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Pleasure, impulse, compulsion, and rationality in the behavior of young consumers in the context of contemporary challenges and current events

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Abstract

In modern societies, significant changes are taking place in the sphere of consumption. Consumption is no longer just a way of satisfying needs. Sometimes it can also be about experiencing pleasure (also on impulse) or relieving tension. A characteristic behavior of pleasure consumers is the spontaneous (impulsive) purchase of goods that are attractive to them. At the same time, impulsive purchases differ from rationalized purchases in that the decision to purchase a given product is made quickly and usually without deeper reflection. The purpose of this article is to try to answer the question, what is the essence of purchasing decisions in the face of the challenges of the modern world, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and inflation? What are the shopping habits of young consumers, especially in relation to their emotional, psychological, social, and economic spheres? In light of these challenges, can one notice any adaptation strategies, “survival” strategies, rationalization of behavior, or, on the contrary, will the orientation towards pleasure, compulsive shopping, or impulse purchases dominate? The subject of this article is the consumer behavior of young people, perceived as a series of reactions to various stimuli — instincts, emotions — that inspire and mobilize them to satisfy their needs. The answers to the questions posed above were obtained by analyzing the data obtained through qualitative research using the technique of focus group interviews.

1. Introduction

The definition of consumption indicates that its most essential element is the realization of the needs and desires of individuals through certain behaviors. However, there is no doubt that in the sphere of consumption, purchasing processes are still very important (Perchla-Włosik, 2019, 98).

Purchasing and consumption behaviors do not always have clear reasons that encourage people to undertake them. Some people become attached to a brand, others more or less consciously choose products that appeal to their beliefs, and still others are ready to overpay for no particular reason (Zych, 2008, 46). At the same time, it should be noted that changes in consumer attitudes and behavior, both in the market and in other spheres of social life, are significantly influenced by the dynamics of structural changes that are constantly taking place in the market (Mazurek-Łopacińska, 2003, 15). Thus, explaining all the motives that guide consumer behavior as well as shape it is very difficult. Consumer behavior is derived from various factors that influence a person in the process of shopping. Modern theories and analyses of consumer behavior are interdisciplinary in nature. They are based primarily on psychology, microeconomics, sociology — referring to the influence of cultural and social determinants on human behavior *sensu largo*. In this case, sociologists also try to understand and structure market-based human behavior (Jachnis, 2007). Many researchers point to the multidimensionality and interpenetration of consumer purchase motives and the multidimensionality of motives for purchasing specific products — referring to the theory of self-determination (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Gagné and Deci, 2005), which points to the mechanisms of involvement of an individual's internal resources for the development of their personality and self-regulation of behavior, as well as to the multidimensional conceptualization of motivation, based on hierarchically ordered different levels of regulatory processes. The determinants of consumer behavior have been the subject of many studies, varying in approach and scope. These considerations focus largely on the role of psychological factors. The emphasis on these determinants is found primarily in the Anglo-American literature where factors such as motivations, needs, emotions or perceptions are assigned a special role. Other factors (e.g., income, prices, supply) are treated as purchase determinants, that constitute general constraints on consumer behavior (Evans, Jamal and Foxall, 2009; Wright, 2006 in Korneta and Lotko, 2021, 4).

2. Theoretical framework of the research

It should be noted that new trends in the consumption behavior of society are the result of changing economic, social, and cultural consumption conditions. They are understood as a specific direction of changes in consumer preferences, which

is a consequence of changes taking place permanently in the market environment (Zalega, 2013, 26). These trends create the environment in which the consumer functions and, together with psychological, cultural, economic or socio-demographic determinants, determine the consumer's purchasing decisions.

The new trends observed in the consumption of Polish households include (Sobczyk, 2018, 174):

- growth and the changing structure of consumption,
- greening of consumption,
- virtualization,
- socially responsible and sustainable consumption,
- co-consumption,
- smart shopping (“smart,” “clever” shopping),
- others (e.g., ethnocentrism).

A review of the literature shows that there are many more trends and new phenomena in consumption in various countries, but not all of them have occurred or are likely to occur in Polish society in the near future. These include, for example (Sobczyk, 2018, 174):

- hyperconsumption,
- democratization of luxury,
- digital abstinence,
- consumer seeker (trysumer),
- LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability) trend.

We can look at contemporary consumers from at least two points of view. Firstly, as seekers and creators of personal identity, who, through the market as a significant source of mythical and symbolic resources, construct identity narratives, fabricate a coherent or differentiated and often fragmented sense of self, often acting out assigned scenarios while adapting their identities to the imperatives of global consumerism (individualistic approach). Secondly, consumers are treated as producers of culture (rather than just bearers), creating feelings of social solidarity and establishing separate, voluntary, and sometimes temporary cultural worlds by dedicating themselves to common consumer interests (the issue of subcultures, novelties as contemporary, free-choice, lifestyle communities) (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Cova 1996; Kacprzak-Choińska 2011; Cebula and Perchla-Włosik, 2014). Consumption, which is more than just the act of exchanging money for goods and services, is necessary for consumers to be able to fulfill themselves in both of these spheres. When consuming products, people engage in many behaviors that are not only related to the act of purchasing. Additionally, it may occur without the act of purchase itself. Individuals can consume both material things such as clothing, but also immaterial things such as political thoughts or impressions, entertainment, etc. In this sense, fashion consumption will take place when consumers look at store displays, when they read fashion magazines and when they watch fashion TV shows. The definition of consumption indicates

that its most essential element is the fulfillment of the needs and desires of individuals through certain behaviors. However, there is no doubt that in the sphere of consumption, purchasing processes are still important, and in the case of fashion, they do not only confirm recognized strategies, but often go beyond them, or take place in a different way. Modern theories and analyses of consumer behavior are interdisciplinary in nature. They are based primarily on psychology, microeconomics, sociology — referring to the influence of cultural and social determinants on human behavior *sensu largo*. Sociologists, in this case, also try to understand and structure market-based human behavior (Jachnis, 2007).

Many researchers point to the multidimensionality and interpenetration of consumers' purchasing motives and the multidimensionality of motives for acquiring specific brands — referring to self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Gagné and Deci, 2005, after Chrupała-Pniak and Grabowski, 2014), which refers to the mechanisms of involvement of an individual's internal resources for the development of their personality and self-regulation of behavior, and the multidimensional conceptualization of motivation, based on hierarchically ordered different levels of regulatory processes.

From a sociological perspective, consumption is determined by postmodern models that focus on desires, hedonism, entertainment — i.e., the relationship linking desires with identification processes. The world of diverse consumption has become a daily life for young people full of difficult choices. On the one hand, they are active consumers, and on the other, their actions are strongly determined by the influence of mobile platforms through top-down created patterns of opinion leaders (Wardzała, 2019, 79). Perhaps today's consumption culture is primarily the culture of young people, either because it is "their" culture (the one they grew up in) or because it contains elements that openly promote youth (constituting a factor of social exclusion). A certain peculiarity is that the youngest people are the most "tired" of consumption, while the oldest are the least tired. Perhaps the degree of reserve towards consumer culture is a function of the degree of "exposure" to this culture. Younger people experience the "excess" of consumer goods relatively faster (Cebula and Perchla-Włosik, 2014, 51).

We can observe several trends in current consumer behavior: attention to health, juvenilization, convenience, slowing down the pace of life, sensuality, and individualism.

An interesting aspect is juvenilization, a trend that characterizes the behavior of younger consumer groups. Among other things, it is about emphasizing their distinctiveness, individuality with the products they choose. It should also be noted that the young consumer actively seeks market information about the offers, and at the same time emphasizes their individuality in all manifestations of market or consumption activity (Wardzała, 2019, 69). In recent years, there has been a grow-

ing interest in comfort, minimizing any inconvenience, and an increase in demand for ready-made products. These behaviors are associated with an appreciation of the value of time and attention to personal and professional balance, a trend that results in a lack of consumer reflection and strongly influences the lack of moderation and time for product analysis. However, a slower pace of life is also increasingly evident among today's consumers, characterized by an aversion to mass consumption and a conscious reduction in favor of leisure time. This strongly supports the development of conscious consumption. Various categories of consumers also include those who seek pleasure. For them, shopping becomes entertainment, they pursue luxury and wealth, they pay attention to the symbolism of objects. On the one hand, they lead a healthy lifestyle, and on the other hand, they are guided by quality and usefulness, and they value branded items (Matel, 2015, 17–19).

Contemporary challenges and events such as the war in Ukraine, inflation, COVID-19, affect the behavior of young consumers. Are their decisions made rationally, or are they influenced by impulse, pleasure or compulsion? What are the factors influencing their purchasing decisions, and how can this behavior be influenced?

From the point of view of the considerations undertaken in this article, the factors that may affect consumer behavior are, in particular: impulse, compulsion, and pleasure-dictated behavior, they will be contrasted with rational behavior, which operates in a specific external and internal market environment.

Compulsive buying is defined especially in Anglo-American literature as: uncontrolled shopping, compulsive shopping, shopping addiction, excessive shopping, buying disorders, as well as shopaholism, shopomania, oniomania, etc.

It is also worth mentioning the symptoms that accompany buying addiction. The main one is bad mood and causing depressive states in the addict. It sometimes interferes with social contacts, consumes a lot of time and, above all, creates financial problems. The compulsive buyer is also aware of the lack of rationality of his or her behavior, is ashamed of it, and feels increasingly guilty due to the difficulty in controlling their impulses and behavior. The literature on the subject also provides specific symptoms that can be used to diagnose an addict more easily (Ertmańska, 2012, 189; Woronowicz, 2021, 265–267).

At the same time, it is worth noting that the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated isolation (“pandemic lockdowns”) of young people may have had a significant impact on the increase in mental health problems and related compulsive behavior and addiction to buying (Dojwa-Turczyńska and Wolska-Zogata, 2020). This is also the thesis claimed in this study.

Compulsive buying is often incorrectly identified with impulsive buying. The following summary highlights important differences between compulsive and impulsive buying.

Compulsive buying	Impulsive buying
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staggered accordingly, also require more time, concern unnecessary things, are mainly focused on internal factors (emotions). Sometimes it happens to act on impulse. • The main motivation factor is the desire to relieve negative emotions, etc. • They lead to addiction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are spontaneous, sudden, focused mainly on internal factors (emotions), also require more time, they can be influenced by external stimuli (e.g., smell, the sight of a product on the shelf or music, etc.). • They are not accompanied by a desire to reduce tension or cope with long-term emotions, situations. • They do not lead to addiction.

Figure 1. Compulsive shopping versus impulsive shopping

Source: own compilation based on: Rook and Hoch, 1985; Gąsiorowska, 2001.

However, several similarities can be noted between impulsive and compulsive buying, i.e., post-purchase dissonance, emotional involvement, a sense of loss of control, and they may be related in some way, but in the respects indicated above they differ significantly.

3. Research methodology

The research is carried out within the framework of IDUB “Initiative of Excellence — Research University” under the direction of Dr. Joanna Wardzała — *Financial Exclusion of Young People in the Perspective of Compensatory Consumption During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Throughout the project, the mixed methods approach research procedure is used — i.e., the combined use of quantitative and qualitative methodologies in a single study.

Empirical analysis, methodologically based on heterogeneous research (plural approach), in which the same research objective will be used: FGI and survey research and, in the second phase, an in-depth ethnographic study with a free-form interview (IDI).

This article uses the results of the FGI (focus group interviewing) research. The surveys were conducted from April 3, 2023 to April 5, 2023 and were the first planned in a series of surveys carried out as part of the project.

The research group consisted of people aged 18–26 who were residents of Wrocław, with 50% women and 50% men. Focus groups were held as follows:

- 2 × group of full-time working students,
- 1 × group of part-time working students,
- 1 × group of working non-students,
- 1 × group of unemployed.

A total of 39 people took part in the survey.

4. Results and discussion

The current situation (inflation, the war in Ukraine) is being felt by young people, who notice that their purchasing capacity has decreased (“that’s why I also make lists for myself, because when I go shopping once a week, I can see the difference that the whole shopping used to be 100 PLN, and now it’s one dinner” — full-time working students).

Some respondents try to change their shopping habits to eliminate or mitigate the effects of the current situation using the following strategies:

- shopping lists,
- less frequent visits to stores “so as not to give in to cravings,”
- comparing prices in different stores, often using promotional leaflets,
- looking for promotions on a needed product and “waiting” to purchase it at the right moment — especially when buying cosmetics,
- giving up some products, e.g., sweets, “cravings,” they often think for a long time whether to buy them and giving up “there is no room for it, I give up extra things” (part-time working students),
- buying cheaper substitutes.

Other respondents do not change their habits, they do not give up what they like — they buy less.

Due to the difficult socio-economic situation, the youth have a very negative attitude towards borrowing. The fear of financial obligations stems, among other things, from the fear of “falling into debt” due to the inability to repay or the lack of knowledge of the mechanisms applicable to taking out credit, loans or installment payments: “You can fall into a spiral of debt, and get into problems.”

Some of the respondents have family or friends who have taken out mortgages, very rarely people whose relatives have taken payday loans (when this happened, it was assessed very negatively — “she took 10,000 PLN to buy herself an iPhone and an Apple Watch and I told her she was stupid” (full-time working students).

The institution of deferred payments is also not very popular among respondents. Only a small number of them use this option. Rarely and only in case of unforeseen expenses or the desire to buy more clothes online, try them on and return the ones that do not fit (they would not be able to afford to buy all these things, instead they want to have a choice):

“I pay with a virtual wallet because I can buy something for myself at the beginning of the month, I buy it for zero and after 1.5 months I just pay, and I have already used it for 1.5 months. Few people use it because they think they are some scammers. And it has helped me many times. If it is not enough for this month and you extend it for another month, you only pay a maximum of 10 PLN more” (full-time working students).

“I had no money in my account and I was able to buy prescriptions, food for the animals...” (non-student working people).

These preliminary findings suggest that young people are more likely to have a more rational approach to shopping. The aversion to use credit or deferred payments suggests a prudent approach to consumption choices. This thesis is supported by the results of research relating to the issue of impulsive and compulsive shopping.

Impulse buying is not an unfamiliar topic for young people. They openly admit that there are times when they make unplanned purchases of products under the influence of a good mood, cravings, special offers, the fear that the dream item will be sold out or its price will increase, or a sudden desire to try something new.

Reaching for something extra that was not planned in the budget also occurs in moments of excitement about a visit to a store (such as IKEA or a clothing store) or the arrival of a long-awaited product (a game, a new collection of clothes from a well-known brand).

The reason for an unplanned purchase may also be the emotions that the respondents feel at a given moment, mainly the excitement connected with visiting a store, or caused by the appearance on the market of a long-awaited product (a game, a new clothing collection of a well-known brand). It can also be motivated by the fear that the price of a service or product will increase or that it will no longer be sold. Emotions such as nostalgia or homesickness can also motivate people, especially to buy products that respondents remember from their childhood (mainly food products). Below there are the respondents' statements:

“I compulsively buy books when the prices drop. I was already afraid that there would be no places, that the price would go up [of workshops]. When I see that something I've been lurking for some time, when the price is lower I have to buy it. Excitement that the price has gone down, fear that the price will go up, joy that you took advantage of the opportunity” (full-time working students).

“The most impulsive purchases are made at game premieres or releases. I could spend all my money on it. Uff, after the purchase. After the purchase, relief, the excitement already goes down, I can play it already” (full-time working students).

It should be noted that this type of shopping involves the possibility to buy the mentioned attractions at promotional prices.

Young people aged 18–26, regardless of their financial status, type of employment or form of education, spend little on this type of shopping, they are not large purchases, but rather small items such as cosmetics, food, books, home accessories

or visits to pubs/restaurants. Although these types of purchases occur among the respondents, they do not have the characteristics of a behavioral addiction — declaratively.

Shopping is an activity that can be divided according to the type of emotions it evokes:

- necessity and “unpleasant duty” (cosmetics and clothing for some respondents, mainly for men, but not only),

- pleasure, shopping mostly related to things that support hobbies, buying clothes (some women) and electronics (some men).

Negative emotions and attitudes are generated by:

- the need to wait in lines;

- a sense of tension in the store due to crowds and the rush of other people;

- constantly rising product prices;

- “clashing” with a bill at the end of a purchasing activity can reduce the enjoyment of the product itself.

Attitudes towards compulsive shopping, on the other hand, were determined by respondents’ reference to the story about “Kasia” presented by the moderator:

Kasia goes shopping several times a week. She often buys under the influence of emotions and in situations when she wants to improve her mood. Shopping gives her fulfillment, she feels slightly excited and euphoric while shopping. Sometimes she buys unnecessary things. Unfortunately, when she returns home, the euphoria wears off and she feels embarrassed and often guilty. She usually hides her purchases.

Young people quickly notice Kasia’s shopping addiction. At the same time, they are very quick to judge her. This is a very sad story for the respondents, and they react to it in two ways:

- compassionately, by advising Kasia to see a therapist,

- bluntly judging her, describing her as “crazy,” “stupid,” “pathological.”

The respondents do not have contact with people who experience the problem of shopaholism, or as several people correctly pointed out, due to hiding such a condition, they may not know about it. Two people admitted that similar behavior had happened to them in the past.

5. Conclusions

The respondents have a fairly rational approach to both the purchases themselves and the money spent on them. A reduction in consumption can be noticed “holding back” — the respondents themselves point out that this is the influence of the current socio-economic situation. They have a negative attitude towards taking out loans or credit, and rarely use deferred payments. Impulsive behavior appears among the respondents, although it does not dominate the purchase process and

is rather episodic in nature. The respondents use adaptive behavior related to high inflation and the war in Ukraine. The implementation of FGI research, which was carried out in the area of consumption of young people (and which constitutes the basis of the above considerations), brings with it several important methodological conclusions related to the limitations of the use of qualitative methods and techniques in social study. It should be noted that qualitative research does not make it possible to generalize the results to the entire population because they are often based on small samples of respondents. Its main goal is a deeper understanding of the phenomena studied rather than general representativeness. Moreover, the results of qualitative research are difficult to verify because they are based on the subjective interpretations of researchers and respondents. Due to the fact that the research conducted was exploratory in nature, and being aware of the resulting limitations, quantitative research (questionnaire survey) is currently being conducted, which will allow for supplementing and extending the analysis related to the nature of the consumer behavior represented by young people and related to phenomena occurring in the field of economy, international politics, and other contemporary challenges.

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