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14. FMCG brands and new communication channels: how do food and beverage brands use TikTok in an emerging market?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to assess the use of TikTok in organic marketing communication of food and beverage brands on the Polish market. Despite the rising popularity of TikTok in Poland, its adoption by FMCG brands and their patterns of communication in this application are still understudied. To address this research gap, desk research method was applied. One hundred bestselling brands of food and non-alcoholic beverages in 2022 were reviewed in terms of their presence and content on TikTok. The results prove that the use of TikTok as a tool of organic marketing communication is still at an early stage of adoption in Polish food and beverage industry. Among the top hundred brands, only twenty-two have an official page on TikTok, of which eighteen profiles are currently active. The most popular themes in communication include tutorial posts, references to current TikTok trends or consumer habits, humour, real-time marketing, posts created with influencers and posts related to adventure or hobbies. The outcomes of the research are concluded with their implications for theory and practice.

Keywords

Marketing communication, social media, TikTok, fast moving consumer goods

Introduction

Since the dynamic development of social networking sites at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when Wikipedia, LinkedIn, MySpace and Facebook started their operations (Edosomwan et al., 2011), social media have evolved into one of the most discussed phenomena in the marketing discourse. Nowadays, social media have become the third biggest advertising channel globally in terms of advertising spend (WARC, 2019). Moreover, social media constantly gain popularity among individual users. At present, 66 percent of Polish population use any social media (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023, p. 17), compared to 45 percent in 2018 (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2018, p. 8).

One of the current trends in social media consumption is the growing importance of mobile devices in social media usage. The biggest part of internet users in Poland – 94 percent – uses social media via mobile phones (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023, p. 32). The increasing role of mobile social media consumption resulted in rising popularity of applications such as TikTok. TikTok is a social media application that allows for publication of short videos that are watched and shared by other users (Wahid et al., 2023). In January 2023, nearly one third of Polish adults used TikTok (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023, p. 67), which has become the fifth most popular social media platform in Poland and the third most popular one excluding messaging applications (ibid., p. 55). In addition, the potential advertisement reach on TikTok grew by over 30 percent versus the previous year (ibid., p. 67).

TikTok is one of the newest social media platforms, as its start dates to 2017 (Wahid et al., 2023). Its popularity among consumers plummeted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Su et al., 2020), with many people looking for at-home entertainment. Since then, TikTok has also become a topic of interest for marketing scholars and practitioners. According to the Scopus database, 122 papers related to TikTok have been published in the field of management, business, and accounting since 2019, including 110 papers published after 2021.

The extant literature on TikTok as a marketing communication tool covers several research areas:

- the role of influencer marketing on TikTok in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours (Yang, Ha, 2021; Deng et al., 2022; Barta et al., 2023; Wright & Cherry, 2023);
- the use of TikTok for marketing purposes in the tourism industry (Du et al., 2022; Wengel et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022; Zhou, Sotiriadis & Shen, 2023);
- TikTok as a communication channel for professional athletes (Su et al., 2020);
- the adoption of TikTok as a marketing communication tool by non-profit organisations (Correll & Buckholtz, 2023);
- the effectiveness of paid advertising strategies on TikTok (Yuan, Xia & Ye, 2022);
- the drivers of consumers' social media engagement on TikTok (Wahid et al., 2023; Xiao & Zhang, 2023).

The majority of extant studies on TikTok is focused on Asian markets, particularly China, as TikTok originates from this market. However, there is still little research on TikTok use for marketing communication on emerging European markets, such as Poland, despite the recent surge of TikTok users there.

TikTok may be an effective communication channel for various types of brands, including food and beverage brands, especially taking into consideration the growing importance of e-commerce for food and beverage sector after the COVID-19 pandemic (Gemius, 2016, p. 98; Gemius, 2022, p. 144). Engaging social media communication might not only help create the desired brand image but also increase conversion (Lee, Hosanagar & Nair, 2018). However, food and beverage brands still record relatively low social media engagement rates, compared to brands from other categories (Chaffey, 2023). TikTok, with its interactivity and vividness, might offer new opportunities for the owners of food and beverage brands to drive consumer engagement and – as a result – increase the brand loyalty. Yet, the topic of TikTok adoption for organic marketing communication via official brand profiles and communication strategies on

this platform, particularly in Eastern European markets, is still understudied. Considering this research gap, two research questions were formulated:

RQ1. What is the level of TikTok adoption for organic marketing communication by the biggest food and beverage brands on the Polish market?

RQ2. Which themes dominate in the organic marketing communication of these brands on TikTok?

Research method

Desk research method was applied to answer the research questions. The data regarding TikTok profiles and posts of one hundred bestselling food and beverages brands in Poland were extracted and analysed with the use of descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis.

The research process was threefold. Firstly, the population of brands to be studied was selected. The sales value data for 2022 were obtained from Euromonitor International for all food and beverage brands in Poland. Next, the brands were sorted from the highest selling to the lowest selling and top hundred bestselling brands were selected for further analysis.

Secondly, each brand name of the top hundred bestselling food and beverage brands in Poland was searched for on TikTok. Only the official Polish-language brand profiles were considered. In the case of brands which had an official TikTok profile, the data regarding the number of followers, number of likes, number and content of posts, date of the first and the last post were extracted and analysed at first with the use of descriptive statistical analysis. As a third step, qualitative content analysis was performed. Each post was assigned thematical codes that described its content (advice, informative or educational content, real-time marketing, product, consumer habits, influencer cooperation, humour, adventure or hobbies, contest, challenge, TikTok trend, event promotion, user-generated content). The final sample of studied profiles covered 22 different brand pages.

The adoption of TikTok by food and beverages brands in Poland

Among the top hundred food and beverage brands in Poland, only 22 appeared to have official Polish-language TikTok profiles, as of 14th May 2023. It indicates that the use of TikTok by food and beverage brands in Poland is at an early stage of adoption. Moreover, 5 of the 22 analysed profiles – Coca-Cola, Lay's, Mirinda, Pepsi and Hortex – have been inactive since 2020. One of these profiles (Lay's) has not published any posts. The group of food and beverage brands active on TikTok includes both global and local brands. Some of the brands belong to the same corporate owner (table 14.1).

Table 14.1. Food and beverage brands with Polish-language TikTok profiles (as of 14th May 2023)

Brand name	Brand owner	Date of the first post	Date of the last post	Posts	Followers	Likes
Coca-Cola	Coca-Cola	03.03.2020	06.03.2020	3	20 500	191 700
Tymbark	Maspex	25.10.2019	03.11.2022	176	130 500	1 000 000
Żywiec Zdrój	Danone	10.03.2021	03.03.2023	19	44 700	452 200
Pepsi	PepsiCo	09.07.2020	30.11.2020	10	21 500	156 400
Winiary	Nestle	15.12.2022	12.05.2023	8	3 053	29 000
Morliny	Animex	02.05.2023	09.05.2023	3	1 295	5 131
Hortex	Hortex	10.07.2020	10.07.2020	1	1 926	1 558
Lipton	Unilever	18.03.2022	13.05.2023	46	513	9 819
Tarczynski	Tarczynski	03.03.2022	14.03.2023	154	110 000	1 600 000
Hochland	Hochland	23.02.2022	08.05.2023	69	6 720	16 600
Red Bull	Red Bull	20.02.2020	14.05.2023	740	534 700	7 700 000
E. Wedel	Lotte	29.10.2021	09.05.2023	146	79 300	1 800 000
Koral	Koral	13.03.2020	09.05.2023	235	221 200	1 300 000
Black	FoodCare	28.04.2021	26.04.2023	68	18 900	289 800
Lay's	PepsiCo	-	-	0	34 200	0
Muszynianka	Muszynianka	08.03.2023	11.05.2023	17	440	1 770
Herbapol	Herbapol	07.10.2022	10.05.2023	30	7 024	19 700
Tiger	Maspex	08.10.2020	27.04.2023	143	153 200	2 600 000
Bonduelle	Bonduelle	29.11.2022	12.05.2023	33	4 123	11 300
Mirinda	PepsiCo	06.07.2020	10.12.2020	9	36 400	315 300
RolmlecZ	Mlekpól	07.04.2023	07.04.2023	1	44	425
Big-Active	Herbapol	08.11.2022	10.05.2023	24	4 863	11 700

Source: tiktok.com.

The first profile of a food and beverage brand on Polish TikTok was Tymbark, launched in October 2019. However, TikTok was a niche communication channel until the beginning of 2022. Over a half of the above listed profiles were established after October 2021. At present, subsequent brands are still joining TikTok; the newest profiles of brands such as Muszynianka, RolmlecZ and Morliny were created between March and May 2023. The most active profiles belong to brands of a rather hedonic than an utilitarian profile, i.e. brands of products bought more often for affective gratification than for utilitarian reasons (Voss, Spangenberg, Grohmann, 2003): energy drink brands (Red Bull, Tiger), confectionery brands (Koral, E. Wedel), a soft drink brand (Tymbark) and a meat snack brand (Tarczynski). When it comes to posting frequency, Red Bull, Tarczyński and E. Wedel are still the top profiles. Yet, utilitarian brands such as Muszynianka (mineral water), Bonduelle (staple foods) and Hochland (cheese products) post as frequently as Tymbark and Tiger (Figure 14.1).

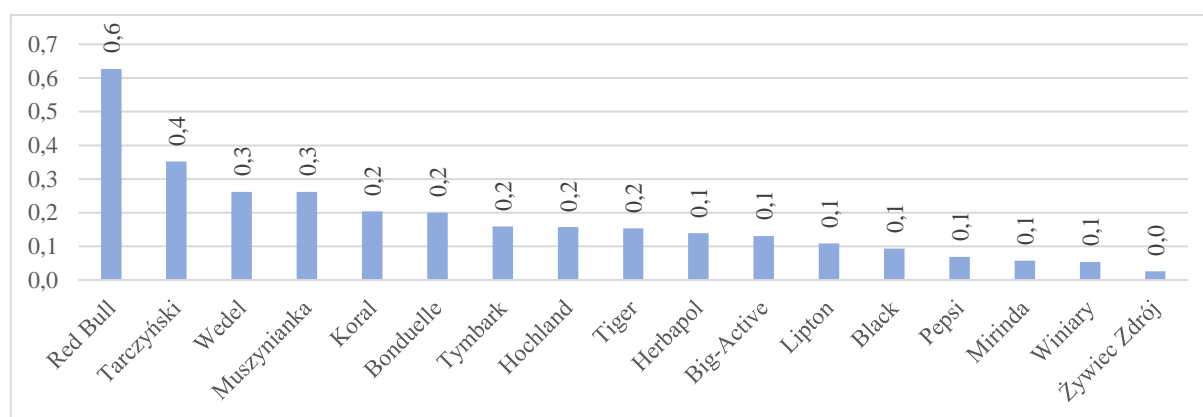


Figure 14.1. Posting frequency per day by brand (brands with more than 5 posts on their profiles)

Source: tiktok.com.

The number of followers is an important indicator of a brand profile popularity; however, the effectiveness of marketing communication should not be assessed only through its lens. Eventually, there might be profiles with a high number of followers who do not engage with the brand-related content. In such case, a useful indicator might be the ratio of total post likes to the number of followers, which may serve as a proxy of a follower engagement. In the case of food and beverage brands active on Polish TikTok, the highest follower engagement ratio is observed for E. Wedel and Lipton (table 14.2). This might be caused by the fact that these two brands implemented a very concise communication strategy with a clear main idea. The communication of E. Wedel is focused on culinary advice and recipes, in line with the brand's communication platform labelled as "In the Kitchen with Wedel" (pol. *W kuchni z Wedlem*). The communication strategy of Lipton comprises tea-related interviews with influencers, interesting facts about tea and references to popular TikTok trends. Aside from E. Wedel and Lipton, other hedonic brands, such as Tiger, Black, Tarczyński and Red Bull, also achieve high follower engagement ratio. The high ratio observed for energy drink brands might be explained by the fact that the target group of these brands are mostly young consumers, who use TikTok more often than consumers aged above 25 (Statista, 2023). Meanwhile, the communication of the Tarczyński brand is built on humour, which may drive consumer engagement.

Table 14.2. Number of total post likes/number of followers ratio (follower engagement ratio) by brand (as of 14th May 2023)

Brand name	Follower engagement ratio
E. Wedel	22,70
Lipton	19,14
Tiger	16,97
Black	15,33
Tarczyński	14,55
Red Bull	14,40
Żywiec Zdrój	10,12
Rolmlecz	9,66
Winiary	9,50

Brand name	Follower engagement ratio
Coca-Cola	9,35
Mirinda	8,66
Tymbark	7,66
Pepsi	7,27
Koral	5,88
Muszynianka	4,02
Morliny	3,96
Herbapol	2,80
Bonduelle	2,74
Hochland	2,47
Big-Active	2,41
Hortex	0,81
Lay's	-

Source: tiktok.com.

The most popular themes in TikTok communication of food and beverage brands

The results of qualitative analysis of content posted on TikTok by the 22 studied brands indicate that there are seven main themes used in the communication: advice, TikTok trends, consumer habits, humour, real-time marketing, influencer collaboration and adventure or hobbies. Posts which contain advice or inspirations for consumers are often published by food brands that have a more utilitarian profile. As an example, brands such as Bonduelle, Hochland and Winiary built their TikTok communication idea mainly on recipes.

One of the distinct features of TikTok is the rapid development of trends. Communication based on current TikTok trends is willingly leveraged by various brands, such as Koral, Tymbark, Lipton, Herbapol and Morliny. References to consumer habits, such as holiday habits or consumers' experience with a brand's products (e.g., the ways used by consumers to open the product packaging) are also a popular theme in TikTok communication of food and beverage brands in Poland. Humour is another common theme in their TikTok posts, used in particular by the Tarczyński brand and their characteristic brand heroes – Musketeers, which is coherent with the brand's cross-channel communication strategy.

Moreover, many food and beverage brands in Poland use real-time marketing, i.e., the reference to ongoing events, occasions, and phenomena (Willemsen et al., 2018). Brands refer in posted content to celebrations such as Christmas holidays, Valentine's Day, or Halloween, as well as ongoing events that raise a high interest of the public, such as the Eurovision Song Contest. In addition, some brands create posts in collaboration with influencers; Tymbark's videos about "spreading the joy" and Lipton's "tea Q&A" might serve as examples. Finally, energy drink brands often include the theme of adventure in their TikTok communication, which is compatible with their brand positioning.

Conclusions

The results of the study prove that TikTok is still not a common communication channel for food and beverage brands in Poland. However, its popularity as a marketing communication channel is growing, as new food and beverage brands are joining TikTok each month. TikTok

use is slightly more common for owners of hedonic brand than owners of utilitarian brands. Energy drink brands achieve the highest number of followers and likes, probably because their target consumers are the most active group of TikTok users. However, the highest follower engagement ratio is observed for brands that stick to a clear communication idea. The main communication themes for food and beverage brands on TikTok involve advice and inspiration, TikTok trends, consumer habits, humour, real-time marketing, influencer collaboration and adventure-related communication.

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