgiving when mistakes are made.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Content analysis focused on the social media of the Glossier brand has confirmed that the experience of VBCs is created by applying the components of customer experience. In order to attract customers, brands mostly employ emotional and sensory components, while the relationship, lifestyle, pragmatic, and cognitive components are used half as often. Thus, applying all components of brand-customer communication in social media is essential to shaping the customer experience. However, promoting conscious customer thinking, inspiring psychological processes, utilizing experience, and validating customer values and belief systems are not as crucial as affecting customer feelings and emotions, or their vision, hearing, taste, and smell, and stimulating their relationships with other people.

Typical examples of Lithuanian brands were examined by conducting interviews with brand representatives, revealing that sensory and emotional components are recognized as being the most important ones for shaping customer experience in virtual communities. The informants agree that visual and hearing stimulation have the most substantial impact on creating customer experience through the sensory component. By contrast, touch, taste, and smell have a less significant effect on the stimulation of the sensory component and can only be stimulated physically, thus having a limited impact on virtual community building. Based on the analyzed media content results and the successful experience achieved by the Glossier community, the relationship and lifestyle components rather than the pragmatic and cognitive components are believed to be slightly more critical for creating customer experience in the VBC.

The brand creating the VBC must possess brand identity and clearly established brand values, have a community manager responsi-

ble for community management, a platform for building the VBC, as well as a content strategy clearly defining limits on the possibility of brand advertising in the VBC and maintaining the relationship between promotional and customer-friendly content.

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Endnotes

1   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ex-fXyRJTU8