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The consumer attitude towards the third-party organisation (TPO) endorsement – an empirical investigation in the child products category

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Abstract

Theoretical background: The issue of recommendations provided by institutions (third-party organisations) is rarely addressed in the literature. The market practice observation provides, however, numerous examples of the use of such recommendations. This is particularly visible in the recommendations given by scientific medical institutions in the form of a symbol – usually a logo and the name of the recommending organisation, used on packaging or in advertising campaigns. German Stiftung Warentest (test.de) and Austrian Verein für Konsumenteninformation (vki.at) provide a good benchmark because these institutions are established by the state's authority to provide an independent assessment of products and to consequently protect the consumers'

interests. Polish scientific research institutions, such as the Institute of Mother and Child or the Institute of Food and Nutrition, have similar goals but they are operated and financed disparately.

Purpose of the article: In this article, the aim is to present the concept of measuring the attitude towards the TPO endorsement and determining the antecedents of this phenomenon in the context of purchasing products for children by their mothers.

Research methods: To develop the scale measuring the attitude towards TPO endorsement and to determine the antecedents of this occurrence, computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) research was conducted using a random sample of 1,001 women aged 25–45 having children up to age 6. Mothers of small children were chosen due to the character of products recommended by the analysed TPO (scientific medical institutions) in Poland. These are mainly products for children and purchasing decisions are made mostly by their mothers. The measurement scale was constructed on the basis of the ABC (affective, behavioural, cognitive) attitude, taking the expertise level and the source's trustworthiness into account. A set of four statements measured by a four-point scale was adopted. The middle value was excluded on purpose to make respondents clearly declare whether or not they agree with a given statement.

Main findings: The purchase of products for children is a prudent decision, often involving the entire family. Mothers willingly spend more on products for their children if they only have the option of paying for safer and better-quality products. From the results, 79% of the respondents are usually satisfied with the products recommended by a well-known medical research institution. For 71%, such institutions use their expert knowledge when recommending products for children. More than half of the respondents (54%) seek recommendations of medical research institutions when buying products for their children. The TPO endorsement in the form of a "seal" has the greatest importance in case of products for children in the following categories: food and beverages (81%), cosmetics (68%), hygienic products (51%), accessories (47%), toys (31%), clothes and shoes (16%).

Introduction

The issue of recommendations provided by institutions is rarely addressed in the literature. The market practice observation provides, however, numerous examples of the use of such recommendations. This is particularly visible in the recommendations given by scientific medical institutions in the form of a symbol – usually a logo and the name of the recommending organisation – used on packaging or in advertising campaigns. Until now, this issue has not been the subject of in-depth academic empirical investigation. Due to the research gap in this field, there is also a need for fulfilment.

German Stiftung Warentest (test.de) and Austrian Verein für Konsumenteninformation (vki.at) provide a good benchmark because these institutions are established by the state's authority to provide an independent assessment of products and to consequently protect the consumers' interests. Polish scientific research institutions, such as the Institute of Mother and Child or the Institute of Food and Nutrition, have similar goals but they are operated and financed disparately. The opinion-giving process is conducted on the request of specific companies that place orders and pay for this service. The procedure follows strictly defined rules under the ISO 9001 accreditation and includes both documentation assessment and usability testing.

In this article, the aim is to present a measurement of the attitude towards the third-party organisation (TPO) endorsement and to determine the antecedents of this phenomenon in the context of purchasing products for children by their mothers.

Literature review

In the consumers' opinion, recommendations may express an independent or objective viewpoint that comes from one of the public institutions involved, among other activities, in the development of generally binding regulations and standards regarding pro-health behaviour. Any recommendation issued by such an institution is not the subjective opinion of a private person, based on their knowledge and experience, but must be justified by the legally binding regulations and objectified findings of scientific research and be compliant with the pro-health policy acknowledged by the institution in a given field.

The scientific literature regarding endorsement identifies three basic types of entities that issue recommendations (Fireworker & Friedman, 1977; Freiden, 1984; Friedman & Friedman, 1979): celebrity, expert and average (typical) consumers. Since Peterson, Wilson, and Brown (1992) conducted their studies, academics have been interested in the issue of recommendations given by an organisation. This is defined as advertising material invoking the name of another organisation illustrating the favourable assessment of the advertised product made by this organisation. Dean and Biswas (2001) distinguish three forms, in which the TPO endorsement is visible in the brand communication. These are as follows:

- the product is ranked against competing products in its class on one or more criteria;
- the product is awarded a “seal” of approval by the TPO;
- a subjective, non-comparative statement is made about one or more product attributes.

The first form of TPO endorsement indicates a position taken for a given product in a ranking conducted by TPO on the basis of defined and overt criteria, usually given in the advertising message. With the use of commonly applied and unambiguously understood symbols such as stars (e.g. assessing restaurants, hotels or films), the endorsement positions the product among competitors and represents a concise visual transporter of information.

The second form of TPO endorsement marks a given product with a symbol serving as a “seal” with stylised graphics, i.e. a logo, often resembling the TPO logo and including its name, thus, invoking the buyer's associations and attracting their attention. The seal is the expression of approval and recommendation of the product by the organisation; however, it remains unclear how this distinction has been made and whether other brands can use it.

The last form of TPO endorsement is the subjective, unique statement of an organisation, invoked in the advertising message and emphasising exceptional advantages of one or several product attributes. The quoted text of recommendation, although the least visually attractive of all endorsement forms, offers the largest flexibility in exposing the product advantages.

The above-mentioned classification only concerns the format of TPO recommendation in a product label, packaging or advertising message. However, organisations provide recommendations in many different aspects. They can be classified according to various criteria, such as the operation profile (commercial or non-profit), the assessment type (experts or average consumers), the range of recommended products (wide or limited to one area) or the recognition of the organisation among consumers (well-known or unknown). Purportedly, the effectiveness of recommendations given by organisations will differ depending on both the recommendation format and the type of organisation in the context of all the above-mentioned variables.

The literature on TPO endorsement is nevertheless extremely limited. The Web of Science indicates only 44 publications between 1992 and 2018 regarding this issue, and their findings are not unequivocal. The first studies referring to the influence of TPO recommendations in the form of a statement on the purchase intentions and buyers' attitudes towards advertisements, brands and companies (Peterson, Wilson, & Brown, 1992) indicated the lack of statistical significance of this occurrence. Other researchers explain this result by the use of fictional organisations and product brands. The research conducted by Dean (1999) confirmed the influence of recommendations in the form of a "Best Buy" approval symbol awarded on the basis of consumer research by the "Consumer Reports" magazine on the consumers' perception of product quality or exceptionality and the assessment of its manufacturer. Similarly, Dean and Biswas (2001) proved the effectiveness of TPO recommendation in the form of a ranking as the indicator of the product quality, lowering the cost of searching information for potential buyers. Hirose, Mineo, Tabe, and Yanagidate (2015) stated that to draw attention from the target audience and reduce the perception of purchase-related risks, advertisers take advantage of TPOs as an endorser of their products.

The considerable support for the analysis of the recommendation is provided in the literature regarding the celebrity endorsement and particularly the expert endorsement. Based on scientific sources, it is evident that the recommendation's effectiveness depends on a number of factors, including the source credibility (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Dholakia & Strenthal, 1977; Ohanian, 1991; Seiler & Kucza, 2017), the source attractiveness (McGuire, 1985), the product and source compatibility (Forkan, 1980; Kamins, 1990), the type of message vs. type of product and consumer involvement (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1980), the consumer knowledge of product and recommendation source (Biswas, Biswas, & Das, 2006), the number of recommendations issued by the source (Mowen & Brown 1981; Graham, 1989; Cooper, 1984; Tripp, Jensen, & Carlson, 1994), the characteristics

of the target group and features attributed to the source, such as personality or value system (Erdogan, 1999).

On the conceptual level, the issue of TPO endorsement seems to be closest to the expert endorsement. The scientific medical organisation recommending products is invoked in advertising messages as the authority confirming the advantages of the presented product, which enhances the message credibility and confirms the health benefits of the product and its purpose for the specific group of users. This allows the assumption that the product is recommended by a public, independent expert, providing people with sufficient knowledge and experience and the scientific research background supporting the opinion. The expert nature of TPO recommendations constitutes the compelling reason that the effectiveness of such communication should be considered from the viewpoint of the recommendation source's credibility. The use of a credible source in the message development is the issue frequently addressed by the researchers focused on endorsements. According to the source credibility model, this variable has two dimensions, i.e. the expertise (expert knowledge) perceived by customers and the trustworthiness (unprejudiced communication of knowledge). Both dimensions have an impact on the expected effect of persuasion (McGinnies & Ward, 1980).

Research methodology

To develop the scale measuring the attitude towards TPO endorsement and to determine the antecedents of this occurrence, the computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) research was conducted using a random sample of 1,001 women aged 25–45 having children up to age 6. Mothers of small children were chosen due to the character of products recommended by the analysed TPO (scientific medical institutions) in Poland. These are mainly products for children and purchasing decisions are made mostly by their mothers.

The measurement scale was constructed on the basis of the ABC (affective, behavioural, cognitive) attitude, taking the expertise level and the source's trustworthiness into account. The set of four statements measured by a four-point scale was adopted. The middle value was excluded on purpose to make respondents clearly declare whether or not they agree with a given statement.

The scale acceptability and reliability were confirmed empirically (Churchill & Peter, 1984). The relationships between variables were checked with the use of Spearman's rho coefficient, because not all variables had a normal distribution.

Results

The consumer attitude towards the TPO endorsement should be considered favourable ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 0.66$). The scale reliability was measured with the use of the Cronbach's alpha index. With the assumptions made, the scale is found to be reliable (Cronbach's alpha = 0.832). The statements included in the scale together with descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. The distribution of the variable defined as the attitude towards TPO endorsement is assumed to be normal.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of scale measuring attitudes towards TPO endorsement

Statements	N	Min	Max	Average	Standard deviation
Buying products for my child, I often seek recommendations of well-known organisations or medical research institutions	1,001	1	4	2.51	.740
I am usually satisfied with products having the recommendation of a well-known organisation or a medical research institution	1,001	1	4	2.82	.575
In my opinion, well-known organisations and medical research institutions follow their expert knowledge when recommending products for children	1,001	1	4	2.74	.687
I trust well-known organisations and medical research institutions that recommend products for children	1,001	1	4	2.70	.671
N	1,001	–	–	–	–

Source: Authors' own study.

From the respondents, 79% are usually satisfied with the products recommended by a well-known medical research institution. For 71%, such institutions use their expert knowledge when recommending products for children. More than a half of the respondents (54%) seek recommendations of medical research institutions when buying products for their children. The TPO endorsement in the form of a "seal" has the greatest importance regarding the products for children in the following categories: food and beverages (81%), cosmetics (68%), hygienic products (51%), accessories (47%), toys (31%), clothes and shoes (16%).

It was also examined whether variables such as the mother's age, place of residence, age of children, occupational status or education could have an influence on the development of attitudes towards TPO endorsement. The only variables with a statistically significant distinction of TPO endorsement attitudes include the children's age ($\rho = 0.185$, $p = 0.005$), size of town ($\rho = -0.188$, $p = 0.004$) and mother's permanent occupation ($\rho = -0.108$, $p = 0.008$); however, their influence is rather small.

Discussion and conclusions

The purchase of products for children is a prudent decision, often involving the entire family. Mothers willingly spend more on products for their children if they only have the option of paying for safer and better-quality products (Harris, 1997). Mothers of younger children (aged 0–3), usually lacking experience and wanting to provide their child with the best product, are more likely to use the recommendation of the institution, which will reduce the risk of bad decisions or simplify the decision-making process. Mothers from smaller towns have a limited choice of products available in traditional points of sale; thus, it is also harder for them to use expert advice (limited availability of specialists) and this is why they will be more willing to use the recommendations of the institution. Permanent employment means that mothers, especially those with small children, have less time to intensively search for safe and high-quality products; therefore, the choice of products recommended by institutions seems to be quite rational.

Limitations, further research and implications

The research sample only included women. It would be very interesting to find out whether men participate somehow in the purchase decision-making process regarding products for children and how important the institutional recommendation is for them. It would be also worth consideration to compare various forms of institutional recommendations and the influence of these forms on the attitude towards TPO endorsement.

The research confirmed the importance of TPO endorsement in the decision-making process referring to the purchase of products for children by their mothers. Companies manufacturing such products, particularly food and cosmetics, should therefore be vitally interested in acquiring such a recommendation. The research is also important for the public health sector, since this indicates a way to promote pro-health trends in consumer attitudes. Providing financial support for research aimed at providing recommendations by the well-known medical research institution backs consumer decisions and constitutes the reliable source of information about products.

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