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MORE THAN WORDS – BRAND DESTRUCTION IN THE ONLINE SPHERE

The focus of this paper is brand destruction, however in a slightly different sense than the traditional marketing literature depicts it. The concept of brand destruction basically tends to be discussed either (1) as an accidental, counter-productive event in a campaign which leads to the ruining of the brand, or (2) an intentional act by competitors in the market, which results the same breakdown mentioned above. As this paper shows, there are other ways to consider as well, when speaking about brand destruction. An often overlooked type of brand destruction is a rather new phenomenon: destroying the brand by customers or business partners. The adequate scene for this case is the internet itself, especially different social media platforms, e. g. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, etc. Also popular weblogs can play an important role in brand destruction made by customers or business partners (general cases related to social media are depicted in Lipsman – Mud – Rich – Bruich, 2012). This paper presents a couple of cases in the online field and focuses basically on online communicative activities, in which a brand's negative properties come to discussion. Both Hungarian and foreign examples are easy to find and they all demonstrate the growing power of consumers. This observation led marketing experts to start talking about the 'smooth seizure of power by consumers'. Whilst the critic of this concept is considered to be relevant, this paper describes the elements and methods of the 'seizure' – from an online social point of view. The key of handling brand destruction cases efficiently lies in the role of social media users. They are not only consumers, but the opportunity for producing online contents is in their hands as well – this fact results in the idea of 'prosumers'. Thus customers on social media platforms must be handled as a 'critical mass': as civic warriors with strong weapons in their armoury. No companies are allowed to feel safe, as the slightest error may well be punished by the crowd.

Keywords: **online marketing, brand destruction, anti-branding, brand value, memes, social media, complaint forums, opinion leaders**

One of the greatest challenges for marketing practice in the last decade has inevitably been the increase of internet usage. After a few years, web2 services developed fast and created a real crowd with serious impact on business companies – beside a good number of social institutes. Owing to the rising number of internet users, more precisely web2 users recently, there exists widespread belief among marketing experts that internet is a rather efficient tool and an adequate scene for building up company and/or product brands. Nevertheless, this belief seems to be one-sided, and the online marketing success beyond question is leastwise doubtful.

Everyday business experience clearly indicates that the process of building up brands requires both (1) consistent planning and (2) continuous attention during the implementation period. The former is necessary for a coherent and articulated brand message; the latter serves the maintaining of consumers' constant attendance. Both assumptions have to tackle the problems rooted in the speciality of internet sphere.

By "internet" DiMaggio et al. (2001: p. 307.) refer to "the electronic network of networks that links people and information through computers and other digital devices allowing person-to-person communication and information retrieval". A narrower concept, "web2" refers on a totality of platforms which allow users to create and share digital contents: "a collaborative medium, a place where we (could) all meet and read and write" (Richardson, 2009: p. 1.).

Furthermore, according to Ropolyi (2006), internet in general can be characterized by three main specialities, which describe web2-phenomena as well.

1. A great deal of contingency: as the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann claims, nothing is obligatory in the media (Luhmann, 2000). Everything can be the other way round, so nothing is inevitable the way it happens. Even if a marketing screenplay proved to be successful in mass media, web2 can make a surprise owing to its unpredictable trait.

2. Eventuality: virtually it is a positive phrasing of point 1. On the world wide web, everything can well be everything else, so there can be affable surprises and unpredictable successes. (Correlation of point 1. and point 2. is depicted by the dotcom-fever in the late 1990s. A complete overview can be seen in (Calhoun et al., 2005), a special field of this phenomena is depicted in (Muhammad, 2000) and another in (Rigby, 2012)).

3. Virtuality: this *terminus technicus* refers to two meanings. According to its Latin origin, virtuality means "worthy, outstanding" on the one hand, and "lifelike" on the other hand. Thus virtuality is eventually a virtual concept on its own. Internet platforms are virtual in the meaning of contingency (see above in point 1.), in addition, it is a word that describes the wealth of synchronic, mediatised and anonymous world of internet, including web2.

The above-mentioned specialities aim to picture that internet is a field of unknown and unpredictable, in contrary to the traditional mass media. All these specific properties imply that brand-builders are facing some serious and inevitable problems and they have to handle them effectively. To reconcile the strictly managed process of internet marketing with the inherent properties of the internet constitutes serious challenge for management. Firstly we will define the exact concept of brand destruction then we will put online brand destruction in the frame of the general brand destruction concept. Furthermore, we will detail four subcases of online brand destruction. Afterwards, we will seek the proofs for the following research hypotheses:

> H1: online brand destruction shows at least four variances: destruction by a gate-keeper, destruction by an opinion leader, destruction by a consumer group and brand destruction by internet users (e. g. by creating memes).

> H2: although online brand destruction activities mentioned above in H1 can give a chance for companies to develop their communication, companies often do not make the best of this opportunity.

To verify or confute H1 and H2, we will present small case studies on this base to present each variances of online brand destruction. The method of our research is a qualitative analysis based on online articles, forums and memes.

"Semasiology" of brand destruction

The focus of this paper is brand destruction in online marketing. More precisely: in this text we are writing about cases where experts are either bovine or unable to control the brand destruction process which evolves online. Firstly, concept of online brand destruction will be worked out, and then in the next subchapter, some case studies from Hungary and the Transatlantic Region will be presented.

Concept of brand and the difference between product and brand is clearly articulated in marketing literature. As Kotler's classic work claims: "People satisfy their needs and wants with products. A *product* is any offering that can satisfy a need or want, such as one of the 10 basic offerings of goods, services, experiences, events, persons, places, properties, organizations, information, and ideas. A *brand* is an offering from a known source. A brand name such as McDonald's carries many associations in the minds of people: hamburgers, fun, children, fast food, golden arches. These associations make up the brand image. All companies strive to build a strong, favorable brand image" (Kotler, 2000: p. 6., emphasis added). As it can be seen, a strong brand is familiar and reliable, for consumers surely know what they can expect from it. It is easily understandable that competition between brands is a necessity for widening the clientele. Competition may involve different types of dynamic communicative actions, including brand destruction. Online communication channels let this dynamics speed up to real-time, instant activities among physically distant people.

The conception of brand destruction basically tends to be discussed either (1) as an accidental, counter-productive event in a campaign which results the ruining of the brand, or (2) an intentional act by competitor(s) in the market, which results the same breakdown mentioned above. (Fitting to this frame, early but fine case studies are available at http://brand-destruction.com.)

In this paper, the term "brand destruction" is discussed in a bit different sense than the traditional marketing literature depicts it, as there are other ways to consider speaking about brand destruction *(see delineated in Table 1.)*. Firstly, it is imaginable that a company has to destroy its former brand in favour of its newer one, especially after a misfit campaign, or if self-repositioning is required in the market. This ver-

sion is quite rare *in vivo*, so it is difficult to find an example, but theoretically it is worth considering. The other and often overlooked type of brand destruction is a newly upcoming method: destroying the brand by customers or business partners. The perfect scene for this case is the internet itself, especially different social media platforms, e. g. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, etc. Also popular weblogs can play an important role in brand destruction made by customers or business partners (general cases related to social media are depicted in (Lipsman et alii 2012)). Henceforth we will focus on chance-giving brand destruction variances which stem from the company's environment.

any financial loss. Product evaluation forums are used to let products to be rated and commented, in addition, helping consumers to select the best article according to their needs. This activity provides the company with a great deal of precious information.

4. The fourth premise is that in recent years, web2 did not count as a 'serious' resource: due to its possible anonymity, contingency, eventuality and virtuality (see above) marketing could not use it as a calculable channel for advertising products. This point of view, however, has been totally changed by now.

However, we have to add that these attitudes – especially the fourth one – are permanently changing, as it

Table 1

Types of brand destruction

Brand destruction		Source/location of origin	
		Inside the company	Outside the company
Aspect/impact	Negative/Ruining	Accidental, counter-productive event in a campaign, acted by the company itself	Intentional destruction by competitor(s) in the market (unethical market behaviour)
	Positive/Chance-giving	Destroy the company's former brand for a newer one; repositioning	Consumers' online anti-campaign; boycott; civic consumer protection problem communicated online; online anti-branding

Source: own draft of the paper's author

Notwithstanding that all of the four formations definitely exist in real life, until the recent years marketing research omitted to emphasize the importance of chance-giving brand destruction coming from the web2 users. At first, this kind of brand destruction may be inevitably negative, henceforth a short explanation is required why we claim this version to be positive or – put in other words – chance-giving.

Approaching web2, there are four traceable premises in traditional marketing.

1. The mere discussion about a product, brand or service may be crucial for companies (cf. the classic words of Mark Twain: "Do not care what they tell about you while they talk about you" – the real problem is just if no one cares about you: Nevertheless, contrary to the widespread belief and Mark Twain's bon mot, there is such thing that bad publicity in business).

2. Companies tend to think that web2 users' attack against a brand is normally not a well-organised, systematic action, so a good crisis communication plan has to be able to tackle any online surge.

3. Another wide-spread belief is that web2 allows companies to test and evaluate the consumers' reaction in a less hazardous set of circumstances compared to the real world – possible hazard is just some kind of negative reaction, negative discussion without

is mentioned above: online marketing is being the most growing and most inquired section of marketing practice, being used systematically for stepping up clientele. Although the power of crowd often gives unpredictable reactions (e. g. boycotts, online anti-branding), data retrieved from online activities are priceless for companies. Hereby we state that online brand destruction by consumers has its positive impacts on companies in *the end* of a brand destruction process, mainly due to the enormous data aggregation and the free-of-charge advertisement, even if the latter is a negative one. Briefly said with a platitude, every crisis gives a good prospect to develop ourselves – via online as well.

Seizure of power by consumers: opinion leaders, gate-keepers and consumer communities

Increasing consumer power, accelerated by the rise of social media, threatens the foundations of branding (Cova – Aranque, 2012: p. 148.). This paper presents some cases in four fields, focusing basically on online communicative activities, in which a brand's negative properties come to the discussion. Both Hungarian and Transatlantic examples are easy to find and they all show the growing power of consumers. This observation led marketing experts to start talking about the 'smooth seizure of power by consumers' (Sas, 2008). Whilst the critic of this conception is considered to be relevant, this

paper describes the methods of the 'smooth seizure of power' – from an online social point of view. The four methods are 1.) online attack against a company by an opinion leader, 2.) a gate-keeper's online attack against a company, 3.) a group's more or less organised attack against a company, and 4.) creating online memes about a product or service (a more or less similar categorisation can be seen in Bokor, 2013: p. 34–53.).

The first example is based on an affair between a musician and an airlines company. Dave Carroll said his guitar was broken while in United Airlines' custody in 2009. He alleged that he heard a fellow passenger exclaim that baggage handlers on the tarmac at Chicago'sO'Hare International Airport were throwing guitars during a layover on his flight from Halifax Stanfield International Airport to Omaha, Nebraska's Eppley Airfield. He arrived at his destination to discover that his $3,500 Taylor guitar was severely damaged (Blitzer, 2009). Carroll said that his fruitless negotiations with the airline for compensation lasted nine months (Broken Guitar Song Gets Airline's Attention, 2009). Finally Carroll wrote a song and created a music video about his experience, uploading it to the YouTube. "They say that you're (United) changing and I hope you do, 'Cause if you don't then who would fly with you?" – asks the artist in the last two lines of the song. The video is over the 12,9 million views until March 2013.

The main lesson for the company was that a public figure – here Dave Carroll, "an award winning singer-songwriter, professional speaker, author and consumer advocate" (by www.davecarrollmusic.com) – can initiate an impressive anti-campaign against a company, and the aggrieved reacts officially with serious detention. Having become aware of the song, United firstly offered Carroll a relief, which was rejected. After the song, United surrendered endeavouring to compensate the musician. In this case, major financial loss could not be set forth in the company's pay-off, however the abstract brand price obviously decreased. In an ideal world, United Airlines could have learnt a lesson. But if any considerable change appeared in real life by taking care of passengers' luggage – well, it is quite doubtful.

Another example was the outrageous case of Tamás Müller, online marketing specialist at Vodafone Hungary. In December 2009, as a freshman at his workplace, he forwarded (retweeted) an official Twitter post about a network breakdown at T-Mobile Hungary with the comment: "OK, call us!". Vodafone human resource intervened on the spot and fired him with the justification of violating the rules of fair competition. Lots of people among web2 users got shocked at the company's decision, despite that it was understandable from the

company's point of view. In two days, Müller gathered thousands of fans online, and what is more, he got several job offers – including big multinational companies. The protest against his discharge took a peculiar shape of anti-Vodafone lobby. Blogs, thematic sites and news portals dealt with the case – even out of Hungary. There were no explicit opinions disregarding Müller's behaviour: every single posts identified themselves with the account manager, and showed obvious solidarity.

The above-mentioned case exemplifies the significance of an opinion leader (Katz, 1955; Keller, 2003; Weimann, 1991) or a gate-keeper (McCombs – Shaw, 1976; Snider, 1967; Willis, 1987) in online brand destruction.

There are also cases when the seizure of power by consumers is indicated by a group, and not by a – more or less famous – person. A Hungarian web blog "Tékozló Homár" ("Prodigal Lobster") makes for a good specific example. This colourful collection with a slogan "consume, lavish, suffer" gives place for posts by unsatisfied customers from many fields of industry and mainly services, furthermore it also presents embarrassing, wrongdoer or immoral advertisements. The most 12 keywords go about naive client (4123), advertisement (1001), "orally" (654, referring to the importance of sent-in material collected by customers), market garden (650), food (560), stupid text (553), hypermarket (498), customer service (407), bank (382), gadget (353), travelling (328), car (325) (number of tags in 31. March, 2013 are in brackets). There are also certain national and multinational companies among the tags, e. g. Apple, Asus, Auchan, DHL, ELMŰ (a Hungarian electricity distributor), E.On, IKEA, Invitel, Malév (the former Hungarian national airflight company), MÁV (Hungarian State Railways), Nokia, OrangeWays, OTP (the biggest Hungarian bank), RyanAir, Samsung, Spar, T-Home, T-Mobile, Telenor, Tesco, Tigáz (a Hungarian natural gas provider), UPC, Vodafone, Windows, WizzAir and Zepter. They all have least 3, at best 35 tags. Hereby it is easy to see that consumers have certain "favourite" scapegoats to attack verbally in (and by) their posts. These can be distinguished into three main groups: typical Hungarian governmental organisations, energy provider companies, respectively multinational trade and service companies.

All posts in the "Prodigal Lobster" site have a two-sided, five-degree rating system: on the one hand, the editors rate all posts ("lobster factor"), on the other hand laic readers can do it as well. So a democratic deliverance method has been built up, which ensures a reliable quality rating among posts. There are no certain and official data about the visitors' number. However, judg-

ing by the amount of comments (generally 25-400 per post) wide reading can be suspected regarding the size of Hungarian internet community. Thus the conclusion is that homar.blog.hu is one of the greatest Hungarian consumer complaint forums, and perhaps the greatest of non-official ones.

Now let us see a set of examples for being attacked by a systematically organised virtual community. Several cases prove that nothing is too expensive for the sweet revenge in the eyes of frustrated clients. Groups of disappointed consumers often create websites emphasising negative properties of a certain company, even if their energy-consuming action requires serious financial investment as well. Disappointment can be established by a personal affair against the consumer and the company (see e. g. whyvolvosucks.blogspot.com), and can be influenced by social responsibility (www.mccruelty.com relating to McDonald's vicious hardball). Such anti-branding sites aim to point out the weaknesses of products and services, often referring to the importance of corporate social responsibility and "environment-friendly" market behaviour. In this sense, anti-branding sites' creators and followers are close to the classic non-government organizations.

As a paper from 2009 demonstrates (Krishnamurthy – Kucuk, 2009), all the *anti-branding* sites are based upon the same presumption, the trigger of consumer dissatisfaction. The above-mentioned authors describe anti-branding as a separate process distinct from product evaluation and complaint forums. Based upon this separation, through qualitative and quantitative methods they claim that "internet has created an empowered consumer through greater information access, instant publishing power and a participatory audience. This allows socially sensitive, ethical and expert consumers to launch meaningful anti-consumption campaigns that have visible market impact" (Krishnamurthy – Kucuk, 2009: p. 1125.).

Talking about "visible market impact", neither that paper nor this one do observe financial impacts; they focus only on abstract brand value. This may be an important similarity related to the judgement of brand destruction. However, there is another big difference between phrasing of the two papers: here anti-branding is only a variant of online brand destruction, whereas the above-cited paper sets out a complete, separated table on differences between complaint forums, product evaluate sites and anti-branding sites (Krishnamurthy – Kucuk, 2009: p. 1120.). Why we decided to handle all these phenomena (see in Table 1.) under a main concept of online brand destruction is the common origin, which is applied also to anti-branding sites: disappointment, which requires some kind of consumer revenge on companies. All the

tools and methods detailed in previous subchapter roots in this feeling, including anti-branding sites and online anti-branding campaigns. (Case studies about the dissatisfaction of "prosumers", their types and their motivations can be found in Bokor, 2013: p. 35-44.)

The fourth and last method of online brand destruction is generating memes in virtue of a spoiled campaign or company outlet. In 2011, Tesco Hungary set up a point collection loyalty action in which more than one million people could obtain Fila bags with discount (hvg.hu, 2011). Experts started to talk about "brand terror" because of the extremely increasing number of Fila bags on the streets, however, in short term, the action was worth both for the hypermarket and the sports equipment company. The only hazard was the obvious brand-wetting, but "it also did good for Karl Lagerfeld to shack up with H&M" (Lukács, 2011). Reflecting on the enormous amount of these bags, a good number of internet memes were born during the campaign, raising the notoriety of Fila (Orcifalvi, 2011). Opinions are therefore divided about the long-term impacts of this campaign on the brand, but the very discussion about Fila and Tesco was definitely a benefit for the concerned companies, especially talking about financial profit.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper outlined a possible theoretical frame of online brand destruction effect. Our method was to create a conceptual framework and then present case studies from each variance, demonstrating the existence of all mentioned brand destruction activities. Thus, our first hypothesis (H1) is verified. Plausibility and reliability of case study based qualitative works is always doubtful, of course. Here and now we only aimed to depict that online brand destruction is more than anti-branding, for the former has a number of variation. A few examples have been hopefully enough to enlighten the diversified group of phenomena. In the second subchapter we detailed how companies sometimes can't handle well an online brand destruction activity. Thus H2 is partially verified, disregarding positive examples.

There are further options to broaden this research. In following years there will definitely be a strong need for working out a proper and reliable rating method of measuring financial loss by brand destruction. As we mentioned above several times, currently there is no such algorithm to resolve this problem. It would be worth inquiring the impact of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) on brand values. Google and other search engines' algorithms let cheat themselves by fake search results and intentional link-generation. Such cheating

aims to optimize the online presence and visibility of a website: either the company or the anti-branding site.

Qualitative research methods have to be involved into the inquiry of developing a company's presence on social media platforms. Attacked, criticized companies normally do not evidence in online complaint forums, so manifestation of critics is unilateral.

Another interesting topic is observing memes and their sharing via online. Who create these? What kind of goals can be detected by meme-generators? Who are the opinion-leaders and most active content-creators? Does meme-generation influence the brand value? If so, what ways does it manifest? Answering these questions will probably lead us to understand online marketing better.

Brand destruction in online sphere is more than words. Although it can be harmful for a company's brand value, the end can be favourable for the attacked company. Brand destruction effort namely can lead to the necessary change in a company's communication and behaviour, developing and fine-tuning its presence. While further inquiry is necessary to work out the details of this fine-tuning, we dauntlessly state that online brand destruction is eventually a chance for development, and a free of charge mirror picturing consumers' mainstream and segregated opinions.

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