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Effects of Brand Experience: The Case of *The Witcher* Brand in the Eyes of Polish Customers

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Abstract: This article addresses the issue of brand recognition in the context of its elements and the products that use it. This is a study of customer experience with the brand. The example of *The Witcher* brand was chosen for consideration as this brand has recently been extremely popular both in Poland and other countries. The purpose of this article is to indicate the course of *The Witcher* brand formation process in the eyes of Polish consumers in relation to selected products related to the brand. The aim of the article is realized through research conducted by a diagnostic survey method among 538 respondents. The survey was conducted via an online questionnaire in February 2022. The results obtained allowed us to conclude that customers who have known the brand for more than 5 years pay attention to it primarily through books, not just a game or series. The article also indicates that customers who have seen advertising with *The Witcher* characters buy products related to the brand. However, the research did not confirm that *The Witcher* brand recognition is most strongly supported by the Netflix production. This research may have practical implications (e.g., for entities using the Witcher image or name in their products) and theoretical ones (including to expand knowledge of branding mechanisms for many products using it). Further research direction for the future can be indicated: research should be expanded to other countries, as *The Witcher* brand is recognized almost all over the world.

Keywords: *The Witcher*; brand; Netflix; game; book; brand recognition

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1. Introduction

This article examines the recognition of *The Witcher* brand based on surveys conducted among Polish consumers. *The Witcher* is currently one of the highest earning brands in pop culture. Created in the 1980s, the universe is already worth billions of PLN [1,2].

The research undertaken in the article is required to show the branding mechanisms in the case of a complex product such as The *Witcher*. This applies to the books and the series, games, etc. The research results presented in this paper and their conclusions reveal certain mechanisms that can be generalized when considering the branding topic in the modern world. Considerations will find not only theoretical, but also practical implications in brand management and, more widely, in marketing management.

This article is about building a brand using a specific customer group as an example. The issue of brand building is extremely important for enterprises. A strong brand allows for building long-lasting relationships with customers that bring profits to both the company and the customer. It was decided to focus on *The Witcher* brand because the genesis of its creation and growing in strength is also interesting from the point of view of the development of marketing theory. The considerations undertaken in the article, apart from theoretical implications, also have practical implications, which may be manifested in the possibility of using the experience of a well-known and growing brand by other companies.

Brand is an element that distinguishes a particular product, service or company from others. It influences recognition and consumer re-choice. Customers identify the specific brands with various characteristics, such as good quality products. The American Marketing Association provides the following brand definition: "A brand is a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers [3]". Brand image is the key driver of brand equity, which refers to consumer's general perception and feeling about a brand and has an influence on consumer behaviour [4]. Brands usually use a logo or slogan for their identification, but sometimes it is also the shape of the packaging or a color.

Those are all brand elements or attributes. When branding, companies should build on the differences their product has compared to the competition and emphasize the uniqueness of the product features and their brand. During the initial branding stages, it is important to build awareness of the brand in the community. Thereafter, provided the brand has been accepted, is profitable and has regular customers, it is possible to develop the brand, which must be constantly stimulated and continued. In the case of development, it should also be decided whether it should be a family brand, an individual brand or perhaps a combined brand. In terms of the company's future plans, this is important [5]. Brand building is defined by Kotler with the words: "Branding is endowing products and services with the power of a brand [6]". The greater the confidence they place in the brand, the more likely they are willing to pay a high price for it [7]. Brand personality perception in consumer's mind can be changed by any direct or indirect experience that consumers have with the brand [8]. In consumer psychology, understanding of how consumers respond to a brand (positive, favourable perception and willing to commit to positive word-of-mouth) begins from attitudes [9].

The aim of this article is to indicate the course of *The Witcher* brand formation process in the eyes of Polish consumers in relation to selected products related to the brand. To achieve this, a diagnostic survey among Polish consumers was designed and conducted. The results of this study are presented below, however, a review of the literature on the subject was presented earlier. This article also includes a discussion that allowed the research results to relate to the current state of knowledge.

2. Literature Review

Among the innovative branding methods that have been used in recent years is the creation of media hype during production promotion. Viral marketing, which results in the transmission of information by sharing materials related to the promotion of a product, is also applicable in creating hype. Viral marketing applies traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing to the online environment [10]. Much confusion exists about its actual definition, as the terms viral marketing, stealth marketing, buzz marketing and viral advertising have been used interchangeably [11]. 'Viral marketing' is a name applied to a group of family resemblant marketing strategies, some of them quite old, though the term itself dates from the height of the Internet bubble economy [12]. According to one of the venture capitalists who launched it, viral marketing amounts to little more than 'network-enhanced word-of-mouth'. Word-of-mouth is one of the oldest and most effective of all branding and marketing strategies [13].

During branding, further elements can be used and combined with previous ones, e.g., using the series to create a new graphic layout for books. The use of English and other translations results in a significant increase in the number of potential customers. One can also notice major changes related to changes in the recipients' lifestyles. An example would be books that have changed format from traditional paper books to e-books and audiobooks.

The innovative methods of building a strong brand include creating content by fans. This phenomenon had not previously occurred with such intensity. This is evident on Facebook fanpages. Users share drawings, stories and objects they create there, inspired by the brand and the characters associated with it [14]. These groups are usually created on

the initiative of the users themselves without interference from the brand, but the content created on the group focuses almost exclusively on the brand. It even comes to sharing the content of posts from the brand group to announce an event or news. This is very evident with TV series, books and various hobbies, as some people take a very emotional approach to a particular work, life area or characters of a particular work.

Brands, considering the fast pace of consumer life and changes in trends, place great emphasis on focusing on emotions and a flexible and consistent brand message. Today, it is even more strongly evident that the Internet channel is essential to a brand's activities. Consumers are spending more and more time on social media activities and brands need to follow them to attract their attention [15]. For the purposes of this article, the following brand definition was adopted: brand is a business and marketing concept that helps people identify a particular company, product or individual with success for the company. It is comprehensive and fits the 21st century. The elements of a modern brand are:

- Trust—Trust in the case of a brand allows you to build a relationship between the customer and the company on a solid foundation. It has to be bilateral.
- Design—Appropriate design of the brand influences its later perception by the customer, its remembering and connotations.
- Value—The brand value is ennobling for the customer and the company. It can significantly influence whether the customer perceives the brand as luxurious and trustworthy.
- Strategy—It is important that the brand building process is carried out in accordance with the strategy established for the entire enterprise.
- Logo—The logo is an important element of the brand that identifies the company in the eyes of the customer. Affects brand recognition.
- Marketing—It is especially important that marketing activities are entirely subordinated to building a coherent brand.
- Advertising—Advertising allows you to strengthen brand recognition, make customers aware of its existence and value, and remind about the company.
- Identity—The important brand identity elements, such as logos, colours, etc., always remain a vital part of the brand.

A relatively new trend is to listen to consumer feedback and make changes and enquire about what customers expect and what they would change. Brands, through facilitated communication via social media, strive to create long-term relationships with customers and build customer loyalty. The element that connects and is immediately prior to achieving loyalty is satisfaction. Once satisfaction is achieved with a particular product, trust in the brand is built and there is a high likelihood for subsequent purchase of the same product or other products from that brand. Loyalty is desired by brands because regular customers/fans of the products in question make regular purchases [5]. Brand trust is rooted in the result of past experience with the brand, and it is also positively associated with brand loyalty, which in turn maintains a positive relationship with brand equity [16]. Furthermore, the results suggest, although brand trust does not play a full mediating role as suggested by Morgan and Hunt, it contributes to a better explanation of brand equity [17].

The Witcher brand was created by Andrzej Sapkowski, who authored *The Witcher* books. He has established collaborations with CD Projekt, Netflix and the independent publishing house SuperNowa. Based on the successes of the CD Projekt and Netflix and the strong interest, further collaborations and products were created. The brand's origins date back to 1986, at which time (December 16, to be exact) the magazine "Nowa Fantastyka" published a short story that launched the creation of *The Witcher* brand. The brand was not widely known at first, but over time it has become a global brand that is recognized under the name *The Witcher*.

The story was an introduction to a series of books that began to be translated into other languages, expanding the brand's area of recognition beyond Poland. The book series on which *The Witcher* brand is based are fantasy. Books are characterized by elements

of humorous situations, but also have a moral and life conclusions can be drawn from them [18].

A Polish film was released in 2001, and a year later a series set in *The Witcher* universe. Unfortunately, they received a wave of criticism and did not gain popularity. It is also worth mentioning many short stories, comic books, musicals and rock operas, were based on Andrzej Sapkowski's books. However, they are rather marginal in the context of the brand [19,20].

Another stage in *The Witcher* brand building was the establishment of a partnership between Andrzej Sapkowski and CD Projekt, which resulted in the first part of the game in 2007, followed by two sequels. In October 2007, when the first game in *The Witcher* series hit the market, CD Projekt RED was a studio that was still unknown to the world, and *The Witcher* was its first project, whose strongest point, in marketing terms, was the use of the world created by Andrzej Sapkowski [21]. Undoubtedly, the first component of *The Witcher* brand that generated the most interest was the first part of the game created by CD Projekt. The focus was mainly on showcasing the product and attracting the interest of social media audiences. The best form was the use of game fragments [22].

The breakthrough for *The Witcher* brand was the film adaptation of the series based on the books by Netflix in 2019. It has caused a great deal of interest among the community, but also among brands, which have begun to use the image of characters from the series. It resulted in increased sales of both the entire series of books and games [23]. According to Google Trends, interest in the phrase *The Witcher* over the last 5 years has been boosted each time a Netflix-produced series premiered (Figure 1). In order to confirm the marketing potential of *The Witcher* brand's cooperation with Netflix, it was decided to verify the following hypothesis

H1: *The Witcher brand recognition is most strongly supported by Netflix productions.*

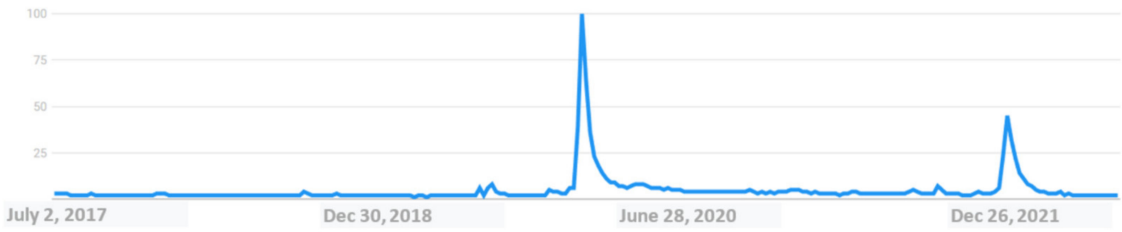


Figure 1. Interest in the phrase The Witcher by the last 5 years worldwide according to Google Trends [24].

A consumer's willingness to buy a brand's products is measured by the amount of purchases or money spent on a brand's products over some period of time or in comparison to other brands. Therefore, the concept of attachment to the main brand exists—this is the amount of purchases or spending associated with the main brand purchased by the consumer. This indicator shows a consumer's intensification of exclusivity in buying this main brand. Another manifestation and measure of consumer attachment to a brand is the time length over which brand product purchases are repeated [25]. In this context, there is an important customer life cycle, when the customer remains loyal to the brand. Therefore, within the context of this article, it was decided to verify hypothesis:

H2: *Customers who have known the Witcher brand for more than 5 years turn their attention to it not only because of the game and series.*

In verifying hypotheses H1 and H2, it was examined both how long respondents have known the brand and what they recognized first. In addition, when verifying hypothesis H2, it was examined how the answers to the question "Which of the selected brand elements do you know?" evolved.

From the moment *The Witcher* game was created, advertisements and slogans related to the game's main character began to appear, with varying degree of intensity. The character began to enter pop culture, becoming increasingly popular. *The Witcher*'s image has been used, for example, in the promotion of sodas, collectible coins, clothing and board games. It seems interesting to verify the power of *Witcher*-related promotional materials to influence customers and their purchasing decisions. In the context of increasing sales opportunities for various products related to *The Witcher* brand, it was decided to verify the following hypothesis:

H3: *Customers who have seen an advertisement with the Witcher character buy products related to the brand*.

In verifying this hypothesis, it is important whether customers have seen ads with *The Witcher* character and whether they buy and own products with his image.

3. Materials and Methods

The research was conducted in February 2022 using a diagnostic survey questionnaire among 539 Polish respondents. The sampling can be described as simple random. The respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire online. This survey was conducted online, as it is largely concerned with brand perceptions in the virtual world. Thus, the research environment was adapted to its subject. In addition to record questions, the questionnaire survey asked the following questions:

1. "Which of the selected brand elements do you know?"—multiple answers could be chosen
2. "Please provide an approximate time since you have known *The Witcher* brand?"—it was possible to choose one of the time intervals that allowed the study to determine when the first meeting with the brand took place, thus it could be logically concluded that if someone has known the brand for a long time (when there was no series yet), they would get to know it from other sources
3. "Which element were you first familiar with?"—it was possible to choose one answer, the question was proposed to, in a way, verify the assumption resulting from the answers to the previous ones

Analyses of the research results were performed in MS Excel and Statistica software from StatSoft company, Tulsa, OK, USA.

The survey included 328 women and 208 men. Three people did not agree to specify their gender. The sample's age structure is reflected in detail in Table 1.

Table 1. Age structure in the research sample.

	Age				
	<18	19–25	26–35	36–50	50<
Sample size	134	229	120	52	4

Respondents overwhelmingly admitted that they were familiar with *The Witcher* brand, there were 538 responses. For this reason, only 1 less person than the research sample counted joined the follow-up survey.

4. Results

In the question about what *The Witcher* brand elements respondents are familiar with, the responses formed as shown in Figure 2. Furthermore, it should be noted that respondents recognizing the transmedia nature of *The Witcher* story and are familiar with both the series, the books and games.

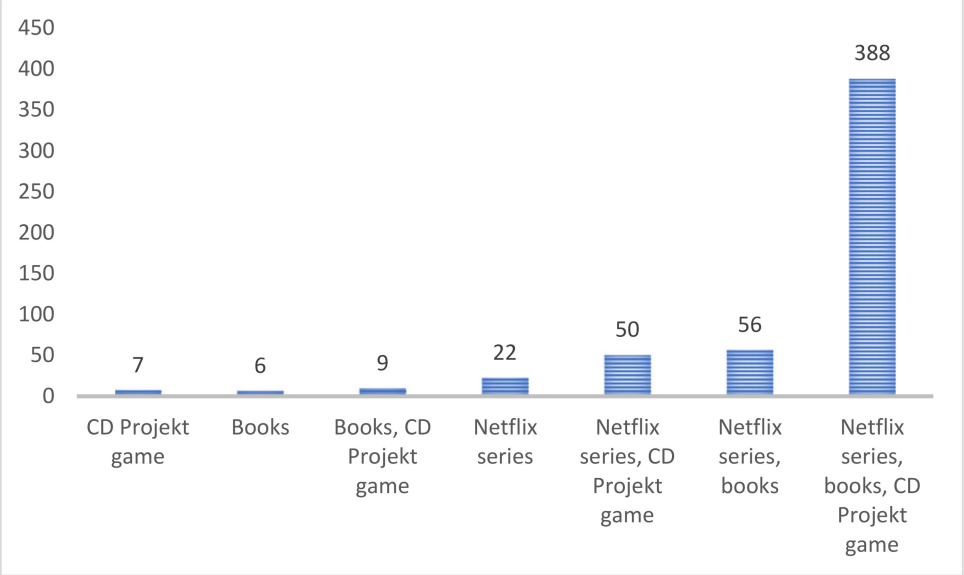


Figure 2. The number of responses to the question: "Which of the selected brand elements do you know?".

Based on the data presented in Figure 2, we aim to verify hypothesis H0: $p = 90\%$ of people familiar with *The Witcher* brand are familiar with the Netflix series; as an alternative hypothesis, let us assume that these people are more than 90%. To verify the null hypothesis, we will use a significance test for the structure index [26] defined by the formula:

$$Z = \frac{\frac{m}{n} - p_0}{\sqrt{\frac{p_0(1-p_0)}{n}}}, \quad (1)$$

where: $n = 538$, sample size, $m = 516$, number of units in the sample with a distinguished feature, $p_0 = 0.9$. The Z statistic is a random variable with a N(0,1) distribution. Let us assume $\alpha = 0.05$ significance level. Based on the test performed, we have reason to believe at the assumed level of significance that these people are more than 90%. Based on this, it could be concluded that *The Witcher* brand recognition is most strongly supported by the Netflix production. What is important, however, is when was the first encounter with the brand occurred.

Analyzing responses to the question about the approximate length of time respondents have known *The Witcher* brand, we found that most people (29.55%) have known the brand for 2 to 5 years, followed by 28.43% who have known the brand for more than 10 years and 26.76% for 5 to 10 years (see Figure 3). Since brand awareness could be influenced by a series in the 2 to 5 year time interval, it was decided to examine the responses to the question "Which element were you first familiar with?" Here, the results show that respondents most often encountered *The Witcher* story in a game (41.82%) and a book (34.20%), see Figure 4. Therefore, they have played a huge role in building brand awareness with consumers.

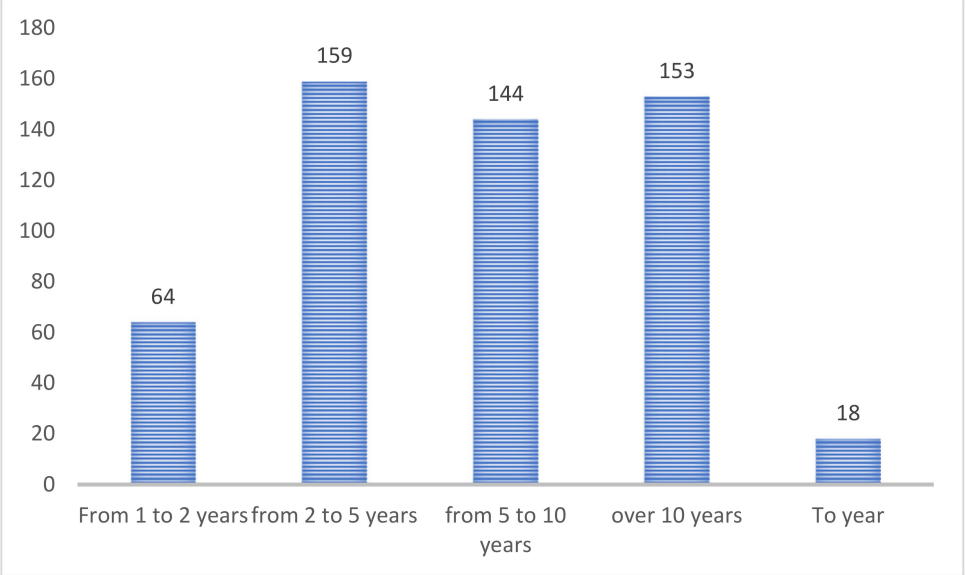


Figure 3. The number of responses to the question: "Please provide an approximate time since you have known the Witcher brand?".



Figure 4. The number of responses to the question: "Which element were you first familiar with?".

Detailed results of the responses to this question by respondents' age are shown in Figure 5.

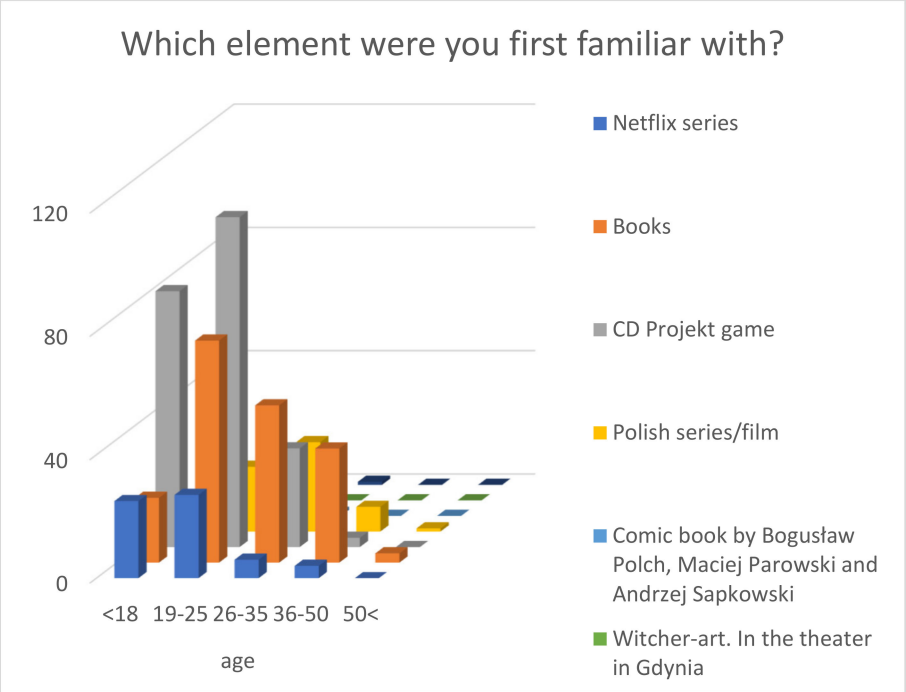


Figure 5. The number of responses to the question: "Which element were you first familiar with?" by respondents' age.

Based on the data provided in Figure 4, our aim is to verify hypothesis H0: $p = 85\%$ of people familiar with *The Witcher* brand did not learn about it through the Netflix series; as an alternative hypothesis, let us assume that these people are more than 85%. To verify the null hypothesis, we will use the Z statistic given by the Equation (1), where $n = 538$, $m = 476$ and $p_0 = 0.85$. Assume $\alpha = 0.05$ significance level. Based on the test performed, we have reason to believe that at the accepted level of significance that more than 85% of those familiar with *The Witcher* brand have not become familiar with it through the Netflix series. Therefore, it is clear that brand awareness cannot be linked only to the series, which was made in 2019. However, this suggests that hypothesis one should be negatively verified.

This brings us to the hypothesis H2 verification. Based on Figure 2, it can be concluded that 297 of those surveyed have known *The Witcher* brand for more than 5 years. Among these, in 269 cases, respondents admitted that they associate the brand not only with the game and series, but also with the books. This provides confirmation of hypothesis two.

Let us proceed to the verification of the hypothesis H2. Based on Figure 2, it can be concluded that 297 of those surveyed have known *The Witcher* brand for more than 5 years. However, of those, in 269 cases, respondents admitted that they associate the brand not only with the game and series, but also with the books. This provides confirmation of hypothesis two. The group includes 150 women and 119 men. They are mainly aged 19–25 (109 people) and 26–35 (85 people).

Table 2 presents the results on the answers to the question "Which of the selected brand elements do you know?" in relation to the respondents' age for the entire survey sample, not only for those who have known the brand for more than 5 years. Furthermore, Figure 6 shows the distribution of these results. In Table 2, red color indicates numbers greater than 10.

Table 2. The number of responses to the question: "Which of the selected brand elements do you know?" in relation to the respondents' age.

Which of the Selected Brand Elements Do You Know?	Age				
	<18	**19–25**	**26–35**	**36–50**	**50<**
CD Projekt game	2	4	1	0	0
Netflix series	6	14	1	1	0
Netflix series, CD Projekt game	16	24	10	0	0
Netflix series, books, CD Projekt game	96	165	91	33	3
books	2	1	2	1	0
Netflix Series, books	10	15	13	17	1
books, CD Projekt game	2	5	2	0	0
Summary	134	228	120	52	4

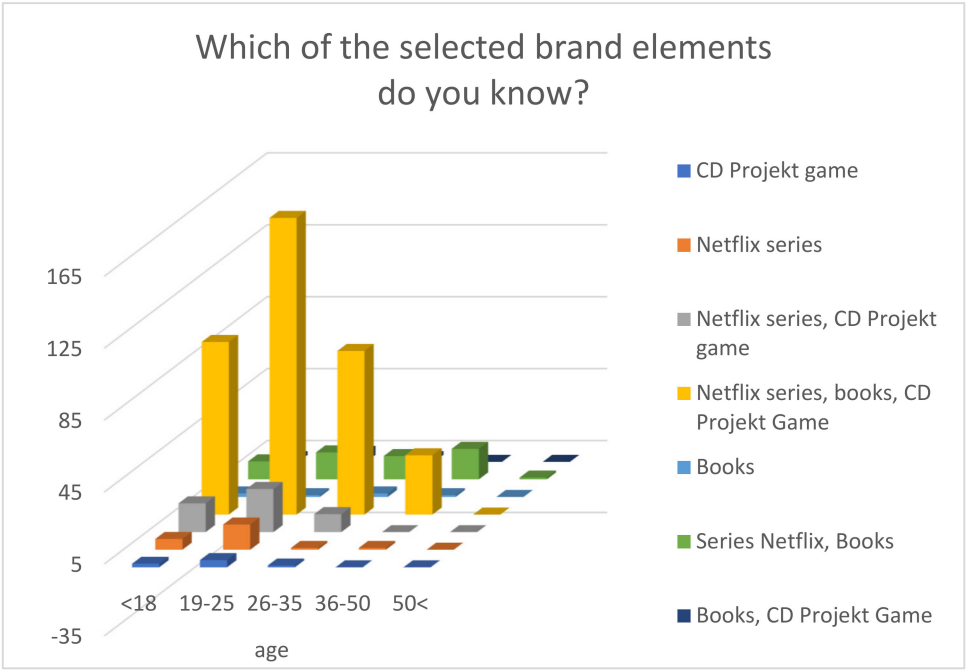


Figure 6. Figure of responses to the question: "Which of the selected brand elements do you know?" in relation to the respondents' age.

Based on the data presented in Table 2 and Figure 6, it can be concluded that the largest number of people in each surveyed age range know the most important elements of the brand (series, books and game) and the largest number of people in the 19–25 age group are familiar with individual brand elements. There are 110 people in the 19–35 age group who have known the brand the longest at more than 10 years; see Table 3.

Table 3. The number of responses to the question: "Please provide an approximate time since you have known *The Witcher* brand?" in relation to the respondents' age.

	To Year	**From 1 to 2 Years**	**From 2 to 5 Years**	**From 5 to 10 Years**	**Over 10 Years**
up to 18 years	13	30	62	27	2
from 19 to 25	5	25	74	84	40
from 26 to 35	0	6	19	25	70
from 36 to 50	0	3	4	8	37
over 50	0	0	0	0	4

The Mann–Whitney U statistical test (with continuity correction) indicates that the length of brand familiarity is statistically significant for good brand familiarity (see Table 4 for detailed results).

Table 4. Detailed results of the Mann–Whitney U test (with continuity correction) for the relationship between *The Witcher* brand awareness and the time from which they are familiar with the brand. (Z means "the value of the test statistic"; *p* means "value").

	Z	***p***	***Z cor.***	***p***
Variable: brand awareness length	2.162303	0.030596	2.241422	0.024999

Regarding the advertising's impact on brand interest, respondents indicated in 88.84% that the games' and series' promotion on the Internet led to interest from other brands to collaborate, and thus, various products with *The Witcher's* image began to appear. Respondents also highlighted that brand recognition has been particularly enhanced by social media (an opinion expressed by 85.13% of respondents). Respondents attributed a large role in branding to the game, with 92.38% stating that brand recognition increased after the game was created and 81.97% admitting that the Netflix series was created by the success of the game. Of respondents, 81.23% admit that interest in the books was secondarily created after the success of *The Witcher* game and series.

The strength of a brand's influence is reflected, among other things, in the purchases made by customers. Therefore, during the survey, a question was asked about whether respondents owned or bought products related to *The Witcher* brand. It appeared that an estimated 82.3% of those surveyed owned something of the products mentioned. The advertising influence on making the above purchases is also important. Only 15.2% of those seeing the ad do not own any product with the brand image. Therefore, hypothesis three can be considered confirmed.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Research on brands and brand building in various aspects has been performed in the literature for some considerable time. For example, S. F. Syed Alwia and Ph. J. Kitchen conducted research that considers corporate brand image, focusing on cognitive and affective brand attributes in the context of business schools. In their research, drawing on an empirical survey of postgraduate (MBA) students from four business schools, the findings revealed that both cognitive and affective attitudinal components appear equally important in shaping corporate brand image. Furthermore, when the mediating effect is investigated, interestingly, students' positive recommendations to schools depended largely on the affective (prestigious, adventurous, empathy and competence) rather than upon the cognitive brand attributes [27]. Similar to *The Witcher* brand, therefore, respondents expected more from the brand than its basics. For *The Witcher* brand, this has resulted in the brand evolving and expanding its constituent elements with new ones.

In contrast, E. Seimienea and E. Kamarauskaiteb researched effect of brand elements on brand personality perception. The study conducted on the beer market revealed that brand personalities were mostly impacted by design of bottle and label, design colors and advertisements. However, such factors as position of brand in the market, brand name and perceived typical user should be also considered as important in forming consumers' perception of brand personality [28]. In the case of *The Witcher* brand, the elements mentioned here are relevant but in a different context. The overall brand perception by customers is more important. However, future research on this brand can be broadened with a breakdown on individual elements such as colors, brand sounds, etc. It will certainly be an extremely interesting topic.

R. B. Kim and Y. Chao in their research, by contrast, have been in their quest for understanding how consumers evaluate brands and react to branding practices. Four

global brands (Nike, Kappa, Ferrero and Meiji) were selected for the analysis and 1100 participants of the millennial generation consumers participated in the online survey. The findings suggest that both rational perception and emotions of consumers play important roles in the process of brand building among Chinese consumers [29]. The authors point to the different paths in branding that are being pursued specifically by *The Witcher* brand.

Similarly, A. Palomba examined how original series help build consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) toward OTT (over-the-top) services and how the consumer-based brand equity model can explicate how OTT services build consumer brand loyalty and brand equity. The study includes a structural equation model that demonstrates that original series can be incorporated into a consumer-based brand equity model for OTT services. This offers further implications for creative arts management in building brand equity and brand loyalty [30]. Similar implications emerge in the above research on *The Witcher* brand.

There are very few scientific studies on *The Witcher* brand itself and similar brands that consist of many elements such as books, games and series. Which argues that the area is new and interesting for scientific research. *The Witcher* brand was discussed by K. Worrow in the context of men's and women's perceptions in the Netflix series [31]. This is an interesting issue that can also affect the brand positively or negatively in the consumer's awareness.

The research presented in this article did not confirm that branding was mainly influenced by the Netflix series. The vast majority of respondents have known the brand longer and its image in their awareness is also partly based on games and books. Research additionally indicates that an advertising campaign for various products with *The Witcher* image has the desired effect and customers buy products associated with the brand.

5.1. Limitations

The authors of this article are fully aware of the limitations of this research. Certainly, the most significant is the narrowing of the survey group to people from Poland. *The Witcher* brand is already recognized almost all over the world and it would be worthwhile to expand this research to other countries. In addition, it is worth expanding the research with a detailed look at brand-building elements such as color schemes and brand sounds. It is also worth considering what role *The Witcher* brand plays in the customers' subconscious, since, according to Harvard professor Gerald Zaltman, 95% of consumer decisions are made subconsciously [32]. Moreover, *The Witcher* story's transmediality has not received much attention, but this may also be an opportunity to be considered in other publications. Issues can also be found regarding gender differences in brand perception. This also could provide a basis for expanding research on the subject. Summarizing these considerations, the second and third hypotheses are confirmed, while the first is rejected.

5.2. Practical Implications

Considering that this article discusses many practical aspects of *The Witcher* brand's use, it may be relevant to any market entities that benefit from Andrzej Sapkowski's work. Implications are emerging, pointing to directions in brand management that are worth developing. In practice, all companies that offer a complex product can benefit from this research. The study shows how it is possible to skillfully build a common brand for products such as a game, series, book, etc. It is based on the principles of transmedia novel and can be used for success by other entrepreneurs. Research shows which brand building marketing activities are most noticeable by customers.

5.3. Theoretical Implications

This article addresses many theoretical aspects of branding and its positive image in the customers' eyes. It expands the brand knowledge covering a wide variety of products and activities. It indicates how customers perceive such a brand and how they begin to attach to it. The article broadens the customer's knowledge of brand perception. It shows

how individual brand elements are noticed and remembered. It points to timing as an important element in building brand trust and customer loyalty.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to at the Lublin University of Science and Technology, the research ethics committee is just starting its work and is being established. The research was done earlier. The survey was carried out in accordance with PKJPA standards. Therefore, the respondents, before starting the survey, are informed that the survey is anonymous, which means that individual responses are not associated with specific persons. Each of the respondents is given only a sequential number in the results database. The respondents were also informed about the purpose of data collection—research purposes.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

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