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Computer-Simulated Environments in the Commercial Sector: Enhancing Customer Experience through 3D Spherical Image Technology

Marco PESTANA

Cape Peninsula University of Technology
marcopestana91@gmail.com

Johannes CRONJE

Cape Peninsula University of Technology
cronjej@cput.ac.za

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Abstract

This build and test study investigated the use of immersive environments in the commercial sector, focusing on 3D Spherical Image Technology to enhance the customer experience and explored user engagement in virtual reality experiences, in the context of integrated marketing communication (IMC). A 3D immersive shop was developed and tested on seven people with marketing experience to determine customer satisfaction. Seven themes emerged from the interview data: Pandemic challenges, design challenges, design improvement, safety during the pandemic, accessibility, business growth and efficiency. Four themes emerged for further research: Effectiveness and Impact of immersive marketing, technical considerations, business strategies and adaptation, and social media and consumer behavior.

Keywords: Immersive environments, 3D Spherical Image Technology, customer experience, user engagement, integrated marketing communication.

JEL classification: L81, M31.

Introduction

This feasibility pilot study investigated the use of immersive environments in the commercial sector, focusing on 3D Spherical Image Technology to enhance customer experience and engagement, in the context of integrated marketing communication (IMC). The research addresses the agenda for augmented reality (AR) proposed by Jayaswal and Parida (2023). It covers aspects such as consumer psychology, individual differences in AR acceptance, stakeholders' views on AR deployment in e-commerce, user-friendly interfaces, factors influencing adoption, and the pandemic's impact on AR success. The study was driven by four key questions:

1. How does user engagement vary within virtual reality experiences offered through computer-simulated virtual environments in the commercial sector?
2. What design challenges are faced by users of immersive virtual spaces?
3. How does embedded digital communication contribute to enhancing customer engagement within immersive virtual spaces?
4. What is the impact of technology, especially 3D Spherical Image Technology, on the transformation of marketing strategies and user engagement within virtual reality environments during a pandemic?

Literature review

In keeping with the research questions listed above this literature review covers four aspects:

- Enhancing end-user engagement and experience in immersive settings

- Shaping the modern world via computer simulation systems and digital touch points and design considerations
- Leveraging integrated marketing communication for user engagement in immersive virtual reality spaces
- Impacting and transforming marketing strategies and user engagement using technology within virtual reality environments amid a pandemic

End-user engagement

During the COVID-19 pandemic, technology played a crucial role in helping businesses adapt to new challenges, manage digital customers, and predict consumer behavior. Innovative marketing techniques attract customers to the market, leading to research on their influence on marketing strategy (Giantari et al., 2022; Ysik and Opaciski, 2019; Filip et al., 2018). AR and VR are important tools in business marketing strategies in various industries, and they help boost sales and draw in clients (Mazurek, 2011). Combining real and virtual worlds in AR makes it easy for users to get involved and interact smoothly with 3D objects, creating an exciting user experience. (Stuart, 2018). VR in marketing improves promotion of products and services, and these technologies let businesses create unique and immersive experiences that grab customers' attention. (Bonetti, Warnaby, and Quinn, 2018) (Scott, 2016; Mandelbaum, 2015).

Design considerations

Customer experience involves interactions a customer has with a company over their lifetime, emphasizing personalization and memorability (Ratcliff, 2015). Successful customer experiences include sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational aspects, and move beyond mere functionality (Schmitt, 1999). Customer Experience Management (CMX) involves five steps: understanding the customer's world, establishing an experiential platform, crafting a brand experience, guiding the customer's journey, and continuous improvement (Schmitt, 1999). Edelman and Singer (2015) propose evaluating customer experiences from a journey perspective for overall enhancement. Technologies like self-service counters can impact customer experiences (Verhoef et al., 2009). Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are immersive technologies that revolutionize how businesses and market research add value to customer experiences (Vo et al., 2022). AR significantly influences brand experiences, interactive advertising, and consumer engagement in marketing (Scholz and Smith, 2016). VR with eye-tracking headsets helps to assess customer perceptions and intentions, facilitating in-store product placement and flexible design adjustments (Białowąs et al., 2019). Emerging technologies like AR and VR engage customers in personalized experiences that bridge mobile platforms and physical stores (Orús et al., 2021). Virtual showrooms offer a store-like experience at home, letting customers explore products at their pace (Yoon et al., 2010). Interaction in computer-generated environments is a pivotal development in VR and AR (Yoon et al., 2010). Customer loyalty and managing comprehensive customer experiences pose challenges for competitors (Homburg et al., 2017).

Integrated marketing communication

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) ensures transparent and continuous communication with stakeholders, helping businesses create consistent brand identities and seamless product experiences across various media (Rehman, 2022). IMC combines various communication specialties to create compelling marketing messages that influence customer decisions, building brand loyalty (Kitchen, 2010; Camilleri, 2018; Kitchen, 2010; Keller, 2000). A consistent brand identity across various media platforms enhances a company's image

and stakeholder connections (Yeshin, 2008). IMC effectively uses both traditional and modern media in marketing campaigns, playing a vital role in multi-channel advertising and public relations in immersive VR worlds (Yeshin, 2008). In immersive VR settings, IMC benefits from digital marketing, improving communication with the target audience, and enabling precise customer targeting based on their interests and actions (Athey et al., 2013). Data-driven marketing in VR helps create compelling advertising and brand messages (Tan et al., 2022). VR fosters deep user engagement with products and services (Yoon et al., 2010), blurring the lines between physical and digital realms through interactive experiences and 360-degree virtual tours. As VR shapes the future of marketing, understanding in-game marketing communication (IMC) is crucial for long-term customer loyalty and competitiveness.

The pandemic and transforming marketing strategies

Technology played a crucial role in marketing decisions during COVID-19. Entrepreneurs relied on technology for various aspects, including product validation, development, market research, and identifying opportunities (Morrish and Jones, 2020). Entrepreneurial innovation is vital during a pandemic, ensuring that products and services are ready for the market (Sharma et al., 2020). Various sources of funding are necessary to support entrepreneurial ventures (Mogaji et al., 2020). During the pandemic, entrepreneurs used AI to analyze opportunities (Bartlett and Burton, 2020; Ploum et al., 2018; Polas and Raju, 2021). Information technology helped businesses adapt to the pandemic, using technologies such as the Internet of Things, robots, AI, and data analytics to improve business processes (Nah and Siau, 2020). Social media marketing and internet technology influenced corporate operations during the pandemic, and adopting internet and e-business technology was positively influenced by perceived benefits and external factors (Patma et al., 2020). Entrepreneurs employ a combination of societal norms, external factors, and personal perspectives that allow them to develop products, processes, and marketing methods (Jahanshahi et al., 2020). The pandemic has led to breakthrough AI-based products and services, creating new entrepreneurial opportunities. Technology, like AI-powered chatbots, assists in handling customer inquiries quickly and sensibly (Javaid et al., 2020). As customers are concerned about virus transmission, remote interactions become vital. AI-powered online services help business owners make relevant marketing decisions during COVID-19 (McCall, 2020). Technology streamlines opportunities' identification, development, and exploitation, which reduces operational costs and fosters entrepreneurial spirit. These factors influence marketing choices positively (Boone et al., 2019; Murnieks et al., 2020). Moreover, technology plays a crucial role in data processing and informs marketing decisions based on customer feedback (Polas et al., 2020). AI-enabled data management systems enhance security, fraud detection, and overall operations during the pandemic (Di Vaio et al., 2020). AI allows businesses to understand their ideal customers, their needs, and anticipate their behavior, aiding marketing plans (Ienca and Vayena, 2020; Haider Syed et al., 2020; Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020).

Method

This build-and-test experiment used the ADDIE (analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation) process to produce and evaluate a computer simulated virtual environment using 3D Spherical Image Technology in a commercial context. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews during the analysis and evaluation phases. The analysis of the data involved identifying themes and patterns in the participants' responses using NVivo.

Participants

Seven participants were chosen through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2014) from a larger group of experienced stakeholders in retail, marketing, and IT fields. All the participants had educational backgrounds related to these areas. The sample included two men and five women. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. Participants were first given the opportunity to interact with a virtual tour of a shop using 3D Spherical Image Technology. The environment was developed and tested using the ADDIE model.

Analysis: involved identifying the research problem, objectives, and target audience for examining user engagement in virtual reality experiences using 3D Spherical Image Technology in commercial environments.

Design and development involved selecting a physical retail store with a digital twin in the form of an online store. A 3D Spherical Image was created of the interior of the store using an Insta360 camera and Matterport platform. Hotspots were added that link to YouTube videos, Websites with more information, larger images of the goods on display and to the online store where items could be purchased. The virtual store also linked to the Facebook and Instagram profiles of the store, as well as the Twitter feed.

These processes culminated in the scenes described below as Figure 1 to Figure 4. The online artefact can be viewed at <http://bit.ly/3Qe7cJ9>. At the outset of a Matterport virtual tour, the entry view presents a scene, chosen to showcase a striking aspect of the environment to be explored. It resembles the gateway into a new world. Users can observe the entire scene in a 360-degree panorama, allowing for exploration in all directions, just like turning one's head. Interactive elements may comprise links or icons facilitating navigation to different locations within the tour. Figure 1 illustrates the initial glimpse of the store environment when commencing the virtual tour. A play button triggers scrolling and/or viewing.

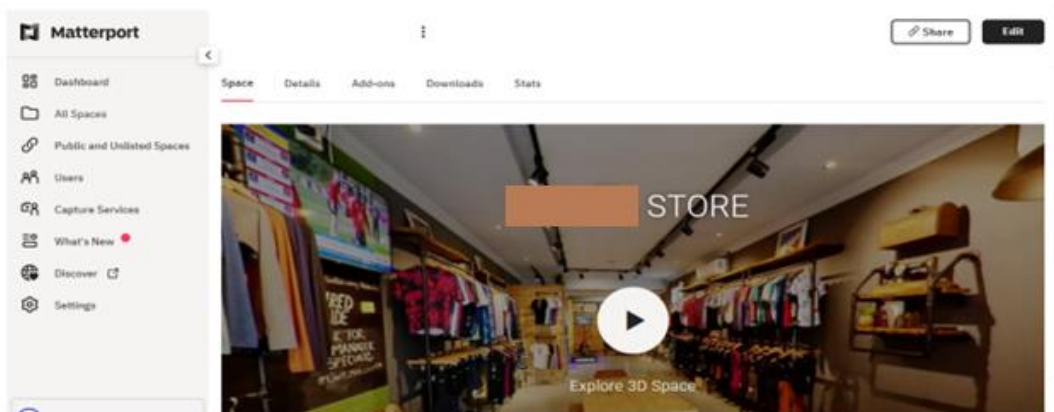


Figure 1 The environment

The store incorporates strategically placed embedded YouTube links within the virtual tour at specific points of interest. These links are clickable hotspots, which users can easily identify visually and interact with by clicking or tapping. Figure 2 shows the outcome of clicking on the highlight reel within the blue icon, demonstrating how integrated video content is launched within the virtual tour.

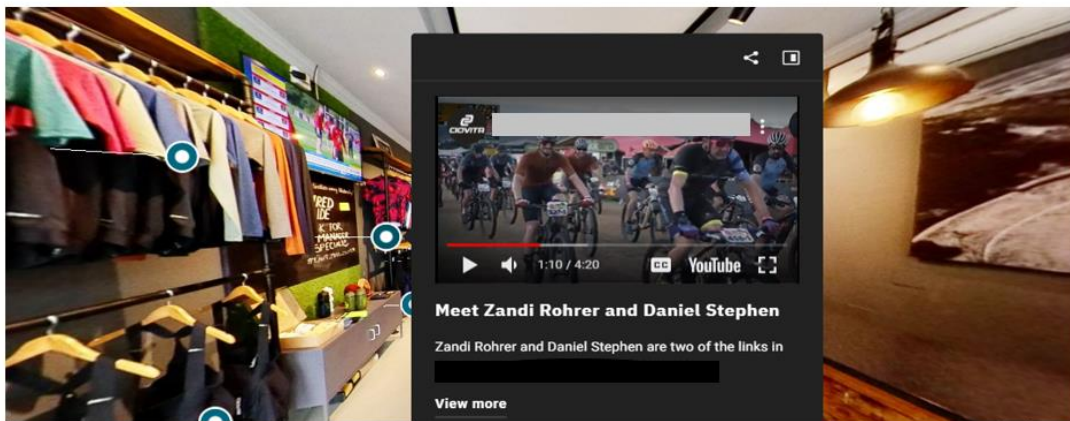


Figure 2 The store

The Virtual Tour includes embedded website links that redirect users to additional information or content. Clicking the blue icon displays a heading indicating the associated content type and redirects the user to the website (Figure 3). The Bird's Eye View, resembling a top-down floor plan, grants users an overhead perspective of the entire virtual space. This view offers a concise visual representation of the space's layout, illustrating the interconnections between various areas. Figure 4 visually demonstrates the Bird's Eye View, offering a comprehensive portrayal of the scanned environment's contents and perspectives.

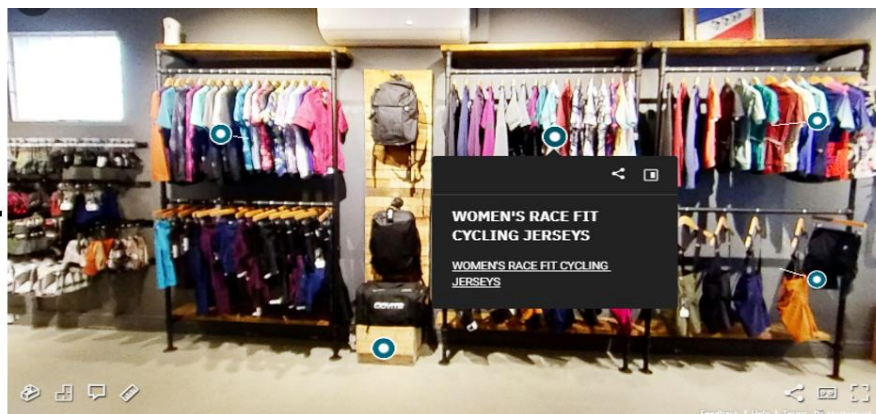


Figure 3 Features of the virtual tour

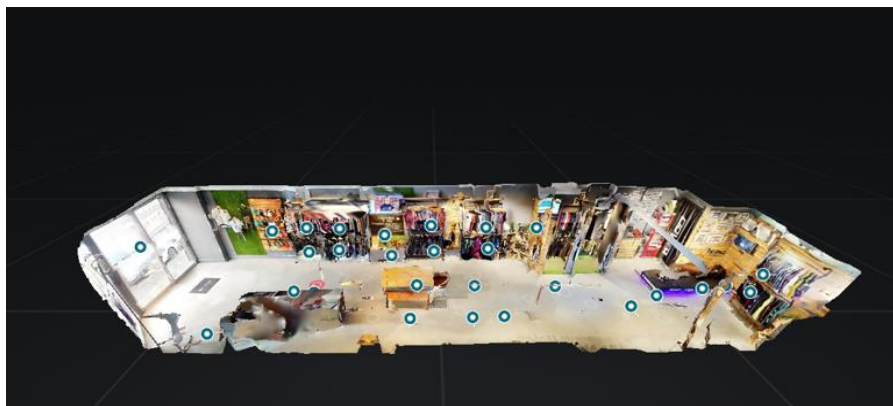


Figure 4 Birdseye and Dollhouse views

In the *Implementation and Evaluation* phase of the ADDIE framework, the artefact (virtual environment) was implemented and tested with participants. The next section will describe the results of the user testing and how the research questions are answered.

Findings

Seven themes emerged from the responses to the four questions: Pandemic challenges, Design challenges, Design improvement, Safety reasons during the pandemic, Ease of access Business growth, and Efficiency.

Research Question 1: The impact of Integrated Marketing Communications in Virtual Reality Environments during a Pandemic

This initial research question focused on unraveling the challenges encountered amid the pandemic. Participants shared insights in response to how the COVID-19 lockdown affected them. The insights collected were grouped under the theme "Pandemic Challenges".

Theme 1 – Pandemic challenges Respondents indicated that Face-to-face selling is easier than digital, but the pandemic limited physical traffic to the stores. Older people are used to the normal way of shopping, which involves physically touching a product that gives it a high selling power.

Research Question 2: User Challenges in Immersive Virtual Spaces

This research question aimed to uncover the challenges faced by users of immersive virtual spaces. The responses obtained from participants were categorized under the theme "Design Challenges," which encompassed three sub-themes: "Confusion for First-time Users," "Redirection from 3D Space," and "Font Size."

Theme 2 - Design Challenges Users encountered issues related to navigation, pricing, and product location. Many found it confusing to navigate the immersive space, especially if they were new to digital environments. The presence of links in the 3D space that directed users to external e-commerce websites also raised concerns, as it risked redirecting users away from the immersive experience. Additionally, participants found the font size too large, necessitating continuous scrolling.

Research Question 3: Enhancing Customer Engagement through Embedded Digital Communication in Immersive Virtual Spaces

This research question explored participants' suggestions for improving the immersive environment based on their challenges. The insights provided by the participants were examined and presented under the theme "Design Improvement."

Theme 3 - Design Improvement Participants recommended enlisting a technology partner to enhance the design of the 3D space, aiming to alleviate information overload. They suggested aligning the immersive space with the cleanliness and organization of a physical store to prevent data overload. Improving navigation, display shelves, and the connectivity of links redirecting users to external websites were noted as areas for enhancement. Furthermore, participants proposed incorporating real images of individuals within the 3D space and offering live feedback or frequently asked questions to enhance the customer experience.

Research Question 4: Impact of Technology on Marketing Strategies and User Engagement in Virtual Reality during a Pandemic

An additional aim of this study was to investigate the underlying reasons behind the adoption of immersive technology by businesses during the pandemic. Participants' responses

were examined and categorized into four themes: "Safety During the Pandemic," "Accessibility," "Business Growth," and "Efficiency."

Theme 4 - Safety During the Pandemic Participants acknowledged that restrictions on in-person gatherings in business establishments prompted the adoption of immersive access. They thought it reduced physical interaction, thus contributing to disease prevention

Theme 5 - Accessibility Ease of access was one big advantage of this design, as it provided an opportunity to experience spaces without physical travel. Participants felt that it could give access to people who might not have access to certain products. The 3D space's ability to accommodate multiple viewers at the same time could improve company exposure.

Theme 6 - Business Growth The immersive design could be used to acquire new businesses and boost sales for existing ones. Participants noted that the design allowed improved inventory management based on historical data which would enable companies to meet customer needs more effectively. It was also beneficial for marketing and advertisements, because it gave a comprehensive visualization of store items. Participants also noted the 3D model's role in providing additional product and company information. These features were linked to social media, to enhance companies' online community growth.

Theme Seven - Efficiency Participants mentioned that that the 3D space offered a cost-effective replication of physical stores in 3D, which could lead to savings in time and transport costs. Participants also highlighted the that the design was easy to understand.

Conclusions

This study has found that immersive technologies can contribute to business success through facilitating easy access to products, expanding business growth through online capacity, and exploring cost savings and enhanced efficiency.

Theoretical, Methodological and Practical Contributions of the Study

The study evaluated a computer-simulated environment using 3D spherical image technology to enhance customer experience in the retail industry. The study combined design-and-build approach, theoretical foundations, empirical strategy, and the ADDIE model. The study produced guidelines for evolving computer-simulated environments and best practices in the retail industry.

Limitations and Further Research

Limitations of the study included the COVID-19 pandemic itself which precluded the wider collection of feedback from customers. Thematic analysis of interview data resulted from personal perception of a relatively small sample of participants. The study explored participant responses linked to a single retail context. Further research may benefit from using a larger sample size and including a broader range of participants from fields other than only marketing. Finally the interview questions and comments from respondents focused on the positive aspects of the environment. More attention should be given to investigating the negative aspects.

Further research could be conducted in other spaces. Four themes emerge for further research:

Theme 1: Effectiveness and Impact of Immersive Marketing, including the effectiveness of integrated marketing communications in immersive settings, the impact of virtual reality environments on consumer satisfaction and loyalty, and across various products and services.

Theme 2: Technical Considerations of implementing immersive technology in marketing contexts, barriers and challenges businesses encounter when implementing virtual reality environments and recommendations for overcoming them and user-friendly design.

Theme 3: Business Strategies and Adaptations such as a comparative analysis of digital and traditional marketing strategies, and transition from in-person to online shopping.

Theme 4: Social Media and Consumer Behavior: Ethical considerations, the influence of external links on user engagement and the integration of immersive technology with social media for expanding online communities and boosting sales.

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Investigating Customer Perceptions of Using Internet Services Providers' Websites to Access Internet Services in Tembisa Township

Farai NYIKA

Management College of Southern Africa (MANCOSA)
farai.nyika@mancosa.co.za

Mphokhethwa NDOU

Management College of Southern Africa (MANCOSA)
mphokhethwandou@gmail.com

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Abstract

Economic ecosystems are found in township markets, which are defined by lower income levels, distinct consumer behavior, limited digital access, and a rich cultural diversity. Website sales of internet-related goods and services are crucial to the survival of South African Internet Service Provider (ISP) businesses in today's digital economy. This research looked at the opinions of internet users about websites of ISPs based in the Tembisa township of Gauteng, South Africa. The research added to the growing body of knowledge on digital accessibility and targeted marketing approaches. The research was qualitative in nature and used a group of 10 subjects. Semi-structured interviews comprising 9 questions were conducted with participants. The study's findings revealed that limited internet access and language barriers were critical concerns. Participants emphasized the need for improved infrastructure, affordable internet packages, multilingual websites, and transparent security measures to enhance trust in online transactions. Some of the recommendations made by the study include creating personalized internet bundles, advertising in a way that is sensitive to different cultures, providing support in more than one language, making cybersecurity a top priority, and providing digital customer service. Businesses, politicians, and groups working to close the digital gap and advance inclusive and equitable economic development can benefit from the study's findings, which deepened our comprehension of digital dynamics in township markets and consumer behavior.

Keywords: internet services providers, marketing; customer service, online sales, digital inclusion.

JEL classification: M31, M37.

1. Introduction

Township markets tend to be underserved and represent unique economic ecosystems distinguished by social, cultural, and economic factors (Miana, 2021). These markets are characterized by lower income levels, unique consumer behavior, limited digital access, and a rich cultural diversity. Township markets are generally situated close to central business districts, but they differ in infrastructure, income levels, consumer behavior, and digital access (Lorenz et al., 2019). Notably, diverse consumer bases with varying needs exist, characterized by price sensitivity and cultural influences (Das Nair, 2020).

There has been progress in digital technology in South Africa (S.A.), yet there is still a digital divide that reflects the divisions that existed under apartheid, especially in the townships (Leurs and Shepherd, 2017). Business initiatives by Vodacom and Vumatel, as well as government initiatives emphasized in President Ramaphosa's State of the Nation speech, sought to address the persistent issue of inequality in access to technology (Presidency, 2022:14).

Despite existing research on township markets (e.g. Nwafor, 2020; Mahlangu, et al. 2020; Masojada, 2021; van Eyk, Amoah, and Yase, 2022), a gap remains in understanding the

specific obstacles faced by ISP Organizations when using websites as their primary sales channel in these markets. While some studies touched upon the general obstacles related to lower income levels, limited digital access, language barriers, and consumer trust, there was a lack of in-depth exploration and understanding of how these challenges manifested in the context of website-based sales for a specific ISP Organization.

For example, Mbatha, (2020) concentrated on the issues of security and trust, emphasizing the difficulties that underserved areas face in navigating websites; however, their study did not explore recommendations, nor did it delve into the reasons behind the prevalence of these challenges. There is limited research that delves into the specific strategies and approaches businesses could adopt to navigate the complexities of website-based sales in township markets. As the digital environment continued to evolve, new challenges and opportunities have emerged, warranting a more current and relevant analysis (Torous et al. 2021).

Millions of South African live in townships, presenting a large potential customer base that desires to use internet services. The aim of this study was to investigate and understand the perceptions of customers in Tembisa township in Gauteng, South Africa when using websites owned by South African Internet Service Provider (ISP) companies. This study has two research questions that are as follows:

- What are the experiences of township customers in accessing internet services, using websites owned by ISPs?
- What practical recommendations can be derived to enhance website-based sales in township markets, to promote equitable economic development and bridge the digital divide?

Conducting this study is important for several reasons. Firstly, it is important for ISP companies as it directly addresses the challenges, they encounter in utilizing websites as their primary sales channel in S.A township markets. By identifying and dissecting these challenges, the study provides these organizations with actionable insights and practical recommendations to enhance their website-based sales strategies, ultimately improving their market penetration and sales performance.

Secondly, this study benefits the township residents by focusing on promoting more equitable digital access and economic development in underserved areas. By addressing the barriers to online sales in township markets, it contributes to bridging the digital divide, enabling residents to access essential internet services more easily.

Finally, this research adds to the body of knowledge in the study area by offering a nuanced understanding of the specific challenges faced by organizations in township markets. It also contributes by providing recommendations tailored to this unique context, benefiting both businesses and policymakers working towards inclusive economic development.

2. Literature Review

According to Gounaridis et al. (2018), township marketplaces can be great places for businesses to grow. Rapid urbanization, population growth, and increasing disposable incomes were common features of these marketplaces. The potential for township marketplaces to attract new customers, broaden a company's consumer base, and stimulate economic growth in underserved areas was highlighted by Swati, (2020).

While there was a lot of promise in township markets, studies had also shown that companies there faced certain special difficulties. According to Msosa (2023), one of the main challenges was the lower income levels that were common in township areas. Consequently, buyers in these marketplaces frequently cared most about cost-effectiveness. Inadequate digital infrastructure and restricted access to the internet also made it difficult for township markets to successfully conduct business online. Because of this internet outage, not only were

consumers unable to complete online purchases, but companies also struggled to contact their ideal clients (Lee and Lee, 2020).

Language barriers were another crucial aspect that added complexity to website-based sales in township markets. In many cases, residents of these areas preferred local languages or dialects over the dominant official language used in mainstream digital platforms. This linguistic diversity called for businesses to adopt multilingual strategies to effectively engage with their potential customers (Elo et al. 2022).

Another major obstacle was the fact that some township people just do not trust online purchases. Possible consumers may be hesitant to shop online due to worries about security, privacy of personal information, and the reliability of online retailers. To thrive in these marketplaces, companies had to earn customers' trust through online purchases (Arifin et al. 2018).

It is necessary to develop marketing tactics that are relevant to township markets and online sales strategies had to take community dynamics and cultural factors into account (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). For the implementation to be a success, it was essential to understand the digital preferences and behaviors of customers in these areas.

The literature on online sales and township markets has already set a solid groundwork by recognizing the opportunities and threats of serving these neglected regions. When developing sales strategies for these markets, experts have stressed the significance of taking community dynamics, linguistic preferences, and cultural influences into account (Stallkamp and Schotter, 2021).

2.1. Theoretical framework

To begin understanding the complex and varied township market, we looked to market segmentation theory for a foundational framework. A wide range of cultural influences, customer tastes, and socioeconomic statuses were represented in these marketplaces. To better serve their customers in township markets, ISPs should use market segmentation theory to divide their clientele into different groups with unique needs. Tomlinson (2017) found that this method increased the success of online sales by tailoring marketing campaigns to each audience's specific traits and interests.

Another important theoretical consideration in relation to township marketplaces was comprehending customer behavior. The purchase decisions of consumers in these disadvantaged locations were influenced by cultural factors, low-income levels, and limited internet access (Thomas et al., 2019). To meet the requirements and expectations of customers in township markets, ISPs should research their motives, views, and tastes to create website experiences that are tailored to them.

3. Research Methodology

This study's research strategy is qualitative and based on an exploratory design. Understanding the complex social phenomena and acquiring deep insights from individuals' viewpoints is best accomplished through the qualitative approach. According to Dawaddi et al. (2021), an exploratory design permits thorough examination, enables for the research process to be adjusted according to new results, and makes use of qualitative approaches like interviews to catch relevant data.

An interpretivist research philosophy was utilized for this investigation. Given the nature of the research challenge and the complexity of the social phenomena within these markets, as well as the cultural diversity, limited internet access, and consumer behaviors that shape them, an interpretivist approach was appropriate (Bremner, 2017). The research strategy utilizes semi-structured interviews, which include nine questions that were answered freely. The

interpretivist research method is well-suited to interviews because it allows participants to freely share their subjective opinions and thoughts. The study's aims and the thorough exploration of participants' viewpoints were carefully considered while crafting each question.

Depending on participant preferences and logistical factors, the semi-structured interviews could be done remotely or in person. The interviewees were put at ease and allowed to freely express their thoughts and feelings because the setting was secure and pleasant. Accurate data capture and analysis were aided by obtaining prior consent from participants to record the interviews. The typical duration of an interview was between twenty-five and forty-five minutes. This time limit was suitable for both the participants and the researcher, allowing for an in-depth examination of their findings.

Participants in this study were residents of the Tembisa township who are current or former users of Internet service providers (ISPs) in the area. Ten participants served as the study subjects, with a target demographic of one hundred current and former clients. The study's exploratory character involved delving deeply into participants' unique viewpoints on the difficulties encountered by South African ISPs operating in township markets. Also, with the limited resources available for qualitative research, we were able to examine the study problem thoroughly with a manageable and practical group of subjects of 10 people, and all participants successfully responded to all the questions from the discussion interview guide. Data saturation was achieved by carefully selecting subjects that adequately addressed the study's unique aims, which were to offer a comprehensive knowledge of the difficulties.

The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a powerful and adaptable tool for discovering themes, patterns, and significance in qualitative data. To uncover important insights and recurring patterns connected to the research objectives, the interview replies are coded and categorized in a methodical manner. Rather of relying on statistical methods, we will be utilizing qualitative data analysis software like NVivo to help us organize, code, and understand the data efficiently.

Several ethical considerations were implemented to ensure the protection and well-being of the participants. The following are some of the most important things to keep in mind: getting participants' informed consent, protecting their confidentiality and anonymity, and getting the necessary permissions. The research was impartial since it avoided gender preconceptions, used gender-neutral terminology, did not identify individuals by race or ethnicity, did not assume their ages, and did not use any other identifying information (see Table 1). These procedures aid in giving an impartial and fair assessment of the participants' experiences, which is consistent with ethical norms.

4. Results and Discussion

This section begins with an overview of participants' ages and their overall encounters while using websites for purchasing goods and services in Tembisa township. All 10 participants successfully responded to all the questions from the discussion guide. The study identified six key themes: digital access barriers, cultural diversity impacts, economic constraints, website user experience, customer service concerns, and, finally, trust and security issues.

Table 1. Subjects characteristics

Age of participants	Number of participants
18-25	4
26-30	3
31-40	2
41 and over	1

Source: Authors' calculations

4.1 Qualitative analysis thematic

The following sections delve deeper into each of these identified themes.

Theme 1: Digital access barriers

The research sought to find out from its participants specific difficulties or frustrations they encountered while trying to purchase products from ISP website in Tembisa Township. Respondent 2 said: *“I have challenges trying to navigate X website, I just find it to be too complex”*. Respondent 5 mentioned: *“How am I expected to navigate through a website to buy internet services, when I don’t have internet looking for internet? They need it consider navigating their websites just like famous banks do, free of charge”*.

People in Tembisa township encounter difficulties while trying to buy goods and services online through ISP websites, which is why digital access restrictions became a major subject in the study. Ndulu, Ngwenya, and Setlhalogile, (2022) cites research that shows how digital access barriers can include things like slow internet, outdated technology, and high prices for gadgets. Specific investments in digital infrastructure, efforts to lower the cost of internet access, and community-based programs to increase digital literacy are all suggestions for addressing this issue in township marketplaces. Bridging these gaps can contribute to a more inclusive and accessible online environment.

Theme 2: Cultural diversity impacts

The theme of ‘cultural diversity impact’ emerged as a significant aspect influencing the challenges faced by individuals using ISP websites in the diverse cultural landscape of Tembisa. Respondent 1 said: *“diverse cultural perspectives influence preferences and expectations; ISP cannot just copy and paste a website used in Sandton (a wealthy part of Johannesburg) to townships”*. Respondent 6: *“Most people here are not fluent in English so immediately when I see a jargon, or misunderstand anything I step away, I don’t want to purchase or sign up for things I don’t understand”*.

Work by Smith (2019) and Hoel and Chen et al. (2020), highlights the profound influence of cultural diversity on consumer behaviors and preferences. In Tembisa, with its rich cultural tapestry, varying cultural norms and practices were found to impact users' interactions with ISP websites. For instance, the study revealed that website content and interfaces not aligned with the cultural expectations of certain demographic groups led to disengagement.

Theme 3: Economic Constraints

The theme of economic constraints highlights the challenges faced by individuals in Tembisa township concerning their financial capacity to access and utilize internet services from ISPs.

Respondent 3 stated that: *“being locked into a contract by ISPs does not really work in markets like this, most people do piece jobs and do not have a constant clearly put out income”*. Respondent 5 stated that: *“affordability is the issues, they should consider different prices or smaller packages”*.

Research has extensively examined the effects of socioeconomic determinants on digital inclusion in such settings, particularly in relation to economic restrictions (Udimal and Biyase, 2021; Wiid and Cant, 2021). The capacity to participate fully in online activities can be hindered when financial resources are inadequate to cover the costs of high-quality internet services.

Theme 4: Website User Experience

Respondent 4: *“I have a hard time navigating any ISP website and I would rather go to a store and get assistance there”*. Respondent 2: *“some websites are not friendly to the type of mobile devices we use, so proper formation of web pages to suite mobiles would be good”*.

According to Roux (2018), user experience encompasses pragmatic aspects like usability and efficiency, coupled with hedonic qualities such as aesthetics and emotional appeal. Participants in the study expressed challenges related to the navigation, design, and overall functionality of ISP websites.

Theme 5: Customer Service Concerns

Respondent 8 and 10 stated: *“it is difficult to find immediate assistance in a website, and usually their self-help guides to not include everything or are hard to follow”*.

The theme of Customer Service Concerns highlights the pivotal role of service interactions in influencing individuals' experiences with ISP websites in Tembisa. Work by Felix and Rembulan, (2023) emphasizes the significance of customer service in shaping overall customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Theme 6: Trust and security issues

Trust and security emerged as pivotal concerns in the study, reflecting participants' worries about the safety of their data on ISP websites.

Respondent 9: *“I have been scammed once buying things online, since then I have been careful to not put my banking details on websites*. Respondent 10: *“I don't buy things online, I have never felt comfortable giving banking information online, it's dangerous”*.

Online shoppers' trust in brands is a key factor in their propensity to make purchases (McKnight, 2019). There were concerns voiced by participants over the safety of their data and finances. Online shopping in township marketplaces might thrive in an atmosphere of increased trust.

Conclusions, limitations and future directions of research

This study explored challenges faced by Tembisa township residents using ISP websites, identifying six key themes: digital access barriers, cultural diversity impacts, economic constraints, website user experience, customer service concerns, and trust and security issues. Participants across diverse age groups highlighted difficulties in navigating complex websites, cultural expectations influencing interactions, economic challenges hindering accessibility, and concerns about website usability, customer support, and data security.

The study recommends targeted investments in digital infrastructure and community-based programs to improve internet accessibility. It is further recommended to provide culturally relevant content and perform sensitive user testing to address the implications of cultural diversity. Constrained budgets necessitate work with local authorities to reasonable price arrangements. Prioritizing usability testing and clean design is key to improving website user experience. Issues with customer service point to the necessity for both rapid response and detailed instructions for troubleshooting. The significance of strong security measures and transparent communication of privacy policies is highlighted by trust and security concerns. The overarching goal of these suggestions is to make internet access in Tembisa more accessible for all inhabitants by reducing digital divides and resolving the complex issues that locals have while making purchases through official ISP websites.

An important limitation of this study lies in the challenge of not being to generalize the findings beyond the specific context of the Tembisa township market in Johannesburg due to the limited group of investigated subjects. In addition, the unique socioeconomic and cultural

characteristics of this market may limit the applicability of results to townships that are in other South African provinces that are very diverse. Future research could investigate the experiences of different ISPs that operate in South African townships, to understand their experiences and challenges in trying to access and service these markets. That will be valuable in helping ISPs develop strategies that are better informed on the dynamics of operating in townships.

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Appendix: Interview questions

Identifying Challenges in ISPS Website for Online Product Purchases in Tembisa Township:

1. Can you share specific difficulties or frustrations encountered while trying to buy products on ISPs website in Tembisa Township? Provide details about your experiences.
2. What aspects of ISPs website do you find confusing or inconvenient during the purchasing process? How do these factors affect your online shopping experience?
3. In your view, what improvements could enhance ISPs website for a more seamless and user-friendly online purchasing process in Tembisa Township? Share any suggestions you may have.

Evaluating User Experience on ISPS's Websites in Tembisa ownship:

4. Describe your overall experience using ISPs websites in Tembisa Township. What aspects were particularly satisfying during your interactions?
5. What improvements would you recommend enhancing the user experience on ISPs websites in Tembisa Township?
6. Are there specific features or changes that would make the website more enjoyable and efficient for users like yourself?

Providing Recommendations to Enhance Online Product Purchasing for ISPS:

7. Based on your experiences, what strategies or improvements could ISPs implement to make their website more user-friendly for customers in Tembisa Township?
8. In your opinion, how important is customer support in the online product purchasing process, and how can ISPs better support customers through their website?
9. Are there additional services or features you believe would improve the overall experience?

Consumer Preferences for Internal Combustion Subcompact Sedan Cars in General Santos City, Philippines

Evann Keith TABASA

University of Mindanao
e.tabasa.521837@umindanao.edu.ph

Marvin CRUZ

University of Mindanao
marvin.cruz@umindanao.edu.ph

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the preferences of consumers for subcompact sedan cars in General Santos City, Philippines. This research may provide the car industry significant information as to how consumers process their car buying decisions that will in turn help car manufacturers and car dealerships develop market-driven marketing and sales strategies and tactics. Conjoint experimental research design was used in this study. Primary data were gathered through the use of a survey essentially structured using the orthogonally designed subcompact sedan car profiles that were rated by a total of 455 valid respondents based on their level of preference. Conjoint analysis revealed that consumers in General Santos City most prefer a subcompact sedan car which Price is USD. 16,044.00 ($\beta=0.037$), which Engine is 1.5 Liter - 4 Cylinder - 106 HP ($\beta=0.092$), which Safety feature is 6-7 SRS Airbags+Speed Sensing Doorlocks ($\beta=0.019$), which Fuel Efficiency is More than 12 Kilometers/Liter - City Driving ($\beta=0.145$) and which Brand is Honda - City ($\beta=0.400$). In addition, consumers place Brand as the most important attribute of a subcompact sedan car with overall relative importance of 43.065%, followed by Engine (18.898%), Price (17.088%), Fuel Efficiency (15.603%) and Safety (5.345%). Overall, majority of the consumers in General Santos City may choose Toyota - Vios as their Subcompact Sedan Car. This study recommends for car manufacturers to further nurture their car brands through advertising and other forms of promotion as consumers have the propensity to choose and purchase a subcompact sedan car primarily because of its brand.

Keywords: Subcompact sedan cars, preferences, conjoint analysis, simulated market shares.

JEL classification: M31.

Introduction

A developing country with an increasing population produces an increasing demand for mobility. The Philippines, as a developing country ranked 9th among the countries across the Asia Pacific Region with the highest passenger cars sold in the year 2020, with approximately 153,830 units, according to data from Statista (2021). In addition, on the same year nearly half of the Filipino households in the Philippines owned a motorcycle or tricycle, while about 10 percent owned either a car, jeep or van. Indeed, an automobile has increasingly become necessary for transportation and people wish to have at least one car to assist them in their daily activities such as shopping, going to work, and vacation travels (Hondori, Javanshir and Rabani, 2013). Moreover, there is an increasing number of cars plying on the roads due to the ease of availability of automobile loans, rise in salary and buying capacity among middle-income class (Mathur et. al., 2018).

Automobile products are considered to be the second most discretionary purchase of consumers next to purchasing a house, according to Vadivel and Jayaprakasam (2018). The purchase of automobiles involves a complex decision making considering many comparisons

and trade-offs among various attributes of different car models (Wu, Liao and Chatwuthikrai, 2014) with the increasing industry competition and given the evolving consumer behavior such as the consumers' considerations in choosing a car that suites their changing lifestyles (Priya and AnanthaLaxmi, 2017). In fact, the year 2018 has exhibited the progressive shift of preferences and attitudes of Filipino car buyers amidst tax reforms, price hikes, car model launches and other relevant developments such that car buyers seem to make more careful decisions as to which cars to purchase (Conoza, 2018).

With the intricacies of the behavioral characteristics of millennials, it is seemingly difficult to identify the preferences of the present generation towards cars (de Sa, Mainardes and Andrade, 2019). Manufacturers find it complicated to ascertain consumer preferences for cars as customers have extra demands in terms of evaluating the quality standards of a particular product (Jayaraman et. al., 2018). Nevertheless, car manufacturers need to understand why and how consumers buy in order to strategically introduce innovative and technological advancements on the cars they produce for them to remain competitive in the dynamic car industry (Lee and Govindan, 2014).

In the General Santos City market, dealerships of different car brands operate such as Honda, Toyota, Mitsubishi, Suzuki, Isuzu, Nissan, Mazda, Hyundai, Kia, Ford, Foton, Subaru and Chevrolet, with the entry of Morris Garages, Geely, Chery, Jetour and GAC in the recent years. The prevalent competition in General Santos consequently posts a lot more car brand alternatives for consumers to choose from. Indeed, competition is very high and dynamic in the automotive market as it is getting saturated with various car models competing with each other (Anandh and Sundar, 2014). Hence, the rationale of this study.

An article by Co (2023) from Autoindustria featured that the top selling car in the Philippines was a brand of subcompact sedan car for the year 2022. Thus, this study aimed to analyze the preferences of consumers for subcompact sedan cars in General Santos City. The result of this study would give car manufacturers and their local dealerships significant information for their perusal regarding the purchasing behavior among car buyers as to how different factors form the preferences of consumers for subcompact sedan cars. This study would serve as a basis for the improvement of their marketing and sales strategies and how else they can provide car owners and potential car buyers the superior customer value.

2. Aims of research

This study aimed to analyze the preferences of consumers for subcompact sedan cars in General Santos City. Specifically, this study sought to (1) Develop an aggregate model of consumers' overall preference for a subcompact sedan car; (2) Ascertain the relative importance of Price, Engine, Fuel Efficiency, Safety and Brand that form the preference structure of consumers in General Santos City; and (3) Simulate possible market shares among subcompact sedan car brands in General Santos City based on consumers' preference structures.

3. Literature review

3.1 Consumer preferences in the automobile industry

Automobiles play a critical role in people's daily life, which make them subject of interest in many academic fields. Consumers in their car buying decisions make their choices and other judgments based on their own preferences and personal requirements. This raises questions from manufactures and dealers with regards to the factors influencing the preferences of consumers towards their selection of car models (Lee and Govindan, 2014). Sharp (2012) recognized in his study that majority of consumers compare different brands and make their buying decisions by considering product quality and the benefits. Sharp further concluded that

products' benefits play significant role in constructing consumers' perceived value. In addition, Hondori, Javanshir and Rabani (2013) mentioned that one of the primary concerns in product development is to meet customers' wishes, which could be accomplished by detecting the most salient characteristics of products. Understanding the influence of product attributes to consumer preferences and shaping market offerings is important for marketing decisions about product development, brand extension and product positioning (Viswanathan and Childers, 1999).

Nevertheless, when asked about the relative importance of a number of key attributes of cars, consumers tend to simply respond that they are all important, thus a simple survey may not be that effective with regards to identifying the relative significance of car attributes (Wu, Liao and Chatwuthikrai, 2014). Moreover, consumers tend to evaluate the key attributes as a whole, rather than independently. Hence, studies on consumer preferences including that of Wu, Liao and Chatwuthikrai (2014) used conjoint analysis in order to carefully examine the individual and joint effect of attributes on consumers' preferences towards cars.

3.2 Conjoint analysis

Conjoint Analysis is a multivariate technique that can be used to analyze how consumers' preferences are formed towards a particular product or service. The analysis is premised that consumers judge the value of a product or service by combining the separate amounts of values provided by its attributes. Also, conjoint analysis assumes that estimates of consumers' preferences can be best measured using the attributes that form the product or service (Hair et. al, 2014). Further, Conjoint methodology includes the identification of the respondent's level of utility towards an array of stimuli or factors measurable by using part-worths (Green and Srinivasan, 1978).

One of the advantages of conjoint analysis as an analytical tool used in marketing lies in its ability to measure consumers' preferences at the individual level and reveal hidden motivations that may not even be known by the respondents themselves. The analysis gives a psychological profile of respondents' preferences and corresponding decision-making processes as it utilizes algebraic theory to study cognitive processes and to generate statistical estimations (Wu, Liao and Chatwuthikrai, 2014). Nevertheless, conjoint analysis also aggregates consumer preferences using all preferences from all respondent preference structures at the individual level.

Another advantage of using conjoint analysis as a multivariate technique in marketing is its ability to simulate preference shares or possible market shares among product or service alternatives with the use of different choice simulators (Hair et. al., 2014). Conjoint simulations can be performed in an attempt to understand how respondents choose among specified product or service alternatives. This process requires the use of part-worth utilities of the different levels of the attributes that form hypothetical profiles. Market shares may be estimated among a set of competing hypothetical product profiles based on the assumption that consumers would choose the product alternative with the highest overall utility for them. Furthermore, market shares are computed by counting the number of subjects for whom a particular hypothetical product or service profile offers the greatest utility and dividing the count by the total number of valid respondents in the study. (Dean, 2004).

4. Research methods

The current study primarily used the conjoint experimental research design. Conjoint experiment was performed in order to create the stimuli for modelling the preferences of consumers (Hair et. al., 2014) for subcompact sedan cars in General Santos City, Philippines. The use of the conjoint experiment method allowed the generation of the different profiles of

a subcompact sedan car with different levels of the salient car attributes that were ascertained in focus group discussions conducted among existing car owners and users in General Santos City.

The study was conducted in General Santos City, Philippines. General Santos City is a home to representatives of various car brands trying to sell to existing car owners, users and potential car buyers. Hence, General Santos City is a conducive locale where this study on consumer preferences for subcompact sedan cars was conducted.

The study involved existing car owners and users in General Santos City. They belong to the working class, either employed or self-employed. According to Orme (2010), the sample sizes of conjoint studies generally range from 150 to 1,200 respondents. Nevertheless, this study employed sample size formula using proportion (Cochran, 1954) in determining the right sample size, as this study dealt with a large population.

The researcher set out to collect responses from a target of 428 respondents. The actual number of responses collected reached up to 496. After cleaning the data base of incomplete and erroneous responses, a total of 455 valid responses were left for further analysis. Moreover, snowball sampling method, also called chain-referral sampling method was further used to reach out the respondents of this study. Those that did not quality according to the specified respondent criteria were excluded from this study. In addition, the respondents' involvement were completely voluntary and respondents could withdraw their involvement anytime without any fear of repercussions.

The study initially conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) involving 9 existing car owners and users in order to reduce the number of possible attributes of a subcompact sedan car into 5 salient attributes. After having identified, each salient attribute was given attribute levels based on how each car attribute behaves in the market, specifically based on the specifications of subcompact sedan cars available in General Santos City. The top 5 subcompact sedan car brands involved in this study were also determined by the FGD respondents.

The attributes and respective levels were then used to create different profiles of a subcompact sedan car, presented using the full-profile method which is a method of gathering ratings from respondents by presenting product profiles that are formed using the different combinations of the levels of each of the attributes. In addition, a fractional factorial design was also be used in order to reduce the number of product profiles into an optimal number, enough to estimate the consumers' preferences for subcompact sedan cars, while still meeting the statistical efficiency criteria given that the use of more attributes, attribute levels and product profiles in the conjoint experiment would render the analysis less accurate (Hair et al., 2014).

The final survey questionnaire of this study initially ascertained the profiles of the 455 respondents. Most essentially, the questionnaire was structured using the 29 profiles or designs of a subcompact sedan car with different combinations of the levels of the 5 salient attributes. Out of these product designs, 25 were actual profiles rated by respondents and were used to estimate the consumers' preferences while the remaining 4 were hold-out cases. These holdout cases were still rated by the respondents but were not used in the estimation of preferences. Instead, these cases were rather used to check the internal validity of the preference structure of consumers that were be modelled by this study (Umesh & Mishra, 1990). Moreover, this study employed a conjoint scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is "least preferable" and 7 being "most preferable", used by the final respondents of this study to rate the 29 profiles of a subcompact sedan car according to their own judgments of preferability. After the gathering of the data, the responses from the respondents were tabulated, processed and interpreted using the conjoint analysis in SPSS. Furthermore, the consumers' preference structure which was modelled by

the analysis was further used in conjoint simulations to simulate possible market shares of subcompact sedan car brands in General Santos City.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Aggregate model of consumers' overall preference for subcompact sedan cars

Table 1 Displays the overall utilities of the attribute levels forming the preference structure of consumers for subcompact sedan cars in General Santos City. The utility values were estimated using the respondents' ratings to the different profiles of a subcompact sedan car. An aggregated model of consumers' overall preference for a subcompact sedan car was then developed using the utility estimates and the additive model. The total value that consumers place on a subcompact sedan car was derived by adding the highest utility values of the levels of each of the attributes and the value of the constant.

Conjoint analysis reveals that consumers in General Santos City most prefer a subcompact sedan car which Price is USD. 16,044.00 ($\beta=0.037$), which Engine is 1.5 Liter - 4 Cylinder - 106 HP ($\beta=0.092$), which Safety feature is 6-7 SRS Airbags+Speed Sensing Door Locks ($\beta=0.019$), which Fuel Efficiency is More than 12 Kilometers/Liter - City Driving ($\beta=0.145$) and which Brand is Honda - City ($\beta=0.400$). The aggregate model of consumers' overall preference for subcompact sedan car is developed using the additive model:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Consumers' Overall Preference for Subcompact Sedan Car (Total Utility)} &= \text{Utility(USD. 16,044.00)} + \text{Utility(1.5 Liter - 4 Cylinder - 106 HP)} \\ &+ \text{Utility(6-7 SRS Airbags+Speed Sensing Door Locks)} + \text{Utility(More than 12 Kilometers/Liter - City Driving)} \\ &+ \text{Utility(Honda - City)} + \text{Constant} \\ &= 0.037 + 0.092 + 0.019 + 0.145 + 0.400 + 4.656 \\ &= 5.349 \end{aligned}$$

Table 1. Overall Utilities of the Attribute Levels Forming the Preference Structure of Consumers for Subcompact Sedan Cars in General Santos City

Attributes	Attribute Levels	Utility Est.	Std. Error
Price	USD. 16,044.00	0.037	0.032
	USD. 17,936.00	0.026	0.032
	USD. 18,525.00	-0.057	0.032
	USD. 18,721.00	-0.032	0.032
	USD. 19,506.00	0.026	0.032
Engine	1.0 Liter Turbo - 3 Cylinder - 99 HP	-0.083	0.032
	1.2 Liter - 3 Cylinder - 78 HP	-0.123	0.032
	1.5 Liter - 4 Cylinder - 106 HP	0.092	0.032
	1.5 Liter - 4 Cylinder - 119 HP	0.085	0.032
	1.6 Liter - 4 Cylinder - 126 HP	0.028	0.032
Safety	6-7 SRS Airbags	-0.019	0.016
	6-7 SRS Airbags+Speed Sensing Door Locks	0.019	0.016
Fuel Efficiency	Below 10 Kilometers/Liter - City Driving	-0.161	0.022
	10-12 Kilometers/Liter - City Driving	0.016	0.022
	More than 12 Kilometers/Liter - City Driving	0.145	0.027
Brand	Nissan – Almera	-0.217	0.032
	Toyota – Vios	0.366	0.032
	Honda – City	0.400	0.032
	Hyundai – Accent	-0.251	0.032

Mitsubishi - Mirage G4	-0.297	0.032
Constant	4.656	0.017

4.2 Relative importance of the attributes forming the preference structure of consumers

Table 2 shows the overall relative importance of the attributes forming the preference structure of consumers for subcompact sedan cars in General Santos City. The relative importance of the attributes were derived by calculating the range between the highest and the lowest utility values of each attribute divided by the sum of all the ranges. The calculations were done for each respondent and were averaged to aggregate the relative importance of each attribute of subcompact sedan car. The overall relative importance of each of the attributes is relative only to this study, as the ranges of utility values may vary across different conjoint experiments.

Conjoint analysis reveals that consumers in General Santos City consider Brand as the first and most important attribute of a subcompact sedan car with overall relative importance of 43.065%. Thus, brand is indeed an important car attribute that influences the buying decisions of consumers. This supports the result of the study of Amron (2018) which revealed the significant influence of brand to the buying decision of consumers in terms of brand image and brand trust. The result of this study also suggests that consumers may choose a subcompact sedan car primarily because of its brand. This is consistent to the result of the study of Alamgir et. al. (2011) which revealed that brand names influence the choice of consumers in purchasing cars. Alamgir et. al. (2011) furthered that consumers prefer to purchase a well-known branded car. Moreover, the result of this study also affirms the postulation of Tekin et. al. (2016) that brand is a powerful tool that can be used to attract more customers to buy and has become important in the luxury market.

Table 2. Overall Relative Importance of the Attributes Forming the Preference Structure of Consumers for Subcompact Sedan Cars in General Santos City

Attributes	Relative Importance	Rank
Price	17.088%	3 rd
Engine	18.898%	2 nd
Safety	5.345%	5 th
Fuel Efficiency	15.603%	4 th
Brand	43.065%	1 st

Consumers in General Santos City also place Engine as the second important attribute of a subcompact sedan car with overall relative importance of 18.898%. This suggests that consumers also look into the engine specifications of cars as one of the considerations in buying a car. The result of the conjoint experiment aligns with the conjoint study of Chowdhury, Salam and Tay (2016) which revealed engine power as an important car attribute to the preferences of car consumers. Chowdhury, Salam and Tay (2016) further mentioned that the horse power or engine size is an important car attribute as it determines performance that includes acceleration and speed.

Price is the third most important attribute of a subcompact sedan car for consumers in General Santos City, with overall relative importance of 17.088%. This suggests that consumers look into the prices of cars along with the set of car features and benefits in their buying decisions. This result is supported by the study of Amron (2018) which revealed price as a significant influencing factor of the buying decisions of consumers for cars. The study of Brucks, Zeithaml and Naylor (2000) revealed that consumers use price along with brand in order to evaluate the prestige among other quality dimensions of products. Further, price is also

known to be associated with the value perceptions of consumers. Kotler and Keller (2014) mentioned that value perceptions increase with quality and service but decrease with price. Fuel Efficiency is the fourth important attribute of a subcompact sedan car for General Santos City consumers, with overall relative importance of 15.603%. Peters, Gutscher and Scholz (2011) argue that fuel consumption is of lesser importance to most car buyers, amidst the ongoing trends of increasing car size and power. This suggests that there are other car attributes that consumers value more importantly than car fuel efficiency. However, the rising fuel prices may also affect the buying decisions of consumers and choose more fuel efficient cars. In fact, the findings of the study of Sallee, West and Fan (2016) suggest that consumers value fuel economy. Furthermore, Allcott and Knittel (2019) mentioned the argument that consumers are poorly informed and cognitively constrained in the evaluation of fuel economy.

Moreover, Safety is the attribute of a subcompact sedan car that consumers in General Santos City consider least, with overall relative importance of 5.345%. The conjoint study of Wu, Liao and Chatwuthikrai. (2014) revealed safety as one the car attributes that consumers consider important. Be that as it may, the result of this study suggests that at present, there are other car attributes that consumers consider more important in their car buying decisions other than car safety. This may be due that car safety is a standard feature of modern cars, such as the standardization of airbags as a car safety feature. As such, consumers may focus on other car features that will give value for their money. Nevertheless, car manufacturers strive to develop safety cars. In fact, Joerger and Spenko (2017) mentioned that promising new technologies emerge to increase the level of safety and autonomy in car driving, including lane and distance keeping assist systems, automatic braking systems and even highway auto-drive systems.

Table 3 displays the overall conjoint correlations between observed and estimated preferences of consumers for subcompact sedan cars in General Santos City. Pearson's R and Kendall's Tau goodness of fit measures were utilized in order to validate the estimated utility values, to ensure that the preferences of consumers are validly represented by the estimated preferences. Kendall's Tau for holdouts was also used to further validate the conjoint model by correlating the observed and estimated preferences of consumers in the case of the holdout profiles.

Table 3. Overall Conjoint Correlations between Observed and Estimated Preferences of Consumers for Subcompact Sedan Cars in General Santos City

Statistics	Value	Sig.
Pearson's R	0.991	0.001
Kendall's Tau	0.941	0.001
Kendall's Tau for Holdouts	1.000	0.021

The value of Pearson's R is 0.991, which is significant at 0.01 level of significance and the value of Kendall's Tau is 0.941, also significant at 0.01 level of significance, indicating that the observed and estimated preferences are highly associated, validating the utility estimates. On the other hand, the conjoint model of consumers' overall preference for subcompact sedan car is further validated by the Kendall's Tau for holdouts with a value of 1.000, which is significant at 0.05 level of significance.

4.3 Simulated market shares among subcompact sedan car brands

Table 4 illustrates the simulation profiles of subcompact sedan cars in General Santos City. The levels of the attributes of the different subcompact sedan cars available in General Santos City were based on how the attributes actually behave as observed in the market. The

Price, Engine, Safety and Brand attribute levels were based from the brochures posted on the Philippine websites of the car makers involved. Specifically, the prices of the subcompact sedan cars were converted from Philippine Peso to US Dollar currency for common international perspective, based on the Reference Exchange Rate Bulletin of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (2024). On the other hand, the Fuel Efficiency levels of the different car brands involved in the simulation were assumed to be More than 12 Kilometers/Liter - City Driving, as car fuel consumption may vary depending on the driving styles or habits of consumers (Meseguer et. al, 2017).

Table 4 Simulation Profiles of Subcompact Sedan Cars in General Santos City as Observed in the Market

Car Maker	Price	Engine	Safety	Fuel Efficiency	Brand
Nissan	USD. 18,721.00	1.0 Liter Turbo - 3 Cylinder - 99 HP	6-7 SRS Airbags+Speed Sensing Door Locks	More than 12 Kilometers/Liter - City Driving	Nissan - Almera
Toyota	USD. 17,936.00	1.5 Liter - 4 Cylinder - 106 HP	6-7 SRS Airbags+Speed Sensing Door Locks	More than 12 Kilometers/Liter - City Driving	Toyota - Vios
Honda	USD. 19,506.00	1.5 Liter - 4 Cylinder - 119 HP	6-7 SRS Airbags+Speed Sensing Door Locks	More than 12 Kilometers/Liter - City Driving	Honda - City
Hyundai	USD. 18,525.00	1.6 Liter - 4 Cylinder - 126 HP	6-7 SRS Airbags+Speed Sensing Door Locks	More than 12 Kilometers/Liter - City Driving	Hyundai - Accent
Mitsubishi	USD. 16,044.00	1.2 Liter - 3 Cylinder - 78 HP	6-7 SRS Airbags+Speed Sensing Door Locks	More than 12 Kilometers/Liter - City Driving	Mitsubishi - Mirage G4

Table 5 displays the simulated market shares among subcompact sedan car brands in General Santos City. The simulation of market shares was performed by employing choice simulators in order to determine the share of the preference of consumers on the different subcompact sedan car brand alternatives, given the simulation profiles in Table 4. There were two main types of choice simulators used in this study: the Maximum Utility or First Choice Model and the Preference Probability Model.

The Maximum Utility or First Choice Model of choice simulation assumes that consumers choose the subcompact sedan car brand alternative with the highest total utility score. Thus, the market share is simulated by counting the number of consumers giving the highest total utility scores on the simulation profiles of the subcompact sedan car brand alternatives. Moreover, this choice simulator is best applied on non-habitual or non-routine buying conditions.

Table 5 Simulated Market Shares among Subcompact Sedan Car Brands in General Santos City

Subcompact Sedan Car Brand	Simulated Market Share		
	Max. Utility	B.T.L.	Logit
Nissan - Almera	10.8%	18.4%	14.3%
Toyota - Vios	31.4%	22.2%	26.8%
Honda - City	28.7%	22.3%	27.1%

Hyundai - Accent	12.3%	18.8%	16.4%
Mitsubishi - Mirage G4	16.8%	18.3%	15.4%

The Preference choice Probability Model of choice simulation deals with the prediction of choice probability summing up to 100% across the simulation profiles of subcompact sedan cars. In this case, each consumer has some percentage of probability in choosing each of the subcompact sedan car brand alternatives. Thus, the market share is simulated by calculating the sum of the preference probabilities of consumers to the different subcompact sedan car brand alternatives. This type of choice simulator is best suited for repetitive or habitual buying situations. Furthermore, the Bradford, Terry and Luce (BTL) and Logit Models are variations of the Preference Probability Model.

Overall (n=455), the Maximum Utility Model calculates 31.4% market share for Toyota - Vios, followed by Honda - City with 28.7% market share. In addition, Mitsubishi - Mirage G4 has 16.8% market share, 12.3% for Hyundai - Accent and 10.8% market share for Nissan - Almera. The Bradford, Terry and Luce (BTL) and Logit models calculate 22.3 - 27.1% probability that consumers may choose Honda - City as their subcompact sedan car, while there is 22.2 - 26.8% probability that consumers may choose Toyota - Vios. Furthermore, Hyundai - Accent has 16.4 - 18.8% choice probability, 15.4 - 18.3% for Mitsubishi - Mirage G4 and 14.3 - 18.4% choice probability for Nissan - Almera.

Thus, majority of the consumers may choose Toyota - Vios with 31.4% simulated market share, immediately followed by Honda - City with simulated market share of 28.7%. The large overall simulated market shares calculated for Toyota - Vios and Honda - City can be attributed to the overall characteristic of the consumers in General Santos City as “*Brand Conscious*” consumers, given the highest relative importance they place on Brand. The Brands Toyota - Vios and Honda - City are the Brands of a subcompact sedan car with high utility values given by consumers. Nevertheless, Toyota - Vios having a relatively larger simulated market share compared to Honda - City can be attributed to the specific preference of consumers for the 1.5 Liter - 4 Cylinder - 106 HP Engine of Toyota - Vios, the most preferred Engine for a subcompact sedan with the highest utility value given by consumers among the Engine attribute levels.

Conclusions, limitations and future directions of research

Based on the results of the research, it is advisable for car manufacturers to consider the overall preference structure of consumers in designing subcompact sedan cars. Car manufacturers may consider offering a subcompact sedan car which engine specification is right around 106 horse power at 1.5 liters of engine displacement. It is also recommended for car manufacturers to improve the fuel efficiency ratings of the subcompact sedan cars they are offering and also assign the optimal safety features in order to target the optimal price point and possibly increase the perceived value of consumers. Car manufacturers as well as their respective car dealerships are also recommended to nurture their car brands in the aspect of brand image and brand trust through advertising and other forms of promotion. This is since that according to the overall preference structure consumers, they can be regarded as “brand conscious” consumers and have the propensity to choose and purchase a subcompact sedan car primarily because of its brand.

Furthermore, an important limitation of this research lies in its focus on subcompact sedan cars, specifically with internal combustion engines. Future researchers may explore on other car segments such as the pick-up truck and the SUV car segments. Cars with engine alternatives such electric cars may also be explored for future investigation.

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Controversy, and Ethical Challenges: ChatGPT and Its Impact on Customer Experience and Marketing. A Study of Professionals' Perception towards this Emerging Trend

Iasmina-Iulia GRĂDINESCU

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
rusugeorgiana973@gmail.com

Elena GOGA

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
goga.elena@gmail.com

Mihai PRELIPCEAN

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
prelipceanmihai@yahoo.com

Cristian GHEORGHE

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
ghcristian@gmail.com

Olguța Anca ORZAN

Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy
olguta.orzan@umfcd.ro

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Abstract

ChatGPT is perceived to have a significant impact on customer experience and marketing. Hence, this paper aims to explore the ethical perspective of ChatGPT and subsequently its effect on the marketing activities through the eyes of marketing professionals. ChatGPT's ability to provide personalized support, analyses customer data, and improve customer experience has helped companies to boost their marketing efforts. As technology continues to advance, this tool will continue to play an important role in improving both customer experience and marketing. While ChatGPT is a remarkable technological achievement, its use raises important ethical implications that must be addressed (e.g., misinformation, risky content, biases and discriminatory attitudes, impersonation or phishing). As an Artificial Intelligence engine, ChatGPT has the potential to revolutionize the way in which communication is conducted. Therefore, addressing the ethical concerns will help to ensure that its usage is done in a responsible and righteous manner.

Keywords: ChatGPT, Artificial Intelligence, Customer Experience, Ethics, Marketing.

JEL classification: M30, M31.

1. Introduction

In recent years, artificial intelligence has made remarkable progress and its applications in various areas have become increasingly common. One of the fields where artificial intelligence has had a significant impact is marketing (Orzan et al., 2021). With the continuous development of technology, a powerful AI tool called ChatGPT, an advanced artificial intelligence-based language model, has developed. ChatGPT has represented a major change

in the way companies conduct their business in terms of how they interact with customers and subsequently, implement marketing strategies (Nastase et al., 2023).

This paper focuses on the impact of ChatGPT on customer experience and marketing strategies, with a particular focus on the ethical practices associated with the use of this tool. The aim is to explore how ChatGPT has changed the interaction model between companies and customers and to highlight the importance of an ethical and responsible approach to its use (Veghes et al., 2012).

ChatGPT has proved its ability to provide personalized and interactive customer support. Through natural language interactions, ChatGPT is able to answer questions, provide personalized pieces of advice and recommendations, creating thus, a unique experience for each and every customer. This has allowed companies to improve their marketing strategies by tailoring messages and offers to individual customer needs and preferences (Smith & Johnson, 2022).

Nevertheless, the adoption of ChatGPT in marketing strategies has led to some ethical challenges. The use of this tool raises questions about data protection and privacy of customer information. During interactions with ChatGPT, customers may disclose personal and sensitive information. Therefore, it is compulsory for companies to ensure competent data security and value customers' privacy and confidentiality (Garcia & Martinez, 2023).

Another important ethical challenge that has to be taken into account is represented by transparency in the use of ChatGPT. Users need to be aware that they are interacting with an AI system and also, understand the manner in which it works when it comes to the decision-making process. Companies are urged to provide clear and transparent information about the use of ChatGPT as to ensure that customers understand how their information is used and subsequently, how marketing decisions are influenced (Brown & Wilson, 2023). A supporter of this view is Swann et al., whose paper insists on the customers' need to be informed that they are interacting with an AI tool, receiving, at the same time, clear and accurate information about its limitations and capabilities (Swann et al., 2021).

Furthermore, when implementing ChatGPT in marketing strategies, it is important to avoid algorithmic bias and discrimination. ChatGPT learns from existing training data and can maintain pre-existing biases and stereotypes. Companies should seek to ensure that ChatGPT is unbiased and provides impartial and non-discriminatory responses to customers (Thompson & Adams, 2022).

Overall, this paper, aims to analyse the impact of ChatGPT on customer experience and marketing strategies, with a particular focus on ethical practices associated with its usage. There will be examined the ethical challenges represented by data protection, transparency and avoidance of discrimination, with the purpose of providing suggestions meant to guarantee a responsible and unbiased use of ChatGPT in marketing.

2. Communication Strategies with Social Media

In order to conduct an in-depth analysis of the impact of ChatGPT on customer experience and marketing strategies, while also considering the associated ethical practices, a variety of academic sources and publications were reviewed. By analyzing the impact of ChatGPT on consumers' experience, Wang et al.'s (2022) research paper emphasizes that the use of this AI tool can have a positive impact on customers' interactions with a brand due to the fact that the messages are personalised and tailored accordingly. Thus, the increase in customer satisfaction and engagement can be easily justified. According to Jones and Smith's (2021) study, ChatGPT can help the consolidation of the customer communication process by providing quick responses and prompt resolution to their issues. Moreover, a case study by

Garcia et al. (2020) undertaken in the e-commerce sector revealed that using ChatGPT for customer interaction led to increased conversion rates and customer loyalty.

On the other hand, the ethical challenges of using ChatGPT in the marketing field are not to be neglected either. Lee and Johnson's (2023) research, revealed that one of the major ethical challenges is related to the biases in natural language models, which can lead to the generation of discriminatory or inappropriate responses which in turn negatively impacts consumers' experience with a brand. To support this view, an article by Johnson et al. (2022) stresses the importance of a transparent and responsible communication when it comes to ChatGPT usage in order to avoid misinformation and manipulation of customers. A recent study of Smith and Jones (2021), highlighting concerns about customer data privacy in the context of ChatGPT use, emphasize the need for robust data protection policies.

Hence, ethical practices in the use of ChatGPT in marketing are an imperative consideration nowadays. Research by Brown et al. (2020) emphasizes the importance of implementing customer data protection policies and practices to ensure customer privacy and security in interactions with ChatGPT. In addition, in a study conducted by Davis and Smith (2022) the importance of transparency and accurately informing customers about the use of ChatGPT in marketing strategies is reiterated. The purpose of this consisting of building trust and long-lasting relationships between consumers and brands (Stăncioiu et al., 2013). According to Wilson and Johnson's (2023) research, constant monitoring and evaluation of the results generated by ChatGPT is essential to identify and correct any ethical or validity issues.

3. Methodology

The researched aimed to study the ethical perspective of ChatGPT and subsequently its effect on the marketing activities through the eyes of marketing professionals. The study was conducted among individuals who have expertise and experience in the marketing field and who hold key positions and possess relevant roles in the development and implementation of marketing strategies in a specific organization, such as: marketing managers, market research specialists, digital marketing professionals, marketing analysts and last but not least, marketing consultants (Stoica et al., 2015). As to be able to assess this, a series of objectives were developed, as follows:

- *Investigate the opinion and perception of marketing professionals on the ethical issues associated with the use of ChatGPT in marketing activities.*
- *Identify and analyse the particular ethical challenges that may arise in the context of using ChatGPT in marketing activities.*
- *Evaluate how the use of ChatGPT in marketing activities can influence brands and customer relationships, together with the manner in which the use of ChatGPT can affect customer perceptions of the brand trust in organisational communication and brand loyalty.*
- *Suggest ethical guidelines and recommendations for the use of ChatGPT in marketing activities with the aim of finding the best practices to ensure responsible use of the technology, including issues such as transparency, accountability, diversity and customer data protection.*

This study was based on qualitative research that helped us to provide a general framework of the investigated concept. The qualitative research consisted of 20 questions addressed to ten professionals in the field through the means of a zoom interview. The interview in question lasted for about 60 minutes and the respondents were asked to justify all their answers as explicitly as possible. The key results are displayed in the next section as to provide a better understanding of the researched objectives. The outcomes should be considered as starting points in understanding ChatGPT's potential, as an Artificial Intelligence engine, to

revolutionize the way in which marketing activities are conducted bearing in mind the ethical concerns.

4. Findings

Out of the ten field experts 70% of them were very familiar with the ChatGPT technology, while only 30% were pretty familiar when responding to the first question of the interview “*Please indicate how familiar are you with ChatGPT?*”.

The following key question “*To what extent do you think ChatGPT has a positive impact on the customer experience in marketing?*” 60% of the respondents agreed that this Artificial Intelligence engine exercises a very high impact, whereas 40% consider that ChatGPT has an impact but not a crucial one justifying their answer with explanations such as: “this tool is still controversial and its future seems to be unclear”.

When it came to the importance of transparency when using ChatGPT (“*How important do you think transparency is in customer interactions when using ChatGPT?*”), marketing experts agreed (10 out of 10) that it is very important given that it impacts consumers’ trust towards a brand.

In terms of ethical implications (“*In your opinion, what are the main ethical challenges related to the use of ChatGPT in marketing?*”) respondents admitted the high sensitivity of this topic (10 out of 10) emphasizing the importance of implementing customer data protection policies and practices meant to provide customer privacy and security in interactions with ChatGPT.

Lastly, 6 out of 10 respondents admitted using ChatGPT in their current marketing strategies registering positive outcomes among consumers and increased conversion rates (“*Would you be willing to use ChatGPT technology in your marketing strategy?*” / “*Do you think ChatGPT can help increase conversions in marketing?*”). The remaining 4 being still skeptical with respects to the potential benefits of adopting ChatGPT when designing a marketing strategy and building long-lasting relationships with consumers.

5. Conclusions, future directions and research limits

The review of relevant literature and the undertaken research highlighted the positive impact of ChatGPT on customer experience and marketing strategies, considering as well the various ethical challenges associated with its use. Ethical practices, such as data protection, transparency and accountability, play a crucial role in ensuring an effective and fair use of ChatGPT in marketing. Future research should focus on developing and applying strong ethical guidelines to address these challenges and augment the benefits of ChatGPT in customer experience and marketing strategies.

However, even if the objectives of the study were attained, it is crucial to take into account the limitation of this research, more exactly of the limited number respondents (10). For this reason, the research in order to ensure the accuracy of the study the interview should be further extended to more marketing experts.

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The Fears Perceived by Young Romanian People Entering an Increasingly Unstable Labor Market in a Post-Pandemic Society

Elena GOGA

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
elena.goga@mk.ase.ro

Iasmina-Iulia GRĂDINESCU

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
gradinescuiasmina15@stud.ase.ro

Georgiana RUSU

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
contact@georgianarusu.ro

Petre Sorin SAVIN

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
contact@sorinsavin.ro

Cristian GHEORGHE

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
ghcristian@gmail.com

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for the labor market and young people entering the job market in Romania may face unique fears and uncertainties. Some of these fears may include: uncertainty about employment opportunities, remote work challenges, health and safety issues, digital skills requirements, economic instability, mental health. This study aims to explore the fears perceived by Romanian youth entering an increasingly unstable labor market in a post-pandemic society. In this article we use a qualitative research method, in-depth interviews, to obtain information about the specific concerns and anxieties of young people entering the labor market after the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to understand their consumer behavior in the labor market. The findings of this study will help us understand the experiences of young people in the labor market in Romania and will help policymakers and businesses find ways to support their transition to the labor market. Also, this study will highlight the need for strategies adapted to the challenges of a post-pandemic society, such as digitization and sustainability. Young people will discover some opportunities to develop the skills and competencies necessary to use the new technologies. In conclusion, this study will serve as a valuable resource for educators, employers and policy makers who wish to promote a more sustainable and inclusive labor market in Romania.

Keywords: Consumer behavior, post-pandemic society, labor market, new technologies, sustainability.

JEL classification: J20, J28.

Introduction

Analyzing the labor market in 2023, we can observe the following trends: the hybrid program will replace the remote one; the number of employees with two jobs will increase; employers will have to resort more and more to the import of personnel. The adoption of the hybrid work schedule to the detriment of the remote one, along with the fact that more and more employees will be tempted to take a second job to supplement their income in the long

term, represent the main directions on the labor market this year according to a report of eJobs commented by Bogdan Badea CEO of eJobs Romania. The young people who enter the labor market must be very prepared for this reality that suffered great changes in the 2 years of Covid-19 pandemic. This labor market brings with it the need for innovation at every step.

Although there has been a long series of challenges at an international level, the desires of employees are basically the same, whether they are part of Generation Z, whether they are Millennials or any other generation. All these generations have three great expectations regarding the job: to have transparent communication with superiors and colleagues, stability and empathy (the need to feel understood and included). Brilliant ideas are not enough to achieve exceptional results. People are needed to share them, support them and turn them into concrete actions (Sinek, 2014). In addition to these values, the criteria well established by each employee or candidate when applying for a new job are added. Next, salary and schedule are two important criteria when it comes to career. But in recent years, along with generation Z, modern employees value the benefits provided by the company. The attitude of young employees will change the labor market, they will not be willing to easily make concessions such as overtime to complete pressing projects.

In Romania, according to the National Institute of Statistics (INS), in the third quarter of 2022, the unemployment rate reached 23.9% among young people (15-24 years), compared to the general rate of 5.4%. Young people's skills and implicitly, their performance on the labor market depend on the ability of education and training systems to meet the demands of employers. It is essential that educational programs are adapted to economic changes and the demands of the labor market in order to facilitate the integration of young people into the professional field. In Romania, although the overall unemployment rate is low, there is a significant gap between the young population and the general population in terms of employment. This indicates that young people have difficulties in finding jobs or meeting the expectations and requirements of employers. Progress in the integration of young people on the labor market in Romania has been modest in the last decade, which highlights the need to implement effective educational policies adapted to the current very rapid economic transformations.

It is important that the education system provides the necessary skills to meet the demands of employers and facilitate the transition of young people from education to the labor market. The world is in urgent need of competent professionals to contribute to societal transformations towards sustainability (Gordon et al. 2019), and educational institutions ought to prepare students for these roles (Barth 2016; Franco et al. 2019). It is also crucial to promote collaboration between educational institutions, the private sector and public policies to identify labor market needs and develop appropriate training and education programs. Thus, young people will have more opportunities to develop their skills and improve their chances of employment in a constantly changing economic environment. The subject of work enters the discussion as one of the most important aspects to consider with regard to a sustainable future (ILO, 2018). This coordinated approach is essential to ensure young people develop the necessary skills and appropriate opportunities to build a successful career.

In the report "Why the world needs to upskill young people to enable the net zero transition", carried out by PwC, UNICEF and Generation Unlimited (2023), it is shown that over 60% of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 globally (830 of millions of people) will not have the necessary skills for the labor market in 2030, including those for the transition to the green economy. Dinu Bumbăcea, Country Managing Partner, PwC Romania cites this report and says that estimates show that the transition to a green economy will create 8.4 million jobs for young people by 2030. An analysis carried out by PwC UK reveals that, for every "green" job created, another 1.4 new jobs can be attributed to it and the multiplier is even higher

in sectors such as energy, utilities and manufacturing. The more sustainable the world, the more new challenges and opportunities arise in the business environment (Magomedov, 2020).

Quoting from the report made by PwC, UNICEF and Generation Unlimited (2023) we find that "the transition to a green economy requires a change in the types of jobs and a transformation in the way people work. Managing this change requires qualification, re-skilling and improvement, which will have a triple impact: they will contribute to reducing carbon emissions, reducing inequality and managing the youth unemployment crisis. The pressure to develop skills in the green economy is felt even more in the context where the pace of reducing carbon emissions must increase 11 times compared to the global average achieved in the early 2000s in order to reach the Paris climate goals. Therefore, the demand for some jobs will increase (eg in construction), it will change the nature of others (eg the maintenance of electric vehicles is different of gasoline cars), will create new jobs (eg more sustainability experts) and even eliminate some existing ones". Thus, companies have begun to think not only about making a profit, but also about implementing marketing strategies that require them to consider what is in the interest of society, in the short term, but especially on the long term (Muşetescu, 2017).

Research on assessment in sustainability (science) education appears to likely be in its emergent growth phase, trailing the pattern of research growth in sustainability science by about 15 years (Fang et al. 2018).

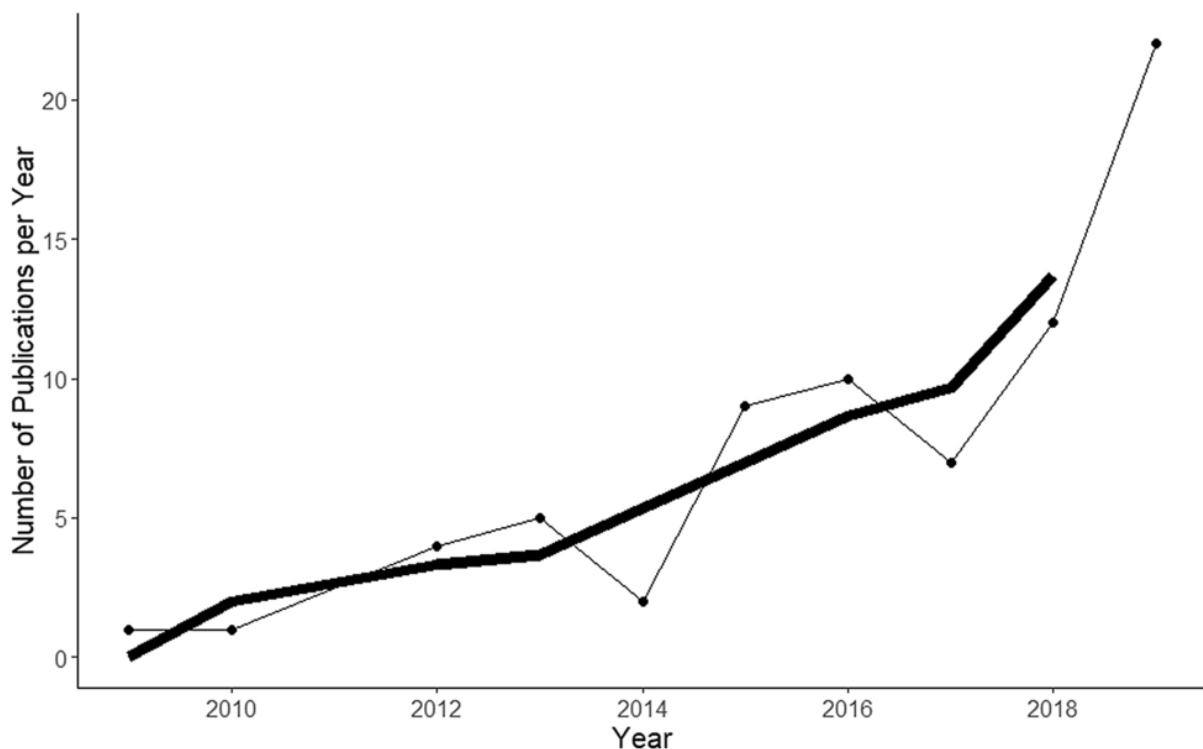


Figure 1. Publications on sustainability competencies assessments per year in final sample (solid line is rolling 3-year average)

Source: Current practice of assessing students' sustainability competencies: a review of tools

In this post-Covid-19 pandemic context, companies are redefining their purpose and proposing to get involved for the community in which they operate, for their employees and proposing to have a sustainable economy. Thus, they propose to get involved at the community level, then at the level of the country where they operate, they propose to initiate projects for a

sustainable economy in which the Millennials generation (born between 1981 - 1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997 - 2012) can be found, they being those conscious consumers, willing to know the whole process of the products from the raw material to the product on the shelf.

The current working model, regardless of whether it is on-site, hybrid or remote (telework), strongly demands a culture of trust, a culture of transparency, of communication, in which the leaders have on the list of objectives the development of the people in the team, on a background where they are permanently connected to the market and the need for innovation. Observing all these changes produced on the labor market in Romania in the post-pandemic Covid-19 climate, we set out to research the fears and threats perceived by young people entering this market. We set out to find out this information by carrying out a qualitative research in the framework of which we would obtain valuable information from specialists in fields of interest for our research topic.

1. Methodology

The methodology of qualitative research regarding the threats perceived by young Romanians when entering the labor market, from the perspective of specialists, is based on notions that aim at meaningful interpretative and naturalistic realistic aspects, with the aim of exploring and understanding in depth the topic of interest (Cătoiu et al, 2009).

The role of this qualitative research is to combine the advantages offered by the previously mentioned theoretical concepts and to transpose them in the research context, in order to identify from the analysis of the specialists' opinions, the fears and threats perceived by young people when entering the labor market in Romania in the post- Covid-19 pandemic. The qualitative analysis regarding the perceptions of the labor market from the perspective of local specialists can identify the current local situation regarding the ratio between the changes produced by the Covid-19 pandemic at the international level and the changes produced by this pandemic at the national level (Romania). We can also obtain valuable information about the efficiency with which sustainable development methods are put into practice on the labor market in Romania and new directions for the development of strategies for the efficient adaptation of young people to the fast-paced labor market can be established.

We have established the following objectives for the qualitative research that we are conducting:

Objective 1: Knowing the level of information of specialists about the major threats to the career prospects of young people entering the labor market.

Objective 2: Identifying the interest shown by specialists in the field regarding the importance of adaptability in the career under the pressure of emerging technologies.

Objective 3: Determining the opinion of specialists about the major changes brought by the Covid-19 pandemic on the labor market.

Objective 4: Evaluation of the degree of familiarity of the specialists with the terms specific to the concept of sustainability on the labor market.

As methods of gathering information, we chose to use a selection questionnaire and an interview guide. The invitation to participate, the recruitment of participants and the gathering of information was done online by means of a selection questionnaire. The interview guide was designed on four topics specific to marketing research, each with the role of achieving the previously established objectives.

Topic 1: Specialists' opinion regarding the major threats to the career prospects of young people entering the labor market (comprises 6 questions).

Topic 2: Specialists' opinion regarding the importance of career adaptability considering the impact of emerging technologies (includes 3 questions)

Topic 3: Specialists' opinion regarding the role of the Covid-19 pandemic and the changes brought to the labor market, with an emphasis on the obstacles related to entering the labor market post-pandemic Covid-19 (comprises 9 questions).

Topic 4: Specialists' opinion regarding the understanding of the concept of sustainability on the post-Covid-19 pandemic labor market (comprises 3 questions).

In order to achieve the established objectives, the chosen method of gathering information was the undirected in-depth interview with the aim of obtaining numerous and highly accurate information (Cătoiu et al, 2009, p. 216). In the creation of the sample and the recruitment of the participants, we applied the type of traditional pre-established sampling (before the data collection), non-probabilistic and oriented towards relevant people from the point of view of the subject, in order to fulfill the objectives based on the analysis of the collective structure (Cătoiu et al, 2009, p. 526). The participants were chosen based on the competences acquired through experience and skills reflected by the status they acquired in the professional field in which they activate, so that their answers can provide us with the most relevant information.

The qualitative research on the fears and threats perceived by young Romanians when entering the labor market focuses on the statements of 11 specialists with experience between 7 and 30 years, who occupy different positions within the companies they represent, such as be: managing director and owner, human resources manager, administrator, sustainability specialist (Table 1).

Table 1. The status and number of specialists participating in the qualitative research

Indicators				
The position within the organization	Managing Director & Owner	Human Resources Manager	Administrator	Sustainability Specialist
Number of specialists	3	3	3	2

The collection of qualitative research information was carried out by means of the selection questionnaire and the interview guide administered both face to face and by telephone, between February 1 and May 31, 2023. This method of administering the interview guides presented the advantage of offering the participants in this research the temporal availability, allowing them to answer the questions in the available time interval, at the time of their choice.

2. Research findings and conclusions

The conclusions of the qualitative research regarding the understanding of the concept of sustainability and the concerns related to the post-Covid-19 pandemic labor market can be presented as follows.

For 2023, experts expect the trends that will shape professional environments to continue to emphasize adaptability, agility and versatility. Thus, the fears of young candidates for a job can be related to the inability to adapt in time to changes in the labor market, to the inability to intuit the direction of evolution of new jobs. In 2023, the labor market for employees and candidates mainly means the need for self-knowledge. They must be prepared to see what skills they have, what they know and what they don't know, where they have defined their limits and what is holding them back, when the need for learning in the market is great. As the companies are on the move, along with them the candidates will develop a series of skills, in close

correlation with the industry and the role they have. But for this it is necessary to clarify the following 3 aspects: what is the trend and the need in the market - what skills are required; what level he is at; to be aware of what resources he allocates (time, money, etc.) to increase his competitiveness on the labor market, now but also for the future.

According to experts, there are 3 directions that companies should take into account in 2023. The first is *remote work*. The opportunity to work from home is at the top of the preferences of the majority of employees. Employees who work remotely enjoy, first of all, the lack of time spent daily in traffic. Full remote or hybrid system work denotes flexibility from the company, which most employees appreciate and look for, being one of the reasons why they decide to accept or refuse a job. The threats reside in the large reduction of direct professional connections and the resilience of employees. The second direction is represented by a *sustainable work style*. Professional stress, which leads to the phenomenon of burnout, has become increasingly common among workers, which has led to a change in the approach to work style (Broman et al., 2017). As a result, many companies have begun to redesign the way they work to promote active rest and prevent physical and mental burnout of employees. These strategies include implementing no-meeting days, adopting four-day work weeks, increasing the number of vacation days and creating attractive recreation areas. More and more people today attach importance to the balance between personal and professional life. Achieving a good harmony between these two aspects becomes a priority for many employees. Companies that manage to develop effective strategies in this direction will benefit from a large number of loyal employees.

The use of the term "sustainability" is mostly motivated by marketing considerations towards the building of a corporate image so that companies can improve their financial performance (Kemper et al., 2019). The threat is represented by the fact that the implementation of this sustainable work style is done at a rather slow pace and not many companies are willing to adopt it yet. Research about strategically integrating sustainability into business is still mainly theoretical or addresses specific aspects of corporate sustainability (Engert et al., 2016). The third direction is *financial stability*. The high level of inflation leads to a much more expensive lifestyle, even when it comes to the minimum required. Thus, it is easy to understand why employers must continue to take into account the salary package offered. In addition to the monthly salary, extra-salary benefits such as private medical insurance, life insurance, holiday and vacation premiums are important elements that can attract quality employees and that will keep the existing ones loyal. The threat for new candidates on the labor market resides in the desire of companies to pay the lower cost with the retraining or specialization of current employees than to bear the higher costs of recruiting and hiring a new one.

Most specialists showed moderate to high familiarity with the concept of sustainability in the context of the post-Covid-19 pandemic labor market. They understood that sustainability refers to the ecological, economic and social approach to work activities and decisions in a sustainable, long-term way (Redman, 2020). Participants highlighted the importance of integrating sustainability into organizations' strategies and practices and into individual career decisions.

Research participants expressed varying levels of concern about perceived threats to entering the labor market in the post-Covid-19 pandemic society. Threats identified included: lack of employment opportunities, economic instability, fierce competition in the labor market, rapid technological change and negative impact on the environment and sustainability.

The experts interviewed provided concrete examples and arguments to support their concerns such as rising unemployment, reduced investment in the economic sector, increasing demand for digital skills and environmental degradation. The results showed that the threats perceived as the most significant for young people entering the labor market in the post-Covid-

19 pandemic society are: fierce competition on the labor market, lack of employment opportunities, negative impact on the environment and sustainability, rapid technological changes and economic instability.

All the interviewed specialists were of the opinion that it is of great importance in the actual climate on Romanian labor market to be able to adapt to changes and technological innovations, such as artificial intelligence and automation which are gaining ground in certain fields. Regarding the sustainability aspect, Romanian labor market is striving to keep up the pace with the demands of the moment. There is a great demand for sustainability specialists, companies must adapt and integrate sustainability in their business plans therefore there is a great need for communicating these plans to their employees through trainings and well coordinated programs.

In this post-pandemic context, Romanian companies are putting together a series of marketing decisions to support young people entering the labor market, such as: *internship programs* (young people get the opportunity to gain practical experience in their field of interest), *mentoring and coaching* (young employees receive guidance and support from more experienced professionals in the organization; this can be an effective way to develop skills and stimulate the professional growth of young employees), *providing learning and development resources* (online courses, seminars, conferences and other learning tools for young employees to improve their knowledge and skills in a flexible way, adapted to their needs), *building an inclusive organizational culture* (policies and practices that support diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as promoting collaboration and active participation), *collaboration with educational institutions* (partnerships with educational institutions, such as universities and vocational schools, to provide learning opportunities and internships to young people during their studies, to facilitate their transition from the academic to the professional environment), *use of technology and digital platforms* (companies can use technology and digital platforms to reach young people and provide them with information about available career opportunities, as well as to facilitate recruitment and selection processes).

There are several limitations associated with qualitative research conducted with a group of 11 specialists: generalization of the results (the opinions and perspectives expressed by the 11 specialists may be relevant and useful, but cannot be considered representative of the entire population), subjectivity and interpretation (specialists' opinions and interpretations may be influenced by their individual experiences and perceptions, which may introduce a certain degree of subjectivity into the research results), potential communication barriers (communication with a small group of specialists can be influenced by various barriers, such as language, differences in perspective and difficulties in mutual understanding), potential for important concerns to be missed (due to the small sample size and limitations in communication, it is possible that certain concerns or perspectives of young people are not covered or are under-represented in the research), lack of diversity and representativeness (the small pool of management professionals may be homogenous in terms of demographics, experiences and perspectives. This can limit the representativeness of the research and lead to the omission of important perspectives, such as those of young people from different socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds). In order to obtain a more comprehensive and representative understanding of the fears of young Romanian people entering the labor market in the post-pandemic context, it is recommended to combine qualitative research with quantitative methods, to expand the sample and to take into account the diversity of perspectives and experiences.

3.1. Originality

Analyzing specialized literature, researches conducted to determine the perceptions of fear and threats felt by young people entering the labor market, especially in post-pandemic context in Romania, is rarely encountered.

3.2. Future research

A close observation of the evolution of labor market of the last 2 years demonstrates that many abrupt changes have occurred and many more are yet to come in this unstable post-pandemic climate. That is why we consider of great interest for future research to investigate young people's perceptions towards entering the labor market by conducting a quantitative research or by means of a neuromarketing experiment using as tool the electroencephalography (EEG) that can provide more complex and valuable insights.

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