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# Development opportunities for the use of social media marketing in health promotion

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### Introduction

Health is one of the most precious human values. Knowledge how to care for it is therefore highly valuable. Health is regarded as dependent in 50% on a lifestyle, i.e. behaviors and habits (Lalonde, 1981). Ordinary daily choices influence it to a large extent. The sooner the preventive measures are introduced, the better effects can be achieved and the longer a healthy life can be enjoyed. Therefore, health promotion is a crucial aspect. However, to make proper decisions necessary knowledge and an appropriate level of health awareness is needed (Gruszczyński *et al.*, 2015). Many scientific publications confirm that health promotion and health education play an important role in acquiring knowledge on health issues (Karski, 1992; Geneva, 1998; Ostrowska, 1999; Szymczuk *et al.*, 2011). World Health Organization describes health promotion as “a process enabling people to increase control of their own health and its improvement” (Ottawa, 1986).



The popularity of the Internet has largely influenced the mass communication. Business entities, companies and public organizations make use of it for numerous purposes. Aside from personal uses, the Internet, including social media, can be required for marketing social activity. The web has become widely available, public hotspots with free Wi-Fi access have appeared and the development of mobile devices with Internet connection led to their high popularity (Safke and Brake, 2009). The Internet mass media have become a major source of information, not leaving apart the aspects of health (Syrkiewicz-Świtła *et al.*, 2014; Evans, 2006).

Social media marketing directed towards health issues and preventive measures aiming to eliminate disease agents are a new research area for experts in the field (Amrita and Biswas, 2013). Analysis of the results of such research shows that the creators of social media websites most often publish information on disease symptoms, treatment methods, and medicines and paramedical products (Hanik, 2011; Fox, 2011; Amrita and Biswas, 2013).

A growing trend of attractiveness of healthy lifestyle propagation by means of social media marketing tools can be observed (Hanik, 2011). This has become a premise for my scientific study aiming to determine opportunities for the development of the social media marketing use in health promotion.

### Purpose

The aim of this paper is to establish opportunities for the development of the social media usage in health promotion.

### Material and methods

This paper provides an overview of research. It was elaborated on the basis of secondary sources analysis – studies of literature such as books, scientific journals, research reports and electronic publications.

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### **The essence of social media marketing and its place in marketing theory**

Social media marketing stems from direct marketing and is one of the elements of the Internet marketing. The Internet marketing is specifically addressed to a customer, a defined target group. It usually is of a two-way character and the channel of message transmission is the World Wide Web. According to a definition, it is “the activity of a company aiming to promote and sell goods and services, and build relations with a customer who is contacted through the Internet” (Armstrong and Kotler, 2012). As a natural consequence of the expansion of the Web, the offline marketing is being gradually displaced by its online counterpart (Armstrong and Kotler, 2012). Marketing is also reoriented towards activities of *inbound marketing* based on generation of the information which attracts customers’ attention. The author of this concept of marketing was Seth Godin (Halligan and Shah, 2010). This form of marketing is a connection of the content, optimization and strategy of social media. Following such marketing practice, customers search for the content they are interested in by themselves. Additionally, one of its major techniques is promotion in social media. To define social media they can be described as “a group of applications, grounded on net technology, based on ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, allowing to create and exchange the content generated by the users.” (Dorenda-Zaborowicz, 2012). The Web 2.0 technology itself is an art of creating the Internet services whose co-creators are the web surfers (Gani and Clemes, 2006). It is based on a virtual community which can express its needs and opinions. It also employs the Internet for communication between the users who influence its content (Dryl, 2011). Social media enable all behaviors and actions which connect the users online. The aim of such activities is information and experience sharing (McNutt, 2014). Dialogue is allowed thanks to a range of applications. Sent information can be expressed in the form of words, sound, photos and videos. Social media are also defined as “a set of technologies to initiate communication and message transmission between the people, their acquaintances and social networks to which they belong” (Brzozowska-Woś, 2013). Each of these definitions comes down to two main features: interactivity and communication.

Definitions of social media marketing can be determined in many ways, however, they always point out creation of multimedia content which involves photos and texts. Creation of the content refers not only to individual needs, but also sharing them among acquaintances (Brańska, 2015). Social media marketing shall be determined as a marketing strategy whose task is gathering, processing and analysis of information obtained from the Internet (texts, comments, opinions) and using it for marketing purposes, including those of social nature (e.g. health promoting). In order to achieve this goal, all tools and services allowing two-way communication and interaction with others are employed. This way, they create a virtual community which shares reflections, opinions and information. Such communities lead discussions on a given topic, fulfilling the need for belonging and self-realization. A great advantage of this marketing is credibility and the Internet users’ trust in such a form of communication. They have higher trust in information obtained from another person whom they know than from an anonymous advertisement (Kamińska-Klonowska, 2012). Elements forming social media marketing are mainly (Dorenda-Zaborowicz, 2012): users (searching for specific information on products, events or advise, and engaging in discussions, exchanging opinions); channels of communication (such as: social media, services/websites, blogs, microblogs, forums); community (a group of people communicating with each other, focused within a given service); content (submitted by all media users which can have both useful (interesting) or useless (with no meaning for the receiver), positive or negative character).

Social media marketing uses social media as a channel of communication. The main premise for such a choice is the exceptional characteristics of social media. The most important ones are (Dryl, 2011): ability to express opinions,

recommendations, reviews, product evaluations and create rankings; access for everybody regardless of their professional education or social status; ability to group a large number of receivers; little cost; fast (almost immediate) transmission of messages between the sender and the receiver; two-way dialogue between the users; open form, possibility to edit the message (contrary to traditional media); ability to create data bases like Wiki.

The most important feature of social media marketing is their two-way nature. Users involved in media creation have become co-producers of the content, and not just receivers as it was in the past. They can be authors of texts, comments and they can share them on their own. Thanks to this, social media have an open character. Every Internet user can participate in a discussion regardless of their social status. Openness of social media enables on-going data modification and verification. Constant edition of texts by numerous users provides true and full information to the readers (Safke and Brake, 2009; Gogołek, 2010). It carries, however, a risk of introducing communication chaos and lack of control over published information. Social media marketing is a means of information transmission controlled only by the community and used on various scales (Shao, 2009). When searching for information on a given topic, a user can immediately spot information related to the searched area. Additionally, there are systems remembering users' preferences and the search algorithm automatically suggests which of the content may be of interest to the user (Castillo *et al.*, 2013).

Social media users co-create information, express their opinions, exert influence on the quality and subject of sent information, as well as a brand's or even company's perception (Podlaski, 2011). Communities which form virtual space can be divided into created (Dryl, 2011): individually, by the group of users, by business entities, and by non-profit organizations.

### **Perspectives for the use of social media marketing in health promotion**

Health campaigns propagating healthy lifestyle are a contemporary tool of information distribution. Implementation of health campaigns is manifested by dissemination of health promoting ideas. Senders of those campaigns, not only in Poland, are government and non-government organizations (Linders, 2012; Karakiza, 2015; Khan, 2015; Syrkiewicz-Światała M. *et al.*, 2015; Syrkiewicz-Światała M. *et al.*, 2015a; Syrkiewicz-Światała M. *et al.*, 2016b). Receivers are specific social groups (target groups) endangered by a given health issue.

The main channel of health communication is media (press, radio, television, the Internet).

Media play an important role in health education. They provide necessary information on health and induce changes in the receivers' attitudes (Szymczuk *et al.*, 2011). They educate the receiver through (Syrkiewicz-Światała and Światała, 2012): programs on the subject matter (specialist programs), information on harmful factors, commercial spots within social campaigns, advertisements of "healthy" products, creation of appropriate behavior by the characters of television series and famous people (celebrities, politicians, healthy lifestyle specialists).

Mass media, however, have a lot of limitations, like one-way communication and lack of an on-going relation between the sender and the receiver. The content of sent messages cannot be changed or supplemented, which can lead to receivers' disorientation. Moreover, many social advertisements on health matters are created by pharmaceutical corporations and medical companies (Syrkiewicz-Światała *et al.*, 2016c). These advertisements impose the necessity of using medicines and supplements as an alternative to changing the lifestyle. Therefore, nowadays social media play an increasingly important role in health education, as they are free from the control by specific groups of interest. They offer a constant update of data and created content reaches much wider audience. Information propagated in social media influences the reality, attitudes and behavior of the society. Today almost all information can be obtained

from the Web. Using the tools of social media marketing is a contemporary trend in promotion of health information perceived as more trustworthy by the receivers (Syrkiewicz-Światała and Kotlarek, 2017).

Social media have a lot of supporters. According to Digital in Global 2017, over one third of users in global population use social media (Report, 2017). In Poland 14 out of 38 million inhabitants are active Internet users (Report, 2016). The report indicates that Poles spend on average 1 hour and 45 minutes daily on browsing the Internet (Report, 2017). Following *Euromonitor International*, in 2016 81% of Poles searched the Internet and social media for opinions, recommendations and references on products they intended to purchase. These media are not only used in a commercial sector, but also constitute a source of information on health (Bagiński, 2017). According to McLawhorn *et al.*, almost 80% of Internet users treat the Internet as a source of health information (McLawhorn *et al.*, 2016). Such conclusions are confirmed by Collier (Collier, 2014). This activity has already been noticed by institutions which promote healthy behavior and lifestyle (Syrkiewicz-Światała, 2012). It is manifested in the realization of educational health programs online in order to reach a wide group of receivers (especially youth and the working-age population) (Sadowski, 2013). Social media are more popular among young people than among older population (Syrkiewicz-Światała and Światała, 2015). Nowadays, almost every adolescent has a Facebook, Instagram or Twitter account (Syrkiewicz-Światała, 2016). A research by Lenhart and co-workers indicated that as much as 73% of American adolescents use social media (Lenhart *et al.*, 2010). They use it on a daily basis. Also, a phenomenon of multiplication of health and its self-assessment is noticed in the population aged 55+ (Syrkiewicz-Światała *et al.*, 2016a). In this group, although less dynamically than in other age groups, still systematically, the number of Internet users increases every year (Syrkiewicz-Światała, 2015). Health promoting activities conducted in social media also come out to meet the expectations of seniors by forming special association groups which, thanks to integration and dialogue, express the willingness to maintain and improve good health (Batorski and Zając, 2010).

The form of communication in social media is adjusted to the online activity of various target groups. Choice of media depends on their popularity. Rankings of the most popular social media services vary, though for a few years both in Poland and in the world the leaders have been Facebook and, among video-sharing services, YouTube with over a billion of users (Report, 2016). As the analysis carried out by Fox shows, 34% of users read comments on health and medical subjects posted on forums and discussion groups (Fox, 2011). Same research indicates that 25% Internet users make use of films/videos to broaden their knowledge on health issues (Fox, 2011). Therefore, both text and video forms should be in use. By its dynamic growth, social media offer an increasingly wider range of tools (Safko and Brake, 2009; McLawhorn *et al.*, 2016).

Social media act as a source of interpersonal communication online, which in an unequivocal way initiated an introduction of free dialogue, discussion and creation of relationships between the sender and the Internet receiver of the message (Agostino, 2013). For this reason, government and non-government organizations, observing repeatedly the communication success of small business, companies and associations, try to enter social media as well. By their means, they create a positive image of a healthy person: someone who is doing medical checkups on a regular basis and leading a healthy lifestyle (Andersen and Henriksen, 2006; Szymczuk *et al.*, 2011; Agostino, 2013).

This medium is also a good source of knowledge about its users. Through creation of their personal profiles, the Internet users provide a lot of precious information for health promoting organizations, like (Podlaski, 2011): demographic (sex, age, residence), and economic referred to profession, education and financial status. Additionally, organizations may obtain information on lifestyle and interests to more precisely determine their target group (Reklama, 2016). Such information becomes valuable knowledge to the people responsible for educational programs, allowing to reach with effective health promoting communication the widest group of those interested (Buchnowska,

2010; Cedrowska *et al.*, 2014).

Low cost is an important factor acting in favor of the possibility to use social media marketing in health promotion (Trzeciak, 2009). It is worth noting that in most cases, the senders promoting such content are non-profit organizations or government institutions whose financial means for this activity are naturally limited. Low cost is also important to the receivers of these messages. Users bear only the cost of Internet connection and necessary computer equipment allowing access and they do not need to pay for instance for every article. They can also reduce the Internet expenses by accessing it in public places such as coffee bars, restaurants, shopping malls and even public transport areas which enable free hotspots for their customers.

Social media have a lot of supporters, as they offer diversified messages and combine other traditional media. They enable reading articles, listening to the news and watching movies. Moreover, they allow employing social media marketing which - thanks to its two-way operation - engages the receiver in content creation by the sender. Social media provide an opportunity to ask questions and thus broaden one's knowledge on a specific topic (Kuhlmann and Suter, 2008).

Although social media offer a vast amount of knowledge, they have a substantial flaw - most of the information is unverified. Social media are characterized by bipolarity which manifests itself in both positive (i.e. increasing availability of health information and disease prevention to the population) and negative impact (e.g. isolation from or condemnation of an individual by a social group, promotion of bad habits and unhealthy behaviors) (Punkt Zdrowia, 2016). So far no fully effective validation systems of the information posted and shared online have been developed. It is the receiver who has to decide which of the information is true. Societies in which social media have been popular for a long time may know better how to assess the content present online. A report from a research carried out by National Research Corp. shows that Americans perceive social media marketing as a reliable source of information on health (Report USA, 2011). 32% of respondents admitted they have a very high or high level of trust in social media as a source of information (Report USA, 2011). In Poland there has not been any broad and reliable research carried out in this field.

It is noteworthy that a crucial role in health education is played by the way the information is transmitted. Firstly, the receivers must become interested in the communicated message, and secondly, they need to find the source of information trustworthy.

## Summary

Interest in social media is systematically growing. Internet users willing to express themselves in virtual reality began to create social media based on generation and sharing of multimedia content with other Web users. By means of social media, the society started to obtain information, communicate with other people (often with complete strangers), share their knowledge and spend leisure time this way (Rak, 2014). Social media transform traditional communication into a virtual dialogue. Since 1997, when first social media service Six Degrees appeared, the role of the Internet has been visibly changing to assume a more social appeal. It is estimated that there are already 2.31 billion social media users worldwide, with 14 million in Poland (Report, 2016). Popularization of these media brought business to social media in order to look for and convince potential customers. As a consequence of these actions, specialists in social media marketing, like Social Media Managers or Community Managers, started being employed (Sadowski, 2013). First social media specialists appeared in Poland about nine years ago (Rak, 2014). Social media developed from its core idea of social communication to a space into which marketing entered (social media marketing).

In medical branch, obtaining information by means of social media marketing became a fact (Amrita and Biswas; Collier, 2014). Medicine acknowledges the progress and tries to “get closer” to a patient, and the Internet and social media only support this process. Potential patients seek information on medical entities (Syrkiewicz-Świtała and Świtała, 2012). When choosing a specialist doctor, they take into account the other patients’ opinions posted via social media (Syrkiewicz-Świtała and Świtała, 2015). Internet and social media are also one of the first sources of information on health education, disease prevention and treatment options (McLawnhorn *et al.*, 2016). Netizens (Internet users) use social media to broaden their knowledge on treatment and prevention of illnesses (McLawnhorn *et al.*, 2016; Syrkiewicz-Świtała M. *et al.*, 2016c).

Social media marketing has a great potential to spread health information. Knowledge absorption by means of social media often takes place without receivers’ awareness. Health promoting articles shared online, discussions on the forums or social campaigns about disease prevention unintentionally reach the Internet user. Sharing material online and reacting by adding “like” to a given website, the users themselves become a tool spreading the promoted content. Thanks to such behavior, health education on a larger scale is enabled. Another advantage of social media marketing is the fact that people can exchange their observations and experience. This means practical knowledge and not just the facts presented in a difficult to understand medical terminology (Wasiołka, 2010).

Social media may lead efficient and effective health promotion often basing on information which is attractive to the receiver (Whittemore *et al.*, 2013). Other elements important here are: participation in message creation, offers of institutions or organizations providing services in health area, and its widely understood promotion. Organizations are obliged to react and effectively listen to the Internet users’ needs. The aforementioned dependency conditions the possibility to build a database devoted to the netizens’ health needs and adjustment of the usefulness of promoted information (Reklama, 2016). The Internet, inclusive of social media, may be considered as one of the most important sources of information on health issues, including the body of knowledge promoting healthy lifestyles (Gugała *et al.*, 2010; Armita and Biswas, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

A growing popularity of the Internet, including social media, as one of the key means of communication, may positively influence their involvement in promoting healthy behavior and lifestyle. The state-of-the-art social media technologies may support a better control over published information and provide the option for its verification. The possibility to return an unlimited number of times to the available and attractive health promoting content automatically increases the effectiveness of health education. Social media marketing may constitute an effective tool to play a significant role in broader actions for the sake of health promotion. On the basis of the above considerations, it can be stated that there are opportunities to develop health promotion by means of social media marketing.



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