

EXPERIENCE BRANDING IN THEORY AND PRACTICE. CASE STUDY

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Purpose: Presenting the essence of modern experience branding (as a result of the available studies and original research), giving an example of marketing tools, methods, and procedures used for Milka experience branding, and to develop recommendations for the interested marketers.

Design/methodology/approach: analysis of secondary sources of information, case study of a selected global brand from the food sector for which broad marketing activities creating its market capital are carried out with prosumer engagement, and participant observation of their selected projects combined with result analysis.

Findings: Marketing ways of impacting (under the analysed brand) stakeholder experiences, taking into consideration contemporary trends and market conditions through the available communication channels and its social media profiles.

Research limitations/implications: The paper was based on literature studies and a case study of a global brand from the food sector. The research problem addressed should be analysed based on a larger number of brands. Moreover, in the next project, opinion surveys among representatives of the brand community of the analysed brand and its key stakeholders are planned for the purpose of personalisation of the brand-related experiences.

Practical implications: Implementation – with customer engagement – of diverse branded marketing activities, such as: raising awareness of the importance of sustainable activities in all the processes of the brand owner, selection of the right components for the brand's products, educating about a healthy diet, providing opportunities for entertainment, education, and fun, engaging the interested parties and personification of activities, adjusting activities to the conditions, and building a real and virtual community.

Social implications: Research shows that branding activities/actions/campaigns do impact customer behaviours, their experiences, attitudes, engagement, changes in the ways of buying and using the brand's products, marketer practices, and – consequently – the entire society and natural environment. They also lead to the promotion – under the brand and with the engagement of its stakeholders – of a sustainable approach to resource management and undertaking projects in line with the 2030 Agenda and recommendations of the ESG directive.

Originality/value: It is the first study of this type (at least in the Polish market) regarding the impact of methodical branding activities on the experiences of the brand's key stakeholders and the resulting practical implications (social, economic, environmental, and managerial).

Keywords: experience branding, sustainable practices, brand projects and campaigns, marketing ways of creating brand-related experiences, case study.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Contemporary brands play the role of a specific kind of management tool (Ind, Horlings 2016; Bloomstein, 2021; Pogorzelski, 2020; Larsen 2023) which significantly impacts stakeholders' behaviours, engagement, and attitudes. In order to accommodate the conditions and the social, competitive, technical, technological, and managerial trends (Cohen, 2017; Foroudi, Palazzo, 2021; Ghaffar et al., 2023), marketers try to undertake various activities (Keller, 2013; Kerzner, 2022) building the brand's market capital.

In this study, experience branding (a set of activities for the brand oriented at experience management) (Hansen, 2021; Lubin, 2022) is analysed as the key trend in brand management, where the brand is personified and stakeholders establish relationships with it. All the engaged entities should gain multifaceted benefits from experience branding projects (Tarczydło, Miłoś, 2019b; McPhee, Dias, 2020; Robertson, 2021; Sarkar et al., 2023) as an important phenomenon in contemporary management of branded objects.

The aim of the article is to present the essence of modern experience branding, giving an example of marketing tools, methods, and procedures used for Milka experience branding, and to develop recommendations for the interested marketers. For the purpose of the paper, literature studies, a meta-analysis of the available online sources, and own qualitative studies with the use of the case study (how the branding activities of the Milka brand are conducted, how they impact stakeholders' experiences, and what effects they generate), participant observation, and online content analysis methods were carried out.

2. Literature review

Experience branding consists in brand management oriented at creating positive experiences for stakeholders (Smilansky, 2009; Schmitt, 2011; Keller, 2013, Tarczydło, Miłoś, 2019b; Lubin, 2022; Targiel, 2022; Dziadkiewicz et al., 2022). In other words, it is a set of activities including the analysis of the initial situation, planning, organizing,

coordinating, and controlling (Hansen, 2021) of any actions oriented at building the brand's market capital.

Branding (brand creation) is a process (Tarczydło, 2019a; Pogorzelski, 2020; Bloomstein, 2021; *Trzy strategiczne...*, 2023) of creating, maintaining, and developing a unique brand image that helps it become ingrained in consumers' minds and stand out from the competition. Brand strategy (Keller, 2013; Tarczydło, 2018a) is an inherent part of branding, along with practical activities oriented at the visual consistency of every message, high quality of the market offering, responding to customers' needs, engaging stakeholders, caring about sustainable business practices, and flexible activities that respect the current trends.

In general, experience branding is about integrating the brand into the buyer's daily life in such a way that they can make purchase decisions based on personal experiences instead of indirect forms of communication, including advertisements. Participation in brand-related events (Chitty et al., 2018) usually involves the customer's conscious choice and makes it possible for them to become engaged in line with their personal potential (possibilities, interests, skills, talents). The projects/campaigns (Tarczydło, 2018b; Goodson, Walker, 2021; Kerzner, 2022) carried out are intended to positively surprise consumers and make the brand stand out from its competition. Creative activities (Tarczydło, 2018c; Tarczydło, Miłoś, 2019a; Larsen, 2023; Tarczydło, Klimczak, 2021) evoking emotions, creating experiences with the brand, refined and thought-through down to the smallest detail hit the stakeholders' expectations.

The projects carried out are supposed to move the customer (Wan et al., 2016; Cohen, 2017; Tarczydło, 2019b; Ghaffar et al., 2023) by drawing their attention, sparking their interest, making them want to take advantage and take active part. The impressions or experience gained should influence emotions, touch, evoke feelings, but also provide rational arguments, and in consequence, trigger a reaction to the brand that is measurable in some sense.

Experience branding is aimed at building relationships thanks to creating opportunities for personal meetings, for instance, by well-thought-out campaigns, events, and undertakings (Zschiesch, Errichiello, 2021). The described phenomenon serves to build an experiential brand. With reference to well-thought-out projects for the brand and its market capital, the word "experience" should be understood as a direct impression of events not processed mentally and/or as certain wisdom gained as a result of reflection on the perceived undertakings, phenomena, and their interpretation. People gain experiences related to certain things, e.g. brands, over time and under the influence of the factors/stimuli they are able to connect to them (Schmitt, 2011). Psychologists distinguish between physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual experiences (Keller, 2013). According to Schmitt (2011), experiences that can be "sold" include: entertainment, education, esthetics, and escapism.

For the purpose of this paper, it is assumed that a brand is a complex construct, symbol, pattern or their combination, which is taken into consideration in people's decision-making processes (Keller, 2013). Hence, brand managers strive after careful creation of brand-related experiences which translate into value impacting the behaviours of buyers and other market players. In economic practice, business projects engage employees and other entities: partners, Internet users, media representatives, local communities, and the competition, although they are usually addressed to customers. In other words, in the current market conditions, the stakeholder theory should be followed.

According to Freeman (2022, p. 67), the term "stakeholders" was introduced by the Stanford Research Institute in 1963, and initially defined groups without the support of which the organisation would cease to exist. The concept of stakeholders was developed in the 1970s by representatives of the systemic approach. In the 1980s, the subject was taken up by Freeman and his colleagues, according to whom stakeholders are any organisations or individuals participating in creating a project or directly interested in the results of its implementation in the management of an enterprise and/or other branded market object. It is assumed that creating brand-related experiences involves carefully thought-out activities; a process of generating stimuli having an effect on the addressees; creating opportunities to meet and establish relations. In brand management, the right experiential brand strategy, i.e. experience branding, plays a significant role.

Experience managers emphasise the importance of the so-called touchpoints (Bajak, 2022; Lubin, 2022; Questus, 2019), i.e. broadly defined opportunities for interaction, e.g. entering a website, watching a commercial, a visit to the store, a conversation with a customer assistant, participation in a competition, using the mobile application, etc.

Finally, it is important to outline the so-called customer journey (Smilansky, 2009; Tarczydło, Miłoś, 2019b), i.e. all the elements which translate into the sum of interactions occurring in contact with a branded market entity, from establishing contact, through all the stages of cooperation (taking advantage of the offer), including potential interactions, such as the after-sales service, and the marketing tools used, e.g. loyalty card, or signs of nurturing the relationship (based on: Kalinowski et al., 2017, p. 62).

Apart from the journey, the experiential selling proposition (Pogorzelski, 2020, pp. 88-89), which is manifested in the opportunity to connect certain emotions and events that translate into values and experiences with the brand, is also of significance. Examples of such formats include Lidl's "Więcej na radość z życia" (More for the joy of life), Ikea's "Dobry klimat zaczyna się w domu" (Good atmosphere starts at home), Apple/iPod's "Uwielbiam wygląd produktów i to jak się z nimi czuję" (I love the way the products look and how they make me feel).

What should also be emphasised is the importance of contemporary conditions (social, technical and technological, economic, competitive, ecological, and others) (Zschiesche, Errichiello, 2021; Ghaffar et al., 2023; Karman, Gavryshkiv, 2022) determining the

effectiveness of the issues and practices considered. In the era of social media (Karasek, Hysa, 2020; Hansen, 2021; Tarczydło, Miłoś, 2019b) and the widespread nature of sharing knowledge and experiences with other members of the community with whom we stay in touch, and the prosumers' willingness to become engaged in the providers' activities, creating brand-related experiences has acquired special significance.

In economic practice (United Nations, 2023), it is possible to gain first-hand experience in a situation of direct participation in a project. Such experience is particularly valuable because the person was there and had the chance to personally evaluate the situation and analyse it. However, as social beings, people are influenced by others, they communicate and interpret, which is conducive to gaining indirect experience. Additionally, in the cases considered herein, the ultimate experiences are affected by personal factors, such as the general well-being, knowledge, significance of the event, situational context, and many others.

Evoking emotions in order to create the right experiences is a significant phenomenon (Tarczydło, 2019b). Researchers Douglas B. Grisaffe and Hieu P. Nguyen (Pogorzelski, 2020) differentiate between five primary antecedents of emotional attachment to brands, and they include: emotional memory (regarding places, people or situations), socialisation (connected with relationships in a group of friends, family, etc.), traditional customer outcomes, classic marketing tools (from 4P to 8P), and user-derived benefits that the consumers themselves may offer in the process of cooperation/interaction.

The procedure of creating experiences (and evoking emotions in the addressees) and building the "brand – stakeholders" relationship involves (own elaboration based on: Tarczydło, Miłoś, 2019b): marketing tools, opportunities to gain experiences (entertainment, education, esthetics, and escapism), communicating rational and emotional content, evoking emotions (e.g. happiness, sensory sensations, stimulating imagination), causing conditioned associations with the brand and the related projects, and unique and interesting impressions of the stakeholders, which translate into value, building relationships, and promoting satisfaction and loyalty.

The issues presented herein constitute motivation for a review of the available studies related to the subject matter discussed. The KPMG study entitled (Kalinowski et al., 2017): *How to build positive customer experience. Analysis of the leading customer experience management practices in the Polish market* was aimed at conducting a comprehensive analysis of customer experiences in their interactions with the brand. The respondents evaluated buyers' satisfaction from the point of view of the quality of customer service at every stage of gaining experience, at as many touchpoints as possible on the customer-company line. The condition for including a brand in the analysis was reaching the minimum required number of the respondents' answers. In the analysed studies, the basis for the comparisons between brands, industries, and countries is the CEE (Customer Experience Excellence) index. It is calculated based on the evaluation of *Six Pillars™ of Customer Experience Excellence*, taking into consideration their individual impact on building the

experiences of customers in the given country. The aspects studied in particular included: integrity, resolution, expectations, time and effort, personalisation, and empathy.

The study was carried out by an external research agency in the first quarter of 2017 using the CAWI (computer-assisted web interview) method on a sample of more than 5,000 respondents, representative for residents of Poland over the age of 16. The analysis included more than 200 brands providing services or selling products to retail customers across the country or in the largest cities. The study included all the sectors in which companies using the given brand have a significant influence on building customer experience at as many touchpoints as possible on the customer-company line. The selection of sectors is consistent with the study methodology adopted by KPMG Nunwood in other countries. Hence, in the study of the Polish market, nine sectors were included: leisure, electricity and gas providers, catering, logistics, media and telecommunications, travel, non-food retail, food retail, and financial services.

KPMG's analyses show that the key pillar of customer satisfaction in Poland is "integrity" in the context of building trust and keeping promises. Companies rated highly by Polish consumers are those that keep the brand promise, honestly inform about significant elements of their offer, and act in the customer's best interest instead of concentrating solely on their own profits. From the point of view of building excellent customer experience, the critical significance of the brand's "integrity" can be justified by the Poles' relatively low level of trust in other people or entities, emphasised in various sociological studies.

What Polish people rate relatively low is their experiences with companies offering more complex products and services, where customer-company interactions are complicated, frequent, and long-term in nature. In industries of this type, making operations oriented at the customer and their needs requires a complex digital business transformation, the primary aim of which should be to enhance the level of customer experience at the key touchpoints. Such a transformation involves a considerable reconstruction of customer service processes, in particular in selected interactions as part of the customer journey, involving the need to make major changes in the IT systems and adjust them to omnichannel requirements. It is also necessary to build a completely new organisational culture (Delchet-Cochet, 2020; Karasek, Hysa, 2020; Larsen, 2023; United Nations, 2023) so that the customer becomes the actual object of the company's operations.

The results obtained show that even in those industries which are highly rated by Polish customers, not many brands manage to fully meet their expectations.

Moreover, a conclusion comes to mind that experience branding is still a relatively new and complex subject, and the research discussed herein should allow marketers to better understand the consumers' perspective and help them approach the process of creating the right brand-related customer experience and long-term loyalty building in a consistent manner.

3. Own research methodology

The research gap revealed refers to the scope and methodological considerations of experience branding activities of a contemporary brand.

For the purpose of the article, own qualitative studies were carried out with the use of the following methods: case study (oriented at obtaining answers to questions such as: How are the selected brand's branding activities carried out? What do they include? What effect do they have on the addressee, their senses, mind, and heart, and on other stakeholders? How do they engage, what experiences, behaviours, and attitudes do they create? What effects do they generate? What can be learnt from them?), participant observation, and online content analysis. The following research scopes were specified: the temporal scope: March 2022 – June 2023; the subjective scope: the Milka brand, active Internet users, followers; the objective scope: ways and forms of the analysed brand's experience branding, and the spatial scope: websites, the brand's social media profiles, points of sale, and other available channels.

The purpose of the research was to obtain information on the marketing tools, methods, and procedures used in experience branding activities for the Milka brand. The studies were carried out on the brand's website and social media profiles, at points of sale, in the press, on the radio and TV. The studies also included outdoor activities, events, and various projects, such as campaigns and competitions. The authors conducted a qualitative analysis of the obtained resources. They focused in particular on the ways of creating opportunities to gain experiences related to the Milka brand, types of communicated content, the tools and procedures used, and the response and results.

When presenting the object of the studies, i.e. the Milka brand, in a little more detail, it is worth referring to its history. Philippe Suchard started the production of chocolate in his home town in 1826 (Historia czekolady, 2023). The name Milka was entered into the register of trade names of the Imperial Patent Office in Berlin in 1901. It was made up of a combination of the words for two primary ingredients: milk (Milch) and cocoa (Kakao).

The brand's history, tradition, image, and – above all – the outstanding (according to customers) quality of the products constitute the foundation of the brand's platform. The Milka brand's strategic direction undoubtedly is product excellence. The Milka brand offers a broad selection of products in the following categories: chocolate bars, pralines, chocolate-covered marshmallows, candy bars, Milkinis bars, cookies, candies, and special series, e.g. for Christmas (Oferta rynkowa, 2023). The value generator for the brand under analysis is tenderness, which is associated both with feelings and the products. The consistency of the message was obtained by adding more detail to the value generator in the form of the brand promise, which is: Milka – Tenderness is inside. Delicious milk chocolate made with 100% Alpine milk. Encouraging tenderness since 1901, tenderly

touching your palates and hearts (Marka Milka, 2023). Yet the brand promise, no matter how beautiful and attractive, is just a promise. And that promise should be turned into reality. For the purpose of transforming the brand promise into Milka's stakeholders' experiences, methodical marketing activities are carried out – they were covered by the qualitative studies and their results will be discussed here.

4. Milka experience branding – research results

The person responsible for Milka's branding activities in Poland is Daniel Czajkowski (Wirtualnemedi, 2023), Marketing Manager for Poland and the Baltic countries since 2023 (former brand manager, with the company since 2016). Joanna Pszona, Senior *Brand Manager, Milka Biscuits & San*, and Ewa Krawczyk, Junior *Brand Manager* at Mondelez Poland, as well as representatives of specialist agencies, cooperate with him. Until 2022 (Media do kampanii, 2023), the agency responsible for media planning and buying for the campaigns of Mondelez's brands was Mindshare Poland (GroupM/WPP), whereas now, it is the Spark Foundry agency, which belongs to Publicis Groupe.

The marketing strategy is presented in five stages (Questus, 2019): 1) products; 2) emotions; 3) interpersonal relationships; 4) the experience of tenderness/sensory marketing; and 5) incentive campaigns.

Another branding tool observed are the slogans and taglines, such as: “Milka – stay tender”, “Tender tastes better”, “Milka – dare to be tender”, “Follow the tenderness”, “Milka multiplies tenderness”, etc. They are an integral part of the long-term branding strategy. For Milka, five-stage emotional branding is used, oriented at relationships between the brand and the consumer (Branding, 2023): 1) emotional memory – communicating pleasure from just eating the chocolate made with Alpine milk and unique cocoa, e.g. with family (an even more tender chocolate flavour; discover the taste of tenderness in Milka cookies); 2) socialisation – social campaigns under the brand, e.g. “My city is cuddly”; 3) benefits for the consumer – high quality of the chocolate itself, uniqueness of the Alpine milk chocolate and special quality cocoa; 4) marketing mix activities (8P, product, price, place, promotion, participation, physical evidence, and partnership); 5) benefits for the consumer – tenderness of the chocolate itself releases tenderness and empathy in each of us.

In creating brand-related stakeholder experiences, the visual identity system plays a significant role. Apart from the brand logo, colours, and the means of conveying them, its components also include the brand hero. It makes it easier to increase brand awareness, both on the conscious and subconscious level. In this aspect, Milka's distinctive symbol surely is the purple cow, recognisable among both children and adults, friendly and unique, widely involved in offline and online marketing activities, creating the brand's market capital.

Milka's purple cow is a symbol of quality. It is attributed characteristics such as friendliness, credibility, kind-heartedness, and patience. With reference to the Milka brand's symbol and value, consumers associate it with a carefree childhood, the warmth and safety of the family home, fun, pure and clean nature, and a world without any cares or the daily hustle and bustle (Marka Milka, 2023).

Campaigns involving the purple cow may involve dancing together, commemorative photos, hugging and stroking, sending a purple heart on Valentine's Day, product tastings, sports competitions, contests, trips, e.g. bike trips, generating content, the opportunity to participate in and create events, and many others, with references to the current events considered as particularly important.

An important trend in contemporary branding activities consists in respecting the principles of sustainable development (United Nations, 2023; *Trzy strategiczne...*, 2023, *Wiadomości handlowe*, 2023). According to the "brand/engagement" (*Nasze zaangażowanie...*, 2023) tab on Milka's Polish website, the following projects are being carried out: Cocoa Life (a sustainable cocoa sourcing programme oriented at long-term improvement of the living and working conditions of cocoa farmers and their families and ensuring the highest quality of the cocoa); "For the well-being of children" (the programme is aimed at eliminating child labour through active prevention and monitoring of such practices, with emphasis placed on eliminating their sources and causes); "For the sustainable farming of palm oil" (the Mondelez company assures that since 2018, it has been sourcing 100% of its palm oil from suppliers who work in a sustainable and transparent manner). It seems reasonable to conclude that the projects listed above confirm that the analysed brand is implementing a sustainable brand strategy. The case study conducted shows that Milka's various marketing projects do respect the goals of the 2030 Agenda. Additionally, in the "Snacking Made Right" report published in May 2023, Mondelez International stresses how the company's comprehensive approach to environmental issues, social responsibility, and corporate governance (ESG) contributes to its progress in the accomplishment of its ambitious goals for 2025 (reducing CO₂ emissions from production by more than 20%, limiting the use of water by more than 30%, and reducing the amount of manufacturing waste by more than 30%) and creates long-term benefits for the company and its stakeholders. The key projects of the Mondelez concern and the Milka brand include (Mondelez, 2023; *Trzy strategiczne...*, 2023): sourcing raw materials in a sustainable manner, reducing impact on the environment, packaging innovations, supporting local communities, developing the product range in order to meet various consumer needs in terms of nutrition and well-being, while at the same time promoting a healthy lifestyle and responsible consumption of snacks.

Integrated 360 degree marketing communication campaigns are carried out for the Milka brand. Their scope and character was impacted by the biggest changes to the Milka brand within the last 25 years, gradually implemented since the 3rd quarter of 2022. They involve the products (refined recipes and formulas, refreshed packaging design, different shape of the

chocolate pieces), changes to the visual identity system (including adding the eco-code for “Sustainably sourced cocoa” on the packaging), and sustainable projects in the brand’s marketing communications.

The authors have conducted regular research on the activities related to the Milka brand for over a dozen years, including a number of publications (e.g. Tarczydło, Miłoś, 2019b). This is important when determining the specificity of the branding (without access to its owner’s strategic information) because these are long-term projects, and methodical efforts reinforced by regular holiday (Easter and Christmas) (Interaktywnie.com, 2022) and special campaigns provide basis for conclusions. The latest projects are directed towards sustainable experience branding.

The current campaign was launched on 10 May 2023 with the slogan: “Tenderness – the best remedy for the inconveniences of city life” (Nowymarketing.pl, 2023a). The campaign was intended to help the inhabitants of the largest cities in Poland in the hustle and bustle of their daily lives (their quick pace, crowds, traffic, gridlocks, and their effects, e.g. aggression, pollution, difficult situations faced by ordinary people). The brand wants to offer even more tenderness to those who need it most. Therefore, it launched special local activations in public spaces aimed at brightening up people’s lives. Because there is not enough greenery in the cities, as it was replaced by tons of concrete, endless road works, traffic jams during peak hours, crowds at train stations due to train delays, the brand chose the following tagline: “This piece is for you – more tenderness for your city” (Delikatność..., 2023). The dedicated materials for the campaign, the projects and the response thereto were supposed to remind Poles about tenderness, in particular in the difficult moments: the need to make a detour due to road works or closures, an unexpected hold-up in the traffic, a sudden downpour of rain, a heat wave, too many people while waiting on a railway platform, etc.

Dedicated local activations were prepared for the inhabitants of two large cities, namely a unique CHOCOLobby (Polish: “PoCZEKOalnia”) located at the Warsaw Central Station and a mural cleaning the air from pollutants such as nitrogen oxides, VOCs (volatile organic compounds), and sulphur oxides, painted at the junction of the Dubois and Pomorska streets in Wrocław (Marketingprzykawie, 2023). Warsaw’s CHOCOLobby welcomed guests and invited them inside with the slogan: *When it turns out you have more time than initially planned before your train leaves, this piece is for you*. Milka wanted to make the time people spend waiting for their train, which is often longer than expected, more pleasant for the inhabitants of Warsaw and people travelling from the capital city. Throughout the entire month, from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., delicious coffee and new Milka products ready for tasting waited for guests at the Warsaw Central Station. The inhabitants of Wrocław, in turn, dealing with smog and air pollution on a daily basis, are now able to admire and enjoy an eco-friendly mural made with paints which reduce the amount of harmful nitrogen oxides. Moreover, the process of painting the mural was carbon neutral.

The current campaign is a continuation of the activities started in 2022, when Milka improved its recipes and formulas and went for more cocoa in every bar of its chocolate (Największe..., 2023). This way, the brand created an even more chocolatey and, at the same time, more tender flavour. The design of the packaging of the entire portfolio of Milka chocolate bars was also changed at the time and the image of the Milka brand icon – the Lila cow – was refreshed. The new design makes it easier to distinguish between various chocolate flavours and find them on store shelves.

The campaign received 360 degree marketing support. A 30-second TV spot was prepared. A number of activities in the media were also planned, starting from a digital campaign, including presence on city light ads, and a broad reach online campaign. Interestingly, the slogans in the individual media and communication channels differed depending on the location. They were adjusted to the current weather or local inconveniences related to road works or traffic. The main tagline, “Even more tenderness”, was displayed at brick-and-mortar stores with dedicated POS materials, including a limited edition packaging of the Alpine Milk 100 g chocolate bars. The stores of the Empik chain offered consumers an additional portion of tenderness for tasting (as many as 700,000 test products) (Nowymarketing.pl, 2023). The agency responsible for public relations, including media relations, was Big Picture, the one responsible for media buying was Spark Foundry, and the agency behind sampling was Smolar. Oglivy prepared the communication strategy and creation, as well as – together with the Endorfina agency – the CHOCOLobby and the mural. Advertising adaptation and digital creations were the responsibility of Publicis Groupe.

From the perspective of over a dozen years of observation of Milka’s branding activities (including in particular marketing communications – relatively easy to monitor and participate in), it can be concluded that there is a clear tendency for adding variety to them and adjusting them to keep up with the technological progress, changing consumer expectations, as well as the legal, environmental, and competitive conditions.

In the last three years, holiday campaigns have been oriented at storytelling. For Easter, Mondelez Poland tells a special story and encourages consumers to take part in a virtual game of searching for Easter treats (Interaktywnie.com, 2022). Easter is a time full of joy, spent with our loved ones. What particularly connects us during this time is the cultivation of Easter traditions. Moments spent with our family become magical and unforgettable. Milka’s Easter commercial inspires consumers to discover new holiday customs and traditions, thanks to which we can create lasting memories. The spot was broadcast on television, on digital platforms, and in social media, such as Facebook and YouTube. Importantly, the story presented in the Easter commercial is strongly rooted in the foundations of the Milka brand, which wants to inspire everyone to enjoy the moments spent with their loved ones. In order to encourage Poles to take part in the virtual game, prizes, an educational element, and the possibility of multigenerational participation were introduced, yet – thanks to the use of Google Maps, which became the board of the game – there was no need to leave the house.

The game included an educational part: each bunny was hiding a titbit related to Polish Easter traditions or Easter customs from other countries. The game was available on mobile devices from 18 March 2021 at wielkanocneszukajki.pl.

In 2022, Milka's Christmas campaign included a number of activities (Interaktywnie.com, 2022a): a charity collection supported by influencers, a special episode of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* ("Milionerzy") on TVN, and product placement of a large-format advent calendar in the "Letters to Santa" ("Listy do M.") movie. The brand's winter activation was also communicated on TV and in digital channels.

Another project was called "Influencers for Seniors" (Interaktywnie.com, 2022a). As part of multi-channel activities, a charity campaign called "Let's share some tenderness this Christmas" was carried out via the Siepomaga.pl platform. The money collected was allotted for the modernisation of nursing homes for senior citizens. It was yet another edition of Milka's campaign that focuses on charity, helping and supporting the needy with tender gestures. The brand has committed itself to and has been engaged in conducting activities constituting part of its social DNA, such as helping local communities and charity organisations, for years. The collection was carried out together with the Santa Claus for Seniors Foundation (Fundacja Święty Mikołaj dla Seniora) and the following influencers were invited to promote the campaign: Marta Żmuda Trzebiatowska, Janina Daily, Robert Motyka, Anna Czartoryska Niemczycka, Joanna Pachla, and Anna Kalczyńska. The collected amount was increased by Milka by an additional PLN 400,000. Campaigns in the social media and a supporting display campaign in the Onet portal were conducted at the same time.

Standard advertising activities are carried out on a multi-channel basis, including both television and digital channels. On television, a 30-second image video commercial produced by Wieden+Kennedy was broadcast, whereas as part of the online campaign, the brand went for long and short spots on YouTube, a social media campaign (on Facebook and Instagram), and a display campaign in the Blix shopping app, redirecting users to Mondelez's Allegro store and the kupslodyczne.pl website. The agency responsible for media planning and buying, as well as the idea for and execution of the charity campaign, the initiative related to product placement in the "Letters to Santa" movie, and the special episode of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" was the Mindshare media agency. The episode of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" and the "Letters to Santa" film project were executed in cooperation with TVN Warner Bros Discovery.

To sum up, in light of the studies carried out, it seems reasonable to conclude that Milka's experience branding activities should be considered as methodical, valuable, and exemplary. Moreover, the spectrum of marketing activities, including marketing communications, of the analysed brand, is both impressive and methodically carried out with stakeholder engagement and multifaceted effects for all those involved, which strongly contributes to building its market capital.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Customers' trust towards the brand is strongly dependent on the emotional satisfaction resulting from each interaction with that brand. Hence, in order to strengthen loyalty, it is necessary to fulfil both the stakeholders' rational and emotional needs in all their encounters with the brand. One of the key challenges for contemporary entrepreneurs is to deliver value to stakeholders, while maintaining sustainable growth of the company. The fundamental question asked by marketers is how effective management of people's branded experiences translates into the company's economic results, in particular in the conditions of strong competition.

Based on the literature studies carried out and the authors' own research, it is reasonable to say that in the current market conditions, the possibility of creating engagement and exciting experiences for buyers, which increase trust towards the brand, loyalty, and profits, seems to be dependent on the right branding strategy.

Effective experience branding should respect the fact that an experience is an internal and subjective response to a direct or indirect interaction between the brand (or a brand-related project) and the stakeholder, throughout the entire duration of their mutual relationship, leading to engagement at the rational, emotional, sensory, physical, and spiritual levels.

We should also take into consideration the fact that contemporary buyers are happy to engage in activities carried out under well-known and valued brands. It is a good idea to administer marketing incentives addressed to stakeholders' consciousness and subconsciousness, creating value, affecting behaviours, supporting the creation of the right experiences, and contributing to strengthening the human-brand relationship, in smaller, but regular doses.

Referring to building an emotional relationship between the consumer and the analysed brand, it should be noted that Milka's experience branding activities include: emotional memory – communicating pleasure from just eating the chocolate, e.g. with family; socialisation – social campaigns connected with Milka, e.g. “Influencers for Seniors”, “Let's share some tenderness this Christmas”, benefits for the consumer – high quality of the chocolate itself, recipe based on Alpine milk and special quality cocoa; marketing mix – product: high quality chocolate, place: easy product availability across Poland, price: mainstream brand, affordable for most Poles, price index: 110/100, promotion: brand communication based on emotions, benefits for the consumer – tenderness of the chocolate itself releases tenderness and empathy in each of us, allowing us to build deeper and more emotional interpersonal relationships.

In light of the research carried out, the following observations regarding Milka's experience branding seem justified:

- The activities are methodical, creative, systematic, long-term, and carried out by experts.
- The analysed study object has a global branding strategy and, which should be considered an advantage, extensive marketing activities adjusted to the local conditions (this article focuses on the Polish market perspective).
- Milka offers attractive products, with new ones introduced on a regular basis; it shapes its pricing policy and distribution strategy in an appropriate manner.
- Under the brand, integrated 360 degree marketing communication activities are carried out (including campaigns, actions, and projects), adjusted to the stakeholders' expectations, technological progress, the competition's strength and activities, and the current market trends.
- The types of activities carried out for the analysed brand and oriented at creating experiences related to it are innovative and attractive thanks to the use of various tools and regular campaigns; they effectively engage prosumers and stand out against the competition.
- The brand's branding activities are holistic and engage the participants emotionally, through the senses, and rationally.
- In the analysed projects, a sustainable approach and transparency of the activities are clearly stressed, along with orientation at patriotic values, adjustment to the local conditions and other current issues, including rational consumption, a healthy diet, and care about social well-being, in particular when it comes to children.
- Both marketing activities and broader management activities for the brand are coherent, consistent, and long-term in nature.
- In certain aspects, the Milka brand educates, entertains, engages, and increases environmental awareness, and fully respects the principles of sustainable development, the goals of the 2030 Agenda, and the ESG directive.

In the analysed projects, strong emphasis is placed on building relationships between the personified brand and its customers through personalisation, telling valuable and creative stories, transparency, interactivity with the use of video productions and content, and communication in the social media in line with Milka's values important to its community and the directions of contemporary business, i.e. a sustainable approach in all the activities of the brand owner, the Mondelez concern.

The research results obtained consolidate the conviction that various tools for creating experiences are used for the Milka brand, they are methodical in nature, and include broad communication channels in line with the 360 degree strategy, i.e. communication via all the available channels (press, radio, TV, outdoor, the Internet, and even mobile devices). The brand's stakeholders are effectively engaged, which is conducive to building a strong

brand community, both traditional and virtual. All those involved derive multifaceted benefits and the brand's market capital is built with a unique and favorable image.

The authors are aware of the limited character of the qualitative research conducted, and therefore intend to continue their studies based on other entities and plan to expand them by adding response and reception studies, as well as evaluation of this type of marketing projects by the engaged stakeholders.

To sum up, the literature and empirical studies carried out consolidated the conviction that brand managing marketers should think through the following questions: Are proper experiences of employees, customers, partners, media representatives, Internet users, local communities, and others built through marketing programmes? Does the brand keep its promise? Are brand-related experiences that are positive for the addressee created in the process of offering value under the specific brand to a sufficient degree, relative to expectations and trends, taking into consideration activities of the largest competitors? Does the created brand image make it possible to distinguish it from the competition? Is brand loyalty built among customers to whom the brand's offer is addressed? To what degree are the tools that are conducive to creating proper experiences adjusted to the current conditions and characterised by creativity and usability for the addressees? And finally, do they use the possibilities resulting from social, scientific, and technological progress, including the development of the Internet (e.g. social media functionalities) or marketing activities?

Skilfully managed experience branding campaigns comply with trends in behaviours and expectations of clients and other stakeholders; they contribute to rationalization of expenses, they generate diverse benefits (reliable information, building relations, delivering information and entertainment, the possibility of participation in the offeror's activities for the key stakeholders, forming brand community, creating value, efficiently distinguishing yourself from competition...).

That's why activities associated with popularization of methodical marketing practices for personified brands on-line and off-line are necessary. If we want to highlight recommendations for marketing specialists interested in carrying out efficient experience branding campaigns in the food sector, we need to take into consideration the following issues: 1) Adapting all marketing activities to the expectations of contemporary consumers and other stakeholders (media representatives, Internet users, potential social and/or business partners). 2) "Engaging the crowd" in a skillful way, as contemporary stakeholders and Internet users in particular display strong inclination towards prosumer behavior. 3) What should serve as a basis for activities are the results of research concerning, among others, the things that key groups of recipients are interested in, what is important for them and can be linked to the offer and actions under the brand. 4) It is necessary to assume a holistic approach to the human, that is, influencing him on the psychological, physical and spiritual levels. 5) Methodical activities require appropriate budget, hiring professionals,

allocating appropriate amount of time and launching a whole spectrum of activities, including a 360-degree communication campaign. 6) Important success factors are flexibility and speed of reaction. 7) What is also important is skillful positioning and building an appropriate and unique image of the Milka brand which is the only one of its kind. 8) Following the current trends, the basis of success of the chocolate producer is a global, recognizable and strong brand, with which stakeholders establish relations 9) A personified brand, which has particular values, should be sustainable, which means it has to not just provide an attractive offer, generate profits, but also deal with social, branch issues, look after the environment and balanced activities.

Brand managing marketers should undertake activities thanks to which brands, in a way, participate in the lives of their communities. What is particularly important is to refer to the current events, generate content, and enable participation. Consistency, multimedia character, creativity, and a methodical approach are what matters.

In light of the discussion and studies carried out, it seems reasonable to conclude that Milka's experience branding activities should be considered as methodical, valuable, and exemplary. Moreover, they generate multifaceted benefits for all the market players involved (the brand's stakeholders, representatives of its real and virtual communities, and other cooperating and affiliated entities) in line with the social, technical, technological, market, and management conditions, including efforts to follow a sustainable approach in every aspect of the brand owner's activities.

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