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THE IMPACT OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES ON ENHANCING HEDONISTIC CONSUMER ATTITUDES

Paper presents conceptual issues connected with virtual communities impact on hedonistic consumer attitudes on the base of scholarly literature and secondary sources such as research reports. There are examples of such impact provided with mention of different kind of communities and possible differences between X, Y and C generations. Virtual communities, particularly social networking sites (in paper mainly Facebook.com and Pinterest.com were considered), and blogs (for this case particularly fashion and other life-style ones), are natural places for young consumers to view, communicate, share and create own content. Ease to use, 24/7 access and overwhelming presence of social media favors their usage by young consumers to spread not only information, pictures and videos, but – what is important from social and marketing points of view – also values and attitudes. Hedonic values and hedonistic attitudes are important part of life-style of such consumers, and social media usage allows them to fulfill hedonic needs, so virtual communities are responsible for spreading and enhancing hedonistic attitudes among consumers, attitudes which presently cannot be classified as simply consumption related, but still focused on consumer pleasure gained from e.g. design, style, and own engagement in DIY activities.

Keywords: hedonism, hedonistic attitude, virtual communities, consumer

Introduction

Consumer is rather emotional or rational? Up to date, the discourse of scientists and researchers is still pending. On the one hand, consumers consciously manage income, spend deliberately, choose what is the best for them. On the other one - just one bad contact with customer service and the consumer turns away from the brand and chooses competitive product, often not the most advantageous for him. Or maybe the consumer is at the same time emotional and rational? Probably it all depends on the context of the situation, income level, or product category (for instance comparing purchase of tea versus buying a TV-set)? Regardless the outcome of this discussion - several studies have shown dualism in consumer nature – he/she is rational in general (e.g. smart shopper who is trying to choose the best product/value for his/her money), and this not excludes having emotional lifestyle, more carefree way of managing money is at the heart of their activities and market choices (e.g., hedonist for whom counts feeling of pleasure in the process of shopping).

This paper is conceptual in its nature. Broad and timeless concepts from human nature, as hedonic values and attitudes, are linked with contemporary consumers attitudes and behaviours, described in the form of conclusions from observation, relevant

scholarly literature, professional periodicals and research reports. So presented arguments are supported by secondary data, mostly gathered via authors' own netnography[1] in virtual environments. This approach is valuable to develop conceptual framework for future research focused on empirical verification of described here concepts and ties.

Hedonic attitudes and consumption

Development of the consumer attitudes is associated with the pursued purchase motives, determinants of the choice, and decisions whether to start the buying process, or give up. The attitude is in fact "*relatively stable, emotional readiness to respond in a coherent and consistent manner considering a person, group of people or situation"*[2]. Classically the attitudes are expressing in three components: a cognitive component, i.e. beliefs and opinions of a person, a behavioral element - behavior and emotional one - feelings.

Hedonistic consumption has not been sufficiently described in the subject literature in a manner adequate for clear defining it. The problem is a subjective nature of experiencing pleasure by the consumer, which the hedonic consumer seeks.[3] Pleasure can be a result from many stimuli, such as using or purchasing goods and services, or from specific activity of the consumer itself.

The authors argue for defining hedonistic consumer, as a person who's behaviors are aimed at:

- maximize the feeling of pleasure with their purchases (e.g., products that meet the need for aesthetics, awards)
- maximize the feeling of pleasure from the process of purchase (such as site selection, purchases of a certain company, the duration of shopping; it should be noted that the purchase process is not always complete in buying the product, and is only associated with activities such as searching, trying, watching , testing (pre-purchase phase is often significantly extended in this case).

Manifestation of hedonistic consumption may also not be purchase, but doing something yourself. It is not about the situation connected with low-income not allowing to fulfill the needs, but often just the opposite. The consumer is looking for possibility to express themselves in other ways than financial – in most cases it is significantly easier to buy than make yourself something of an individual character.

Hedonic consumer will pay more attention to the aesthetics of the products/places, ambiance purchases or places, or even time - hedonist does not like to rush, prefers to shop with friends or family. He likes to have fun in life. He is less loyal, likes to try / taste / test, hence the preference for diversity and not agreement for routine in the choices to be made. It will be more sensitive to fashion, as well as more

[1] Netnography is a term developed by R.V. Kozinets for the procedure and set of methodological guidelines of doing ethnographic research online, especially in virtual communities mainly by participant observation, R.V. Kozinets, *Netnography*, SAGE, London 2010, s. 60.

[2] P. Zimbardo, F. Ruch, *Psychologia i życie*, Warszawa 1988, s .557

3 S. Kim, M. Eastin, Hedonic Tendencies and the Online Consumers: An Investigation of the Online Shopping Process, „Journal of Internet Commerce", 2011, t. 10, p. 69

compulsive, seeks also recreational lifestyle. Hedonic consumer evaluates reality primarily by emotions and senses (rather than rational calculation as smart shopper).

Taking into account provided characteristics - hedonistic consumption attitude can be seen in both the physical channel (physical stores) and virtual (online shopping). Variables: time (in the online world the concept of time is lost), people (immediate horizontal communication with people similar to you), diversity (the power to search, find and compare any number of objects and places) - are easily adaptable to the online environment. While everyone in the physical world of the senses can feel a key role, whereas in the virtual world - the main role is played by sight and in some situations - hearing (some companies to blend into your web page in the background playing music that mimics the physical sensations associated with staying store - for example, in the case of fashion chains - Reserved http://www.reserved.com/pl, or simply wants to build atmosphere, where it is important in the case of photographer's portfolio - see: http://www.zomer.pl/, http://www.melissajill.com/).

The emergence and rapid development of social media, and so all sorts of virtual communities can - according to the authors - affect the intensification of the severity of hedonistic attitudes.

The social media

Rapid development of social media is strongly coupled to the separation of consumers referred to as Generation Y and Generation C. First, these are people born between 1980 and 2000, others - about the 2000 and they are now students, graduates and young workers recently entered the labor market. There is still little data showing the more detailed information about the generation C, because it is a relatively young group. Much more can be said about Generation Y, which is very heavy in use of new technologies (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of X, Y and C generations

Attribute	Generation X	Generation Y	Generation C
Date of birth	1965 – 1979	1980-2000	after 2000
Approach to work	Career is particularly important	- They believe that work is important (not the most important value), distinction is drawn between work and private life - Know their worth, know how to fight for their rights, privileges, they seek a job where they will feel like: "this is what I just would like to do in my life.	Probably: Remote work, work "in the cloud"
	- Conscientiously carry out the tasks - Focus on process - "Change is a necessary evil"	Young people expect that they will have an impact on key decisions. They want to advance rapidly, and at the same time do not feel attached to their place of work. Lack of loyalty and work ethic - they are willing to change jobs to another better paid or seen as an opportunity to develop or gain valuable experience. They focus primarily on their own needs rather than the needs	Lack of information

		of the organization they work. - Focus on the result (define deadlines) - open for the changes	
Important values in life	safety	personal development	designated career plan
	Quickly seek to become independent, they want to go own way	Procrastinate independence in life, longer live with their parents	Lack of information
Aspirations	stabilization	self-realization, life with passion	connect, communicate, change
Attitude toward online world	uses some of information technology, rather the Internet than a mobile device	familiar with the technology, heavy use of social networking sites	fully connected mobile devices, online 24/7, leading parallel life on social networking sites
Private life and work balance	Lack of information	Trying to find a balance between private life and professional life, are concerned that flexible working can reduce their value in the workplace, impede the promotion and contact with the team, so they carry model "half and a half"- work being done at of any place (coffee shop or a house), but also in the company's office	Frequently indicated scenario: ”I'll work the first few years in the corporation, and then I'll start own business”. The ultimate goal is independence and flexibility achievable by the self-employed - entrepreneurs and freelancers; being flexi is natural to them, they believe that the flexibility of the work allow them to pursue passions and improve their skills, live family life and have greater control over their own lives

Source: own elaboration on the base of content of :*Gen Y na rynku pracy*, online: http://hrstandard.pl/2011/11/14/gen-y-na-rynku-pracy/, *Pokolenie C- nowa odsłona pokolenia Y?*, online: http://hrstandard.pl/2012/01/04/pokolenie-c-nowa-odslona-pokolenia-y/, *Żegnaj X i Y. Witaj C! Nowe pokolenie zmienia rynek pracy*, online: http://hrstandard.pl/2011/09/21/zegnaj-x-i-y-witaj-c-nowe-pokolenie-zmienia-rynek-pracy/

In US as many as 60% of Gen Y-ers unconsciously or uncontrollably looks into their smartphones to check e-mails, text messages or social media. This ratio is much lower in Poland, where 37% of respondents confirmed uncontrolled checking their smartphones. 40% of this generation would feel anxiety and experienced some "withdrawal effect" if they didn’t have the possibility of continuous use of their smartphone.[4] They create communities (mostly virtual) and communicate with each other. Approximately 67% of this generation in the whole world confirmed to spend the same or more time on the socializing with friends online than in person, in fact. In Poland this percentage is much lower (56% still prefer personal contact, while 23% - contacts over the network). In addition, 90% of young people shares their photos over the Internet, about 80% of them have an account on Facebook, which updates quite often (41% globally and 10% in Poland is doing it at least once a day). These young consumers have difficulty understanding the long and complex text, image and sound are

[4] *Cisco Connected World Technology 2012 Report*, online: http://www.cisco.com/en/US/solutions/ns341/ns525/ns537/ns705/ns1120/2012-CCWTR-Chapter1-Global-Results.pdf, p. 4

substituting the text for them. They like multitasking, and expect quick results. They are impatient and easy to distract. Their life-style (to a large extent integrated in the online world), aspirations and needs (i.e to be in touch, to share ect.[5]) significantly influence the development of virtual communities.

The virtual communities

On the Internet, various communities are built and maintained, most often using social media tools. They can be created[6]: individually by particular Internet user, democratically by a group of Internet users, by commercial enterprises, and by non-profit organizations. Exemplary typology of social media is provided in table 2.

Table 2. Social media typology

Type of social media	Characteristics	Examples
social networking service	is used to contact with the other participants of the community, to presentation of a person by creating his/her own profile and the contents prepared by the member of the group, monitoring the activity of other group members	Facebook.com, NK.pl
Internet forums/ discussion groups	They allow to exchange Internet users opinions and experiences	Forum.gazeta.pl Mozdev.org
Rating sites	They allow internet users to grade products and producers and to recommend them to others	Cokupic.pl Consumersearch.com
Blogs	Internet "diaries" written by users	Blox.pl, wordpress.com
Microblogs	Publishing short text messages in real time	Twitter.com, Blip.pl
Sharing videos/music	Publishing own media content with possibility to comment and grade them	YouTube.com Wrzuta.pl
Group purchasing sites	They allow aggregation of demand to buy products and often local services much cheaper	Groupon.com Citeam.pl
Promoting interesting news sites	They make possible to share interesting information with others	Digg.com Wykop.pl

Source: M. Moroz, *Social commerce – modyfikacja procesu nabywczego pod wpływem mediów społecznościowych*, online http://www.pszw.edu.pl/eng/images/stories/ksiazki/pdf/T_53.pdf#page=116, s. 118

Users create virtual communities mostly within the forums or social networking sites. G. Mazurek suggests that the most important catalysts to support the process of building virtual communities are[7]:

- existence of common need;
- common demographic characteristics or cultural;
- spatial proximity;
- habit / routine / loyalty;
- high frequency of interaction / account
- common interests / hobbies.

[5] *Raport Młodzi 2011*, online: http://zds.kprm.gov.pl/sites/default/files/pliki/mlodzi_2011_printerfriendly.pdf, s.33

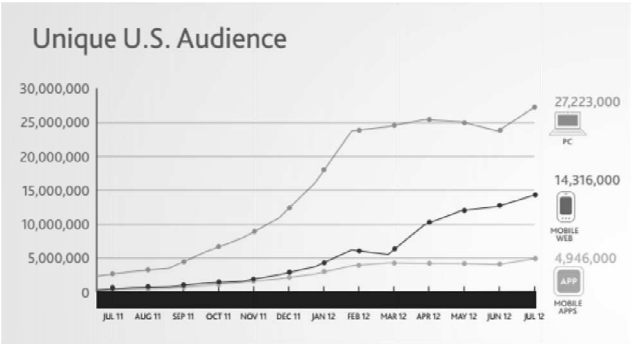
[6]; T. Dryl, *Serwisy społecznościowe Web 2.0 jako element budowania interakcji przedsiębiorstwa z klientami* http://wzr.pl/~dryl/img_fck/artykul%20-%20serwisy%20web%202_0%20-%20Tomek%20Dryl.pdf , s. 5

[7] G. Mazurek, *Wirtualne społeczności konsumenckie*, online: http://www.gmazurek.com/download/3.PhD_spolecznosci_AEKatowice_092003.pdf, s. 2

In estabilished communities their users can share content, photos (found on the web and captured by them), as well as video. Studies show that joining to virtual community allows them to feel: informed, amused, indifferent, excited, happy, energized, but also sad, angry, jealous, and that they are wasted time[8]. 76% of cited study respondents felt positive emotions, and only 21% negative ones. It is worth to note that the most popular communities are those focused on the things that users like - such as Facebook (various content), YouTube (videos), Pinterest (photos). The idea behind these sites is to share materials that users like, delight and inspire.

In Poland, Facebook.com has gathered more users, though the site called "Nasza Klasa" (now NK.pl, site similar to Classmates.com or odnoklassniki.ru) was the first mass social networking site. This what worked for Facebook did not work on NK.pl, though this was the pioneer on the Polish market. Although the mechanisms of operation are very similar - Facebook has created an idea that led users to liking, referring, recommending, instead of simply reheating and cultivating ties from the past.

„ *It is estimated that by 2015 90% of the content available on the internet take the form of either video or photos. This can be seen even after the great popularity of infographics, which often summarize content of the reports with dozens of pages. We should remember that every day on Facebook 300 million photos are added."*[9] Site entirely dedicated to photos is Pinterest (figure 1), which users are mostly women (according to various sources - between 60 and 80%), aged 18-44 years. It dominates the specific subject matter: it is better environment not for the big brands, but particularly for the brands associated with lifestyle, food, creativity, designer, fashion[10]. In Poland, it is a relatively new service, but very fast-growing in terms of increasing number of users (growth of 164% over II-IX 2012).



Pinterest.com audience changes in Poland (Megapanel PBI/Gemius data)		
Time period	Real users (audience)	Reach
II 2012	137 890	0,71%
III 2012	209 288	1,08%
IV 2012	290 688	1,49%
V 2011	318 128	1,63%
VI 2012	310 721	1,59%
VII 2012	303 714	1,56%
VIII 2012	308 986	1,59%
IX 2012	364 925	1,88%

Figure 1. Pinterest users growth: World and Poland

Source: *The Social Media Report 2012*, online: http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2012-Reports/The-Social-Media-Report-2012.pdf, p.9; *Pinterest ma już 365 tys. użytkowników w Polsce*, online: http://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artykul/pinterest-ma-juz-365-tys-uzytkownikow-w-polsce

[8] *The Social Media Report 2012*, online: http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2012-Reports/The-Social-Media-Report-2012.pdf, p.12

[9] M. Niewęgłowski, *Pinterest w Polsce*, online: http://socjomania.pl/pinterest-w-polsce-warto-sie-nim-zainteresowac-bo/

[10] Tamże

From Figure 2, it is clear that portals like Facebook, and Pinterest are mainly used for entertainment, but also to get inspiration on what to buy or to keep up with the latest popular trends, liked by others. Such usage patterns foster the development of hedonistic attitudes, particularly over Pinterest.

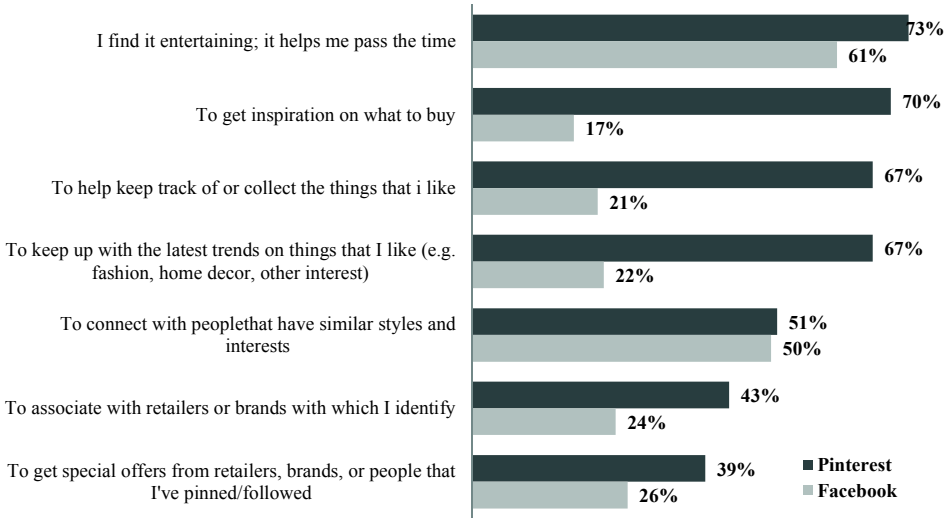


Figure 2. Reasons for using Facebook and Pinterest (2012)
Note: n=1248/4738 online shoppers who use Pinterest/Facebook respectively
Source: *Social Image Sharing and Online Shopping Report by Bizrate Insights.,* online: http://bizrateinsights.com/blog/2012/10/15/online-consumer-pulse-pinterest-vs-facebook-which-social-sharing-site-wins-at-shopping-engagement/

A greater percent (55%) of Pinterest users have engaged with retailers and brands via Pinterest, compared to the percent of Facebook users that engage retailers or brands on Facebook (48%) – figure 3. But the way how customers engage differs for each of the two platforms (figure 3). Pinterest users are more likely to be "Creators": adding and sharing retailer/brand related content, while Facebook users are more likely to be passive "Observers" and/or "Participators": interacting with promotional activities developed by retailers and brands.

In Poland, among the most popular social media are social networking sites (86,89% of internet audience), but they are followed by blogs (almost 60%) and forums and discussion groups (51,16%)[11].

Joining the virtual community - regardless of their type - allows the user to: observe the activity of others, share data content, comment on it, and create their own content. Each of these activities - directly or indirectly affect the development / intensity of hedonistic attitude. It is worth to note that very important role plays the virality element. If a person performs an action – others will know about it. Others means in this case those belonging to the circle of friends, or those which can observe the profile

[11] A. Garapich, *Zasięg blogosfery w Polsce*, online: http://www.slideshare.net/domino00/blogosfera-w-liczbach, s. 7

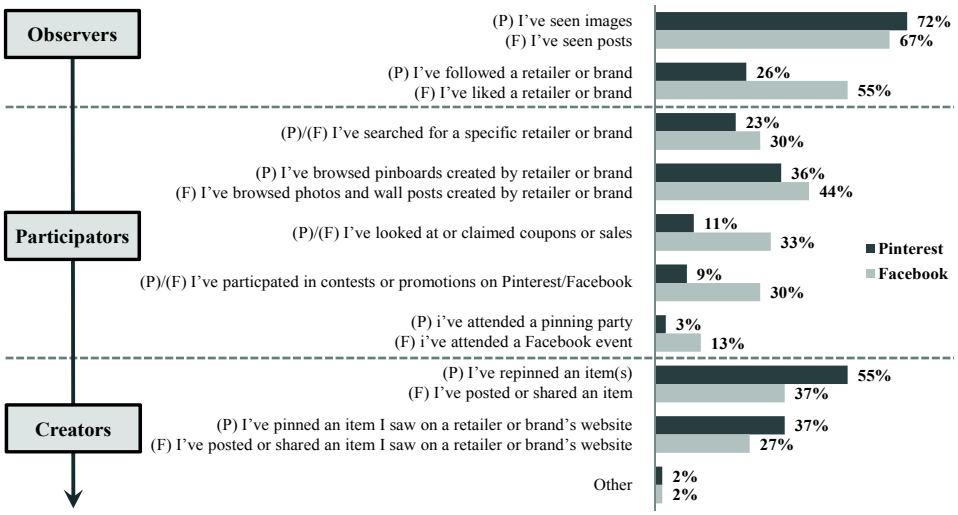


Figure 3. Brand engagement via Pinterest and Facebook (2012)
Note: n=732/2327 online shoppers who engage with retailers or brands via Pinterest/Facebook respectively
Source: *Social Image Sharing and Online Shopping Report by Bizrate Insights*, online: http://bizrateinsights.com/blog/2012/10/15/online-consumer-pulse-pinterest-vs-facebook-which-social-sharing-site-wins-at-shopping-engagement/

(considering profile privacy settings, not available on all of such sites). In addition - as part of a community of people who rather do not know physically - it's easier to admit to certain interests (but also easier to only declare them), than in the case of friends, which somebody meets in the neighborhood.

Observation – passive participation

This form of rather passive participation in the community, is performed by the vast majority (about 90%) of users. It helps in making purchase decisions, fosters learning from others, or even entertain itself. Watching lifestyle blogs (among others: fashion, beauty, cooking), for persons interested in a particular subject makes sense of taste, increased awareness (shows new features, such as the new connections of certain items of clothing), allows to be in touch with trends. Lifestyle blogs are now the fastest developing in Poland, and their audience is much greater than opinion press (table 3).

Table 3. Popularity of main cooking and fashion blogs in Poland (measured by # of fans on Facebook.com)

	Cooking blogs		Fashion blogs	
1	Kwestia Smaku	103 000	Maffashion	153 000
2	Pozytywna Kuchnia	82 100	Make Life Easier	87 700
3	Kocham gotować	69 600	Fashionelka	17 300
4	Kotlet.tv	25 700	Segritta	5 100

Note: for comparison the number of fans for popular press in Poland, Newsweek Polska is 57 000 and for Rzeczpospolita - 27 800.
Source: own elaboration on the base of facebook.com data

Mentioned blogs are containing in the majority of high-quality photos and/or videos. It perfectly fits into consumer trend to "do it yourself" (DIY), which shows others how to easily get amazing results: make interesting creations with homemade clothes, fancy meals with simple ingredients, fantastic hair done at home (eg. Lilith Moon user having over than 485 thousands subscribers on Youtube.com), etc. Consumer tired by mass consumption seeks opportunity to distinguish themselves. Watching the blogs, reading groups/forums, or collecting photos on Pinterest – allows to look on own self differently, it learns, develops his/her own style, which then shares and inspires others. In times of such a large supply of products - many people do not want to blindly follow fashion, but they find pleasure in finding the elements and creating yourself - even if it is by following the style of blogger. All those activities take time - spent watching content generated by the virtual community to which he/she belongs, and then look for places where they can buy something desirable (whether online or offline), but it is a source of hedonic pleasure. This rule applies only not to fashion, but also to the cooking. Healthy eating and DIY trends as well as fatigue caused by fast pace of life leads some people to prefer to cook/prepare something yourself, at home, with proven ingredients like more natural vegetables bought at the market, instead go out to restaurant for dinner. The consumer learns tested, meets and discovers the world through taste. It also is a source of pleasure, which he/she seeks. Over the year 2012 in Poland 190 thousand people had bought products after reading the recipe found on the blog.[12]

To conclude mass observation habits are leading to the situation when „*of large number blogs, they emerge ones with a very wide audience, high popularity and substantial possibility to create opinions, whose authors became authorities and determiners of fashion. This naturally results in a "half-professionalization" of such blogs*."[13] So influential bloggers easily can influence hedonic attitudes.

Sharing – active participation

The more active social media users share content. They are sharing what they found over the Internet and what they created themselves. So creating content, they are expressing themselves, their personality, by sharing what they like and recommend. On the one hand, they may feel the need to show off, disseminate their knowledge, or share information, and on the other hand – they are creating: trends, flavors, tastes. As a rule, it does not matter whether virtual communities are centered around brands (B2C), or around users themselves (C2C). Due to virtual communities revives what have forgotten or what do not belong to the mass culture (the so-called long tail[14]).

Users do not only write about products. They inform each other about things worth to see, climatic places or interesting venues. They inform about the events. All those activities allow them to create "their own culture" – designated products, services, destinations, so they are feeling not "ordinary consumers", but stand out from the others. With all those activities their choices are more sophisticated, less typical, so they gain more pleasure from shopping.

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[12] Ł. Dębski, *Polska blogosfera kulinarna*, online: http://infosocialmedia.blogspot.com/2013/02/polska-blogosfera-kulinarna-2013.html

[13] *Blogosfera RPG na początku 2013 roku,* online: http://k20rpg.pl/blogosfera-rpg-na-poczatku-2013/

[14] It's concept created by C. Anderson in book *The Long Tail*, Kraków 2001, Znak

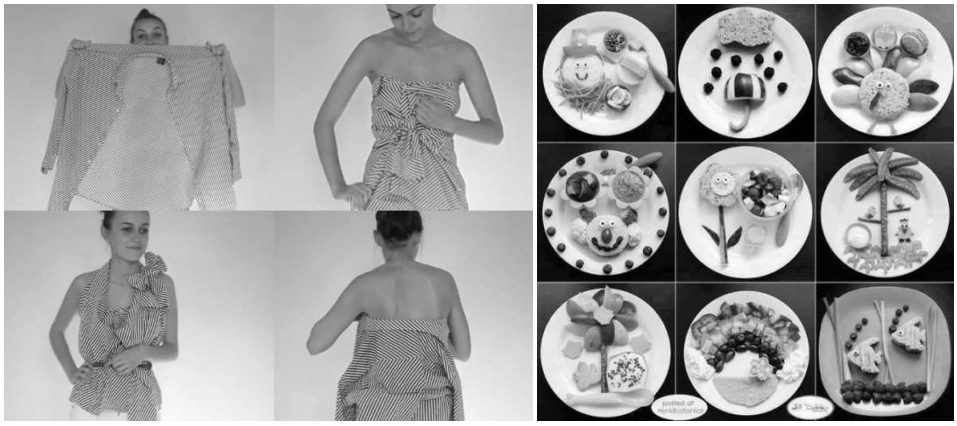

Figure 4. Exemplary photos showing hedonic behavior coming from DIY activity shared on social media
Source: Pinterest.com

By commenting consumers interact, show their own views, their own tastes and individuality. The same happens by creating their own content, which is located highest on the ladder of user participation (the dynamic development of Instagram app that allows you to easily share pictures taken through mobile phone is a proof for such point of view).

Conclusion

It seems that the hedonistic attitudes are intensifying in the modern world. Young people, as different in their behavior and lifestyle from previous generations – are very intensive involved in the world of social media and are creating online communities that help them to be in touch, to experience the world, and share interesting content. Due to virtual communities, consumers have virtually unlimited access to the resources that allow them to create their personalized style, which they can "promote" the same may. There are no geographical barriers (that makes possible imitation of other cultures) and time limits. There is possible to communicate with "one to many" model, which accelerates fast flow of information, and encourages development of group focused around specific interests. Thanks to virtual communities hedonism does not have to be a "expensive" – not always somebody needs to buy or spend, publicly available tutorials (whether in video or picture form), are showing how to do / make (DIY) things wanted. Young people are also more likely prone to visuals than text. In this way, hedonism may soon become heavily outlined attitude among consumers.

There is a need to directly investigate mentioned in this paper circumstances of boosting hedonic attitudes by social media. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches will be valuable in this case, particularly to find clearly identified factors and patterns of influence.

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Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiono rozważania dotyczące wpływu wirtualnych społeczności na kształtowanie postaw hedonistycznych konsumentów na tle literatury przedmiotu oraz źródeł wtórnych, np. raportów z badań. Przedstawiono przykłady takiego wpływu, z wyodrębnieniem różnych rodzajów społeczności oraz dostrzegalne różnice pomiędzy generacjami X, Y i C. Wirtualne społeczności, zwłaszcza portale społecznościowe (w tekście odnoszono się głównie do serwisów Facebook.com i Pinterest.com) oraz blogi (w tym przypadku: poświęcone modzie i stylowi życia) są naturalnym miejscem dla młodych konsumentów, w którym spędzają czas na

obserwowaniu, komunikacji, dzieleniu się i tworzeniu własnych treści. Łatwe w użyciu, dostępne 24/7 i wszechobecne media społecznościowe sprzyjają ich wykorzystaniu przez młodych konsumentów do rozpowszechniania nie tylko informacji, zdjęć i filmów, ale - co jest ważne z społecznego i marketingowego punktu widzenia - także określonych wartości i postaw. Hedonistyczne wartości i postawy są istotnym elementem stylu życia młodych konsumentów, a media społecznościowe pozwalają im łatwo zaspokajać hedonistyczne potrzeby. Wirtualne społeczności są więc odpowiedzialne za szerzenie i wzmacnianie nasilenia postaw hedonistycznych wśród konsumentów. Postawy te obecnie nie mogą być klasyfikowane jako wyłącznie związane z konsumpcją, pomimo tego że nadal skupiają się na odczuwaniu przyjemności przez konsumentów, ale przyjemność ta osiągana jest nie tylko poprzez kupowanie, ale również wyróżniający design, styl i własne zaangażowanie w aktywność DIY (do it yourself – zrób to sam).

Słowa kluczowe: hedonizm, postawa hedonistyczna, wirtualne społeczności, konsument

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