

Tomasz Zalega*

Durable goods possessed by seniors’ households as researched by the author

Introduction

Durables, which form the so-called household infrastructure, are a key feature of consumer preferences of households and, consequently, of a consumption pattern. They are accumulated and consumed over the long term, forming part of fixed consumer assets. Furthermore, they confirm household wealth, provide quality of life and to some extent offset the impact of periodic reduction in current income on satisfaction of needs of each household member. Household possessions, which are an indicator of social well-being, significantly affect consumer purchasing behaviour. Generally, the more durables a household possesses, the greater freedom it has in the disposition of its current income and, on average, the better it assesses its standard of living. In addition, the related literature increasingly draws attention to the fact that contemporary apartments/houses with durable household equipment are beginning to fulfil many new social functions, namely, as put by Gilles Pronovost, a Canadian cultural sociologist, they are becoming “places of consumption of art”, a kind of substitutes for cinemas, theatres, operettas, operas and concert halls, and education and fitness and wellness facilities in a broad sense (Pronovost, 2007). It is possible to fulfil all these functions at home thanks to infotainment equipment and rapid development and popularisation of electronic media for cultural content dissemination such as satellite and cable television, radio and the Internet. Thus, the home is beginning to replace some social institutions to a certain extent, thereby contributing to diminishing the living space of today’s consumers, which in turn impacts their purchasing behaviours.

* Professor Associate of UW dr hab. Tomasz Zalega, Department of National Economy, University of Warsaw, email: tomasz.zalega@wp.pl.

Durable goods fulfil three basic functions: utilitarian, exchange and symbolic. Utilitarian functions of durables directly serve to meet specific needs or are a means of satisfying the felt needs indirectly. Exchange functions have a certain exchange value, e.g. in periods of goods shortages in the market, they are either items of exchange or investment of surplus money. Symbolic function means that some goods, being rare and signalling wealth, have become social distinctions, e.g. a house in an exclusive part of town, all kinds of equipment fitted with new information technologies, etc. Currently, most goods have lost their symbolic function and partly their exchange function. As durables are widely available in the market, most of them are no longer a rarity or a sign of wealth. Exceptions include durables considered as the so-called Veblen goods, or goods that are associated with conspicuous consumption most frequently occurring in high-income households and those regarded as economic elites (Zalega, 2016: 150).

Technological development, which is a natural consequence of technical progress, provides the public with new and more modified goods and services that satisfy needs more effectively and create new needs. This refers mainly to the so-called new-generation equipment.

This article presents some durable goods possessed by urban households of people aged 65 and more. Its key objective is to provide some insight into seniors' household infrastructure. The structure of this article is as follows. After a brief introduction, the first section focuses on the research conceptualisation and a description of the sample and its characteristics. The further part of the study synthetically analyses mechanised household appliances, infotainment and mobile equipment possessed by urban household of older people. The level of satisfaction of seniors' demand for durable goods is also examined. Finally, major conclusions end this study.

Conceptualisation of research

The empirical material contained in this article comes from direct research conducted in the form of a survey questionnaire on a sample of 2537 households in 2014–2015 in ten Polish cities of various populations and sizes. In accordance with the research assumptions, the sample included persons over 65 years of age who took independent purchasing decisions in the market. In order to select the sample, the selective quota sampling procedure was used. The characteristics covered by the research were: sex and age.

The surveys were conducted among participants of the University of the Third Age at state universities in: Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź, Poznań, Gdańsk, Katowice, Lublin, Białystok, Toruń and Wrocław, as well as among members of parochial clubs in parishes located in the Archdioceses of Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź, Białystok, Gdańsk, Katowice, Lublin, Poznań, Wrocław and the Dioceses of Warsaw-Praga and Toruń.

Selection and characteristics of the research sample

Studying consumer behaviours is an extremely intricate process. This is due to the complexity of consumption and consumer purchasing behaviours in the field of consumer decision-making. Such research encompasses an important step to explain the phenomenon examined, namely adoption of specific indicators. This is essential because an indicator is used to define a certain characteristic of an object or phenomenon which is in such a relation with another characteristic that indicates the occurrence of the latter when it occurs itself. An indicator is a measurable, i.e. empirically available, variable. When consumer behaviours are investigated, indicators explaining the complexity of this phenomenon include demographic (sex, age, place of residence, household size) and socio-economic indicators (education, income).

71% of those who took part in the survey were women, with only every third respondent being male. There were definitely more women than men and people aged 65–74 formed the largest age group in the sample¹. Place of residence was also an important variable in the research. In line with the research assumptions, the sample comprised respondents who lived in the largest Polish cities.

Respondents were also asked about their level of education. The questionnaire included four categories of education: primary, basic vocational, secondary and higher education. Respondents with secondary education formed the largest group. Nearly 2/5 of those surveyed declared this level. Every fourth respondent was a university graduate, and those with basic vocational education represented a similar percentage. In the sample surveyed, people with primary education formed the smallest group (11.4%).

Nearly half of those surveyed were members of households consisting of two persons, while fewer than 2/5 represented three-person households. Every sixth respondent was a member of a single-person household.

The largest group of respondents included people whose monthly income per capita did not exceed PLN 2000.00. For every third respondent, the monthly income per household member ranged from PLN 2001.00 to 3000.00. In turn, every fourth person interviewed had a monthly disposable income per capita of between PLN 3001.00 and 4000.00. The smallest group of respondents included households where the income was above PLN 4000.00 per capita a month.

¹ The Anglo-Saxon literature uses the following division of older people: 1) young old – people aged 60/65–74; 2) old old – people aged 75–84; and 3) the oldest old – people aged 85 and more. The age classification in this study is similar to that proposed by the WHO. The author divided seniors into: 1) young old – people aged 65–74, 2) old old – people aged 75–84, and 3) the oldest old – people aged 85 and more. According to the UN, the conventional old-age threshold is 65. It should be remembered, however, that old age is not just the number of years that a person has lived. We distinguish calendar (chronological) age and biological age. Many factors often cause very large discrepancies between chronological and biological ages.

Selected durable goods possessed by seniors' households

Durable goods are a major spending group for households, including seniors' households. It should also be borne in mind that the constantly progressing technical and technological innovation, new technological discoveries, conservation of natural resources, globalisation, imitation of cultures, civilisation progress, consumer lifestyle and many other determinants, and intertwined and simultaneous processes influence changes in household infrastructure, and thus durable goods possessed by households are constantly changing. These processes are usually accompanied by not only new but also better quality of these products. In turn, spreading lifestyles make households, including those of seniors, seek to change their equipment and appliances, both by replacing existing equipment with new products and by purchasing completely new, hitherto unknown goods. Over the last few years, goods that in the late 1990s still indicated a high material status of their owners (such as microwave ovens, dishwashers, plasma and LCD TV sets, hi-fi stereo music systems, digital cameras, microcomputers, etc.) have become ever-present in seniors' households. Currently, these products are considered as popular household equipment that has almost "blended" into the functioning of an average household.

Most people, including the elderly, think that they have to consume products and, if possible, replace them with other, newer and better ones. Today, products are not used until they are physically worn out, but until newer models are launched. This is reflected in the short product life cycle. An endless production and purchasing spiral emerges whereby manufacturers deliver new products to the market and consumers buy them, discarding them shortly afterwards in order to purchase their latest versions. This contributes to a series of unnecessary purchases. The described consumer behaviour, including that of seniors, in the market for durable goods is part of the so-called Diderot effect. The term comes from the name of Denis Diderot, an 18th-century French writer and philosopher, who wrote an essay about a silk dressing gown that had changed his life. Although his study was in very good condition, he decided to change the interior design radically. All this was motivated by the fact that the new gown did not match the study design. Certainly, the Diderot effect contributes to persistent insatiability, leading to the acquisition of much more products than the consumer actually needs (Rostek and Zalega, 2015: 263–264).

Households belonging to a specific socio-economic group often emphasise their wealth in an effort to get closer to a particular pattern developed under the influence of fashion, tastes, habits, position, etc. Such behaviours are frequently a factor in changing consumption behaviour of a society and modernising the structure of consumption and the structure of household durables (Ślaby, 2006: 90). In addition, household durable goods together with the home affect a wide range of everyday consumer behaviours of all household members that determine the internal functioning of the household. They also determine the amount of free time and the way in which it is spent.

Irrespective of objective advantages, many durables owned by households meet higher-order needs and, as such, depict the standard of living and are an expression of modernity. Though not always rightly, they are often treated as a symbol of social prestige, a new material culture and a new lifestyle (Gutkowska, Ozimek and Lasowski, 2001: 103).

The particular role played by durable goods in the functioning of each household lies in the facilitation and mechanisation of housework, including, in particular (Kędzior, 1989: 4–6):

- food preparation and storage equipment, referred to as kitchen equipment, such as refrigerators, freezers, food processors, microwave ovens, etc.;
- equipment for keeping home neat and clean, washing and maintaining clothes, referred to as general household appliances, such as electric washing and de-watering machines, vacuum cleaners, sewing machines, etc.;
- equipment meeting home entertainment and leisure needs, termed consumer electronics, such as radios, cassette players, TV sets, video recorders, etc.

Taking into consideration the types of needs of households and their members that are satisfied, durables are divided into three basic groups (Zalega, 2010a):

- mechanised household appliances, i.e. goods used directly by households for housework mechanisation (e.g. preparation and storage of food products – cookers and ovens, food processors, refrigerators, freezers) and for cleaning the house, laundry and clothing maintenance, e.g. automatic and agitator-type washing machines, dishwashers, hot press, food processors, sewing machines and other;
- infotainment equipment, i.e. consumer electronics satisfying diverse needs for home entertainment, leisure or study, which directly satisfies individual needs of household members, such as TV sets, video recorders, radio sets, video cameras, personal computers and other;
- mobility-related goods that meet transport needs, i.e. bicycles, motorcycles, cars.

In order to specify the situation in terms of household equipment facilitating various activities, a three-degree scale of saturation is used:

- a high degree of saturation, where more than 80% of households possess a given piece of equipment;
- a medium degree of saturation, where from 50% to 80% of households possess a given piece of equipment;
- a low degree of saturation, where less than 50% of households possess a given piece of equipment.

The identifiers that are commonly used to describe the degree to which demand for durable goods is met include: the level and structure of spending from household personal income and durables possessed. Expenditure on consumer goods and services means the final stage of meeting demand with a specific market range of prod-

ucts. In the case of durable goods, it informs about current purchases of goods and services (Zalega, 2008: 186). By analysing the structure of expenditure, it is possible to determine the position of durables in satisfaction of needs.

Nonetheless, it should be recognised that durable goods owned by households are closely correlated with socio-economic (i.e. age, sex, education, family life cycle, type of housing) and non-economic factors such as tastes, preferences, imitation, varied predilections and other (Zalega, 2010b: 172).

In view of the data from the survey, it can be stated that the situation as regards durable goods possessed by seniors was assessed as very good by almost every fifth respondent and as good by every third respondent. This situation was rated as bad by every seventh person aged 65 and more, while every tenth said that it was very bad. One in four seniors assessed it as moderate. Furthermore, seniors who were UTA students (56.3%) gave higher ratings than older members of parochial clubs (44.5%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Assessment of durable goods possessed by urban households of seniors (%)

Situation as regards durable goods possessed by households	Number of respondents (N = 2537)	Percentage share
Very good	503	19.8
Good	776	30.6
Moderate (satisfactory)	637	25.1
Bad	360	14.2
Very bad	261	10.3

Source: the author's research.

Mechanised household appliances

In each household, an important role is played by equipment for facilitation and mechanisation of housework. Mechanised household appliances possessed by those surveyed are presented in Table 2. For this type of durable goods, the proportion of seniors revealing high saturation was similar for UTA students and parochial community members.

The survey shows that the situation in terms of mechanised appliances owned by seniors' households and the degree of their popularity were varied. In the interviewed families, a high degree of saturation was noted for automatic washing machines (100.0% of respondents), refrigerators (100.0% of respondents) and electric vacuum cleaners (99.3%), whereas a medium degree of saturation was observed for food processors (53.1% of respondents) and microwave ovens (49.5% of respondents). The least popular mechanised appliances include dishwashers (11.7%) and electric cookers with ceramic hob (5.5% of respondents).

Table 2. Mechanised household appliances possessed by urban households of seniors (%)

Place of residence	Items						
	Electric washing and dewatering machine or automatic washing machine	Electric vacuum cleaner	Refrigerator or freezer	Electric cooker with ceramic hob	Microwave oven	Food processor	Dishwasher
Warsaw	100.0	98.3	100.0	9.3	53.6	59.6	13.4
Kraków	100.0	99.1	100.0	7.2	54.2	56.1	11.8
Łódź	100.0	96.7	100.0	3.8	50.8	49.8	10.7
Poznań	100.0	99.5	100.0	5.6	60.1	52.3	13.1
Wrocław	100.0	99.8	100.0	4.2	52.1	54.0	12.5
Gdańsk	100.0	100.0	100.0	3.9	47.3	53.6	10.9
Katowice	100.0	99.8	100.0	4.2	52.1	56.4	11.2
Lublin	100.0	99.8	100.0	4.0	37.6	48.3	10.8
Białystok	100.0	99.6	100.0	3.9	39.2	49.1	11.1
Toruń	100.0	100.0	100.0	4.8	48.1	51.2	12.4

Source: the author's research.

Infotainment and mobile equipment

In addition to mechanised household appliances, an important role in the household is also played by equipment for entertainment and leisure (the so-called infotainment equipment) and equipment for mobility and individual communication (the so-called mobile equipment).

The analysis of individual pieces of infotainment equipment shows a lower degree of their popularity than in the case of mechanised appliances (Table 3).

A high level of saturation can be noted only for TV sets (100.0% of respondents) and mobile phones (94.8% of respondents). Among TV set owners, almost every third person surveyed had an LCD, plasma or LED TV set. Medium saturation can be observed for fixed-line telephones (60.5% of respondents), personal computers (44.4% of respondents) and satellite television equipment (59.8% of respondents). DVD players (29.0% of respondents), video recorders (players) (24.3% of respondents) and digital cameras (24.2% of respondents) were rare in the households surveyed. Very rare were MP3 players (3.2% of respondents), video cameras (3.4% of respondents), CD players (4.0% of respondents) and home cinema systems (6.4% of respondents).

The survey found that UTA students pointed to a high level of saturation for most goods categorised as infotainment equipment more frequently than senior parochial community members.

Table 3. Infotainment equipment possessed by urban households of seniors (%)

Items	Place of residence										
	Warsaw	Kraków	Łódź	Poznań	Wrocław	Gdańsk	Katowice	Lublin	Białystok	Toruń	
TV set	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
Satellite or cable TV equipment	67.3	62.1	54.3	59.2	61.7	64.8	61.7	55.3	52.7	58.9	
Home cinema	7.3	6.8	6.8	7.2	7.5	6.9	7.8	4.3	4.0	5.1	
Hi-fi stereo music system	20.1	17.9	15.8	16.2	18.3	14.3	19.1	10.8	11.3	12.5	
Radio or radio cassette player with CD player	11.8	12.4	12.8	14.0	13.2	9.7	8.9	10.7	11.2	10.6	
MP3 player	3.6	4.1	3.7	2.9	3.1	2.8	3.5	2.9	2.8	3.0	
CD player	4.1	3.9	5.0	4.3	3.6	3.8	4.0	3.7	3.5	3.9	
Video recorder/player	15.3	13.6	13.5	12.8	12.3	11.9	12.8	14.9	15.1	13.5	
DVD player	29.6	26.9	30.4	25.4	27.8	27.6	32.1	29.1	31.2	29.1	
Video camera	3.4	2.9	3.1	3.0	2.7	4.1	3.9	4.0	2.7	3.8	
Digital camera	26.1	25.8	24.1	23.8	22.7	23.6	26.3	21.9	23.6	24.1	
Computer with Internet access	51.2	43.6	39.2	43.1	42.8	45.6	47.7	42.9	41.5	46.8	
Printer	12.6	11.8	10.4	11.6	13.0	12.4	11.2	10.6	11.1	10.8	
Fixed-line phone	60.8	61.3	62.0	59.4	56.8	60.1	62.3	59.8	60.7	61.3	
Mobile phone	96.2	95.7	93.6	96.8	95.9	95.3	96.0	93.3	92.8	93.7	

Source: the author's research.

The turn of the 21st century saw the emergence and gradual popularisation of such goods and services as personal computer, mobile phone and the Internet in households. In the early 1990s, computers were relatively expensive for many individual users and computer use required specific skills. Hence, seniors' households possessed very few of them in that period. In less than two decades, the utility and popularity of the computer has increased and user-friendly software has developed. As a result, for many households, the computer (especially the portable one) has become the primary tool facilitating not only learning, work and communication but also finding a job, including through online services. All this has led to a significant improvement in the household situation in terms of personal computers (laptops). In the households surveyed, the computer with Internet access was owned by 44.4% of respondents. However, it should be remembered that having a computer is closely correlated with the household income and wealth. Internet service has also become more accessible over the last few years, resulting in a noticeable increase in the numbers of computers with Internet access in households. The survey reveals that almost every second senior had Internet access.

It should also be borne in mind that today a TV set does not only mean access to TV shows, but is also a database of photographs and films and a viable alternative to the computer (especially the desktop one). This phenomenon will become more common in the near future with the spread of high-tech TVs known as OLED (Organic Light-Emitting Diode), dubbed by subject matter experts as smart TVs (without a remote and with the Internet) and "killers of LCDs and plasma". These TV sets have screens of thickness not exceeding 4 mm that display 4-color pixels refining the quality of the picture and offer an almost unlimited viewing angle. In addition, OLED TVs offer an infinite contrast ratio and a refresh rate of 0.02 millisecond (almost 100 times faster than LCD TVs).

The mobile phone is a good that is constantly growing in popularity in today's world, at a pace comparable to that of the Internet, and similarly affecting people's lifestyles. This was reflected in the spread of that device across households within only a few years. In the context of the survey, it can be concluded that as many as 94.8% of households had mobile phones.

Table 4. Mobile durables possessed by households of people aged 65+ (%)

Place of residence	Items		
	Bicycle (excl. children's bike)	Motorcycle, scooter, moped	Passenger car
Warsaw	42.8	2.3	49.3
Kraków	43.9	1.9	47.6
Łódź	46.3	1.7	42.9
Poznań	45.9	1.8	46.8
Wrocław	48.1	2.1	47.5
Gdańsk	49.2	2.3	47.3
Katowice	46.3	2.0	48.2
Lublin	54.9	2.6	49.6
Białystok	55.6	2.4	51.2
Toruń	47.3	1.9	46.1

Source: the author's research.

Analysing the group of durable goods serving the satisfaction of transportation needs, a medium degree of saturation can be observed for bicycles and passenger cars. They were owned by 48.0% and 47.6% of seniors respectively (Table 4). Fewer households of people aged 65+ had two-wheeled vehicles (motorcycles, scooters, mopeds) (2.1% of respondents). Mobile durables were more frequent among UTA students than among parochial community members. The former had more bicycles and mopeds, while the latter more often owned passenger cars.

The survey shows that household situation as regards durable goods possessed is significantly improving quantitatively and qualitatively, thereby modernising the structure of resources owned. Black and white TV sets, monophonic radio sets, cassette players or record players and typewriters have virtually disappeared. They were replaced by new goods which were quickly accepted. A particularly big number of new products occurred in the ICT field: especially satellite and cable television equipment, hi-fi equipment, personal computers, the Internet and mobile phones. It should be highlighted here that the lack of some durable goods in the surveyed seniors' households may result not so much from the lack of financial capacity but from their reluctance to possess them.

Satisfaction of demand for durable goods among people aged 65+

How well the demand for durable goods is met is strongly correlated with the level of household wealth. Durables possessed by the surveyed seniors' households catered for their needs to varying degrees (Table 5).

Table 5. Level of satisfaction of demand for selected durable goods in seniors' urban households (% of respondents)

Kind of goods	Level of demand satisfaction		
	completely satisfied	moderately satisfied	not satisfied
Electric washing and draining machine or automatic washing machine	100.0	–	–
Electric vacuum cleaner	98.5	1.5	–
Refrigerator or freezer	100.0	–	–
Electric cooker with ceramic hob	65.4	15.3	19.3
Microwave oven	63.8	23.5	12.7
Food processor	63.6	21.8	14.6
Dishwasher	21.2	48.3	30.5
TV set	100.0	–	–
Satellite or cable TV equipment	69.2	20.4	10.4
Home cinema	59.3	29.8	10.9
Hi-fi stereo music system	35.4	27.3	37.3
Radio or radio cassette player with CD player	58.3	25.2	16.5
MP3 player	48.9	36.2	14.9
CD player	67.8	21.4	10.8
Video recorder/player	52.1	23.6	24.3
DVD player	61.7	19.8	18.5
Video camera	49.6	37.2	13.2
Digital camera	59.3	26.1	14.6
Computer with Internet access	61.3	24.4	14.3
Printer	50.6	29.3	20.1
Fixed-line phone	69.3	25.1	5.6
Mobile phone	95.8	3.1	1.1
Bicycle (excl. children's bike)	61.8	12.4	25.8
Motorcycle, scooter, moped	41.2	21.7	37.1
Passenger car	56.3	24.8	18.9

Source: the author's research.

The survey found that more than 64% of seniors' households thought that their demand for durable goods was completely satisfied, with every fourth senior assessing that level as moderate and almost every seventh respondent considering that it was not satisfied.

In the context of the survey results, it can be stated that the households of people aged 65+ living in cities possess more and better mechanised, infotainment and mobility equipment. This undoubtedly translates into how well the demand for durable

goods is met. The survey results indicate that seniors actively attending UTA courses are more likely to assess the satisfaction of their demand for durable goods better than respondents who are parochial community members.

Conclusion

Durables, which form the so-called household infrastructure, are a key feature of consumer preferences of seniors' urban households and, consequently, of a consumption pattern. In addition to the purchase and use of durable goods, their sheer possession is of great importance in consumer behaviour. Urban households of seniors are best equipped with washing machines, refrigerators/freezers, TV sets, mobile phones and electric vacuum cleaners, and worst equipped with electric cookers with ceramic hob, MP3 players, video cameras, home cinema systems and two-wheeled vehicles (motorcycles/mopeds).

It is clear from the observation of changes in the equipment and appliances owned by urban households of people aged 65+ that the improvement in this respect is not only quantitative but predominantly qualitative. Furthermore, there is a noticeable increase in ICT equipment, demonstrating the modernisation of consumption patterns. It has also been noted that nearly 3/5 of seniors assess the level of satisfaction of their demand for durable goods as high, more than 25% as moderate and 14.2% as low or very low.

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Summary

Durable goods possessed by seniors' households as researched by the author

Durable goods possessed by households are not only an important measure of wealth and quality of life but also a meaningful indicator of the consumer position of each household. It should be borne in mind that durable goods that are accumulated and consumed predominantly over the long term constitute a vital part of household consumer wealth in the form of cash and non-cash resources. Their role and significance ensue from their capacity for meeting the whole range of human needs that continually change and undergo gradual modification.

This article presents some durable goods possessed by urban households of people aged 65 and more. Its key objective is to provide some insight into seniors' household infrastructure. The structure of this article is as follows. After a brief introduction, the first section focuses on the research conceptualisation

and a description of the sample and its characteristics. The later part of the article synthetically analyses mechanised household appliances, infotainment and mobile equipment possessed by urban households of older people. The level of satisfaction of seniors' demand for durable goods is also examined.

Keywords: seniors, household infrastructure, durable goods

JEL Code: A12, D03, D18.