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PROSUMPTION AWARENESS AMONG YOUNG CONSUMERS

Introduction

Advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) are among the key drivers of social, economic and technological changes. These changes are embedded in and determined by the information society, i.e. one which depends for its emergence and its growth on access to information and the ability to exploit it [Ziem13b], [Info10, p. 471], [Kisi08].

Today's consumers, being part of the information society, tend to be very fluent in searching and managing information for a specific purpose. Using ICTs, they share opinions and participate in a number of activities initiated by businesses. Many consumers are unaware that the true motivation underlying contests or interactive games run by business companies is to stimulate them into action and then use them to a company's own ends. By getting involved into such activities, consumers become prosumers without knowing it [Ziem11], [Ziem13a], [InCo13], [XBT08], [ZBD08], [Gune10], [HOdJ11].

The objective of this paper is presenting results of research revolving around phenomenon of prosumption among young consumers. Our research was aimed at exploring prosumer awareness, particularly among youth consumers who are keen users of ICTs. The authors sought to demonstrate the extent to which consumers are aware of becoming prosumers through their involvement in different sorts of programs organized and supported by business companies.

The paper continues as follows. The theoretical section presents the role of consumers in business enterprises and explains how they, using ICTs, become prosumers. The empirical section is devoted to the findings of a direct survey focusing on prosumer awareness. Last section of the paper contains conclusions.

The outcomes of our survey can be useful for businesses intending to get consumers involved in the process of innovation. They reflect consumers' interest and desire to take part in a rich variety of prosumption initiatives. The findings also indicate which interactions between businesses and consumers the latter are most willing to support.

1. Theoretical background – *consumer* vs. *prosumer*

More and more studies will distinguish the notions of *consumers* and *e-consumers*, where the former are an individual who purchase goods in traditional ways in order to meet their own needs or the needs of their household [Szop12, p. 46], while the latter satisfy their consumer needs by buying goods and services via the Internet [JaWo11, p. 10]. The Internet plays a central role in the emergence of a virtual world of consumption [DaJa10, p. 42]. Its explosive growth has altered the relationships between businesses and consumers. Modern consumers are no longer seen merely as the end users of a product. To an increasing degree, they have become partners to business companies, whether traditional or virtual ones. They want to co-author products that are launched to the market. At the same time, they are uncompromising judges of product quality as well as of the manufacturer. More and more often they take advantage of the Internet to share opinions with other consumers [DaJa10, p. 55].

Through their personal involvement and their proficiency with ICTs, consumers have become more and more aware of the way they use goods and services, thus turning into co-creators – prosumers [ZBD08], [Merc12], [InCo13]. Over the years, the degree of prosumers' involvement has varied, and so has the scope and importance of their role. Originally, the prosumer was identified with someone making goods for his own personal use [Toff97]. In that sense, prosumers would simply consume what they themselves produced. As technology progressed, the prosumer took over some of the business companies' roles and some of the processes typically found in business enterprises. Finally, prosumers got engaged in the production process by contributing to product design and re-configuration [Ziem11]. As a result, they were able to obtain a final product that fulfilled their expectations perfectly.

The contemporary understanding of the term *prosumer* has been largely influenced by ICTs. In practice, the term applies to those consumers who meet at least two of the three following characteristics [ZaPr08]:

 they seek the advice and opinion of the Internet community and usually consult it when planning a purchase,

- they publish product descriptions or make inquiries about products in the Internet,
- they take part in promotional events, partnering in the creation of products, advertising slogans or campaigns.

The rapid expansion of Web 2.0 technology and the increasing role of modern-day prosumers brings attention to how ICTs have made it easy for us to become prosumers. Web 2.0 represents a technology that enables users to actively engage in social networking. It provides them with an unprecedented degree of control over the contents of Web resources [Coll10], [HaBa09]. They can make evaluations, comments, share thoughts and experiences and build different types of social relations. It is hardly imaginable these days that an Internet user would have never had exposure to other users' opinions. A growing number of Web users are sharing their thoughts and experiences with others through forums, blogs, feedback/comments pages, etc. [Siud12]. Further, business companies are attempting to exploit the potential of the Web – notably its popularity with young people – e.g. by launching promotional programs and events designed to engage consumers in corporate plans and activities.

The authors feels that today prosumption corresponds to companies' competitive struggle whereby consumers are involved in the process of knowledge exploration, innovation and value creation [Ziem11]. Prosumption makes it possible for consumers to engage in product or service development by contributing their knowledge and ideas as well as through collaboration with others [Arvi07]. Such consumers are called prosumers. Today's prosumers will use ICTs to satisfy their needs, to search and create information. Prosumers will gladly volunteer their involvement in joint product development, product improvement, idea generation and solution-finding processes [Radz11], [Garo11], [Bruns08]. Prosumers' activity should result in the making of products characterized by enhanced functionality and compliance with user expectations [LGG12]. Hence, two other closely related notions are frequently found in studies of prosumption: co-creation and co-design.

2. Research methodology

Issues outlined in the preceding chapters were addressed by a recent survey which the authors undertook in an effort to investigate prosumer awareness among contemporary consumers. To accomplish this, Web users were surveyed

for their familiarity with the notions of *prosumer*, *prosumption*, and *co-creation*, and its likely linkage with their declared use of ICTs, which are perceived as conducive to the growth of prosumption.

The paper focuses on addressing the following research questions:

- 1. Are consumers familiar with the notions of *prosumer*, *prosumption*, and *co-creation*?
- 2. What factors determine prosumer awareness?
- 3. Do consumers identify themselves, by admitting to involvement in specific activities, as prosumers?

Obtaining answers to these questions required efforts of cognitive and utilitarian nature. Literature search and extensive reading of both domestic and international writings were followed by mind mapping and the application of critical thinking methods. These were supported with the use of a questionnaire-based direct survey. In processing the findings, statistical analysis and data analysis techniques incorporating pivot tables were employed.

The questionnaire-based direct survey was performed in March and April 2013 and involved a sample of 575 persons, including 346 women and 229 men. The survey was run on a group of consumers, a majority of whom were Generation Y* youth, since those are now considered the largest and most active faction of Web users [Laza12]. Generation Y people are known to approach ICTs as an unalienable part of their lives and as tools used for work as well as for entertainment. They are happy to buy goods and services delivered via the Internet. They will also often exchange comments with other Web users and consult the opinions of others before making purchase decisions [Eisn05], which has been confirmed by the authors' research findings.

The subsequent chapter presents research outcomes which depict prosumer awareness among Internet users and prosumer activities pursued by them.

Further in the paper the authors employs the term *prosumption* in analyzing, describing, and making references to the research outcomes. It should be remembered, however, that the term is to be treated as a portmanteau word and a mental leap. In fact, as the survey shows, prosumption is always accompanied by two synonymous terms: *prosumer* and *co-creation*.

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^{*} A number of authors have categorized Internet users by demographic factors and characteristics. It is argued that generations will differ significantly in terms of attitude toward Internet access and the use of ICTs. It is generally agreed that Generation Y is made up of persons born between mid-1970s and mid-1990s. More on current generations can be found in [Gard06], [Fazl08], [TheR10].

3. Research findings – prosumption awareness

The determinants of prosumption

In the survey, emphasis was placed on establishing how much Web users, many of them representatives of Generation Y, knew about prosumption, and whether they pursued any prosumer activities in the Internet.

The respondents were asked if they are familiar with any of the three notions: *prosumption*, *prosumer*, *co-creation*. It was found that only 14.4% of those surveyed knew at least one of these notions, while 85.6% were ignorant of all of them. Age was the key factor determining familiarity with the term *prosumption* (*prosumer*, *co-creation*). This correlation is shown in Figure 1.

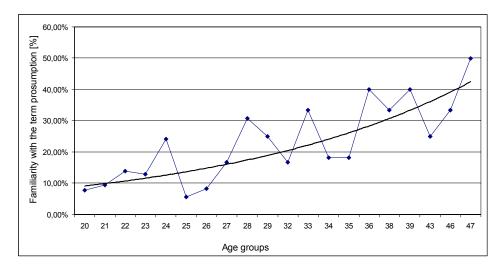


Fig. 1. The percentage of persons familiar with the term *prosumption* in respective age groups

Source: Author's own research.

In Figure 1, the traverse indicates the percentage of people in respective age groups (the horizontal axis) who declared familiarity with the term *prosumption* (the vertical axis). The trend, plotted as a solid line, shows the relationship between familiarity with prosumption and the respondents' age. It is easy to see that prosumer awareness increases with age.

Figure 2 illustrates how familiarity with the term *prosumption* correlates with gender.

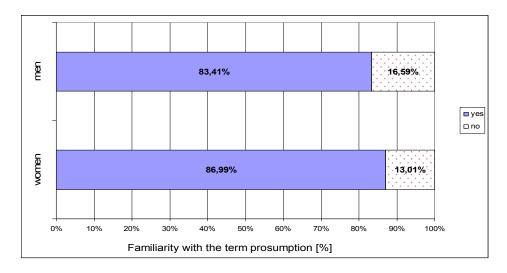


Fig. 2. The percentage of men and women familiar with the term *prosumption* Source: Author's own research.

It turns out that slightly more men are familiar with the term. 16.59% of men and only 13.01% of women declared familiarity with *prosumption*. What the graph shows best is, nonetheless, that most respondents, both men and women, do not know the term at all.

Prosumer as a feedback provider

The research was centered on analyzing prosumption through the lens of opinions, comments, rankings and polls. This approach reflects a conviction that these represent important ways in which one can influence products and services. Comments posted in the Internet can be instrumental in making decisions on the extent and nature of modifications to all kinds of merchandise. More than that, they could inspire a manufacturer or service provider to introduce improvements and enhancements even in cases where no modifications were previously considered necessary. As a result, companies are able to respond promptly and effectively and to align their business with concepts that would be difficult to discover in any other way.

The truth is that, in contributing their opinions, consumers do not think in terms of their usability for business purposes. All they do is share their thoughts

and experiences with others, hoping to help them in that way – to reassure or alert them, or even to discredit certain products. What they do not often realize is that, by doing so, they help businesses at the same time [Baru10, p. 244].

The respondents were asked whether they:

- 1. Had ever come across evaluations of products or services provided through:
 - rankings or polls,
 - giving opinion or comments.
- 2. Had ever evaluated a product or service themselves through:
 - rankings or polls,
 - giving opinion or comments.

When answering the questions, the individuals surveyed could choose among five options: "definitely not" (never); "probably not"; "no answer"; "probably yes"; "definitely yes" (lots of times). The results are shown in Table 1.

Data included in the table clearly demonstrate that most people have come across user opinions and comments on products and services in the Internet. 62.1% of the respondents stated that they very often looked at opinions and comments, and 24.3% of them that they quite frequently did. These combine into a total of 86.4% of those who do look for opinions and comments in the Web and use them as tips before making their own purchase decisions.

Table 1
The distribution of the respondents' activities vis-à-vis rankings,
polls, opinions and comments

point, opinione and commente								
Specification	Definitely	Probably	No	Probably	Definitely			
	not	not	answer	yes	yes			
Have you ever come cross product or service evaluations provided through:								
Rankings,	11	47 (9 20/)	62	192	263			
polls	(1.9%)	47 (8.2%)	(10.8%)	(33.4%)	(45.7%)			
Opinions,	8	24	46	140	357			
comments	(1.4%)	(4.2%)	(8.0%)	(24.3%)	(62.1%)			
Have you ever evaluated a product or service through:								
Rankings,	92	175	85	122	101			
polls	(16%)	(30.4%)	(14.8%)	(21.2%)	(17.6%)			
Opinions,	89	178	86	116	106			
comments	(15.5%)	(31%)	(15%)	(20.2%)	(18.4%)			

Source: Author's own research.

At the same time, those affirming that they "very often" looked at Internet rankings and polls on products and services represented 45.7% of the survey sample, while those who "rather often" looked at such polls and rankings consti-

tuted 33.4%. Therefore, in aggregate the proportion of respondents who have come across product or service rankings and polls totals 79.1% of the sample.

The proportions are different when it comes to active involvement, i.e. providing feedback and making one's own opinions or product evaluations available to others in the Internet. Unlike with seeking the opinion of others, persons declaring a low level of activity make up the largest group of respondents. The group represents 30.4% in the case of rankings and polls, and 31% in the case of opinions and comments. At the same time, 38.8% of the sampled Web users declared that they had evaluated products and services through rankings and polls, and 38.6% of them – through opinions and comments. When asked, *Have you ever evaluated a product or service through rankings or polls, opinions or comments?*, these individuals replied with a "rather yes" or "definitely yes". In conjunction with the Gemius S.A. report on "Prosumers in the Polish Internet" (the original title: "Prosumenci w polskim Internecie"), this seems to be sufficient evidence that the group, representing nearly 39% of all Web users, can be identified with prosumers.

By way of summary to the discussion so far, it could be concluded that Web users often make use of other users' opinions and comments available in the Internet. However, they do not contribute such opinions and comments as often themselves.

Prosumer as a value creator

A prosumer is not just someone who reads and posts comments in the Internet. A prosumer is primarily a proactive consumer entering into a variety of interactions with businesses. Such interactions usually involve two kinds of activities:

- 1. Consumers' (Internet users') engagement in the process of improving and modernizing products that are already present in the market and are well known to consumers.
- Consumers' engagement in the design and development of new products through sharing original ideas, innovative concepts, and nonstereotype solutions.

Consumers' involvement may take a number of diverse forms, ranging from games and contests to serious initiatives aimed at encouraging consumers to design new products or suggest improvements to existing ones.

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^{*} For comparison's sake: the authors of the December 2007 Gemius S.A. report assert that prosumers account for 36% of Web users.

The authors inquired if:

- 1. They knew of any examples of consumers' (Web users') involvement in designing or improving products (services) through:
 - offering an original product/service design to a commercial manufacturer,
 - suggesting improvements to a product/service.
- 2. They had ever personally designed, or suggested improvements to, a product or service through:
 - offering an original product/service design to a commercial manufacturer,
 - suggesting improvements to a product/service.

The outcomes are given in Table 2.

Table 2
The distribution of the respondents' activities vis-à-vis product (service)
design or improvement

		g op. c						
Specification	Definitely	Probably	No	Probably	Definitely			
	not	not	answer	yes	yes			
Do you know of any examples of consumers' (Web users') involvement								
in designing or improving products (services) through:								
Offering								
an original prod-	89	219	158	78	31			
uct/service design	(15.5%)	(38.1%)	(27.5%)	(13.6%)	(5.4%)			
to a manufacturer								
Suggesting	78	200	169	94	34			
improvements to				-	_			
a product/service	(13.6%)	(34.8%)	(29.4%)	(16.3%)	(5.9%)			
Have yo	u ever personally	y designed, or	r suggested i	nprovements	s to,			
a product (service) through:								
Offering								
an original prod-	324	198	27	18	8			
uct/service design	(56.3%)	(34.4%)	(4.7%)	(3.1%)	(1.4%)			
to a manufacturer								
Suggesting	212	100	20	22	12			
improvements to	313	190	38	22	12			
a product/service	(54.4%)	(33%)	(6.6%)	(3.8%)	(2.1%)			

Source: Author's own research.

Data contained in Table 2 shows that 53.6% of the respondents do not know of any form of inviting consumers' contribution to product (service) design. 48.3% of them do not know of any initiatives where improvements to products (services) would be suggested by consumers. These groups selected "definitely not" or "probably not" when answering the questions on consumer activity.

On analyzing responses to the questions about opportunities for consumers to offer their original product designs to a manufacturer, the following can observed:

- 31 persons said "definitely yes" when asked whether they knew of any such opportunities,
- 78 people replied "probably yes" when asked if they had ever come across such initiatives.

This means that, in total, 19% of the respondents were aware of mechanisms whereby consumers' proprietary product designs could be submitted to business companies.

As for suggesting improvements to a product/service that is already available in the market:

- 94 persons answered "probably yes",
- 31 people replied "definitely yes".

This produces a total of 22.3% maintaining that they are aware of consumers' involvement in introducing improvements and modernizations to products or services.

The second portion of data presented in Table 2 concerns the respondents' own prosumer experience. For the sake of comparison, the largest group within the survey sample is made up of those who have never been engaged in prosumer activities by contributing product (service) designs (90.8% of all the people surveyed) or suggesting improvements to existing products (87.5% of those surveyed). All of these people marked the answers "definitely yes" or "probably yes" when replying to the relevant questions on prosumer activity. Only 26 out of a total of 575 respondents stated that they had offered their own product (service) design(s) to a business company; 8 of the 26 claimed that they had repeatedly done so.

It was not very different in the case of suggestions for improvements to products or services. 34 people declared prior involvement in such activities, but only 12 of those admitted to doing it often.

The findings discussed above demonstrate that most consumers are aware of prosumer activities taking place around them. However, few of them get personally involved in such initiatives.

There are many examples of consumers' suggestions for improvements in products and services. Specific examples are given in the paper: "Complementarity Web 2.0 and prosumption in the context of today's business support" [ZiEi13].

Discussion and conclusion

The sample consisted of tertiary students. The manner in which the survey sample was formed could be partly justified on pragmatic grounds: owing to that, most respondents (73.4%) were young individuals between 20 and 24 years of age, which is consistent with the objective of learning about those who use ICTs fluently and frequently. On the other hand, the selection implies that the findings may not be representative for the entire population. However, the sample obviously permits definite conclusions on contemporary youth.

Survey results discussed in the paper have drawn an outline of prosumption among contemporary ICT-proficient youth. The respondents demonstrate an awareness of prosumption-related and prosumption-driven programs run in the Web. Nevertheless, they do not often get personally and actively involved in such initiatives. This condition may be attributable to a relatively low level of companies' commitment to reaching a great number of consumers with relevant proposals. Consumers may be also discouraged by such factors as the not so friendly terms, a cumbersome registration process or complicated, confusing software applications.

Moderate interest in prosumer activities may be a consequence of consumers' attitude toward a majority of promotional events, which are usually seen as just another pushy form of advertising. Last but not least, the outcomes may be indicative of inferior popularity of the media through which business companies attempt to target consumers. It can be therefore assumed that these media will continue to evolve toward greater interactivity and openness to consumers.

The research outcomes presented in the paper delineate a large scope for innovative projects available to business organizations. They demonstrate, too, the extent of consumers' interest in certain types of activities and indicate the forms of interaction which consumers are the happiest to support with their creativity. They also highlight the challenges facing a business company which would like to stimulate consumers' activity toward increased involvement in modernizing, modifying and improving their products and services or toward designing new ones.

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ŚWIADOMOŚĆ PROSUMENCKA MŁODYCH KONSUMENTÓW

Streszczenie

Artykuł koncentruje się na zidentyfikowaniu poziomu świadomości młodych konsumentów dotyczącej prosumpcji oraz poziomu wykorzystania ICTs na potrzeby prosumpcji. Na wstępie scharakteryzowano prosumpcję oraz rolę, jaką w rozwoju prosumpcji odgrywają ICTs. W kolejnej części artykułu zaprezentowano wyniki badań przeprowadzonych wśród młodych konsumentów, których celem była odpowiedź na pytanie, czy młodzi konsumenci znają prosumpcję oraz czy uczestniczą w różnorodnych aktywnościach prosumenckich proponowanych im w Internecie przez przedsiębiorstwa. Wyniki badań podzielono na trzy części. Pierwsza dotyczy znajomości pojęcia "prosumpcja" wśród respondentów. Druga koncentruje się na analizie prosumpcji przez pryzmat tworzenia opinii i komentarzy oraz rankingów i głosowań. Trzecia prezentuje stopień zaangażowania konsumentów w doskonalenie i projektowanie produktów i usług. Wynikiem przeprowadzonych badań są konkluzje dotyczące chęci angażowania się młodych konsumentów w działania prosumenckie organizowane przez przedsiębiorstwa. Badanie zostało przeprowadzone na podstawie analizy literatury wspartej metodami krytycznego myślenia oraz badania bezpośredniego z wykorzystaniem ankiety.