# IS TRUST AMONGST THE MAIN BRAND EQUITY DIMENSIONS? THE TELECOM PROJECT (BULGARIA)

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**Abstract:**

*This article addresses brand equity and the 'trust' factor in it. The latter is perceived as highly crucial in brand-consumer relationship, embracing positive image of given brand and high level of loyalty. The study aims to clarify the 'trust' notion by demonstrating the brand equity status of the three companies providing mobile services in Bulgaria. It included questionnaire based on David Aarker's brand equity model, with sample of 375 respondents. The data was processed by SPSS 2010 software. Even the leader in the sector could suffer the lack of trust which would drive to negative market results in the future. Relying on the study we could put consumer's trust between 'satisfaction' and 'loyalty', but 'image' demonstrates strong correlation with the latter. The Aaker's model itself is not enough for exhaustive conclusions about the multidimensional nature of brand equity and especially in the study it was not applied in its entireness.*

**Key words:** *brand equity, loyalty, consumer trust, mobile services*

# 1. INTRODUCTION[1]

In the era of consumer dominance in the market brand equity concept has been established as the most appropriate way of displaying the specific character of the current consumer-brand relationship (Kotler et al. 2010, Keller et al. 2012). However, it is a multidimensional concept and as a result often seems vague. As a notion in brand management it is very useful not only in making plain acceptable explanation of what brand itself *is* but predominantly in unveiling the working mechanism that stands behind it. It's a good theory, an abstract model describing brand influence in current economies but still there is no complete and unified methodology how to be measured correctly and it is still missing some factors (social, micro-economical, personal, etc.) which play a significant role in its definition and management. In fact, however, we are speaking not about static equality between the elements involved, just the opposite - about quite dynamic process and each company should take an account of specific conditions and exact, relevant factors in given industry, category and/or entire market around the globe in its effort to control the process in question in the right way possible. As Charles Darwin pointed out, the one who survives is neither the bigger nor the cleverer, but the fittest. Nowadays we are required to be the fittest ones because of the fragmented media environment, diminishing consumer loyalty and changing cultural landscape. Darwin's dictum entered the world of management long time ago but it becomes even more obvious and reliable when we take account of the influence of globalization, fashion, social media, etc., over the consumer awareness and perception on particular brand no matter how big it is. Market conditions and brand environment have always been difficult, especially after the end of the so called 'product period' (Kotler et al. 2010), when added value of brands got onto agenda. The realities we face now, just to name a few, are high levels of competition

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and communication noise, too many offers and choices before the consumers (causing an effect known as 'an agony of choice', Berger 2010: 177), fatigue and resistance against the permanent flow of commercial information as a whole, and social pressure for sustainable economical growth and fair trade. Therefore, what significantly distinguishes current stage in branding area from the previous ones are the tangible power of the consumer in the market dialogue (because of the production initiative and collaboration s/he has, fast and wide-scale Internet information spreading, increasing power word-of-mouth effect, etc.) and the distrust which a lot of bad brand practices and the last world financial crisis have been providing.

Nevertheless, the market still goes on and brands should continue to makes their everyday efforts to keep the stakeholders close, satisfied as much as it is possible and to turn them into brand advocates. A classical print ad by McGraw Hill (Fig.1) always reminds us of the power of communication, awareness and good impression that build together the key preliminary condition for starting successful dialogue (Zyman, 2004) with the potential consumers. The purchasing only seems like an act of the present since communication efforts of the brands made in the past result in given attitude and assessment in POS situation. Reputation is a set of different relevant to the brand pieces of information which is *conditio sine qua non* in contemporary business relations. Even negative reputation is better then none, since any foregoing information is a base for potential deal between the parties and even for trustworthy partnership in long-term period.

Fig. 1: McGraw Hill's Appreciation of Brand Communication, in Barrett, 2012.
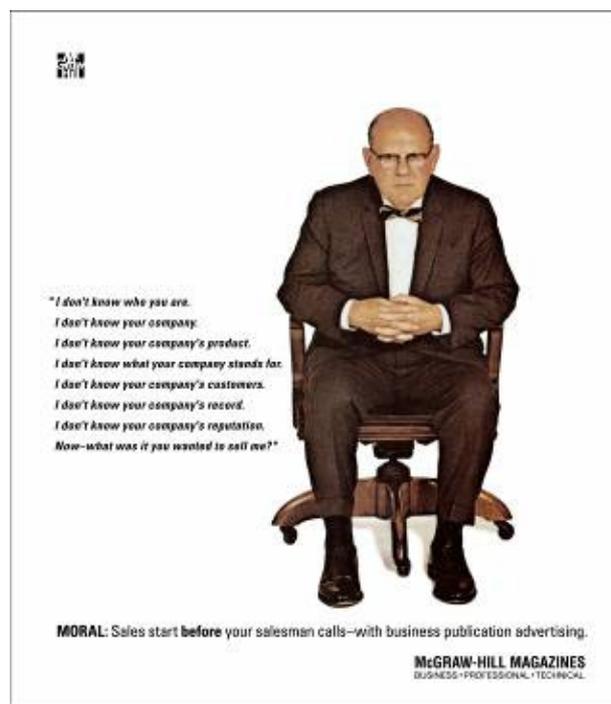


### 1.1    *Loyalty and Trust.*

Dick-Basu's model of loyalty taxonomy (Table 1) is really useful model of "reading" the consumer behavior in the context of the meaning that clients put into relationship with provider whose services they use and, consequently, it helps defining from what point on we could speak about trust and consumer commitment. But we should pay attention to the findings by Richard Oliver (1999) who pointed out that loyalty is noble phenomenon and it presupposes conviction, trust and fidelity. He

disagrees with widespread opinion saying that notorious consumer satisfaction is not enough to provide loyalty, and adds personal factors like self-confidence, certainty about product's supremacy and above all - social integration. Even years after the publication of his article on the topic we could readily observe these factors in the cases of Apple and Harley-Davidson communities, which make the two brands standards of high level loyalty.

Table 1: Dick and Besu's Consumer Loyalty Taxonomy Matrix (in Garland & Gendall, 2004, p.82).

|  |  | Repeat Patronage | |
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | High | Low |
| Relative | High | True loyalty | Latent loyalty |
| Attitude | Low | Spurious loyalty | No loyalty |

However, the model (Table 1) does not explain what "attitude" actually is (or embraces) nor in what dynamic relation are "patronage" and "attitude". Which one is the "motor" for the other factor? Moreover, certainly loyalty greatly varies between the categories and markets and that is why is it difficult to be empirically traced out and discussed in general. The new question which arises in that case is how *trust* influences the development of loyalty from "latent" to "true" one? The author is quite sure that the topic is more complex that it seems but the paper makes an effort to shed light on the issue. For instance, the long-term relationship in telecom sector in Bulgaria could easily be mixed or directly confused with "true loyalty" since the 2-years or open end contracts give the wrong impression that clients are satisfied and ready to endorse the chosen provider.

Kapferer puts *trust* among the most crucial factors that transforms a simple name into brand together with saliency, differentiability and intensity (2008, p.11). Good name, of course, is a powerful tool but it takes time and a lot of managerial efforts to become trustworthy. Once this position achieved, it serves as a magnet for consumers because the reputation, *image* and *trust* work to generate more purchases and unlikelihood for shifting to less reliable brand (Ehrenberg & Goodhardt 2002). Castaldo (2007) dedicated entire monograph on trust issues in marketing area. He specifies that it is in a positive relation with image persistence in time, and what is more, trust is "an image's critical component, especially when it is difficult to find identification criteria and, consequently, the consumers cannot precisely define their attitude towards each alternative offer" (2007, p.97). In her research Susan Fournier (1998) put trust as a part of brand partner quality performance inasmuch it is expected good brand to deliver what is desired against what is feared and it is a key factor for providing consumer's commitment. In the same vain of thoughts Sirdeshmukh, Singh and Sabol (2002) in their study on two services contexts found that trustworthiness embraces operational competence, operational benevolence and problem-solving orientation, which finding is very useful for the project exposed below. Before them, Barney and Hansen (1994) isolated three types of trustworthiness in terms of their potential to be a competitive advantage in a certain degree. In exchange, they specified, is important not to exploit the other party's vulnerabilities, which in the case of consumer-brand relationship is of greater significance than in B-to-B area. The strongest form of trustworthiness comes on the stage in a sector where this phenomenon is relatively rare among the set of competitors and the two parties engaged in some exchange avoid low-cost imitation (Barney & Hansen 1994, p.188).

*2.1 The study*

The study about brand equity in the telecom sector presented here was conducted in May-June 2011 at New Bulgarian University – Sofia in course of special practical classes, dedicated to the brand equity issues and measurement (Trendafilov 2011). The local market is dynamic as everywhere else and almost each respondent in it has had a contact with at least one of the providers available (the open access data indicates that mobile services penetration is between 120 and 130% and since 2010 the smart phones market has been growing quickly). At that period all of the operators were in some kind of transformation process from merely "mobile operators" to "communication providers", looking for deeper and stronger relationship with the clients (especially younger ones), and the level of brand awareness was very high. It does mean, however, neither that automatically their images get into the required framework, nor that the providers are trustworthy.

The main focus of the research was the gap – if there would any - between what was said and communicated by the providers in various media and what was perceived and expressed by the opinion of the users facing these companies every day (focusing mainly on the telephone service). Likewise, we assumed that there was some discrepancy between respondents' answers (precisely attitude) and their real behavior, whose origin, in addition, could be useful to be investigated.

It was curious for us also what was the brand status of the first operator – Mtel, which had entered Bulgarian market in the mid 90's (and had been the only one about 7 years), and between 2010 and 2012 it was in the middle of serious data processing crisis, which was affecting adversely the routine front-offices work and the rhythm of the monthly invoicing. The behavior of the other two providers was interesting also, since no one was alone on the market map and was dependent on the messages and movements of its competitors. Following these points, the questionnaire included panels of questions on the *image* of the companies, *perceived quality* of their services, relative consumer's *loyalty* (e.g. trust, recommendation and device purchase readiness), and some additional data. The more important thing was that we believed that the triad 'image-quality-loyalty' is crucial for the perception and attitude on the consumer's part. They compose a kind of "microsystem" in which these elements supply each other and have something to do with *trust* in one way or another. We claim that the latter is the key to success – even if a given company already had had previous contacts or complete contracts with clients, the lack of *trust* would be the reason for the consumers to switch over to another company or "simply" to share their negative experience and impressions to the other prospects around them. Put in other words, openly *trust* goes before the "Holy Grail" - *brand loyalty*, but the question was where exactly it could be placed. Was it a part of the positive image, a result of high quality satisfaction or may be we could put it elsewhere?

## 2. RESEARCH PURPOSES

The realization of the project was inspired by the significant contrasts in the attitude towards the three companies among the average consumer and increasing companies' PR "war" that had been available both in the online and offline media. The main purposes are: 1. using David Aaker's model of brand equity (1991), to measure quantitatively the consumer's attitude towards the quality of services provided by the three brands in question, 2. to define their images among the consumers, 3. to define consumer's loyalty levels, and last but not least, 5. to examine the relationships between "image", "satisfaction", "trust" and "loyalty" if there actually were any.

Hypotheses we were working on were as follows:

H1: The market leader Mtel "suffers" from spurious or even from lack of loyalty at all but still keeps its position because it is the first company that entered this market;

H2: Vivacom and Globul[2] have latent loyalty and serious potential to steel "share of mind" in near future from the leader;

H3: *Trust* plays a key role in reaching *brand loyalty*, connecting consumer's satisfaction and "true loyalty", and, additionally, legitimizes the latter.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

According to the purposes, the survey was designed by the author. A 32-question questionnaire was distributed via e-mail and submitted by 375 respondents in digital format. The data was processed by SPSS 2010 software. All participants were active users in the following sample profile:

• 59% females,

• 61% at the age of 22 to 27 or put in other words, the most valuable target group for the providers under study,

• more than 40% declared average income,

• 80.7% Sofia (the biggest local market) citizens,

• 73% - business sector employees.

The questionnaire was based on brand equity model introduced by American professor David Aaker (1996) and adapted for the project, although his work bears criticism. It is definitely not perfect, but we should have in mind that it is not a research tool itself but only a good basis that puts the necessary concrete frames of brand equity, extracted from practice. The sample of the survey was far from the status of national representation, if we consider statistics, but it reached the right target and was large enough in order to outline some patterns.

## 4. RESULTS

Some preliminary information should be put here:

▪ 1/3 of the respondents has changed mobile operator in last 5 years,

▪ 61.3% of the sample are clients of Mtel – the market leader,

▪ 66% perceived Mtel as "leader" with approved corporate identity,

▪ 69,4% of the respondents present themselves as "loyal" consumers,

▪ as expected, exactly 20% use two mobile phones by two different providers,

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[2] In 2014 the company was renamed to "Telenor" and totally rebranded – from the logo to the PoS interior.

- 89.4% present themselves as "loyal" clients but the same percent of the respondents actually confirmed that regularly or on occasion check the other companies' offers.

In fact, Mtel is a popular partner for the business organizations but in the same time its image is injured and inclines towards negative, which opens an opportunity for Vivacom to be at the head of the list. The latter has the best reputation in terms of two very crucial criteria – *perceived quality* of the service and *office attendance*. Globul, on its part, is recognized as 'consumer oriented' operator and very effective in its reaction to clients' questions and complaints. Both Vivacom and Globul are *trustworthy* (each one receives around 25% positive answers and this was confirmed by positive *overall estimate* – respectively 57% and 46%) and enjoy positive worth-of-mouth effect (not surprisingly, respectively 48.9% and 45% would recommend these two providers to other people – prospective clients, which is totally the opposite to the Mtel's results). The point here is that when the fundament of the given company's service is not stable and offered as it is expected, the consumers treat with distrust even its good and meaningful ATL communication (73% pointed Mtel' advertisements as "misleading" (Fig.3) in comparison with its market rivals – respectively 61.2% for Vivacom and 66.7% for Globul, which also could be pointed as a confirmation for the lower efficiency of the conventional TVC nowadays).

Fig. 2: Distribution of the responds concerning *problems with invoicing* (positive [left-hand side] and negative answers).
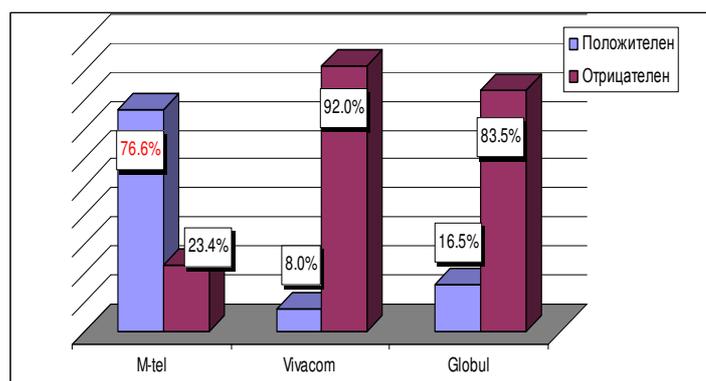


An invoicing (billing) problem in Mtel's service caused delay and inaccuracy in the bills and turned itself into a serious public rumor. The company was trying to deaden it by all possible means, but it was annoying the clients long time and inevitably affected its image and consumer attitude. As it become quite clear (Fig.2) this trouble was available among Mtel' competitors as well, but the echo of its problems lasted too long and, in fact, it empowered the position of its competitors. Vivacom, which had larger portfolio, could not afford any invoicing errors especially in relation to its business clients and in that period gathered momentum.

Fig. 3: "Do you think that TV ads of the mobile providers are misleading?" (with regards to each company, from *completely agree* to *completely disagree*).
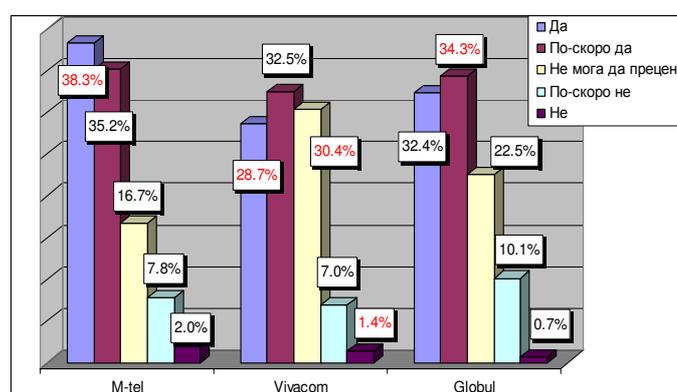
As to the characteristics of the advertising in this market (Fig.3), the three players are among the biggest advertisers in Bulgaria and, logically, saturate the media environment with great number and various messages – special offers for particular devices, diverse services' payment programs, additional services, etc. Sometimes they resort to direct confrontation between each other, which is still forbidden by the law, by using metaphors and ironic humor in the spots. The language towards the audience in advertisements is more 'friendly' than before and there is significant use of "you" appeal and words like "security" and "freedom", in order personal approach and care to be displayed. It is not always easy even for the powerful companies, as these under study, to "generate" trust, firstly, because building a brand in service sector is a constant process, depending highly on people working for the provider, and, secondly, because in a small markets a trust crisis of one brand (or company in this case) could affect negative attitude towards the whole category.

Fig. 4: Responses about the *image* of each company (*positive* [from left to right], *towards positive*, *can not assess*, *towards negative*, *negative*, *no answer*)
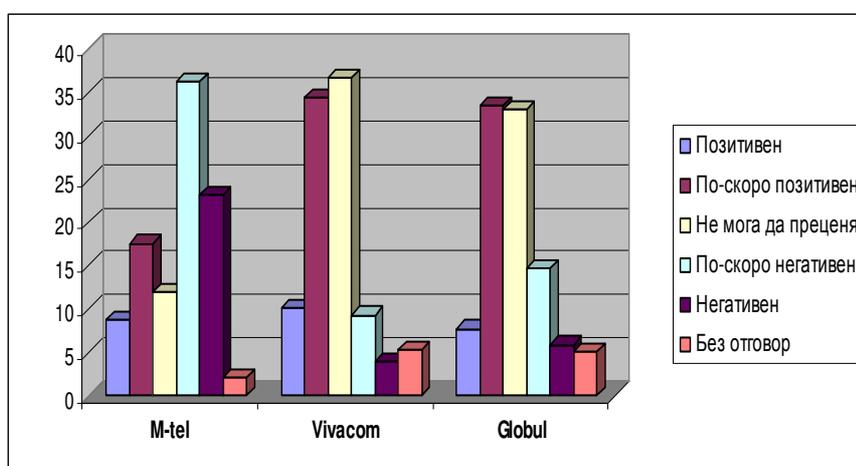


Most of the companies are excessively focused on their image and conduct research projects mainly on it. In our case, the figures display that the leader was in big image trouble since the sum of negative responses was twice bigger (59.5%) than the sum of the positive ones (26.4%), despite of the respect and experience it had. We should give an account of the wavering results for Vivacom and Globul but, however, the overall assess is significantly positive. This shows that our H1 was partly confirmed and H2 is completely correct. The two providers mentioned should use the opportunity to strengthen their positions in the market before the activities which the leader would start to prevent the serious harm possible.

Fig. 5: Distribution of the responses about the possibility given provider *to berecommended to a friend* (from *completely positive* [from left to right], *may be*, to *completely negative*).
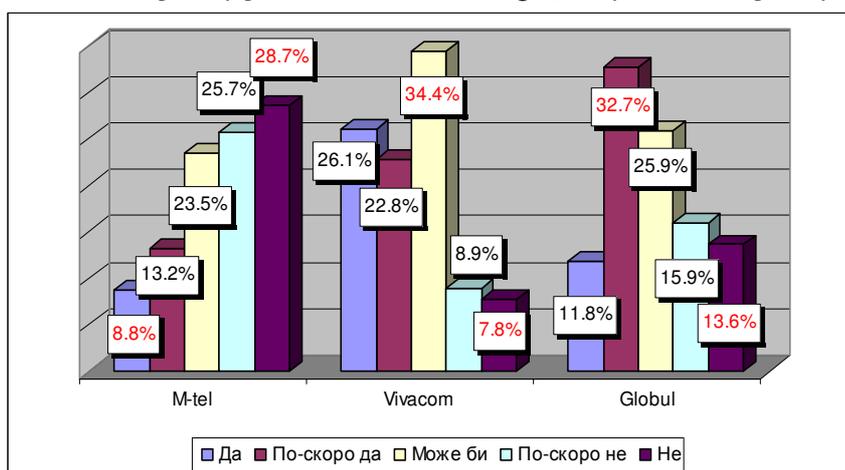
Fig. 6: Results from the *attitude* question (positive - from left to right – to negative).
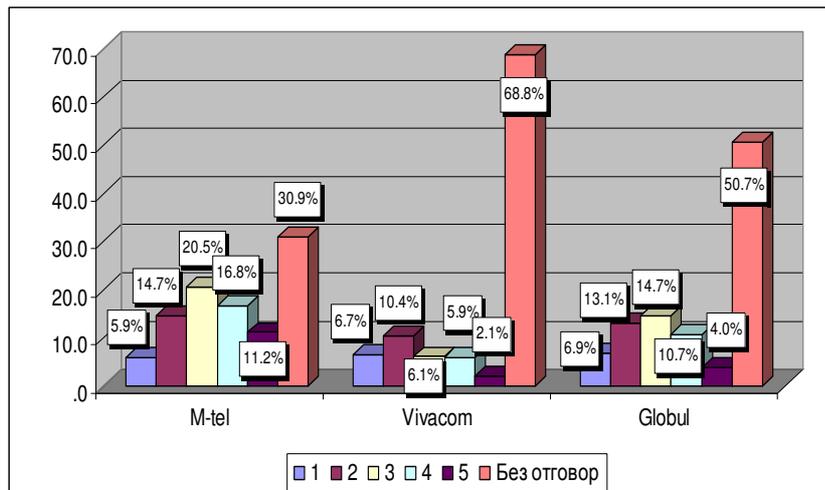


Fig. 7: Distribution of the responses about *trust* in providers (from completely positive – from left to right – to completely negative).
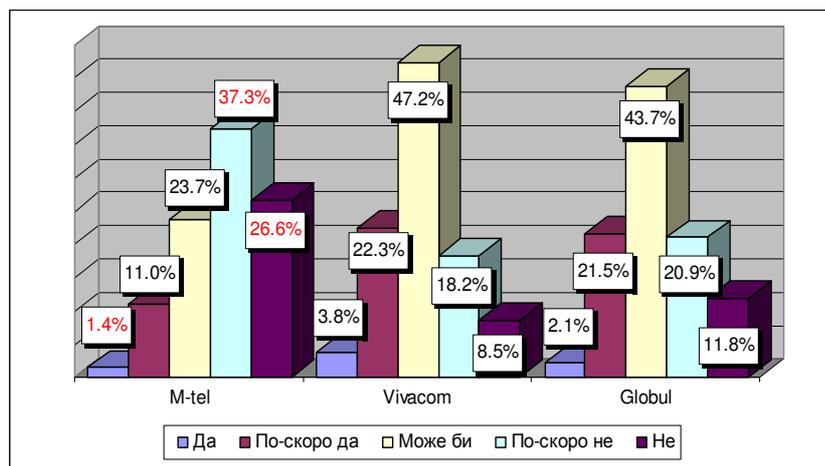


The diagram of the direct question about *trust* in the companies (Fig.7) explicitly displays that Vivacom and Globul are placed in the "golden mean", which is good capital for further work in improving brand loyalty. As to the leading operator – Mtel, the figures show that it faces serious problem. Although it is recognized as the leader by 66% of the sample, the generation of 26.6% of complete distrust and other negative answers in addition could be termed "crisis", which confirms (once again) our H1.

Table 2: ANOVA model, measuring the connection between the tree main elements and the *consumer loyalty*.

| | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Constant) | ,336 | ,143 | 2,344 | **,020** |

| Trust | ,309 | ,048 | **,275** | 6,498 | **,000** |
| Image | ,541 | ,045 | **,538** | 12,106 | **,000** |
| Satisfaction | ,084 | ,042 | **,076** | 1,972 | **,049** |

The next step in our analysis was the search for correlations between the important variables based on the related questions for all the brands included. In the first stage (Table 2) we examine the relations by means of ANOVA model between the subordinate to loyalty elements and the *loyalty* itself. The 0-s in the right side (Table 2) demonstrate that the indicators are correct, especially those of *trust* and *image*. The *satisfaction* indicator, however, shows some aberration, or precisely it is on the edge of the correction. Nevertheless, it definitely still allows us to entrust the figures. As to the main information in this analysis – standardized coefficients, they indicate that not *trust* but *image* is the element which effects *loyalty* the most. And the difference between the two factors is significant. Also, the weaker role of *satisfaction* could be interpreted both as a confirmation for Oliver's claim (1999) mentioned above and as result of the "pamper" which the regular client is used to in the sector under study. Such finding affects our H3 in negative way. Therefore, image (no matter of the company in this project), which is accumulation of advertising, first-hand impression, experience and overall estimation in the course of time, has stronger influence on consumer's loyalty than *trust* as an expectation given provider to perform correctly (e.g. with the highest level of perceived quality possible) in every occasion. At this stage we could hardly confirm that *trust* "legitimizes" availability of "true loyalty" as well.

The final stage was dedicated to direct correlations between the variables (Table 3) using Kendall's algorithm. As demonstrated (figures in red color), the weakest correlation of *image* is with *satisfaction* factor while the strongest is with *loyalty*. What is no less interesting is that *trust* and *satisfaction* also have weak correlation, which steadily places *trust* "after" *satisfaction* but not before *image* with respect to "true loyalty" that combines positive attitude and high frequency of purchasing in telecom market. If, however, we pay attention to the coefficient of *satisfaction-image* relation, it becomes clear that it is higher than that of *satisfaction-trust* one. But *trust* is closer to *image* than *satisfaction*, which could be accept as another prove that *trust* and *image* together have more something to do with *loyalty* than mare consumer's need satisfaction. It by no means could not be related with the second degree in the Dick and Besu's Taxonomy Matrix (Table 1) where the higher level of (positive) attitude is crucial for a strong loyalty achievement.

As a result, we witness again the fact that *image* and *loyalty* stay very close to each other that is the opposite of *loyalty* and *satisfaction* relation. *Trust* obviously lags behind *image* in correlation with *loyalty* but still the relation between *trust* and *image* deserves close attention and keeps the door open for new studies as well as for managerial interpretation and application.

Table 3: Correlation analysis, including the four main elements on the highest levels of brand equity.

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Kendall's tau_b** | **Image** | Correlation Coefficient | 1,000 | ,409(**) | ,501(**) | ,623(**) |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | . | ,000 | ,000 | ,000 |
| | | N | 371 | 365 | 369 | 365 |
| | **Satisfaction** | Correlation Coefficient | ,409(**) | 1,000 | ,328(**) | ,381(**) |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,000 | . | ,000 | ,000 |
| | | N | 365 | 368 | 366 | 364 |
| | **Trust** | Correlation Coefficient | ,501(**) | ,328(**) | 1,000 | ,540(**) |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,000 | ,000 | . | ,000 |
| | | N | 369 | 366 | 372 | 366 |
| | **Loyalty** | Correlation Coefficient | ,623(**) | ,381(**) | ,540(**) | 1,000 |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,000 | ,000 | ,000 | . |
| | | N | 365 | 364 | 366 | 368 |

## 5. LIMITATIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

Although Aaker (1996) introduced two more assets in his brand equity model (named "other distinctive proprietary assets" and "types of brand associations"), it was impossible for us to collect all the information on them only by the chosen research tool. We chose to put the stress on the main elements of his model just to try making the equity picture in this sector as clear as possible. The sample itself is not large enough to make us completely certain about the results but, however, we could outline some tendencies and interesting points that deserve further discussion. Also, in this paper is not possible to display the whole amount of data we have, that is why we use only the most relevant results from the study to discuss our hypotheses.

In addition, we should specify that about a year after this study accomplishment Mtel's corporate identity was completely changed and Vivacom considerably increased its aggressiveness in term of communication, which significantly changed the landscape of the market. The decision about the rebranding was made under the circumstances of new business reality but not in connection with the problems we have pointed above.



Fig. 8 – The "old" Mtel logo, accompanied by the slogan "This is Your Voice" (in PC World, 2009).
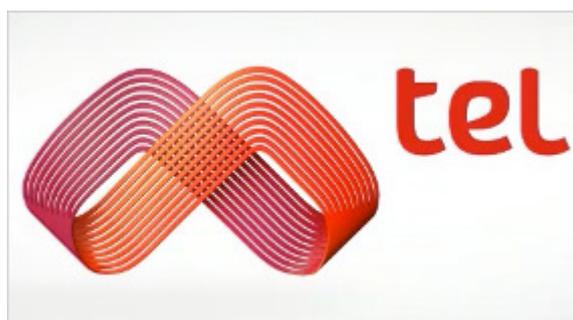


Fig. 9 – The "new" Mtel logo (the slogan: "More for You") (in Develor, n.d.).

Total rebranding happened in the beginning of the new business season in September 2012 and it generated, as expected by the way, wide public discussions. It was clear that inconsistent PoS and ATL communication were pernicious and it opened new roads for the competition to take advantage. Obviously new identity was the only reasonable move on behalf of the management in that unpleasant moment, although in presentation at NBU (April 2014) a company representatives indicated that the rebranding was not in direct relation with billing problems but planned independently by the head quarter.

Fig. 10 – Mtel's office interior after the rebranding (in Kaldata.com, 2012).

We found the survey results useful and very informative regarding brand equity issues. Therefore, the study is worth to be repeated in near future in terms of comparison, since the companies' ATL and BTL activities and the market environment as a whole recently have changed and most probably consumers' opinion has changed likewise. Comparison between the results of the two projects would possibly give us qualitatively new information and would point how companies tried to narrow the gap between the wanted and perceived image, if *trust* in them increased, and so on and so forth.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Regulations, increasing competition and spoilt consumers cause difficulties for the companies providing mobile services in Bulgaria. Each of the three brands under study could achieve profitable loyalty but in fact they have – in different levels - desultory communication policy from catalogues and front offices to TV ads, which affects the image clients finally assemble in their mind. What lacks is consumer's *trust* that guarantees long-term relationship with each of the providers in question. As the study results have demonstrated *image* is even more important than *trust* and mare *satisfaction*, which means that *trust* is necessary factor but certainly not the most important element in brand equity "system". In Bulgarian telecom market (positive) image, even though it is a very wide collection of various information pieces about the brand, has the greatest influence on *loyalty* construction which affects brand equity. As to the question put in the title of this paper, obviously *trust* is not the main dimension of equity in the sector in question, but it is significant process that connects *image* and *quality performance*, which bring higher level of loyalty and, after all, fits with what Castaldo (2007) points out. In general, the project reminds us that the brand equity is hard to be measured in service businesses, but in the same time brand is even of a greater significance of them than of FMCG area (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003).

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