

# The Role of Food Product Features in the Purchase Process by Consumer Generation X and Y



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**Abstract** This paper attempts to identify and analyze the importance of product characteristics that affect consumer choices in the food market. The main purpose of the study is to present and evaluate the differences in buyer behavior between X and Y generation groups. The analytical part is based on the results of a survey conducted in 2016 on purchasing behavior in the food market. Research shows that the age of buyers differentiates their behavior in the purchase of food products. Young and elders' buyers differ in their priorities, preferences, decision-making process and style of communication. They differently are planning shopping, searching the offer and evaluating the products, and different sets of factors affect their final choices.

**Keywords** Food · Consumer behavior · Product attributes · X and Y generation

## 1 Introduction

The dynamically changing conditions of the enterprises' functioning on the food market make them apply newer and newer methods and tools of strategic marketing both concerning the product and the customer. The enterprises working in food industry must all the time adjust to the evolution of nutritional needs of the consumers, growing competition, modern technologies or new methods of communicating on the market. Thus, it becomes necessary to assume a new way of thinking and acting on the competitive market. The marketing organization is forced to ask principal questions about constant modifications of the current market strategy and introduce new solutions. The strategic thinking of food industry enterprises must take into account the vast scope of problems starting from the specificity of food products through the quality management system, requirements of distribution

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channels, up to the economic profitability and consumer acceptance (Angowski and Kijek 2018; Toselli 2017).

The food market is highly variable and difficult to predictable. Knowing the factors that shape the choice of product by purchaser becomes a key element forming the competitive strategy of companies operating in this market. Assuming marketing orientation by companies places the consumer in the focus of their attention. The products offered by enterprises must satisfy their needs. Therefore, first it becomes necessary to identify these needs. It is one of the basic research areas within the studies on consumer behavior (Angowski and Lipowski 2014).

The aim of this paper is presenting the significance of the respondents' age in the purchaser's behavior on the food market in the context of choosing a product. Author is identifying, analyzing and assessing the behavior of the examined purchasers from X and Y generations connected with choosing certain food products (meat and meat products, vegetables and fruit, dairy products and cereals). The main research problem is determining the significance of factors connected with product features in product selection process, as well as identification of differences in the behavior of buyers in generation groups X and Y. The generations of X and Y consumers are very attractive from the cognitive point of view, both for the researchers and practitioners of marketing, because both the groups together today have a significant purchasing strength, they constitute most of the labor force. They also demonstrate different kinds of market behavior and shopping habits (Burgiel and Sowa 2017; Strutton et al. 2011).

## **2 Consumer Behavior on Food Market**

The choice of a product on the food market is a process that is broadly discussed in the literature of marketing-related sciences. It is conditioned by different factors, depending on the consumer's individual features: state of their knowledge, material status, education and many others. The contemporary consumers are quite differentiated and changeable in the process of purchase decision-making. Therefore, for the entrepreneurs they constitute a substantial challenge, because there may be problems with identification and an attempt at foreseeing needs that can be satisfied by products available on the market. To a similar extent it is difficult to foresee the features of product or service that will attract attention and evoke the customers' interest. We observe constant changeability of factors affecting decisions in the process of choosing products on the food market (Domańska and Angowski 2016).

Knowledge on consumers' conduct on the market of food products is a very important element of interests in both researchers and marketing practitioners. It is useful in marketing activity of enterprises, aimed at exerting specific kinds of behavior upon the purchasers and creating their attitudes concerning product purchasing. That frequently requires appropriate adjustment of the company to the customers' needs. Food plays crucial role in the consumers' lives. It is first of all the source of nutrition, but also fulfills socio-cultural functions and constitutes a

significant part of consumers' expenses. Most problems with conducting research in this significant domain, both for the customer and for the sellers, lies in the complexity and variety of food selection and consumption conditionings, as well as in the fact that such studies require the knowledge of notions and observations from the vast gamut of scientific and social disciplines, such as, e.g. biology, food sciences, human nutrition, medicine, psychology, physiology, psychophysics, sociology, economics, marketing or anthropology (Menard 2003; Steenkamp 1997).

Thus, the problem of behavior is extremely vast, it in fact concerns all the aspects of human life. It requires not only recognizing the properties and principles of the functioning of human organism, ways of responding to stimuli and acting in specific cases, but also inquiring about the effect of various external and internal conditionings, as well as the possibilities of influencing reality connected with them. Researchers make attempts at recognizing and describing all significant determinants of behavior in greater and greater detail. The development of science and technology enables them to apply precise methods of measuring and insight into the functioning of an individual organism. In the subject literature the consumers' conduct is described as all activities connected with the product, i.e. resulting in obtaining it, using it and having it at one's disposal. The customers' activities in this field also include the purchasers' decisions preceding them, and sometimes even determining them.

The consumers' behavior is influenced by many factors, and those most frequently encountered in literature are social, cultural, personal and psychological ones. For instance, Ph. Kotler assumes in his model of a consumer's conduct on the market that the stimuli from outside, affecting purchasers, are marketing instruments referring to the product, special offer (promotion), price, sales conditions, as well as stimuli from the surroundings, in. a. technical, political cultural and economic factors (Kotler and Keller 2012). According to that model, all these factors are put into, as he defines it, the so called "consumer's black box", which consists of the purchaser's features affecting their individual conduct during purchasing a product. Another element of the box is the purchaser's decision-making process, which means their way, starting from the formation of a need, up to the stage of making a purchase. It is in the black box that the analysis of stimuli that have reached the consumer takes place, and then the decision concerning which of them are the most significant, which, finally, results in deciding to make a purchase or resigning from it (Oliver 2015; Sethna and Blythe 2016).

Throughout their lives consumers have to take many important decisions in different situation frequently taking place in risky conditions, and the justifiability of which they are not always certain of. Such decisions also take place when making purchases. That conduct has the nature of purposeful behavior, with directed course, leading to the accomplishment of a given final state. This is affected by, among others, past experiences or the activity of accidental stimuli. During shopping the consumer actively participates in decision-making process (Alemu et al. 2017; Lagerkvist et al. 2015). According to the classical theory, purchasing decisions were perceived as a single purchase satisfying the buyer. However, in this process consumption and manner of using goods and services were not taken into account.

Nowadays the decision making process is considered in a broader perspective. Firstly, it is a process with a few stages, where decision about a purchase is gradually made more specific. Secondly, the decision making process is no longer believed to end at the purchase, but as late as after the behavior that the consumer demonstrates afterwards. The consumer's feelings resulting from the sense of satisfaction from the use of given goods will influence their conduct in future. The model of purchase process consists of five stages (Seetharaman et al. 2005; Songa and Russo 2018):

- becoming aware of the need,
- seeking information,
- comparing variants,
- decision about the purchase,
- behavior after purchase.

Markets of particular food products consist of purchasers who differ between themselves in. a. in their desires, resources, places of residence, attitudes and shopping customs, as well as in their needs and eating habits, preferences and consumer behavior, attitude towards health and dietary aspects, as well as brand loyalty. Because of that differentiation it is necessary to analyze the process of undertaking a purchase by buyers with reference to smaller, more homogeneous consumer groups. That purpose can be accomplished in. a. due to market segmentation (Dolnicar and Leish 2017; Nasir and Karakaya 2014; Tsai and Chiu 2014).

The enterprise segmentation process divides markets into smaller segments that can be accessed more effectively by means of products and services satisfying their specific needs. Market segmentation means division of the market into homogeneous sets of subjects that delineate the enterprise activity area and constitute the point of reference for marketing programs (Venter et al. 2015). One of the basic ways of purchasers' division aiming at identification and getting acquainted with their needs for goods, there is a division of customers from the point of view their demographic features. They include, among others, sex, age, education level, family status, place of residence etc. (Panzone et al. 2016). Each feature can be considered separately, thanks to which we can estimate the demand for a given kind of products and services. Such kind of a profile usually require more data. The selection features depend upon product designation, number of consumers and on how a consumption unit whose needs should be satisfied is defined (Angowski and Kijek 2017).

### **3 Age, Theory of Generations and Consumers' Conduct on the Market**

One of the main determinants of consumer behavior most frequently applied in segmentation procedures is formed by demographic features. The most important of them is age, which is connected with various needs of purchasers and ways of satisfying them. Age significantly affects the process of taking market decisions, the

amount of expenses and consumption, styles of consumption and scope of the purchased goods and services. Most theories concerning behavior of purchasers on the market confirm that age, together with the acquired experience connected with it, events in life and circumstances, significantly influences the awareness, motivation and preference of consumers, which, consequently, is translated into their specific behavior (Bakewell and Mitchell 2003). Considering this, the appropriate identification of features affecting consumers' behavior in different age groups and understanding typical features of members of various age categories seem to be necessary to work out effective market strategies addressed to the particular segments.

Therefore, attempts are made at understanding and explaining changes and differences in consumers' behavior applying the approach based on the theory of generations. Theory of generation is a commonly recognized theory that describes and analyzes differences between "generational attitudes". It is the theory of the so-called "social history", describing and explaining changes in social attitudes in time. In literature generation is most frequently defined as a community of all persons of the same age, individuals belonging to a given cultural circle, who, on the basis of common historical-social situation, demonstrate a similarity of attitudes, motivations inclinations and systems of values (Jaciow 2016; Pilcher 1994). Some other definitions of generations can also be found, such as: offspring of the same parents, the whole group of people born and living in the same epoch, or a group of people more or less of the same age. The problems of generations and their connections with socio-economic transformations in the world have their long history, in sociological sciences, going back to the 1920s (Burgiel and Sowa 2017; Corsten 1999; Kachniewska and Para 2014). In contemporary times the theory was developed and its application was extended to political sciences, economics, psychology and management by Strauss and Howe (1991) and Strauss and Howe (1997). These researchers introduced in the notion of four generation cycle theory based on BB (Baby boomers), X, Y and Millennial generations (Mirkowska 2017). The theory assumes that one can characterize members of a generation identified on the basis of the year of birth. Each generation has different opinions, features, interests, expectations and convictions, common for all the representatives of it (Kuczamer-Kłopotowska 2016; Valkeneers and Vanhoomissen 2012). The theory assumes that the times in which a person is born and grows up determine their whole life and form a certain philosophy of living, which then influences their personalities, way of perception and interaction with the world. That philosophy of life and system of values are to a significant extent determined by the circumstances in which a person develops. It means that when people grow up in different historical periods, their systems of values are expected to differ (Dhanapal et al. 2015; Reisenwitz and Iver 2009). This theory is also broadly applied in behavioral studies concerning various generations of consumers, which are practically applied in market analyses, market segmentation and the ability to formulate marketing strategies depending upon the purchasers' age. Analyzing the features of particular generations, understanding their life experiences, learning about their values and understanding the differences can enable us to effectively manage these groups of consumers (Angowski et al. 2017; Kroenke 2015; McAlexander et al. 2015).

In spite of the fact that the demographic criterion is the main one, on the basis of which generational groups are distinguished, in the subject literature no clear criteria specifying age, were presented (exact year of birth) of persons belonging to particular groups of generations. Besides, there is also a discussion about to what degree the time framework assumed by the researchers depends upon the socio-economic conditions in a given country. Lack of clear-cut guidelines is therefore a significant restriction both in the context of the conducted studies and analyses of particular populations, as well as with reference to enterprises undertaking marketing activities addressed to a particular target group (Gołąb-Andrzejczak 2016; Kuczamer-Kłopotowska 2016). Most authors dealing with the theory of generations suggest the following division of generations: BB generation comprises people born between the years 1945–1964; X generation—people born in the period 1965–1980; Y generation refers to early 1980s and the beginning of the new century, and the youngest generation—Z or the Millennials are people born in the current millennium. That division is basically aimed at classifying consumers into the groups of people who have similar life experiences, knowledge and motives, as well as living in similar circumstances. That is why age intervals of particular generations correspond to socio-cultural and economic transformations, scientific and technological development, as well as political events taking place throughout these years (Lipowski 2016; Ordun 2015).

The consumers from X generation are relatively well educated, they already have jobs, achieved professional success, have permanent income, are responsible, have families and children, but are quite critical towards the world. They frequently have active lifestyles, take care of their health, pursue their hobbies and interests. We can say that today they are, from the point of view of their purchasing potential, the main marketing aim of enterprises. The Y generation is the future of the market, they are young people who have just graduated or are just graduating from universities, are looking for jobs or are just starting work, frequently live with their parents and depend on them. They are people who are looking for their own place in the world of adults and have very high expectations (Gołąb-Andrzejczak 2016; Pourbaix 2015; Shavitt et al. 2016). Both the groups are well acquainted with the Internet and can use it, but it is the Y generation that is definitely better at taking advantage of ICT. The level of using electronic media in everyday life became for the Y generation a specific determinant of affiliation and style of life, influencing many of its aspects, including, among others, interpersonal relationships, the system of values they believed in, professional career, interests, as well as consumers' behavior (Dhanapal et al. 2015; McAlexander et al. 2015; Reisenwitz and Iver 2009). Generational differences, taking into account their perception of the world is presented in Table 1.

Generation X as consumers are pragmatic, rather traditionally minded, favoring direct contact, loyal towards their favorite products and brands, decisions are made very carefully, on the basis of full knowledge, they are more skeptical and do not trust marketing activities. Consumers from generation Y, in turn, are more open and brave, they like experimenting, follow trends, are ready for changes, look for new products, make decisions fast and frequently make impulse purchases, look for bargain, lower purchase and service costs (Angowski et al. 2017; Chuah et al.

**Table 1** X and Y generation perspectives

	Traditionalists	Baby boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
Outlook	Practical	Optimistic	Skeptical	Hopeful
Work ethic	Dedicated	Driven	Balanced	Ambitious
View of authority	Respectful	Love/hate	Unimpressed	Relaxed, polite
Leadership by	Hierarchy	Consensus	Competence	Achievement, pulling together
Relationships	Self-sacrifice	Personal gratification	Reluctance to commit	Loyal, inclusive
Perspective	Civic-minded	Team-oriented	Self-reliant	Civic-minded
Turn-offs	Vulgarity	Political incorrectness	Clichés, hype	Cynicism, condescension

Sources: Nicholas (2009)

2017). Traditional shopping detaches them from reality and a pastime. They more frequently take advantage of multi-channel and integrated forms of distribution, more willingly using personalized products and services. Consumers from generation Y like to influence the features that the purchased product will have, they even want them to be created especially for them, to feel sort of special (Adamczyk and Anioła 2011; Gołąb-Andrzejczak 2016).

## 4 Data and Methodology

When preparing the empirical part of the study author used the results of poll surveys conducted in 2016 on the group of 739 respondents with the use of purposeful selection method. The basic data collection method was Computer-Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) supported by Paper and Pen Personal Interview (PAPI). The survey questionnaire was worked out in paper and electronic form, connected with database in SurveyMonkey service. The poll questionnaire consisted of 18 problem questions concerning the assessment of purchasers' behavior and attitudes on the market of food products, as well as specification questions. The studies comprised opinions of the respondents about their behavior on the markets of meat products, fruit and vegetables, dairy products and cereals.

It was assumed that generation X would include people born between 1965 and 1981, and generation Y people born between 1981 and 1999. The characteristic of the examined respondents is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** Sample characteristic by X and Y generation

Specification		X (N = 238) (%)	Y (N = 345) (%)
Total		44.24	64.13
Gender	Women	67.23	70.72
	Men	32.77	29.28
Place of residence (the number of residents—in thousands)	To 15	36.13	57.39
	From 16 to 50	44.96	20.29
	Over 50	18.91	22.32
Net income (per one family member) in EUR	To 180	15.13	23.77
	181–240	21.01	29.57
	241–360	39.50	32.46
	Over 360	24.37	14.20

Source: The author's own calculation

## 5 Results

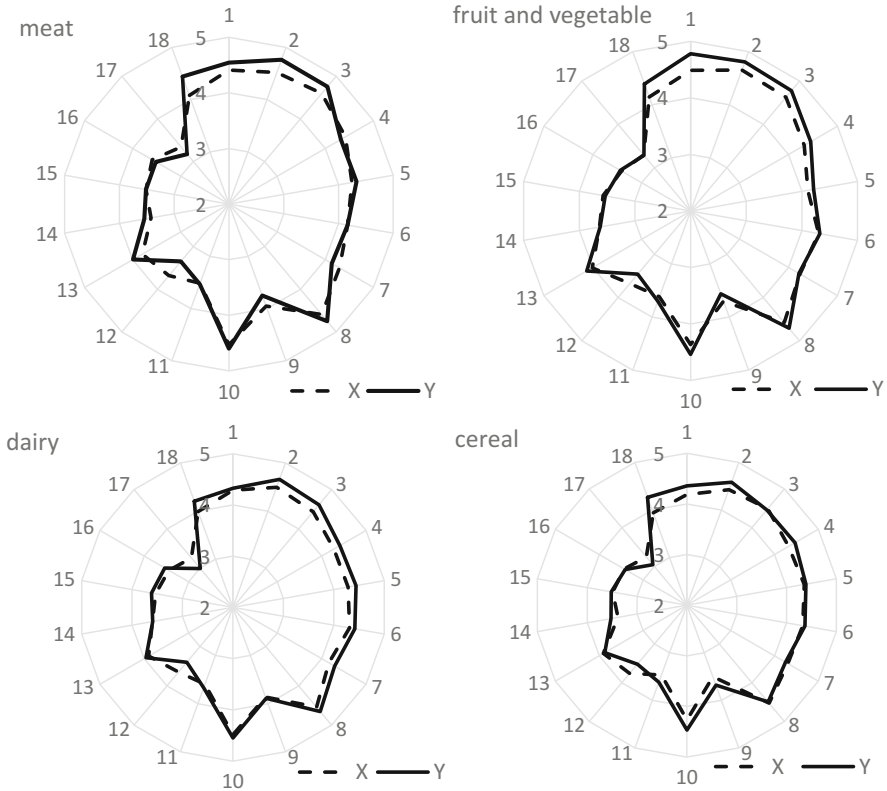
The process of selecting a particular product is very complex and multi-dimensional. The purchaser, who buys food products, takes many factors into account, which is confirmed in the result of the conducted poll surveys. Among these, factors were identified, which were connected both with the product and broadly understood marketing activities conducted by both the producers and salespersons on the food market. In the analysis presented here author focused on the criteria connected with the product features and their significance for product assessment. On the basis of these studies and analyses 18 factors significant for purchasers of food products were selected. Important factors connected with the features of food products, determining such decisions about a purchase in two age groups (generations X and Y), on the markets of meat products, fruit and vegetables, dairy products and cereals are shown in Fig. 1.

In the case of all analyzed groups of foods (regardless of age) the respondents, choosing products, paid attention first of all to the smell and taste. Freshness and image of the products also turned out to be significant. Ecological character of the product, in turn, was regarded as the least significant feature for the examined purchasers at the selection of product, which seems rather unexpected, if we consider the new and popular trend of ecological food consumption, which has recently been observed in the consumer behavior on the market.

Generally, the purchasers of meat products demonstrate the biggest differences in the assessment of individual product selection criteria (between generations X and Y), whereas the smallest differences between generations occur in assessing the criteria of choosing dairy products.

For generation Y in the product selection process the following factors are most important: taste, smell and freshness (all product groups), image (meat products, fruit and vegetables), as well as best before date (meat products, dairy products and





**Fig. 1** Factors connected with the product considered in product selection process. Notes: 1 product appearance, 2 taste, 3 smell, 4 type of product, 5 product composition, 6 nutritional values, 7 lack of artificial preservatives, 8 product freshness, 9 low fat contents, 10 best before date, 11 quality certificates, 12 traditional recipes, 13 healthiness of the product, 14 attractive image of packaging, 15 package size, 16 product brand, 17 organic product, 18 product prices. Scale: 1 I definitely do not agree, 2 I do not agree, 3 it is difficult to say, 4 I agree, 5 I definitely agree. Source: The author’s own calculation

cereals). For the examined purchasers representing X generation, the most significant criteria of product assessment were: freshness (all product groups), smell and taste (meat products, fruit and vegetables, cereals), image (meat products, fruit and vegetables), and best before date (meat and dairy products).

Analyzing the meaning of particular factors determining the selection of product by different generation groups, it can be noticed that the most significant differences concern the significance of such factors as: prices, taste, fat contents, traditional recipes and ecological character of the product (Table 3). This is confirmed by statistical analyses indicating statistically significant differences in assessing the importance of particular product features in the selection process between generations X and Y.

**Table 3** The importance of particular product features in the selection process

	Meat prod.		Fruit/veg prod.		Dairy prod.		Cereal prod.	
	Mean diff. (X-Y)	Sig.	Mean diff. (X-Y)	Sig.	Mean diff. (X-Y)	Sig.	Mean diff. (X-Y)	Sig.
1	-0.134	0.064	-0.295***	0.000	-0.039	0.639	-0.172**	0.048
2	-0.246***	0.000	-0.155***	0.001	-0.162**	0.012	-0.154**	0.026
3	-0.157***	0.004	-0.151***	0.001	-0.178***	0.009	0.029	0.683
4	0.098	0.144	-0.129	0.061	-0.131	0.085	-0.143	0.051
5	-0.080	0.286	-0.107	0.218	-0.156**	0.043	-0.035	0.642
6	0.000	1.000	-0.019	0.796	-0.106	0.157	-0.043	0.582
7	0.158	0.054	0.021	0.800	-0.129	0.134	0.050	0.543
8	-0.158**	0.015	-0.135**	0.022	-0.114	0.081	0.031	0.659
9	0.206**	0.032	0.139	0.214	-0.029	0.772	-0.174	0.116
10	-0.071	0.303	-0.174**	0.018	-0.065	0.345	-0.201**	0.012
11	-0.017	0.873	-0.084	0.399	-0.073	0.466	-0.150	0.152
12	0.336***	0.001	0.216**	0.038	0.254**	0.012	0.239**	0.014
13	-0.196**	0.043	-0.112	0.202	-0.063	0.507	0.032	0.741
14	-0.123	0.256	0.013	0.899	0.005	0.959	-0.139	0.189
15	0.004	0.970	0.042	0.668	-0.081	0.415	-0.031	0.761
16	0.074	0.463	-0.026	0.809	-0.091	0.384	0.024	0.818
17	0.169	0.112	0.010	0.928	0.269**	0.019	0.197	0.087
18	-0.361***	0.000	-0.244***	0.001	-0.214**	0.019	-0.325***	0.000

Differences between generation X and generation X

Notes: \*\*\* and \*\* indicates the statistical significance at the 1% level and 5% level, respectively. *1* product appearance, *2* taste, *3* smell, *4* type of product, *5* product composition, *6* nutritional values, *7* lack of artificial preservatives, *8* product freshness, *9* low fat contents, *10* best before date, *11* quality certificates, *12* traditional recipes, *13* healthiness of the product, *14* attractive image of packaging, *15* package size, *16* product brand, *17* organic product, *18* product prices

Source: The author's own calculation

For generation Y, compared to generation X, the following factors are more important: price (all product groups), taste (meat product), image (fruit and vegetables and cereals), as well as best before date and the contents of fat (cereal products). For the examined purchasers representing generation X more important product assessment criteria than for Y were: traditional recipes (all product groups), low fat contents (meat products, fruit and vegetables) and ecological character of the product (dairy products and cereals).

## 6 Conclusion

On the basis of the studied subject literature and the analysis of survey results it can be found that there are many factors affecting the formation of decision-making process while shopping by purchasers on the market of food products and it is very

difficult to identify and analyze them all and unambiguously. In the publication an attempt was made of analyzing how product features affect the process of choosing a specific product by the consumer. The conducted studies and analyses allow us to remark that the consumers from generations X and Y differ as to the assessment of the importance of selection criteria for food products, connected with product features. Statistical analyses, however, show that these differences relatively were not big, but in the most comparable criteria, statistically significant. Analyzing the respondents' answers, we can notice that the purchasers from X generation, much more frequently than Y, in their decisions concerning product purchase they were guided by the traditional manner of manufacturing products, fat contents and "ecological character". That may indicate greater consumers' awareness and regional ethnocentrism. The examined Y generation purchasers, in turn, having lower income at their disposal, seem to be more savings oriented and therefore they paid more attention to product purchase costs. Respondents in the group of meat purchasers were the most differentiated in particular generation groups in the assessment of product selection criteria through the prism of their features, and at least the purchasers of dairy products.

The results of studies and analyses presented in the publication do not exhaust the problems of the purchasers' decision-making process on the food market, but they can constitute a supplement of the existing studies concerning purchasers' behavior on the food market as to the factors affecting the selection of products by consumers of different ages. Besides, they can be used as the input material for future preparation of more thorough studies and analyses concerning differences in consumers' behavior and factors influencing them in the field of shopping, taking into consideration the criterion of age.

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