

Driving the Image of an Electricity Supplier through Marketing Activities

DARIUSZ DĄBROWSKI, JAKUB DĄBROWSKI, KRZYSZTOF ZAMASZ,
MARCIN LIS

Abstract

The liberalisation of the electricity market enables consumers to freely choose their electricity provider. Consequently, it is crucial for these providers to cultivate a positive image, as it can lead to customer loyalty and positive recommendations. However, to date, no research has been conducted to assess how the marketing activities of electricity providers within the marketing mix affect their image. Therefore, the aim of this study is to determine how marketing actions undertaken within the marketing mix by electricity providers influence their image. Referring to the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, research hypotheses were formulated, and a regression model was constructed, assuming the positive impacts of selected marketing actions of electricity providers on their image. A quantitative approach was employed to test the research hypotheses. Data were collected through a questionnaire survey of 503 randomly selected domestic electricity consumers, and statistical analysis was used for the purposes of data analysis. The research results indicate that the following marketing activities of electricity providers have a positive impact on their image: offering other products along with electricity, providing price discounts, providing physical customer service offices, and engagement in sponsorship. Several positive effects of marketing activities of electricity providers on their image were identified. Thus, the study theoretically contributes to the field of marketing management of energy companies. Based on the results obtained, the following practical implications for electricity providers can be proposed. It is recommended that these providers employ the following marketing activities to shape a positive image among consumers: offering other products along with electricity, providing price discounts, providing physical customer service offices, and engaging in sponsor-

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Dariusz Dąbrowski

e-mail: dariusz.dabrowski@zie.pg.gda.pl
Gdansk University of Technology,
Faculty of Management and Economics,
Poland

Jakub Dąbrowski

e-mail: kuba_dabrowski@wp.pl
independent researcher,
Poland

Krzysztof Zamasz

e-mail: kzamasz@wsb.edu.pl
WSB University,
Institute of Energy Transformation,
Poland

Marcin Lis

e-mail: mlis@wsb.edu.pl
WSB University,
Regional Development Centre,
Poland

ship. In line with the literature, this positive image should foster desired consumer behaviour from the perspective of the electricity provider (e.g. customer loyalty, issuing positive recommendations).

Key words

marketing mix, marketing activities, image, electricity.

Introduction

In Poland, the process of creating an energy market dates back to 1997. On 10 April of that year, the Energy Law Act came into force. It was established in line with European Union (EU) Directive 96/92/EC and was a significant step towards the liberalisation of the energy market, demonstrating Poland's alignment with European standards. Actions regarding the liberalisation of this market accelerated significantly after the country's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004. This was associated with the alignment of its internal regulations with the later Energy Package of 2007. The liberalisation of the domestic electricity market led to the introduction of competition in a previously monopolised market. As a result of this liberalisation, many new electricity providers emerged, leading to increased competition on the market (Wojtkowska-Łodej et al., 2014). From the customers' perspective, this competition means they have a wider choice of electricity suppliers, while from the suppliers' perspective, it implies the pursuit of a competitive advantage. These electricity suppliers can achieve this by shaping a higher economic value compared to their competitors, which means striving to provide the highest possible benefits to customers at the lowest possible costs (Barney and Hesterly, 2012; Grondys et al., 2020).

In a situation where the electricity market operates according to the principles of a free market, it is crucial for electricity providers to shape a positive image among electricity consumers. The company's image,

understood as the general perception of the company by consumers and other entities in the environment (Zawadzka 2010; Vaničková et al., 2020), is an important factor in its success. It can influence consumers' decisions to enter into, continue, or terminate an electricity supply agreement (Saługa et al., 2020). Additionally, the image impacts consumer recommendations, which are voluntary consumer behaviours that influence its operations. These recommendations can involve recommending or discouraging cooperation with a particular company to other consumers, as well as encouraging or discouraging the purchase of the company's products (Baehre et al., 2021).

The company's image is linked to its marketing activities, which are usually categorised in reference to the concept of the marketing mix, the classical 4P (product, price, place, promotion). These activities refer to all the various actions undertaken by a company in the field of marketing that are intended to achieve its marketing goals (Kotler and Keller, 2018), such as creating a positive company image or stimulating positive consumer recommendations (Penc, 2001). Relationships between the company's marketing actions and its image can be embedded within the framework of Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) "Stimulus-Organism-Response" (SOR) theory. According to this theory, the marketing actions of electricity providers (stimulus) induce a specific state in consumers' minds (state of the organism), such as the image of the electricity provider. This state, in turn, serves as a basis

for specific consumer behaviours. These behaviours can include continuing or terminating cooperation with the electricity provider, issuing positive or negative recommendations, or advocacy.

The substantive relationships between the marketing actions of electricity providers and their image, as well as the aforementioned importance of shaping a positive image, lead to the formulation of the following research problem: How do the marketing activities of electricity providers, carried out in the realm of the marketing mix, impact the image of these providers among consumers? The research literature indicates that to date, such a problem has not been the subject of research, and therefore represents a research gap.

According to the authors' best knowledge, previous research on the impact of marketing actions on company image has not been conducted in relation to electricity providers. Previous national studies have focused on specific components of the marketing mix, most often promotion, and its influence on the image of entities in the banking sector (Fałowski, 2010; Sobczyk-Kolbuch, 2000), the dairy industry (Parkita, 2017), hotels (Orfin-Tomaszewska and Sidorkiewicz, 2019), and commercial entities in the Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector (Wójcik, 2014; Oleś, 2017). Research conducted worldwide has primarily focused on issues related to advertising in terms of expenditures incurred, as well as sales promotion, distribution efficiency, core product, and price level in terms of their impact on a company's image. These studies encompassed entities from the food and beverage sectors (Sembiring, 2021), IT services (Kim and Hyun, 2011), retail in the food industry (Mukonza and Swarts, 2020), and the job market (Kim et al., 2011). However, research on the impact of marketing actions of electricity suppliers on their image is still lacking.

The contribution of this work to management science lies in understanding how selected marketing actions undertaken by

electricity providers within the marketing mix influence their image. The study focuses on the Polish electricity market, as after its liberalisation, the relationships between electricity providers have largely been shaped by the phenomenon of competition. Consequently, the importance of marketing activities by electricity providers and the shaping of their desirable image among consumers are amplified in this market.

1. Literature review

The concept of actions in management is defined as the execution of specific activities with the intention of achieving the goals of an organisation or as activities leading to an intended result (Kotarbiński, 1975; Mucha-Kuś et al., 2021; Hussain et al., 2021; Saługa, 2021). In this context, marketing activities can be understood as a set of controlled actions undertaken by a company to elicit a desired response among buyers. Concerning the shaping of a desirable image, marketing activities are defined as stimuli sent by the company to consumers to achieve a positive, trustworthy image (Penc, 2001). One way to classify marketing activities is to place them in the categories of the so-called marketing mix, also known as the "4Ps" of marketing. In line with this approach, the classical categories of the marketing mix are product, price, place, and promotion (McCarthy and Perreault, 2002).

The first conceptualisation of the term "image" in management science appeared in the 1950s (Martineau, 1958) and subsequently evolved, developing its essence, complexity, and role. As early as the 1990s, it was recognised that achieving success is not sufficient solely through a product supported by attractive prices, considering the broad-ranging promotional activities. It is essential to create a specific company image that supports buyers in making choices and purchase decisions (Bombiak, 2015) based on their own opinion or perception (Wereda

and Książek, 2012), despite the potential lack of complete information. It is believed that a negative attitude towards a company can lead to the abandonment of purchasing or owning its product, even if it satisfies a felt need. Similarly, a positive attitude towards a company can lead to the purchase of its products (Rudnicki, 2012), as well as to recommendations.

For the purposes of this article, the authors adopted the definition of the company's image as associations that arise in response to stimuli sent by the company to participants in its environment, where each of them assesses the organisation through the lens of their own experiences, values, or benefits (Zawadzka, 2010). The image is formed as a result of the company's interactions with its environment and is understood as an impression (Nguyen and Leblanc, 2001) or perceptions (Lemmink et al., 2003) and beliefs (Pomeroy and Johnson, 2009) about the organisation (Frąckiewicz, 2008). The company's image contributes to ensuring its success in the competitive market (Gray and Balmer, 1998) and creates its value (Spyropoulou et al., 2010). It is used to introduce new products (Dowling, 1986), leading to customer satisfaction (Hart and Rosenberger, 2004) and ensuring their loyalty (Nguyen and Leblanc, 2001). Consequently, companies strive to provide their recipients with a positive image (Gray and Balmer, 1998), whereby the latter believe they are receiving high value when they make a purchase (Nguyen and Leblanc, 2001). The issue of the company's image therefore lies in the question of how to use marketing activities to shape a positive company image in the minds of customers to achieve the intended goal.

The Stimulus-Organism-Response theory, also known as the Stimulus-State-Response (SSR) framework, provides a theoretical framework that explains how individuals' behaviours are shaped based on stimuli from their environment (Koch and Oulasvirta, 2018). In reference to this theory, a stimulus

is any factor from an individual's environment that influences that individual and leads to a specific state or behaviour. An organism, in this context, refers to an individual's internal state, including beliefs, attitude, emotions or image. Next, a response refers to a specific behaviour or action undertaken by an individual in response to a stimulus (Koch and Oulasvirta, 2018).

The work focuses on the first two components of the SOR model, namely external stimuli (stimulus) and the state of the organism. In the context of this work, external stimuli are perceived as the marketing activities of the electricity provider to which the electricity consumer is exposed. On the other hand, the internal state of the organism can be considered as the image of this provider that forms in the consumer's mind. This image represents the overall perception of the provider by the consumer, which is formed based on the provider's past and present actions. Furthermore, the consumer's response to the marketing activities of the electricity provider – which is not the subject of this work – is expressed through the behaviour of the consumer, which may involve continuing or terminating cooperation with the electricity provider, recommending or criticising it.

According to the authors' best knowledge, no empirical research has been conducted thus far to determine the impact of marketing activities undertaken within the marketing mix on the image of energy companies. Previous studies conducted in Poland have only examined the impact of selected marketing mix activities, often limited to promotions, on the image of cities, provinces, and Poland (Stanowicka-Traczyk, 2007; Ludew, 2016; Mazurkiewicz, 2011; Szarota, 2011; Ślusarz, 2015), banks (Fałowski, 2010; Sobczyk-Kolbuck, 2000), the dairy industry (Parkita, 2017), hotels (Orfin-Tomaszewska and Sidorkiewicz, 2019), and commercial entities in the FMCG industry (Wójcik, 2014; Oleś, 2017; Wróblewski, 2018). Research

conducted globally has primarily focused on issues related to advertising in terms of the expenditures incurred and sales promotion, distribution efficiency, core product, and price level in relation to their proposed relationship with the company's image. These studies encompassed sectors such as food and beverages (Sembiring, 2021), IT services (Kim and Hyun, 2011), retail in the food industry (Mukonza and Swarts, 2020), and the job market (Kim et al., 2011). They were conducted in companies (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995; Kim and Hyun, 2011; Sembiring, 2021; Mukonza and Swarts, 2020; Konovalyuk et al., 2023), as well as among students, who were treated as potential "target customers" (Ebeid, 2014).

The results of empirical research on the impact of an electricity provider's marketing activities on its image will contribute to the field of management science, thereby enhancing the significance of the current state of the art. This is because such research pertains to a different environment than previously studied (it relates to the national energy sector) and considers the specific marketing activities undertaken by electricity providers within various categories of the marketing mix. Hence, the identified research gap arises from the previous lack of studies on the impact of marketing activities conducted by electricity suppliers within the marketing mix on their image.

In the following part of this chapter, research hypotheses related to each category of the marketing mix will be developed.

In the literature, it is indicated that marketing activities related to the product are significant in shaping how a company is perceived by its customers (Frąckiewicz, 2008). Characteristics of these activities include, among others, building product quality, service levels, warranties provided, and creating product lines in the company's offerings (Armstrong and Kotler, 2012; Rafiq and Ahmed, 1995). Customers' perceptions of a company arise from the accumulation

of information through which buyers evaluate the company's offerings (Nguyen and Leblanc, 2001). In light of the SOR theory, this information stems from the marketing activities of companies that showcase certain aspects, such as the promise of high quality through warranties or the creation of product packages tailored to customer needs. This is intended to influence the positive perception of the energy company by its customers. A study published in 2021 indicated that an ecological product line influences the perception of the company. This study focused on entities in the food industry in Indonesia and was conducted among firms (Sembiring, 2021). In another study conducted in the Korean market among firms in the IT industry, it was also shown that delivered quality, in this case through levels of service warranties, impacts the company's image (Kim and Hyun, 2011).

In the context of the activities carried out by energy companies in the product area, it can be observed that in addition to the core product, which is electricity, for which uninterrupted electricity supply is guaranteed by companies (a fundamental quality criterion at the core product level), additional products are also offered, such as eco-friendly options (indicating electricity sourced exclusively from renewable energy sources or photovoltaic installations for homes with contracts for the purchase/sale of electricity). Offers for other products are also created in conjunction with electricity, such as natural gas or home appliances, e.g. boilers or air purifiers, signalling the satisfaction of various customer needs. Considering the above, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

- H1:** The offering of additional products along with electricity by the provider positively influences its image.
- H2:** Ensuring the continuity of the electricity supply positively influences the image of the provider.

Marketing activities in the area of pricing can be utilised to shape a company's image. Price has been recognised as an initial attribute that influences the process of shaping a company's image (Dowling, 1986). The price can signal the quality of the purchased product (Milgrom Robert, 1986; Yoo et al., 2000). The level of the price can suggest the product quality and can thus be associated with how the company is perceived (Kim and Hyun, 2011). Too high a price for homogeneous products can have a negative impact on the company's image, as customers realise it is merely about paying more (Kim and Hyun, 2011). On the other hand, the use of discounts and rebates can suggest lower prices, contributing to a positive perception of the company (Herbig and Milewicz, 1998). Characteristics of marketing activities in the area of pricing have been attributed to, among other things, setting discounts for the purchase of additional products, applying moderate or the lowest prices in the area/region (Poh et al., 2011).

In the context of the actions carried out by energy companies in the area of pricing, it can be observed that psychological discounts are already widely applied in fixed fees, for example, a monthly subscription fee of PLN 9.90. Seasonal promotions and discounts are less common. In light of the above, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H3: The provision of price discounts by the electricity provider positively influences its image.

Distribution channels owned by the company and its ability to create them in line with the expectations set by customers, as well as the standards offered in the market, can be used to shape the image of the provider (Dowling, 1986). By adjusting the intensity of the company's distribution channels, signals are sent to increase the level of convenience for customers, who engage less and sacrifice less in the purchase

of products, thereby increasing their satisfaction level (Yoo et al., 2000). It has been shown that the intensity of distribution channels has a positive impact on the company's image (Ebeid, 2014), as does the performance of the sales channel (Kim and Hyun, 2011). Characteristics of marketing activities in the area of distribution have been attributed to, among other things, the creation of channels expressed by the distribution range, sales area, location of sales points, and customer service (Rafiq and Ahmed, 1995), their attractiveness in terms of decor and convenience for customers, including convenient parking, short distance from the place of residence, or the possibility of reaching them by public transport (Poh et al., 2011). It is noted that customers prefer companies that have mastered online distribution channels to make them available to their buyers, thereby enhancing user convenience (Shpak et al., 2020).

In the context of activities carried out by energy companies, it can be observed that the largest ones operate physical customer service points, albeit in varying numbers and locations. The locations of these points also vary, with some companies having them exclusively in shopping centres, while others have them in county and provincial towns, often situated on main streets and city centres. Some electricity providers do not have physical service points at all. Additionally, the majority of energy companies, including smaller ones, provide alternative distribution channels in the form of websites and electronic platforms, thereby influencing the distribution reach and sales area. In this regard, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H4: The provision of a physical customer service office by an electricity provider positively influences its image.

H5: The provision of a remote customer service office by an electricity provider positively influences its image.

The ability to undertake and create appropriate promotional activities, including communication and sponsorship, can be used in shaping image. Advertising is perceived as one of the most visible marketing activities (Buil, 2013). When consumers encounter a company's advertisement, they automatically form an image of it, albeit not necessarily positive. Corporate advertising objectives, in line with the theory of attitudes, would be actions aimed at creating awareness and knowledge of the company among consumers (Dowling, 1986). The amount spent on advertising indicates the company's investment in its brand (Yoo et al., 2000). Characteristics of promotional activities include not only advertising but also engaging in events and consciously, purposefully, and systematically influencing the environment through sponsoring entities and events (Rafiq and Ahmed, 1995).

In the context of activities carried out by energy companies, it is common to observe advertising on the Internet, the use of billboards in urban areas, displays at sales points, as well as promotion through sponsoring and supporting sporting, cultural, or other local community events. In light of the above, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H6: Advertising by the electricity provider has a positive impact on its image.

H7: Engagement in sponsorship by the electricity provider has a positive impact on its image.

2. Methodology

In relation to the research hypotheses, the theoretical model considered in the study can be expressed using the following linear regression equation (based on Muthén, Muthén and Asparouhov, 2016):

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{1i} + \beta_2 x_{2i} + \beta_3 x_{3i} + \beta_4 x_{4i} + \beta_5 x_{5i} + \beta_6 x_{6i} + \beta_7 x_{7i} + \varepsilon_{yi}, \quad (1)$$

where:

y_i – the image of the electricity provider as perceived by individual i ,

x_{1i} – offering other products along with electricity as perceived by individual i ,

x_{2i} – ensuring the continuity of the electricity supply as perceived by individual i ,

x_{3i} – providing price discounts as perceived by individual i ,

x_{4i} – providing physical customer service offices as perceived by individual i ,

x_{5i} – providing a remote customer service office as perceived by individual i ,

x_{6i} – advertising of the supplier as perceived by individual i ,

x_{7i} – engagement in sponsorship as perceived by individual i ,

β_0 – intercept term,

$\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4, \beta_5, \beta_6, \beta_7$ – regression coefficients,

ε_{yi} – residual in equation for individual i .

The verification of research hypotheses and the achievement of the study's goal were facilitated by a quantitative study conducted based on primary sources. To gather empirical material, a survey was carried out among individuals responsible for cooperation with the electricity provider in households.

The units of the studied population were national households purchasing electricity for their own needs. The sample selection

utilised a natural list of population units, considering the geographical distribution of households resulting from their place of residence. The sample size was 503 units, and the "random-route" method was used for its selection. Face-to-face interviews, with the use of a standardised questionnaire, were conducted within households among individuals responsible for cooperation with the electricity supplier in a household.

In the random-route method, 80 randomly selected starting points were used. Firstly, the map of Poland was divided into territorial units according to the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NTUS). Sixteen voivodeships were assigned to six regions, and then – based on the analysis from 16 provincial offices of the Central Statistical Office in Poland – specific towns for the survey were identified, meeting the criterion of the size of the place of residence (local NTUS level). The selected towns were assigned a street name randomly chosen from the publicly available Google Maps service. Next, the first housing unit (i.e. an apartment or a single-family house) was located as the starting point. Subsequently, the interviewer moved to the next apartment or house, interviewing residents, while interviews were not conducted at the starting points. Buildings were counted by moving to the right from the selected house, on the same side of the street.

With regard to the questionnaire, the Likert scale was used to measure the independent variables describing the marketing activities of the electricity supplier. For each of these variables, a positive statement was constructed, and respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement. The degree of agreement was assessed on a five-point scale, with points defined verbally from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. On the other hand, the measurement of the dependent variable, expressing the image of the electricity provider,

involved evaluating this image based on a five-point scale, with points described verbally from “decidedly negative” to “decidedly positive”. The questionnaire was tested in a pilot study before conducting the main survey.

Multiple linear regression was used for data analysis, with the evaluation of the image of the household’s electricity provider as the dependent variable, and the evaluations of the marketing activities of the provider captured in the study as the independent variables. The statistical software Mplus v. 7.11 was used to estimate the regression coefficients and their statistical significance, using the Maximum Likelihood and Mean-adjusted (MLM) estimator. This estimator is robust to deviations of data from the normal distribution (Muthén and Muthén, 2012).

As presented in Table 1, the participants in our sample were classified based on their gender, age, and the size of their place of residence. Regarding gender, there were slightly more women (52.0%) than men (48.0%) in the sample. The majority of the participants resided in rural areas (33.4%), followed by cities with a population of over 200,000 (28.6%), then cities with a population ranging from 20,000 to 200,000 (24.9%), and the fewest resided in cities with less than 20,000 inhabitants. The majority of the respondents were in the age range of 30 to 49 years (50.9%), followed by the age group of 50 to 59 years (31.8%), then those above 60 years (14.7%), with the fewest participants in the age group of 18 to 29 years (2.6%).

Table 1. Structure of the research sample

Feature	Sample size	Percentage	Feature	Sample size	Percentage
Age			Residence size		
18-29 years	13	2.6%	village	168	33.4%
30-49 years	256	50.9%	town up to 20,000	66	13.1%
50-59 years	160	31.8%	town from 20,000 to 200,000	125	24.9%
60 years and over	74	14.7%	city over 200,000	144	28.6%
Gender					
women	263	52.0%			
men	240	48.0%			

Source: own elaboration

3. Research results

In the multiple regression model, the independent variables were as follows: offering other products along with electricity, ensuring the continuity of the electricity supply, providing price discounts, providing

a physical customer service office, providing a remote customer service office, advertising by the provider, and engagement in sponsorship by the electricity provider. The dependent variable was the image of the electricity provider. Table 2 presents the standardised estimates of the regression coefficients.

Table 2. The effects of independent variables on the image of the electricity provider

Variable	Estimate (standardised)	P-value
offering other products along with electricity	0.201	0.000
ensuring the continuity of the electricity supply	0.082 ns	0.067
providing price discounts	0.211	0.000
providing physical customer service offices	0.144	0.001
providing a remote customer service office	-0.065 ns	0.155
advertising by the supplier	0.045 ns	0.290
engagement in sponsorship	0.159	0.000

Source: own work

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that the following factors positively affect the image of the electricity provider: offering other products along with electricity ($\beta = 0.201$, $p < 0.001$), providing price discounts ($\beta = 0.211$, $p < 0.001$), providing physical customer service offices ($\beta = 0.144$, $p < 0.01$), providing a remote customer

service office, advertising, and engagement in sponsorship ($\beta = 0.159$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the following research hypotheses were accepted: H1, H3, H4, and H7. However, no statistically significant impact on the electricity provider's image was observed for the following variables: ensuring the continuity of the electricity supply

($\beta = 0.082$, $p > 0.05$), providing a remote customer service office ($\beta = -0.065$, $p > 0.05$), and advertising ($\beta = 0.045$, $p > 0.05$). As a result, the following research hypotheses were rejected: H2, H5, and H6. The coefficient of determination (R^2) in the regression model was 0.239, indicating that the adopted model explained approximately 24% of the variability of the dependent variable.

4. Discussion

The results of the analysis allowed for the verification of the research hypotheses. Regarding the results obtained in relation to hypotheses H1 and H2, formulated within the product category, it appears that offering other products along with electricity positively influences the image of the energy company. However, contrary to our expectations, the same cannot be said for ensuring the continuity of the electricity supply to households. This latter result is somewhat surprising. A previous study conducted in the Information Technology (IT) industry demonstrated that delivered quality, including service guarantee levels, influences the company's image (Kim et al., 2011). The result obtained in our work can be explained by the fact that the reliability of the electricity supply is currently a sort of expected norm or standard; thus, ensuring a continuous power supply does not affect the image of companies in the energy industry.

In relation to the price category, within which hypothesis H3 was formulated, it was found that offering price discounts positively impacts the image of the electricity provider. This is likely due to the specific benefit that consumers obtain as a result of such actions, in the form of lower electricity fees. Previous research findings support this positive influence of pricing activities on the company's image (Herbig and Milewicz, 1998; Ling et al., 2012).

In reference to the results concerning the distribution category, it was found that

providing physical customer service offices positively influences the image of energy companies, as indicated by the adopted hypothesis H4. This result is consistent with the findings of other studies that have demonstrated the positive impact of the performance of the sales channel on a company's image (Kim and Hyun, 2011) and the possession of proprietary distribution channels (Ebeid, 2014).

Regarding the next hypothesis within the distribution category (H5), our results indicate that providing a remote customer service office has no impact on the image of the electricity provider. This result is inconsistent with earlier research findings (Shpak et al., 2020), which suggested that customers prefer companies that have mastered online distribution channels, thereby enhancing usability. It can be presumed that the provision of remote customer service offices by electricity providers is currently a certain norm; therefore, such an action may not influence the image of the electricity provider. Currently, not all electricity providers offer physical customer service offices, likely due to the high costs associated with their maintenance, despite the fact that, as previously mentioned, this is positively associated with the image of the electricity provider.

In the context of the promotion category, where hypotheses H6 and H7 were posited, the results might appear surprising due to the rejection of the sixth hypothesis (H6). Some previous studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between advertising expenditures and company image. However, these studies highlighting the influence of advertising intensity on company image were focused on product categories other than electricity, such as FMCG products (Wójcik, 2014; Oleś, 2017) and food products (Mukonza and Swarts, 2020; Sembiring, 2021). Businesses operating in these latter product groups often utilise expensive television advertisements due to their wide reach (Szymański, 2021), which is not common

in the case of electricity. These differences may account for the varying results when examining the impact of advertising on the company's image. However, concerning the seventh hypothesis (H7), it is evident that engagement in sponsorship positively influences the image of energy companies, which is in line with our expectations and the findings of previous research (Ahmed, 1995).

Conclusions

The study addressed the issue of the impact of selected marketing activities on the image of electricity providers in households. Seven different marketing activities of domestic electricity suppliers were considered, encompassing various categories of the marketing mix. Based on the SOR theory, a positive influence of each investigated activity on the image of the electricity provider was assumed, as expressed in the formulated research hypotheses. These hypotheses were tested based on data collected during a survey conducted among households using electricity.

The adopted research model, expressed in the form of multiple regression, assumed the influence of the analysed marketing activities on the image of electricity providers. The results of the empirical study demonstrated that out of the seven examined marketing activities, four had a positive impact on the image of electricity providers. These activities spanned the following marketing mix categories: offering other products along with electricity in the product context, providing discounts in the price domain, offering physical customer service offices in the distribution realm, and sponsorship in the promotion domain. The results of the analysis indicate that these marketing activities, encompassing different elements of the marketing mix, have a favourable impact on the image of electricity suppliers. This is a significant theoretical insight from our study and contributes to the field of

marketing management for electricity supply companies.

Based on the results obtained, the following practical recommendations are suggested for electricity suppliers. It is recommended that such providers implement the following marketing activities, integrating them within the marketing mix, to build a positive image among households: offering additional products along with electricity (such as private medical care, access to technicians for minor home repairs), providing discounts (e.g. reducing the energy price for extending electricity supply agreements), ensuring access to physical customer service offices (e.g. establishing service points in easily accessible shopping centres), and engaging in sponsorship (e.g. sponsoring local sporting events). According to the available literature, such a favourable image should foster favourable consumer behaviours towards the electricity supplier, such as loyalty and positive recommendations.

This study is not without limitations. One of the limitations pertains to the focus on specific determinants of the image of electricity providers in the form of selected marketing activities. It is conceivable that there are other factors not considered in the empirical study that also influence the image of the electricity provider. These might include marketing activities specific to a particular provider or factors that fall outside the scope of the marketing mix of the companies. Another limitation is the adoption of the consumer perspective in our study, which seems appropriate for evaluating a company's image. However, when it comes to assessing marketing activities, there are certain limitations that result from the level of perception of these actions by consumers. Furthermore, the empirical study was conducted on a specific group of companies, namely domestic electricity providers. Therefore, the direct transfer of the results to companies in other industries or countries should be approached with

caution. Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the empirical study, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships. Nevertheless, the relationships examined in the empirical study were based on substantive grounds derived from the SOR theory, justifying their potential existence.

The limitations listed indicate potential directions for future research related to the theme of the work to a certain extent. Future research could consider other potential determinants of company image, such as those extending beyond the scope of activities included in the marketing mix (e.g. environmental responsibility, transparency in operations). Another possible research perspective could involve conducting a long-term study in which marketing activities would be evaluated at the company level, while the image of these companies would be analysed at the consumer level. Another research task could be to test our research model in the context of industries other than the electricity provider sector or on an international scale. However, concerning the issue of applying the proposed research approach to the energy sectors of other countries, the proposed model can be applied, but after taking into account the specific conditions present in the given country. It is particularly important to recognise and incorporate the specific marketing actions undertaken by energy providers in the given country into the model. The next potential research direction could focus on the consequences of a specific image, such as customer advocacy or their engagement in the actions of suppliers.

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Dariusz Dąbrowski is an Associate Professor at the Gdańsk University of Technology. His scientific interests have focused on problems related to the management of product innovation, as well as the market orientation of organisations. His recent research concerns issues related to the creativity and application of market knowledge in new product development within high technology companies, shaping the image of market entities, the implementation of market orientation and marketing programmes in organisations, and achieving a competitive advantage based on new products. He has participated in numerous research projects implemented at academic centres and in projects requested by industry. Currently, he serves as the head of the Marketing Department at the Faculty of Management and Economics at the Gdańsk University of Technology. ORCID no. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2045-2683>

Jakub Dąbrowski, PhD, is a member of the Polish Scientific Marketing Society. He is the author of publications in the field of project management, organisational management, and marketing. Certified as a project manager and methodologist, he places a strong emphasis on effectiveness, efficiency, and innovation in his professional work. He has authored development strategies for companies in the energy sector, developing and implementing new products. He leads complex research projects and market analyses, taking responsibility for the execution of marketing strategies. Currently, he serves as the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) at one of the major energy groups in Poland. ORCID no. <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9912-8241>

Krzysztof Zamasz is a Polish manager and economist, and an Associate Professor at WSB University in Dąbrowa Górnicza and the Silesian University of Technology. He is the author of a number of publications devoted to the management of energy companies and scientific expertise in the field of energy economics, the energy market, mergers and acquisitions, innovation and logistics process management. He is a recognised authority and expert who for many years had merged the theory of economy and management with practice as a member of the management boards of the biggest Polish and international energy groups. During the 25 years of his professional life, he pursued his career in the energy sector, where he implemented projects related to the transformation of the sector. He currently serves on the boards of companies in the energy sector and he is also the Director of the Institute of Energy Transformation at WSB University. ORCID no. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4090-8737>

Marcin Lis is an Associate Professor and Vice-Rector for Student Affairs and Cooperation with the Environment at WSB University. He is an advocate for initiatives aimed at the development of higher education, entrepreneurship, knowledge transfer from science to the economy, and the development of a knowledge-based economy. He serves as the President of the Delegation (Dąbrowa Górnicza) of the Regional Chamber of Commerce in Katowice, a member of the international association The European Academy of Management (EURAM

c/o EIASM – European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management), Vice-President of the Board of the Scientific Society of Organisation and Management's branch in Dąbrowa Górnicza, Vice-President of the Board of the Polish Economic Society in Katowice, Vice-President of the Board of the Silesian Employers' Association Lewiatan, and a member of the Programme Board of the National Cluster "Silesia Automotive & Advanced Manufacturing" of the Katowice Special Economic Zone. He has extensive corporate experience gained in international service companies, having held key managerial positions related to the creation of customer relationship management systems, quality and process management, and project management. He served as an executive-level manager at Orange S.A. and is an MBA graduate. In recognition of his activity in shaping relations between science and business, he was honoured with the Silver and Golden Cross of Merit, the Medal of the National Education Commission, and the Golden Honorary Badge for Merit to the Silesian Voivodeship. ORCID no. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7046-591X>