Factors controlling consumer behaviour in frontier towns

Katarzyna Kulczyńska

Abstract. This article focuses on the most important factors shaping the spatial behaviour of transborder consumers in Ślubice and Frankfurt on the Oder, towns split by a state border. The factors are highly diversified and differ in the spatial range of influence. They can be divided into seven groups, viz. geographical, political-administrative, legal-normative, economic, demographic, psycho-social and cultural, and the foreign-language information layout of a town. But it is economic factors, like the level of prices in the given country or the currency exchange rate, that have the strongest effect on the movement of inhabitants and the intensity of transborder contacts between the two frontier towns.

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1. Introduction

Frontier towns are specific 'integration laboratories' resulting from the transformation of European borders in the 1990s. In localities neighbouring across a state border, the increase in border permeability has brought differences between their socioeconomic systems to prominence. Those differences are especially readily visible in the split towns of Central and Eastern Europe, e.g., Frankfurt on the Oder – Słubice in the Polish-German borderland.

There was an upsurge of interest in split towns at the start of the 1990s when new economic mechanisms had been introduced in Poland while Central-Eastern Europe was going through political changes (Matykowski et al., 1998). Several works were published at that time which addressed the split-towns problem in a multi-aspect approach, e.g., Rutowska (1996), Kratke (1996), Matykowski and Schaefer (1996), jasiński-Quast and Stoklosa (2000), Waack (2004), Rusek and Werpachowski (2007), Jańczak (2009b), or Kulczyńska et al. (2011). Those publications can be treated as registers of changes taking place in selected split towns, especially of their historical, demographic, socio-cultural, infrastructural, and spatial aspects.

Split towns and their operation have also been a subject of many analyses focusing on general mechanisms of cooperation and competition, or cooperation and conflict. It is a large group of publications including, e.g., Loboda and Ciok (1995), Kaczmarek (1999), Brol (2004), Lundén (2007, 2008), Kulczyńska, Matykowski, 2011; Lisiecki, 2009; Ciok et al. (2008), Ładysz (2008), Bierwiaczonek, 2008; Matykowski, Kulczyńska, 2006, 2011a); (f) socio-cultural changes (Pfeiffer, 2006, 2011); (g) political changes and mechanisms of cooperation and competition, or political changes and mechanisms resulting from the transformation of European borders (Matykowski et al., 1998). Several publications can be treated as registers of changes taking place in selected split towns, especially of their historical, demographic, socio-cultural, infrastructural, and spatial aspects.

The aim of this article is to characterise factors determining consumer behaviour in the frontier urban complex of Słubice-Frankfurt on the Oder. The characterisation rests on statistical data on border traffic supplied by the Border Guard Headquarters in Warsaw as well as the statistical information on the population number obtained in the town and statistical offices. The remaining data come from a survey research conducted in the two frontier towns.

2. Movements of the inhabitants of the split towns

The analysis of border traffic covers the years 1994-2007. However, the 2007 statistics are not complete due to Poland’s inclusion into the Schengen Area (21 December 2007) and the resultant elimination of internal border controls in accordance with Regulation (EC) No. 562/2006 of the European Parliament and Council of 15 March 2006 (Official Gazette L 105 of 13 April 2006), setting up a Community code regulating the flow of people across borders (the Schengen Border Code).

At the Słubice-Frankfurt border crossing one can observe a marked disproportion in border traffic intensity: there are decidedly many more foreigners crossing the state border into Poland than Poles going to Germany. The number is double, both in pedestrian and wheeled traffic (passenger cars) (cf. Table 1).

The analysis of the intensity of pedestrian and wheeled border traffic also leads to the conclusion that it dwindled substantially over the study period, which is especially readily visible in pedestrian

Source: Own compilation on the basis of statistical data of the Border Guard Headquarters in Warsaw.
traffic. The number of foreigners crossing the border to Poland decreased from 5,962,583 in 1995 to 1,453,436 in 2007, i.e. by 75.62%. The drop proceeded steadily throughout the entire period, although in the years 2004-2006 a slight increase was recorded. The pedestrian traffic of Poles to Germany declined not only of border crossing to 1,216,397, i.e. by 45.57%, although in 2001 and 2007 there was a slight increase in the number of crossings (cf. Table 1). An analysis of border traffic intensity can also be made with reference to the year and the week. During the twelve months of the year, the greatest number of consumers was recorded from April to August and in December, and during the seven days of the week, definitely at weekends.

The chief purpose of consumer traffic across the state border is the satisfaction of needs concerning broadly understood services in the neighbour-town (country). The German buyer in Ślubice makes use primarily of retailing services, which he seeks at the local bazaars, supermarkets, and petrol stations; he is also ready to seek food, cosmetic, dental, and entertainment services (night clubs). Thus, the German buyer tends to penetrate those parts of the town in which such services are concentrated, viz. Wojska Polskiego, Kościuszki, Młodzieży Polskiej, and Sportowa streets (cf. Kulczyńska, 2008). In turn, the Polish customer in Frankfurt on the Oder is only interested in what German supermarkets and shopping centres have to offer. Hence the mainstream of consumers from Poland tends to concentrate in Karl-Marx-Strasse with its Der Oderturn and Lenné Passagen shopping centres. Another shopping mall which the Polish consumers visit in great numbers is Spitzkrug-Multi-Center situated in Spitzkrugring Street. and the Real hypermarket in Messering Str. (cf. Kulczyńska, 2008). In turn, the Polish customer in Frankfurt on the Oder is only interested in what German supermarkets and shopping centres have to offer. Hence the mainstream of consumers from Poland tends to concentrate in Karl-Marx-Strasse with its Der Oderturn and Lenné Passagen shopping centres. Another shopping mall which the Polish consumers visit in great numbers is Spitzkrug-Multi-Center situated in Spitzkrugring Street. and the Real hypermarket in Messering Str. (cf. Fig. 1).

3. Factors shaping the behaviour of transborder consumers

The behaviour of transborder consumers is determined by several factors differing in their spatial range of influence. A necessary condition for border traffic to occur is the existence of transborder infrastructure, or border crossings (a geographical factor), while the intensity of cross-border traffic depends on the permeability of the state border (a political-administrative factor), differences in wages and prices in the two countries, and currency exchange rates (economic factors). Of no less importance are demographic, legal-normative, psycho-social, and cultural factors, as well as a town's foreign-language information layout facilitating everyday movement of transborder consumers in its space, especially public space.

3.1. Geographical factors

Until the end of the 1980s, Ślubice and Frankfurt on the Oder were peripheral areas in the settlement systems of the respective states. It was only after the change in international orientation and in the geopolitical situation in Europe (Chojnicki, 1999) that the geographical location of those towns has become an asset. They are separated by a natural barrier, viz. the Oder river, along which runs the state border established in 1945. Although the river is second in length in Poland, the physical distance dividing the two towns is a mere 300 m. This short distance has a beneficial effect on the intensity of transborder contacts, the more so as the towns are not connected by a common municipal transport system.

The most important element is the transborder infrastructure making transborder contacts possible, and its presence is the first and necessary condition of spatial movements of the inhabitants of frontier towns (Szlą, 2001). Ślubice and Frankfurt on the Oder are linked by two types of border crossing: a road and a railway one. Road traffic of transborder customers moves across a border bridge, which only carries pedestrians and passenger cars up to 3.5 t in weight. Cars exceeding the permitted tonnage cross the border at Świecko (some 8 km from the Ślubice-Frankfurt crossing).

3.2. Political-administrative factors

The border is ascribed an especially significant role in shaping buyer behaviour because its character and functions determine mutual links between areas situated along its two sides. The basic function of the border in the contemporary political-territorial system is that of a spatial barrier of a varying degree of formality and permeability, which we can observe in Europe today (cf. Rykiel, 1990). The permeability of a state border has two aspects: (a) physical-technical, and (b) legal-political (Chojnicki, 1998). The physical-technical aspect involves the number and location of border crossings, the range of border controls, and the layout and quality of the transport network. The legal-political aspect concerns legal regulations defining the character and volume of transborder traffic and exchange (e.g. customs tariffs or rules of currency exchange and circulation).

The state border changes its permeability and can transform from a filtering border to an open one facilitating a wide range of social and economic contacts. The weakening role of the state border as a spatial barrier is a result of limitations on the sovereignty of states and an evolution due to post-modern changes that can mostly be found in Western European countries (Chojnicki, 1999). Also the character of the Polish state borders changed in the early 1990s as a result of the country's systemic transformation, new bilateral regulations, accession to the EU, and joining the Schengen Area. One can say, therefore, that the transformation of the borders in the 1990s created a situation facilitating (re)integration of frontier towns (including split towns), and their geographical location has become their greatest asset (Jaracz, 2009a).

Once those towns were uniform organisms which were then divided by a new state border. The division of towns on the western border was a consequence of decisions made at the Potsdam Conference in 1945. They involved a westward shift not only of the border of Poland, but also of the centuries-old Polish-German ethnic border.

Thus, towns so far functionally interdependent were cut by a state border and became units independent in legal-administrative terms because lying in different states. Hence the necessity of making the new urban organisms self-reliant.
The situation was much worse for those towns that used to be on one of the districts of the original city before the split, e.g. Słubice, a right-bank quarter of Frankfurt on the Oder, known at that time as Dammvorstadt. In Słubice there were only two schools coming from the start of the 20th century (Huttenschule in the south-western part, dating back to the 19th century. The only investment of any importance was a stadium built in the years 1919-1926 together with the accompanying infrastructure, viz. a swimming pool and a recreational/park area (cf. Rutowska, 1996).

In the postwar years, one can distinguish several periods in the coexistence of the two parts of frontier towns in which the border changed its character, although until the end of the 1980s it was mostly a barrier of low permeability (cf. Ciok, 1992). It was only the late 1980s and early '90s that saw the start of significant changes following from several favourable legal regulations as well as the signing of new treaties laying the foundations for good neighbourhood which influenced the nature of contacts and the intensity of transborder cooperation. The next stage on the road to the integration of the two towns was Poland’s accession to the European Union (1 May 2004), but even more importantly, its joining the Schengen Area (21 December 2007), which involved a marked weakening of the border in its role of a spatial barrier by the elimination of passport control and a great reduction of tariff barriers.

3.3. Legal-normative factors

What affect the spatial behaviour of inhabitants of frontier towns are customs regulations that are a consequence of political changes and the altered conditions of operation of the economy. Today Germany and Poland, as EU members, are in a customs union with other EU states (within the Community, goods imported to and exported from Poland are duty-free). EU citizens travelling in the European Union may cross borders carrying 800 cigarettes, 10 l of spirits, 20 l of wine of higher alcoholic content, 90 l of regular wine, and 110 l of fuel (1).

This liberalisation of customs rules brought about the demise of the profession known popularly as a ‘cross-border ant’, which involved multiple crossings of the border during the day to carry goods, e.g., cigarettes to Germany or alcohol to Poland, without exceeding the statutory limits on the quantity of articles transported on a single occasion. Routine controls by the border service showed that people engaged in this sort of trade could transport to Germany up to 15 cartons of cigarettes a day, and to Poland, up to 15 half-litre bottles of brand-name alcohol in demand there, while the law provided that one could cross the border with only 1 carton of cigarettes and 0.5 l of alcohol at a time.

Poland’s accession to the European Union also put an end to the sale of German products to Germans. The profitability of this transaction consisted in Polish citizens buying household appliances or radio or TV sets in Germany, obtaining a VAT refund for them, and selling the goods to Germans at lower prices than in German shops. This was a legal transfer, because neither the German nor the Polish law forbade it.

With time, the changing conditions of operation of the economy eliminated some forms of trade in the Polish-German borderland. This was due to a change in customs regulations which allowed German citizens to carry much more goods (within the Community) than in the 1990s.

3.4. Economic factors

Of particular importance seem to be transborder differences in wages and prices, especially if reinforced by currency exchange rates, since this generates streams of people, goods and money, and stimulates the formation of a local transborder market. Its characteristic is that labour force and money goes in both directions, although with varying intensity (cf. Fig. 2).

There is a decided predominance of the flow of people and money to Słubice, and of goods and services to Frankfurt on the Oder. Especially significant is the level of prices in the given country, since it makes the money flow what it is. While prices tend to gradually level out on the two sides of the border, one can still observe some shopping-motivated cross-border traffic (cf. Table 2). It is still profitable for Germans to buy tobacco products in Słubice (Poland). As follows from a research conducted in June 2011, a packet of 20 Marlboro Light cigarettes cost 11.80 zlotys in Poland. In Germany, the same and goods go in both directions, although with varying intensity (cf. Fig. 2).

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| Table 2. A comparison of prices of some goods in Słubice and Frankfurt on the Oder. |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                | A               | B               | C               | D               |
| sugar          | 1 kg            | 3.49            | 0.65            | 2.60            |
| petrol         | 11              | 5.18            | 1.55            | 6.42            |
| diesel oil     | 11              | 5.09            | 1.42            | 5.98            |
| cigarettes, Marlboro Light | 20 pieces | 11.80            | 4.90            | 20.30          |
| cigarettes, L&M light | 20 pieces | 10.50            | 4.50            | 18.60          |
| pork loin, boneless | 1,000 g        | 20.81            | 7.49            | 31.02          |
| minced pork   | 1,000 g         | 9.98            | 3.98            | 16.48          |
| Bayer aspirin plus C | 10 tablets | 16.30            | 5.53            | 22.90          |
| Dove body balm | 400 ml          | 20.99            | 2.95            | 12.22          |
| Lenor fabric softener | 11       | 8.99            | 1.55            | 6.42           |

Explanation: *1 euro = 4.1417 zlotys (average NBP exchange rate of 18 Aug. 2011); A – article/good; B – weight/amount; C – Słubice Poland price in zlotys; D – Frankfurt on the Oder (Germany); a – price in euros; b – price in zlotys.

Source: Own compilation on the basis of a Słubice-Frankfurt/O. survey research, June-August 2011.
packet of cigarettes cost €4.90, which, converted at an average NBP exchange rate of 18 August 2011 (€1 = 4.417 zlotys) gives the amount of 20.30 zlotys. Such a big difference in the price of cigarettes explains the presence of the German customer in Słubice.

Until recently, one of the goods mass-purchased by Polish customs in the frontier town of Frankfurt on the Oder was sugar. While at the end of 2010 its prices were comparable on the two sides of the border, at the start of 2011 the price in Poland soared to a record high of 6.00 zlotys per kg (March 2011) and held throughout the first quarter of the year. In April it began to drift down, to reach 4.63 zlotys in May, which was still 82% higher than in May the previous year (2). At that time in the neighbouring Frankfurt sugar cost – and still does – 60.65 (2.70 zlotys). This swelled the cross-border traffic of Polish consumers wanting to get this basic staple. The mass buy-out of sugar by Poles resulted in a limit being imposed on a purchase of this product – up to 5 kg at a time. Generally, limits are being imposed on those goods which are much in demand.

German consumers are attracted not only by Polish bazaars or supermarkets, but also by the Travel Free Shop located next to the border crossing (in the neighbourhood of Collegium Polonicum, a local branch of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan), which is one of the two such shops established on the Polish-German border (the other is 30 km north of Słubice, in Kostrzyn on the Oder). This shop is mostly geared to the German customer, as shown by the fact that all the banners advertising it and encouraging shopping, as well as monthly newsletters listing current bargains, are offered exclusively in German.

Another factor controlling consumer behaviour, apart from prices, is the exchange rate of the euro. It was assumed that there was a dependence, apart from prices, is the exchange rate of the euro. When comparing the intensity of border traffic and the exchange rate of the euro at yearly intervals, no clear-cut dependence was observed, but the analysis of monthly data revealed there to be a relation. It turned out that it was not the Polish customer who responded to fluctuations in the euro, viz. the higher its exchange rate, the fewer Poles crossed the border to Germany, and vice versa. The German buyer, however, was indifferent to changes in the exchange rate because the service he bought on the Polish side was cheaper for him than at home anyway.

### 3.5. Demographic factors

When speaking of demographic factors, it is worth looking at such indices as the number of the urban population and the population's age structure, because they substantially affect the number and kinds of services offered in the borderland, and those in turn shape consumer behaviour in the split towns.

In the analysed years 1990-2009, one can note a significant drop in the population number in Frankfurt on the Oder, which is connected directly with the unification of Germany in 1990 (Table 3). The phenomenon of urban shrinkage – known for more than a century as Ostflucht (‘escape from the East’) – is not new, but it has accelerated considerably after the unification of Germany. It largely concerns young and better educated people, who move to West Germany. At the same time, the total fertility rate has slumped since the mid-1980s and the society can be observed to be ageing. Forecasts predict a further drop in the population (in 2020 Frankfurt on the Oder is supposed to be inhabited by about 50,604 people). The decline in numbers will be accompanied by a shrinkage of the 0-26 age group, which in 2020 will account for 21% of the total number of residents, and an increase in the proportion of the oldest inhabitants (over 65 years) to 30% (3). The total number of residents is expected to become 50,604 people in 2050.

It was hypothesised that the oldest inhabitants would show little spatial mobility because of their age. However, the research demonstrated that both, older and younger people were ready to satisfy their demand for some services in Słubice (Table 4). It seems that what makes older people seek goods and services on the Polish side is primarily a lot of free time on their hands as well as rather modest old-age or disability pensions. In turn, young people, often poorly educated or even unemployed, want to economise by availing themselves of the cheaper service offer on the Polish side.

### Table 3. Changes in the population number in the split towns between 1990 and 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Słubice</th>
<th>Frankfurt/O.</th>
<th>Frankfurt/O. frontier urban complex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>16,069</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>86,131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>16,222</td>
<td>101.0</td>
<td>85,357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>16,592</td>
<td>103.6</td>
<td>84,937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>16,832</td>
<td>104.7</td>
<td>83,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>17,063</td>
<td>106.2</td>
<td>82,323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>17,285</td>
<td>107.6</td>
<td>80,807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>17,273</td>
<td>107.5</td>
<td>79,784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>17,476</td>
<td>108.8</td>
<td>77,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>17,637</td>
<td>109.8</td>
<td>75,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>17,288</td>
<td>107.5</td>
<td>73,832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>17,252</td>
<td>107.4</td>
<td>72,131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>17,308</td>
<td>107.7</td>
<td>70,308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>17,575</td>
<td>108.1</td>
<td>68,351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>17,571</td>
<td>109.3</td>
<td>67,014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>17,314</td>
<td>107.7</td>
<td>65,242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>17,265</td>
<td>107.4</td>
<td>63,748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>17,032</td>
<td>106.0</td>
<td>62,594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>16,818</td>
<td>104.7</td>
<td>61,969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>16,668</td>
<td>103.7</td>
<td>60,588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>16,497</td>
<td>102.7</td>
<td>60,625</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4. The age structure of buyers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17-19</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 and over</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.6. Psycho-social and cultural factors

Their source is national, language or cultural distinctness (Chojnicki, 1999) which not long ago used to be a significant barrier to establishing transborder contacts. Today, as demonstrated by a research conducted by Jańczak in Słubice and Frankfurt on the Oder (2009c: 166), cultural differences and prejudices play a very small role in transborder contacts, which shows, he claims, that ‘on the one hand the two towns operate as separate urban, national and cultural systems, but on the other there is a great readiness for non-instrumental cooperation of specific milieux in which the troubled past is not perceived as a problem, and the opportunities offered by the integration are a direct motivating factor’.

Jańczak (2009a: 223; 2009c: 166) also draws attention to the scope of integration as measured by the quality and number of interpersonal contacts in the borderland. He believes that Frankfurt on the Oder and Słubice are two communities living independently of each other and only connected by interactions of a commercial nature, which is also corroborated by the present author’s many observations. Non-commercial contacts are sporadic and limited to social or cultural ones.

The nature of transborder contacts also depends on the knowledge of the neighbour’s language. As early as 1998 (cf. Kaczmarek, 1999), a good knowledge of German was declared by 22% of Słubice inhabitants, and a poor one (basic communicative skills) by as many as 69%. Today 25% Słubice residents polled declare a very good knowledge of German, and 50% – ‘an ability to communicate’ in this language (Jańczak, 2009a). This is certainly an asset facilitating communication between the two communities. Regrettably, the present author has no comparative information for Frankfurt on the Oder. Drawing only on a research by Kaczmarek (1999), one can state that the knowledge of Polish among Frankfurt inhabitants is much poorer than of German among Słubice residents: a mere 1% of the inhabitants of Frankfurt on the Oder declared their knowledge of Polish to be good, and 24%, to be basic enough to communicate. The remaining 75% of those polled had no knowledge of the language of their neighbours. It might seem that the knowledge of the neighbour’s language is an unquestioned advantage facilitating communication between the two communities. Still, as the research shows, Frankfurt citizens see no need to learn Polish.

3.7. The role of information in moulding buyer behaviour

The town sends its recipients pieces of information using many forms and means, and in various codes. In order for it to operate, it must communicate with its users and convey messages to them that assist them in their daily movements in its space, especially public (Matykowski, Kulczyńska, 2008). Both in Słubice and Frankfurt on the Oder urban information is given a foreign-language layout which helps the neighbour from across the Oder to move around the town.

The perception of visual stimuli sent by the urban environment is made easier for foreigners when information is offered in their native tongue. There is an especially high saturation with German-language information in Słubice; it can be found in advertisements, posters or shop signs and notices, usually alongside names in Polish. However, there are also cases when, e.g., a shop sign displays information only in German and there is no name in Polish at all (cf. Fig. 3a and b). The highest frequency of German-language names can be found in the area penetrated by Germans. Those are primarily the streets: Jedności Robotniczej, Kościuszki, Młodzieży Polskiej Avenue, and Wojska Polskiego. They offer all the major services, like petrol stations, marketplaces, eating places as well as groceries and industrial goods shops that are the chief destinations of the German cross-border traffic. However, Frankfurt on the Oder does not supply significant examples of an information layout in Polish.

4. Conclusion

A survey of factors shaping consumer behaviour in the frontier towns of Słubice and Frankfurt on the Oder reveals that they display a great diversity and have different spatial ranges of influence. It also helps to identify tendencies and regularities governing movements of the inhabitants. While there


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