OBSERVING THE PURCHASING BEHAVIOUR OF THE INDIVIDUALS IN THE LARGE SURFACE STORES DURING THE 2012 WINTER HOLIDAYS IN BUCHAREST

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Abstract

The purpose of our endeavour was to identify the buying behaviour during the 2012 winter holidays. We focused on large surface stores for several reasons. First of all, in Bucharest, there is a strong tendency toward purchasing from the modern retail. Secondly, the assortment displayed in these stores covers, probably, the widest array of needs. Thirdly, the consumer behaviour during this time of the year is more squander-oriented than thrift-oriented. All the above-mentioned coordinates support our idea of choosing the large surface stores as the right venues for observing where the individual goes, what he/she does and how he/she selects categories and brands.

Key words: observation, observation guide, purchasing behaviour, behaviour patterns, semi-structured, disguised and direct observation

JEL Classification: M31.

Theoretical guidelines

Observation is an exploratory or descriptive research method used to collect primary data about people, objects or phenomena in which the researcher does not interact or communicate with the subjects (Cătoiu I, 2002). It entails intentional pursuance and exact and systematic recording of different individual and situational behavioural displays which could lead to certain behaviour patterns (Malhotra K. Naresh, 2004). The golden rule of this method resides in estimating and planning at least equal time shares for the field work and onsite completion of the observation notes (Patton M., 2002). The main advantage of observation as a research method lies in the recording of the actual behaviour and not of the stated one, the collected data not being distorted by the biased answers, tiredness and refusal of the researched individual (Papuc M., 2007). There are several types of observation used especially in sociology which could be grouped in: structured, unstructured; participant, nonparticipant; ongoing, sampled; disguised; undisguised (Chelcea S., 2004).

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Research objectives

We split the research goal into five major objectives with a special focus on the buying behaviour of three product categories which record high volumes during winter holidays: sweets, toys and Christmas adornments.

We defined our research objectives considering the following chapters:
1. research coordinates:
    a. date
    b. store
    c. hour
    d. duration
    e. environment
2. purchase size
3. store travelling
4. selection behaviour
5. in-store behaviour
    a. expressions
    b. sensorial conduct
    c. communication

Research hypotheses

We presumed the following aspects for the objectives pursued in this research:
1. The average time spent by an individual in a store is 30 minutes
2. 70% of the individuals reside in Bucharest
3. 50% of the individuals shop using a basket and 50% using a trolley
4. 50% of the individuals make the first stop in a store at the "sweets" section
5. Sweets are purchased in a higher frequency, followed by toys and Christmas decorations and adornments
6. More than 50% of the individuals select products from inside the section at middle height
7. The individual displays a wide variety of in-store gestures in the buying process
8. The individual tries to gather intelligence about an offer by reading the price tags, the product instructions, by touching and testing the product
9. The individual communicates with his/her companions, other buyers and store employees in the buying process

Research variables

Variable	Conceptual definition	Operational definition
Store	A venue from where products are purchased	Large surface stores: supermarkets and hypermarkets in Bucharest
Shopping device	A means placed at the store entrance to be picked up by the shopper for carrying the selected products	Baskets and trolleys
Store section	A place where a wide variety of a single type of product is found	
Shelf	A display structure in a store section located at different levels	Low, middle and high
Product category	A type of product	
In-store marketing communication	Means of marketing communication used in a store	Store ads, sales promotions, product islands etc
Expressive conduct	The conduct displayed by an individual through gestures and body language	
Reflexive conduct	The conduct displayed by an individual in the quest for information	
Verbal conduct	The communication conduct displayed by an individual	

Descriptive variables

Variable	Conceptual definition	Operational definition
Age	The length of time a person has lived[2]	18-40 41-60 Over 60
Gender		M; F

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[2] http://oxforddictionaries.com

Population

The researched population was represented by people over the age of 18 purchasing from large surface stores in Bucharest.

Research methodology

As a research method we used a semi-structured, disguised and direct observation performed by people in stores.

We used an observation guide with 7 topics to be completed by the observers.

As a sampling method, we used a mixture of two random sampling methods: multi-stage and systematic random sampling.

We considered two variables- gender and age- and we built our sample based on the percentages found in the observed population:
- gender: male- 48.4%; female- 51.6%
- age groups: 18-40 y.o.- 43%; 41-60 y.o.- 34%; over 60 y.o.- 23%

The sample size was set at 396 people, considering a sampling error of 3.5% and a significance level of 95%.

The individuals were selected using a counting system. Every other 10th individual was observed in the large surface stores from the entrance point to the exit one.

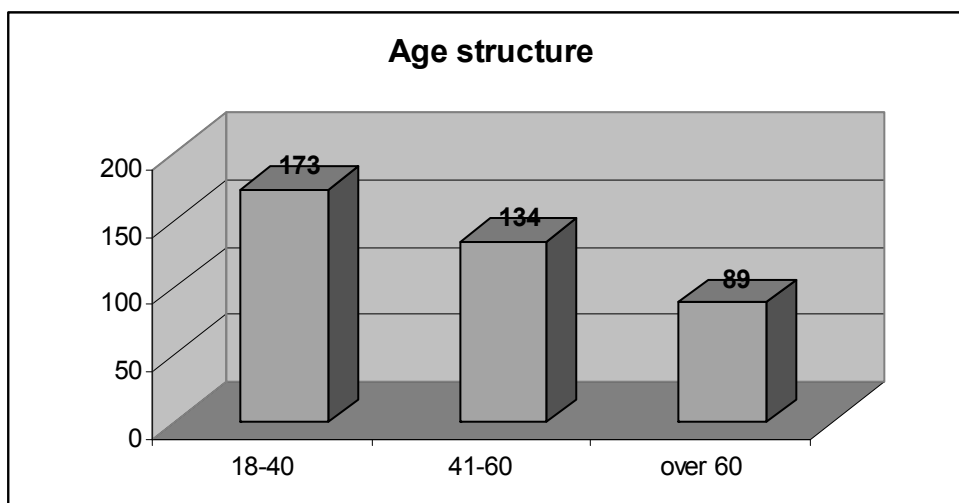We selected randomly 8 store chains in Bucharest for our research.

Data analysis

The data were collected with the help of 20 students from a master's program as part of their project.

We observed 198 men and 198 women between November, 30 and December, 16.
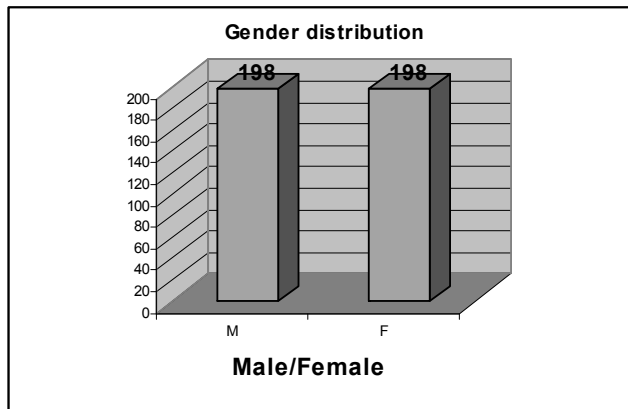
The people observed by us had the following age structure:

Age structure

We performed our observations in 17 stores belonging to 8 chains. The chains and stores were randomly selected.

No. of observations made in each store
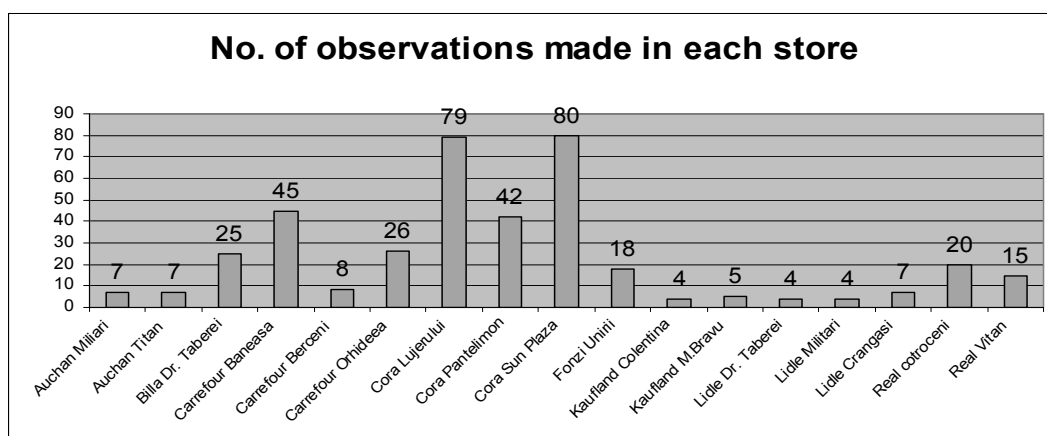
We observed the individuals from the entrance point until the exit one. The duration of our observations varied from 3 minutes to more than 60 minutes. In the below figure, we displayed the distribution of the performed observations.
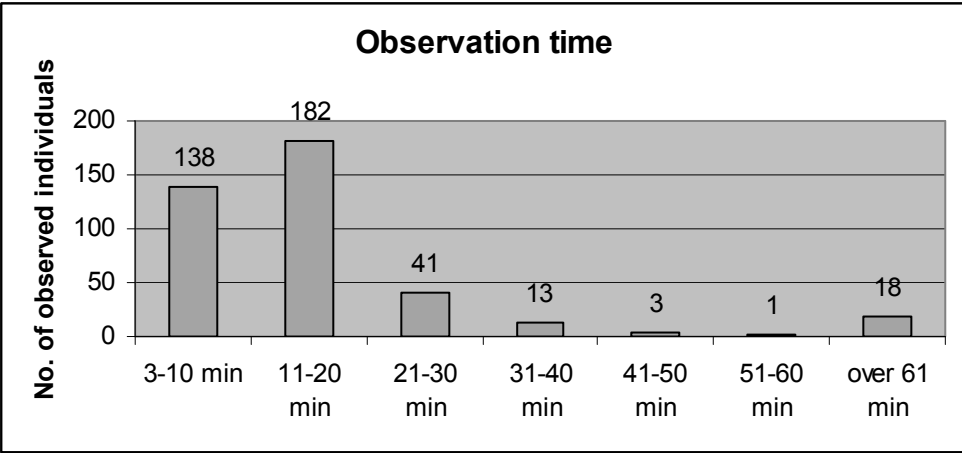
Observation time

We were able to indicate the place of residence of the people found in the store at the observation moment based on the car registration plates parked in the parking lot. Based on this assumption, the overall situation is depicted in the next figure:

Frequency distribution of the counties based on the car registration plates from the parking lot
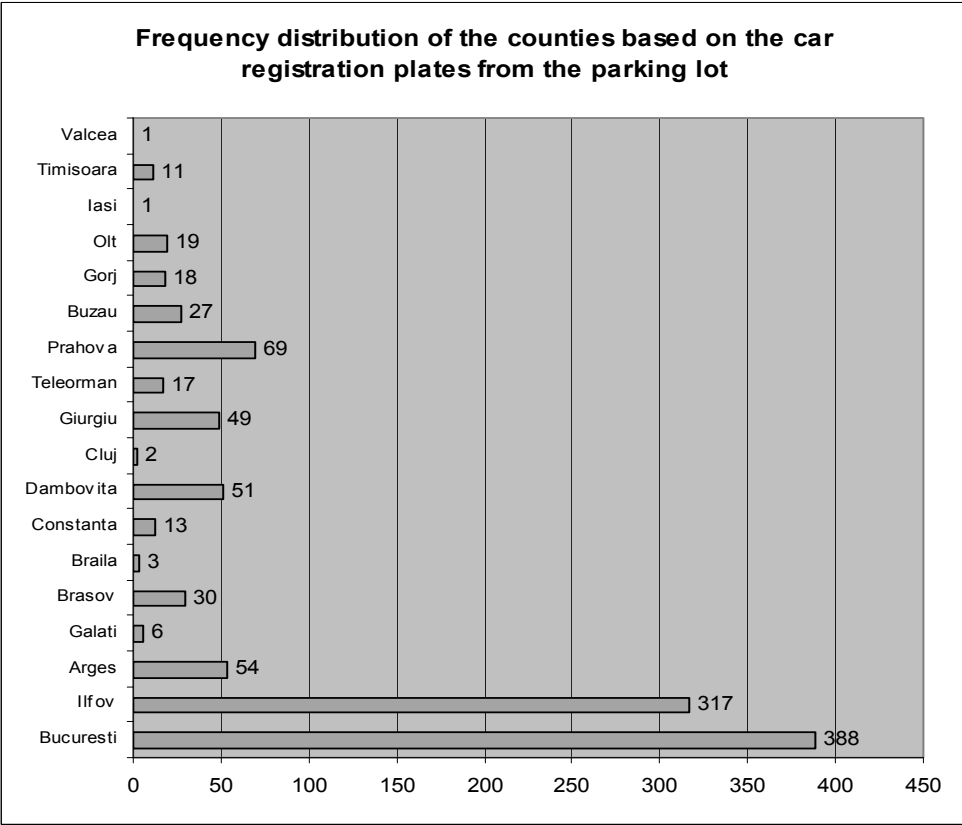
We observed the shopping device chosen by every individual upon entering the store. The distribution of our findings is found below.

At the store entrance, the individual chose

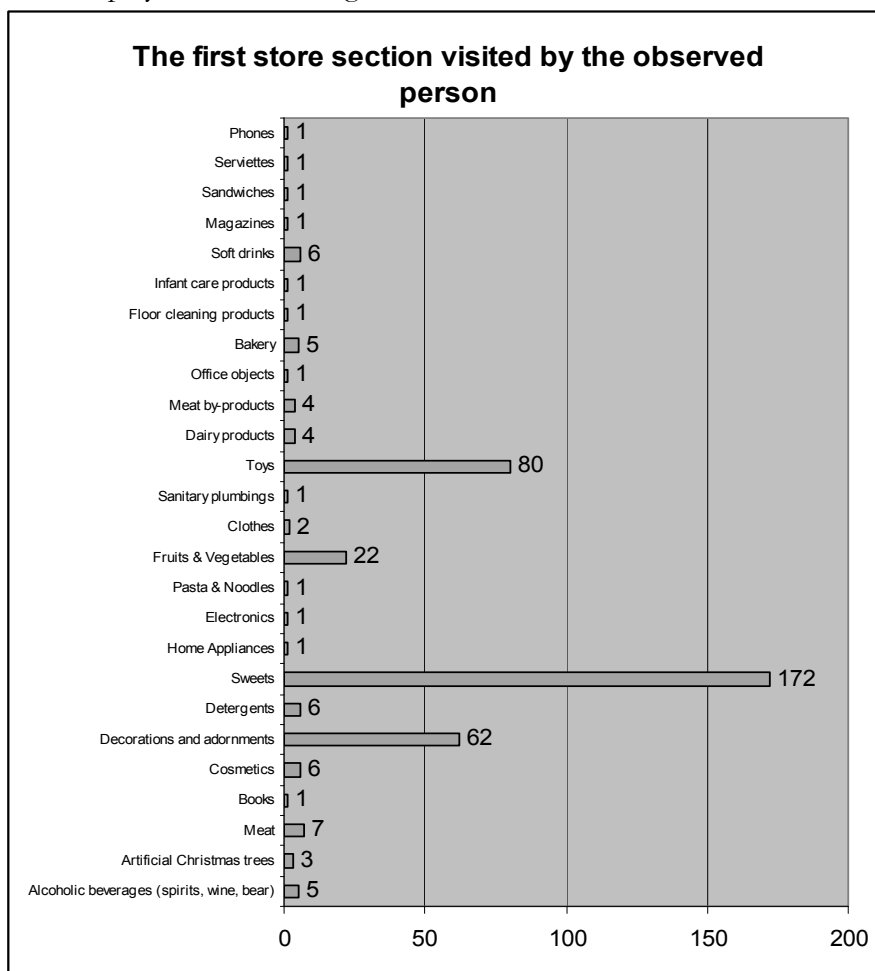|	Basket	Trolley	Nothing
	159	224	13

We observed the first stop of every individual after entering the store. Our observation displayed the following situation:

The first store section visited by the observed person

Section	Value
Phones	1
Serviettes	1
Sandwiches	1
Magazines	1
Soft drinks	6
Infant care products	1
Floor cleaning products	1
Bakery	5
Office objects	1
Meat by-products	4
Dairy products	4
Toys	80
Sanitary plumbings	1
Clothes	2
Fruits & Vegetables	22
Pasta & Noodles	1
Electronics	1
Home Appliances	1
Sweets	172
Detergents	6
Decorations and adornments	62
Cosmetics	6
Books	1
Meat	7
Artificial Christmas trees	3
Alcoholic beverages (spirits, wine, bear)	5

We observed where every individual stopped for the first time amongst the three observed store sections: sweets, toys and Christmas decorations and adornments

The first section amongst the three studied ones where the observed individual stopped

Christmas decorations and adornments	Sweets	Toys
79	218	99
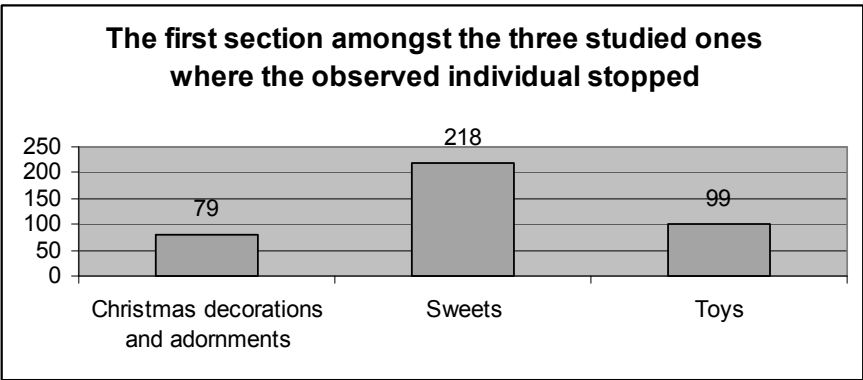
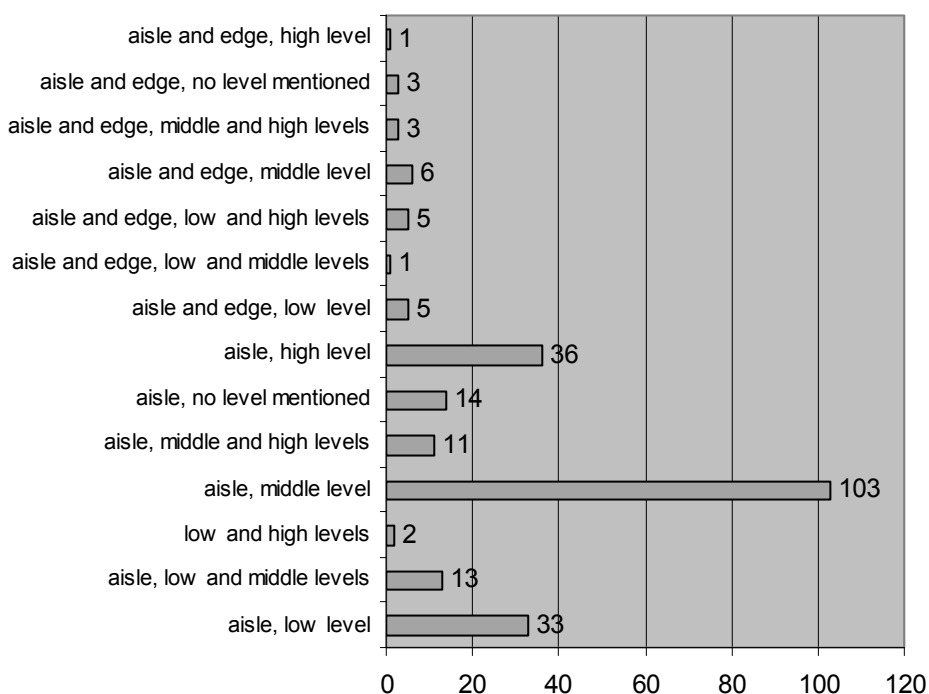We observed the place/s and level/s from which every individual selected the products in the store. In this regard we observed that the products were selected from special places inside the stores and from designated sections at low, middle and high levels. Our findings are displayed in the next three figures:

In-store product selection- Point-of-Sale display

Point-of-Sale display, edge and high level	1
Point-of-Sale display, edge, no level mentioned	5
Point-of-Sale display, edge and middle level	1
Point-of-Sale display, inside, middle and low levels	1
Point-of-Sale display, inside and middle level	3
Point-of-Sale display, inside and low level	1
Point-of-Sale display- in general	22
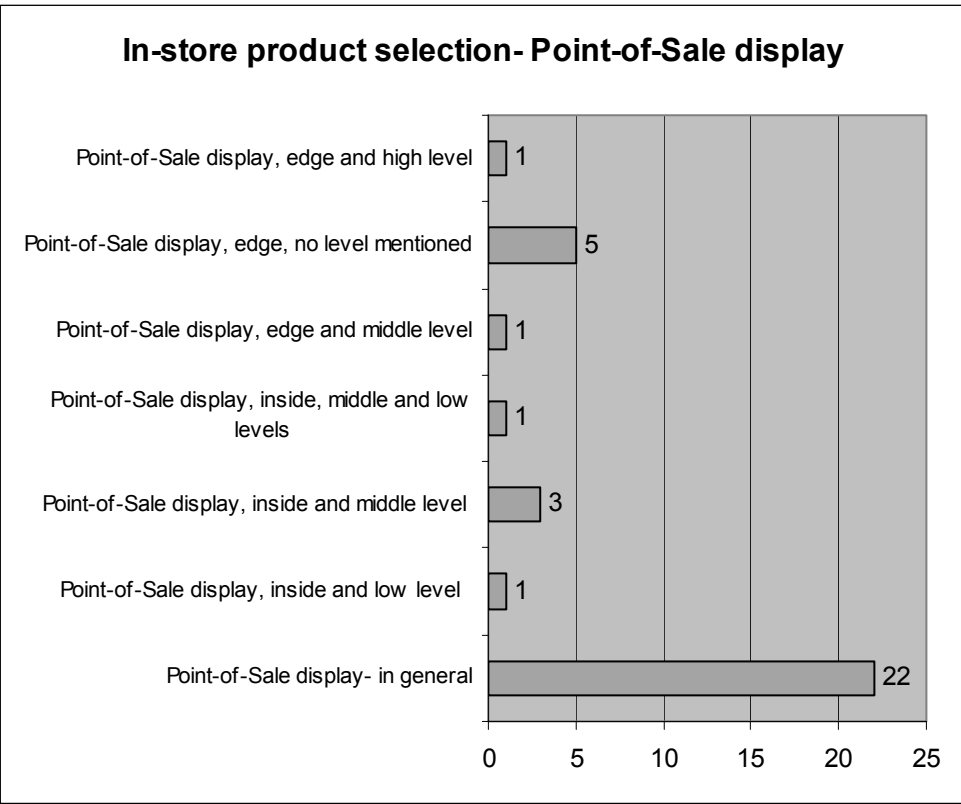
In-store product selection- Aisle- inside and edge

Category	Value
aisle and edge, high level	1
aisle and edge, no level mentioned	3
aisle and edge, middle and high levels	3
aisle and edge, middle level	6
aisle and edge, low and high levels	5
aisle and edge, low and middle levels	1
aisle and edge, low level	5
aisle, high level	36
aisle, no level mentioned	14
aisle, middle and high levels	11
aisle, middle level	103
low and high levels	2
aisle, low and middle levels	13
aisle, low level	33

In-store product selection- Aisle- only edge

Category	
edge, high level	
edge, no level mentioned	
edge, middle and high levels	
edge, middle level	
edge, low , middle and high levels	
edge, low and high levels	
edge, low and middle levels	
edge, low level	
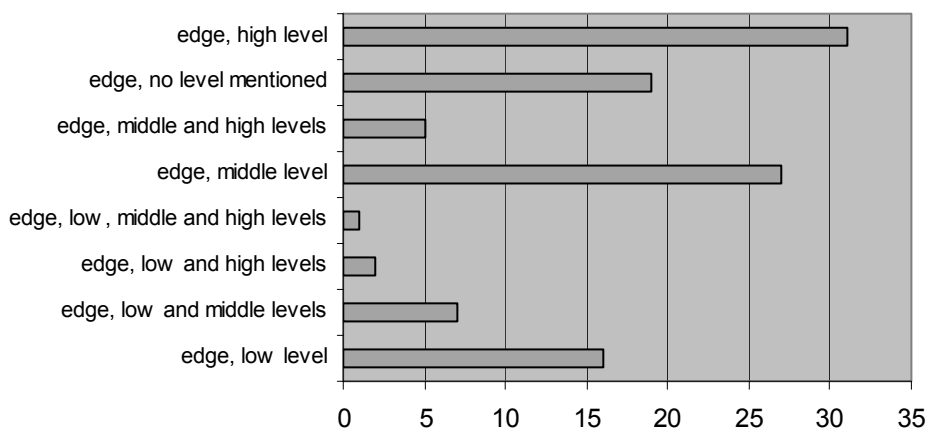
Out of the 396 observed people, 18 did not place any items in a basket or trolley.

We observed the number of products placed in the basket or trolley in each of the three store sections of interest to us: sweets, toys and Christmas decorations and adornments. Our findings are shown in the next figure:

The observed individual placed in the basket or trolley

|	One product	Several products	None
	160	231	5

No. of people

We also observed if the individual returned to the section/s previously visited. We discovered based on the findings displayed below that just around 20% returned for reasons which we were able to summarize in: to return items, to reassess options, to choose other options, to select more product units or larger quantities.

Did the observed individual return to the previously visited store sections?

74

322

☐ Yes
■ No

The observed individual selected a wide variety of items from the three store sections under study: sweets, toys and Christmas decorations and adornments. We were able to summarize and fine-tune the findings through content analysis into the following product subcategories:

- Christmas decorations and adornments: artificial Christmas trees, ornaments, garlands, tree tips, tree lights, table cloths, tree bows, tree candy
- Sweets: candy, chocolate bars, wafers, cookies, biscuits, cakes, chocolate eggs, sweet bread
- Toys: functional dolls, plush dolls, cardboard games, electronic games, remote control cars, robots and helicopters, drawing pencils

We observed the influence of in-store marketing communication on the buying behaviour. We uncovered that 67% of the observed individual were influenced to a certain extent by the marketing communication performed inside the store.
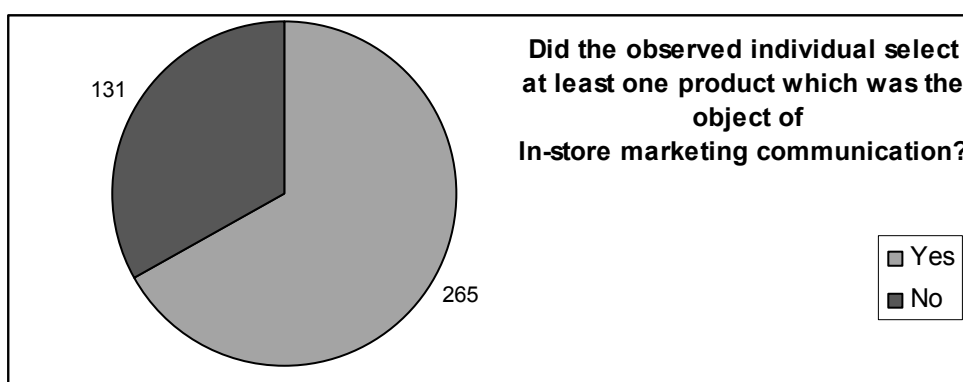
Through content analysis we were able to group the most important observed in-store marketing communication instruments in:
- price reductions
- contests
- product displays
- printed store advertisements
- radio advertisements
- additional quantity or product units
- printed aisle advertisements
- flyers
- merchandisers
- demonstrations and product tasting

In our endeavour we focused significantly on observing each individual's behaviour on three levels: expressions, sensorial conduct and communication.

Through content analysis we were able to extract the most important coordinates for each level.

With regard to the expressive behaviour, our main findings were: content, joy, surprise, body gestures, indifference, curiosity, hasting, uncertainty, indecision and relaxation.

As of the sensorial conduct, our main findings were: price reading, product touching, packaging analysis, offer analysis, colour and size analyses, instructions reading, price comparison, product testing and sales analysis.

Pertaining to communication, our main findings were: 203 individuals did not interact with other people in their buying decisions. The other individuals communicated with their companion/s, store staff, other shoppers and on the phone.

Research conclusions

Based on our findings we were able to conclude upon each hypothesis formulated at the beginning of our research.

1. The average time spent by an individual in a store is 30 minutes

Based on our findings, 320 individuals spent less than 21 minutes in a store, so we could not confirm the first hypothesis.

2. 70% of the individuals reside in Bucharest

Based on our findings, in 388 out of 396 cases, the cars parked in the store parking lots had Bucharest registration plates, so we could not confirm the second hypothesis

3. 50% of the individuals shop using a basket and 50% using a trolley

Based on our findings, 56.6% of the observed individuals chose a trolley, 40.2% a basket, while 3.2% did not select anything. According to these findings, the third hypothesis could not be confirmed.

4. 50% of the individuals make the first stop in a store at the "sweets" section

Our findings displayed a 43.4% with the first stop at the "sweets" section. Although our findings were not far from what we had assumed, we could not confirm the fourth hypothesis.

5. Sweets are purchased in a higher frequency, followed by toys and Christmas decorations and adornments

Our findings show that 55.1% of the observed individuals stopped firstly at the "Sweets" section, followed by the "toys" section with 25% and Christmas decorations and adornments with 19.9%. According to these findings, we confirmed the fifth hypothesis.

6. More than 50% of the individuals select products from inside the section at middle height 103 individuals (26.01%) selected products from inside the aisle at the middle level. Based on this figure, the sixth hypothesis could not be confirmed.

7. The individual displays a wide variety of in-store gestures in the buying process

We were able to uncover a wide variety of in-store gestures in the buying process, such as: content, joy, surprise, body gestures, indifference, curiosity, hasting, uncertainty, indecision and relaxation. These conclusions entitled us to confirm the seventh hypothesis.

8. The individual tries to gather intelligence about an offer by reading the price tags, the product instructions, by touching and testing the product

Our findings display the above-mentioned ideas plus others, such as: packaging analysis, offer analysis, colour and size analyses, price comparison and sales analysis. Based on these findings, the eight hypothesis was partially confirmed.

9. The individual communicates with his/her companions, other buyers and store employees in the buying process

The ninth hypothesis was partially confirmed because 203 individuals did not interact with other people in their buying decisions. The other individuals communicated with their companion/s, store staff, other shoppers and on the phone

Our study provides comprehensive insights about the buying behaviour displayed by people during the 2012 winter holidays. These findings provide valuable information for retailers and manufacturers pertaining to product assortment, store planning, aisle structure and in-store marketing communication.
This study could be considered a suitable starting point for a longitudinal research aimed at uncovering mutations in the buying behaviour from one year to another.

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