

Exploring Cross-National Differences in Consumer Engagement: A Comprehensive Study of Business Processes, Interaction Methods, Incentives, and ICT Utilisation in the HoReCa Sector in Poland and the UK

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Abstract

This research aims to develop a framework for analysing companies' activities related to sourcing consumers' knowledge and apply this framework to the hotel, restaurants, and catering (HoReCa) sector in Poland and the UK. Data collection involves case studies within the HoReCa industry, and the research methodology considers the four key perspectives of companies' activities: (1) the business process, (2) methods of interaction, (3) incentives for knowledge sharing, and (4) ICT support. The research demonstrates that HoReCa companies actively engage consumers through diverse projects, emphasising feedback-related activities. While UK-based companies exhibit more extensive consumer involvement across various business processes, including product development, marketing, and customer service, Poland-based projects focus primarily on consumers' opinions. The study identifies significant differences in interaction methods, incentives, and ICT offerings between the two countries analysed. For academics, the study contributes to the understanding of cross-cultural variations in consumer engagement strategies within the HoReCa sector. From a practical standpoint, HoReCa businesses can tailor their consumer engagement strategies based on regional disparities highlighted in the study.

Key words

consumer engagement, HoReCa, cross-national differences, business processes, interaction methods, incentives, ICT utilisation.

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Introduction

As society becomes more interconnected, consumers have seamless access to engagement with both fellow consumers and businesses through information and communication technologies (ICT). Serving as integral stakeholders, they actively contribute to diverse activities, nurturing innovations and exchanging valuable knowledge (Eisenhardt, 2021; Pandey et al., 2014). Empirical studies indicate that consumer engagement is currently a widespread and frequent phenomenon, a mass activity that companies and managers should not overlook (Franke et al., 2016; Potra & Pugna, 2015). Consumers engage in numerous activities such as scoring and reviewing products, services, and companies, as well as developing, modifying, and designing products and services to better meet their needs (Ziemba et al., 2019; von Hippel, 2017). Recognising the scale and importance of consumer engagement, an increasing number of companies are placing consumers at the core of their business efforts, involving them in business processes and thereby tapping into consumer knowledge (Deloitte, 2018). This underscores the necessity for companies to be acutely aware of consumers as a source of knowledge and generators of innovative ideas.

Consumer engagement is closely linked to the theories of prosumers, consumer knowledge, and free innovation explored in the literature. Existing studies highlight the active engagement of 'prosumers', consumers who act as producers to some extent, impacting businesses by sharing knowledge for co-designing, co-producing, co-promoting, and co-creating products and services (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Robert et al., 2019; Seran & Izvercian, 2014). The relationship between businesses and consumers is a significant issue, prompting authors to examine factors influencing the implementation of consumer knowledge in companies, online consumer communities, differences between national cultures affecting the willingness to share knowledge, and participation in knowledge-related activities offered by companies (Fernandes & Remelhe, 2016; von Hippel, 2017; de Jong et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2019; Strychalska-Rudzewicz, 2016; Tian et al., 2018). Other studies focus on behavioural issues, exploring the effects of national cultures on consumer behaviour (Kacprzak & Dziwanowska, 2015; Wojciechowska, 2017), and consumers' attitudes towards prosumption (Baruk, 2019; Ziemba & Eisenhardt, 2016).

However, there are significant issues that warrant further investigation in order to substantiate the theory regarding companies' efforts in acquiring consumer knowledge. From this standpoint, the actions undertaken by companies can influence consumers' interest in their products and services, thereby potentially enhancing consumers' inclination to share knowledge. Therefore, in acquiring consumer knowledge it is imperative to elucidate companies' strategies, which align with their business objectives and growth. Our study aims to address this gap by developing a framework for analysing companies' endeavours in acquiring consumer knowledge and applying this framework to HoReCa companies operating in both Poland and the UK. Through a comprehensive analysis, we thoroughly examined and delineated the similarities and disparities between these two countries.

In the literature, two elaborations of the HoReCa abbreviation can be found. The first explains it as hotels/restaurants/café (cafeterias), and the second as hotels/restaurants/catering. Despite this slight difference, both focus on companies and sectors that provide food and food-related services (Ceynova et al., 2023; Casolani & Del Signore, 2016; García-Madurga et al., 2021). HoReCa companies were chosen primarily because they continually cooperate with consumers, offering many channels and possibilities for collaboration, making it relatively easy to source consumers' knowledge. It can be postulated that HoReCa enterprises possess a well-established track record and substantial expertise in procuring and harnessing consumer insights for the purposes of business innovation and advancement.

Poland and the UK were selected due to the perceived differences in methods of acquiring consumer knowledge and opinions in these countries. This selection is based on previous joint research

results in these countries, which highlight associations between national culture, innovation, and consumer behaviour in the Polish and British contexts. According to Andrijauskienė and Dumciuvienė (2018), using Hofstede's (2019) cultural dimensions, the UK is perceived as more innovative compared to Poland. Moreover, researchers such as Fandrejewska (2017) and Wojciechowska (2017) have also used Hofstede's dimensions to analyse consumer behaviour in both countries. Their research revealed significant correlations between national cultural characteristics and consumer purchasing preferences, as well as the way consumers perceive branded products. The research findings indicate cultural and developmental differences between Poland and the UK. However, these findings are general and often analyse the issue in relation to enterprises or consumers broadly. There is a lack of studies focusing on cross-country analysis specific to the HoReCa sector. Therefore, we decided to conduct a study on selected HoReCa companies, examining variables such as business processes, methods of interaction with consumers, incentives, and ICT offerings. This sector-specific analysis aims to address the identified research gap.

The paper is organised into several sections. First, it presents a thorough review of the existing literature, followed by the formulation of research questions and hypotheses. Next, the research methodology and data collection process are detailed, leading to a comprehensive analysis of the gathered data and subsequent discussion. Finally, the paper concludes by highlighting the contributions to research and practical implications of the study, along with acknowledging its limitations and suggesting areas for further research.

1. Literature review

1.1. Literature review on HoReCa sector

The term HoReCa refers to a collection of commercial catering food establishments whose primary activity involves the production and sale of food for direct out-of-home consumption. HoReCa companies provide food and food-related services (Casolani & Del Signore, 2016; García-Madurga et al., 2021). According to the industry report for the Polish market in 2022 (Gastronomy News, 2023), 67% of people used to eat outside their homes, 55% used to take food away, and 53% are ordering food to their homes. Furthermore, the financial performance of Polish HoReCa companies in 2022 increased by 8.3% compared to the results for 2021 (Gastronomy News, 2023). The newest reports indicate that 84% of UK-based and 73% of Poland-based consumers agree that price rises would reduce their spending on everyday lunches from food outlets or restaurants (Gastronomy News, 2023; Mintel, 2022). Many studies focusing on HoReCa address environmental and sustainability issues, emphasizing that this sector's operations contribute to food waste (Buczacki et al., 2021; Vizzoto et al., 2020). Other studies concentrate on the role of traditional national foods in the HoReCa sector as a factor influencing tourists' destination choices (Stankov et al., 2016). HoReCa companies consistently collaborate with consumers, and such collaboration can be crucial for the long-term success of businesses and relationship-building. Successful collaboration strengthens participants' willingness to contribute to the joint production of collective goods (Ceynowa et al., 2023; Planko et al., 2019; Yamamoto & Suzuki, 2018). However, Bolisani et al. (2020) pointed out that the HoReCa sector faces difficulties in the knowledge management process, resulting in the fact that they have a large number of consumers, but know little about them, even the regular ones. Consequently, any effort to improve service is often based on the intuitions of the owner. Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to examine HoReCa companies' activities towards sourcing consumers' knowledge from the perspectives of two countries: Poland and the UK.

1.2. Companies' activities towards consumers' knowledge

A central theme in business research involves the difficulties encountered by companies regarding consumer knowledge and its impact on them (Chen et al., 2018). Consumer knowledge is a crucial resource for inspiring enhancements in products, services, operational procedures, and strategies. It

is noteworthy to enumerate the activities consumers may autonomously undertake without any explicit support or intent from companies. Practical cases demonstrate that consumers can critically assess and review companies, their offerings, and activities through well-established and widely used tools and web portals, enabling them to share their opinions effortlessly and swiftly. Moreover, consumers possess the capability to offer assessments and endorsements for particular products, services, and brands to fellow consumers, thereby influencing their purchasing decisions. (Khac et al., 2020; Rather et al., 2023). Simultaneously, consumers exert an influence on businesses and their operational and strategic processes.

Further studies and cases reveal that many companies proactively engage in specific activities, creating opportunities for consumers to share knowledge (Zollo et al., 2020), commonly known as firm-generated content (FGC) (Santiago et al., 2022). The benefits derived from such activities are primarily associated with the acquisition and utilization of consumers' knowledge for business purposes. Moreover, companies exercise complete supervision over the knowledge created and shared. Often, a company's activity can be regarded and analyzed from four main perspectives: (1) business processes that the company can develop and enhance by sourcing consumers' knowledge; (2) methods of interacting with consumers; (3) incentives offered to consumers to gather their knowledge; and (4) ICT provided for consumers, which can support both consumers in their knowledge-sharing endeavors and companies in sourcing consumers' knowledge.

1.3. Business Processes and consumers engagement

In our study, we utilized the APQC Process Classification Framework (PCF) (APQC, 2020). This framework encompasses operational processes and outlines different forms of consumer interaction within these processes. We chose the PCF because it functions as a classification system for cross-functional business processes (BP), intended to enable unbiased evaluations of organizational performance both internally and externally. Furthermore, the PCF sets a universal standard aimed at promoting enhancement through process management and benchmarking, irrespective of industry, scale, or geographical location (APQC, 2020). Therefore, by employing the PCF, it was possible to apply the same standards and rules for both countries – Poland and the UK, as well as for all HoReCa companies under consideration, irrespective of their size, industry, work stream, or location.

This study focused on four key operational business processes (BP), delineating the diverse avenues through which consumers could actively contribute to driving innovation. Leveraging the APQC PCF framework, companies' initiatives pertaining to consumer knowledge are integrated within the following processes: (BP2) product development and management; (BP3) marketing and sales strategies; (BP4) product delivery logistics; and (BP5) customer service management. Within each of these processes, specific consumer-related activities have been identified, tailored to the unique requirements of each process. For instance, consumers may participate in product development and management by conceptualizing novel product designs and functionalities, refining product compositions, augmenting product reliability and longevity, or streamlining product usability and intuitiveness. Further elaboration on these activities is provided in Figure 1.

Drawing upon the PCF and taking into account insights from existing literature, the following research question was asked: Q1: Which business processes do HoReCa companies engage consumers in for sourcing their knowledge in Poland and the UK?

1.4. The methods of the interaction with consumers

Companies' activities toward consumers' knowledge can be analyzed through the methods of interaction with consumers (Prentice et al., 2018). In the literature, three primary modes of consumer engagement are commonly identified: word-of-mouth recommendations, consumers aiding fellow consumers, and consumers assisting companies directly (Roy et al., 2018). The crucial factor is that

the way consumers interact with companies depends on the activities of both consumers and companies. From this perspective, both consumers and companies can initiate and develop the ways they interact with each other.

Liu et al. (2019) confirmed the proactive approach of companies in seeking feedback on their existing products, new product ideas, and prototypes, actively involving customers in the process. This finding is supported by numerous other scholars in the field. For instance, scholarly research has demonstrated that consumer engagement through reviews, evaluations, complaints, and opinions serves as a significant means of collecting customer feedback and discerning new requirements for product development or design (Jin et al., 2016; Qiao et al., 2018). Additionally, consumer engagement encompasses several avenues for proposing and refining products and processes (Liu et al., 2019). Therefore, consumers play a pivotal role in assisting companies in innovating by providing reviews and ratings for products and processes, sharing their opinions, insights, and experiences about products and processes, as well as actively participating in the design of products and processes.

Aligned with existing literature, our research incorporated three distinct modes of interaction with consumers offered by companies. These include: (1) scoring, allowing consumers to promptly provide evaluations on products, services, brands, and companies, ranging from 1 - indicating dissatisfaction to 5 - indicating high satisfaction; (2) reviewing, encompassing consumer actions such as providing feedback and opinions on brands, services, and products; and (3) designing, involving consumer engagement in product or service design activities. Subsequently, this study sought to address the research question: Q2: What are the methods of interaction between consumers and HoReCa companies in Poland and the UK?

1.5. Consumers' motivations and incentives

Understanding consumer engagement across various activities provided by companies necessitates delving into consumers' motivations for participating in this process and sharing their knowledge and ideas. The differentiation between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation holds significant importance (Vivek et al., 2012). Intrinsic motivation entails consumers engaging with companies for their own sake, devoid of apparent external inducements. Conversely, extrinsic motivation involves external incentives such as monetary rewards or acknowledgment from others. Some consumers are driven by hobbies and passion, others are primarily motivated by financial incentives. Similar findings were reported by West and Bogers (2014), who highlighted both monetary rewards (extrinsic benefits) and non-monetary rewards (intrinsic motivation) as driving forces behind consumers' engagement in open innovation projects. As outlined by Füller (2010), the motivation of most consumers stems from a combination of intrinsic factors such as enjoyment and altruism, internalized extrinsic motives including learning and reputation, and entirely extrinsic factors like payment, giveaways, and career opportunities. Consequently, for companies relying on consumer engagement, effectively identifying and understanding the diverse incentives at play poses a significant challenge.

In our study, we chose to focus exclusively on extrinsic incentives. Exploring personal incentives presents additional complexities and would require a different research approach, possibly involving a longitudinal analysis of consumer behavior to fully grasp individual motivations. The extrinsic incentives we examined encompassed material rewards, monetary compensation, complimentary product testing, free product samples, and bonus points. Hence, our subsequent research question aimed to address: Q3: What incentives do HoReCa companies offer to consumers in Poland and the UK?

1.6. ICT offered to consumers

Research on consumer engagement has identified ICT as an essential factor that allows consumers to interact outside the boundaries of companies, with well-chosen incentives being another crucial element (West & Bogers, 2014). Thus, ICT can support consumers' knowledge sharing and companies' activities aimed at that knowledge, serving as a form of incentive as well. Tools and apps are necessary

to provide a platform for consumers to produce and share knowledge and ideas (Gawer, 2010; Wang et al., 2024).

Indeed, numerous studies have indicated that interactive information and communication technology-based channels, coupled with a variety of internet-based tools, enable consumers to engage as co-designers, co-producers, and co-creators for businesses (Eisenhardt, 2021; Hernández-Serrano et al., 2017). Consumers are empowered to actively leverage ICT to apply their experiences, knowledge, and skills in contributing to the design, creation, and delivery processes of products and services (Oliveira et al., 2020). For instance, Starbucks revolutionized its consumers' roles through the utilization of social media and other platforms, shifting them from passive recipients of beverages to active contributors to innovation (Retaildive, 2023). Additionally, Chen et al. (2018) affirmed that ICT tools constitute a vital element supported by companies for engaging consumers in business innovation. However, Ceynowa et al. (2023) pointed out that to date, only a few studies have investigated the adoption of ICT within the HoReCa sector.

Aligned with prior studies on information and communication technology (ICT) facilitating consumer knowledge sharing (Ziemba et al., 2017), our investigation incorporated a range of ICT tools, including e-mails, online discussion forums, corporate websites, industry-specific websites, widely-used information platforms, sector-focused online portals, mobile applications, social media platforms like Facebook, and web-based surveys. Consequently, we aim to explore the following research question: Q4: What ICT do HoReCa companies offer to consumers in Poland and the UK?

2. Methodology

2.1 *The Conceptual Framework, Research Problem and Hypotheses Development*

The results of previous studies informed the selection of variables and categories for examining HoReCa companies. These studies suggest that in-depth research into the company-customer relationship requires consideration of business processes (Ziemba et al., 2019), methods of consumer interaction (Ziemba & Eisenhardt, 2018), incentives (Eisenhardt, 2020; Eisenhardt, 2019), and ICT (Eisenhardt, 2021; Ziemba et al., 2017) offered by the companies. The literature review supported our decision to identify four distinct research areas, which were aligned with our research questions. These areas are related to HoReCa companies' activities in acquiring consumer knowledge, as depicted in the conceptual model in Figure 1. The research areas and their associated variables provide the conceptual foundation for our research and its subsequent findings.

The research problem of this study is to investigate HoReCa companies' activities towards sourcing consumers' knowledge in Poland and the UK. Thus, the main research question is: What are the HoReCa activities towards sourcing consumers' knowledge? To answer this question, the empirical study focuses on addressing the following four specific questions:

RQ1: Which business processes do HoReCa companies engage consumers in for sourcing their knowledge in Poland and the UK?

To answer RQ1, we followed the PCF (APQC, 2020), and four operational business processes were taken into consideration. The following hypothesis was developed:

H1: There are statistically significant differences in business processes that HoReCa companies engage consumers in, in Poland and the UK.

RQ2: What are the methods of the interaction between consumers and HoReCa companies in Poland and the UK?

To answer RQ2 we used such variables as designing, reviewing, and scoring. The following hypothesis was developed: H2: There are statistically significant differences in the methods of the interaction between consumers and HoReCa companies in Poland and the UK.

RQ3: What incentives do HoReCa companies offer to consumers in Poland and the UK?

To answer RQ3 we used such variables as material reward, monetary compensation, free product testing, complimentary product testing, and bonus points. The following hypothesis was developed: H3: There are statistically significant differences in incentives the HoReCa companies offer to consumers in Poland and the UK.

RQ4: What ICT do HoReCa companies offer to consumer in Poland and the UK?

To answer RQ4 we used such variables as e-mails, online discussion forums, corporate websites, industry-specific websites, widely-used information platforms, sector-focused online portals, mobile applications, Facebook, and web-based surveys. The following hypothesis was developed: H4: There are statistically significant differences in ICT the HoReCa companies offer to consumers in Poland and the UK (Fig. 1).

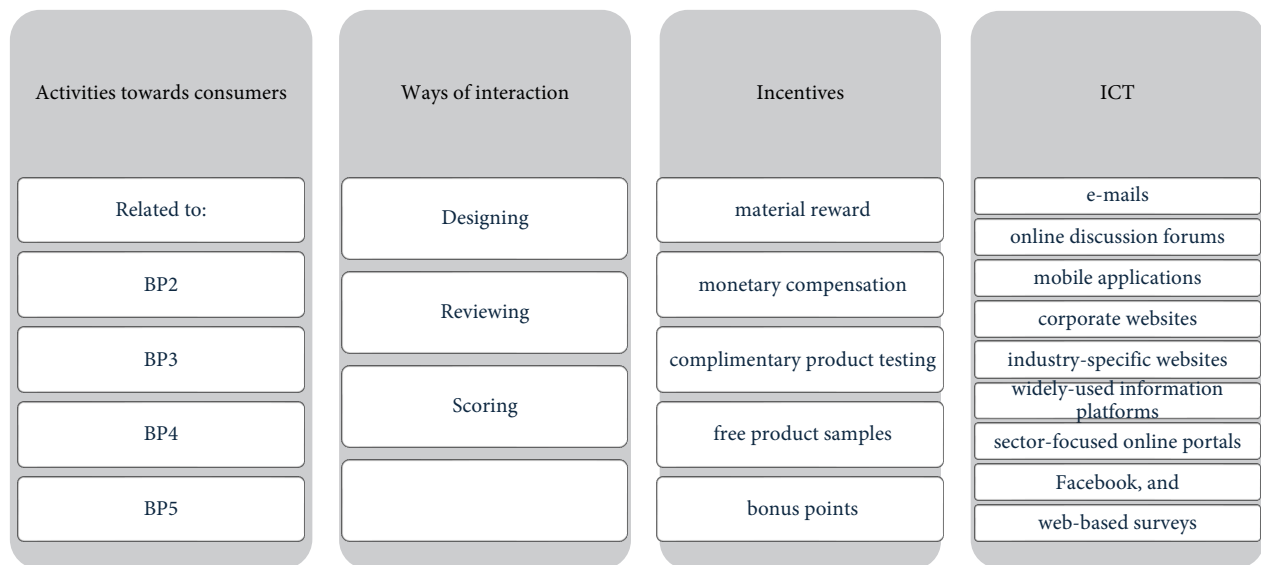


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of HoReCa companies' activities towards sourcing consumers' knowledge.

Source: created by authors.

2.2 Research procedure

This research employs a case study approach, centering on Poland and the UK, to investigate the potential for HoReCa companies to gather consumer knowledge. The study incorporates data from 1053 case studies, capturing diverse companies in terms of size, industry, and consumer engagement initiatives. To construct our methodology, we adhered to Eisenhardt's (1989) framework for building theories from case study research, emphasizing a structured research process:

Research Design: A comprehensive literature review framed research questions, exploring consumer innovation, engagement, and incentives. Multiple bibliographic databases and web resources were scrutinized.

Case Selection: Targeting companies in Poland and the UK actively engaging consumers in the projects aimed at their knowledge.

Instrument Development: A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with six sheets facilitated empirical data documentation, defining terms, objectives, and categorizing observed companies based on PCF business processes, methods of interactions, incentives, and supporting ICT.

Main Research Process took place in 2018 and 2019, and simultaneous observations were conducted in Poland and the UK, with students reporting case studies for ongoing verification. Over 1500 case studies were documented and refined, resulting in a final sample of 1053 cases, categorized by industry using the British industrial classification. The focus narrowed to 66 HoReCa companies (29 in Poland, 37 in the UK).

Statistical Analysis: Microsoft Excel and Statistica packages were employed for a comprehensive analysis, incorporating Chi-Square tests for hypotheses and descriptive statistics for visualizing differences and similarities in consumer engagement between Poland and the UK.

The meticulous methodology ensures robust insights into HoReCa activities related to sourcing consumers' knowledge, contributing to the understanding of cross-cultural dynamics in consumer engagement practices.

3. Research results

3.1. HoReCa companies' activities aimed at consumers

The case studies compiled in Table 1 illustrate the diverse array of initiatives undertaken by HoReCa companies to involve consumers, thus serving as a conduit for acquiring consumer knowledge. Many of these companies involve consumers in feedback-related activities, expecting them to share their opinions on products and services they have used or experienced. Some enterprises offer more engaging projects, allowing consumers to design something, receive rewards, and promote the products they already know. It is noticeable that projects of Poland-based companies are more centered around consumers' opinions and their new ideas, while UK-based projects are slightly more differentiated, also focusing on competition, rewards, and promotional activities.

Table 1. Poland and the UK chosen HoReCa companies and their projects for consumers

Poland HoReCa businesses		UK-based HoReCa businesses	
Name	Description of the project	Name	Description of the project
KFC	GFP - Guests feedback programme for sharing opinions on the service quality	KFC	Get in touch - Guests feedback programme for sharing opinions on the service quality
McDonald's	Surveys on the service and food quality	Mariott Hotel	Guests' feedback for sharing opinions on the hotel's services quality
'Micha' soup restaurant	Consumers can impact on restaurant's menu by sharing opinions on tastes they would like to try in the future	Too Good To Go	A social impact company with a mission to fight food waste and ensure it is available for consumption before it ever needs to reach a landfill waste ground. Consumers download the app and benefit from getting access to reduced priced food.
My muesli flakes [MojeMusli.pl]	Consumers can create their own muesli combinations using 120 ingredients	Real Junk Food Project -cafes in the UK	Pay As You Feel Café. Consumers can donate or volunteer and share ideas and suggestions related to the projects services. Volunteers join WhatsApp groups to help and serve the customers in the café.
Burger bistro 'Pasi-bus'	Consumers can share ideas on the name of the "burger of the month"	Kenco. The coffee company	If consumers have any questions about Kenco's products, can fill in the contact form and suggestions form available on the website or call the customer care line
'Pod Sikorką' restaurant	Consumers can share opinions on the service and food quality	Tea Pigs	For many years, each month, they ran a competition with their stockists to find the stockist of the month who, in the funniest and most engaging way, shares opinions on Tea Pigs' offer.
Delicious tea [Smaczna herbata]	Consumers can create tea following their own preferences	Greggs	Using the mobile app consumers can enjoy tasty rewards on everything such as birthdays and they get a free hot drink for downloading the app.
My Starbucks Idea	Consumers share ideas for improving the café and its products Consumers can:	My Starbucks Idea	Consumers share ideas for improving the café and its products
Wedel – the Poland producer of sweets and chocolates	1. Design graphical elements and labels of the packages 2. In the 'Chocolate lovers club' they receive some discounts and bonus points as well as they can design and personalize some gadgets	Pizza Express	Refer-a-friend programme. The friend registers and the referrer and friend are offered free starters on next visit. The programme is for each friend who orders for the first time.

Source: Own elaboration.

The projects listed in Table 1 are selected examples of initiatives undertaken by HoReCa companies and are analysed in further detail. It is important to note that these projects primarily targeted ordinary consumers, with no requirement for expert knowledge or specific skills. Depending on the scope and objectives of each project, HoReCa companies engaged in activities such as listening to customers, seeking their input, and collaborating with them. Additionally, while some projects had a limited duration, many initiatives are ongoing, allowing consumers to continuously contribute their insights and innovative ideas.

3.2. Business processes the HoReCa companies involve consumers in Poland and the UK

Figure 2 presents the data analysis related to hypothesis H1 and research question RQ1. It shows that HoReCa companies in the UK engage consumers more extensively in their business operations and associated activities compared to those in Poland. Based on the PCF framework, four business processes were considered, i.e., BP 2.0 (Develop and manage products), BP 3.0 (Market and sell products), BP 4.0 (Deliver products), and BP 5.0 (Manage customer service).

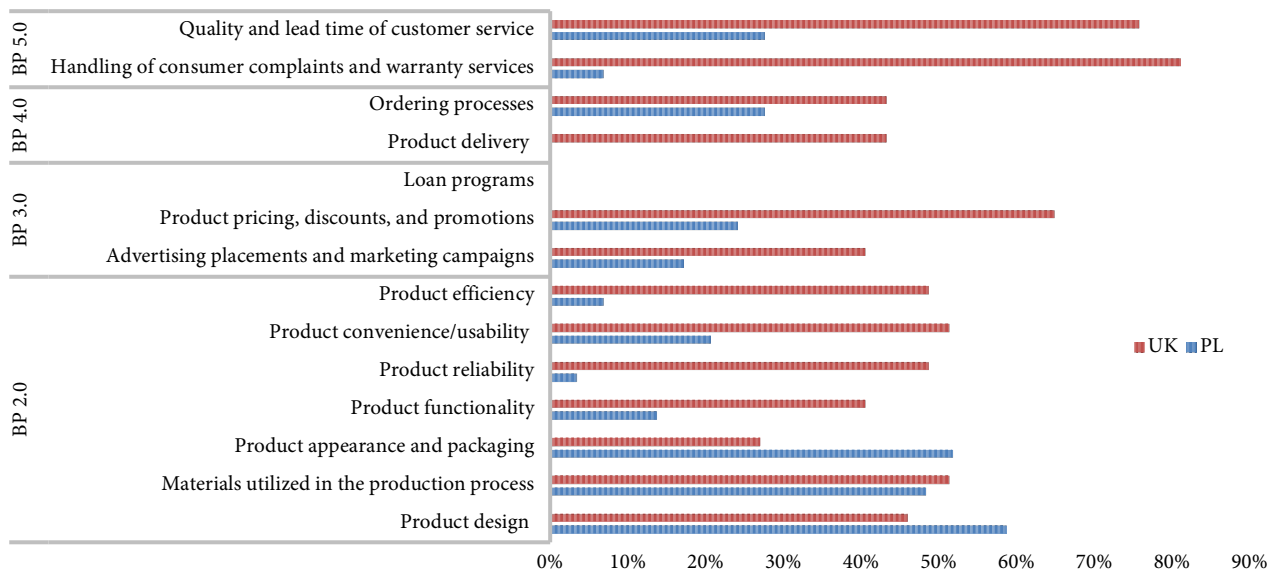


Figure 2. Business processes the HoReCa companies involve consumers - Poland and UK perspective. Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2 shows that the differences are specifically related to the following consumers activities:

- Product functionality (BP 2.0): 40.05% of HoReCa companies in the UK and 13.8% in Poland involve consumers in activities related to product functionalities (a difference of 26.25%). Conversely, 51.7% of Polish and 27% of UK-based HoReCa companies engage consumers in projects focused on product appearance and packaging (a difference of 24.7%).
- Product pricing, discounts, and promotions (BP 3.0): 64.9% of HoReCa companies in the UK and 24.1% in Poland (a difference of 40.8%) involve consumers in a such activities.
- Products delivery (BP 4.0): 43.2% of HoReCa companies in the UK involve consumers in activities related to product delivery, whereas such activities were not observed in Poland, resulting in a difference of 43.2%.
- Handling of consumer complaints and warranty services (BP 5.0): 81.1% of HoReCa companies in the UK provide consumers with the opportunity to engage, while only 6.9% of HoReCa companies in Poland offer this possibility. The disparity is substantial, amounting to 74.2%. Likewise, Quality and lead time of customer service (BP 5.0) is provided by 75.7% of HoReCa companies in the UK, compared to just 27.6% in Poland, representing a difference of 48.1%.

Generally, the results of frequency procedures presented in Figure 2 show major differences between Poland and UK-based HoReCa companies. Thus, the Chi-Square test was applied to examine these differences. The results for testing hypothesis H1 are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Differences in business processes the HoReCa companies engage consumers in Poland and the UK.

Parameters	BP 2.0	BP 3.0	BP 4.0	BP 5.0
Chi2	11.957	11.617	13.352	48.658
p-value	0.00055	0.0007	0.0003	< 0.00001

Source: Own elaboration.

As shown in Table 2, the p-value is lower than 0.05 for all four business processes, i.e., BP 2.0 (Develop and manage products), BP 3.0 (Market and sell products), BP 4.0 (Deliver products), and BP 5.0 (Manage customer service). This confirms that there are statistically significant differences in business processes the HoReCa engage consumers in Poland and the UK. Thus, hypothesis H1 is supported in our study.

3.3. The methods of interaction between consumers and HoReCa companies

To test hypothesis H2 and address research question RQ2, the data analysis presented in this section indicates that HoReCa companies in the UK more frequently offer scoring and reviewing as means of interaction compared to their counterparts in Poland (Figure 3).

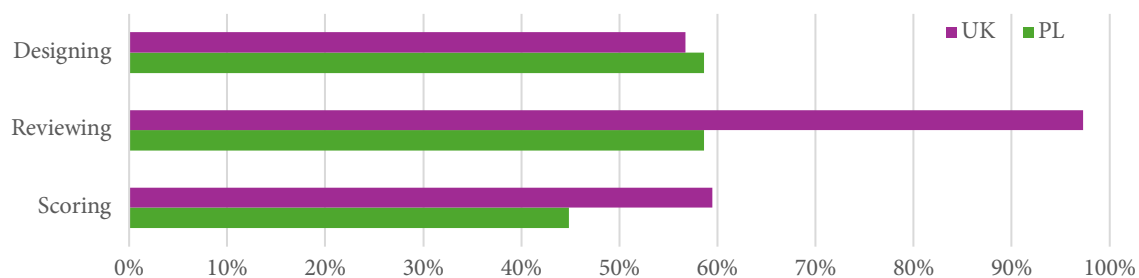


Figure 3. Methods of interaction between consumers and HoReCa in Poland and the UK.

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 3 shows that 97.3% of UK-based HoReCa companies provide reviewing, compared to 58.6% in Poland, representing a difference of 38.7%. Additionally, 59.5% of UK-based HoReCa companies offer scoring, while 44.8% of Poland-based companies do the same. The availability of designing services is comparable between HoReCa companies in both countries.

For testing hypothesis H2 the Chi-Square test was used. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Chi-Square test results on differences in the methods of the interaction between consumers and HoReCa companies in Poland and the UK.

Parameters	Scoring	Reviewing	Designing
Chi2	1.397	15.375	0.023
p-value	0.237	<0.05	0.879

Source: Own elaboration.

As indicated in Table 3, the p-value is below 0.05 only for Reviewing. This indicates statistically significant differences in this method of interaction between HoReCa companies based in Poland and the UK. The test does not reveal any significant differences in the case of the remaining two methods of interaction, namely Scoring and Designing. In summary, hypothesis H2 is partially supported in our study.

3.4. Comparative analysis of incentives offered by HoReCa companies in Poland and the UK

To assess the third hypothesis H3 and investigate the third research question RQ3 frequency procedures were developed. Figure 4 unveils that HoReCa companies in the UK offer incentives to a greater extent than their counterparts in Poland. The most notable disparities are evident in:

- Free product samples: employed by 59.5% of HoReCa companies in the UK compared to only 20.7% in Poland (a difference of 38.8%).
- Bonus points: utilized by 32.5% of HoReCa companies in the UK versus only 13.8% in Poland (a difference of 18.6%).
- Monetary compensation: employed by 27% of HoReCa companies in the UK compared to just 10.3% in Poland (a difference of 16.7%).

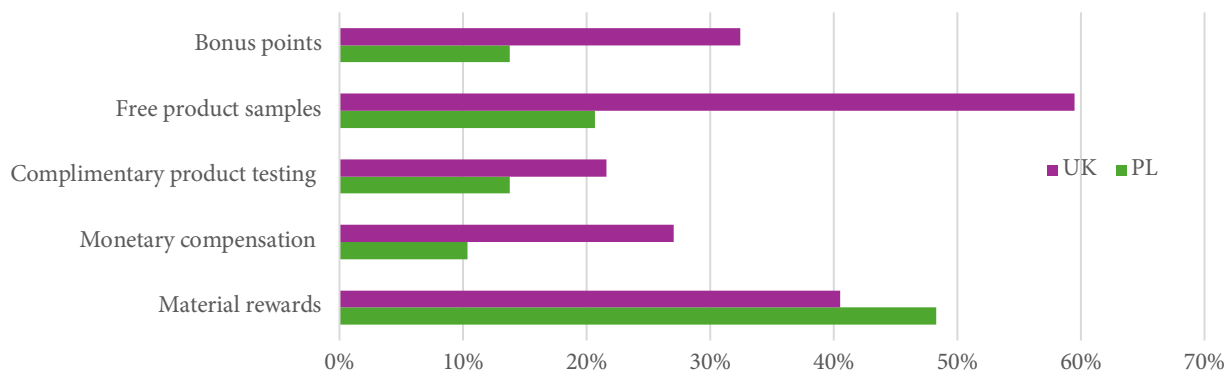


Figure 4. The incentives the HoReCa companies offer to consumers.

Source: created by authors.

The results of the Chi-Square test for testing hypothesis H3, as presented in Table 4, indicate minor differences in the incentives offered by HoReCa companies to consumers in Poland and the UK.

Table 4. Chi-Square test results on differences in the incentives offered in Poland and the UK.

Parameters	Material reward	Monetary compensation	Complimentary product testing	Free product samples	Bonus points
Chi2	0.3949	2.8604	0.6698	10.0044	3.0755
p-value	0.530	0.091	0.413	0.002	0.079

Source: Own elaboration.

As shown, the p-value is below 0.05 for only one incentive, namely free product samples, indicating statistically significant differences for this variable. The test does not reveal any significant differences in the case of the four remaining incentives, including bonus points, complimentary product testing, monetary compensation, and material rewards. Therefore, hypothesis H3 is rejected.

3.5. ICT the HoReCa offer to consumers in Poland and the UK

To test hypothesis H4 and to answer the RQ4, the data analysis using frequency procedures is presented in Figure 5.

As shown in Figure 5, HoReCa companies in the UK offer ICT to a greater extent than those in Poland. The only exception is the corporate website, which is more frequently offered by HoReCa companies in Poland. The most significant differences are observed for:

- Widely-used information platforms: offered by 48.6% of HoReCa companies in the UK and by 10.3% in Poland (a difference of 38.3%).
- Online discussion forums: provided by 54.1% of HoReCa companies in the UK and by 17.2% in Poland (a difference of 36.9%).

- E-mails: available from 83.8% of HoReCa companies in the UK and from 48.3% in Poland (a difference of 35.5%).
- Mobile applications: offered by 62.2% of HoReCa companies in the UK and by 31% in Poland (a difference of 31.2%).

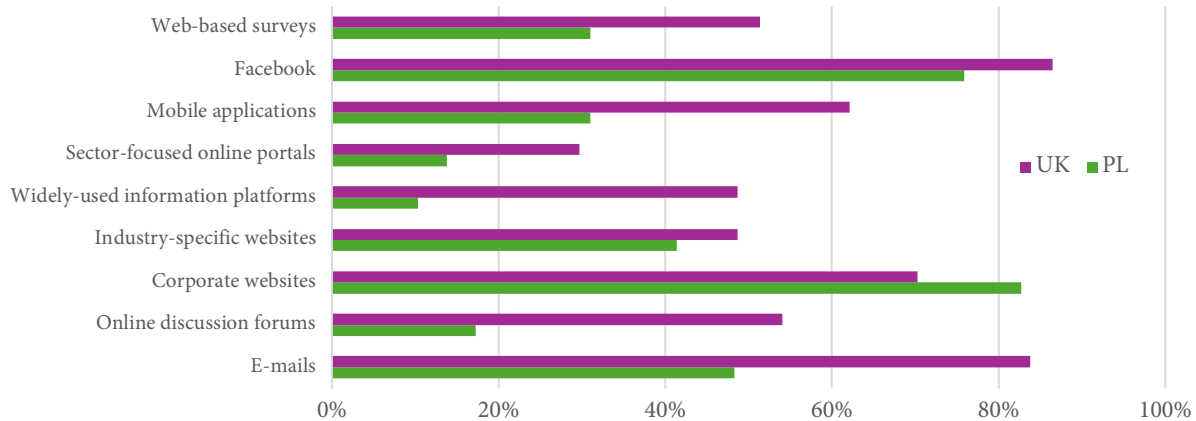


Figure 5. ICT the HoReCa offer to consumers in Poland and the UK.

Source: created by authors.

The results of the Chi-Square test for testing hypothesis H4 are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Chi-Square test results on differences in ICT offered in Poland and the UK.

Parameters	E-mail	Online discussion forum	Corporate website	Industry-specific website	Widely-used information platforms	Sector-focused online portals	Mobile applications	Facebook	Web-based surveys
Chi2	9.449	9.363	1.381	0.347	10.995	2.351	6.307	1.234	2.747
p-value	0.002	0.002	0.240	0.556	0.001	0.125	0.012	0.267	0.097

Source: Own elaboration.

As show in Table 5, the p-value is lower than 0.05 for four ICT, i.e., e-mails, online discussion forums, widely used information platforms, and mobile applications, suggesting that statistically significant differences are observed. The test does not reveal significant differences for the remaining five ICT. In summary, hypothesis H4 is partially supported by the findings of this study.

4. Discussion

The results obtained show the cross-national differences in consumer engagement in the HoReCa sector in Poland and the UK. The results are spited into four categories, i.e. business processes, methods of interaction with consumers, incentives, and ICT offered by the companies.

Referencing to our results on business processes, HoReCa companies can engage consumers in different business processes and prioritize them. It is evident that certain processes, such as "Quality and lead time of customer service" (75.7% in the UK vs. 27.6% in Poland) and "Handling of consumer complaints and warranty services" (81.1% in Poland vs. 6.9% in the UK), are approached differently in these two countries, suggesting distinct national preferences or market demands. Similarly, noticeable differences are seen in other categories like "Product pricing, discounts, and promotions" and "Product efficiency", "Product convenience/reliability", "Product functionality", and "Product reliability" where UK companies show higher engagement rates compared to their Polish counterparts. This data highlights the cultural and operational differences between the two markets, providing valuable insights into how consumer engagement strategies are tailored differently in Poland and the UK. One notable observation is the complete absence of engagement in certain areas, such as "Product delivery"

(showing 0% for Poland). In contrast, UK companies show 43.2% engagement. For "Loan programs" (both) indicate that this is not area of focus or relevance for HoReCa companies in their consumer knowledge acquisition strategies regardless the country, suggesting this is not a strategic area for either market, potentially due to different business models or consumer expectations within the HoReCa sector.

Another interesting point is the relative emphasis on "Product design" and "Materials utilized in the production process". Polish companies place a greater emphasis on "Product design" (58.6% for Poland vs. 45.9% for the UK) suggesting a stronger focus on product development and quality at the production level. This could reflect a cultural preference in Poland for more bespoke, customized offerings or a competitive strategy focusing on product differentiation in the HoReCa sector. These differences underline how companies in different markets may adopt unique approaches and prioritize different aspects of their operations to engage consumers effectively and adapt to local market conditions.

Referencing to the results on consumer engagement through three modes: designing, reviewing, and scoring one can find "Reviewing" as a dominant mode in the UK, with 97.3% of consumers participating, compared to 58.6% in Poland. This suggests that UK consumers are highly active in providing feedback, opinions, and evaluations of products and services. HoReCa companies in the UK should prioritize channels and platforms that facilitate consumer reviews, such as online feedback forms, review websites, and social media pages.

What is more, in Poland, the levels of engagement across the three modes (designing at 58.6%, reviewing at 58.6%, and scoring at 44.8%) are more balanced. This suggests that Polish consumers are moderately engaged in all types of consumer-company interactions.

Referencing to the results on incentives UK consumers are more responsive to free product samples (59.5%) and bonus points (32.4%), while Polish consumers show a stronger preference for material rewards (48.3%). This suggests that UK consumers may be more engaged by incentives that allow them to experience or try new products (which aligns with a desire for knowledge and experience), while Polish consumers are motivated by tangible goods or direct rewards, potentially indicating a stronger preference for certainty and tangible value in their transactions. To practically engage consumers in these two markets, companies need to align their incentives with these preferences. In the UK, marketing efforts should emphasize opportunities for consumers to receive free samples and earn points through loyalty programs, catering to consumers who find value in exploration and experiential engagement (as a form of extrinsic motivation). In contrast, in Poland, companies should promote material rewards more prominently, ensuring that these rewards are visible and appealing to drive consumer engagement.

For ICT, the results show a strong preference among UK consumers for Facebook (86.5%) and emails (83.8%) as primary channels for engagement, while Polish consumers favor Corporate websites (82.8%) and also Facebook (75.9%). These insights suggest that companies should prioritize these platforms for their communication and engagement strategies, ensuring they are utilized effectively to connect with and motivate consumers. What is more, the high usage of corporate websites in Poland (82.8%) compared to the UK (70.3%) suggests that Polish consumers may trust or rely more on official channels for information. Therefore, companies should maintain updated, engaging, and transparent websites in Poland. In the UK, where web-based surveys are more popular (51.4% vs. 31.0% in Poland), companies could employ surveys to gather consumer feedback, opinions, and ideas to foster engagement and co-creation.

Conclusions

Following the previously presented results, the main findings are summarised in Table 6. The results from the Chi-Square test confirm statistically significant differences between Poland and UK HoReCa companies in terms of the consumers engagement.

Table 6. Summary of Research Hypotheses.

Hypotheses	Result
H1: There are statistically significant differences in business processes that HoReCa companies engage consumers in, in Poland and the UK	Supported
H2: There are statistically significant differences in the methods of the interaction between consumers and HoReCa companies in Poland and the UK	Partially supported
H3: There are statistically significant differences in incentives the HoReCa companies offer to consumers in Poland and the UK	Rejected
H4: There are statistically significant differences in ICT the HoReCa companies offer to consumers in Poland and the UK	Supported

Source: Own elaboration.

Referencing Table 6, the findings reveal important insights into how HoReCa companies engage with consumers in Poland and the UK, reflecting differences in business processes, interaction methods, and the use of ICT tools, while challenging assumptions about incentive structures. The most important are:

- Differences in Business Processes. The study supports Hypothesis 1, confirming that there are statistically significant differences in the business processes through which HoReCa companies engage consumers in the UK and Poland. In the UK, consumer engagement is primarily driven by reviewing, suggesting a focus on feedback and opinion-sharing. In contrast, Polish consumers exhibit a more balanced approach across various engagement modes, such as designing, reviewing, and scoring, highlighting diverse engagement processes.

- Differences in Interaction Methods. Hypothesis 2 is partially supported, indicating some significant differences in the ways consumers interact with HoReCa companies between the two countries. While the UK shows a strong preference for feedback through reviews, Polish consumers engage more evenly across multiple interaction modes. This suggests that UK companies may benefit from enhancing review platforms, whereas Polish companies should offer a broader range of engagement opportunities.

- Incentives Offered to Consumers. Hypothesis 3 is rejected, indicating that there are no statistically significant differences in the incentives offered by HoReCa companies in Poland and the UK. This finding suggests that both markets employ similar extrinsic incentive strategies, such as material rewards, monetary compensation, free product samples, and bonus points, without major differentiation. Companies in both countries may need to rethink their incentive strategies to better align with local consumer motivations.

- Differences in ICT Tools Offered. Hypothesis 4 is supported, confirming significant differences in the use of ICT tools offered by HoReCa companies in the UK and Poland. The UK shows higher engagement with social media platforms, corporate websites, and web-based surveys, reflecting a more digital-focused strategy. Meanwhile, Poland demonstrates a more varied use of ICT tools, with significant engagement through corporate websites and e-mails. This suggests that HoReCa companies in the UK should continue to invest in digital platforms, while those in Poland should maintain a diverse range of ICT tools to support consumer engagement.

The results obtained show the cross-national differences in consumer engagement in the HoReCa sector in Poland and the UK. The results led us to provide the following implications.

Companies should provide diverse opportunities for engagement, such as platforms for designing products, scoring mechanisms like star ratings, and forums for reviews and discussions. The findings align with the literature on consumer engagement modes, where companies seek active consumer participation to innovate and improve their offerings (Liu et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2016; Qiao et al., 2018). The emphasis on reviewing, scoring, and designing supports the proactive approach identified by Liu et al. (2019), in which companies actively solicit feedback and ideas from consumers.

The modes of interaction reflect the social dynamics of consumer participation in the innovation and feedback processes which led to two main social implications. Firstly, the high engagement in reviewing in the UK indicates a robust culture of feedback and opinion-sharing. This could suggest that UK consumers feel more empowered or are more accustomed to voicing their opinions about products and services. It also points to a potential social norm where consumer feedback is expected and valued, contributing to a more transparent and interactive relationship between companies and consumers. Our results support the report of consumers growing power and indicate that the consumer empowerment is still a crucial issue (Deloitte, 2014). Secondly, the balanced engagement across all modes in Poland suggests a more collaborative approach, where consumers are equally willing to participate in various stages of the product or service lifecycle—from design to scoring. This could reflect a consumer culture that values diverse forms of contribution, which companies can leverage to foster a sense of community and involvement. We noticed that the differences between Poland and the UK align with Fendrejewska's (2017) deliberations. She presented several indexes which showed that Poland is seen as a hierarchical society much more than the UK. Moreover, the UK is a more individualistic nation and a consumer is seen as “an autonomous entity with a distinctive set of attributes, qualities or processes”. All those characteristics align with our results as individuals from Poland and the UK differ significantly in terms of their willingness to share knowledge and take part in business-consumer relationships, to be a source of knowledge for companies and their expectations of the incentives.

The results on incentives suggest that different types of extrinsic incentives might impact social engagement behaviours differently in each country, reflecting cultural and social norms. The UK's preference for free samples and bonus points may indicate a consumer culture that values experimentation and sharing experiences. Consumers who receive samples might share their feedback and experiences more freely, promoting social engagement and word-of-mouth marketing. Our results are in line with Bhandari's and Rodgers's (2019) who suggest that brand feedback had a simultaneous positive and negative effect on purchase intentions, whereby brand trust mediated the positive effect and conclude that by describing mechanisms through which brand feedback occurs to influence brand outcomes. In Poland, a higher preference for material rewards might reflect a consumer culture that values certainty and tangible benefits over experimentation. This could imply that social dynamics around product engagement are less driven by shared experiences or peer influence and more by personal gain or visible status markers.

The use of ICT tools reflects social dynamics and behaviours in how consumers interact with brands and companies. The strong preference for social media, particularly Facebook, suggests that both Polish and UK consumers value platforms that allow for community interaction and social sharing. This implies that consumers in both countries are open to engaging with brands in a social and public context, where their interactions can be visible to others, potentially driving peer influence and community building. This approach was confirmed by Wang et al. (2021), who provided insights into how social media brand communities can be leveraged as a strategic tool for achieving business value. The preference for emails and corporate websites, especially in Poland, might indicate a desire for more controlled, direct, and potentially private communication channels, reflecting a more cautious approach to engagement. Our results are consistent with Sołek-Borowska (2018), whose research involving 153 Polish SMEs revealed that email is the most popular tool, used by 88% of the surveyed

entities. Conversely, the UK's openness to web-based surveys and online discussion forums suggests a greater willingness to share opinions and engage in public dialogue. The results we received confirm Andrijauskiene and Dumciuvienė's (2018) observations that the UK is seen to be more innovative than Poland.

Our research comprehensively analyses companies' activities towards sourcing consumers' knowledge in the HoReCa sector. The findings contribute to managerial aspects as well, guiding businesses in optimizing their consumer engagement and knowledge utilization strategies.

For managers in the HoReCa sector, understanding the distinct consumer motivations and preferences is crucial for developing effective engagement strategies. Managers need to carefully design incentive programs that align with the cultural and motivational differences of consumers in these markets. In the UK, for instance, offering a range of experiential incentives (like free samples or product testing) may appeal to consumers who value novelty and exploration, which could also lead to higher consumer advocacy and retention. Meanwhile, in Poland, more traditional incentives like material rewards should be the focal point, as they align with the prevalent consumer desire for concrete benefits. What is more, our results suggest that while both markets respond to extrinsic motivators, the type of motivator that resonates most can differ significantly. Managers must align their communication strategies with these insights. In the UK, campaigns should stress the fun and discovery aspects of receiving samples or accumulating points, framing these incentives in terms of enjoyment and learning. In Poland, however, the focus should be on the immediate and tangible benefits of participating in loyalty programs or promotional activities, possibly highlighting material rewards as a means to secure consumer loyalty.

Referencing to ICT and communication channels, understanding these preferences is crucial for managers aiming to enhance consumer engagement through digital platforms. Thus, managers need to recognize that different digital tools resonate differently across markets. In the UK, focusing on social media strategies (primarily Facebook) and integrating web-based surveys can help foster engagement by leveraging the public nature of these platforms and the willingness of consumers to provide input. In Poland, companies should emphasize their presence on corporate websites and email marketing campaigns to build trust and ensure a direct line of communication. To fully utilize ICT for consumer engagement, managers should foster an environment where consumers feel empowered to participate in the innovation process. This could involve using Facebook and other social media channels to solicit ideas, feedback, and participation in product development or using corporate websites and emails for more formal feedback and customer relationship management.

For managers in the HoReCa sector, insights based on modes of interaction are crucial for shaping effective engagement strategies. In the UK, their focus can be on enhancing review mechanisms, as our results emphasize high engagement in reviewing. Thus, managers in the UK should improve platforms for consumer feedback, making it easier for consumers to share their opinions. Encouraging reviews can help companies gather valuable insights for improving products and services while building a transparent, consumer-focused brand image.

In contrast, the need for diversified engagement methods in Poland was confirmed. Therefore, managers in Poland should offer a range of engagement options to cater to the balanced interest in different modes of interaction. For example, creating opportunities for co-design initiatives (like product design contests), implementing scoring systems for feedback, and facilitating review platforms can help maximize consumer involvement and satisfaction.

In summary, for HoReCa sector managers, understanding consumer engagement preferences is key. Particularly, UK focus shall emphasize review mechanisms to leverage high consumer engagement in providing feedback. Enhance platforms for reviews to gather insights, improve offerings, and build a transparent, consumer-focused brand image whereas Poland focus can be towards implementation of diverse engagement methods to cater to a balanced interest in different interaction modes.

Provide opportunities for co-design (e.g., product design contests), scoring systems, and review platforms to maximize consumer participation and satisfaction.

By aligning strategies with these preferences, managers can foster deeper consumer involvement and drive innovation.

The cultural differences are crucial for that study. We are aware that we have only mentioned them. The main point was to focus on knowledge-related analyses. Thus, additional in-depth studies are needed on cultural differences and how these differences impact the main research problem which sourcing consumers' knowledge.

Furthermore, the research embraced two sets, i.e., Poland and UK-based HoReCa companies which were selected on the basis of the case studies observation. We are aware that this selection may impact the results. It is advisable to extend further research to other sectors and a bigger number of companies. By doing so the validity and reliability of the further research and results can be strengthened.

The analyses we performed are aimed at the pre-pandemic time. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some projects aimed at consumer knowledge were opened or closed for various reasons. That opens new possibilities for our research and encourages us to perform the next step of the research to be able to compare the results for two periods of time, i.e. pre- and after-pandemic.

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