

BUSINESS NETWORKING IN SOCIAL MEDIA

A CASE STUDY OF POLISH EXPORT PROFESSIONALS

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ABSTRACT

The article offers a literature review on the role of trust in the business relationship development. It describes the role of social media in cognitive and affective trust building. The focal point of the article is devoted to an empirical research covering the use of LinkedIn and GoldenLine professional social media platforms by Polish export professionals. It indicates their overall passivity in maintaining a trustworthy online appearance, but it also touches the limitations of social media communications. The article gives also some managerial recommendations dealing with social media B2B involvement and argues that in the predictable future the deployment of social media in business networking will remain in its infancy.

Keywords: Business networking, Business relationships, GoldenLine, LinkedIn, Social media, Trust.

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INTRODUCTION

What makes a good trustworthy business relationship? The research body on business relationships comes with various answers to this question including the openness for communication as one of the basic prerequisites (Mohr, Fisher & Nevin, 1996; Steffel & Ellis, 2009; Murphy, 2013). Meanwhile, the immanent need of the business world to communicate has compelled companies to adapt social media as new tools, which supplement the traditional methods of looking for customers and new business opportunities (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012). The majority of social media research, however, focuses on Facebook (Utz, 2016), which is usually associated with the end-customer dialogue in the B2C markets (Deszczynski, 2012). Nevertheless, social media can also be used as a tool for professional communication in the B2B markets (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016).

Therefore, the research question, which this

article is trying to answer, is: *To what extent do businesspeople make use of social media for professional purposes?* LinkedIn as the most known professional social media tool (a platform designed for networking on business and professional career) constitutes the basic research environment in this study. It seems it provides the shortest path through the business network that is most likely to make valuable connections, such as potential sales contacts (Kane, 2015). Nonetheless, the existing body of literature focused on the activities performed by businesspeople on this platform, is scarce. Although LinkedIn is exemplarily listed after Facebook and Twitter in numerous papers, most of these contributions are not explicitly dealing with social networking among businesspeople. Moreover, when studying the use of professional social media by private business users, the common research method applied in the literature, is to question various groups of individuals on their general online attitude and

behavior in business social networking, instead of empirically observing this behavior (Meyliana, Hidayanto, & Budiardjo, 2015; Song, 2015; Benton, 2016; Kalkan & Bozkurt, 2017; Nord, Achituv, & Paliszkiwicz, 2017).

In this research we concentrate on business social networking in LinkedIn and examine not what the people say about their online activities, but what they actually do. The reason to take this method is to exclude the response bias, whereas the respective research material is publicly available, and to assess the intensity and themes of online business encounters.

Export managers were chosen as the focus group in this study, because of several reasons. First, owing to the mercantile type of their position, they were believed to be one of the most open, externally exposed management groups which should be potentially interested in various forms of communication. Second, being involved in international trade, they were believed to maintain and actively use an online profile in LinkedIn. Third, they are less numerous than domestic trade managers, thereby posing a chance to assess the behavior of the whole homogenous population in one paper.

Based on the literature review on trust in business relationships and social networking as well as on the assumptions dealing with the focus group and LinkedIn's position in the social media world, two research hypotheses were made. The first states that: (H1) *The export managers are actively making use of online business social networking in LinkedIn.* The second assumes that: (H2) *Online social networking performance of the export managers can be a source of best practices useful for other groups of businesspeople.*

The research applies several scientific methods, including literature review, non-invasive online observation of individuals and communities, and online surveying. In the first section the role of trust in offline and online business relationships is explained. Next comes the methodological description, followed by several sections covering the results of subsequent research procedures, discussion on these results, and concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Business relationships can be defined as permanent ties between two or more entities.

They have the capacity to improve the competitive position of all related partners, thanks to the development of new products and technologies, cost and risk reduction, creation of useful knowledge, etc. (Deszczynski, 2017). The knock-on effect of business relationships is also the emergence of various interdependencies at the formal business level (e.g. when signing an agreement on cooperation) and at the informal level (e.g. mutual personal relations of the employees working for the cooperating companies). However, this duality is not equally reflected in the subject literature, which is mainly focused on the focal company and its network (Anderson, Håkansson & Johanson, 1994; Johnasson & Kao, 2002;), even though the factual „medium” of business relationships are the managers.

The nature of relationships is characterized by mutual trust and commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the light of social science and psychology, trusting behavior can be seen as allowing oneself to be in a potentially vulnerable position relative to a partner, while possessing some knowledge of the other that inspires trust in his goodwill (Blomqvist, 1997, 271-286). In a business context, expressing trust is assuming a certain degree of probability that the partner will behave in an accountable way (Welter & Smalbone, 2006; Malys & Berckhan, 2016). Some complex definitions of trust emphasize a set of related issues, like the determinants of trust or the effects of a trusting relationship (Nielsen, 2004). Trust is also a matter of interest in research on internationalization (Dymitrowski & Soniewicki, 2015). However, probably more important than attempts to catalogue all characteristics of trust is a process approach focusing on incremental development of trust between parties. Following levels of trust can be distinguished (Sako 1992, 37-39; Nielsen 2004, 224-225; Ibrahim & Ribbers 2009, 240-244): contractual (institutional, systemic), cognitive (competency) and affective (emotional).

The contractual level deals with an overall grounding of a partner in a renowned legal, political, organizational, social and cultural order. E.g. it comes with an assumption that written and oral agreements will be held. This kind of trust is built upon the assessment of general market standards. At the beginning of a business relationship it can act as a substitute for the other levels of trust, which will emerge as the company gains knowledge about its

partner (Deszczynski, Fonfara & Dymitrowski, 2017).

The cognitive level of trust is based on the assessment of partner's credibility and potential (e.g. technical, managerial, in terms of market expertise and financial), both in relation to the partnering company and its employees. (Bönte & Keilbach, 2005; Małys, 2014). In the initial phase of a relationship, lack of shared history of contacts and experiences can be partly compensated by partner's reputation (Bennett & Gabriel, 2001). Nevertheless, a rational and objective assessment of a company as an institution should be accompanied by the development of individual business relationships between people representing the partnering entities.

The affective level of trust seems to be the most abstract form of trust. It is not based on rational thinking (like e.g. formal evaluation system) but rather on a personal sensing, a conviction of partner's good will and benevolence (Ganesan, 1994; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Hauke-Lopes, 2011). In fact, it is the only level of trust near to the literal meaning of this term. Even if it takes into account previous experiences and contacts, it comes not as a calculation, but rather as a belief in the integrity and fairness of a partner, which is reinforced with the emotional bonds evolving between particular individuals in different areas, e.g. sharing the same values, hobbies, etc. However, as the emergence of a relationship with emotional background is usually very time-consuming (Bachman, 2001), one can assume that it is created only if the business relationship has also strong objective rationale (Moverly, Oxley & Silverman, 1998; Czakon, 2011; Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2014). A longer cooperation gives a chance to support cognitive and affective levels of trust upon mutual assessment of behavior in terms of predictability, reliability, authenticity, communication accessibility and moral values (Mathers, 2009). However, some authors claim that such an intimacy can only evolve before the institutional business contacts start (Halinen & Salmi, 2001).

Given the role of trust in traditional business network analysis, it is important to understand how trust and trusting behaviors take place in an online setting. Professional social media services are helpful in facilitating an informal dialogue, which can substantially contribute to a

favorable climate of cooperation in the present time or can ease establishing business contacts in the future (Fonfara, Deszczynski & Dymitrowski, 2016). This includes searching for and initializing contacts with total strangers. The informality and the straightforwardness of online contacts extends the scope of communication allowing to chat upon a concrete business venture, but also with reference to different social configurations, like school or academic communities, professional or hobby groups. Social networking is also time efficient and therefore it eases maintaining relations with bigger audiences than an individual could ever afford to in the offline world. Thereby, online social networks are a particular form of social capital that individuals can employ to enhance their advantages and opportunities (Scott, 2017).

This capital can foster the creation of trust at all defined levels. At the contractual level it substantiates the existence of sound structural conditions, which increase the likelihood of a successful activity within the context of a specified domain (Claybaugh & Haseman, 2013). In other words, scarce mutual experiences can be successfully substituted with reference to the activities of the online platform users (e.g. contacts and comments), as reputable social media services enable to track back history of contacts of a given individual with the online community and make such person more transparent. Hence, the extensive self-presentation and the willingness to provide personal information in member profile creates acceptance that facilitates the establishment of relationships with the other network members (Schwämmlein & Wodzicki, 2012).

But the accountability and the transparency of the online appearance is not the whole story. Business people can influence the perception of their image in a conscious way by frequently updating and managing information presented in social media what is a step further than just maintaining a profile (Paliszkiwicz & Mađra-Sawicka, 2016). People who post frequently and make valuable contributions, are perceived as more trustworthy than the average online community member (Utz, 2016). By doing so, they simultaneously create informational benefits for their audience and for themselves. These benefits in the context of cognitive level of trust can be conceptualized as timely access to information and receiving referrals (Burt, 1992). Moreover, if they manage to attract

regular readers (followers), they can even create ambient intimacy with their audience, which may turn into a preference on an affective level (Fulk & Yuan, 2013).

Of course a virtual meeting space has its limits. After all, a relationship that only exists in the online networking world is not much of a relationship. Over time it has to materialize in the physical world (Comer, 2011). Haythornthwaite introduced the term “latent ties” to describe the distant online connections typically established with strangers, which are “technologically possible but not yet activated socially” (2005, 137). As so, these connections cannot even be labeled as Granovetter’s weak ties (relations with acquaintances), because the degree of overlap of two individuals’ networks is scant (1973). Nor are social media believed to be capable to create strong ties, which according to Granovetter are a multifaceted / multidimensional relationship to a close friend (1973). However, most likely, any single communication channel has the capacity to automatically turn strangers into friends. Even direct physical proximity cannot guarantee this (just imagine an occasional handshake of a high-ranked officer).

To sum up, the importance of social media in business networking lies primarily in facilitating contacts within a large collection of business professionals. Online platforms like LinkedIn enable their users to relatively easily (re-)connect to latent ties and potentially activate them into weak ties (Ellison & Vitak, 2015). They foster the development of new relationships, by providing a trusty space of communication. They also contribute to existing relationships by extending their dimensions to shared non-contractual interests.

METHODOLOGY

Among hundreds of virtual communication platforms, LinkedIn with its 415 million members from all over the world (including approximate one million Polish residents) seems to be the most appropriate service for new business development in the international markets (LinkedIn, 2016). According to recent statistics, approximately 40% of its users visit LinkedIn everyday (Hammett, 2016). Moreover, in the study of IPSOS research institute LinkedIn was quoted as the most popular professional social media service in the group of senior managers (Turner, 2016). Therefore, LinkedIn

was chosen as the basic environment for conducting present research, even if its Polish competitor – GoldenLine, has gathered more than two million members from Poland – two times more than LinkedIn (GoldenLine, 2016).

The main empirical research method was multilevel internet exploratory analysis, which enabled non-invasive manual observation of online communities and individuals in their natural environment (e.g. conversations in discussion groups). This method was supplemented by an online survey applied with the help of the tools offered by social media services. Between April 2016 and February 2017 following research steps were taken:

- selection of Polish export managers (LinkedIn),
- analysis of social media profiles of the target group (LinkedIn and GoldenLine),
- online survey applying multiple-choice questionnaire targeted at export professionals (GoldenLine),
- analysis of discussion groups, where target group members have signed in (LinkedIn).

The individual online profiles were found with the use of a HR tool called *LinkedIn Recruiter*. It enabled to extend the basic search criteria like name and surname by such data as position or membership in discussion groups. Following selection criteria were applied:

- business title of a person includes the word “export” and refers to a current position,
- business function: sales or new business development,
- at least six years of professional experience in exports,
- company headquartered in Poland,
- profile nationality: Polish (indicating a Polish resident, but the profile language remains English),
- skills: export or new business development (skills are characteristics distinctive to a given profile, which can only be associated with a particular person if other users add them to their profile; unexperienced or inactive users should normally have less skills than experienced ones).

The selection procedure brought a list of 69 persons. 32% of them had at least six years of

experience in exports and 54% more than ten years. 51% of them were holding a senior managerial position including a director position (16%). The current employers of selected managers represented a variety of manufacturing and service industries including: manufacturers of building materials, food, electronic and electric devices, providers of industrial automation solutions, construction, logistic and warehousing services.

Maintaining a profile is an initial step in making use of LinkedIn (DeMers, 2014). The other criterion is the ongoing activity of the user. These activities were examined in the second step of research. LinkedIn's business model is focused on employment services (Arruda, 2014). Hence most popular categories of information available on the platform are: professional experience, skills, and recommendations. There is, however, much more data that reveals the image of a profile owner. The most important are own posts, which can be published on the profile or placed in the news feed (called *LinkedIn Pulse*) as well as on the discussion forums devoted to a variety of topics. Therefore, the profiles of selected users were manually screened in search for any type of such an activity.

Due to somewhat unexpected results of the profiles' screening (which are revealed in the following sections), two additional research procedures were launched. First was an attempt to directly question members of the target group on the reasons they use professional social media and their attitude towards online presence in general business context. This survey included two semi-open-ended questions and was carried out with use of Google forms and so called direct in-mail services provided by GoldenLine (enabling to directly contact a profile owner). The second procedure featured manual reading of all posts that were placed over one year in the discussion forums the export managers have signed in. This step was devoted to assess the overall intensity and content of the dialogue not limited to a Polish community. It helped to draw the overall conclusions dealing with the applicability of social media for professional networking.

Although the following sections of the article include some statistics, e.g. dealing with the frequency of particular themes in online discussions, the analysis offered in this paper has predominately a qualitative character. The

ambition of the author was to avoid superficiality of the reasoning thanks to a thorough textual analysis of the available online material.

EMPERICAL ANALYSIS

LinkedIn profiles' analysis

The analysis of the LinkedIn profiles of Polish export managers has brought surprising findings. Each and every profile was completely idle. No one has published even a single post. Meanwhile, a complete and updated profile creates more confidence and helps to be noticed by people interested in establishing a cooperation (Time, 2013; Mehmet & Clarke, 2016). In this context the indolence of the target group has given a rise to doubt as to the correctness of the selection procedure. In order to exclude this doubt, the target group was supplemented by a control group consisting of export professionals selected upon the same criteria except for the long professional experience. This came to mitigate the potential influence of age of selected people. It was assumed that a more mature age can coincide with a lesser propensity to use social media among people, who had to first learn to use them in their thirties or later.

The control group consisted of 46 less experienced export professionals, who completed their studies between 2000-2004 (16 people) and in the year 2005 or later (33 people). But the result of their profiles' screening was the same – no one has published a single post. Hence a conclusion arose that Polish export managers underestimate social media or that LinkedIn is not the right place to develop business relations. Subsequent research procedures were aimed to verify both statements.

GoldenLine profiles' analysis

To gain fuller knowledge about the activities of Polish export managers in professional social media and to correct a potential misjudgment of LinkedIn as the proper research environment, the same research procedure was applied on GoldenLine portal. Although, LinkedIn seemed to be a better platform to develop international contacts than its Polish counterpart, this stage of research was aimed to explore the general level of intensity in use of professional social media services in the same target group of managers.

According to the owner of GoldenLine – Polish media giant Agora S.A., this portal is specialized in recruitment services and employer branding. Its monthly traffic reaches three million unique visitors (GoldenLine, 2017). The user functionality is a bit poorer than on LinkedIn, but the basic communication tools like: professional profile, possibility to publish posts directly on the profile or on the thematic discussion forums, people and company search and direct in-mail, works pretty much the same.

Whether for the purpose of the development of business relationships or only to search for a job, the GoldenLine users should stick to the same rules as in the case of LinkedIn: update their profiles and share interesting content (posts, photos, infographics, etc.). These activities raise people's awareness and encourage them to share the original content with the others or synergistically edit it, which extends the impact of a broadcaster (Holton et al., 2015). As stated before, the interactions with the other users, to some extent, verify the profile owner and enrich the base of knowledge for his potential partners, which has a positive impact on trust building.

Only 57% of experienced export managers selected in LinkedIn had their own profile on GoldenLine. Among this group, 6% of the profiles were outdated (information on positions dating before those listed on LinkedIn) or were used for other purposes than LinkedIn profile (e.g. information dealing own business). In remaining cases a person could not be identified or the profile was blank. The possibility of confusing two or more persons with the same name and surname was eliminated thanks to the comparison of photos, places of residence, graduations and professional career track.

Active GoldenLine users usually joined several discussion groups. Some of them were devoted to professional matters, e.g. *B2B Import-Export*, *B2B Polska* (B2B Poland), *Import-Export*, *B2B Export Import Non-European Trade*. Most of the groups listed on the analyzed profiles had, however, a lifestyle character (e.g. travel, pets and photography). Hence, the posts and comments of the export managers were mainly dealing with their own hobbies or other non-business interests. The business related posts (dominated by sell/buy posts) accounted for 13% of communication flow only. In general, however, most of the profiles were idle, as 70% of the posts and comments were accounted for

by three most active users. Altogether, eighty posts and comments were identified in total giving in average mere 2,29 activities per user during the whole lifetime of the online profile.

Managerial attitude towards professional social media

The activities of Polish export managers identified on LinkedIn and GoldenLine turned out to be marginal. In search for answers for such a state of affairs, an online survey was carried out among 39 managers, who maintained profiles on both social media platforms. The aim of this step of research was to find out why they set up a profile and what hinders them from actively using it.

The survey has brought mixed results (table 1 and 2). First of all, it turned out that although the basic business model of both platforms are recruiting services, the main reason for maintaining a profile in the target group was not the job search but maintaining relations with the current and potential partners (58%). At the same time many of the respondents claimed that (at least for now) professional social media do not have a strong impact on business relationships (various answers up to 36%). Nevertheless, almost half of the managers declared they recognize the potential of social media, but time shortages frustrate their efforts to stay updated and fully take advantage of them.

It is an undisputed fact that cultural systems can influence managerial behavior (Khan & Panarina, 2017) and so passivity in online sphere might have been a Polish specialty. But the presented results of the online survey, even if not compelling (12 answers collected from the surveyed managers and members of discussion groups *IMPORT-EXPORT* and *Rynki Zagraniczne* – Foreign Markets), are coherent with previous research on professional use of social media. *Nature* asked regular ResearchGate visitors (ResearchGate is a leading social network platform for scientists) on their activities in this platform and found that most of them only maintain a basic profile. 35% of the scientists admitted they post their work content, less than 30% follow discussions, less than 20% comment on research and less than 10% actively discuss research. The statistics concerning the use of LinkedIn in this group were roughly exceeding or below 10% in the same categories (van Noorden, 2014). A research on the use of

LinkedIn among students revealed that although they correctly identify the main benefits of using LinkedIn such as having an online identity or accessing the information useful in career advancement, 69% of them have never updated their profile. Exactly the same number of students have never connected to anybody

through this network (Florenthal, 2015, 25-27). Another study devoted to the general population of LinkedIn users indicates that they declare having strong connections with other platform members, but they do not find it necessary to use LinkedIn on a frequent basis (Claybaugh & Haseman, 2013).

Table 1. For what reason do you use *LinkedIn* or *GoldenLine* profile.

Maintaining business contacts with contractors	58%
Improvement of own credibility and better access to new business partners	58%
Search for new clients	50%
Job search	42%
Maintaining contacts with people befriended in previous jobs	42%
Getting more insight about contractors before meeting	17%
Verification of supplier credibility	0%

Source: Own elaboration based on online survey.

Table 2. What frustrates my activities in *LinkedIn* or *GoldenLine*.

Lack of time even if I believe it is worth doing	46%
In our industry it is still not that popular	36%
I signed in for no specific reason	27%
Business relationship is only built upon direct contact	27%
I do not have a concept of my online presence	18%
I doubt, whether it makes any sense	9%
Other reasons or there is nothing that disturbs me	9%

Source: Own elaboration based on online survey.

Hence, it seems that the Polish export professionals, just as the other LinkedIn users, follow the same pattern of behavior. They understand or at least they pretend to understand that their online engagement is important for a good set of reasons. However, the same people probably do not have an idea of

how to manage their social footprint or they are lacking time to look for interesting topics and share them with the community and to participate in discussions. Merely having a profile on LinkedIn seems to be satisfying their ambitions, just as on other occasions businesspeople look for a way to quickly tick off

a task from the list at the least possible cost. Other explanations than the individual opportunism are also possible. At least in the case of the export managers, this may be an overly concentration on ongoing transactional operations and a myopic attitude of their employers, who do not provide enough room for their employees to learn new skills and to manage their relationship portfolio. Nevertheless, to fully uncover this issue would need a separate study.

LinkedIn discussion groups

The last step in research procedure was the analysis of LinkedIn discussion groups. Although, as already revealed, none of the export managers had actively used this tool, a closer look at these forums could shed some light on the question – why.

The discussion groups can be spontaneously created by any LinkedIn user. The discussions may deal with business but also lifestyle and any other topics, which do not violate LinkedIn's general terms and conditions. As the groups gather people with similar interests, there should emerge closer links and relations between their members (Helmrich, 2016). Theoretically, therefore, an engaged group member can position himself as an industry expert not only inside the group, but also among other service users and beyond the platform (the open group discussions are visible to internet search engines).

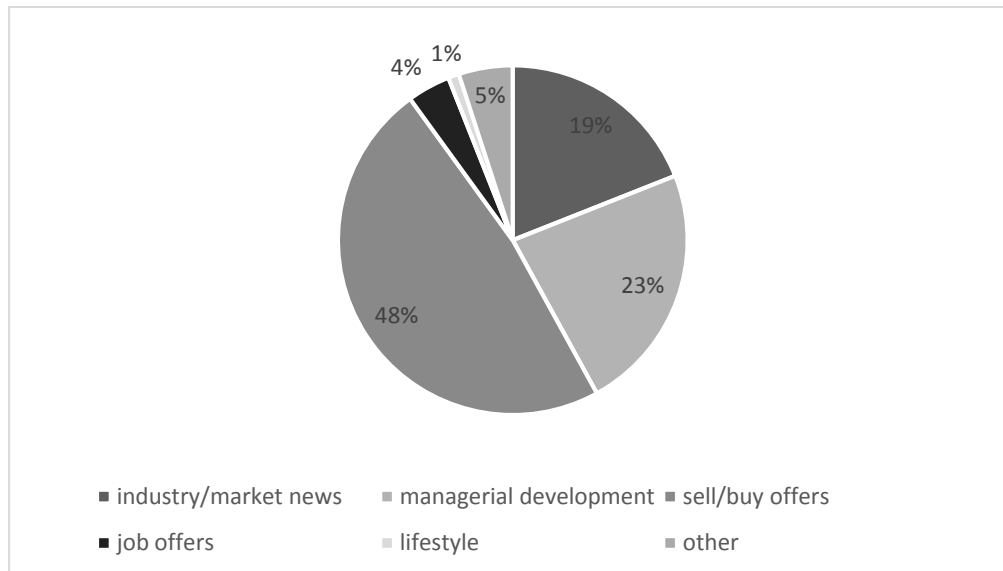
The selection criteria of LinkedIn groups were based on two factors. First, export managers from the target group had to be their members. Second, the groups had to be devoted to international business. Following six groups were thoroughly examined: *ASIA Import Export Trading* (approx. 27.000 members), *Business Network Poland and Central Europe* (approx. 9.500 members), *Buyers World* (approx. 211.000 members), *Construction Project Leads* (approx. 38.000 members), *Global Business & Commerce Network* (approx. 11.000 members), *Import Export Germany* (approx. 1.700 members), *International Export Import* (approx. 275.000 members).

There have been 1.372 posts published

throughout one year by these groups' members (April 2015 – March 2016). Their general thematic division is shown in Figure 1. The social media experts underline that, contrary to one-way communication in traditional mass media, the characteristics of new media require from sender not only to broadcast, but also to stay open for a dialogue with his recipients (Buchnowska, 2013; Deszczynski, 2016a). Nevertheless, almost half of published posts directly advertised products or services and their authors often did not care about the right style (e.g. using language of benefits) or even proper spelling. Approximately 4% of such posts were created by the Polish LinkedIn users, but as already indicated none of them was the export manager from the target group.

Many of analysed posts were even not directly involved in foreign trade. A good example of this kind of communication was a particular real estate agent, who kept on offering his services in form of consultancy and webinars. However, most of the "advertisement-like" posts dealt with commodities and food (all of them originated in Africa and Asia) or education (language courses or post-graduate studies with culture background of the country where hosting university was seated). With approximately 0,32 comments per post these messages did not stir up much resonance.

Roughly one in five posts dealt with assorted issues, which can be described as personal development of a manager. Likewise, 20% of published content was devoted to trends in particular industries or markets. These two types of messages complied with the basic requirements for social media content, which is sharing useful information without direct sales solicitations (Deszczynski, 2016b). A good example of such attitude was a particular attorney commenting the most important law changes or an oil broker who shared his comments on OPEC meetings or on other facts influencing the oil market. Most of the posts, however, took form of irrelevant rankings like "10 most common mistakes during a recruitment interview". Not a surprise, they also evoked a marginal response (0,17 – 0,40 comments per post).

Figure. 1. Posts' thematic division in selected LinkedIn discussion groups.

Source: Own study based on group communication traffic analysis.

Job offers were distinguishing from the other posts. Even if less numerous (4%), they resonated with most of the comments. More than 40% of them were discussed in forum and their average comment/post ratio accounted to 21. What is interesting, none of these posts were published or commented by a Polish LinkedIn user. The highest share of Polish posts could be observed among lifestyle type: travel, leisure time, events and alike. Such a high position, however, can be attributed to the fact that lifestyle threads had no leading position in any of the analysed groups. Moreover, almost all of this traffic can be accounted to the activity of a single enthusiast.

It seems that the underperformance of LinkedIn groups uncovered in this study is representative to the whole population. The unsolicited sales pitches are reported to be flooding the unmoderated groups, which morph into spammy blog feeds with real discussions being buried (Rosser, 2016). Similar to the case of the individual attitudes towards online business social networking revealed in the previous section, this may indicate that a tool designed for relationship management is commonly improperly used. This limits the impact of online relationship management services like LinkedIn and raises a concern whether they have potential to improve.

CONCLUSION

The research on business networking in LinkedIn and GoldenLine has brought ambiguous results. On the one hand, the capacity of Polish export managers to actively use the modern ways of communication and to maintain online relations seems to be very limited. All of them have so far reduced their online presence just to setting up a profile without any further actions. This passivity hampers the potential benefits of social media as a tool for building trust and developing new business relations, which were reported as the main reasons for signing in to LinkedIn or GoldenLine by the very interested. Thus the first research hypothesis was validated negatively.

On the other hand, the LinkedIn discussion group analysis revealed that most of their members (whether Polish or not) are almost completely indifferent to content placed on these forums. A single exception were job offers, what goes in line with the basic business model of professional social media platforms. However, it also indicates that the incentives for using LinkedIn (or any similar service) for other purposes than potential recruitment processes may be very limited (Pisano, Lepore & Lamboglia, 2017).

Coming back to the initial research question on the extent of business networking in social media by the businesspeople, it seems that it probably should be supplemented by the

question on the very sense of doing it. Indeed, maybe Polish export professionals are not showing indolence, but common sense? Admittedly there are only limited sources quoting examples of successful use of LinkedIn in strengthening the existing business relationships or exploring new business opportunities. These sources have partly commercial character, like the one that comes from Financial Planning Association quoting that 67% of high growth firms are reporting they added new clients as a direct result of using multiple professional and social sites, including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn (2015). Another survey on an extensive, nationwide sample of Dutch social media users came with conclusions that users of business social networks report “higher professional informational benefits than non-users” (Utz, 2016, 2687). But this is rather circumstantial and not a waterproof evidence.

As second hypothesis in this research, indicating the focus group would deliver some best practices of business social networking, has automatically failed with the first one, I felt bound to deliver at least a clue of what that desired, professional performance could look like. In my search for the best practices on LinkedIn, I found a list of prominent business key note speakers “worth to see in 2017” compiled by the Huffpost (Huffpost, 2016). I assumed that professionals, who make a living for their expertise and communication skills could bring a proof that online business networking can really make sense. Among twelve names only two persons, who had a successful career as musicians before they started to give public speeches, did not have a LinkedIn account. Nine of the other ten had not only a LinkedIn profile, but 500+ online friends, 3 000+ followers and approximately 13 referrals. They were also active in terms of original or shared posts ranging from 1-2 monthly to almost one daily.

It was beyond the scope of this article to go deeper in the qualitative analysis of these contributions, however, I think that this small test indicated topicality of Pareto principle also in terms of online business networking. Probably 20% or less of LinkedIn members stand to gain 80% or more of benefits of business social networking in terms of the reach and intensity of communication, the strength and the workability of online ties in the real world. This assumption may be truth for several groups of users, like already well-known people (as the

mentioned key note speakers), keen users active in smaller communities focused on a specific topic (Quinton & Wilson, 2016) or others. This thesis should be verified thoroughly in a set of subsequent research, as the present study came rather with the evidence of what is not being done than with success stories. Another limitation of this research is the concentration on the online activities of predominately Polish export managers. Even if the analysis of discussion groups proved that there are no significant differences between members of international LinkedIn online communities, research in other fields of business or national markets could bring additional evidence for the level of social media activities of business professionals.

To sum up, the key take away message of this study is that although from the theoretical point of view online business networking will foster trust in dyadic and group constellations of strangers, acquaintances and real friends, the social media services, such as LinkedIn, are not automatically compensating for lack of experience and engagement in business communications. These tools require relationship management skills to be effective, as they were originally designed not to sell but to share. As these skills have always been in short supply, it seems that in a predictable future the deployment of social media in business networking will remain in its infancy.

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