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Dimensions of the influence of the virtualisation of consumption on the decision-making of young Polish consumers

Introduction

Contemporary consumption does not mean the use of material goods and services in order to satisfy the felt needs, but has also become an indicator of the standard of living, a criterion of the structure of society and a way in which individuals communicate their identity. Nowadays, already the youngest members of households are increasingly taking over active roles in the shopping process, becoming the main advisers and often decision-makers in the selection and purchase of various goods, in particular those used by families for enjoyment, such as modern and hi-tech equipment. As claimed by Adamczyk (2014, p. 7), this "child-centeredness" is gaining momentum, sometimes even turning into a form of compensation provided to children by their overworked parents who feel guilty for too short time devoted to them.

Advancing globalisation, internationalisation of the world economy and economic, including seasonal, migrations have significantly influenced today's family model. In Western societies, young people are becoming independent and are leaving their family homes ever sooner, continuing their education or looking for a job in another city or migrating abroad. Furthermore, tough labour market requirements, high unemployment rates among young people (Hertel, Schütz, De-Paulo, Morris and Stucke, 2007, p. 146–148), mentality change involving transformations and pluralisation of value systems and lifestyles, structural effects of women's emancipation have increased the number of people living alone, cohabitation and LAT (*Living Apart Together*) relationships, and marriages that choose

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not to have children, the so-called DINKS (*Double Incomes No Kids*). Individualisation and associated diversity of lifestyles are undoubtedly affecting consumer behaviour of young people.

What is most visible in their behaviour is the impact of social and technological trends. The widespread and increasing use of the Internet for fun, work and communication with friends as well as mobile technologies and virtualisation of consumption are a clear sign of modern times. This consumer trend implies a new structure, new forms and methods of consumption but also the emergence of new needs and motives for their satisfaction. Today, young consumers are ever more commonly inclined to pursue these changes. Edelman and Singer (2016) refer to young consumers as empowered buyers, emphasising their proficiency in the use of both digital technologies and information.

The changes in young people's behaviour essentially involve the time pressure and its increased value, manifested by greater demand for specific "time-saving" products or services. Although young consumers today declare criticism and caution about the surrounding world, they relatively often engage in consumption in which they find joy, pleasure and satisfaction, treating it as entertainment and a form of spending free time or an opportunity to meet family or friends. This category of consumers was chosen in view of its growing importance and decision-making power in households as well as of the fact that young consumers intensively respond to the changing environment, globalisation processes and their impact on lifestyle, consumer behaviour, and consumer trends and macro-trends.

The structure of the article is as follows. After a brief introduction, the first section explains what consumption virtualisation essentially involves as an alternative consumer trend. In the second part, the research conceptualisation and the research sample selection and characteristics are outlined, and then the concentration is on the use of the Internet by young people and the implementation of virtualisation processes in consumer behaviours of this age group. Finally, major conclusions end this study.

THE CONCEPT AND ESSENCE OF VIRTUALISATION OF CONSUMPTION – THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Virtualisation of consumption is an alternative consumer trend that has been gaining momentum in the past few years and is associated with the development of a network society and technological changes (chiefly information and telecommunications technologies, with the Internet having the greatest influence on consumer purchasing behaviours). Virtualisation means that electronic media such as television, radio and the Internet are playing a growing role in meeting human needs. It helps organise everyday life and contributes to creating cocoon consumption through reducing constraints on mobility of consumers and information and through enabling direct access to products and services (Zalega, 2013, p. 133). Virtualisation may be said to mean dematerialisation, a loss of certain physical attributes of the original item, object, process, and a transformation of their material form into an immaterial one by replacing them with their digital counterparts. It is therefore a process whereby, by means of ICT, real beings are converted into abstract, amorphous things that exist and operate in virtual space. Virtualisation of consumption helps consumers to transform the world according to their own point of view.

The modification of purchasing patterns ensuing from the development of new technologies and the ever widespread Internet access is characteristic especially of young people as it is among them than the greatest share of "digital consumers" can be spotted. As statistical data shows, those up to 34 years of age account for the greatest share of 25.8 million Internet users in Poland (53%) (Report: E-commerce in Poland..., 2016). Virtualisation of consumer behaviour, notably among young people, characteristically involves specific shrinkage of time and space. According to Urry (2009, p. 179–180), distance and time, which used to pose a major problem in interpersonal communication, have completely lost their validity due to the Internet or television. New technologies have changed the way we perceive time and have transformed the opportunities for and limitations to human mobility and information.

Virtualisation of consumption is also increasingly meaningful in social life, as evidenced by the constantly growing number of Internet users, more and more time spent watching TV and using the computer and the Internet, the rising popularity of online purchase of goods and services and group buying. The presence of ever more vendors, producers and intermediaries on the web makes it easier for consumers to take advantage of the virtual world. Consumers thus save their time, but they can also emphasise their independence. An important role in consumer behaviour is also played by product and service information available on the Internet, for example on forums or blogs. An "online" consumer is usually a young person who has little free time, is comfort-centred, impatient, curious about sensations and experiences, and critical (Ritzer, 2012).

The problem to be particularly noted when discussing virtualisation of consumption is the emergence of online social groups. This involves limited direct human relationships, with a much more significant role attributed to friends in the cyberspace. Such friendships facilitate not only buying and selling goods or services but also offer the opportunity to contact people with the same interests, fulfil fantasies, invent a new environment, and exchange information. Internet communities are dynamic and open, and can be the place of personal self-realisation. One can belong to several communities simultaneously and manifest one's individuality (Torlak, Spillan and Harcar, 2011, p. 49–50; Ritzer, 2015, p. 9–11).

Considering the enormous importance of the Internet in the lives of today's consumers, in particular young ones, as well as related common use of mobile devices (mostly smartphones and iPods), it is foreseen that virtualisation of consumer purchasing behaviours will become more and more widespread.

Technologies that are associated with the development of the Internet and advanced mobile devices allow marketers to reach out to customers via new contact points. In effect, consumers today can resort to various shopping channels, and the online e-commerce environment gives them a chance to find information and buy certain products or services later through a direct interaction with an online shop. This means that shopping done by consumers more and more frequently relies on the appearance of the entire cyberspace such as images, drawings, information on product quality and video clips presenting products (Kolesar and Galbraith, 2000, p. 424–438). Virtualisation of consumer behaviour may refer to each of its stages, beginning with the recognition of the need, through the search and processing of information and evaluation of available alternatives, and ending with the purchase decision and post-purchase assessment. Virtualisation of purchasing behaviour in retail trade essentially involves the transfer of individual, specific stages of that behaviour to the Internet, where it is realised at a time convenient for the consumer.

Accenture research (2015) on a group of 10,000 online shoppers from different countries of the world showed that 40% of respondents believed that they more and more often used mobile phones to browse for products and services, and 48% thought that shopping through mobile devices was easy. Almost half of respondents wanted to receive discount coupons on their phones and did not mind receiving them in real time (when they were physically present in a shop). 37% wanted to use additional facilities such as shopping lists, products locators or shop navigators (Newsroom Accenture, 2015). According to the Gemius survey (2016), 41% and 24% of Internet users declare using smartphones and tablets, respectively, to shop online.

The use of mobile technologies by consumers also depends on their demographic characteristics such as sex, age and income. For example, men have a more positive attitude towards mobile shopping than women and consider this way of buying products less risky. Younger consumers are generally more inclined to use new technologies than older ones. Research shows, for instance, that younger people are more willing to use mobile banking (Laukkanen, 2016, p. 682–683). Lower income is also negatively correlated with the perceived utility of new technologies, and those earning higher incomes are more eager to resort to electronic sales channels (Mann and Sahni, 2012, p. 285–287).

The Gemius survey indicated inadequate webpage design ill-suited for mobile devices among the factors that most seriously hampered mobile shopping. It may be for this reason that the so-called multichannelling whereby transactions initiated on a smartphone or tablet are finalised on a desktop computer or laptop is so popular. As many as 61% of respondents admitted doing so (Gemius, 2016).

In conclusion, virtualisation of consumption may be said to manifest itself as the use of laptops, desktop computers and mobile devices (e.g. smartphones, iPods, tablets) for comprehensive Internet usage in order to (Jen-Hui Wang, Malthouseb and Krishnamurthia, 2015):

- seek inspiration, ideas, product and service information, consumer opinions and expert advice on certain products;
- use applications that allow shopping lists to be created and managed;
- browse for information on product and service availability, and availability of shopping venues in the case of offline shops (opening hours, location, etc.);
- browse for information regarding the terms and conditions of the transaction, payment or warranty;
- scrutinise offers by means of price comparison websites that automatically redirect the user to a specific outlet (in the case of shopping in a physical location, QR codes are scanned to obtain more information about the product);
- use coupons and discounts received by e-mail;
- make orders and payments;
- use group buying sites and social networks;
- inform other users or friends about a purchase and give feedback about the product and place of purchase.

With the advent of the Internet as a trading channel, consumers, retailers and producers faced constant changes in trading conditions posing challenges for traditional shopping channels. In this context, interest in multichannelling, showrooming and webrooming increased.

Multichannelling

Although the terms "showrooming" and "webrooming" have been introduced to marketing literature relatively recently, they are not entirely new. Today's consumers do not have to use one specific shopping channel to buy products and services because they can choose from many different channels. These new consumer "contact points" can serve as tools for communication, interaction, transactions and/or distribution. Examples of such channels include offline shops, the Internet, telephone orders or catalogues. Consumers who use different channels to shop for products and services are referred to as multichannel shoppers (Kuan and Ruby, 2003, p. 177–183). Multichannel shoppers, mostly young people, are more satisfied with shopping, more price conscious and innovative than older consumers who consistently use the same shopping channel. Undoubtedly, complementary shopping and higher shopping frequency increase the likelihood of young consumers using multiple channels simultaneously. The research by Konus, Verhoef and Nesil clearly shows that consumers who purchase various categories of products tend to use multiple shopping channels more often, thus becoming typical multichannel shoppers (Konus, Verhoef and Neslin, 2008, p. 398–413).

By resorting to many shopping channels of the same retailer, such consumers often spend more money and shop more frequently than those who use only one channel. It should be stressed, nonetheless, that although the Internet channel has gained enormous popularity over the last decade and is becoming a more and more acceptable shopping channel, especially among young people, consumers still make most purchases in offline shops (Kumar and Venkatesan, 2005, p. 44–62). The decision to use multiple shopping channels may be influenced by, among others, contextual retail utility such as the service itself or the shopping ambience as well as perceived product risk that depends on product type.

Young consumers need transparency and utility of sales channels, they expect their interaction; therefore, showrooming and webrooming are important for shopping decisions.

SHOWROOMING

Showrooming means visiting shops for the sole purpose of inspecting and testing products with the intention to buy them elsewhere and at a cheaper price, most commonly in online shops that offer discounts (e.g. discount codes, regular customer discounts, birthday discounts) or in less expensive shops. Inspecting and comparing products in shops is driven by two needs: firstly, the confidence that the product price is the best possible offer, and secondly, that the product will meet our expectations and is suitable for us. Such a behaviour is often accompanied by simultaneously checking online shop offers, taking product photos, sharing them on Instagram, reading and providing feedback on specific models in social media, etc., by using smartphones (Showrooming with a mobile…, 2016). Showrooming can thus be defined as consumer behaviour that involves physically "experiencing" the product in a shop, gathering the necessary information about the product, its features and price, with its subsequent online purchase, often on more favourable terms (eMarketer, 2012).

Tech-savvy consumers are beginning to change the fundamental consumer--vendor relationship. Showrooming is becoming a serious problem hitting the retail industry not only in Poland but also worldwide (Philips, 2013). Currently, technology in the hands of ordinary people gives them the power far beyond what is convenient for companies, and its enormous strength has increased their control of the market and has ultimately influenced the purchasing behaviour of modern consumers. For these reasons, showrooming entails not only great opportunities but also threats to offline shops. It is believed that in the near future traditional retail outlets will serve only as showrooms where customers can enjoy exceptional shopping experience, gain inspiration, and interact with products, with the actual purchase being made online. Whether it will be positive or negative development will depend on retailers' ability to make existing customers of offline shops change the shopping channel and to retain them. Through adequate management of "consumer transfer" towards online sales, vendors can achieve more cost-efficiency. On the other hand, the loss of customers to a competitive online shop means, however, no compensation of costs and lower profits (Iyer, Eastman and Liao-Troth, 2014, p. 463–465).

Showrooming is a relatively new shopping trend and is developing dynamically. Given its substantial expansion in the last few years, it can already now be spotted that traditional shops are ever more suffering from showrooming effects as customers are spending their money in competitive online shops. As claimed by Zimmerman (2012), showrooming is beginning to harm offline retail chains, while bringing benefits to vendors offering their products solely online (e.g. Amazon). Should more and more consumers visit offline shops only to inspect products and obtain additional product information without actually buying them, the existence of such shops will become uncertain (Zalega, 2017a, p. 103).

Accenture research shows that 63% of Americans examine products in offline shops and then use the Internet to find a better offer. In addition, most consumers who have smartphones compare products and prices online while in an offline shop (Newsroom Accenture, 2015). In turn, the research by Gupta, Su and Walter (2004, p. 142) reveals that 52% of customers tend to switch from offline to online channels when purchasing certain products, mainly infotainment equipment or mechanised household appliances. Consumers certainly value unlimited shopping time, clearly lower prices, and ease and speed of buying online. An important reason for online shopping is also the avoidance of problems with parking the car or queues at the checkout. Furthermore, access to a wider range of products makes consumers buy online more and more frequently and refrain from visiting offline shops. Google Consumer Barometer indicated that 12% of electronics (laptops, tablets and mobile phones) and 8% of clothing and footwear were bought through showrooming in Europe in 2015. The survey also shows that avatars – animated graphical representatives of retailers – have a positive influence on the behaviour of some groups of consumers, notably those most innovative. Avatars, also due to the lack of emotional engagement and extremely innovative solutions, are not as yet sufficiently good substitutes for salespersons (Kollmann, Kuckertz and Kayser, 2012, p. 86–84).

Virtualisation of consumer behaviour also involves the use of social media at various stages. Consumers are active in obtaining information, advice and sharing their personal post-purchase opinions, notably when they feel post-purchase discord. Moreover, social media users are not only providers but also consumers of contents, through active use of such solutions as: social networks, microblogs, blogs, discussion groups, forums, VoIP, videocasts and audio uploads. Depending on their choice, the message may be addressed to any small or large audiences (Zalega, 2016, p. 65; Zalega 2017b, p. 260–261).

WEBROOMING

Webrooming involves watching products on the Internet and finalising transactions in an offline shop, whereas showrooming works the other way: people inspect products in a shop and buy them online. Rather than walking around shops for many hours, webroomers prefer checking products online and choose a traditional shop to confirm the product utility, verify the product personally by trying it on or testing it, and to ultimately finalise the purchase. This is a more and more common way in which consumers shop for clothing, footwear, electronics and cosmetics. It is the Internet that eventually convinces them to buy in a physical shop (*Polaków wziął webrooming…* [*Poles have been taken by webrooming...*], 2015). This is facilitated by consumer-dedicated applications of clothing, chemist's and other shops, online reviews, bloggers' promotion and opinions, web forums etc.

Webrooming, alongside showrooming, is one of the most widespread shopping behaviours today. Over 41% of American social network users regularly purchase products using the webrooming method, and 35% and 48% of European consumers, respectively, search for electronic equipment, clothing and footwear online before finally buying them in an offline shop (Google Consumer Barometer, 2015). According to Forrester Research, webrooming-based sales were five times greater than online sales in 2014. In fact, more than 90% of global purchases take place offline, and CBRE informs that more than half (55%) of global retailers intended to open at least 11 new offline shops in 2016. What is more promising is that earlier retailers that operated only as an online channel, such as ModCloth, Warby Parker or Rent the Runway, have expanded their operations to include offline shops during the last year (eMarketer, 2016). A survey conducted in 2015 by PricewaterhouseCoopers shows that three most important factors encouraging customers to shop offline are:

1. "I am able to see, touch and try merchandise".
2. "I can get the product immediately."
3. "I'm more certain about fit/suitability of the product."

According to a survey carried out by Google in 2016, 82% of shoppers admit that they consult experts in a physical shop before buying a mobile phone/smartphone. Thus, the number of webroomers still clearly exceeds that of showroomers, revealing, however, a downward trend. It is predicted that by 2018, the Internet will affect as much as 44% of all purchases made so far in offline shops. The impact of online information on offline shopping is particularly considerable given the development of mobile technologies (Forrester Research, 2014). The most common drivers of multichannelling include convenience, reduced prices and recreation. In addition, many researchers believe that if consumers spend time and use cognitive resources in search of a product on the Internet, and then visit a traditional shop to physically check and purchase an item, it can be assumed that this is also driven by the uncertainty reduction strategy (Heitz-Spahn, 2013, p. 572–573). Moreover, the decision to buy a product offline also depends on the product category and its perception by the consumer. Products that can only be tested by experience – assessed solely through direct interaction (e.g. touch, smell, hearing) – as well as those that are perceived as high-risk are more often bought personally in physical shops in order to reduce uncertainty about the accurate and optimal purchase. Personal service provided by a shop advisor and the opportunity to obtain information from a specialist are important factors in decisions regarding offline shopping, especially if the product is regarded as risky. What is more, consumers may prefer traditional shopping for purely social reasons such as visiting a shopping centre with friends and family. It can therefore be concluded that physical shops will continue to matter as shopping outlets in the future, but online channels are slowly beginning to change these habits (Gupta, Su and Walter, 2004, p. 131–161). Undoubtedly, sources of interpersonal information such as feedback from other consumers reduce consumers' shopping uncertainty and may help enhance their preference for a specific product, and the development of new technologies is contributing to ubiquitous access to this information. Furthermore, the motivation for the final direct interaction with a product chosen online proves to be a key factor in multichannel consumer behaviour. In this way, consumers can fully confront both their online experience gained while searching for a products and online reviews of other users, which may ultimately affect the final purchase decision (Herhausen, Binder, Schögel and Hermann, 2015, p. 309–325).

Webroomers look for information about the product online with an intention to buy it offline later since they wish to reduce uncertainty and be more confident about the purchase. The purchase uncertainty in this context may result from the specificity of the situation. Numerous studies in this area suggest that multichannelling is a behaviour based on strong involvement. Consumers combine virtual and physical channels to collect the essential information about the product and are ready to take a relatively big effort to gain comprehensive knowledge about the product that they are interested in. When consumers buy products, their information needs increase, consequently leading to a thorough search of information (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). Strongly involved consumers are motivated to choose the best option (i.e. the best product that will meet their needs and/or commercial goals), and this deep involvement also results in their considerable uncertainty in the purchase process. The uncertainty associated with the purchase as part of webrooming may also ensue from the multitude of available online sources such as user opinions, various specialist forums and websites. Indeed, the Internet today provides consumers with a huge amount of information and decision-support tools for access, search, selection, comparison, and finally assessment of existing product alternatives (Puccinelli, Goldstein, Grewal, Price, Raghubir and Stewart, 2009, p. 15–30). On the other hand, consumers have limited cognitive ability, and huge amounts of information can "overload" their minds and cause confusion and anxiety. These negative feelings may eventually increase general uncertainty (Walsh and Mitchell, 2010, p. 840–842). The combination of online and offline channels will allow consumers to reduce this purchase-related uncertainty and make a more confident decision. According to the uncertainty reduction theory, the feeling of uncertainty has a strong motivational effect. In the context of multichannelling, consumers combine channels in line with their information needs, and more information enhances the perceived control over the process and leads them to believe that they are making the right choice (Stafford and Grimes, 2012, p. 995–1003).

CONCEPTUALISATION OF RESEARCH

The tool used to conduct the research was my original questionnaire comprising 50 closed-ended questions about alternative consumer trends, including virtualisation of consumption. The difficulty lay in appropriate definition of the study subject because the category of "young consumer" is not clearly specified in the literature. Scholarly publications refer to various age ranges for the group of young consumers, for example 15–29 years (Szulce, 2009, p. 637), 15–34 years (Olejniczuk-Merta, 2001, p. 40), 18–25 years (Grønhøj, 2007, p. 243), 18–30 years (Kumar and Kapoor, 2017, p. 218), 18–35 years (Phillips and Stanton, 2004, p. 8; Ofosu et al., 2013, p. 288). In this article, those between 18 and 34 years of age are considered to be the population of young people. The upper age limit, that is 34 years, is regarded as the end of youth in the Polish literature. The survey was carried out from 10th May to 10th June 2017. The participants were recruited via the "ankietka.pl" website and social media such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Messenger, and e-mail. In order to partake in the survey, those interested had to visit a specific website containing the questionnaire. It was also distributed across special forums, university and private school fanpages. In accordance with the research assumptions, the sample included persons aged 18–34, representatives of Generations Y and Z[2], who took independent purchasing decisions in the market. In order to select the sample, the selective quota sampling procedure was used. The characteristics (quotas) covered by the research were: sex and age. In addition to the basic measures of descriptive statistics, the analysis of variance and the LSD test (LSD – Least Significant Differences) for $\alpha = 0.05$ were performed. The survey was conducted as part of statutory research and fully funded by the Faculty of Management of the University of Warsaw.

[2] Consumers representing Generation Y (people born between 1978 and 1994) and Generation Z (those born after 1994) primarily communicate through social media such as Facebook or Twitter, and their purchasing decisions are determined by their peers' opinions posted on online forums. What is characteristic of this group is impulse buying and a large share of online transactions. Generation Y consumers excel at modern technologies and feel good in virtual communities. They expect diverse products, competitive prices, new experiences and pleasure, and products and services tailored to their individual needs and preferences. Generation Z, on the other hand, is the youngest group of consumers in the market, with such characteristics as: connected, computerized, always clicking, community-oriented, and content-centric. Compared to Generation Y, they use new technologies even more. More in: Cohen (2009, p. 57–59) and Williams and Page (2011, p. 1–17).

Young consumers were chosen for the research in view of their growing importance and decision-making power in today's households, and because they respond to the changing environment, globalisation and its impact on consumption, lifestyle and emerging new consumer trends more intensely than other market participants. Undoubtedly, understanding their reasons, behaviours and market attitudes can help enterprises not only to decide on appropriate innovative marketing strategies but also to determine the right development path, allowing companies to remain in the market and make their product (service) offer attractive to new customers, especially young ones, despite dynamic changes in consumption and ever faster development of mobile technologies and applications. Currently, young people, especially the Z Generation, are said to be courageous, aware of themselves and their needs, curious about novelties, but also to have high requirements and to simplify their decisions (Persaud and Azhar, 2012, p. 418–443). It is young consumers that are most frequently early users of new services and products (e.g. iPod or Netflix) and it is their recommendations that condition whether a particular product is taken up by the market. They are also trendsetters, hence the observation of trends that are followed by young people allows marketing specialists to discover what may also be of interest to older segments of the market in the future. From the marketing point of view, it should be noted that it is young consumers who are most inclined to interact and discuss with other Internet users (also about brands) and create their own content, thereby influencing consumer behaviour of other consumers.

The key objective of the study was to identify how virtualisation of consumption influences the decision-making of young Polish consumers. The study focused on the analysis of reasons (for online shopping, showrooming and webrooming, and for using a mobile phone/smartphone while shopping) that affect the purchases made by young consumers. With this in mind, three research hypotheses were put forward:

H_1 : The virtual shopping models (showrooming and webrooming) change the behaviour of young Polish consumers.

H_2 : Competitive prices of products and services sold online and time-saving are the most important reasons for online shopping among young Polish consumers.

H_3 : The most important reasons for the use of smartphones/mobile phones by young people while shopping is looking for information about products and opinions about them among other market users.

Selection and characteristics of the research sample

240 people took part in the survey, including 112 men and 128 women. Slightly over half of respondents lived in cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants. Every third participant had completed secondary education, less than 2/5 of re-

spondents held a bachelor's or engineering degree, and every fifth held a master's degree. The average age of respondents is 24 years. They were mostly students who combined studies with work, whereas the unemployed formed the smallest group. Almost half of respondents lived in cohabitation or LAT (*Living Apart Together*) relationships. More than 2/5 of them were single and one in ten was married. As regards monthly disposable income *per capita*, the largest group earned from PLN 1001.00 to PLN 2000.00. However, astonishingly many (half of respondents) assessed their current financial situation as good, and 6.7% as very good (Table 1).

Table 1. The structure of respondents

Sex	Percentage share	Number of respondents (N=240)
1	*2*	*3*
Female	53.33	128
Male	46.67	112
Age		
18-23	45.83	110
24-28	34.58	83
29-34	19.58	47
Place of residence		
Country	9.17	22
City of up to 20,000 inhabitants	7.92	19
City of 20,000–100,000 inhabitants	8.75	21
City of 101,000–200,000 inhabitants	8.75	21
City of 201,000–500,000 inhabitants	12.92	31
City of more than 500,000 inhabitants	52.50	126
Education		
Primary	2.08	5
Secondary	35.00	84
Bachelor/engineer or equivalent	37.92	91
Master or equivalent	22.92	55
PhD or equivalent	1.25	3
Other, what?*	0.83	2
Professional status		
In education	4.17	10
I study	34.58	83
I study and work	37.92	91
I work	20.42	49
Unemployed	2.92	7

1	*2*	*3*
Marital status		
Single	41.67	100
In a cohabitation or LAT relationship	48.75	117
Married	9.17	22
Widowed	0.00	0
Divorced	0.42	1
Assessment of the financial situation		
Very good	6.67	16
Good	50.83	122
Moderate	38.33	92
Bad	3.75	9
Very bad	0.42	1
Monthly *per capita* income in PLN		
Less than 1000.00	12.08	29
1001.00–2000.00	25.42	61
2001.00–3000.00	23.33	56
3001.00–4000.00	9.58	23
4001.00–5000.00	4.58	11
More than 5000.00	2.92	7
I have no income of my own	22.08	53

Source: As researched by the author.

Implementation of consumption virtualisation in consumer behaviour of young consumers

In the first part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to answer a number of questions about virtualisation of consumption. Over 57% of them had never come across this notion, while another question showed that more than 96% of them had done online shopping. Furthermore, young people usually obtain product information (96.25%) and reviews (97.50%) from the Internet. This implies that the lack of knowledge of the terminology does not have to be accompanied by refraining from certain behaviours in real life. More men (97.5%) than women (91.2%) reported that they were involved in virtualisation of consumption. An in-depth statistical analysis also covered the impact of other characteristics of respondents, namely age (p = 0.31479) and place of residence (p = 0.31775), on their declared participation in online and offline shopping. The survey results have shown that these variables do not significantly affect the participation of young respondents in virtualisation of consumption.

People who had ever had done online shopping were asked about the main reasons for choosing this form of buying products. The most common reason was a lower and more competitive price of products and services provided by an online retailer (Table 2).

Table 2. Reasons for online shopping

Response	Percentage of responses	Number of respondents
Lower and more competitive prices of products and services provided by an online retailer	77.49	179
Time savings	72.91	175
Opportunity to analyse offers at home	69.58	167
Free delivery	34.63	83
I prefer home delivery	48.75	117
I always plan a product purchase online	10.83	26
The product is no longer available at traditional shops	34.16	82
Online membership offers me multiple rewards and discounts	10.42	25
Better customer service online	5.00	12
Free choice of shopping time	64.16	154
Better return policy online	9.16	22
Negative previous experience with a physical shop	0.83	2
Greater confidence in an online retailer than in a physical shop	0.00	0
Other, what?*	11.25	27

N.B.: Respondents could select more than one answer.

Source: Prepared by the author.

Young consumers also did online shopping because of time savings, the opportunity to analyse offers at home, free choice of shopping time, and home delivery. Moreover, the survey shows that less than 2/5 of respondents give feedback about the quality of service and the product purchased after making an online purchase. After buying an item, the vast majority of respondents do not wish or need to share their views and observations with other users.

It should be stressed that more than 3/4 of respondents who buy products and services online consult reviews and recommendations posted on shop websites by other users, while every fourth respondent looks for them on independent websites (e.g. in comparable search engines). What is worrying is just that only 6% of young consumers surveyed read shop regulations and check certificates confirming the safety and reliability of shops.

The next question concerned one of the shopping trends forming part of virtualisation of consumption, namely showrooming.

Table 3. Products and services purchased by respondents as part of showrooming

Response	Percentage of responses	Number of respondents
Electronics and electronic equipment	77.08	185
Train/coach/plane tickets	75.83	182
Books and music	32.08	77
Sports products, toys, hobbies	15.42	37
Clothing and footwear	46.67	112
Furniture and furnishings	12.92	31
DIY and gardening tools	2.08	5
Health and beauty	31.67	76
Automotive industry	11.67	28
Food and beverages	17.08	41
Other, what?*	0.83	2
I don't compare prices	2.92	7

N.B.: Respondents could select more than one answer.

Source: As researched by the author.

The survey reveals that over 49% of respondents admitted that they had practised showrooming before. More than 2/5 of them had done such shopping from one to three, and almost every tenth respondent over ten times within a half-year period. It also turned out that electronics and electronic equipment as well as train/coach/plane tickets were most often purchased by respondents, whereas automotive products and DIY items were bought least frequently (Table 3). The survey also shows that the average value of goods and services purchased online was PLN 2187 per shopper.

Showrooming, or testing products in a traditional shop and then buying them online at a lower price, is more often pursued by men than women, mostly aged 29–34, with higher or secondary education and a monthly disposable income of above PLN 3000.00 *per capita*, and living in big cities (over 200,000 inhabitants) and urban agglomerations.

When shopping online, young consumers surveyed usually visit classifieds sites (such as: Gratka.pl, Tablica.pl and Gumtree.pl), price comparison sites (such as: Ceneo.pl, Skapiec.pl and Nokaut.pl), and to a lesser extent online shopping malls and catalogues via mobile devices, paying for products through online payment systems.

The expansion of mobile phones and smartphones is affecting the shopping methods of young consumers. The survey suggests that 42.9% of them use a mobile phone/smartphone to shop (Table 4). Over 45% of them use a mobile phone/smartphone when shopping in a traditional shop in order to find information about products or services and related opinions of other users, and almost every fourth respondent uses a mobile phone/smartphone to check the price of products and services of interest.

Table 4. Most common reasons for using a mobile phone/smartphone when shopping in an offline shop

Response	Percentage of responses	Number of respondents
To check prices of products and services	23.30	24
To find product information and opinions of other users	45.63	47
To consult and ask for advice of friends and family	14.56	15
I don't use a mobile phone/smartphone	13.59	14
Other, what?*	2.92	3

Source: Prepared by the author.

The notion of consumption virtualisation is also associated with webrooming. Only 2/5 of the surveyed young respondents know this idea, whereas more than 58% practise it.

Young consumers increasingly use smartphones in the shopping process, also in physical shops. Over 78% of them do so (Table 5). Based on the analysis of the research material, it can be said that almost 3/5 of respondents claimed to use the Internet to collect information and opinions about products, yet to make the actual purchase in a traditional shop. In the context of the obtained results, it can be concluded that 3/5 of respondents use a smartphone to search for online coupons for products that they are interested in, while less than 37% to log into the loyalty program of a specific traditional shop (Table 5).

Table 5. Most common acts performed by respondents with a mobile phone/smartphone while shopping in a traditional shop

Response	Percentage of responses	Number of respondents
You have used a barcode or QR scanner	16.50	17
You have looked for coupons online	59.22	61
You have posted statuses on social media sites – Facebook, Twitter, etc.	10.68	11
You have checked in based on your Foursquare, Facebook etc. location	11.65	12
You have logged into the loyalty programme of a specific physical shop	36.89	38
You have paid at the checkout by means of a mobile application	24.27	25
I haven't done any of the above	24.27	25

Source: Prepared by the author.

When buying in offline shops, over half of young consumers following the webrooming trend use applications that allow them to find a product at a better price than in another shop. This was the most common behaviour in the case of men aged 24–28 with higher and secondary education, earning PLN 3001.00–4000.00, living in cities of more than 500 thousand inhabitants (61.4%).

Table 6. Reasons for shopping in physical shops

Response	Percentage of responses	Number of respondents
Immediate need to buy a product	70.75	150
Reluctance to wait for an online order to be delivered	68.87	146
Convenience of offline shopping	30.66	65
Better customer service in shops	11.79	25
Better return policy of a shop than an online retailer	19.34	41
Greater confidence in an offline than online retailer	30.19	64
Personal contact with the shop staff	25.94	55
Negative experience with online shopping	26.89	57
Possibility to compare online opinions and information about products with the retailer's opinion	5.66	12
Certainty that the product meets expectations	55.66	118
Other, what?*	4.72	10

N.B.: Respondents could select more than one answer.

Source: Prepared by the author.

The main reasons why young people prefer webrooming include: immediate need to buy a product, reluctance to wait for an online order to be delivered, and certainty that the chosen product will meet their expectations (Table 6).

Table 7. Products purchased by respondents as part of webrooming

Response	Percentage of responses	Number of respondents
1	*2*	*3*
Electronics and electronic equipment	46.23	98
Train/coach/plane tickets	24.16	58
Books and music	29.25	62
Sports products, toys, hobbies	8.49	18
Clothing and footwear	53.30	113
Furniture and furnishings	17.45	37
DIY and gardening tools	4.25	9

1	*2*	*3*
Health and beauty	39.15	83
Automotive industry	3.77	8
Food and beverages	18.40	39
Other, what?*	1.89	4

N.B.: Respondents could select more than one answer.

Source: Prepared by the author.

In the case of webrooming, the products most frequently purchased by respondents include clothing and footwear as well as electronics and electronic equipment (Table 7). It can therefore be concluded that items such as clothing or properly fitted footwear are extremely important to young consumers. They are aware that although a product may look extremely attractive online, it may actually be unsuitable for a given person, considering its size, cut or colour. This is equally true of shoes. Each footwear manufacturer has a different size table, and each foot fits differently in particular shoe models. Therefore, young consumers, despite preferring a specific footwear model on the Internet, are willing to take the time to verify their enthusiasm in reality.

It should be expected that in the coming years, virtual shopping models will increasingly change consumer behaviour of young people, especially consumers representing Generation Z, which is entering the market. Presently, young, notably digital, consumers feel better in the virtual world than in real life, and they use the web not only to receive but also to edit content, build a network of contacts, take advantage of the latest technologies, trust the opinions of other users, readily share opinions about products and services, and buy online rather than offline. In addition, by using a variety of applications, they can use multiple shopping channels at the same time, according to the situation and circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing virtualisation of consumption ensuing from the development of new technologies and the ever widespread Internet access has influenced how consumers buy products and services in the 21st century. This is particularly true of young consumers. The scope of virtualisation of their behaviours, in particular online shopping, largely depends on the product type and characteristics of consumers.

The survey shows that most young consumers surveyed did online shopping, and the related shopping trends such as webrooming and showrooming are highly popular. 58% of respondents tend to practise webrooming, with this share standing at 49% for showrooming. This means that some young respondents follow both shopping trends simultaneously.

Young consumers are more and more often conscious market players who are perfectly aware of the diversity of prices, products and services as well as additional product and distribution options. When shopping online, they usually take into account time savings, opportunity to analyse the purchase offer at home, more attractive prices in online shops than in traditional ones, freedom of choice of shopping time, and home delivery. The largest group of showroomers buy electronics and electronic equipment, train/coach/plane tickets as well as clothing and footwear. Young webroomers, on the other hand, usually purchase clothing and footwear, electronics and cosmetics.

Taking into account the presented survey results, some limitations ensuing from a small research sample should be borne in mind. Following the conclusions made, they should not be treated as representative of the population of young Polish consumers. They only provide some insight into actual consumer behaviours of young people as part of virtualisation of consumption.

This publication should contribute to a broader discussion and exchange of views on virtualisation of consumption, thereby encouraging other Polish scholars and researchers from various scientific and research centres to carry out extensive research in this area.

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Summary

The expansion of the Internet has undoubtedly contributed to the fast development of a trend known as virtualisation of consumption. This consumer trend is primarily followed by young consumers. Their use of the Internet has led to improvements to the consumption process and facilitated their access to unlimited sources of information, consumer goods and services. Information and communication technologies make it easier and faster for young consumers to access rich sources of information about products and services offered on the web. Consequently, consumer choice increases, expanding opportunities for online shopping. In this way, consumption styles may be personalised as young consumers are more and more eager to shop online with home delivery of the goods so purchased. It should also be noted that young online shoppers have easier access to product innovations and can themselves generate such innovations by posting their opinions about specific offers.

The objective of the article is to identify how virtualisation of consumption influences the decision-making of young Polish consumers. The first section explains what virtualisation of consumption essentially involves as an alternative consumer trend. In the second part, the research conceptualisation and the research sample selection and characteristics are outlined, and then the concentration is on the use of the Internet by young people and the implementation of virtualisation processes in consumer behaviours of this age group.

Keywords: young people, virtualisation of consumption, multichannelling, showrooming, webroomiong.

Wymiary wpływu wirtualizacji konsumpcji na podejmowanie decyzji przez młodych polskich konsumentów

Streszczenie

Rozwój Internetu niewątpliwie przyczynił się do dynamicznego rozwoju trendu zwanego wirtualizacją konsumpcji. Temu trendowi konsumenckiemu ulegają przede wszystkim młodzi konsumenci. Korzystanie przez nich z Internetu doprowadziło do usprawnienia procesu konsumpcji i ułatwiło im dostęp do nieograniczonych źródeł informacji, dóbr konsumpcyjnych i usług. Technologie informacyjno-telekomunikacyjne ułatwiają młodym konsumentom szybki dostęp do bogatych źródeł informacji o produktach i usługach oferowanych w sieci. Zwiększają się zatem możliwości wyboru konsumentów, a co zatem tym idzie, robienie zakupów online. To z kolei umożliwia zindywidualizowanie stylu konsumpcji, gdyż młodzi konsumenci coraz chętniej korzystają z zakupów robionych przez Internet z opcją dostarczenia zakupionych towarów do domu. Należy także zauważyć, że młodzi konsumenci dokonujący zakupu za pośrednictwem Internetu mają łatwiejszy dostęp do innowacji produktowych, a także sami, przez zamieszczanie opinii o określonej ofercie, mogą te innowacje generować.

Celem artykułu jest uchwycenie wymiarów wpływu wirtualizacji konsumpcji na podejmowanie decyzji przez młodych polskich konsumentów. W pierwszej części opracowania skupiono się na wyjaśnieniu istoty wirtualizacji konsumpcji jako alternatywnego trendu konsumenckiego. W kolejnej drugiej, po omówieniu konceptualizacji badań i doboru próby badawczej i jej charakterystyki, skoncentrowano się na wykorzystywaniu Internetu przez osoby młode oraz na implementacji procesów wirtualizacji w zachowaniach konsumenckich tej grupy wiekowej.

Słowa kluczowe: osoby młode, wirtualizacja konsumpcji, zakupy multikanałowe, showrooming, webroomiong.

JEL: D12, M31.