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## Information and communication processes among younger and older consumers

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## INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION PROCESSES AMONG YOUNGER AND OLDER CONSUMERS<sup>1</sup>

### Summary

The aim of this paper is to present the specificity of the course of information and communication processes among younger and older consumer groups resulting from information access and a preferred system of values. In the first part, the development of a cognitive conception in consumer behaviours will be discussed, connected with the course of information processes focused on gathering information about products. Further, ways of using external and internal sources of information will be presented, as well as information exchange, and communication barriers in different phases of the family life cycle with reference to the behaviors of younger and older consumers. The example will be the results of the surveys conducted as part of the grant awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education no 0926/B/H03/2009/36 to Wrocław School of Banking, in which the author of the paper was one of the researchers.

### Specificity of the course of information processes in households

Consumer behavior from the perspective of information processing started to be developed in accordance with the cognitive conception in the 1970s and early 1980s in the United States. Consumers gather information about products and services from various internal and external sources, exchanging some of it among the other members of the household. Informational influence on the consumer consists in providing him/her with information on a continuous basis through various internal channels from the resources of his/her own memory and from the other household members, as well as from external ones from diverse media channels, about existing and emerging, new market offers. The

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is based on the surveys conducted as part of the research grant no 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

selection of information coming simultaneously from different sources results in its categorization, which gives such information subjective meaning.

At the level of a household, the consumer receives information from other members of the household, processes it in accordance with the specificity of his/her own perception and confronts with his/her own knowledge about market offers. Information reaches the consumer in the form of sounds, smells, motions and colors, and is received through senses. Information that comes to the consumer depends on the sense organ perceiving a given message and can be divided into:

- visual information about products, brands, shops, other consumers, situations,
- aural information involves mainly knowledge about products and is transmitted through adverts, salespersons and other consumers,
- olfactory information often works subliminally and may make it, depending on the consumer's sensitivity, more or less attractive,
- sensory information is based on the touch and manual movements during contact with a product; is important during buying clothes, shoes, textile materials, toys,
- gustatory information is created during tasting foodstuffs in hypermarkets.<sup>2</sup>

At the level of a household, there is a transfer of information about purchase offers coming from external sources, such as television, radio, the Internet, press, shops, friends, product labels, etc. and from internal sources: information flow between the household members based on agreement of meanings through interaction of the members. Treating external information in terms of meanings highlights the role of individual members of a household in creating common meaning areas for achieving agreed priorities in purchasing behaviors of the members as a target group in consumption.

Informational influence is vital in transmitting reliable knowledge about market offers, fulfilling the function of informal communication in households. However, the sense of such information is often subject to filtering at the level of normative influence enhancing or decreasing the level of its perceptivity depending on the cohesion or heterogeneity of the household's axionormative system, which may generate conflicts and communication disruptions. The influence of informal communication is especially strongly felt at the phase of

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<sup>2</sup> A. Jachnis, *Psychologia konsumenta*, Oficyna Wyd. Branta, Bydgoszcz 2008, p. 59.

product choice, strengthened by the household's normative cohesion, which is sometimes stronger than the consumer's individual perceptivity.<sup>3</sup>

### Using the sources of internal and external information depending on the phase of the family's life cycle

This section of the paper will discuss the way in which households gather information depending on the phase of the family's life cycle at which a given household is. It will include the results of the quantitative survey financed from the research grant number 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry Science and Higher Education to Wrocław School of Banking, in which the author of the paper was one of the researchers.

The sample consisted of 500 respondents selected from the areas of Wrocław, Szczecin, Białystok, Kraków, Rzeszów, Poznań and Warsaw agglomerations in the strata of central cities, further stratified in districts, and the remaining cities and rural areas (random selection of cities and villages outside the central cities), and using quota sampling based on the number of members of a household and the livelihood of the head of a household. As far as the gender is concerned, women dominated in the structure of the population surveyed, making up 60,6% of the surveyed – table 1.

Table 1

Respondent's gender

Specification		Frequency	Percent	Percent of important	Accumulated percent
Important	female	303	60.6	60.6	60.6
	male	197	39.4	39.4	100.0
	in total	500	100.0	100.0	

Source: own study based on the survey conducted as part of the grant No. 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

In the quantitative surveys constituting the 1st stage of the surveys conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center older consumers, aged 35–54, dominated, making up 38.5% of the population, as well as people aged 55–64, 22.6% of the surveyed, and younger consumers aged 25–34, 16.2% of the respondents (table 2). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of qualitative surveys, conducted under the direction of the author of the paper by lecturers and PhD students of the Faculty of Social Sciences of University of Wrocław in five Polish agglomerations, the same size focus groups (FGI) of younger consumers, aged 20–34, and older ones, over 35

<sup>3</sup> *Racjonalność konsumpcji*, ed. E. Kieźel, PWE, Warszawa 2004, p. 57–58.

years old, were selected. The results of these surveys will be presented in further section of the paper.

Table 2

		Respondent's age			
		Frequency	Percent	Percent of important	Accumulated percent
Important	20–24 years old	17	3.4	3.4	3.4
	25–34 years old	81	16.2	16.2	19.6
	35–54 years old	192	38.4	38.5	58.1
	55–64 years old	113	22.6	22.6	80.8
	65 years old and older	96	19.2	19.2	100.0
	In total	499	99.8	100.0	
Lack of data	Lack of data	1	.2		
In total		500	100.0		

Source: own study based on the survey conducted as part of the grant No. 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

As shown in the surveys of households, the most important sources of external information when making a purchase are: shops (32.2% of indications), TV (19.4%), the Internet (15.6 %) and friends (10.2%) – figure 1.

In the social life, a household is usually associated with a family, and they are often treated as synonyms. Usually, it is due to substantive considerations, not demographic ones. It is of special importance in Poland, because most of the households are families, so equating a family with a household is justified.<sup>4</sup> The survey conducted under the direction of the author of the paper shows that the prevailing tendency in shopping in Poland is family shopping.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of shops as the most important source of external information when shopping was examined with reference to a phase of the family life cycle of the households surveyed. It has been found out that this source of external information is the most important for married couples with adult children who live separately (47.62% of the indications) and for married couples

<sup>4</sup> Cz. Bywalec, *Konsumpcja a rozwój gospodarczy i społeczny*, C.H. Beck, Warszawa 2012, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> W. Patrzalek, *Konsumenci jako podmioty w procesie globalizacji*, in: *Zachowania podmiotów w warunkach globalizacji rynków*, ed. W. Patrzalek, Wyd. Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2010, p. 38.

with children living together (40.81% of the indications), followed by widows/widowers living alone (38.63%) and married couples with studying children (35%) (fig. 2). Thus, shops as a source of external information are more important for older consumers.

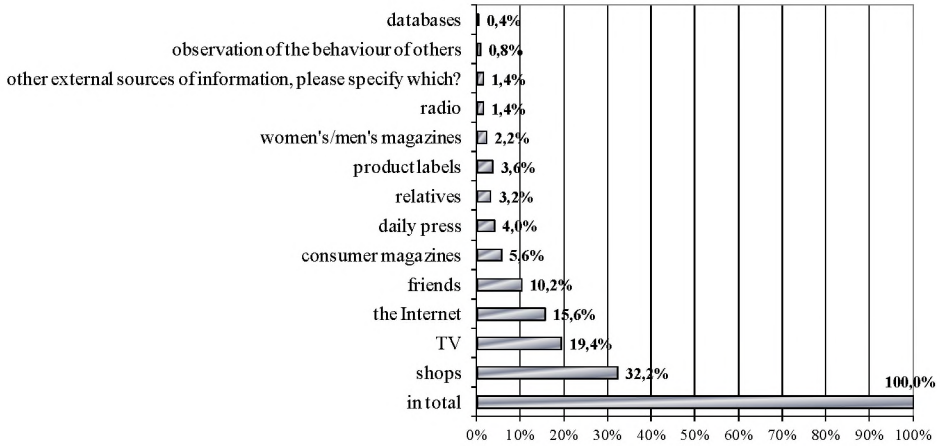


Fig. 1. Indications of the most important external sources of information during shopping in households

Source: own study based on the survey conducted as part of the grant No. 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

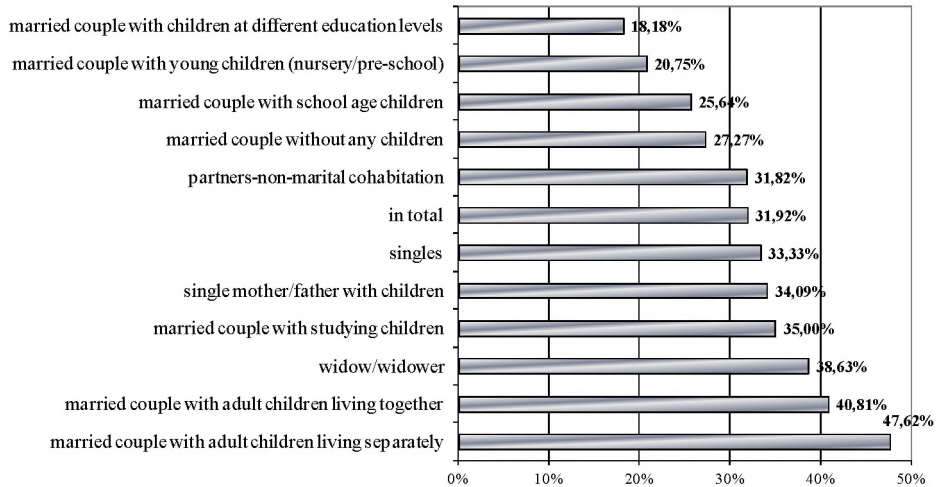


Fig. 2. Importance of shops as a source of shopping information in households depending on the family life cycle

Source: own study based on the survey conducted as part of the grant No. 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

Another source of external information indicated as important for the surveyed in terms of shopping was TV. Let's compare its importance in specific types of households based on the family life cycle (fig. 3).

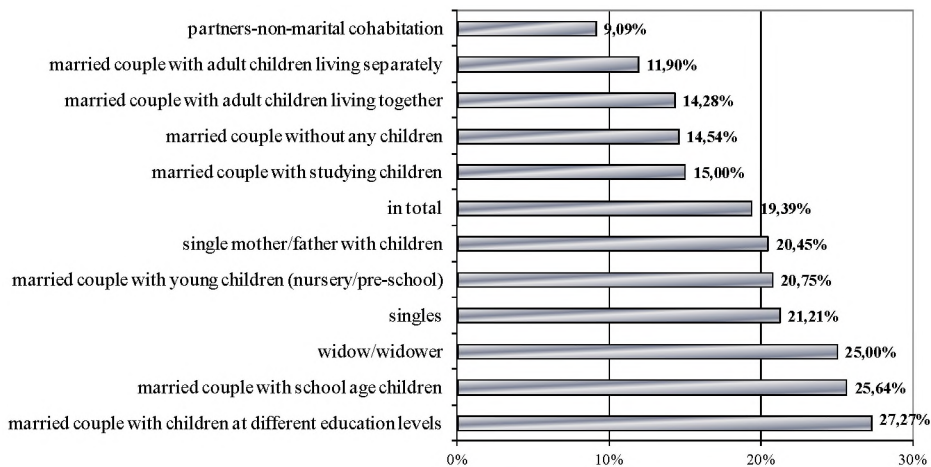


Fig. 3. Importance of TV as an external source of shopping information depending on the family life cycle

Source: own study based on the survey conducted as part of the grant No. 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

As a source of external information important for shopping, TV is important for a diverse groups of consumers, both younger and older, that is: married couples with children at different levels of education (27.27% of the indications), married couples with children at school age (25.64% of the indications) and widows/widowers living alone (25% of the indications).

The Internet as a source of external information about shopping is the most important for married couples with studying children (30% of the indications), married couples with children at school age (25.64% of the indications) and for partners in non-marital cohabitation (22.72% of the indications) – figure 4.

Another source of external information about shopping in the population surveyed was friends. Let's look at the importance of this source of information for households in particular phases of the family life cycle (fig. 5). Friends as a source of external information about shopping are the most important for singles (16.66% of the indications), married couples without children (13.21% of the indications) and married couples with adult children living separately (11.9% of the indications).

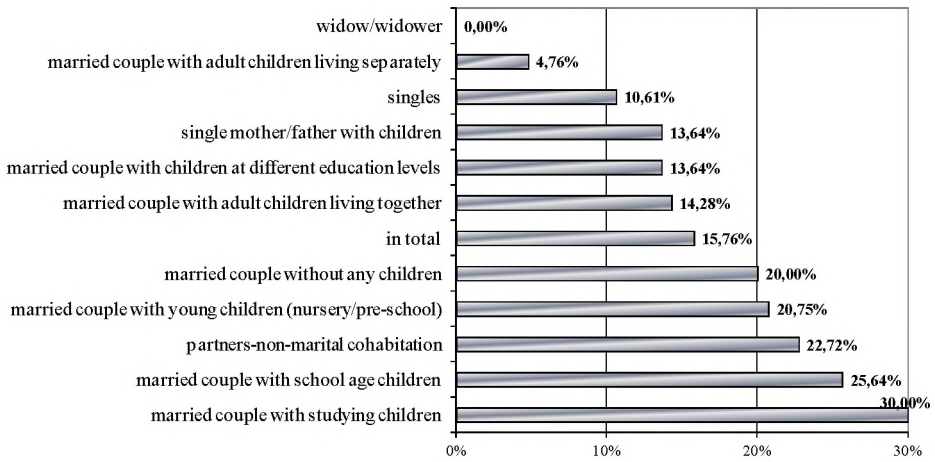


Fig. 4. Importance of the Internet as a source of shopping information in households depending on the family life cycle

Source: own study based on the survey conducted as part of the grant No. 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

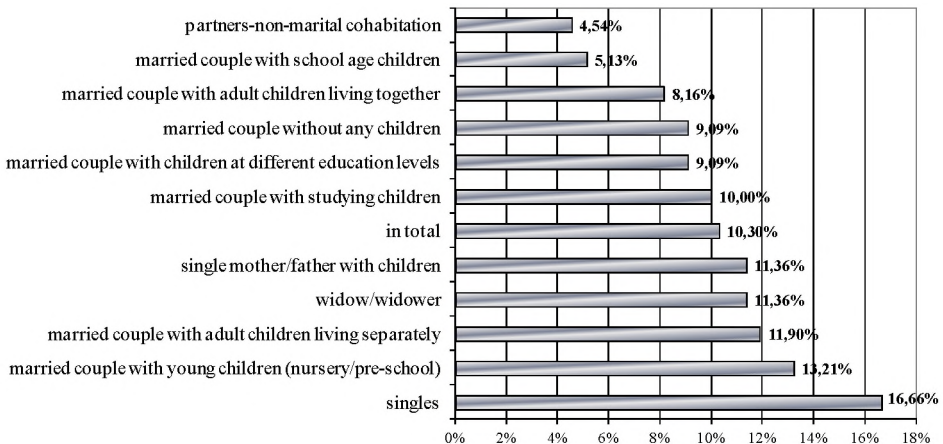


Fig. 5. Importance of friends as an external source of shopping information depending on the family life cycle

Source: own study based on the survey conducted as part of the grant No. 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

The most important source of internal information in the households surveyed is own experience (81% of the indications). Its importance for particular phases of the family life cycle is shown in figure 6. This source of internal information was most often indicated by partners in non-marital cohabitation (90.91% of the indications), singles (87.88% of the indications) and widows/widowers (88.64% of the indications).



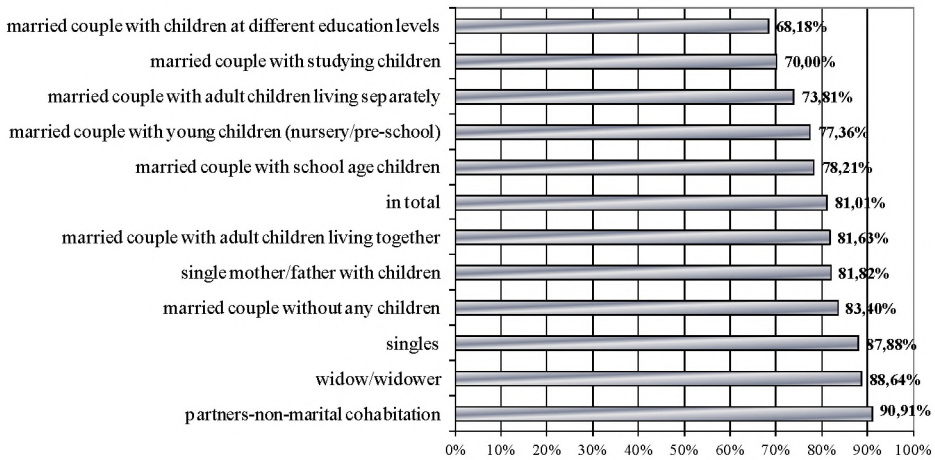


Fig. 6. Importance of own experience as the most important source of internal information in the households surveyed on the subject of and a phase of the family life cycle

Source: own study based on the survey conducted as part of the grant No. 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

The results of the qualitative surveys show that the use of information sources for making shopping decisions depends on the age of the consumer. Among younger consumers, the most important source of external information about products are: the Internet, opinions posted on Internet forums, testing websites examining technical parameters of devices and equipment and price comparing websites. They are followed by recommendations of their friends and their experiences, and opinions of specialists and authorities in a given field, with advertisement brochures indicated less often. Older consumers rely on friends, advertisements brochures, especially those of distribution networks, and information about prices and special prices, followed by conversations with salespersons, opinions of specialists and people working in a given industry, the Internet and daily TV commercials, as well as specialist magazines. As far as the internal sources of information are concerned, past experience is more important in older groups.

### Information exchange and phases of the family life cycle

The frequency of information exchange before planned shopping in households depends on the phase of the family life cycle. Such exchange takes place most often in households of married couples with children at school age (61% of the indications), married couples without any children (44% of the indications) and married couples with young children (38% of the indications) and married couples with adult children living together with parents (32%) – table 3.

Table 3

Information exchange before planned shopping in households depending on the family life cycle

Column	Partners-non-marital cohabitation	Married couple without any children	Married couple with young children (nursery/pre-school)	Married couple with school age children	Married couple with studying children	Married couple with adult children living together	Married couple with adult children living separately	Married couples with children at different education levels	Singles	Widow/widower	Single mother/father with children
Always	12.00	44.00	38.00	61.00	16.00	32.00	29.00	18.00	7.00	6.00	17.00
	54.55	80.00	71.70	79.22	80.00	65.31	69.05	81.82	10.60	13.64	38.64
Sometimes	5.00	4.00	10.00	9.00	4.00	11.00	3.00	2.00	4.00	4.00	12.00
	22.73	7.27	18.87	11.69	20.00	22.45	7.14	9.09	6.06	9.09	27.27
Sporadically	1.00	1.00	0.00	3.00	0.00	2.00	2.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	3.00
	4.55	1.82	0.00	3.90	0.00	4.08	4.76	0.00	0.00	2.27	6.82
Never	4.00	6.00	5.00	4.00	0.00	4.00	8.00	2.00	55.00	33.00	12.00
	18.18	10.91	9.43	5.19	0.00	8.16	19.05	9.09	83.3	75.00	27.27
	22.00	55.00	53.00	77.00	20.00	49.00	42.00	22.00	66.0	44.00	44.00
	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: own study based on the survey conducted as part of the grant No. 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

The qualitative surveys show that in the households whose members are older, brands of necessities are established for daily shopping. The exchange of information within a household about technical novelties and software has a character of intergenerational exchange: children – parents in the form of family discussions whereas as far as the functionality and use of a product is concerned, the younger generation has a dominating role. In the older age groups, the information exchange often takes place during shopping. In younger age groups, the consultations concern products for a child or presents for special occasions. Talks in younger households are held to agree:

- where to buy,
- how much to spend,
- special offers,
- costs of product use.

They take place often so as to avoid tensions over financial situations. Let's examine what are the most common communication barriers in different phases of the family life cycle.

### Communication barriers and a phase of the family life cycle

Communication barriers in a household may occur as a result of different motives concerning fulfilling consumption needs. If one member of a household shows enough care to be considered as the head of the family, then no matter how much the other members show egoistic behaviors, there will be a common motive for maximizing the “chances” of the whole family. Naturally, a family may have no “head” at all, when all the members have only altruistic or egoistic motives.<sup>6</sup>

Positive motives occurring in the communication within a household which are directed at others through fulfilling the expectations and desires of the other members of the household allow overcoming the barriers, whereas negative motives, based on frustration in the fulfillment of consumption needs by some members of a household lead to conflicts and reduce the links within the family. Especially dangerous is the motivation connected with instrumental domination based on messages designed to use one’s own position at the cost of the other members of a household.<sup>7</sup> In the quantitative surveys, factors have been identified which may have an influence on communication barriers that occur depending on a phase of the family life cycle. The most important of them include: age of the members of a household and preferences of different values.

Age constitutes the biggest communication barrier for single mothers/fathers with children (100% of the indications) and widows/widowers (83.33%), as well as for married couples with studying children and singles (80% of the indications for each group) – figure 7.

Differences in preferences of different values constitute the biggest communication barrier for married couples without any children and those with young children (75% of the indications for both) and for married couples with adult children living together (71.43% of the indications) – figure 8.

In the qualitative surveys, an attempt was made to elaborate the specificity of communication barriers among younger and older consumer groups.

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<sup>6</sup> G.S. Becker, *Ekonomiczna teoria zachowań ludzkich*, PWN, Warszawa 1990, p. 460.

<sup>7</sup> S.P. Morreale, B.H. Spitzberg, J.K. Barge, *Komunikacja między ludźmi. Motywacja, wiedza i umiejętności*, Wyd. Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2008, p. 293–295.

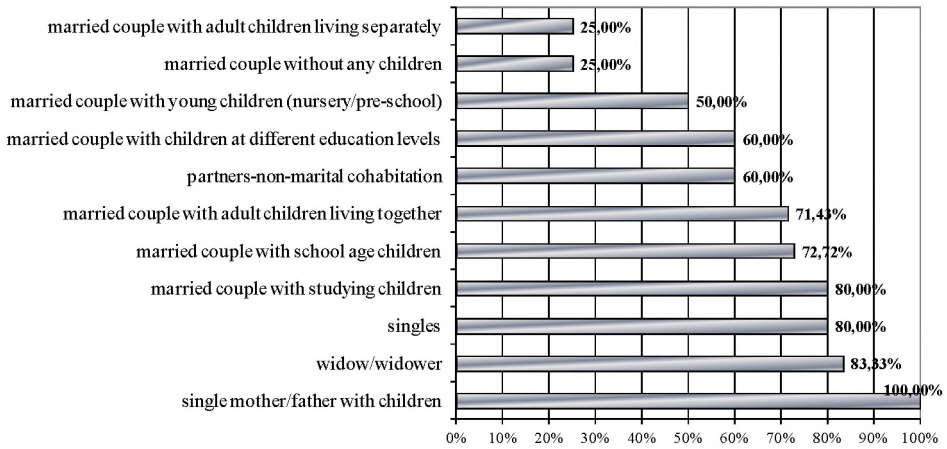


Fig. 7. Age as a communication barrier between the members of a household in different phases of the family life cycle

Source: own study based on the survey conducted as part of the grant No. 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

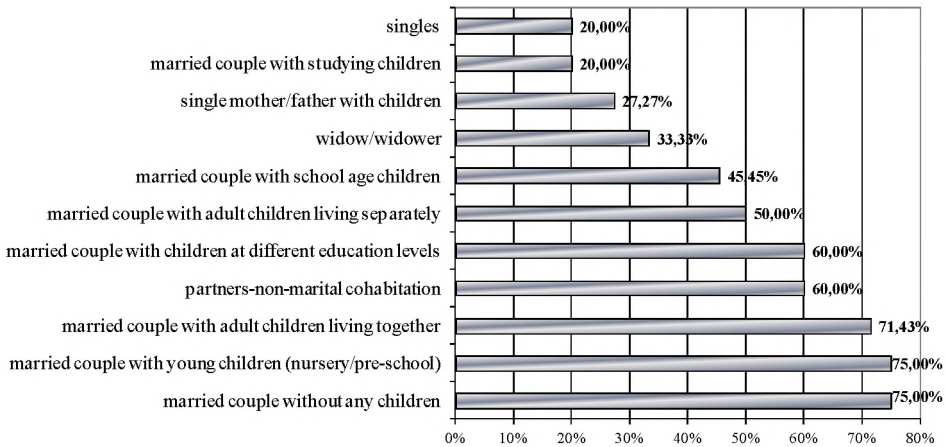


Fig. 8. Communication barriers due to preferences of different values depending on the family life cycle

Source: own study based on the survey conducted as part of the grant No. 0926/B/H03/2009/36 awarded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

These surveys show that in younger groups the communication is disrupted by consumption and work ambitions of a household’s members, their different backgrounds, and dilemmas over consumption and choosing prestigious or well-paid work. In households where adult children live together with their parents the communication is disturbed due to age difference, and different consumption needs. Whereas in households with young children the communica-

tional contact is more difficult because of children who require constant care, thus many talks and decisions must wait until a child (or children) goes to sleep.

### **Summary**

The paper presents the course of information processes connected with the use of various kinds of sources of external and internal information, and disruptions arising in this area in households depending on the family life cycle.

For younger households, the most important sources of information about products, shopping are: the Internet, internet forums, professional websites, price comparison websites, expert blogs, as well as other users' opinions posted on the Internet. The information flow takes place mainly through Instant Messengers, e-mails and SMS-es.

Older households with adolescent or independent children use various sources of information: press, the Internet, friends' opinions, and TV. For this group, own experience is of significant importance in the shopping process. The prevailing form of information flow is direct communication, with some use of the Internet, and information exchange by telephone.

Communication disruptions arising from age differences of household members are more often seen in older households. However, those arising from different preferences concerning values more often occur in younger households.

## **PROCES INFORMACJI I KOMUNIKACJI MIĘDZY MŁODYMI I STARSZYMI KONSUMENTAMI**

### **Streszczenie**

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie specyfiki przebiegu informacji i komunikacyjnych procesów wśród młodszych i starszych grup konsumentów, wynikających z dostępu do informacji i preferowanego systemu wartości. W pierwszej części artykułu omówiono rozwój poznawczy koncepcji w zachowaniach konsumenckich, związanych z przebiegiem procesów informacyjnych, dotyczących zbierania informacji o produktach. Ponadto, zaprezentowano sposoby wykorzystania zewnętrznych i wewnętrznych źródeł informacji, a także bariery wymiany informacji i komunikacji w różnych fazach cyklu życia rodzinnego z uwzględnieniem zachowań młodych i starszych konsumentów. W drugiej części przedstawiono wyniki badań prowadzonych w ramach grantu przyznanego przez Ministerstwo Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego nr 0926/B/H03/2009/36 dla Szkoły Bankowej we Wrocławiu, w którym autorka artykułu był jednym z badaczy.

*Thumaczenie Wanda Patrzalek*