

## МІЖНАРОДНЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКОГО РИНКУ МОЛОДИХ ІНТЕРНЕТ-СПОЖИВАЧІВ (МЕТОДОЛОГІЧНІ ДИЛЕМИ)

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Інтернаціоналізація накладає на підприємства необхідність визнання цільових ринків у європейському просторі. Одним із таких ринків може бути сформований ринок молодих споживачів. Ця група доволі однорідна за соціально-демографічними характеристиками, але відрізняється за культурним аспектом. Виділення цього сегменту вимагає проектування маркетингового дослідження міжнародного масштабу. Представлено методологічні проблеми, пов'язані з підготовкою та проведенням міжнародних досліджень, а також дослідження досвіду автора, накопиченого в ході дослідження європейського електронного споживача у шести європейських країнах для потреб НКР (Національного наукового центру) у межах проекту під назвою «Електронний споживач в Європі – порівняльний аналіз поведінки».

**Ключові слова:** міжнародне дослідження, молодий електронний споживач.

## INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH OF EUROPEAN MARKET OF YOUNG E-CONSUMERS (METHODOLOGICAL DILEMMAS)

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Internationalization imposes on enterprises the necessity to recognize target markets in a European space. One of such markets may be constituted by young consumers. This group is quite homogeneous as for social-demographic features, but different as for cultural aspect. Recognizing this segment requires designing marketing research of international scope. The objective of this article is to present methodological problems related to designing and conducting international research. This article has a methodological character and presents research experience of the author gained during European research of e-consumer in 6 European countries for the needs of NCN (National Science Centre) project titled 'E-consumer in Europe – a comparative analysis of behaviors'.

**Key words:** international research, young e-consumer.

**Problem formulation.** The segment of young consumers constitutes an attractive target market of many companies functioning on the Internet. A young consumer is dynamic, continually creative and discovering his/her new needs. He /She gains different experience in many aspects of life, possesses very high skills in using new technologies [1, p. 87-94]. Having access to many miscellaneous sources of information he/she gains knowledge about products, makes, prices, places and conditions of purchase. He /She tries to be rational in his/her decisions, by which he/she is forced by a wide offer, exhaustive market information and limited income. He /She resigns from shopping done on the spur of the moment in favour of reasonable (planned) shopping. He /She is a user of mobile technologies, is permanently in touch with everything and everyone, is aware of his/ her power as a consumer, knows his/her rights and is able to enforce them [more about a consumer and his/her behaviours in: 2, 44 and subsequent ones]. Living in a real and a virtual world, he/she becomes an e-consumer. The definition of e-consumer states that it is a natural person, who demonstrates and satisfies his/her consumption needs by means of products (goods and services) purchased on the Internet [3, p. 10].

**Analysis of current research outputs and publications.** The Internet is a permanent and unlimited (as an entity, as an object, temporally and spatially) access to the world.. A consumer using the Internet, does shopping or pays bills at each time (24 hours a day) and receives deliveries in the hours convenient for himself/herself. E-consumer respects his/her time, and thanks to full self-service in online shopping controls such activities as: searching for information, placing an order, controlling the parcel, checking the account, asking questions, 24 hours a day. He /She will pay more for Internet safety, certainty of delivering a parcel, or shortening time of its delivery, he/she has an opportunity to modify the offer and matching the products with his/her preferences [4, p. 7-8].

As statistics and numerous research indicate, the biggest part of e-consumers are young people[5 – 10]. Young consumers are a numerous and developing market segment of a big purchasing power, which is observable in their market activity both on a traditional and an electronic market. Young consumers are most frequently identified as economically independent people aged 15-24 being supported by their parents [11, p. 317-318]. A contemporary young consumer is characterized by an enormous purchasing power, often possesses own financial resources and does shopping for many goods and services [12, 30-34]. Young consumers become a basic entity of e-commerce market and fulfil greater and greater role in purchasing decisions of their own household. The market activity of young e-consumers is indicated by means of their own shopping (in the situation when they act as purchasers) and in the participation in decisions concerning the purchase of products for other members of a given household. They very frequently fulfil a role of shopping initiators, advisers and even decision-makers, especially during shopping on the Internet.

Social-demographic features of young consumers indicate that this is a relatively homogeneous segment (in this respect: sex, age, place of residence, professional activity, education). Taking into consideration economic features, e.g. income – this segment demonstrates some differentiation. Depending on a town/city, region, country young people represent different purchasing power. Culture belongs to the features profoundly differentiating young consumers` market (particularly in the international scope). Culture conditions approaches and behaviours of young e-consumers. However, when analyzing young consumers` behaviours in the virtual scope (on the Internet), we may propose a thesis than regardless of a country and culture of origin these behaviours are similar to each other. Young e-consumers `making a living` from the Internet on a daily basis, search for information in the same sources (www websites, in e-shops, on Internet forum), in a similar way (e.g. using an Internet browser or a price comparer), for the same reason (to compare prices of products). Can such a formulated thesis be confirmed? The curiosity of the researcher (and mostly an entrepreneur running a commercial activity on the Internet) may be satisfied by designing and conducting relevant market research.

The researcher-professional commences his/her `cognition path` from recognizing what has already been done in a given theme (problem, area) by others. The available literature comprises reports on purchasing behaviours of individual consumer, households, enterprises and other institutions as well as electronic commerce (e-commerce) in Poland and other countries. The reports contain only fragmentary research on e-consumers` behaviours in several countries (e.g. China, Australia, South Korea). The theme of the research conducted abroad is most frequently trust, satisfaction and loyalty of e-consumers [13, p. 70]. However, no research was found, in which the attempt would be done to recognize and compare purchasing behaviours of e-consumers in Europe. The problem has not been recognized in a complex way in the objective scope (purchasing behaviours of e-consumers), as well as in a spatial scope (in Europe).

Knowledge about the segment of European e-consumers is significant for enterprises running a commercial activity on the Internet, making their offers for e-consumers in different countries.

Information from appropriately designed and conducted international research outline an area of marketing activity and constitute a reference point while preparing efficient strategies of acquiring, maintaining and building permanent relations with customers.

**Article objectives.** The objective of the article is to present a research procedure of an international scope with the indication of methodological problems, which we must face while designing and conducting such research. International research on behaviours of market entities are conducted by researchers to

complete, systematize, gain and verify knowledge about behaviours of enterprises, institutions, households and their members (or consumers). Such researches are time-consuming and expensive. We must be aware of several aspects of such types of research for them to be effective (the value of information as a result of research should be higher than the cost of obtaining them [14-15]).

**Presentation of main materials.** The researchers (supervised by invaluable adepts in this matter – Prof. Z. Kedzior and prof. K. Karcz) from University of Economics in Katowice took up conducting international researches. These projects concerned, among others intercultural communication [16], values and cultural symbols [17], consumers' approaches towards domestic and foreign products (ethnocentrism and effect of country of origin) [18] or managers' approaches towards the process of EU expansion [19].

The deficits of knowledge about purchasing behaviours of European e-consumers were completed by the NCN (National Science Centre) project titled 'E-consumer in Europe – comparative analysis of behaviours' (manager M. Jaciow, PhD). The subject of the research was purchasing behaviours of e-consumers from France, Portugal, Italy (countries representing 'old European Union') and Poland, Slovakia and Romania (countries representing 'young European Union'). The researches were not a set of national researches. They were designed as international researches, with full awareness of the necessity to take attempt to ensure the equivalence of research subjects, measurement and research sample. Methodological dilemmas are described in the subsequent part of the article, which were solved at the stage of designing research and problems the research group was obliged to face during conducting these researches.

**International comparative research – own experience.** Taking into account criteria of research division indicated in the subject literature [17, p. 92], a conducted research project may be defined as: direct, explanatory, quantitative, simultaneous, of a comparative character. Regardless of the research type the researchers face many different problems in international projects. Methodological problems occur at all stages of research procedure (table 1).

The first research dilemma is agreeing on the approach to research. It is assumed that because of globalization and popularization of the Internet the observed consumers' behaviours are getting similar on the European level, the approach 'etic' is possible. The researchers, aware of different cultural conditions determining traditional purchasing behaviours in selected studied countries, assumed that online shopping done by e-consumers (of the same social-demographic features) takes place (regardless of a place of residence) in a universal way, in accordance with the stages of a purchasing process, described in Polish and foreign literature.

At the stage of formulating the objective and scopes of research it was assumed that:

1. the process of purchasing goods and services online is a comparable process in selected countries, universal for many markets,
2. the objective of international comparisons is identification of both similarities and differences in purchasing behaviours of e-consumers in selected countries, however the degree of differentiation of the studied process is small.

Solving a set of methodological dilemma, the following assumptions were made:

1. Using in research both secondary and primary sources of information. Information deriving from secondary sources was used to recognize conditions (demographic, social, economic, cultural and technological) of e-consumers' research behaviours in selected countries. The used sources of statistical data – databases of EUROSTAT and GUS – were considered reliable, precise and up-to-date.
2. Using a technique of direct interview in direct research (in pilot studies) and a technique of random survey (in proper studies).
3. The research sample, homogeneous in terms of demographic features (sex, age), social (membership in a social group) was selected to ensure the comparability of collected data. The entities for the research were selected due to a criterion of doing shopping online. The quantities of samples in tested countries were equipotent (which allowed for spatial comparative analyses) and amounted 300 people.

Table 1

**Methodological problems in international research  
of e-consumers' behaviours**

Research stage	Research tasks	Methodological problems – research dilemmas
Research preparation	1. Setting research approach	§ What approach to set: 'emic' or 'etic'?
	2. Formulating objective, research scope and research hypotheses	§ Are studied phenomena or processes comparable? § What is the objective of comparisons: searching for similarities or differences? § What is the source of differences in studied processes and phenomena? § What is the differentiation degree of studied processes and phenomena? § Are studied processes and phenomena universal for many markets or culturally sensitive (specific for a given market)? § Has a criterion of self-reference been isolated?
	3. Formulating basic research assumptions: § sources of information § methods and techniques of collecting information § methods of sample selection § methods of analysing collected information	§ What sources of information to use? § What is credibility, certainty, topicality, usefulness of information from secondary sources (domestic, foreign)? § Which methods and techniques of direct research to use in research? § In what way to ensure comparability of collected information? § How to ensure equivalence of research tools (measurement problems and appropriate translation)? § In what way to ensure comparability of research samples (number, features, selection methods)? § Which methods of processing quantitative data to select? Which statistical sets to use? § How to divide tasks with reference to processing qualitative data (what is the share of local researchers supposed to be)?
	4. Checking and evaluation of research assumptions and formulating a final version of research project	§ How to organize work of international team evaluating appropriateness of the project? § How to divide competence of team members with reference to making final decisions concerning formal side, content-related matters and organizational issues of research?
Conducting research	5. Conducting local research	§ Standardize or adapt local research to the conditions of local markets? § In what way to organize local research? § What is the share of research agencies in conducting local research on selected markets? § In what way to select and organize work of local team research? § In what way to control team work in the field?
	6. Processing (analysis and interpretation) data	§ Which method of data standardization to select? § In what section to analyze collected data? § What methods of qualitative data analysis to use?
Communicating results	7. Presentation of results (study report)	§ What form of written presentation of obtained results to select? § In what way to visualize results?

Source: own report on the basis of [17, p. 135 and subsequent ones]

4. The translation of standardized questionnaire into national languages was done to ensure equivalence of measurement tools. Measurement tools were consulted with national coordinators and necessary linguistic corrections were implemented. In the pilot studies respondents pointed to several doubts related mainly to measurement scales in selected questions.

5. Using a statistical set SPSS to analyze a collected research material.

6. The responsibility for content-relatedness of the project and formulating its final version as well as research tools was taken by a research team from Poland. National coordinators were responsible for research organization in their country (organizing auditorium, distributing and collecting questionnaires, formal control of questionnaires, explaining any potential content-related and formal doubts to respondents, sending back a collected research material to Poland).

One of the key problems at the stage of conducting local research is to provide a suitable team of local researchers and ensure their efficient control. It is important for each of project participants to possess relevant skills and motivations as well as to be aware of the objectives of a conducted project. Coordinators, who deal with the theme of consumer` behaviours in several countries, were invited to cooperate in conducting the research. The coordinators were people from befriended foreign scientific centres (scientists-researchers), interested in research results. The character of their work enabled an efficient organization of a relevant auditorium (people aged 18-25 – students attending classes at university). The involvement of the people with such high qualifications in conducting research excluded the necessity to carry out a detailed training. The coordinators from 5 countries did not have any problems with performing the tasks imposed on them. They were performing them efficiently and conscientiously, within the deadline (most quickly in Slovakia and in Romania). The cooperation with the French coordinator was the only one that did not proceed as planned. The coordinator had problems with organizing auditorium and did not meet the deadline to conduct research, providing arguments that respondents, when seeing such a complex (for French standards) questionnaire, were not willing to participate in the study.

**Conclusions and perspectives for further research.** While conducting direct research of international scope, the researcher must be aware of a set of problems, which occur during their design and further procedure. Both theoretical and methodological dilemmas require a solution. During design, procedure, and subsequently the analysis of research results we must use different combinations of approaches and methods studied on the basis of experience of the mother country, as well as cultures of countries, in which researches are carried out. Regardless of the objective and scopes of research, used methods and techniques of collecting information, it is necessary to ensure comparability of research conducted on different markets.

The results of conducted direct research constituted the basis for comparative analysis of purchasing behaviours of e-consumers from 6 selected European countries. The objective of research project, apart from comparative analysis of e-consumers` behaviours, was also collecting information, which constitutes a set of guidelines to construct competitive advantages for enterprises running their activities on the Internet and making their offer for e-consumers in different European countries.

And although information does not guarantee generalizing conclusions, they provide an opportunity to figure out the approaches and purchasing behaviours of e-consumers from France, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Italy and may be regarded as ‘a signpost’ for more spatially sophisticated research projects.

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