

Modern Consumers and the Decision-Making Process in the Context of Digitalization

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Abstract

Considering all positive and negative characteristics, its creative and destructive effects, the dynamic advance of digitalization and globalization in the last decade has dramatically changed the world we live in. The business environment has been modified, the social system has been transformed. People, have definitely changed, their values, mindset and lifestyle, their consumption mode have altered, too. The paper focuses on some key characteristics of modern consumers; their connectivity, mobility, high level of awareness and expertise, aspirations to access, omnichannel behaviour, their activity in the social networks. All this has modified the decision-making process. Consumer' journey to purchase becomes more complex and more social which is evident in the reviewed decision-making models concerning the modern connected consumers.

Keywords: Commerce 4.0, modern consumers, decision-making process, omnichannel retailing, omnichannel consumers, connected consumers

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Introduction

The dynamic advance of digitalization and globalization in the last decade, with all their positive and negative manifestations, creative and destructive effects, has dramatically changed the world we live in. The economic, social, cultural, technological and geopolitical environments are changing, too. People and their values, their mindset, life and work style and consumption mode are altering, too. This brings about the conception of new business models as well as new models of consumer behaviour. Digitalization, Internet and the Information and communication technologies (ICT) create a new era in marketing (Marketing 4.0), in commerce (Commerce 4.0), in consumer behaviour and their protection, as well as in the interaction between consumers and business.

What does new era mean? Although it may seem paradoxical in modern digital economies, only being digital is not sufficient. Having entirely digital interaction between companies and consumers is not enough. The presence of real physical interaction is a strong differential factor. Digital marketing – the new trend in marketing could not substitute the traditional offline marketing. On the contrary, they have to develop jointly, to act in a complimentary way and alternating their roles in the consumer journey. Marketing 4.0 combines online and offline interaction between business and clients in order to create consumer engagement and advocacy. The traditional and digital marketing exist simultaneously in Marketing 4.0 and their ultimate goal is to gain customer support (Kotler et al., 2019). The new era in commerce, Commerce 4.0 in a similar way to Marketing 4.0 represents the need for interaction and integration of online (electronic) and offline (traditional) commerce.

Commerce 4.0 is the next wave after Commerce 3.0 (electronic trade) and means „the advance of multichannel and omnichannel commerce, digitalization and robotization of commercial processes, artificial intelligence” (Dimitrova, 2018). In the world trade practice the multichannel commerce came into existence a decade ago, as the „physical” traders response to the increasing role of electronic trade. It is typical for the multichannel commerce that “the trader interacts with various consumer segments through different channels, which operate simultaneously and in parallel “(Danchev, 2018). But these online and offline channels are managed in isolation and there is no integration (there are small exceptions, for example, which are present in some elements of the commercial mix). At this point of time, the model of omnichannel retailing is becoming increasingly popular; in it online and offline retail channels are integrated to provide thorough

consumer satisfaction and experience irrespective of contact points. The synergy in management of all sales channels and all points of contact with consumers as well as the simultaneous and synchronized management of the marketing mix have key influence in the omnichannel retail strategy. This is a serious challenge and a difficult task to management because of the fact that the consumers expect and require seamless and frictionless transition through various channels in the process of consumer experience. In reality, there are a lot of preconditions that suppose the occurrence of disruptions and conflicts in various channels because each of them has its own purpose. The end-result would be unsatisfied customers and many missed opportunities. It could be summarized that in omnichannel retailing the attention is focused on interaction and integration between all possible channels (Vernoef et al., 2015). It is also important that all participants in the supply chain should act in close cooperation, as well as the creative innovations and serious marketing research (Danchev, 2018).

1. The modern consumers in the era of Commerce 4.0

What is the factor that provokes the development and evolution of multichannel into omnichannel retailing? The answer is – the consumers, themselves, and their behaviour. The modern consumers are distinguished by continuously increasing connectivity in the social media and because of this they can be called “hyperconnected” (Euromonitor, 2017). The hyper connectivity is explained with the so called “social physics”, namely: social media cause measurable increase of the information speed and the interaction in both directions which leads to a change in the positions of each object (Solis, 2015). The expansion of social media (Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, Instagram) creates large online communities, distances are deleted, boundaries transformed, both in geopolitical and social aspect. The world is no longer vertical but more horizontal¹, not so much individual but social (Kotler et al., 2019). The end result is a “smaller” and more connected world. This world is a place where people are sympathetic, socially committed, egotist and at the same time altruist, sharing resources and assets but also – thoughts, ideas, experiences, practice. In future consumers will ask themselves questions which are essentially more philosophical and existential rather than economic (Peteva, 2018). Those will be questions concerning values and priorities in life, meaning, relativity, consequences of decisions made and not made, global ethics of consumer society, the future of our planet. The modern consumer, especially the future consumer would not be homo economicus, but homo reciprocans (Bowles, 2011), i.e. sympathetic human – sharing reciprocal motives, sympathy, altruism and non-acceptance of inequality.

The modern consumers possess an exceptionally important key advantage. They have practically limitless access to information on Internet, and therefore – they have a very high level of awareness and expertise concerning: companies, products, prices, financial and stock markets, governmental and non-governmental organizations, etc. With a certain degree of conditionality, caused by informational asymmetry, it could be argued that this is the whole range of information, required for making economic, more precisely consumer decisions. Another characteristic of modern consumers is the underlying tendency to usefulness and their price sensitivity. An important feature of consumer behaviour is the increasingly pronounced striving for accessibility not ownership. A lot of consumers deny the need to own material assets (real estates, personal effects), in return for greater freedom in their lifestyle and more flexibility in their routine. (Peteva, 2018). The consumers’ aspirations to access correspond directly with the rise of the shared economy which extends to more sectors and is fuelled by increasing digital connectivity of consumers. The platforms of the shared economy connect directly millions of consumers and offer the opportunity

¹ The flow of innovations which was vertical (from companies to market), is now horizontal. The companies rely on external sources of ideas, mainly from connected consumers, whose ideas will be commercialized, according to internal possibilities of companies. The competition, also, in some sense, changes from vertical to horizontal. Digitalization gives chance to small firms to overcome the physical logistic limitations and compete with large companies.

to perform the following activities: sale and resale, exchange of goods and services, ideas, gift giving of new or used items, donations, financing of projects, cultural events, etc. (Dushkova, 2020).

Another important peculiarity of customers is their mobility, i.e. they are connected and at the same time mobile (through smart phones and various wearable gadgets and accessories). Therefore time becomes the scarcest resource and obtains particular value for the modern person. Hence, consumers would choose and buy those products or offers which provide convenient access and transaction, immediate meeting of their needs and fast delivery. It is of paramount importance for modern connected consumers to have access to all possible offers and points of sales (contact), the freedom to choose where and when to buy, as well as to move from one channel to another in a smooth manner. In this context, it could be argued that modern consumers are “agnostics in regards to channel“ (Kotler et al., 2019) or “channel opportunists“ (Danchev, 2018). What is important to them is continuity and consistency (synchronization) of information, provided by traders, as well as the smooth interaction with various sales channels (brick and mortar store, website, mobile application, commercial agents, direct sales, social media, call centers, television, etc.).

Three trends in the development of omnichannel retailing are worthy of attention. First: introduction of „webrooming“² in the offline channels; second: introduction of „showrooming“³ in the online channels; third: focusing on the mobile trade in economy “on- time“ or “on-demand“⁴.

Webrooming in offline channels, i.e. during shopping in physical commercial outlets, means that the traders provide the clients digital content that will be useful and will help them to make their purchase decisions. Different sensor technologies are used for this purpose, for example– Radio-Frequency IDentification (RFID), Near-Field Communication (NFC); smart phone applications allowing label scanning of products and QR codes; SMS with references to online content (including opinions of other clients). Since the connected consumers are constantly online on their mobile devices, they generate a significant volume of information for their behaviour, purchases, locations, surfing models (Internet traffic) activities in social media, etc. This abundant information is extremely valuable for marketers and traders; its use allows a high level of personalization of offers, as well as promotion targeting and efficiency.

Showrooming in online channels means that the merchants should introduce advantages of offline shopping (physical visit into the sales outlet) in online channels. These advantages are mostly linked to the hedonistic shopping motives, i.e. the pleasure and enjoyment when visiting the premises. An indisputable benefit for consumers when visiting the physical sales outlets is the sensor stimulation or stimulation of their perceptions (colours, lights, music, aromas and other elements of the commercial atmosphere). Shopping is also a kind of entertainment, vanity, relaxation, and physical activity⁵. The other benefits for consumers are associated with their social life, relationships in social groups and communities, their aspirations, ostentation, obtaining and demonstrating status, as well as the natural human desire for face-to-face communication. It could be summarized that the hedonistic consumption is expressed in “multi sensor, fantasy and emotional aspects of interaction of consumers and products “ (Hirschman et al., 1982).

Showrooming in online channels gives the clients the opportunity to shop as they examine products in physical space using their senses. The online retailers, more precisely if we call them omnichannel retailers achieve this by the technique of virtual reality (VR), for example: virtual exhibition halls, virtual stores of the type “wallpaper“, imitating shelves in a grocery. The purpose

² Webrooming or ROPO model – the consumers search information online, but buy from a real, physical sales outlet.

³ Showrooming – the consumers search information, look around, research goods in a physical sales outlet, but buy online.

⁴ On-time economy (economy „on time“); On-demand economy (economy „on demand“).

⁵ Hedonistic shopping may come to an unfavorable extremes: addiction, psychological dependency from shopping, escape from depressions. There exists even a diagnose CSD – compulsive shopping disorder.

of VR is to achieve more exciting and complete experience for consumers. Augmented reality (AR), is widely used, too; it broadens perception of objects through computer generated images. AR is applied mainly in beauty products (hairdos, make ups), accessories, fashion goods, real estates, household furniture (virtual interior design) etc.

The mobile commerce in the economy “on-time“ or ”on-demand“ in global aspect is developing rapidly, so as it can be claimed that “online commerce is shifting towards mobile commerce“ (Danchev, 2018). That is being entirely explicable in the context of constantly rising connectivity and mobility of modern consumers, who are not separated from their smart phones – the most convenient, closest and personal sales channel.

What does economy “on-time“ or “on-demand“ mean and why is mobile commerce associated with it? In the rush of the modern consumer routine, time acquires an increasingly greater value. This is true for consumers in all (or nearly all) cultures or subcultures, all social classes, all age segments (generations). There is a term “time poverty” in marketing which defines the consumer’ feeling that they are increasingly under time pressure⁶ (Solomon, 2011). Whatever product (goods and/or services) the particular retailer offers he in fact offers time and convenience. The speed of delivery turns into a very important factor for consumers when they made the purchasing decision. In the online and offline world, overloaded with abundant adverts and hype, the consumers are often confused and in difficulty to find the necessary information as well as products they need. This so called” information overload “, multiplies the importance of “time” factor for consumers and highlights its scarcity as a resource. The consumers want to obtain the product at the time whenever and wherever they want it and they want it now. These consumer requirements represent the essence of the economy “on-demand” or “on-time”. Moreover, a permanent trend is emerging that consumer expectations would gradually increase. Because of that it would be more precise if we call this economy – economy “right now”. Because the modern business environment is extremely competitive and dynamic and at any point in time another one could appear who would offer better, faster, cheaper and more attractive service and offer it right now⁷.

It could be summarized that modern consumers are connected and mobile at the same time, and from the point of their behaviour – they are “omnichannel consumers” (Danchev, 2018). Omnichannel consumers demonstrate behaviour that combines advantages of online and offline shopping with the intention to achieve greater satisfaction, more exciting, complete and smooth consumer experience. The purpose is to integrate “ the best of the two worlds: immediacy of online and the intimacy of offline channels” (Kotler et al., 2019).

How has the connectivity changed the consumer behaviour? Undoubtedly, the Internet gives new and significantly greater strength to consumers, makes them more powerful and influential than ever before not only in the sector of consumption but also in the sector of production, too. The consumers are participating more actively in the very process of product creation (project and design), since this creative individual act brings them greater satisfaction than the purchase, itself. The role of the consumers as product designers, in fact, is an act of the desire to product personalization (Euromonitor, 2018). The high level of awareness of the connected consumers generates serious advantages for them, forms self-consciousness, improves consumer expertise, gives them authority to decide the time and manner to interact with business. In this way the

⁶ The consumers’ sense of “time poverty“, is probably more due to their perception than to real facts. A forgotten fact is , for example, the duration of the working week at the beginning of 20th c, which was 6 days 10 working hours a day.

⁷ For the first time in 2013 the technological giant Amazon offered a service “one day delivery“ in its new types of stores which offered everything – from alcohol to electrical appliances. At the same year, Amazon started to test pilotless airplanes for deliveries as they try to make the delivery to the consumer home for 30 minutes. And in 2020 , the company has already obtained a license from FFA to use drones for delivery of consignments up to 5 kg in a more sparsely populated places.

consumers establish their own consumer area” (Solomon, 2011) and they are no longer only passive receivers of marketing messages. They become active and pro-active consumers of information and communication.

The greater level of awareness and expertise appears to be a constant tendency for connected consumers. It is driven by younger generations – the ones that are born digital: Y (born between the years 1980-94) and Z (born between the years 1995-2010). Young people are quick to perceive new products and technologies (they are the so called early adopters), define the trends and significantly impact older generations. The most important thing is that they change the traditional ways of life and work. They are passionate supporters of shared economy. The young generations demonstrate preferences to greater freedom and flexibility in lifestyle, denial to possessions and mainly – a desire to access not to possess (Euromonitor, 2018). They are typical consumers – activists, worried about global ecological and social issues, about charitable and voluntary campaigns, protection of consumer rights. The young people expect and insist on high level of corporate responsibility of business, in exchange of their advocacy and support in social media⁸. The generations Y and Z are willing to reject traditional corporative models of work and employment, and to seek freedom and independence, undertaking the entrepreneurial risk or the insecurity of self-employment.⁹

The listed characteristics and tendencies in the behaviour of young generations (digital natives) unambiguously give grounds to define them as the most important and “influential digital subculture“ (Kotler et al., 2019). Of course, that does not mean that the older generations would not be defined as digital subcultures. The generation X (born between the years 1964-1979) is often called “digitally adapted generation“. Even representatives of “Baby Boomers” generation (born between the years 1946 –1963) could be as much addicted to technologies and smart devices as the digital natives¹⁰.

In the 90s Michael Hauben introduced the term „netizens“ which means “Internet citizens”. The meaning of “netizens“ has to designate people beyond geographical boundaries and age limits who are interested in and actively promote the advance of Internet (Hauben et al.,1997). The key word here is “actively” because there are plenty of Internet users who are inactive – spectators; readers of online content; those who joined social media. The real netizens (Internet citizens) are those who contribute to its development: people who post reviews and comments (critics); people who create online content (creators); people who influence other people through their experience and life style (influencers). All of them are, namely socially connected, sharing and influencing others. Logically, they turn into “f – factors” i.e. fans, followers, friends (Kunz et al., 2011). F–factors (fens, followers, friends) play a significant role in the social media and make a key contribution in the concept of trust for connected consumers. Modern consumers look for opinion and advice in social media and trust to them more than to adverts and traders. In fact, social media are built through the links of many people with other many people on the basis of trust. The connected consumers build circles (zones) of trust around them that actually exist only in the net, but are extremely significant, because it is there where consumers seek information and advice for making a purchase decision. Demand is proactive, i.e. the consumers require that information should “go” to them. Demand is also among f-factors mostly those of them whose opinion is

⁸ A form of consumer- activist’ self-expression is the voluntary marketing, i.e. advertising (mainly in social media) on a voluntary basis of products and brands. In this way the consumer-activists manifest themselves as advocates of goodwill, giving voice to their approval and sharing their consumer experience with the certain product or brand.

⁹ According to Euromonitor, this tendency can be called “adaptive entrepreneurship“. An example for similar life and work style are the so called “digital nomads” – independent young people, predominantly highly qualified professionals wandering all over the world.

¹⁰ The experts on consumer behaviour at the agency Euromonitor formulate the tendency, called „age agnostic“, which is a consequence of the rising life-expectancy and moving the age boundaries. People have overcome the passive attitude to ageing but they neither want to feel old nor to be perceived as such. Reaching the peak of their careers people at the age of 60- 65 have also had great financial capacity.

valuable. In the trust zones opinions and pieces of advice are more important and influential, they are idolized.

The question why people (consumers) are present in social media and spend more time there is interesting. Because the presence in the social media gives them the sense of belonging, sympathy, social commitment, moreover – at the cost of minimum efforts, time and money. In this way the social media attract more and more consumers and become “a home away from home” (Solis, 2015). People always feel emotions, regardless of the type – positive, negative or neutral, as well as they always need to share them. Sharing is a necessity and a natural desire for socializing of each person. This is a well-known and tested arrangement in marketing which is not new but is represented in a new way. The new aspect is in the techniques, scale and speed through which the social interaction nowadays takes place including sharing and communicating between people. In the context of socio-psychological theories of consumption, it has significant social and cultural influence, it demonstrates and symbolizes who we are and who we want to be. In constructing the social reality, the consumers load the value of symbols and external exponent of their social status into products. Consumption turns into a means of self-realization and identification. Consumers no longer use goods but their symbolic meaning, their images (Chaundri et al., 2006). Therefore, in present days, sharing in social media has extremely important symbolic meaning. In the situation of increasing connectivity, the social conformism of consumers grows and they more often enter the role of social imitators. Though there exists the counterpoint tendency of conformism – the pursuit of uniqueness and individualism. Irrespective of the fact whether consumers are conformist or individualists in their consumer behaviour, they all are connected in social media. They all share life stories and consumer experience with the aim to be identified in their groups of friends, followers, as well as in broader social context – the society as a whole.

2. The process of decision - making by the connected consumers

In modern digital economy the nature of the consumer journey (or the nature of the process of decision making) changes. In the most synthesized aspect, the decision making process becomes more complex, more dynamic and more social. Its classical type, prepared by five basic stages (awareness of the problem, looking for information, assessment of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behaviour), is no longer the same. The consumers’ unlimited access to information, their connectivity in horizontal, including social environment, too, the increased consumer power and impact, the information flow in real time, all that undoubtedly, has influence. Linearity of the process of consumer decision and its stages are changing. The consistency of stages may no longer be rigidly fixed and the separate stages – to follow elliptical journey or a spiral. New opportunities are opened up for directing customers’ decisions, before purchase and during purchase, as well as for impact on their experience and activity after the purchase. At first glance, personal consumer decisions in fact turn out to be social decisions by their nature. The concept of consumer loyalty is redefined and is defined mainly by the eagerness of connected consumers to recommend the product or brand.

One of the first models for decision making by the modern consumers is the one of the consultant agency McKinsey, called “The new consumer decision journey“ (Edelman, 2010). According to this model, the digital consumers, as they are called by the authors of McKinsey, undergo through four stages. The first stage is considering – opportunities (alternatives) are more precisely defined and can increase or decrease depending on information and the active evaluation by consumers. The second stage is evaluation – the consumers actively and consciously evaluate the opportunities, as they search for information from relatives, traders, the brands themselves, and rivals, too. The third stage is the purchase – it is typical that the consumers often postpone the moment of purchase till last moment which gives them the chance to actively assess all alternatives, to the very end of the journey – the decision, itself. The fourth stage is experience – the greater part of consumers do online research even after the purchase. When they like the product, they

recommend it actively. This recommendation turns into a serious form of advocacy in social media and online space. Active and passive proponents are differentiated: the active ones are brand loyal and persuade the rest to do the same, the passive ones are ready to change if intriguing offers appeared.

The process of evaluation in the model of the company McKinsey needs to be given greater consideration. Since the connected consumers are continuously online, they believe that information is inexhaustible and variable, and the choice of products – enormous. The consumers will apply methods for simplifying the assessment by reducing their choices to few brands only, in the same way as this is done in the classic type of decision making process. This is necessary because the choice options as well as the marketing messages, are too numerous to enter all the initial selection (also called range of consideration) and to subject them to evaluation. In contrast to classic process, the evaluation at connected consumers is carried out together with the trusted f -factors (fans, followers, friends) i.e. it is public. The greater part of the active evaluation the consumers made by the help of online reviews, word-of-mouth recommendations, and also by the help of communication in sales network i.e. offline interactions. As a result of this active joint evaluation, alterations in the initial selection of brands may arise. New alternative brands can be added to the initial selection or some of the already chosen one – may drop out¹¹. This possibility optimizes consumers' choices.

Another model for decision making from the connected consumers is the one, which is called “A decision making cycle” developed by Brian Solis in the form of decision ellipse (Solis, 2015). By analogy with the model of the company McKinsey, the consumer journey or the process of decision making is divided into four basic stages. But these stages are a bit different in details. The first stage is formulating – this is the moment of attracting interest and attention, and the steps which the connected consumer makes to inform about the initial possibilities. The second stage is before the purchase – on the basis of the initial possibilities, the connected consumers explore in order to find new alternatives and to confirm the initial ones. This is a process of consideration but also evaluation in which the opinion and advice of trusted friends and acquaintances in social media outweigh considerably. The third stage is the purchase – at this stage the connected consumers have already made their decisions and take action to proceed. It is important to stress that after the decision has been made it is shared. Sharing in the social media is an important part of the whole process because it is linked with the self-expression of consumers. They are overflowing with emotions and feel satisfied that they have made the decision and the process is completed. The fourth stage is post purchase – at this stage the consumers immerse into the experience. They explore online in order to validate their purchase as well as to compare their experiences to those of other users in social media. The consumers can become loyal clients and active advocates of the brand if they are satisfied with the purchase and feel happy in experiencing the new item. It is important to stress that the connected consumers share their experiences during and after the purchase within the decision cycle. Another peculiarity of connected consumers which is highlighted in Solis model has significant importance – consumer loyalty. It becomes the function of their experiences during the process of decision making, the pleasure, the brand experience and the other positive emotions as a result of the purchase.

The third model that will be studied, can be called “The consumer' journey through the five As” and is offered by Philip Kotler, Kartajaya and Sitiawan. The five As mean: aware, appeal, ask , act and advocate. In that way the five stages of the consumer journey (Kotler et al., 2019) are formed.

¹¹ According to research of the company McKinsey, the connected consumers who would like to buy a computer add to their initial selection of 1,7 brands one additional. In other words, if the initial selection of nearly two alternative brands for a computer increases with one more, it means that, thanks to the mutual evaluation in social media the selection opportunities have risen with 50%. When choosing a car, 2.2 brands more are added to the initial 3.8 ones.

At the first stage – awareness, the consumers are passively exposed to the various impacts including their own past experiences, marketing messages, and the opinions of others (word of mouth advertising). As a result of multiple passive impacts, the consumer makes a long list of alternatives (brands). This is the entrance to the whole consumer journey.

At the second stage – attraction, the consumer refines all messages and makes a short list of alternatives (brands) which attract him. The initial brand attraction is influenced by the community around the connected consumer. Memorable and highlighted brands, the ones with strong competitive positions have better chances to be included in the consumers' short list.

At the third stage – asking, the consumers actively explore brands which attract them. For this purpose they ask their f – factors, the manufacturers and traders themselves, search online reviews, do showrooming and even try the products in the stores. This stage becomes complicated by the inevitable integration of offline and online channels, characteristic for omnichannel consumers. They could “ask” i.e. to demand more information from numerous channels. That is the reason why the companies and their brands are desirable to be present at least in the most popular offline and online channels. It should be stressed that at this stage the consumer journey changes from individual to social. This alteration is extremely essential. The purchase decision will be made on the basis of the whole range of opinions, conversations, pieces of advice, recommendations which are “spoken” with the rest. The brands which attract the consumer need to be confirmed and supported by the rest – friends, fens, etc.

The fourth stage is the activity when the consumer makes the decision, supported by additional information gathered as a result of asking. Here, for the first time the consumer interacts at a deeper level with the product through consumption and utilization. The relationships between consumer and trader do not end with the product purchase, they continue at the stage of after sales service, too. The entire consumer experience with the product (brand) should be positive, satisfactory and even admirable.

At the last, fifth stage – advocacy, the consumer can develop strong loyalty, which is not only limited to brand loyalty and repeated purchases but to the act of consumer brand recommendation to other consumers. There exist two types of advocates: active and passive. The active ones are spontaneous in their advocacy, they are a source of positive information and “word of mouth” advertisement. They do that voluntarily, without the request of anyone. The passive advocates are more popular. They are latent, i.e. hidden supporters who if we want them to demonstrate their skills have to be challenged by the rest, precise circumstances or an enquiry.

The described consumer journey through the “five As” is not always direct and does not follow rigidly this fixed sequence. For example, it is possible for consumers to omit some stages¹². If any consumer is impulsive an impatient he/she can omit the asking stage and act, i.e. to make the purchase decision, only on the basis of initial awareness and attraction. The journey can have a spiraling shape, with returns to previous stages. For that reason the number of considered alternatives (brands) on the whole consumer journey could change on all five stages. The time spent by the consumers at the separate stages, as well as at the whole journey depends on the product category, the consumer commitment to the purchase (strong or weak), the consumption situation and some unexpected factors. The model “The consumer journey through the five As” is principally applicable for describing the consumer behaviour in all product categories and in all sectors. This makes the comparison between the processes of decision making for different products possible.

In conclusion, the examined three models of the decision-making process made by the connected consumers do not differ significantly from each other. They demonstrate the exceptional

¹² The loyal brand advocates may not be buyers. That means that they omit the activity stage and directly enter the stage of recommendation. A good example for this are the numerous supporters and advocates of “Tesla” brand who are in fact non- buyers.

role of consumer connectivity at the separate stages of the decision-making process. Moving through this process the consumers build relations of the type “ask and recommend” (Kotler et al., 2019). These models illustrate and summarize a more social, more dynamic and omnichannel model of the connected consumer journey in the modern digital environment.

3. Challenges and problems connected with digitalization

Digitalization and all connected innovations, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), can ensure sustainable prosperity to the human civilization. That is undisputable. But the development of digital technology beyond recognition as well as the convergence between them could lead to negative and destructive consequences. The process is not unequivocal, on the contrary – it is controversial and multi-layered. Some people find the development of the digital technologies exciting, inspiring, optimizing the routine human activity, including work and consumption. For other people – it is a real threat, concern, stress and psychological barrier. There is a third group of people, who are inspiring, worried and scared at the same time.

The reverse, unfavorable side of digitalization and technologies has numerous variable faces which could be summarized in some basic strands.

Firstly. Negative impact on labour market, therefore on the basic macroeconomic indicators, such as employment and unemployment. In particular: loss of employment in low-skilled and routine positions and jobs; structural unemployment; non-standard forms of employment; “gig” economy (random, short-term employment) etc. In this aspect digitalization can be defined as indirect, ancillary source of poverty and social stratification.

Secondly. Digital divide, i.e. inequality concerning the access to digital technologies, including infrastructure and technical devices. It is manifested in different cross-sections and scales – global, regional and national: social and ethnic groups, or subcultures; generations, or age subcultures; professional guilds, etc. Nowadays, may be, this is the most significant social division in the world.

Thirdly. The growing gap between technologies and innovations, on one side, and humans on the other side, specifically – their psychological and cognitive abilities. The challenge of finding the optimal balance between the technical capabilities of devices and consumer comfort is a serious one, because man would always be the one who underperforms. The trend is that the comfort of using the technologies would grow, and at the same time, the set of activities which consumers can carry out together digitally, but separated physically would increase, too.

Fourthly. Violation of people’s personal space and privacy. The reasonable risk, perceived as serious by consumers, which is linked to the access to their personal data and the ensuing issues such as protection of personal data, their theft and abuse can be added to this problem, too. This is one of the most significant factors which can be defined as dissuasive and counteracting factors for the development of electronic and omnichannel commerce. In fact, this is a psychological risk, perceived by consumers as fear of entering one’s personal space.

Fifthly. Manipulation of information on Internet. The possibilities and, rather the risks are numerous in this aspect. The manipulation concerning the information design – first as images and photos, and second – as text is very popular. The design is extremely important, because the way of facts representation including the technical components (font, size, colours) influences consumer choice. Another type of consumer manipulation is using incorrect techniques in Internet, mainly emails (malicious, fraudulent) and unwanted advertising. These manipulations can be characterized as an expression of information “violence”. The social media could also be used for manipulating consumer behaviour by distribution like avalanche of fake news, disinformations, defamations, rumours.

Sixthly. Negative psychological and emotional consequences on people, expressed in difficult social contacts in physical environment or “face-to-face“. The negative influence is

particularly serious on people who are introverts; they become more withdrawn and asocial. Another negative psychological consequence from the excessive immersion into the digital environment is the loss of the sense of empathy.

Seventhly. Negative psychological influence on children and young people leading to computer addiction. The problem is extremely serious. An evidence for this is the fact that in 2003 this type of addiction is recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a disease condition such as drug and alcohol addictions. A negative severe effect of computer games in young children is the loss of the sense of reality. It can be viewed mainly in “Alpha” generation – the children born after 2010 who grow physically and psychologically surrounded continuously by smart phones, tablets, and all kinds of screens.

Eighthly. Moral and ethical problems linked to technological innovations, mainly the artificial intelligence (AI). For example: psychological barriers of consumers as well as company employees; fright of self-development and hostility of the artificial intelligence. In the moral and ethical context the problems can be raised connected with robotization of industries, including threat from the intensive rise of robotized job positions. In other words, the artificial intelligence and robotization have certain social price which has to be paid by someone.

All the above mentioned “dark” sides, i.e. unfavorable and negative effects of digitalization and the new technologies are not reasons for scepticism. They eloquently demonstrate how complicated, varied, colorful, dynamic, insecure and turbulent the world around us is. They signal that we have to be careful about the future development and application of digital technologies in the context of their direction towards achieving the best possible results. In the contemporary conditions it is absolutely necessary to report that “innovations are complicated social processes and should not be taken for granted at any cost” (Ribov, 2019).

Conclusion

In today’s digital era we all have witnessed the exceptional dynamism in the social, economic, cultural and political processes in society. We are, also witnessing unprecedented crisis in global scale with a lot of unknown things but mostly two basic heavy forms of manifestation– economic crisis (recession) and health crisis (pandemic). Likewise, digitalization and other technological innovations, the convergence of different technologies, as well as the rapid growth of these technologies, have both sustainable positive and negative impact on society. Regardless of this, the process of development and advancement of information and communication technologies (ICT) is irreversible, and digitalization constantly and dramatically changes the social and business environment. These changes are to a certain extent evolutionary, as well as revolutionary. A new era in marketing is created – Marketing 4.0, in commerce – Commerce 4.0, in consumer behaviour as well as in the process of purchase decision-making.

The modern consumers become more complex and unpredictable in their behaviour, increasingly more mobile and more connected, even hyperconnected in social media. The level of their awareness and expertise is continuously rising. They demonstrate omnichannel behaviour which combines the advantages of online and offline shopping with the aim to obtain greater satisfaction, more exciting and smooth consumer experience. For the connected consumers shopping turns into social activity, symbolic act and shared experience. As a result the process of making a purchase decision becomes more complex, more dynamic and more social.

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