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A conceptual model of consumer behaviour when purchasing fixed telecommunications connections

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Abstract

The topic of the paper is the development of a structural model of consumer behaviour when purchasing fixed telecommunications connections. We will show the correlations between selected factors (salesperson's characteristics, customer loyalty to the telecommunications company, company characteristics), and their influence on the consumer purchase decision with regard to fixed telecommunications connections in the Republic of Slovenia at the time of sale. Telecommunications is an area that deals with the transmission of information between distant locations. Its development has been exponential in recent decades and today it represents one of the key factors in the formation of society. The collected secondary data from literature review and the research published to date in the field in question will be a starting point for conducting in-depth research to develop a structural model for identifying correlations between the selected factors and their impact on the purchaseg decision of consumers of fixed telecommunications services in personal selling. The paper presents the development of a conceptual model which will serve as the basis for conducting the research.

Keywords: personal sales, consumer behaviour, sales skills, after-sales activities, purchase decision, service marketing mix, brand, consumer loyalty.

1 INTRODUCTION

The understanding of consumer behaviour extends to various arms of science and is the key to successful marketing (Azevedo et al. 2008). Consumerism is an active movement of today's society. Trends, such as globalization, specialization and increasing competition change together with the consumer's role. A consumer is no longer a mere classical buyer and product consumer, but is turning into an active participant in product designing, its development and supply (Wang, Lo and Yang 2004, pp. 171). Companies should, therefore, have better knowledge of consumers than in the past. They should be familiar with the factors influencing their purchase decision-making. During the process of purchase decision-making, consumer behaviour is affected by various factors. These can be divided into several factor (influence) groups: psychological (motivation, attitude, learning and memory), social (reference groups, family, individual's role and position, status), personal (age and level of a family's life cycle, occupation and financial situation, lifestyle, personality and self-image, values and beliefs), cultural (culture, social class), economic (price -monetary and non-monetary aspect, income, quality), situational factors related to time and place of purchase (physical environment such as store, location, equipment; social environment as salesperson's influence, time associated with seasonal influences, days of the week and previous consumer mood), individual differences and environmental impacts (Habjanič and Ušaj 2003; Blackwell, Miniard and Engel 2006; Azevedo et al. 2008; Bennett 2011; Prodnik 2011; Kotler and Armstrong 2018; Vukasović 2020). The characteristics of the salesperson and the telecommunication company also play a very important part in the buying decision of consumers in the sale of fixed telecommunications connections.

For the successful realization of a sales transaction it is necessary for the salesperson to know a number of different factors that influence the purchase decisions of users or customers. The salespeople are required to possess knowledge of the market environment where the interaction takes place. The knowledge of buyers' buying habits and influencers in the purchasing decisions is also required. In the context of cultural factors, salespeople have to be aware of or be able to identify and respect the customer's core values and norms. In the context of social factors, the salespeople have to primarily recognize the influence of traditional values, reference groups and family in the purchase behaviour. The salesperson has to identify, in the context of the buyer's personal factors, the need based on the buyer's life cycle, the financial situation and the characteristics of the products the buyer is purchasing. Within the psychological factor, however, it is important to identify a motive that encourages the buyer to make a purchasing decision. Price is certainly a factor that shapes the customer's perception of the quality of the service, and the individual needs of the customers also have to be taken into account.

By designing its marketing strategy, the company shapes the characteristics of the company that play an important role in consumer buying decisions. In today's competitive environment, markets are increasingly saturated with brands and the battle for (possibly loyal) consumers is increasingly fierce. This is particularly noticeable in the telecommunications industry, as its elements are changing even faster than in other industries, which means that the battle for the consumer is even fiercer and, therefore, the processes of developing and adapting to competitors and the market situation need to take place even faster. In this day and age of increasing pressure of information and marketing on consumers, brands are the cornerstones of quality, consistency and trust (Kapferer, 2008). The brand is the transmitter of information about the quality, tradition, style, status, manufacturer and origin of the product. According to Končnik Ruzzier (2011, p. 159), the function of a company's brand has the following characteristics from the user's point of view: facilitates product recognition from competing products, enables better transparency and access to information on the market, facilitates price

comparisons, ensures product quality, ensures better sales services, makes it easier to buy, reduces the sense of risk. In this paper, an important feature of the company is represented also by the characteristics of telecommunication connection as the central entity of the service and its after-sales activities.

During the process of selling and buying, loyalty (among other things) represents an important part. The process of generating loyalty in the sale of fixed telecommunications connections plays the largest role. When making a purchase decision, the buyer concludes a subscription contract for an indefinite period of time, with a very short deadline and consequences for terminating the subscription. User loyalty has been defined by Lovelock and Wirtz (2007, p. 125) as a conscious decision by the user. But it does continue for a longer period until its benefit is greater than its cost. The users a company most wants are loyal users. As Vida (2010 p. 235) states, the feeling of belonging and loyalty are important factors. A relationship that keeps together mutual connections is divided into three types of connections-economic or financial connections based on direct benefits arising from the transactions, structural connections based on shared resources, shared infrastructure and coordinated processes, and sociological and psychological connections, which create interpersonal bonds based on satisfaction of social needs and security. To gain a comprehensive knowledge of loyalty-maintaining bonds, we also have to acquire knowledge of the opposing forces that loosen loyalty bonds and create infidelity.

Telecommunication services are changing at an extraordinary rate. Service providers offer their new, renewed, modified and innovative services at every step of the way. A digital agenda is currently in place in the EU as well as in Slovenia. With the rapid modernization of the network, the digital agenda forces contracting entities to change contractual relationships, thereby creating a great dynamic in the sales activities for telecommunication service providers.

1.1 Description of related research

The field of research is very specific and involves two areas. The first area is explored from the technological aspect of telecommunications and the impact of internet technologies on the society. The second area is the area of consumer purchasing behavior and the examination of the influence of various factors on consumer buying behavior and buying decisions. We did not find any definite research exploring both of these areas. Different authors and experts in the field of research individually regard it as some kind of impact on a particular phenomenon, which makes us note that the conceptual design of the treatment of both fields simulateously is new. We have identified related starting points for research in the existing research and literature that define different areas in relation to consumer purchase behaviour.

Table 1: The existing related research that we have examined

Author(s)	Subject / topic covered	Area / topic summary
Culiberg (2010)	Ethics and decision-making process when purchasing	More and more consumers are taking ethical issues such as human rights, environmental concerns and animal welfare into account in their decision-making process.

Benett (2011)	The influence of price on the purchase decision.	Price has a prominent influence on consumer response.
Krishnan and Ramachandran (2011)	Technological advancement and innovation are forcing companies to continually improve their products, performance and make customer-centric offers.	The authors connect innovation and uniqueness of offer with the design and perception of price.
Kadić et al. (2011)	Establishing an optimal sales atmosphere for the purpose of trusting the salesperson.	The sales strategy needs to be adjusted according to the customer segment.
Mende and Bolton (2011)	Relationship: customer – company, customer -employees.	Customers with low anxiety are positively oriented towards the mentioned problem in terms of trust, satisfaction, and emotional attachment. Customers with high anxiety, however, respond best to financial programmes (reward).
Vukasović (2012)	The influence of the perceived price on the perceived value	The perceived price directly affects the perceived value of a product or service.
Šušter Erjavec (2012)	Competition in the market has a huge impact on customer satisfaction	With increasing market competition in the industry, consumer satisfaction is also growing.
Jönke (2012)	The importance of after-sales activities	After-sales activities result in customer confidence and competitive advantage.
Pan (2012)	Factors influencing customer loyalty	There are no obvious factors that generally have a key influence on loyalty. Individual entity-specific measurement is required.
Dremel and Dove (2013)	Reference prices	Businesses have to first and foremost be well aware of the price expectations and only then the offer expectations.
Rozkhov (2014)	The influence factors affecting the skills of the salesperson, the personal level of the buyer and their purchase decision	It represents the impact of business, communication, organizational and work skills.
Kobold (2014)	Marketing communication as an important function within the company for the recognition of the company as well as the brand	Electronic media are a key marketing communication tool in business visibility and branding.

Vukasovic (2014)	Impact of the knowledge and skills of marketing on the success of the company	Having certain skills is the key to success. It is important to be able to constantly learn and adapt in the society and interact with others. Knowledge has to be put into practice.
Bertschek (2015)	Impact of telecommunications networks and broadband access on economic growth	The accessibility of telecommunications networks and broadband access has a major impact on economic growth as well as other aspects of the quality of life.
Kadič (2015)	The influence of emotional intelligence in the salesperson-buyer relationship	Emotional intelligence influences sales performance through sales behaviour by adapting sales interaction and customer orientation.
Rehman (2017)	The influence of personal factors on the purchase decision	Personal characteristics have a significant influence on the purchase decision of the customers in the sale of textile products.
Chen (2018)	The power of influence that sales skills have on customer purchase decisions	The best results are achieved by salespeople with skills for customer-oriented selling.

The described trends that we are witnessing in the telecommunications sector, analysis of the secondary data from the literature review and the so far published research of the area in question, will serve as a starting point for the survey, by which we will design a conceptual model for determining the correlations between selected factors and their influence on the buying decision of consumers of fixed telecommunications services at personal sale.

2   MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1   Methodology, data collection and sample

In the first part of the empirical research and within the qualitative research, we will conduct personal interviews with ten salespeople of fixed telecommunications connections. The purpose of the interviews is to discuss their opinions of the already identified determinants and identify potential unknown determinants that have an impact on the purchase decision and customer loyalty of fixed telecommunications connections. Thus, we will determine the final set of variables to check in the quantitative research. Particular attention will the devoted to the development of quality measuring instrument (questionnaire) to measure the correlations between the studied factors in the quantitative study. The aim of the qualitative research is to ensure that the concepts in the conceptual model are

defined as perceived and understood by consumers in Slovenia. The qualitative research method has been chosen primarily because it is useful in the initial research stage, when we are only discovering the breadth and depth of the research problem.

In the second part of the empirical research, we will design and conduct a quantitative survey. For the purpose of quantitative research, we will collect primary data employing a structured questionnaire. Using the deductive method, we will, on the basis of theoretical definitions by different authors, previous research and the results of the qualitative research, create a questionnaire, which will include demographic elements and the perception of awareness of the elements influencing the buying decision of customers of fixed telecommunications connections. The questionnaire will be pre-tested on a smaller sample of customers through a pilot survey. We will create a a five point Likert scale for the statements, whereby the numbers signify as follows: 1 - Strongly Disagree, 2 - Disagree, 3 - Neither Disagree nor Disagree, 4 - Agree, 5 - Completely Agree. For each element in the model, we will develop a set of statements.

Table 1: Research instrument

The name of the construct	Construct variables (Likert scale 1-5 or corresponding listed option)
Personal characteristics of the salesperson	*The construct will consist of 5 to 7 statements for which the respondents will choose one value that best aligns with their view on a Likert scale from 1 to 5.* *The proposed statements are:* PCS1. The salesperson was tidy. PCS2. The salesperson was communicative. PCS3. The salesperson was friendly. PCS4. The salesperson had a genuine smile. PCS5. The salesperson was in a positive mood. PCS6. The salesperson was persistent in selling.
Salesperson's sales skills	*The construct will consist of 5 to 7 statements for which the respondents will choose one value that best aligns with their view on a Likert scale from 1 to 5.* *The proposed statements are:* SSS1. The salesperson was a successful negotiator. SSS2. The salesperson had good communication skills. SSS3. The salesperson quickly defined the appropriate offer. SSS4. The salesperson was empathetic ("got under our skin"). SSS5. The salesperson immediately caught my attention. SSS6. The salesperson listened closely to me.
Salesperson's technological knowledge	*The construct will consist of 5 to 7 statements for which the respondents will choose one value that best aligns with their view on a Likert scale from 1 to 5.* *The proposed statements are:*

	STK1. The salesperson knows the sales range of the telecommunications connections. STK2. The salesperson knows the technological characteristics of the telecommunication networks. STK3. The salesperson knows the technological characteristics of the telecommunication services. STK4. The salesperson advised me on the optimal telecommunications connection. STK5. The salesperson knows the trends in the telecommunications industry. STK6. The salesperson is fully technologically informed about the area of their work.
After-sales activities of a telecommunications company	*The construct will consist of 5 to 7 statements for which the respondents will choose one value that best aligns with their view on a Likert scale from 1 to 5.* *The proposed statements are:* AATC1. The company trains the customer to use all the functionalities of the connection. AATC2. The company responds quickly in the event of service failure. AATC3. The company / service is quickly reachable. AATC4. The company admits and corrects the mistakes. AATC5. The company is up-to-date with the latest developments in the industry. AATC6. The company checks my satisfaction with the service.
Features of telecommunications connection	*The construct will consist of 5 to 7 statements for which the respondents will choose one value that best aligns with their view on a Likert scale from 1 to 5.* *The proposed statements are:* FTC1. The price of a telecommunications connection is competitive compared to the competition. FTC2. The technical characteristics of the telecommunications connection are at the expected level. FTC3. No interruptions occur on the telecommunications connection. FTC4. The mobile phone always has a very good signal. FTC5. The TV picture works without interruptions (blocks or a frozen picture). FTC6. Your computer quickly accesses Internet sites.
Brand of a telecommunications company	*The construct will consist of 5 to 7 statements for which the respondents will choose one value that best aligns with their view on a Likert scale from 1 to 5.* *The proposed statements are:* BTC1. I trust the telecommunications company. BTC2. I am sure the telecommunications company is reputable.

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	BTC3. The customer support provided by the telecommunications company meets my expectations. BTC4. The telecommunications company is to a large degree present in the media (advertisements). BTC5. The telecommunications company offers innovative services. BTC6. The telecommunications company is socially responsible.
Purchase decision	*The purchase decision will be measured by a binomial variable that will give information if the buyer decided/would decide to buy a fixed telephone line.* PD1. the buyer has decided / would decide to buy a fixed telephone line (1 - decided/would decide to buy, 0 - did not decide/would not decide to buy).
Customer loyalty to the telecommunications company	*The construct will consist of 5 to 7 statements for which the respondents will choose the appropriate value to their position on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. The proposed statements are:* CLTC1. I am completely loyal to the telecommunications company. CLTC2. I am loyal to the telecommunications company because of their salespeople. CLTC3. I am loyal to the telecommunications company because of their social responsibility. CLTC4. I am loyal to the telecommunications company because of their ecological awareness. CLTC5. I am loyal to the telecommunications company because of their quality of service. CLTC6. I am loyal to the telecommunications company because of the reputation of the company (brand).
Demographic characteristics of the customer	DCC1. Gender (male, female). DCC2. Age (up to 25 years, 26-35 years, 36-45 years, 46-55 years, 55-65 years, over 65 years). DCC3. Income (up to 1000 EUR, 1000-2000 EUR, above 2000 EUR) DCC4. Education (unfinished primary school, completed primary school, completed secondary school, completed college, completed university degree, completed master's degree or doctorate). DCC5. Region, area codes (01 Ljubljana, 02 Maribor-Murska Sobota, 03 Celje-Trbovlje, 04 Kranj, 05 Nova Gorica-Koper, 07 Novo mesto

To check the hypotheses, we will conduct primary research with the help of a structured questionnaire. The survey will be carried out by distributing questionnaires via e-mail. The distribution of the questionnaires will be initiated according to the snowball principle in all Slovenian regions. The target population of the survey will be the population of Slovenian citizens between 18 and 65 years of age who already use fixed telecommunication links, want to use them or want to change their provider.

The survey will be carried out in two phases, namely a pilot survey and the main survey. In the first phase, we will conduct a pilot study. The pilot survey will help us examine the extent to which the research instrument is comprehensible to respondents. What matters is whether and how respondents understand the survey questions. During this phase, 10 respondents will participate and later we will adjust the questions if necessary. Based on the pilot research we will design the final questionnaire that will be used to test hypotheses and will be distributed to respondents. We anticipate a response of 500 or more respondents over a three-month period.

In the second phase, we will conduct the main survey. At this stage, we will perform the analysis of the reliability of measurement scales and in doing so use Crombach alpha test and exploratory analysis of the elimination of common factor. Then, the data will be prepared and tested through research, which will include tests to test atypical values in the data and to test the assumptions of normal distribution of manifest variables. Figure 1shows the process of the empirical research.

Figure 1: The process of the empirical research
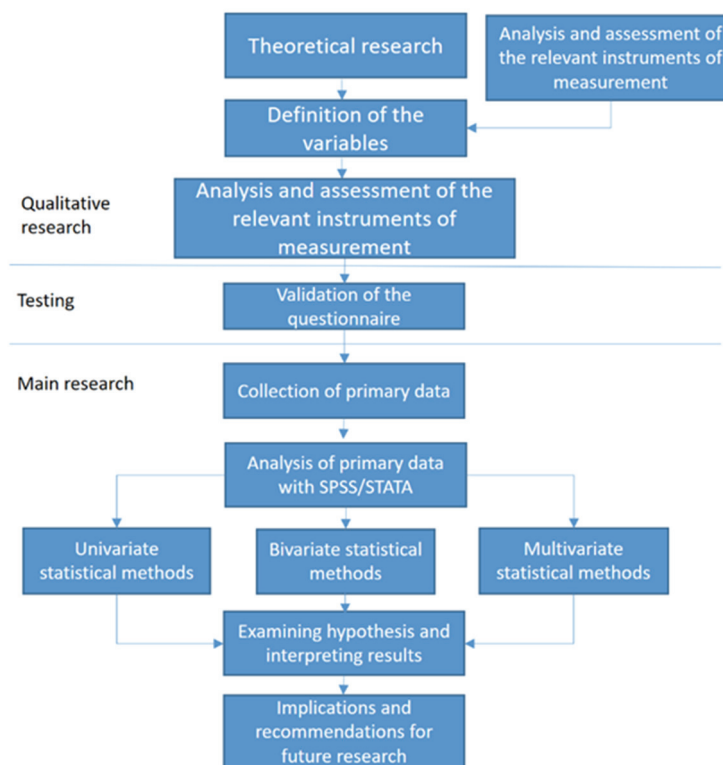
To test the hypothesis we will employ data analysis with the relevant uni-, bi- and multivariate methods of data processing using the SPSS and STATA statistical programmes. We will use the following methods of descriptive statistics: factor analysis, Cronbach alpha test, and linear regression method. The answer to the research question will be sought in the qualitative research. We expect the data group to express statistically significant differences at a risk level of 5% ($\alpha = 0.05$).

The research instrument will collect data employing a five-point Likart scale. The obtained data will be analysed using the following parametric statistical methods: mean, factor analysis, linear regression analysis, and ANOVA analysis. Although there are some concerns in the literature that data collected by the Likert scale need to be analyzed using nonparametric methods (Jamieson, 2004), recent research

by statistical experts has shown that these data are based on parametric methods (Norman, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2013).

In the first phase, the data will be analyzed through descriptive statistics, absolute and relative frequency distributions, mean values and dispersion. In the second phase, we will analyse the data by applying the method of factor analysis. First, the reliability of the type of internal consistency and factor structure is verified, indicating construct validity that refers to the empirical conclusion that the scale is the target construct using factor analysis (Hanushek and Jackson, 2013). An analysis of the principal components will also be carried out, taking into account the Kaiser-Guttman criterion for factor elimination. The intercorrelation of the items in the questionnaire will be used to verify the reliability of the type of internal consistency, whereby the Cronbach alpha coefficient of internal consistency is obtained. This shows the percentage of variance. Items that do not have a high correlation with the overall result will not be used in further analysis. In the third phase, we will check the hypotheses. In order to examine the hypotheses, the linear regression method will be utilized. Given that the dependent variable in the linear stepwise regression models will rely on the binomial variable – the decision to buy a fixed telecommunications connection - robust standard error estimates of the linear regression model will be used. The STATA software will be employed with the .regress command including the .vce option (robust). A stepwise regression is performed applying an algorithm for selecting variables in different steps, which can most clearly explain the variance in the criteria variables. Figure 1 shows the flow of the empirical research consisting of several parts.

In carrying out the research we will take into account the ethical criteria listed in the ESOMAR codes (2016). The ethical behaviour of practitioners is summarized according to Kavčič (2011), whereas the responsibility and ethical behaviour of researchers has been studied by Malner (2011).

3   RESEARCH QUESTIONS, MODEL, HYPOTHESES

The key research questions are: What are the key factors in the sale of fixed telecommunications connections and how do they affect consumers' buying decisions? Also, what are the relationships between the variables in the purchase behaviour model?

A purchase decision is a decision whether or not to make a purchase. Of course, this decision is influenced by many different factors of varying intensity. In this research, the purchase decision when buying a fixed telecommunications connection variable will be monitored based on the influence of the salesperson's as well as the company's characteristics. An important element of the research is customer loyalty to the telecommunications company. The survey will also examine the impact of demographic characteristics of a customer. Figure 2 shows the conceptual model of the influence of these factors on the buyer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection.

Figure 2: Model of the influence of factors on the customer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection
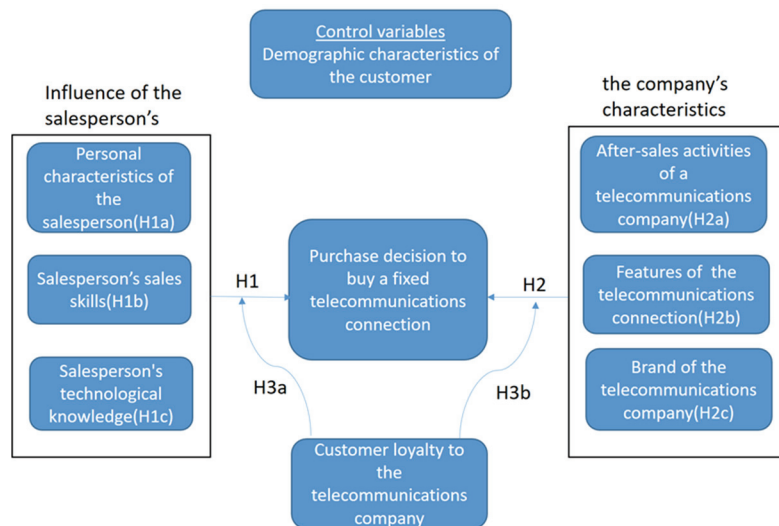
Within the model, the dependent variable is defined: the decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection. The independent variables on the salesperson's side are the personal characteristics of the salesperson, sales skills of the salesperson and their technological know-how; on the company's side, the independent variables are the company's brand, characteristics of the telecommunications connection and the after-sales activities of the telecommunications company. As an external factor in the purchase and sales interactions, an independent moderator variable of customer loyalty to the telecommunications company has been defined. The moderator variable, as stated by Kenny (2011), influences the direction and power between two independent variables. As important variables, a customer's demographic characteristics have also been defined within the model. Starting points for the hypotheses have been formulated based on previous research.

H1 – A salesperson's characteristics have a statistically significant influence on a customer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection.
- H1a – The personal characteristics of the salesperson have a statistically significant influence on the customer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection.
- H1b – A salesperson's sales skills have a statistically significant influence on a customer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection.
- H1c – A salesperson's technological knowledge has a statistically significant influence on a customer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection.

H2 - The characteristics of a telecommunications company have a statistically significant influence on a customer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection.
- H2a - The after-sales activities of a telecommunications company have a statistically significant influence on a customer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection.
- H2b - The characteristics of a telecommunications connection have a statistically significant influence on a customer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection.
- H2c - The telecommunications company brand has a statistically significant influence on a customer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection.

H3 - Customer loyalty to a telecommunications company has a stronger influence on the correlation between the characteristics of the telecommunications company and the customer's decision to purchase

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a fixed telecommunications connection in comparison with the correlation between the characteristics of the salesperson and the customer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection.

- H3a - Customer loyalty to a telecommunications company has a moderating influence on the relationship between the characteristics of the salesperson and the customer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection.
- H3b - Customer loyalty to a telecommunications company has a moderating influence on the relationship between the characteristics of a telecommunications company and the customer's decision to purchase a fixed telecommunications connection.

The survey will also check the influence of various demographic factors such as gender, age, region, income and education structure. For the verification of the mentioned hypotheses, we will use relevant programmes and an appropriate statistical regression method, by which we will detemine whether the results obtained from the answers of the respondents are statistically significant and representative for the evaluation of the hypotheses.

The list below shows the initial forms of the determinants in the hypothesis models and further in the research instrument. The list contains constructs that are the basic elements of the hypotheses:
- Personal characteristics of the salesperson
- Salesperson's sales skills
- Salesperson's technological knowledge
- After-sales activities of a telecommunications company
- Features of the telecommunications connection
- Brand of the telecommunications company
- Purchase decision
- Customer loyalty to a telecommunications company
- Demographic characteristics of a customer

4 CONCLUSION

The original scientific contribution is the development of the consumer purchase behaviour conceptual model to study. So far, there has been no such research to verify this. We have not seen such a model neither in Slovenia nor in internationally, and our research, therefore, certainly represents a step towards the development of science. It will be difficult to compare the paper's original contribution to science with other scientific research because this is a new conceptual model. The new conceptual model will help the developers of marketing strategies working in telecommunications companies and related industries to implement the new findings.

The main contribution to the research in the next step will be represented by empirical analysis intended to reveal the possibility of theoretical and empirical findings to be transferred into practice, namely telecommunication industry. The research will, in terms of its design and content, represent one of the reference works in the field of marketing research and its narrower segment consumer behaviour. The research to test the latter, has not, according to researched data, been carried out yet. This type of model has not been noted, neither in Slovenia nor internationally. Bearing this in mind the research represents an important step towards development in science.

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