

Abstract. *In nowadays' informational society, both the rapid pace development of technology and Internet's heavy influence on everyday's life brought along new characteristics to the 21st century consumer. Accordingly, in this little e-s dominated world, it comes as no surprise that the booming business on the new virtual market, the Internet, triggered the appearance of a new consumer, the online consumer, by far more informed, open to progress and selective. Along with the shifts of the traditional consumer' traits, this aim of this article is to emphasize, on a theoretical basis, the rising importance of the online consumer in the 21st century, and point out its main hallmarks and consumer behavior habits. With Generation Y, not only thriving in the digital era but also prevailing as the most active online shopper, the profile of the 21st century consumer is defined by a clearly new and enhanced perspective.*

Keywords: informational society, Internet, online consumer's behavior, online consumer.

SEVERAL CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE ONLINE CONSUMER IN THE 21st CENTURY – A THEORETICAL APPROACH

Nicoleta-Dorina RACOLTA-PAINA
*Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca,
Romania*

*Em. de Martonne str., no. 1, Cluj-Napoca
e-mail: npaina@euro.ubbcluj.ro*

Theodora Alexandra LUCA
*Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca,
Romania*

*Em. de Martonne str., no. 1, Cluj-Napoca
e-mail: thealuca@stud.euro.ubbcluj.ro*

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1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, the information society is a reality that shapes the whole globe. Information and knowledge represent by far the main assets of nowadays' society, followed by the Internet, the largest network ever (Fulmer, 2000). The 3rd Wave society of which Alvin Toffler spoke about triggered indeed a chain reaction of „explosive changes” (Toffler, 1996, p. 7), that drew the characteristics of a „a new civilization” (Toffler, 1996, p. 258). In this context, not only did the impact of the Internet and the rapid pace development of TIME industry (telecommunications, information technology, media and entertainment) resulted in the appearance of a new Generation- Generation Y, the so-called first generation of digital natives, but it also sparked the arrival of a new type of consumer, „the online consumer”. Internet's heavy influence in everyday's life also changed the main determinants of the traditional consumer, companies now having to cope with well-informed, selective and in control customer.

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to emphasize, on a theoretical basis, the rising importance of the online consumer in the 21st century, and point out its main characteristics and consumer behavior habits. The analysis, based on several studies, is fuelled by the clear shift that the virtual society posed upon the traditional consumer's traits. However, it must be mentioned that findings are exploratory, because of the lack of specialized studies on online consumer, and all the research articles clearly point out the need for further and more elaborate studies, on a higher scale, as the online consumer gains more and more influence.

Therefore, the paper's main objectives of the article are as follows:

- Pointing out the impact of the knowledge-based and information society on the 21st century consumer;
- Identifying the main traits of the 21st century online consumer;
- Drawing out the online 21st century consumer behavior.

The article consists of three main parts, namely, 21st Century: The Informational Age, The 21st Century Consumer and The Importance of the Online Consumer. The first part brings into attention the important changes brought along by the Internet and the remarkable technological development. The second one presents the hallmarks of the 21st century consumer, information's society customer, focusing on the characteristics of the online consumer. It also raising awareness of the impact that Generation Y has as the future prevailing consumer of the 21st century, permanently connected, online and with higher control and involvement in the process of product and service creation. Lastly, the third part emphasizes the need for official regulations to protect the rights and interest of the online consumer, as his heavy influence in nowadays life is more and more enhanced. For each part we included information connected to Romania.

All in all, the article renders a theoretical approach, which underlines the main directions, traits and behavioral patterns of the new consumer brought along by the

digital society. On a booming Internet market business, in the knowledge society, the consumer himself adapted and opened his perspective by taking advantage of all the vast information provided, at a mere click's distance.

2. Twenty-One Century: The Informational Age

Change represents a key element in the evolution and development of each and every society. Not only does it spark important breakthroughs in science but it also brings along fundamental shifts in society paradigms and mentalities. The major changes of the last decades have resulted in the appearance of a new society, namely the information society, or the digital age, with flexibility, speed and technology as the main hallmarks.

First of all, the concept of the informational society spins around the impact of networking, that allowed a „world-wide connection of thousands of computers” (Rohner, 1999, p. 11) to the largest web ever, the Internet, triggering the appearance of a „whole new social structure at a global level” (Negroponte, 1999, p. 171). In fact, it is the Internet that allowed the protrusion of such a significant spread of knowledge and information in next to no time at a global scale. Moreover, it created new interpersonal means of communication, with neither time nor space barriers, enhancing the limited perspective and making way for new possibilities to be explored both at an individual and at a social level.

In nowadays' society, the 21st century, in developed countries, the Internet represents an essential element of daily activities. The main words that pop up into mind when referring to the Internet are connected to network, virtual space, digitalization, instant communication, lack of space and time barriers. The Internet has indeed created a new world, completely independent from the physical borders of the natural environment, in which „the mouse clicks ... opening a great many means of information, fun, adventure, trade, knowledge ...” (Dertouzos, 2000, p. 20). The power of this incredible network, given by its accessibility, user friendliness and the wide perspectives offered for many an independent activity (Dertouzos, 2000, p. 20), is also confirmed by the high number of users, the rapid pace evolution speeding up tremendously: from 16 million (0.4% out of world population) on December 1995, to 361 million (5.8% out of world population) on December 2000, to 1,018 million (15.7% out of world population) on December 2005 and to 1,669 million (24.7% out of world population) on March 2009 (Internet Growth Statistics, 2009). Facts speak for themselves; approximately 1,733 million (25.6 %) Internet users were estimated in September 2009 worldwide (Internet World Statistics, 2009), The total number of Internet users at Europe's level is 52%, while in Romania the latest figures show that 33.4% (7,430,000 million) from the entire population (22,215,421 million) uses the Internet (Internet World Statistics, 2009).

Consequently, the Internet stirred up a world wide craze that opened the horizons and resulted in the appearance of the information society, now a 21st century reality to shape the whole globe. The rapid pace development of the Internet in such a short time also created an immense platform for an informational world-wide market. E-

business, e-banking, e-communities, e-learning, e-mail, e-commerce, e-services etc are clear examples which emphasize the fact that we live in a „little e-s” dominated world. Furthermore, the concept of the informational market is also closely connected to the one of the „New Economy”, a „phrase to mark the distinction between the classic and the digital economy” (Todoran, 2005, p 71). It is considered that the New Economy can be distinguished through 3 main traits: “it is global, interconnected and renders intangible elements (ideas, information, and knowledge)” (Băjenescu, 2006, p. 73).

Therefore, it can be stated that the Internet has indeed changed „the face” of the business environment, both companies and consumers adopting it as a means of better accomplishing their desired objectives. Organizations now operate on a changing and competitive business environment in which information became one of the main context determinants. In addition to this, one can clearly see the appearance of „a new type of customer”, by far more demanding about companies’ interaction, communication and how they treat „him” (the customer) across segments, products and channels. On such a shifting new market, companies came up with new and by far more creative means of attracting the consumer. Online banners, pop up-s, text links, discussion forums, online chats, are all part of the „offensive” advertising to „reach the virtual consumer” (Vegheş, 2003, p. 337) and trigger an immediate reaction from him. To continue, the most common and widely spread means of e-commerce and e-business are as it follows: e-shop, e-mall, e-procurement, e-auction, virtual communities, e-service providing, 3rd party marketplace and so on (Kovacs, 2007, pp. 23-27). New media marketing and viral marketing are also to be included in the innovative strategic instruments that companies come up with to connect to the newly informed and integrated online consumer.

Last but not least, one should keep in mind that the rising importance of the Internet has its equal share of drawbacks. The Internet is faced on a daily basis with a great many security and privacy issues that negatively influence not only the companies’ activities but also the well-being of the consumer and individuals surfing the web. Statistics show that 55% of online users have been infected with spyware; known computer viruses grew by 28,327 in 2004 to bring the number of old and new viruses to 112,438 in 2005; instant messaging security threats doubling every 6 months; malware, including viruses, worms and Trojans, cost global businesses between \$169 billion and \$204 billion in 2004, and these are just a few examples of the threats that Internet brings along (Attack Intelligence Research Center). Not to mention that Internet ID theft statistics reveal online id theft is the fastest growing identity crime (Guard Privacy and Online Statistics).

All in all, the 21st century shapes a new world, a digital society, where time and space barriers have been themselves remodeled. The rapid pace technological development and the world-wide spread of the Internet resulted in the creation of a global informational infrastructure, which in fact represents the basis for a so-called „New Economy”. It is an online market, a virtual network, where the only constant is change and where companies have to meet the eye of a new, more demanding and needy consumer. It is on the analysis of this new consumer that we will focus in the next chapters.

3. The 21st Century Consumer

3.1. A new type of consumer in the 21st century

The arrival of the informational age triggered the appearance of a new type of consumer, more demanding, more informed and by far more pretentious in his choices. It comes as a natural fact, under the present evolution of the market, where mass production gave way to a focused individual production and market orientation to client orientation. Organizations now face a well-informed consumer, due to the remarkable expansion of the Internet, technologies' rapid pace development and new and accessible at a mere „click” means of communication. „The wider variety of goods and services is an obvious reflection of the vast diversity of needs, values and life styles of the 3rd Wave Society (Toffler, 1996, p. 159)”. Therefore, companies play on a competitive market where they intensely promote client orientation and aim at gaining the loyalty of their customers. Failing at satisfying consumers' shifting needs can only lead to market elimination.

The selective consumer of the 21st century is not easily satisfied and marketers are on a constant watch out to meet his eyes and cope with his needs and preferences. As a result, they have come up with new and innovative means of catching the attention of this „demanding and unforgiving” (Hammer, 1997, p. 32) consumer: from ground and floor advertising, some of them with surprising 3D effects, to mobile phone commercials, and even to the actual involvement of the consumer in the creation of certain products. After all, the 21st century consumer is clearly more demanding, as his access to information grew exponentially with the Internet spread. The knowledge and informational boom gave way to a highly aware consumer that filters out and decides „what marketing data he will receive about the products and services that interest him, as well as the way through which that data is received” (Kovacs, 2007, p. 35). Consequently, we speak of a more empowered consumer, with a higher buying power, „integrated in the companies' own world, not just limited to the offer-demand interaction” (Schwaninger, 2006, p. 7).

3.2. Generation Y – One of the most important parts of the new type of consumer in the 21st century

The hallmarks of this challenging new consumer are best represented at the level of Generation Y, the „the first generation of digital natives” (Sârbu, 2008), a youngster generation to be at its peak in the 21st century. They represent a true dare for companies, although, at first, organizations underestimated their real market potential. Generation Y (1979-1994), also called the Echo-Boomers, the Entitlement generation, the Millennium generation, Internet generation, the MySpace/Facebook, @ Generation or „Why” generation, has developed new behavioral needs and habits because of the informational era in which they were born and live. Moreover, since their childhood, they have been under the constant influence of the Internet as well as new

technologies – computers, laptops, digital photo & video cameras, portable MP3 players, cell phones, iPhones or other gadgets are part of their everyday life. Even the vocabulary has radically shifted: „mail”, „networking”, „site”, „torrent”, „browser”, „online”, „blog”, „host”, or „P2P” (peer-to-peer) are words to be heard on daily basis.

Studies reveal both the heavy influence and the rising interest of this generation towards new services and technologies, and greater media flexibility: (Club It&C, Anon., 2008a). 75% would like to watch movies while they travel (Maximus, 2008), 61% of the teenagers between 13 and 17 years old already have a socializing profile on community networks likes MySpace, Friendster, or Xanga (Cox Communication, Teen Internet Safety Study, 2006), while, according to an Ericsson ConsumerLab research, a 21 young person has already sent and received 250,000 e-mails and SMS, has used the mobile phone for at least 10,000 hours, has spend minimum 5,000 hours on online or offline games and 3,500 hours on online networking communities (Curuş, 2008). Consequently, Y youngsters live in a virtual space, where communication changed into „instant messaging” and space and time barriers disappeared. Moreover, they bring an essential contribution to the technological progress through their constant interest in new media.

According to the specialized literature on the main general characteristics of Generation Y, these young consumers are:

- Pragmatic, clever, socially and environmentally aware, and open to new experiences (Schiffman et al., 2008);
- More-skilled and multi-tasking, agile in making decisions, evaluating risks and managing dilemmas, flexible and persistent in the face of change, highly skilled in social networking and team activities;
- Optimist, educated, having collaborative abilities, open-mindedness drive (Spiro, 2006);
- “Natural multi-taskers, often simultaneously texting on a mobile device and instant messaging on a PC without ever removing even one iPod ear bud. Many of this generation can't conceive communicating without an IM (instant messaging) system or social network” (Havenstein, 2008)
- Online, fully engaged in social networks (these being their medium), virtual hangouts, having new forms of social behavior that blur the distinctions between online and real-world interactions, using a great many forms of media simultaneously (Business Week, Anon., 2005).

In Romania, two main studies conducted at the level of 5 important cities by LeoBurnett showed that Romanian youngsters have the main characteristics of Generation Y: their social life is moving on the Internet; they have a few true friends “in real life”; they depend on Internet and cell phone; they are well informed, mostly from the web (Leo Youth I, 2007; Leo Youth II, 2008).

To conclude, it can be stated that the specific characteristics of Y Generation reveal great challenges for all those who desire to target them. It is of an utmost importance that companies take them into consideration when they define the main traits (product/service, price, place, promotion and so on) of their offer. Six years ago, it was underlined that in the case of USA, „Y Generation already experts influence on

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music, sport, computers, and videogame purchases” (Kerin et al., 2003, p. 64). At the level of the year 2010, it is common knowledge in the case of the most industries from developed countries. Therefore, Y Generation is the future prevailing consumer of the 21st century, permanently updated, connected and informed, with a wide power of selection, control and involvement in the process of product and service creation.

3.3. The online consumer

As previously mentioned in the former chapter, the 21st century and the information super-highway brought along new determinant traits to the traditional consumer. What is more, it triggered the appearance of a new type of consumer, the „online” one whose booming market presence could not be overlooked in this little „e”-s world. In the emerging world of the virtual market, the consumer proceeded towards a truly remarkable online shopping spree. The online platform has rapidly developed as more and more consumers surf the web, accessing through a mere click the information they want.

Statistics show that e-commerce grows steadily from one year to another. In 2008, a Global Nielsen survey brought into attention the fact that 85% of the global population has at least once purchased products and services online, the number of Internet shoppers growing up 40% in two years (Achille, 2008). Moreover, it seems that among the most purchased products and services are books, clothing, airline tickets, music, groceries, with a spectacular increase at the global average of 2008 compared to 2005 (Nielsen Global Online Shopping Report, 2008). In 2009, 6 million e-shoppers were active on the Internet, accounting for 51% of the Internet users (CBS Statistics Netherlands, 2009). Mostly, they prefer purchasing by credit card (Nielsen), with no notable differences between generations (78% Baby Boomers, 74% Generation X and 71% out of Generation Y online consumers used the credit card) (Internet Retailer, Anon., 2008b).

Numerous studies have been published to analyze both the behavior and the main traits that define the online consumer. However, they sometimes bring into attention quite different results. For example, on the one hand, a Bellman et al. (1999) research indicated that demographic variables such as income, education and age have a modest impact on the decision of whether to buy online (Jayawardhena et al., 2003, p. 124). On the other hand, Korgaonkar and Wollin (1999) found that motivational factors as well as age and gender had an impact on online acquisition, also confirmed by Donthu and Garcia’s research (1999) which pointed out that mainly older Internet users are likely to buy online (Jayawardhena et al., 2003, p. 124). More up-dated research brings into attention the fact that in 2005 „Generation X accounted for more than one third of all online purchases” (Marketing Voice, Anon., 2006), while in 2008 a PriceGabber research showed that „Generation Y shoppers are most active and comfortable with online and mobile activities”, being the busiest online shoppers (Jones, 2008).

3.4. Differences between the offline and the online consumer

But what makes the actual distinction between the offline and online consumer? First of all, it should be stated that the online consumer is represented by the individual who has Internet access, thus willing and able to spend a certain amount of time online. A Pew Internet & American Life Project „found that those segments remaining disproportionately unconnected to the Internet included the following: the elderly, rural residents, the poor and the less educated” (The Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2002-2005, cited in Reisenwitz et al., 2007). Romania, for instance, is on the last place in EU as concerning Internet usage, with 69% of the population not using it (Smart Future, Anon., 2009). Explanations could include the high number of rural communities with no according IT infrastructure, as well as areas of high poverty and low education. Specialized literature states that „online access from home is becoming a norm amongst the upper social groupings and the young professional classes” (Jayawardhena et al., 2003, p. 59).

3.4.1. *The profile of the online consumer*

Overall, the profile of the online shopper cannot be clearly drawn, as published facts vary from one year to another. If in 1999, research (Donthu and Garcia, 1999, Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999, cited in Jayawardhena et al., 2003, p. 59) „asserted that the Internet consumer is older and of a higher income, less sensitive to brand and price, less risk adverse, in comparison to the terrestrial consumer, with a higher proportion of males”, others (Li et al., 1999; Sin and Tse, 2002; Swinyard and Smith, 2003 cited in Allred et al., 2006, p. 311) mentioned that Internet shoppers „are most likely to be younger males with more knowledge of the Internet, greater education and higher incomes” (Allred et al., 2006, p. 311); later studies show that 60% of online consumer are female (Sorce et al., 2005). In addition to this, although age differences are more obvious, it must kept in mind that the online consumer is a steady rising segment, at the level of all generations. Accordingly, in 2002, 16% of online consumers in the USA were 50 or older (Sorce et al., 2005), seniors representing the „fastest-growing segment online” (Reisenwitz et al., 2007, p 407). Sorce et al. (2005) pointed out that older shoppers search for more products online, but they purchase an equal amount online as younger buyers.

3.4.2. *The online consumer behavior*

Thus, the arrival of the online consumer sparked a great many questions regarding both his/her hallmarks and the main behavioral differences as compared to the „offline” or traditional consumer. In the specialized literature there are a great many consumer segment typologies: from the economic consumer, or the active versus inactive one, to the brand loyalty driven consumer, or the convenience seeker, these are all consumer purchase orientations to be found at the level of the traditional shoppers (Jayawardhena et al., 2003). But which shopping motives are identifiable at

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the level of the online consumer? Online consumers can be included in the two main segments of the traditional consumer purchase orientation, namely hedonic shoppers „typically seeking product specific online shopping experience” (Sorce et al., 2005, p.123) and goal-oriented consumers, driven by „four motives for online shopping: convenience, informativeness, selection, and the ability to control the shopping experience” (Sorce et al., 2005). Later findings confirm these conclusions, convenience, time saving and control being the most cited motives for online shopping (Alreck and Settle, 2002; Bhatnagar et al., 2000; Evans and Wurster, 1999 cited in Sorce et al., 2005). Other research enriched the frame and underlined seven main factors that driven the online consumer: social escapism, transaction security and privacy, information, interactive control, socialization, non-transactional privacy and economic motivation (Sorce et al., 2005).

When talking about consumer behavior, there are several factors that clearly influence it, such as: social (given by culture, subculture, social class, reference groups, family and roles and status), personal (given by age and life-cycle stage, occupation, lifestyle, personality, self-concept and economic circumstances), psychological (influenced by motivation, perception, learning and beliefs and attitudes) and situational (Drummond et al., 2008). All of these have developed new dimensions because of the characteristics of the information era and the impact of the Internet. Thus, in the digital society, a new variable appears in the behavioral study of the consumer, namely the Internet. And it seems that the online consumer is by far most heavily influenced by it as compared to the traditional consumer. Accordingly, „online shoppers differed from offline shoppers in their perceptions of online risk, the fear of financial loss and confusion about the Internet and computer technology” (Allred, et. al., 2006, p. 311) with a more positive attitude towards advertising and direct marketing, they are „variety seekers, innovative and impulsive” (Donthu and Garcia, 1999 cited in Allred et al., 2006:311). Moreover, e-loyalty at the level of online consumers is under the clear influence of factors like „customization, contact interactively, care community, convenience, cultivation, choice and character” (Srinivasan et. a., 2002 cited in Allred et al., 2006, p. 311), satisfaction being connected to „speed of service, promptness in delivery, quality of service encounter and the physical product delivery” (Jayawardhena et al., 2003, p. 61).

3.4.3. Models of online consumer buyer's behavior

On such a competitive market companies struggle to find out „the secret mechanism” that triggers the consumer's behavior. According to the specialized literature, there are several models of consumer buyers' behavior. One of the most quoted approach proposes the following: marketing and other stimuli (such as: product, price, place, promotion, economic, technological, political and cultural factors) enters the consumer's „black box” (given by buyer characteristics and buyer decision process) and produces certain responses (product choice, brand choice, dealer choice, purchase timing and purchase amount). The characteristics of information society have a heavy influence both on the dimensions of marketing or other stimuli and the consumer's

„black box”. Accordingly, we will present in the following lines a model of online consumer buyer’s behavior, as presented by Smith and Rupp (2003), who based their research on Kanuk and Schiffman (2000) and Mowen’s theories.

There are three main stages to describe the process of the online consumer’s decision-making behavior: the operational input, the process and the output stage. The first „is influenced by consumers’ recognition of a product need” (Smith and Rupp, 2003, p. 422) It consists of external stimuli, both socio-cultural influences, such as family, friends, social class, age group, economy, culture and websites’ marketing efforts to catch the attention of the online consumer: online shopping sites, free Internet, promotions (TV, radio, other sites), items directly sold online. Next is the process level, where psychological factors (motivation, perception, personality, attitudes and emotions) heavily influence the external inputs and afterwards trigger the response – „to buy or not to buy”. It is the stage of the actual consumer decision, where the consumers ask himself relevant questions connected to the recognition of need pre-purchase, search for information and evaluations of alternatives: „how much do I really need this?”, „should I look for a better price, or should I go with convenience?”, „if I don’t buy online, how else can I get the product?” Fundamental motivations in this process are connected to convenience, saving time and effort, comfort zone regarding security and privacy, but also selection and search for alternatives or better prices. It is an intertwined stage, which raises awareness of the complexity of the process and it reminds that „e-commerce strategies must take into account not only economic theories but also people’s online habits” (Smith and Rupp, 2003, p. 425). A clear example is in the seniors’ online purchase process, where Internet phobia is overcome as they spend more hours online, more frequently „becoming more comfortable and more likely to buy online” (Reisenwitz et al., 2007, p. 413) The more they surf the web, the more the positive attitude, „greater Internet purchasing and higher likelihood of future internet purchase” (Reisenwitz et al., 2007, p. 409). This fact brings into attention the importance of consumers’ comfort zone (Smith and Rupp, 2003, p. 425) on the online market. In addition to this, seniors’ online purchasing is enhanced by marketers’ illustration of the Internet as a means to „relate to the past through looking up old acquaintances, remembering loved ones, or finding vintage products” (Reisenwitz et al., 2007, p. 413). Lastly, the third stage is given by the output, the actual finality of this complex pattern, resulting either in the purchase or non-acquisition of the product or service.

3.4.4. Threats to the online consumer

Still, despite its rapid spread, online shopping faces a series of drawbacks, which are fuelled by consumers’ perception of numerous Internet threats. From viruses, spam, cookies, pop-ups, to identity theft, and other major security and privacy aspects (techno crooks, credit card fraud, loss of private information), all are issues to frighten the mind of the online consumer and make him seriously ponder about the actual cost of buying online. As presented in the first chapter, statistics show a rise in the number of threats from one year to another, while different consumer surveys point out concerns motivated by an increase perception of risk. Security is represented by the „protection

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against accidental or intentional disclosure to unauthorized persons, or unauthorized modification or destruction". Privacy consists of „the rights of individuals and organizations to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information is to be transmitted by others" (Udo, 2001, p. 165). Both represent fundamental aspects when shopping online, along with consumer comfort with the Internet and the virtual market. In addition to this, communication plays an essential part in the perception of risk. Companies try on daily basis to increase their consumers trust in their online stores (Andrews and Boyle, 2008, p. 61), examples including the following „the use of risk relievers or signalling cue-based-trust, such as money-back guarantees, return policies or security and privacy disclosures" (Andrews and Boyle, 2008, p. 62). Some web sites even introduced the „s" ending for their web address (https) to assure the consumer of their stability and risk-free online stores. However, it seems that the sceptical consumers are heavily influenced by the power of examples surrounding them. A qualitative research underlines that interpersonal communication and the power of example represent clinching arguments when it comes to going online for shopping. On the one hand, media reports, particularly television, „have made a significant, negative impact on the interviewees' affective perceptions of the risk involved" (Andrews and Boyle, 2008, p. 67). On the other hand, consumers are more likely to buy online as long as they have had a previous either personal or network friends or acquaintances online shopping experience.

All in all, from the above mentioned information, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, even if at a first glance, there is not such a widening gap between the online consumer and the traditional one, on closer inspection, the distinctions can actually make a difference when it comes to validating the online presence of companies. With a growing impact from one year to another, the online consumer is highly informed, innovative, and in a constant search for the best alternatives. Therefore, companies should keep in mind that they are operation on a new market, of a world-wide extent, where space and time barriers have disappeared. Moreover, with „technology now passing yet more control to customers, so that they can manage their intake of communications and filter out unwanted messages" (Gamble et al., 2007), organizations should adapt their strategies accordingly and acknowledge their online consumers' constantly shifting needs and expectations.

4. The Importance of the Online Consumer

The rising influence of the online consumer in nowadays' society is perceivable not only through companies constant marketing efforts but also at the level of official regulations. The need for an official legislation ensuring the security and right protection of the online consumer has gradually changed into a must in the informational age. Consumers' significant risk awareness, as well as concerning statistics connected to the numerous virtual threats, makes online consumer protection an issue of a growing importance.

In the USA, the Federal Trade Commission included a distinct category at the level of consumer protection, namely Computer and the Internet, including security

issues such as online shopping and e-payments, spam e-mails, web scams and other (Federal Trade Commission, Bureau of Consumer Information). Moreover, The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission incorporated the pages of Consumer Online Website (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission).

At a European level, the Commission introduced in 2007 a briefing guide for digital rights- eYouGuide-, regarding the main problems connected to web surfing, online services and goods acquisition. Practical at the level of web sites ending in „eu”, the guide was rapidly followed by a regulation proposal in this domain, namely the „Digital Agenda” with 8 main intervention domains (Boghian, 2009). However, despite the high number of online shoppers, 150 million (Teodorescu, 2008), it seems that only a small percentage-12%- of the European Internet users are truly confident when buying online (Eurobarometer, 2009, Confidence in the Information Society, p. 6). Therefore, by far stricter settlements are needed when it comes to the online consumer. As Meglena Kuneva, the European Commissioner for Consumer Affairs stated, „If we want consumers to shop around and exploit the potential of digital communications, then we need to give them confidence that their rights are guaranteed. That means putting in place and enforcing clear consumer rights that meet the high standards already existing in the main street. Internet has everything to offer consumers, but we need to build trust so that people can shop around with peace of mind” (EYouGuide, Kuneva).

Romania is still at the beginning when it comes to online consumer security, with no actual regulation accounting for online consumer protection. Our country has yet to catch up with the European’s clear directions in this area. It is worth mentioning that EU is at the 7th Safer Internet Day, that „promotes safer and more responsible use of online technology and mobile phones, especially amongst children and young people across the world” (InSafe, 2010).

Online shopping is a definite reality at the level of the 21st century, expanding from one day to another. In Romania, the first e-commerce shop appeared in 1997, „CyberShop.ro”, focusing on music CD sales, while in next to no time EShop.ro introduced a rudimentary but first online cart on the Romanian e-commerce market (Radu et al., 2008, p. 2). Thus the online commerce in Romania gain weight and reached the noticeable number of 2215 online shops in 2008 (see Table 1) (Radu et al., 2008, p. 8) In addition to this, in 2009, more than 60 online stores took part at the 4th edition of the E-commerce Awards, the only festivity in Romania that rewards the performance of the online shops (SmartNews, 2009).

Table 1

The evolution of the number of online shops in Romania

Number of online shops	Year	E-commerce evolution
3	2000	-
19	2001	633%
328	2005	231%
2215	2008	241%

Source: Adaptation from Radu et al. (2008), *Studiu privind dezvoltarea comerțului electronic in Romania*, p. 8.

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At a global level, there is an abundance of online shops, and a great many have actually transformed into real data basis offering products and services information for online consumers. They are true search engines, of a wide variety: from accommodation, to clothes, flowers, grocery, books, electronics, airline ticket bookings, a remarkable diversity waiting to be explored, compare prices and find the best bargains just at a „click“-s distance.

To sum up, the importance of the online consumer is emphasized through the emergent regulations at the official level, which bring into attention both security and privacy issues on the virtual market. Although just in its beginnings, online consumer protection plays an essential part in the informational society, as the number of threats increases on a daily basis. The wide variety of online shops and the search engines connected to them are clear examples of how companies try to meet the eye of their new and challenging consumers. In this context, it is of an utmost importance that for online consumer not only to have access to information about his rights but also to have the certainty that security and privacy are both respected and defended by law.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the Internet and the rapid pace development of new technologies opened the horizons towards a world-wide market, with no time and space barriers and a remarkable network booming business. In fact, nowadays' society spins around the informational age that triggered the appearance of a new consumer, as well as a techno-savvy generation that marks out the future evolution in the 21st century, Generation Y.

In the context of the „New Economy“, companies play on a highly competitive and dynamic market, constantly striving to satisfy the needs and preferences of a highly selective, well-informed and pretentious consumer. In addition to this, along with the new determinant traits of the traditional shopper, heavily influenced by Internet's global impact, organizations now face the emergence of a new type of customer, the online consumer, which operates in the world of e-commerce. With a steady growth from one year to another, the online consumer is hallmarked through his clear openness towards Internet usage and technology, constant search for alternatives as well as innovativeness. Driven either by better prices, wider variety, convenience, control or merely the hedonic shopping experience, the online customer represents a true challenge for marketers. However, having to face on a daily basis numerous virtual threats, the online consumers' need for official privacy and security regulations at a global level is an issue of a higher and higher importance.

All in all, specialized literature highlights the rising importance of the online shopper, as well as the need for further research that should predict and provide a better understanding of his evolution, preferences and habits. And with the appearance of Generation Y, digital natives, permanently updated, informed, connected, and what is more, the most active online shoppers, the prevailing profile of the 21st century consumer is indeed defined by a new and enhanced perspective.

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