

Trust as a Factor of E-Commerce Development and Building Relationship in the B2C Sector in the Situation of an Exogenous Shock¹

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, the development of e-commerce is to a great extent a result of the common use of modern technologies, growing mobility and the gradual growth of business digitalisation. By the end of the first quarter 2020 there was a dynamic growth of transactions concluded in virtual space. It was largely a consequence of the introduction of drastic restrictions resulting from the pandemic situation. The restrictions have brought dramatic consequences for traditional commerce, among others, but turned out to have a beneficial side effect for e-commerce. There has been a significant increase in the interest in concluding transactions on the Internet, from both buyers and firms. Firms operating on the Internet before have started to develop and improve online sales, and a lot of businesses have opened new channels for contact with customers at an accelerated rate.

In e-commerce, on each stage of contact between entities, there is risk and uncertainty. Also problems connected with building mutual relations between stakeholders become particularly apparent. The element which influences the shape of the relationship is trust. Its presence mitigates the effects of the asymmetry of information, affects the perceived risk, and indirectly also the acceptance of the conclusion of the transaction. The occurrence of a crisis evoked by negative exogenous factors (the COVID-19 pandemic, for example), as in any shock situation, causes astonishment, the growth of fear and uncertainty and influences trust level.

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The paper presents a problem of the role of trust in the situation of the presence of a factor bringing about a crisis situation and its effect on the process of shaping the relationship between entities in e-commerce. It attempts to show how a threat evoked by exogenous factors affects the behaviour of e-consumers, and defines necessary actions to build mutual trust and relationship. The threat perceived by consumers resulting from the possibility of infection in, for example, brick-and-mortar stores has largely changed their purchasing behavior towards e-commerce. For consumers who had not previously shopped online, it was the moment when they had to break the barriers related to making transactions in the virtual space, because this form of transaction was often the only way to meet basic needs. While the sense of security has declined among all internet users, e-commerce is one of the industries that has benefited the most from the pandemic. Increased demand during the pandemic also means increased competition and the fight for e-consumers. Despite the huge increase in demand, companies with extensive e-commerce experience in particular offer many promotions and amenities to their customers during this period. The current situation is a big challenge for sellers, because in addition to acquiring them, the goal is to keep e-consumers for longer. To achieve this goal, various tools and methods are used on an ongoing basis to gain trust and build lasting relationships with e-consumers so that they stay with a given online store also after the pandemic.

It was assumed that a crisis situation triggered by an exogenous shock causes a change in the level of the experienced consumer trust (its drop in many cases), which influences the relationship. For sellers it means actions aiming at building trust and thus an investment in mutual market relationships. In order to present the problem in-depth the verification of the adopted assumptions was based on theoretical assumptions, available secondary data and own research findings.

2. An exogenous Shock and Socio-Economic Consequences

An exogenous shock is in practice identified from the angle of specific notions and related phenomena which occur in all significant areas of human life and in economy. According to Taleb, Krugman and Dornbusch, an exogenous shock is understood as unexpected and big changes in external factors which affect and influence internal factors (Karpavicius 2012, p. 89). The Covid-19 pandemic, which struck the world economy in 2020, is of the global character and has influenced greatly the functioning of all areas of socio-economic life. Unpredictability of the pandemic, its fast spread and the reaction of international community have definitely features of an exogenous shock (Kohlscheen et al., 2020;

McKibbin & Fernando 2021, Noy & Nualsri, 2007). Such situations of shocks on a global scale do not happen frequently and this is where their uniqueness comes from. Such a strong epidemic shock and arising consequences have caused immediate, significant and apparently permanent socio-economic effects. As a result of the introduced restrictions and increased aversion to risk, economic activity has dropped rapidly, and the area of private life has been disturbed substantially. In the past, various countries, not only European ones, were subject to external shocks, but they were usually of economic character.

The notion of a shock is known and related to economic phenomena of supranational character which evoke crisis situations. A shock, very often triggering the state of a collective social shock, can be an element of a phenomenon described as the shock doctrine (Klein, 2009). The issue of an exogenous shock is analysed in the area of many other scientific disciplines. Most often, the context of a shock appears in psychology and medicine as an individual phenomenon, in sociology as a social phenomenon. Some researchers, Schutz for example, claim that the practice of everyday life as something obvious and natural until a change is evoked, needs reflection through experiencing shock (Schutz 1972). On the other hand, according to Jaspers, the causes of shock on the individual level may be borderline situations, namely extreme experiences and feelings facing the truth, e.g. a disease (Jasper 2014). In each of the quoted cases, a situation bringing about a shock usually leads to a crisis situation on the level of individuals, entities and social structures, understood as the state of imbalance, collapse, fluctuation, disorder, etc. Therefore, the problem of a shock is of broader than simply economic nature and requires a more holistic view.

The macro-economic and neo-classical approach prevailing in economics usually discusses the problem of shocks from the angle of the effects in the form of inflation, a decline in GDP, debt, unemployment, etc., often reaching for structural or systemic causes in economy. However, it seems that the criticism towards this approach, expressed for many years, manifesting itself in the necessity to consider a greater number of factors in the description of the shock phenomenon and the search for countermeasures, is justified. In addition, what is considered important are mechanisms and processes taking place within so-called “black box”. In particular, behavioural aspects are pointed to, underlying the causes of shocks and reactions to them. The example, the underlying causes for the 2008 crisis was the mechanism of moral gambling, opportunism and the faulty system of contracts on the real estate market, as well as the weakness of supervisory institutions. The state of high asymmetry of information created by the financial market institutions enabled the occurrence of the mechanism of malpractices to a large scale. According to the EBC report of April 2021, the shock related to COVID-19 was more exogenous than the crises of 2008 and 2011–2012, as the

2020 recession had its sources outside economy (in the Eurozone GDP dropped by 6.6% in comparison with 2019). The spread of COVID-19 has caused the collapse of international trade, the functioning of value chains and the growth of uncertainty on the world financial markets (EBC Report, 2021).

The behavioural aspect of this problem has been present for many years in numerous theories and concepts of the broad institutional and neo-institutional strand. Also in management studies, within the problems of attitudes, motives of behaviour and taking decisions in the conditions of risk and uncertainty, or opportunism, e.g. in the marketing approach, in the transaction costs theory, agency theory and behavioural finance.

A multi-dimensional aspect of the problem of exogenous shocks points to the need of investigating such phenomena, considering both their causes, and first of all from the point of view of their influence on the behaviours and decisions of different entities participating in market processes. The Covid-19 pandemic and the crisis triggered by it manifests itself in significant changes within individual markets. e.g. a drop in traditional trade to the benefit of e-commerce and serious obstacles in the functioning of logistics chains. In each of these areas we deal with decisions connected with restrictions for citizens who participate in the role of consumers, among others. Relations among different groups of individual entities in relationship networks with economic entities create a number of relations with specific characteristics. The occurrence of a sudden shock situation usually triggers disturbances in those relations.

As it was mentioned, the scale of the threat to human lives and the low level of knowledge about the phenomenon have caused different reactions on the institutional level in the majority of the countries of the world, including Poland. The conclusions from the EBC research suggest, among others, that the existing situation will cause higher turnover in e-commerce and a broader use of digital technologies, which will increase productivity but at the expense of a drop in employment in the long run (EBC Report 2021).

3. The Situation of the E-Commerce Industry in the Pandemic Era

In the macro scale, the pandemic has caused an “earthquake” in the world trade and the necessity to adapt to the new conditions. E-commerce is one of the industries which have benefited from the pandemic. A lot of firms realised that almost everything can be sold online and immediately transformed their activity from offline to online. The dynamic development of e-commerce is a result of the majority of firms’ transformation to electronic commerce and the growth of buyers’ interest in this form of shopping. At present, about 50% of consumers do

shopping on the Internet more often than before the pandemic. The introduced restrictions which have affected traditional trade, among others, and forced isolation has brought about an increase in the interest in online transactions which in a way are the only way to satisfy needs. According to report “E-commerce in the Times of the Crisis” of the Chamber of Digital Economy and Mobile Institute, 14% of Poles declared the purchase of food products and cleaning agents only via the Internet, and 24% partly via the Internet and in stationary stores. The Polish e-commerce market already before the pandemic was one of the fastest-growing ones worldwide. In 2019, as many as 62% of people using the Internet declared online shopping. According to 75% of respondents, the most important factors influencing the choice of this form of shopping is the 24-hour availability, as it guarantees independence in shopping. Also convenient delivery methods are significant (courier delivery to the indicated address, self-service parcel pick-up stations) and modern payment methods, among others BLIK, quick bank transfers, or deferred payments dates (E-commerce w Polsce 2019. Gemius dla e-Commerce Polska). According to the PMR report, the Internet commerce market in Poland in 2019 was worth over PLN 61 billion. It constituted almost 11% of the whole retail trade market, and in 2025 the share is to reach almost 20% („Handel internetowy w Polsce 2020. Analiza i prognoza rozwoju rynku e-commerce na lata 2020–2025”).

In addition to entities which did online shopping before, a large part of demand in the e-commerce sector was generated by people who, due to the restrictions introduced, did not have access to traditional trade. The growth of interest in online transactions can be in a way explained by the occurrent shock situation. In such a situation, on every market, almost always the supply side reacts to the increased demand very quickly. Reacting positively to the increased demand, the e-commerce industry tries to ensure the availability of products, the continuity of deliveries and a wide range of safe payments. Taking into consideration safety on many levels, recipients are reassured that they will receive the desired product, a safe product (e.g. packed in sterile conditions), they can choose a safe form of payment and delivery, and a possible return of the product will also be safe (E-commerce w czasie kryzysu 2020). According to the report prepared by Shopper „Handel vs koronawirus – jak sprzedaż przeniosła się do Internetu”, in the first quarter 2020, online activity was commenced by from 5% to 23% more stores. They were mainly grocery stores (18%). According to the report „e-Commerce w czasie kryzysu 2020”, in the face of the pandemic threat, as many as 37% of Poles found that online shopping is a safer form than the traditional one and that is why they choose it. 38% of the surveyed consumers bought food, hygiene and household chemical products for the time of quarantine online. To a great

extent, those were middle-aged people (35–44 years old). Increased demand on the Internet created problems with the availability of some goods. As many as 59% of Internet users assessed the availability of food products in e-stores as bad or very bad. Online commerce is also developing by means of social media, for example, this kind of contact is mainly used by catering which delivers its products to individual customers.

A lot indicates that the pandemic situation will strengthen the development of e-commerce in Poland and will affect a change in Poles' shopping habits („e-Commerce w czasie kryzysu 2020”). Also GlobalData experts, in their report „Wpływ Covid-19 na e-commerce” argue that the pandemic will have a long-term positive impact on the e-commerce sector. An additional support for the growth of the e-commerce market in the future are to be e-wallets as the most popular online payment method and the development of mobile and “augmented reality” – type technologies (FedEx 2021 Report Trade Trends).

4. Trust as a Factor of Building Relationships in the B2C Sector

The process of building the relationship between parties to a transaction in the virtual space requires the presence of trust. The firm usually has a substantial advantage over the customer, among others in the informative or technical aspect, therefore, the relations are largely asymmetric. Concluding transactions is always connected, among other things, with risk, therefore, the presence of trust is a method to tame it and counteract uncertainty (Sztompka 2007)². It seems that no market could function properly without the presence of trust. In the transaction conclusion process it is indispensable (Grudzewski et al. 2009, p. 15) as it influences and accelerates building relationships (Rudzewicz 2018, p. 56) and it determines their quality.

Usually consumers play the role of trustees, whereas sellers become entities of trust (Grudzewski et al. 2007, p. 31). To a great extent, trust creates social capital, which affects the functioning of the economy and the economic result of society (Fukuyama 1997). It should be emphasised that no entity can be forced to put trust in anyone else. If trust occurs between specific entities, it is the effect of their free choice. The presence of trust is conditioned by benefits which can be achieved, which are accepted by both parties of the exchange and treated

² In the literature of the subject there is no unambiguous definition of the term of trust. The compilation of different approaches and definitions of trust is available in papers by, among others, Sztompka (Sztompka 2007, pp. 69–70), Grudzewski et al. (Grudzewski et al. 2009, p. 16), Wierziński (Wierziński 2009, pp. 26–27), Sankowska (Sankowska 2011, pp. 31–33), Rudzewicz (Rudzewicz 2018, pp. 58–59).

“as their own”. Such an approach suggests the dependence on the level of acceptance of the other party’s interest and the level of trust to it (Hardin 2009, p. 26). Consumer trust is significant and it may be the effect of, among others, achieving previous positive experiences in contacts with the firm, a positive and emotional relationship with the seller, professional activity of the seller, and the consumer’s attitude, which is characterised by general trust towards other entities (Sagan & Plichta 2014, p. 224). The sense of consumer trust grows when they experience a positive attitude and message from sellers, for example in the form of the extended consultancy system, the approach focused on problem solving or responsible treatment. Building consumer trust can also be favoured by: the generation of positive experiences for consumers, the presence of dedicated and personalised communication channels, or the existence of a platform with access to important information in the virtual space (Bylok 2012).

The presence of trust between entities is based on the conviction that the stronger party does not use its advantage against the weaker party, usually the consumer. Moreover, it means that the firm (the stronger party) should not conduct activities which would be inconsistent with the consumer’s interest (Plichta 2013). In the case of the common use of new media and the dynamic growth of online transactions, the above statements concerning trust are particularly important³. They are important also because in Poland general trust has stayed on a low level for years. In the latest edition of the research of February 2020 conducted by CBOS respondents’ answer to the questions: “generally, most people can be trusted” or “in relations with others one must be very careful”, a lot of “carefulness” was declared by 76% of respondents, similarly to the year 2019. In the face of the pandemic, when uncertainty and fear occur, trust drops in numerous areas of socio-economic life. It is also proven by the data obtained within the research carried out within the research project⁴ „Uwarunkowania i czynniki wpływające na trwałość postaw podmiotów indywidualnych w relacjach do pozostałych interesariuszy w warunkach niepewności i ryzyka wynikających z zagrożeń spowodowanych wstrząsem egzogenicznym” (No 211/20/MSAP; im-

³ More on that in, among others, Plichta, G. (2020). *Role of New Media in Shaping Relationships in e-commerce on B2C Market* (in): Knowledge Economy Society. External and Internal Determinants of Modern Business Management. Jaki A. & Ziębicki B. (eds.). Wyd. TNOiK, Toruń, pp. 179–194.

⁴ The research project was carried out by a research team composed of: dr hab. Prof. UEK Jarosław Plichta (head of the research team) and Prof. dr hab. Adam Sagan and dr Grażyna Plichta (members of the research team).

plementation within REV 4.0.)⁵. Respondents' answers referring to statements concerning the opinion on the trust level between people during the pandemic are mostly negative. The lack of agreement with the statement "the pandemic time shows that people are more trustworthy" was 43.25% (only 22.49% agreed with the statement). The statement "the pandemic time shows that people trust each other more" – the lack of agreement in the case of 43.45% of respondents, 25.61% of respondents agreed with this opinion. Responses in the case of the statement "during the pandemic people will respond with greater trust, even if others are not honest towards them" were similar, namely 43.25% of respondents did not agree, and only 24.39% agreed. To an even greater extent, respondents did not agree with "the time of pandemic shows that people trust each other more than I thought before". As many as 48.44% respondents disagreed, and only 21.45% agreed with the statement, which proves the low level of trust in our society, and uncertainty or fear triggered by the crisis situation only deepens this problem.

The dynamic growth of e-commerce during the pandemic cannot obliterate the significance of undertaking actions serving the presence of trust, which has declined during the pandemic, also to the digital ecosystem. It is important that particularly in the case of physical contact, trust level plays a role in building relationship with customers. It is a challenge, among others to sellers who should do everything to prove to their customers that they deserve trust. They should deepen the relationships and make them more personal and permanent (IAB Polska „Zaufanie internautów a COVID-19”. Raport z badania 2020).

A lot of influence on the positive relationship between parties in e-commerce is exerted by value creation through customer-oriented actions, e.g. personalised offers, using different facilities which are potentially beneficial to customers, as well as uniform, clear and understandable for both parties method of the communication of important contents. Nowadays, e-commerce platforms are trying to build relationship with the customer by using, among others, different facilities for customers, applying all types of novelties in the digital world, managing the user's path and responding to his needs. At present, e-commerce store

⁵ Taking into account the limitations in access to the sampling frame and the research costs, the quota selection method was selected, which, according to many authors, is comparable to stratified random sampling. The sample size was assumed to meet the requirements for the methods based on the expected detail of cross-classification in the tabular analysis of data and sufficient to verify the assumptions made in the structural research model reflecting the research problem. The survey was conducted through a research company on a representative group of respondents (selected on the basis of current data from the Central Statistical Office of Poland) with the use of the CAWI research tool on a sample of 578 respondents. The research sample was selected according to the following criteria: age, sex, place of residence (city/village), area of residence (voivodship).

operators are investing more in technologies improving consumer experience, for example in satisfaction, comfort and quickness of doing shopping. Building relationships is significantly influenced by shortening the distance between the customer and the seller. Today, the support within that scope is provided by automatic chatbots, which help, among others, in making complaints and product returns, they follow shipments and answer questions.

It should be emphasised that a substantial role in the relationship building process is played by reliable information exchange between parties to the transaction. Moreover, an important issue is a gradual increase in the quality of service and price stability. In the pandemic situation it is extremely important, as due to different limitations on the supply side, on the sellers' side an inclination to use the crisis situation to increase prices may occur. If it is able to win consumers' trust, it usually affects the growth of the frequency of transactions, and in the long run, builds a permanent relationship.

5. Conclusions

In e-commerce the presence of the specific level of trust between entities means the investment in mutual market relationships. It results in a decrease in uncertainty in relationships, influences their durability and builds a long-term relationship. The situation of the occurrence of a rapid exogenous shock, like the pandemic, has caused disturbances in various areas of socio-economic life and influenced a change in consumer behaviours. The overall drop of the feeling of safety and uncertainty evoked by the pandemic has affected a decrease in trust, also with regard to the digital ecosystem. In spite of this, it has been found out that online transactions have intensified, which was, among others, a result of the choice of a form of shopping which would be safer from buyers' point of view, that is, not requiring physical contact. Consumers' decision about the choice of an online transaction resulted largely not from the free choice but the occurrent restrictions and a necessity to satisfy needs. At present, e-commerce is developing very well, prospects for the future are positive with a lot of likelihood that a considerable part of transactions now concluded online can be concluded in that way in the future. In spite of the current situation, firms functioning online should take actions causing customer satisfaction and "positive reception" to keep customers for longer, i.e. to build consumer trust. Gradual investment in building trust conduces not only the ability to implement the firm's set goals, but is necessary to build a mutual relationship with consumers, a long-term one if it is possible.

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