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THE EFFECT OF LENIENT RETURN POLICY ON BRAND RECOGNITION

Abstract: Every year, the global retail industry loses billions of dollars due to the product returns. Despite this, too little attention in the literature has been paid to examine customers' intentions to return and the associated implications. As the subject of returns is broad and multifaceted, this article attempts to analyze one of the many aspects of the returns policy, namely the impact of the pro-consumer returns policy on brand recognition. The research process related to the collection of primary data consisted of two stages: pilot and proper studies. The research shows that brands that notice the need to introduce a pro-consumer return system by extending the return period and introducing a more efficient system for managing the process of accepting them, derive more and more benefits in the form of increasing brand recognition.

Keywords: Return policies; Brand recognition; Pro-consumer returns system; Customer satisfaction.

1. Introduction

For many years, the principle of "customer focus" has been at the heart of modern quality management systems (Adem & Viridi, 2020; Krivokapić & Stefanović, 2020). The customer decides about the future of the enterprise and is the final "judge" of the quality of products or services offered by the organization. Therefore, companies should prioritize all activities focused on meeting customer expectations (Fonseca, 2015; Hadidi et al., 2017). This requires the organization to design a customer service policy, to provide effective information exchange channels and enable the customer to join the process of designing new products and services. (Yaya et al., 2014). Moreover, the role of logistics (eliminating the time and space gaps between the organization and its customers) and extensive post-trade services. Therefore, the designing an effective logistic customer service system requires finding the optimum between the organization of the

are equally important (Lysenko-Ryba, 2021). Customer service occupies the most important place among other logistics issues (Zimon & Madzik, 2020). This is mainly due to the changes taking place in the markets as a result of globalization, the implementation of modern customer service systems in enterprises, the need to maintain a high level of logistic efficiency in customer service, as well as discrepancies between the level of service and customer expectations (Muñuzuri et al., 2013; Zatwarnicka-Madura et al., 2016). Rogers i Leuschner (2004) pointed out that management of returns is one of the distinct dimensions of the supply chain concept compared to the traditional logistics-oriented perspective. A large part of customer returns may be defect-free as the returned product does not meet the customer's tastes or does not meet their expectations (Chen & Bell, 2011).

physical flow of products and the development of effective forms of communication with the customer (Zimon &

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Dellana, 2020; Hoehle et al., 2018; Zatwarnicka-Madura et al., 2019).

These activities will allow to provide customers with an appropriate range of products, focus on eliminating time and space gaps between customers and the manufacturer, and provide the required level of after-sales service and handling of returns. (Tomic & Brkic, 2019). The starting point leading to the development of a distribution strategy is to identify the needs of individual customer groups, to choose the form of distribution and to design distribution channels in accordance with the requirements of the adopted service standards for individual customer groups (Candas & Kutanoglu, 2020).

The overriding goal of the organization should be not only to improve the emphasized activities, but also to go beyond them by trying to offer customers the satisfaction of their unconscious needs. (Pattanayak et al., 2017). There are many studies in the literature on the issues of customer service from the point of view of manufacturing companies (Wang et al., 2016; Olhager, 2010). However, not only these companies need to fully focus on knowing and exceeding customer requirements. After all, the role of the last links in the supply chain, which directly contact customers, is particularly important (Mahlamäki et al., 2020). Improving after-sales service in retail stores can be one of the most important aspects of providing a competitive advantage to supply chains (Shokouhyar et al., 2020). During the literature review only, a small number of studies can be noticed with the topics covering the issue of handling returns in retail stores. From the point of view of customer satisfaction, the most important things in the return process are: place, time of return and information flow (Bi et al., 2018). The place of return may be the retail store where the purchase was made, a collection point (e.g. a recycling company) or a carrier (courier company) who will drive to the customer's door and pick up the goods himself (this is

how Zalando works). The farther the return point is, the less customer satisfaction will be (Mehta & Balakumar, 2021). The ideal situation for a modern customer, who is very convenient, is to hand over the goods to a courier or a company that collects household waste that drives directly to the customer. (Gulc, 2020). The reverse supply chain must be configured to reduce to a minimum the time and effort on the part of the customer.

Every year, the global retail industry loses billions of dollars due to the product returns. Despite this, too little attention in the literature has been paid to examine customers' intentions to return and the associated implications (Maity, 2020). As the subject of returns is broad and multifaceted, this article attempts to analyze one of the many aspects of the returns policy, namely the impact of the pro-consumer returns policy on brand recognition.

2. Literature review

Building a store's brand and recognizing means creating a set of favorable and unique associations for a given network, which may be a factor deciding where consumers will buy (Thoma & Williams, 2013; Hall, 2019; Oszust & Stecko, 2020). The return policy is one of such factors. It is an essential element for offline and online stores. Customers, especially before buying online, check how they can return the goods when they do not meet their expectations, what are the related costs and when they will receive a refund. For them, it is an overwhelming factor when choosing an e-shop. Virtual store experience affects consumers' perceptions and intentions toward the retailer's brand (Pizzi et al., 2020).

Keller (1993) defines brand recognition as consumer's ability to discriminate the brand as having seen or heard before. Brand recognition is to confirm prior exposure to the brand when the brand is given a cue (Khurram et al., 2018). People choose mostly the things that are familiar to them (Coates et al., 2006).

The role of a retailer's return policy in consumers' decision making is very important. A lenient return policy drives down purchase risk and leads consumers to have positive store images and higher patronage intentions (Rokonuzzaman et al., 2021). When the online retailers adopt a lenient return policy, the consumers have higher perceived quality and lower perceived risk, which in turn leads to a higher intention to purchase (Shao et al., 2021). Offering return policy in web-store channels has an impact on the amount of manufacturers' profits in each channel (Alaei, 2020).

Retailers often use lenient return policies—possibly due to the inherent belief that leniency increases product purchase more than product returns—despite the high processing costs and low salvage values associated with returns (Janakiraman et al., 2016). Interesting research was conducted by Khouja et al. (2019) regarding to the effect of return and price adjustment policies on a retailer's performance. Product returns cost retailers billions of dollars annually. Consumers return products they are dissatisfied with and may return and repurchase products in order to obtain a discount when temporary price drops occur. According to the authors using noncash refunds can significantly reduce the cost of providing a return policy and may even make such a policy profitable. Retailers selling products with valuation uncertainty often offer return policies to consumers to stimulate demand.

According to Bahn and Boyd (2014) consumers will view an assortment characterized by a more restrictive return policy as attractive to the extent that the assortment supports the information processing strategy triggered by the return policy.

Clothing market research has shown that consumers appreciate brands that give an opportunity to return the purchased clothing for no specific reason. Additionally, the possibility of a future return or exchange of

clothing is one of the main factors when purchasing clothing as a gift (Sempruch, 2010).

The return policy is not only an element that minimizes various types of risk occurring during the decision-making process, it has a large impact on brand trust (Comegys et al., 2009) but it can also influence brand recognition. Building an appropriate brand image increases its recognition. The image is influenced by many elements (Erdil, 2015). When analyzing the publication sources, a research gap was noticed regarding to the relationship between the returns policy and brand recognition.

According to the literature analysis, the pro-consumer returns system can contribute to the satisfaction of customers with their service and increase their loyalty to the brand. (Lysenko-Ryba & Zimon, 2021). In Poland, only few companies invest in the right tools to create an optimal system for handling returns (Jeszka, 2014). Although entrepreneurs declare that they make it easier for buyers to submit complaints, comments, and wishes, most of them use traditional, passive methods of establishing contacts with the client. Entrepreneurs often do not hire qualified personnel for customer service. In addition, companies do not always provide information fully and accurately, which prevents improvements and statistics on how many goods have been returned (Ofek et al., 2010).

The speed of processing the returned goods is very important because it has a direct impact on customer satisfaction, because customer expects the fastest possible return of funds and the best service. (Stöcker et al., 2021). It also influences the optimization of working capital - the sooner the returned goods are approved in the system, the sooner they will find their pay back to the store's offer and will be purchased by the next customer. (Sun et al., 2021). An example of such an operator is Docdata, which cooperates with Zalando or Asos. An item bought online is often returned with dirt or damage and, for obvious reasons,

cannot be re-circulated for sale. The delivered goods must be meticulously checked and classified, which is what the external operator does. Often such goods go to outlets. Initially, the leftover goods, often damaged, were sold in outlets for the workers of the factories where these goods were produced. Over time, outlets were also opened for all interested parties. Customer can buy goods at a very bargain price, often below the cost of its production. This is good for the producer as well, because if he doesn't sell the commodity at a discounted price, he has to destroy it and won't make any money from it. Outlets and stockists are a good way to extend the life cycle of goods (Rangarajan & Krishna, 2018).

3. Research methodology

In this research, for measuring the factors of customers return, a CAWI technique was used as the main data collection method. The questionnaire as a main tool included the questions related to the expectations of the customers and their ability to share information about their experience, both negative and positive.

The main goal of the empirical research was to identify the relationship between the liberal return policy and brand recognition among customers.

The article attempts to verify the following research hypothesis:

- *H: Liberal returns policy increases the level of brand recognition.*

The following gender and age amounts were used in the study:

- 48% of male and 52% of female,
- 60% of people aged 25 to 46.

The research process related to the collection of primary data consisted of two stages: pilot and proper studies. In each of them, questionnaire surveys were used to collect primary data. The actual survey was carried out in April and May 2018 among 327 people representing Polish adult final buyers. Care was taken to ensure that the respondents had

realized a return at least once. According to the Central Statistical Office, 38.434 million people lived in Poland at the time of the research

Table 1. Sample profile

Question:	n	%
Age:		
up to 25 years	41	12,5%
26–45 years	128	39,1%
46–60 years	48	14,7%
over 60 years old	110	33,6%
Sex:		
female	162	49,5%
male	165	50,5%
Place of residence:		
village	125	38,2%
city up to 50,000	47	14,4%
city 50,000 –150,000	42	12,8%
city 150,000–500,000	46	14,1%
city with over 500,000	67	20,5%
Education:		
basic	5	1,5%
professional	17	5,2%
technical secondary	82	25,1%
general secondary education	93	28,4%
higher	130	39,8%
Average net income:		
Up to PLN 1000	23	7,0%
PLN 1001-2000	98	30,0%
PLN 2001–3000	93	28,4%
PLN 3001– 4000	60	18,3%
over PLN 4000	53	16,2%
Professional situation:		
unemployed	30	9,2%
student	21	6,4%
have own business	12	3,7%
employed in a company / institution	147	45,0%
pensioner	117	35,8%
n = 327		

4. Research results

In order to identify stores with the most pro-consumer return policy, and thus with the longest return time, respondents were asked to identify the stores that, in their opinion, are associated with the most pro-consumer return policy. It was an open-ended question; the respondents could name 5 stores (Fig. 1). Then the question was asked: "Which of the listed stores do you associate with the most pro-consumer returns system?" In this case, the respondents received a list with various stores and had to choose from among them (Fig. 2). It is a technique used in brand recognition research. Its use allowed to test spontaneous and assisted awareness.

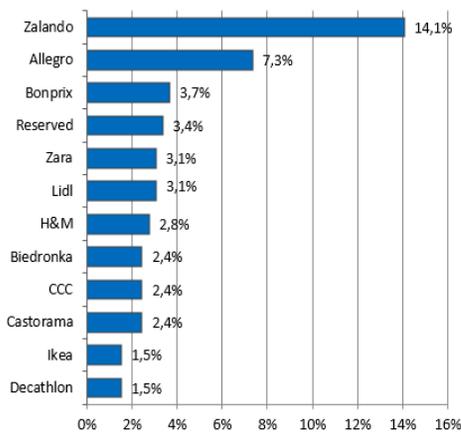


Figure 1. Shops most often indicated by the respondents as being associated with the most pro-consumer return system)

In both cases, Zalando was selected in the first place. It is a German clothing store that provides online services. It provides free shipping and returns with no minimum order value, free hotline and 100 days for the return of the purchased goods. A key factor in Zalando's success is the Free Shipping and Return Policy, which is a very important part of the value proposition for the customer and business model. The choice of a given store by the respondents confirms the hypothesis - Liberal returns policy increases the level of

brand recognition. In the first case described above, it was interesting that the respondents indicated Allegro, which is not really a shop, but a marketplace.

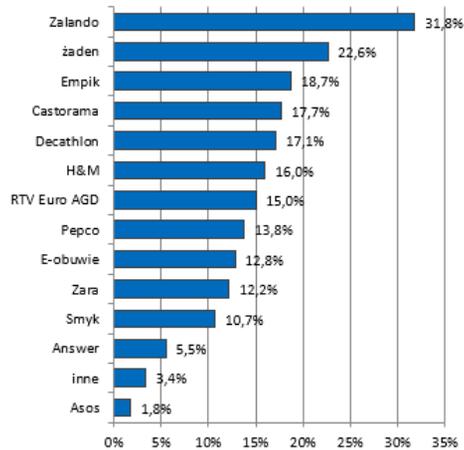


Figure 2. Shops most often indicated (selected from the list) by the respondents as being associated with the most pro-consumer returns system

The results of the chi-square test showed a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.05$) between the stores indicated by the respondents as associated with the pro-consumer return system and their net income in the case of 1 answer (Table 2).

The results of the chi-square test showed statistically significant relationships ($p < 0.05$) between the stores indicated (selected from the list) by the respondents as being associated with the pro-consumer returns system and their gender in the case of 3 responses (Table 3).

Men more often than women indicated the Castorama brand (24.2%), and women more often than men indicated the Smyk brand (14.8%) and Answer (9.3%). The difference in the story is probably due to the assortment offered by the surveyed stores. Castorama offers home finishing and renovation products, while in Smyk it has products for children and Answer represents the fashion industry.

Table 2. Shops indicated by the respondents as associating them with the most pro-consumer return system, broken down into the average net income of respondents per person in the household

Shop	Up to PLN 1000 [n=9]	PLN 1001-2000 [n=41]	PLN 2001-3000 [n=41]	PLN 3001-4000 [n=24]	Above PLN 4000 [n=24]	Statistical significance
Zalando	33,3%	53,7%	14,6%	45,8%	16,7%	$\chi^2=18,825278$ df=4 p=0,000851
Allegro	0,0%	17,1%	14,6%	16,7%	29,2%	$\chi^2=4,463565$ df=4 p=0,34689
Bonprix	0,0%	12,2%	7,3%	4,2%	12,5%	-
Reserved	22,2%	9,8%	4,9%	4,2%	8,3%	-
Lidl	0,0%	4,9%	17,1%	0,0%	4,2%	-
Zara	0,0%	7,3%	4,9%	8,3%	12,5%	-

Table 3. Shops most often indicated (selected from the list) by the respondents as being associated with the most pro-consumer return system, broken down by gender of the respondents

Shop	female [n=162]	male [n=165]	Statistical significance
Castorama	11,1%	24,2%	$\chi^2=9,660125$, df=1, p=0,001883
Zalando	35,8%	27,9%	$\chi^2=2,36626$, df=1, p=0,123984
Asos	1,2%	2,4%	$\chi^2=0,642313$, df=1, p=0,422874
Decathlon	14,2%	20,0%	$\chi^2=9,660125$, df=1, p=0,001883
Zara	13,6%	10,9%	$\chi^2=0,543254$, df=1, p=0,461087
H&M	17,9%	15,8%	$\chi^2=0,268489$, df=1, p=0,604347
E-obuwie	14,2%	11,5%	$\chi^2=0,525403$, df=1, p=0,468546
Empik	16,1%	21,2%	$\chi^2=1,435805$, df=1, p=0,230819
Smyk	14,8%	6,7%	$\chi^2=5,678239$, df=1, p=0,017177
Answear	9,3%	1,8%	$\chi^2=8,701365$, df=1, p=0,00318
RTV Euro AGD	11,1%	18,8%	$\chi^2=3,781487$, df=1, p=0,051823
Pepco	16,7%	10,9%	$\chi^2=2,283308$, df=1, p=0,130773
Other	1,9%	4,9%	$\chi^2=2,258053$, df=1, p=0,132921
none	24,1%	21,2%	$\chi^2=0,382401$, df=1, p=0,536321

5. Discussion

The pro-consumer return policy is associated with a long time that the store offers to decide on the return of goods. Under national law, a Polish consumer who has concluded a distance contract, i.e. purchased online or over the phone, may withdraw from the transaction within 14 days without giving a reason and without incurring costs. However, when buying in a stationary store, it is not a legal obligation of the store and it depends only on the good will of the seller. Hence, different stores have different return periods, e.g. in the Reserved clothing store it is 30 days, in TK Maxx - 28 days, in Lidl, the return of industrial goods is possible only within 7 days from the date of purchase, and in the Społem store, which sells industrial goods, return goods is not possible at all. The consumer may only exchange the article for another if the store manager allows for it. In Leroy Merlin and Castorama stores, the return period is unlimited. For these DIY stores, the returned product must not be damaged, used and its packaging must not be broken. Moreover, when returning goods, the customer must have a proof of purchase. For example, if a customer wants to return a piece of furniture that has been assembled, but has not been used later, the store will not accept such goods. At first glance, the DIY stores seem to have a very pro-consumer policy, but this is not the case. Shops have long lists of items that cannot be returned, such as products sold by meters or light bulbs. This unlimited return period applies to goods such as panels and tiles, which we can return even when the packaging is open. This is because they have unlimited expiration dates and the store will easily sell them again.

When analyzing the Polish market, it can be concluded that companies still lack awareness of the reasons for returns and what benefits they can bring for the company. All because returns are perceived as a result of the poor quality and mismanaged. To change this, Polish managers need to integrate the returns

management process into the company's overall strategy, which will benefit companies and their customers. (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1997). In November 2016, in Poland, Lidl stores carried out campaigns under the slogan "Absolute satisfaction or your money back". The rules of the action were very simple. Customers who bought Lidl's own brand products could request a refund if they were not satisfied with the purchased goods, without giving any reason. They only had to take the packaging of the product with them. Moreover, they did not even need to have a receipt with them. Lidl is very proud of its own brand, Lidl believes that their products have a very good quality, so the assumption was that consumer should not complain. Unfortunately, the managers did not take into account the mentality of the Poles. As a consequence, the stores were filled with people returning huge amounts of used packaging. Within a few days, the store had to suspend its operation. Although the intentions of the store were very good ("The aim of the campaign is to guarantee customers complete satisfaction with the own brand products purchased in our stores. We believe that this will allow consumers to make the right choices during subsequent purchases, which may minimize food waste in households"), carrying out such an undertaking in such a liberal way without any market research and specificity of consumer behavior is very expensive and may have a negative impact on the company's reputation. The situation on the American market is different. Return flows are a frequent subject of research by scientists and business. Every year, The Retail Equation conducts surveys and prepares a Consumer Returns in the Retail Industry report based on the results for the National Retail Federation. This report presents all the information about returned items by state. Consumers returned an estimated \$428 billion in merchandise in 2020 (<https://nrf.com/media-center/press-releases/428-billion-merchandise-returned-2020>, access 22.04.2021).

The reason for this is a very liberal return policy, which has to be adapted to the market and citizens' mentality. At Nordstrom and Macy's US store, customers have one year to return. In the US, customers often buy goods with the intention of returning them in a few days. In order to reduce abuses, for example, the Nordstrom store introduced restrictions on occasional dresses that were returned after one event. From the customers perspective, the return process is very easy and stress-free, they do not have to go to the same store where he purchased the goods, and the staff does not strictly check the goods. The logic behind this liberal return policy is that the ease of returns motivates customers to make a purchase, and after the transaction, there is a chance that those who intended to return the goods will keep the goods for various reasons. Japan is another example of a country adopting a liberal approach. The country is admired for its perfectly organized society which completely changed its philosophy after the end of the war. The Japanese pay a lot of attention to customer service and customer satisfaction. Everyone knows the expression "the customer is always right". In Japan, it says: "the customer is God", which shows the direction of all marketing and logistics activities. In terms of liberality, the Japanese goods return system can be compared to the US. For example, in the Uniqlo store from the clothing industry, customers can even return worn and washed clothes, which in the Polish reality is unimaginable. In Poland, where most companies have introduced a restrictive returns management system, the main task is to minimize the volume of returns, and only in second place is to meet the needs of customers, especially the demanding ones. Not only Japanese companies serve customers in this way. Foreign companies, such as Amazon, also have to be very flexible and adapt to consumer expectations, because customers are used to the highest level of service. The Japanese system of returns is characterized by high efficiency and effectiveness. In order to benefit from a situation that seems to be a crisis (the

customer does not want or does not need our goods), companies must first of all change their attitude to be more pro-consumer. (Lantz & Hjort, 2013). Jeng (2017) points out that less well-known brands in particular can gain a lot by using convenient forms of returns that encourage customers to buy.

The above case studies from the US and Japan are good examples of how customers should be treated to gain a market advantage. Unfortunately, changing the approach alone is not enough. Logistic aspects go hand in hand with this. Companies must streamline all their processes to guarantee the fastest possible service, so that on the one hand the customer is satisfied, and on the other hand, the company does not have to incur high costs (Guerrero-Lorente et al., 2020). Moreover, taking care customers providing the most liberal pro-consumer return policy will contribute to increase brand recognition. And brand recognition influences consumers' purchasing decisions reducing their perceived risk (Moisescu, 2009).

6. Summary

The common view among managers that the reasons for complaints or returns belongs only to the customer and are related to the improper use of products, is no longer valid. Currently, the customer makes returns for various reasons, about which he often does not want to and does not need to inform the sellers. Customer-to-retailer returns are now a common feature of competitive markets. Some consumers return products that are unsatisfactory, while others return products that are functioning properly for other reasons, such as not meeting expectations, changing taste preferences or wanting to take advantage of new and more favorable promotions. The existence of customer returns is now becoming an important element that supply chains can use in the promotion process and as part of the competitive struggle. A well-designed return policy in its idea is to improve customer service and, consequently, increase

satisfaction, although it must be done in a thoughtful way, adapting to the economic level of the country, the possibilities of the supply chain and the mentality of its citizens. The return policy must be as pro-consumer as possible, but up to a certain level, because too lenient return rules encourage some customers to abuse these rules through opportunistic or even fraudulent behavior. Customers can abuse return policies by making purchases with the full intention of returning the products or by returning a product long after extracting most of the product's market value (Ketzenberg et al., 2020).

The research shows that brands that notice the need to introduce a pro-consumer return system by extending the return period and

introducing a more efficient system for managing the process of accepting them, derive more and more benefits in the form of increasing customer loyalty. An example of such a company is Zalando.pl, which offers 100 days to return the goods and is considered a leader in the clothing industry. Achieving this level of after-sales service requires the manufacturer to understand the tastes and preferences of customers and make design changes based on customer tastes and data, and strong retailer involvement. However, the efforts made in this area result in a strengthened competitive position, better brand recognition and higher sales volume, as well as more returns. Therefore, the key to success is the development of logistically effective pro-consumer returns.

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