

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE COMPETITIVENESS OF POLISH ENTERPRISES FROM THE CONSUMER'S PERSPECTIVE

Anna WOLAK-TUZIMEK

Kazimierz Pulaski University of Radom, Faculty of Economic and Finance, Radom, e-mail: awt@uthrad.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0002-2998-909X

Purpose: To identify the key factors of enterprise competitiveness from the consumer's perspective. Two research hypotheses are proposed: **H1:** consumer satisfaction is an important factor of enterprise competitiveness; **H2:** the consumer's age has a significant effect on the choice of enterprise competitiveness factors. The notion and essence of competitiveness are discussed. The dimensions of competitiveness, that is, competitive position and competitive potential of an enterprise, as well as the instruments of competition are set out in detail.

Design/methodology/approach: The theoretical section follows a detailed review of leading literature on the subject. In the empirical part, descriptive statistics, i.e., the measures of position (arithmetic mean, median) and of dispersion (standard deviation, the coefficient of variance) and the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test are used to verify the hypotheses.

Findings: The paper contains the results of a survey of 236 respondents living in Poland. The tools of descriptive analysis serve to demonstrate the consumer's behaviour is a major factor of enterprise competitiveness in the consumers' opinion. The Kruskal-Wallis test, on the other hand, serves to determine whether the factor distribution of enterprise competitive position, competitive potential, and the instruments of competition are identical for the variable category of the respondent's age. The age is proved to be a variable differentiating the choice of enterprise competitiveness factors in all its dimensions.

Practical implications: The results may be of use to entrepreneurs as a guide to the selection of competitiveness factors in line with consumers' opinions.

Originality/value: The paper includes some original results of research into a group of respondents living in Poland with regard to their assessment of competitiveness factors utilised by enterprises.

Keywords: competitiveness, enterprise, competitive potential, competitive position, instruments of competition.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Competitiveness is a key factor of success for any enterprise. In today's global and dynamic business environment, enterprises must continue adapting and developing to maintain their market positions. There are a number of factors influencing enterprise competitiveness. A correct choice and understanding of these factors is necessary for effective management and preparation of a strategy that will allow an enterprise to gain and preserve its competitive advantage. This is for this reason that consumers' opinion about which competitiveness factors employed by enterprises matter most to consumers is so important. The purpose of this article is therefore to identify the factors of enterprise competitiveness from the consumer's perspective.

The knowledge of rules followed by people when making their purchase decisions plays a crucial role in planning effective enterprise actions. The extent of understanding consumers' purchasing behaviour may determine which enterprises will survive in the market and which will attain a competitive advantage.

Consumers' opinions can provide important information about what an enterprise does well and what it can change to improve its competitive position in the market. If an enterprise is in possession of information which factors customers pay particular attention to when making their shopping decisions, it can modify its strategy to better meet consumer expectations and compete in the market more effectively.

2. The role of consumer in forming the factors of enterprise competitiveness – literature review

Competitiveness is the object of many theoretical studies and empirical analyses. The term itself is vaguely defined and multifaceted (Porter, 1994), relative (Balkytė, Tvaronavičienė, 2010), and implies the need for comparisons with other entities (Berger, 2010).

Competitiveness can be analysed at the level of:

- Country – in this case, it means an economy's ability to provide a population with high living standards and high employment in a sustainable manner. These issues have been studied by e.g., Fyliuk et al., 2019; Haller, 2020; Androniceanu et al., 2020.
- Region – this means improving living standards of a given region's inhabitants. A region is more competitive if businesses there are more productive than those in other regions. The subject matter has been researched by e.g., Vetráková, Smerek, 2019; Higgins et al., 2013, Berger, 2011.

- Enterprise – in this case, it denotes actions taken by enterprises to preserve their existing ‘good’ competitive position in the market compared to competitors. The subject matter has been studied by e.g., Konstantinidis et al., 2022; Wolak-Tuzimek et al., 2021; Doncheva, 2020.

Some authors decompose enterprise competitiveness into its components. According to M.J. Stankiewicz (2005, p. 89), competitiveness consists of four subsystems: competitive potential, competitive advantage, instruments of competition, and competitive position. M. Gorynia (2010, p. 77), on the other hand, suggests describing enterprise competitiveness by means of three dimensions (variable groups): competitive position in future, competitive potential, and strategy (instruments) of competition. Competitive potential is seen as a bundle of abilities, possibilities, capacities, and productiveness (of someone like an employee or something like machinery, equipment or technology) (Sobolewski, Narojczyk, 2018, p. 38), all tangible and intangible resources of an enterprise necessary for functioning in the scene of market competition (Stankiewicz, 2005, p. 89). It should address both internal elements in an entity and its business environment. It’s commonly identified with resources, competences and unique skills available to a specific firm (Wolak-Tuzimek, 2022, p. 714).

A. Janiak and others (2017, p.5) believe competitive advantage is limited in time and conditioned by actions taken by competitors and changes in an industry structure. This is the result of using the competitive potential of an enterprise (considering environment conditions) to allow for an effective generation of an attractive market offer and effective instruments of competition (Stankiewicz, 2005, p. 89). It’s founded on the utilisation of: resources, potential, quality, reputation, corporate culture, brand, know-how, innovation and creativity, unique technology, time and speed, successful strategy implementation, the capability for learning and knowledge management, and organisational slack. It should be noted enterprises increasingly address some parts of Corporate Social Responsibility in their strategies in order to achieve competitive advantage (Maráková et al., 2021, p. 111).

The instruments of competition can be defined as means an enterprise creates consciously to attract clients to their current or projected (future) offers (Stankiewicz, 2005, p. 89), as the methods of finding consumers and creating goodwill, such as quality, product pricing, or a flexible adjustment of products to consumers (Jabłońska-Porzuczek, Smoluk-Sikorska, 2016, p. 103). A suitable use of competition instruments gives rise to a competitive position stronger than of competitors.

The competitive position of an enterprise at a given time is a result of the position in a previous period, its competitive potential available in a current period, and a present strategy of competition (Dzikowska, Gorynia, 2012, p. 24).

The competitive position of an enterprise in the market economy is decided by the way it is perceived by its workers, partners, consumers, local authorities and communities, whose needs and expectations are increasingly reflected in the long-term strategies of development.

An analysis of links among the dimensions of competitiveness indicates that the achievement of a desired competitive position is conditioned by the competitive advantage that is in place, which is in turn dependent on the competitive potential that is available to an enterprise. An entity's resources and skills influence the preparation of a product range that is to be evaluated by the market and that allows for a competitive advantage. The instruments of competition should be chosen following a detailed analysis of an enterprise's competitive potential and the environment in which it operates. Only after applying the appropriate instruments of competition can a certain competitive position be acquired (Duda et al., 2021, p. 142).

The literature offers some theories that uphold the significance of consumers' opinions as a factor influencing how an enterprise builds its competitive advantage:

1. Customer Value Theory - The competitiveness of an enterprise depends on the value supplied to customers. The customer value is the difference between the benefits a customer derives from a product or service and the costs of its acquisition. Enterprises focussing on enhancing the value for customers more than their competitors attain competitive advantage (Woodruff, 1997; Woodside et al., 2008).
2. Customer Satisfaction Theory - It regards customer satisfaction as the key factor influencing enterprise competitiveness. Customers satisfied with products or services tend to return to a given enterprise and recommend it to others. Thus, enterprises effectively managing customer satisfaction can gain competitive advantage (Anderson, 1994; Atila, Fisun, 2008).
3. Customer Engagement Theory - Enterprise competitiveness depends on the degree of customer engagement with a brand and products/ services. Engaged customers are loyal, buy more often, and are more eager to recommend an enterprise. Enterprises which effectively engage their customers through interactions, communication, and relationship building can achieve competitive advantage (Brodie, 2011; Vivek et al., 2012).
4. Customer Experience Theory - The theory stresses the importance of creating positive and valuable experiences for customers. They frequently value enterprises on foot of their associated experiences, which include any contacts and interactions. Enterprises providing positive experiences to their customers can attain competitive advantage (Verhoef et al., 2009; Meyer, Schwager, 2007).
5. Customer Advocacy Theory - It assumes enterprise competitiveness depends on the ability to generate positive customer recommendations. A firm supports customer interests while customers support the firm buying its products and helping adapt its product range to consumer requirements (Reichheld, 2003; Urban, 2005).

6. Customer Trust Theory - In line with its assumptions, customer trust is the key factor influencing enterprise competitiveness. Customers tend to choose enterprises they trust to supply promised products and services and to care for their interests. Enterprises that build and maintain customer trust with their honesty, transparency, and consistent actions can achieve competitive advantage (Moorman et al., 1992; Isaeva et al., 2020).
7. Customer Relationship Theory - It assumes long-term and lasting customer relationships are crucial to enterprise competitiveness. The creation and preservation of strong bonds with customers, founded on mutual understanding, trust and collaboration, can lead to customer loyalty and competitive advantage (Morgan, Hunt, 1994; Rajarshi et al., 2016).
8. Customer Satisfaction-Loyalty Theory - According to this theory, enterprise competitiveness depends on the ability to generate customer loyalty by satisfying the needs and expectations of customers. Satisfied customers are more willing to return their custom, which can produce a long-term competitive advantage (Fornell, Larcker, 1981; Khadka, Maharjan, 2017).

All these theories highlight the role of consumer in creating competitive advantage and a focus on customer value creation, building of relationships, generating trust, and providing positive experiences. The enterprises which effectively address these factors from the consumer's perspective stand a greater chance of becoming successful in the market. The research hypothesis **H1** has been formulated, therefore: consumer satisfaction is an important factor of enterprise competitiveness.

Consumer behaviour may depend on a range of factors. Consumer age is one, since people of various ages have different needs, preferences and values, which affects the structure of demand. In line with the lifestyle theory (Wells, Tigert, 1971), consumers from diverse age groups have different lifestyles that affect their shopping preferences and the choices of products or services. In addition, consumer age is addressed when creating marketing strategies targeted at specific age groups, which also influences the shopping behaviour of customers in the particular age groups. Hypothesis **H2** has been proposed, therefore: the consumer's age has a significant effect on the choice of enterprise competitiveness factors.

3. Methods

Correctly filled survey questionnaires are analysed, including part one, the formal characteristics of respondents, and part two, questions on the evaluation of competitiveness factors that enterprises utilise in consumers' opinions. The sample is selected at random, the survey was conducted via the Google Forms platform in June-August 2022.

The research hypotheses are verified with the results for 236 respondents living in Poland.

As far as the sample's characteristics are concerned, women (60.2% of the respondents) and university educated individuals (49.2%) prevailed. The residents of cities with populations of up to 100 000 (22.1%) and from 301 000 to 500 000 (13.1%) dominated. Respondents aged 31-40 (31.8%) formed the largest and those aged 26-30 the smallest grouping (8.0%). The details of the respondents' age structure are laid down in Figure 1.

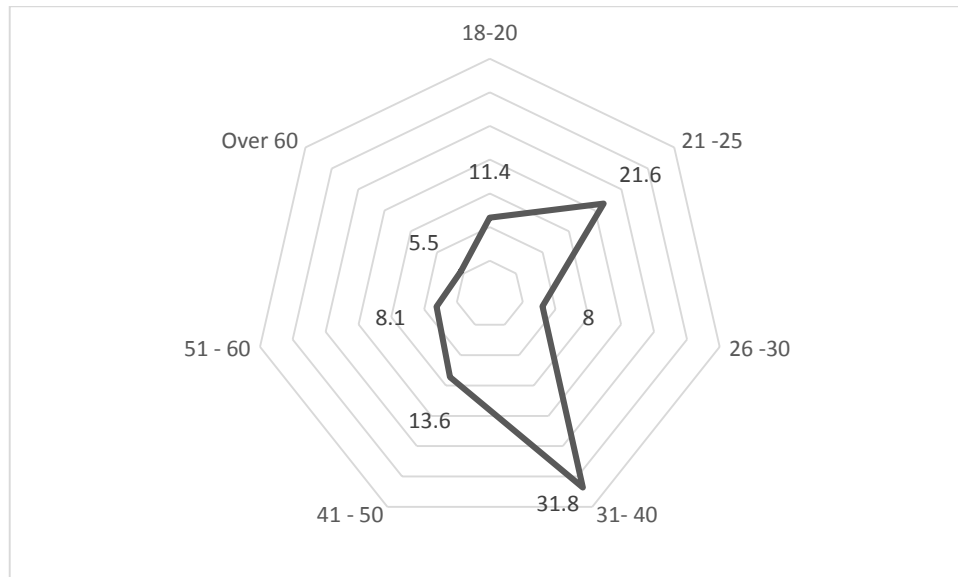


Figure 1. The age structure of the study sample.

Source: The author's own research.

The respondents were asked to attribute significance to the particular factors of enterprise competitiveness. Their responses were recorded on 10-point ordinal scales, with 1 denoting a low significance and 10 high significance. Table 1 lists the factors of enterprise competitiveness (observable variables) surveyed.

If the table was borrowed from a publication, the source should be provided underneath. You should not insert tables as figures, but as Microsoft Word tables. The text must contain a reference to a given table (Table 1).

Table 1.

The variables forming the database

Variable symbol	Name of observable variable
<i>Variables defining the competitive position of enterprises</i>	
V1	Market share
V2	Financial position
V3	Recognition of enterprise and its products in the market
V4	Customer satisfaction

Cont. table 1.

<i>Variables defining the competitive potential of enterprises</i>	
V5	Financial liquidity of enterprise
V6	Profitability of enterprise
V7	Equity level in enterprise
V8	Customer loyalty
V9	Method of distribution
V10	Integrated IT system
V11	Quality of managerial staff
V12	Creativity of workers
V13	Condition of plant and machinery
V14	Research and development activities
V15	Technical standard of products+
V16	New technology
V17	Creation of strong product brand
V18	Standard of servicing
Variables defining the instruments of competition	
V19	Quality of product/ service
V20	Quality of servicing
V21	Product brand
V22	Advertising
V23	Public relations
V24	Image of enterprise
V25	Highly qualified staff
V26	Product pricing
V27	Innovativeness of products
V28	Size of product range
V29	Matching of product structure to structure of consumer demand
V30	Implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility

Source: Source: The author's own research.

Non-parametric methods apply to variables measured with ordinal scales (Gaca, 2016, p. 32). The Kruskal-Wallis test (1952) is used to verify the research hypotheses, therefore. This non-parametric test serves to verify statistical hypotheses concerning the diversity of individual dimensions between groups. This is equivalent to a one-factor variance analysis (ANOVA). The following is required for the Kruskal-Wallis test to apply (Kruskal, 1952, p. 525):

- Variables are measured along an ordinal (interval) scale.
- Groups studied are independent.
- Normal distribution.

The assumptions were fulfilled, therefore, the Kruskal-Wallis test was applied in line with the formula below (Donocik et al., 2013, p. 35):

$$H = \frac{12}{n(n+1)} \left(\sum_{j=1}^k \frac{R_j^2}{n_j} \right) - 3(n+1) \quad (1)$$

where:

$n = n_1 + n_2 + \dots + n_j$,

(n_1, \dots, n_j) – the strengths of successive samples,

R_j – the rank-sum in the j -th sample.

The Kruskal-Wallis test's zero hypothesis assumes the samples come from populations of the same distributions, whereas the alternative hypothesis says they come from different distributions.

Thus:

$$H_0: \theta_1 = \theta_2, \dots, \theta_k$$

(the variable distribution is the same as or similar to the alternative hypothesis, given the comparative variable considered), since

$$H_1: \text{not all } \theta_j \text{ are equal } (j = 1, 2, \dots, k)$$

(the variable distributions for at least two codes of the grouping factor are different)

where:

$\theta_1, \theta_2, \dots, \theta_k$, – the medians of the variable studied in the populations the samples are withdrawn from.

p , based on the test statistics, is comparable to the significance level α (PQStat Software, 2018):

if $p \leq \alpha \Rightarrow H_0$ is rejected and H_1 is accepted,

if $p > \alpha \Rightarrow$, there are grounds for rejecting H_0 .

Accepting H_0 implies the levels of a factor examined have no significant effect on results observed. Rejecting H_0 implies the levels of a factor examined have a significant effect on results observed. The factor differentiates the results in the circumstances (Skrzypek, 2013).

Descriptive statistics are used as well, ordering the data for ease of analysis and interpretation. On applying the measures of position (arithmetic mean, median) and of dispersion, the way the data are arranged and differ from each other is presented.

4. Results

The measures of position (arithmetic mean, median) applied indicate around what values the distribution of variables concentrates. The analysis of descriptive statistics implies the arithmetic mean is lowest for variables V7 (6.64) and V1 (6.78). This means customers attach a minimum importance to the equity level in enterprises and to the market share. On the other hand, the arithmetic mean is maximum for V4, V20, V26. It's in the range $\langle 8.37; 8.43 \rangle$. This means customers attach the greatest weight to customer satisfaction, quality of servicing, and product pricing. The median, or the central value, for these variables reached a maximum of 8, proof of a normal relationship between the arithmetic mean and the median for these variables.

Both standard deviation and the coefficient of variance are the measures of dispersion that serve to examine the degree of differentiation of variable values. They served to determine whether the values the respondents assigned to the variables differ significantly from one another.

The low standard deviation in the range $\langle 1.02; 1.62 \rangle$ for all the variables studied is evidence of the homogeneity and stability of the data analysed. For customer satisfaction, it is 1.18, with a coefficient of variance of 13.97%, proof of a low dispersion of the responses. The coefficient of variance is highest for market share (23.89%) and equity level in enterprises (23.85%). This implies the consumers surveyed supplied the most diverse answers relative to these two variables.

This analysis implies consumers appreciated customer satisfaction the most, with a low diversity and dispersion of responses that concentrated around the mean, which corroborates the **hypothesis H1**: consumer satisfaction is an important factor of enterprise competitiveness.

Table 2.

The results of descriptive statistics

Variable symbol	Measures of position		Measures of dispersion	
	Arithmetic mean	Median	Standard deviation	Coefficient of variance (%)
V1	6.78	7	1.62	23.89
V2	6.96	7	1.55	22.26
V3	8.04	8	1.02	12.66
V4	8.43	8	1.18	13.97
V5	6.94	7	1.60	23.00
V6	6.84	7	1.51	22.05
V7	6.64	7	1.58	23.85
V8	8.03	8	1.1	13.68
V9	8.15	8	1.14	14.01
V10	6.92	7	1.62	23.39
V11	8.31	8	1.04	12.57
V12	8.01	8	1.13	14.11
V13	6.94	7	1.55	22.31
V14	7.03	7	1.61	22.85
V15	7.35	7	1.40	18.99
V16	7.48	8	1.47	19.63
V17	7.55	7	1.39	18.46
V18	7.89	8	1.10	13.93
V19	8.28	8	1.18	14.26
V20	8.41	8	1.10	13.05
V21	7.39	7	1.48	20.05
V22	8.03	8	1.08	13.43
V23	7.38	7	1.46	19.72
V24	7.81	8	1.46	18.69
V25	7.95	8	1.38	17.33
V26	8.37	8	1.11	13.30
V27	8.01	8	1.03	12.88
V28	7.62	8	1.42	18.67
V29	7.49	7	1.46	19.49
V30	7.33	7	1.57	21.47

Source: The author's own research.

The results developed by means of *Statistica* software served to analyse the observed level of significance p . Its value represents the declining reliability of the result and helps to assess the probability of a result assuming H_0 is true. p should be greater than the set level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

Two hypotheses were posited:

H_0 : The distributions of competitiveness factors (for its particular dimensions, i.e., the competitive position and potential of enterprise, the instruments of competition) are the same for the variable category of respondent age.

H_1 : The distributions of competitiveness factors (for its particular dimensions, i.e., the competitive position and potential of enterprise, the instruments of competition) are not the same for the variable category of respondent age.

H_0 should be rejected and H_1 accepted if $p \leq \alpha$. Where $p > \alpha$, there are no reasons for rejecting H_0 . The results of Kruskal-Wallis test are included in Table 3.

Table 3.

Test results for the values of enterprise competitiveness factors by the respondents' age

No.	Zero hypothesis	Test	Significance (p)	Decision
1	The distribution of enterprise competitiveness factors is the same for the variable category of respondent age.	Kruskal-Wallis test	0.000	Reject the zero hypothesis
2	The distribution of enterprise competitive potential factors is the same for the variable category of respondent age.		0.001	Reject the zero hypothesis
3	The distribution of competition instrument factors is the same for the variable category of respondent age.		0.000	Reject the zero hypothesis

Source: The author's own research.

The analysis of probabilities for the particular boundary values shown in Table 1 implies the zero hypothesis should be rejected for the factors determining the competitive position, competitive potential, and the instruments of competition. This means the respondent's age in the population surveyed is a variable differentiating the selection of enterprise competitiveness factors in all the dimensions, which corroborates the validity of the research **hypothesis H2**: the consumer's age has a significant effect on the choice of enterprise competitiveness factors.

5. Discussion

The literature review shows most authors focus on examining competitiveness factors from the viewpoint of enterprises (e.g., Maráková et al., 2021; Cao et al., 2022; Flak, Głód, 2022), with few studies perceiving these factors from the customer's perspective (including Mende et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2021; Le, 2022).

My results are in line with or similar to those reported by other authors. N. Isaeva and others (2020) see customer trust as a major factor with a positive influence on the development of service enterprises. Research demonstrates service sectors benefit from customer trust, which has a positive impact on engagement, loyalty, sales efficiency, cooperation, and successful exchange. The results obtained by I.A. Ripa (2022) confirm the creation of long-term partner relationships and supply of customised offers that satisfy the needs of key clients are the essence of customer relationship management. A trust-based relationship emerges between a firm and key clients. Positive relationships with key customers and an improved understanding of their needs lead to suitable strategies of customer relationship management, which results in a competitive advantage in the market. R. Ahlawat's study of the hotel industry (2022) indicates customers' trust and loyalty have an immediate effect on the development of budget and luxury hotels in the UK. Factors like customer service, cleanliness, room quality, quality to price ratio, food quality, and family friendliness influence the levels of customer trust and loyalty and, indirectly, hotels' competitiveness in the market.

Technological innovation and stable customer relationships are some important factors of sustainable enterprise development. Y. Chen et al. (2021) have studied the connection between stable customer relationships and technological innovation. Empirical research has proved stable customer relationships greatly promote technological innovation in enterprises, which helps them gain competitive advantage. In addition, a comparison of sample big enterprises, state enterprises, mature enterprises, and low capital consuming enterprises shows stable customer relationships can substantially promote technological innovation in small enterprises, non-state enterprises, young enterprises, and high capital consuming enterprises. These results affirm stable customer relationships influence enterprises' technological innovation and continuing competitive advantage.

The literature also offers some research into the impact of age on customers' shopping behaviour. E.J. Tomaszewska and U. Ryciuk (2018) have proved some statistically significant differences in shopping for certain product and service ranges depending on the age of e-consumers in Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Friends' opinions, advertising, social media, and company image are the principal factors influencing the decisions of consumers aged below 25, with ranges sold and loyalty programmes counting most for those aged 25 and above.

The results generated by M. Slabá (2019) demonstrate age is one of the factors influencing consumers' shopping behaviour and attitudes to price, the prime factor of enterprise competitiveness.

The top age group of 64+ consumers were most sensitive to pricing. ANOVA shows the price is a factor influencing the shopping decisions of the age brackets 16-24 and 55-64 as well. The results of chi-square test additionally show the preferences for branded and unbranded goods are also dependent on the consumer's age.

The knowledge of the consumer's behaviour improves the chances of market success (Stankevich, 2017) and helps in understanding what consumers appreciate the most (Islam, Chowdhury, 2018), which produces an enterprise's competitive advantage.

Consumers address a variety of aspects when making their shopping decisions. Lacey et al. (2009) claim several factors like information that helps to eliminate hesitation when deciding to buy, that is, price, quality, product availability or brand knowledge, influence the shopping decisions of consumers (Chan, Raharja, 2021).

6. Conclusion

Consumers' assessment is of paramount importance to enterprise success in the contemporary, competitive market. What consumers think about products, services and their characteristics is a key factor influencing a company's image and competitive position in the market.

Consumers' opinions influence a number of aspects of enterprise operations, including marketing strategies, the development of products and services, and the building of competitive advantage.

Contemporary enterprises pay increasing attention to consumers' opinions, which furnish valuable guides to the improvement of products, services, and customer support. The analysis of these opinions helps to identify areas for improvement and adjust offers to changing consumer needs. My results, therefore, according to which consumer satisfaction, quality of service, and product prices allow enterprises to gain competitive advantage in the market, uphold the hypothesis H1 that consumer satisfaction is an important factor of enterprise competitiveness.

It should be noted, though, consumers' opinions may vary a lot depending on many factors, both economic and not. A consumer's age may have a significant influence on the selection of enterprise competitiveness factors. Diverse age groups have varied preferences, needs, and expectations of products and services. The young are commonly more attached to technology and are thus more likely to point to innovative technological solutions or state-of-the-art methods of customer service as the factors of competitive advantage. The younger generation is also more aware of sustainable development and social values, therefore, enterprises are able to compete by promoting their commitment to social responsibility and actions for the environment. Older generations, on the other hand, prefer trust, loyalty, and a high quality of service. The analysis of my results implies the consumer's age affects the choice of competitiveness factors employed by enterprises, which corroborates the research hypothesis H2.

It can be said in general that, as the market becomes more competitive, consumers' opinions influence long-term success of companies. Therefore, entrepreneurs should consider these opinions in their marketing strategies, as what consumers think about products and services has an immediate impact on a firm's reputation, customers' trust and loyalty and, above all, their shopping decisions. Enterprises should actively manage consumers' opinions and build lasting customer relationships. Such an approach should bring benefits in both improved competitiveness and a positive influence on business profitability and development.

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