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THE BLOG AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL IN THE ASSESSMENT OF YOUNG CONSUMERS - THE RESULTS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The aim of the article is to explore the attitudes of young people towards the use of company blogs as a communication tool between the company and clients and source of information about products and/or the company. In the first part of the article, based on the analysis of secondary sources, the history of the development of modern blogs is presented. This part also discusses the classification of blogs and the potential of the blogosphere as a virtual community as well as the numerous benefits resulting from running a corporate blog. The second part of the study presents the results of the primary research carried out among a representative sample of young people (aged 15-24), whose aim was to recognize their attitudes towards the use of corporate blogs in marketing communication.

Keywords: blog, generation Y, blogosphere, online communication, influencer marketing.

JEL Codes: M31, O30.

Introduction

The widespread accessibility to a global computer network has significantly modified the enterprise's capabilities to use various tools to communicate with the market. Only a few years ago, the Internet was a place of isolation and anonymity, whilst today – in response to human desire for self-expression, strengthening human ties and a sense of belonging – it has become a social network¹. The driving force behind this change is technology, particularly the development of social media – considered the place to share photos, feelings and the space for maintaining relationships.

In the era of the information society, the role of the client has also changed, as clients increasingly expect to be granted the role of an active participant in the company's operations. They want to be up to date with events taking place in the company and expect to receive notifications about new products, but also want to submit their own ideas and comments. The transformation of clients' position, which is strongly associated with the development of information and communication tools, puts clients in the role of the company's partners who have an impact on its market position. The omnipresent influx of messages pushes consumers to seek information from reliable and authentic sources. They depreciate commercial advertising messages, whilst increasing trust in the opinions of other Internet users. The tool that fits into the observed trend are blogs, both commercial and individual. They provide a chance to reach consumers in a

¹ C. Shih, *Era Facebooka. Wykorzystanie sieci społecznościowych do promocji sprzedaży i komunikacji z Twoimi klientami*. Wydanie II, Helion, Gliwice 2012 p. 34.

manner tailored to their expectations, enabling long-term relationships to be built. By combining recommendation marketing, experiential marketing and content marketing, blogs create a kind of a triad of impact on customers and on their way of thinking as well as their purchasing behaviour.

The aim of the article is to explore the attitudes of young people towards the use of company blogs as a communication tool between the company and clients and as a source of information about products and/or the company. The study was divided into theoretical and empirical parts. The primary research was conducted on a representative sample of 502 young people living in Poland in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship.

The Definition and Classification of Blogs

The origins of blogs date back to the 1970s, and Lester (Les) Earnest is considered the creator of the first protoblogical tool, the so-called *Finger Protocol*². The very concept of blogs has its origin in web logs or internet journals. Modern blogging began in the mid-1990s; the pioneers of this movement, independently from each other, were Dave Winer, John Barger and Justin Hall³.

Table 1. The Classification of Blogs

Criterion	Classification	Features
Nature of the content	blogs	Text is the main medium.
	vlogs	Video materials play the main communication function.
	photoblogs	Photo content prevails.
	podcasts	Audio files.
	link logs	Primarily links to other websites or Internet services.
	tumblelogs	Resemble a notebook and favor short-form content - short text, single photos or videos.
Ownership	individual/private	Forming a type of individual electronic journal.
	corporate/company	Created by a company/brand and/or its employees, having a more personal character, but at the same time strictly focused on the company's activities.
The type of content published	informational	Focused primarily on the presentation of all new products, in particular in the area related to the activities of the company or organization.
	opinion	They contain opinions and/or views of certain people on a particular subject in order to provoke social discussion.
	content	They contain less textual content and constitute a repository for various materials of interest to the author and readers.
	educational	Usually do not contain the opinion of the author or current news, but mainly information of educational use. By using them, the brand/company can build the image of an expert in the sector, and additionally, through articles saturated with key words increases their visibility in search engines.

Source: author's own elaboration based on: B. Gregor, D. Kaczorowska-Spychalska, *Blogi w procesie komunikacji marketingowej*, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2016, pp. 49-53.

Blogs have gained in importance since 2004 when they were adopted as a tool for broadly understood marketing communication used by individuals as well as

² A. Dejnaka, *E-marketing*, [w:] M. Dutko (red.), *Biblia e-biznesu*, Wyd. Helion, Gliwice 2013, p. 192.

³ E. Fedorowicz, *Blog, czyli nowa nisza reklamowa*, „Marketing i Rynek”, 2009, No 10, p. 36.

enterprises⁴. The development of free platforms for creating one's own websites, such as WordPress.com, blogger.pl (Google), blog (Wirtualna Polska), blog.pl (Onet), YouTube, gave users almost unlimited possibilities of presenting content in a digital form (texts, photos, videos). The growing popularity of web journals has contributed to the creation of the so-called blogosphere, which has now been the subject of growing interest from enterprises.

A blog is, therefore, a website with entries displayed chronologically, starting from the most recent. It is a kind of a diary where the owner of the blog regularly posts content he/she finds important. It can be run by one author (a blogger) or an editorial team. Thanks to a subscription to messages and the possibility of adding comments by readers, the blog is characterized by a high level of interactivity of communication. As such, blogs are one of the communication channels creating new media, such as social media.⁵ An in-depth analysis made it possible to classify blogs depending on the adopted criterion. The classification is presented in Table 1.

The Blogosphere as a Virtual Community

Bloggers, regardless of the type of blog and its nature, create blog communities called the blogosphere. The term refers to a set of all blogs available on the Internet as well as communities that center around these blogs. Among the participants of the blogosphere, one can distinguish the creators of blogs (bloggers) and their readers, who often engage in commenting on the shared content – blogs live when they are read by their readers. Apart from the members of the blogosphere and its content, the elements that create a network of relationships between blogs are various technological solutions that include⁶:

- links to recommended blogs, posted on the main page or placed in the sidebar of a blog, so-called blogroll,
- links in the content of entries,
- comments posted on the blog.

The author and his/her readers create a virtual community, the development of which depends on several key aspects. Researchers consider the determinants that influence the growing involvement of the community to be the following⁷:

1. The analysis of the members' needs – virtual communities should be created based on the needs of its members and not the interests of the company or other groups wanting to influence this community;
2. Autonomous community management – creating and publishing content within the community should involve its members, which will result in the greater involvement and activity of community members;

⁴ W. Cwalina, A. Falkowski, B.I. Newman, *Political marketing Theoretical and strategic foundations*, Routledge, London–New York 2015, p. 242.

⁵ J.W. Wiktor, *Komunikacja marketingowa*, PWN, Warszawa 2013, p. 279.

⁶ J.M. Zając, K. Rakocy, *Blogi i blogosfera w perspektywy sieci społecznych*, „Studia Medioznawcze” 2007, No 3(30), pp. 88-91.

⁷ G. Mazurek, *Znaczenie wirtualizacji marketingu w sieciowym kreowaniu wartości*, Wyd. Poltext, Warszawa 2012, pp. 165-166.

3. Minimizing control – the community should have the possibility of limited development and all the control mechanisms should be initiated by the community and implemented with its consent;
4. The optimal technological infrastructure – a key element because this type of community uses virtual environments for communication, hence the technological system should be flexible, easy to use and visually attractive;
5. Strengthening the ties among participants – the intensity of the relationships among participants has a significant impact on the community and its development dynamics. This intensity depends on the value that participants get from participating in the blogosphere. Therefore, the role of the blog's owner is to systematically publish materials that are valuable from the point of view of the members and to stimulate the interaction both with the company itself and among the participants.

The concept of virtual communities has dominated the development of the online environment in recent years. Many companies, recognizing the potential of creating bonds among Internet users, actively participate in building the virtual space. Companies that do not decide to create their own community through a company blog are increasingly using so-called 'influencers'. This term is used to define individuals who influence the purchasing decisions of many people due to their authority, knowledge, position or relationships they have built with their recipients. In the social media world, influencers are people who build their reputation based on experience and knowledge of particular subjects. They regularly publish posts on a given topic on particular platforms, thus generating a large group of people who are involved in the community, who follow their entries and are influenced by their opinions and recommendations. The involvement of influencers to achieve marketing targets of enterprises, called influencer marketing, has recently become one of the fastest growing tools in terms of acquiring potential customers online (Figure 1). It is estimated that in 2020, the influencer marketing market around the world may be worth up to \$10 billion⁸. According to a 2017 Newspoint report *Analytics and Monitoring of Influencers*, influencers create three times more engaging content than people who are not opinion leaders, and each of their material quadruples in the purchasing decisions of their recipients⁹. The proper use of influencer marketing is a cost-effective way of promoting goods, people or ideas due to the possibility of reaching target groups in a way that is most natural for them.

The Company's Benefits Derived from Having a Blog

The informal nature of communication, the growing popularity of blogging and the significant involvement of blog readers make this tool an excellent environment for marketing activities. Both a corporate blog and a cooperation with an individual blogger allow companies to obtain many benefits, but it is their own company blog that provides an independent space in which the brand can communicate with consumers. In addition, what is extremely attractive from the company's point of view is the nature of blogs, as they are usually thematic and niche, and thus are better suited to the needs of the

⁸ Newspoint, *Raport: Analityka i monitoring influencerów*, December 2017, p. 7.

⁹ Ibidem.

recipients. Unlike in the case of media such as radio or television that are consumed in a passive way, blogs are used in an active way, which facilitates establishing direct interaction between the company (the blogger) and its recipients, which in turn forms the basis for long-term relationships¹⁰. Moreover, the benefits that can be derived from a company blog influencing the image and the relationships between the company and its readers are as follows¹¹:

1. **The opportunity to convince a potential customer to start a relationship** – many customers make purchasing decisions based on information found online. A blog is a good place for companies to present the offered values in a thoughtful and targeted manner. On the one hand, a well-run blog is a great source of information about the company, whilst on the other hand, by allowing the company to read the entries of current customers, it gives the company an opportunity to stimulate communication and to convince a potential customer to enter into a relationship with the company;
2. **Building credibility by higher ranking in search engines** – articles published on the blog allow one to create the so-called ‘long tail’ of keywords, which are queries that potential clients can enter into a search engine, and which differ from the phrases set for the main page. In addition, websites that are updated frequently are indexed faster by search engines, and therefore, regularly posted articles directly translate into higher search engine rankings;
3. **Building an expert's position** – building an image of an expert with key competences in a given field is very important, especially in the case of sales of services requiring expert knowledge. Publishing professional articles, interesting films, or helping clients solve their problems position the company as a specialist in a given sector. This is important because customers trust products more when they are made by reliable and professional creators and these are the partners they want to enter into relationships with;
4. **A better understanding of the problems faced by the client** – as the role of the blog is to help clients solve their problems, the company is required to put itself in the position of a customer. By doing so, the company can better understand the problems that arise and help solve them, which may improve the quality of the offer as well as increase the level of customers’ satisfaction that affects the strength of the relationship created with the company¹²;
5. **Building a community around the company** – a blog helps to easily build a community that is centered around a certain niche area. At a later stage of the blog's

¹⁰ I. Szmigin, L. Canning, A.E.Reppel, *Online Community: Enhancing the Relationship Marketing Concept Through Customer Bonding*, „International Journal of Service Industry Management” 2005, No 5, pp. 480-496.

¹¹ B. Geddes, V. Anderson, H. Cannon, C. Tanner, T. Khachatryan, V. Golovanyov, *Introduction to online marketing*, eLight marketing, Saint George 2015, pp. 325–326; I.V. Kondratyeva, Z.S. Zavyalova, *Corporate Blogging: Best Practices in Russia and Abroad*, „Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences”, No 166, 2015, 562-565; M. Łebkowski, *E-wizerunek. Internet jako narzędzie kreowania image'u w biznesie*, Wyd. Helion, Gliwice 2009, pp. 166-167; J. Reed, *Szybkie łącze z klientami. Marketing Internetowy*, Wyd. Helion, Gliwice 2011, pp. 95-96; Whitepress, *10 powodów, dla których warto prowadzić blog firmowy*, <https://www.whitepress.pl/baza-wiedzy/104/10-powodow-dla-ktorych-warto-prowadzic-blog-firmowy>, [February 10, 2019].

¹² O. Witczak, *Blog w kreowaniu wartości dla klienta – media społecznościowe w komunikacji marketingowej przedsiębiorstw*, „Handel Wewnętrzny” 2013, No 3, pp. 134-136.

development, acquiring such a group of recipients enables the company to offer its members products and services that are tailored to their preferences. A skillfully-run blog is an effective method for building a newsletter list and increasing coverage in social media;

6. **The opportunity to stand out from other companies** – nowadays almost every company has a website, and even more often has its fanpage on a social network, but running a company blog is still not very common; this gap allows companies to stand out from their competition. The blog allows the company to create its own image as a modern entity that meets customers' needs, using new technologies tailored to their expectations to communicate with them;
7. **The opportunity to maintain constant communication with clients** – due to the nature of the blog, the systematically appearing new content prompts readers to post comments or ask questions related to the brand. This creates an excellent platform for answering questions, discussing and dispelling doubts. Bilateral communication helps to get to know the clients better and to strengthen relationships. Additionally, the content published by readers gives the company feedback on how its offer is perceived and what changes are expected. Customers can get acquainted with the brand better, which in turn may be reflected in sales result, as the customer more willingly chooses the products of a company they have built relationships with, rather than the offer of a company that is unfamiliar to them;
8. **Managing reputation and public relations** – the blog allows the company to quickly respond to messages about the company. In particular, it is an effective tool for denying incorrect information or responding to unfavorable comments. Blogs are also a reliable source of information for journalists and also increase traffic on the company's home pages.;
9. **Telling the story of the brand and showing the so-called 'human face' of the company** – the blog is a good way to create stories about the brand and product (*storytelling*). It allows the company to present a strategic message, an idea, the history of the brand or the values it is guided by. An interestingly presented story is easier and more quickly remembered by customers, which may affect their willingness to continue the relationship with the company. By giving the company the opportunity to express feelings like empathy, care, humor or intelligence, blogs present 'the human face' of the company. In the eyes of the client, it ceases to be an institution, but becomes a partner for conversation.

Company blogs can be a valuable tool of communication with recipients and bring many benefits. Through them it is possible to build the image of the organization as well as improve the company's visibility on the Internet. However, it is important to maintain a balance between promotional activities and providing readers with real value such as knowledge or entertainment, which will be supported by good content and a coherent communication concept.

Research Methods

The survey was conducted using the author's own questionnaire on a representative group of 502 young people (aged 15-24) residing in Poland in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship. The survey was conducted in January and February 2016 through direct

contact. The main criterion for the selection of the research sample was the age of the respondents. However, in order to increase the correctness of inference, the gender criterion of the examined persons was additionally proportionate (50/50). The appropriate sample size was determined based on the data provided by the Statistics Poland (formerly known as the Polish Central Statistical Office) regarding the population of the studied voivodeship in the year of the survey (2016). The selection of the research sample was intentional.

The Results of the Research

In the first stage of the conducted research, the credibility of various sources of communication as perceived by young people was verified. Apart from blogs, both the classical and online communication forms were included in the study. The respondents were asked to indicate the three, in their opinion, most reliable sources of information. The obtained results showed that the most frequently indicated source of information fulfilling the criterion of credibility were online opinions from strangers (Figure 1). This tool was chosen by as much as 87.3% of the respondents. The second most often chosen source of information by the respondents are opinions of strangers (87.3%), which are considered slightly more reliable for the respondents than the direct contact with the seller indicated by 86.7% of people.

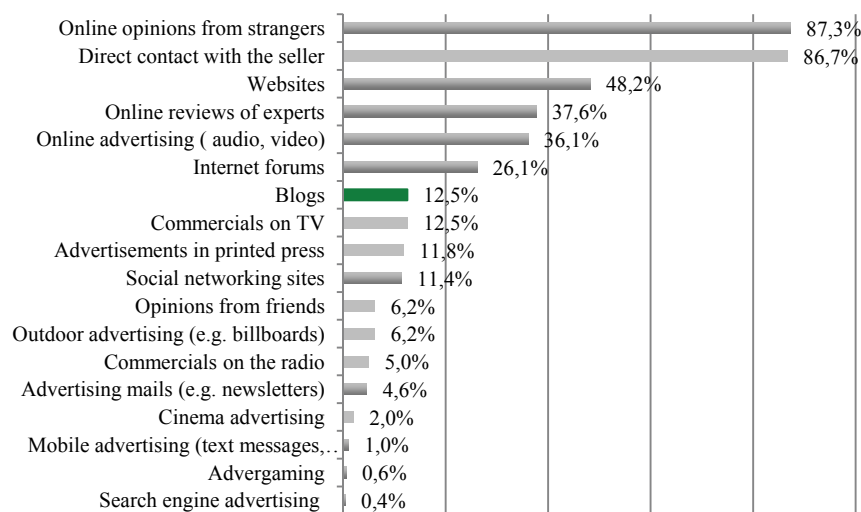


Figure 1. Credibility of communication tools
Source: author's own study.

These results are consistent with the results of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) "Return on Word of Mouth" report that Word of Mouth (WOM) has a large impact on consumer purchasing decisions. The results indicated that WOM is the driving force behind 13% of sales. The researchers also found that

recommendation marketing brings up to five times higher sales than paid advertising¹³. However, the PwC report (2018) showed that the opinions of friends and family, and sometimes even strangers who present them on social media or blogs, have more influence on purchasing choices than messages controlled by sellers, such as advertisements, promotions or attractive pricing¹⁴.

The collected results showed that the young respondents of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship consider online communication tools to be definitely more credible than the ones using traditional communication channels. This is evidenced by the fact that apart from the two discussed forms of communication, the next five, which obtained the highest number of indications in terms of reliability, are also forms of online communication: websites (48.2%), online reviews of experts (37.6%), online advertising (36.1%), internet forums (26.1%) and blogs (12.5%). These results are confirmed by the report *Shopping habits of Poles* prepared by Promosfera.pl, which shows that 78% of consumers before making purchase decisions searched for information on the Internet¹⁵.

How often do you use blogs as a source of information about the company or product?

- very often
- often
- seldom
- very seldom
- never

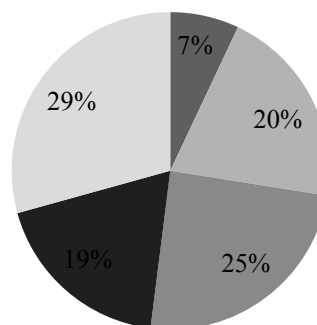


Chart 2. Frequency of using blogs to search for information about the company/product
Source: author's own study.

Although the perceived reliability of blogs as a source of information about products and/or the company ranked fairly low, more than a quarter of the respondents use them very often (7% of the respondents) or often (20%) when seeking this type of information (Chart 2). This study confirms the results of a report published by whitepress.pl, indicating that young people are increasingly learning about products from influencers they follow on blogs and social media, and not from traditional information sources.¹⁶ According to a report by the Polish Association of Bloggers and Vloggers and Hash.fm, for 72% of readers of blogs and vlogs, they are the first source of information about products and services – more important than the opinions of family and friends. 60% of regular customers use them to make aware purchases, and 53%

¹³ P. Zielewski, *Marketing szeptany. Rekomendacje znajomych sprzedają każdy produkt*, Forbes, 8/2016.

¹⁴ PwC, *Raport Polacy na zakupach*, 2018, p. 17.

¹⁵ Promosfera.pl, *Raport: Polacy na zakupach*, 2016.

¹⁶ whitepress.pl, *Influencer marketing – praktycznie*, 2016, <https://www.loswiaheros.pl/zdjecia/influencer-marketing-praktycznie-whitepress.pdf> [February 10, 2019].

acknowledge that they made purchases under their influence¹⁷. The results show that although blogs are not yet the tool used by most young people in their search for information, a large group ranks this communication tool in a positive way (40%). A negative opinion was expressed by less than 16% of the respondents, which may indicate the existing potential of the tool, which, if properly adjusted to the recipients in the content and forms presented on blogs, may win a larger group of satisfied recipients (Chart 3).

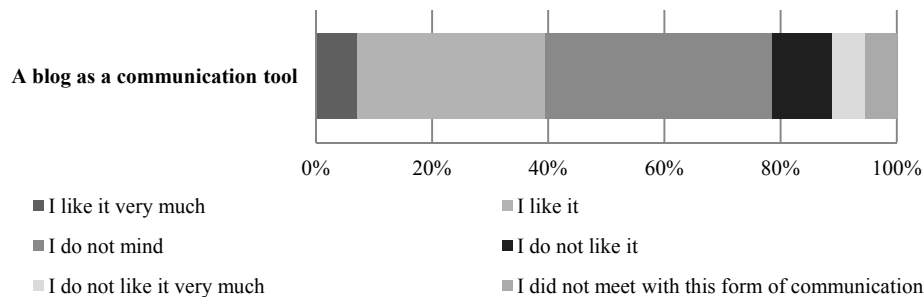


Chart 3. Attitudes of young people towards using blogs as a tool for communication with the client
Source: author's own study.

Although blogs are not recognized by young people as a tool of great credibility and for many are not a source of information about a company, respondents speak positively about the effectiveness of blogs as a form of communication with the client. Over 43% of the respondents indicate that, in their opinion, it is very high or high. However, the opinion about low and very low effectiveness of blogs is expressed by 21% and 8% respectively (Chart 4).

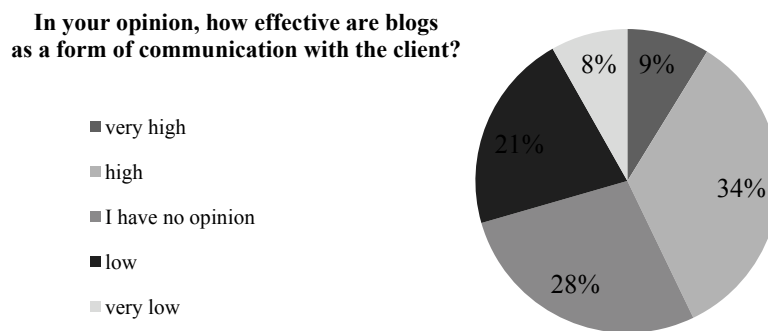


Chart 4. Effectiveness of blogs as a form of communication between the company and clients
Source: author's own study.

¹⁷Polskie Stowarzyszenie Blogerów i Vlogerów, *Raport: (B)vlog Power. Wpływ blogerów i wideoblogerów na internautów*, 2015; Hash.fm, *Raport: Kreatywność i wiarygodność. Współpraca z markami oczami digital influencers*, 2015.

Conclusion

Blogs as the original form of Internet journals have turned into a significant tool to realize aspirations, and create trends and attitudes, including purchasing behavior. It is currently one of the most popular non-formal communication channels, an instrument for influencing consumer preferences and a tool to learn about the real needs of the market. The variety of blogs and their increasing degree of specialization enables more precise access to a relevant group of recipients. Through the process of recommendation and broadly understood relations built in the blogosphere, blogs increase the level of consumer knowledge about products and companies by providing an objective source of information when making purchase decisions. From the company's point of view, corporate blogs and cooperation with influencers require a well-thought-out and long-term strategy. It is important to be aware that communication through the blogosphere should be a long-term process, which requires commitment and systematic control and evaluation. A survey conducted among representatives of young people indicates that online communication tools are a valuable source of information for them, and blogs as a form of online communication are assessed positively.

The conducted research had limitations on the delimitation of the examined group of people and on the generality of the questions asked. In addition, the study was conducted only in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship in Poland, hence the results obtained may be characteristic for young people of this region. The territorially limited area of the study does not allow to generalize the results obtained for the entire Polish population.

The direction of further research enabling the exploration of the discussed area would be an analysis among representatives of other generations and on a wider geographical scale. In addition, valuable findings could be generated by research on communication conducted by corporate blogs and blogs run by influencers.

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Blog jako narzędzie komunikacji w ocenie młodych konsumentów – wyniki badań empirycznych

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest eksploracja przekonań i postaw młodych osób wobec wykorzystania blogów firmowych jako narzędzia komunikacji pomiędzy przedsiębiorstwem a klientami oraz źródła informacji o produktach i/lub firmie. W pierwszej części artykułu w oparciu o analizę źródeł wtórnych zaprezentowano historię powstania współczesnych blogów, omówiono ich klasyfikację, wskazano na potencjał blogosfery jako wirtualnej społeczności, a także omówiono liczne korzyści wynikające z prowadzenie bloga korporacyjnego. W drugiej części opracowania zaprezentowano wyniki badań pierwotnych, przeprowadzonych wśród przedstawicieli młodych osób (w wieku 15-24 lat), których celem było poznanie ich postaw względem wykorzystanie blogów korporacyjnych w komunikacji marketingowej

Słowa kluczowe: blog, generation Y, blogosfera, online communication, influencer marketing.

JEL Codes: M31, O30.

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