Consumers' Knowledge about Product's Country-of-Origin and Its Impact upon Sensorical Product Evaluation

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The aim of the research was to determine consumer perceptions of food products regarding the knowledge about the product's origin and the potential impact on the sensorical evaluation of other product properties. The research results represent a deeper investigation of the impact of origin on consumer perceptions. An integrated approach to the research of impacts of product origin was chosen in order to form interlinks between knowledge about product origin and its other sensorical properties.

Keywords: consumer behaviour, country-of-origin, experiment, food product, knowledge, knowledge management

Introduction

In an international research the known origin of a product has proved to be one of the more important factors in product distinction and selection of consumers and, by that, of the competitiveness as well. The investigation of the impact that country-of-origin (COO) has on consumer behaviour in the buying decision-making process became topics especially in the second half of the twentieth century and was studied by different authors, Bilkey and Nes (1982), Han and Terpstra (1988), Kaynak, Kucukemiroglu, and Hyder (2000), Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002), Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2004), Vukasovič (2014).

Reasons why the COO influences the buying decision are diverse and concern the knowledge of a product group, as well as the knowledge of a certain country. Modern consumers choose among many products, produced in different countries around the world. Consumers' responses to this fact are different and depend upon their personal nature and opinion, as well as other external factors.

COO affect can be defined as any influence that the country of manufacture has on a consumer's positive or negative perception of a product. With increasing availability of foreign goods in most national markets, the COO cue has become more important, as consumers often evaluate imported

goods and competing domestic products differently (Bilkey & Nes, 1982).

Nowadays, more companies are competing on the global market. They manufacture their products worldwide and the location where these products are manufactured might affect the perception of the consumer on the quality of the product based on the country of production. Consumer perceptions on the COO affect play a major role in influencing a consumer's choice of a product. The impact of the consumer's perception on COO may also influence a multinational in deciding which foreign country should be its manufacturing base, apart from considerations of cheap labor costs, tax incentives, access to resources, etc.

A research of consumer purchasing behaviour also encroaches on product origin and its impact on the buying decision-making process, a country's image formed in the consumer consciousness, ethnocentrism, patriotism, and consumer purchasing behaviour in individual countries. During the past several decades, COO research has attracted significant attention of researchers and practitioners alike around the globe. A part of the reason for this continuous interest in the subject area is attributable to the increased global competition among foreign firms operating in different parts of the globe.

These firms, in most cases, do not only offer more assortment variety, but also offer very competitive prices. This, coupled with increased standards of living and improved lifestyles of consumers around the world, the improvement of global communication and increased use of Internet-based communication means that the target customers in the worldwide market are exposed to and are selecting from a wider range of foreign products than ever before (Kaynak & Kara, 2000).

Knowledge management is very important and a key factor for successful and efficient businesses because of globalization andof the need for a quick response of companies, due to consumers changes in the market. Knowledge management is required due to customer orientation through the provision of services, mobility of workers and the adoption of modern knowledge in a new way because of the rapid development of technology and competitive matches between firms. From all of the above, effective use of knowledge is needed.

The paper is structured as follows. First the study starts with a review of the literature pertaining to the COO impacts and continues with the COO evaluation during the past several decades and about the importance of knowledge and knowledge management in the process of product evaluation. Next, the paper summarizes the used methodology to collect and analyse the data and discusses the main findings of the study. The paper concludes with the implications of the research for both theory development and managerial practice.

Literature Review

The COO is generally considered as an extrinsic product cue (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Hong & Wyer, 1989; Cordell, 1992). Consumers are known to develop stereotypical beliefs about products originating from particular countries and about the attributes of such products. Therefore, the COO image has the power to arouse importers' and consumers' belief about products attributes and to influence evaluations of products and brands (Yasin, Noor, & Mohamad, 2007). The most important in the light of marketing praxis is to understand a reflection of COO in consumer buying behaviour. Still, some previous studies prove that COO influences consumer perceptions of product properties or product groups, consumer preferences and consumer behaviour in buying decision processes. At the same time, results of previous studies show that a known COO is the key factor in consumer buying decision processes for consumables (Becker, Benner, & Glitsch, 2000; Sismanoglou, 2011; Aral et al. 2013; Vukasovič, 2014).

Based on published research and literature review, it was determined that impacts of COO were to be studied in five most important directions:

- The most researched topic was an image of a certain country from a foreign consumer's point of view (lives in another country);
- The second largest research topic was ethnocentrism and relationship between domestic and imported products, as well as the importance of a threat that successful countries represent in a local environment;
- A smaller proportion of studies (10%) discussed the product country image, based on consumer perceptions and beliefs;
- Even smaller proportion of empirical studies discussed the impact of a product's origin in relation with the factors like trade mark and price. A smallest proportion of studies dealt with the importance of national images in inter-organizational branch buying-decisions.

A research dealt with the impact of COO on product evaluation has taken three approaches from the current marketing literature. The latter are single-cue studies, multi-cue studies and conjoint (trade-off) analysis. In recent years, a fourth approach is emerging, namely environmental analysis, which links consumer product perception and/or evaluation of an impact and/or influence of a selected number of environmental factors. In single-cue COO studies, when evaluating a product a consumer bases his/her decision on both intrinsic (i.e. taste, shelf life, design) and extrinsic (i.e. price, trade mark name, service) cues. Those researchers who used multi-cues, on the other hand, designed their studies in such a way that COO is one of the factors amongst a variety of influences a consumer considers when making a

selection and an ultimate purchasing decision. To overcome the shortcomings of the first two groups of COO studies, a third group of researchers proposed the usage of a conjoint (trade-off) analysis, where a researcher tries to measure how much consumer's value a respective product attributes. The last mentioned research approach – environmental analysis – looks at the impact of various environmental factors on consumers and/or on company decision makers. To this end, the conjoint research of COO is more behavioural-oriented, whereas the environmental analysis is more related to the environmental impact on consumer decision-making (Kaynak et al., 2000).

Knowledge is defined as all of the information that someone pressed into the consciousness of learning and studying. In the development of the field of study of knowledge management, there is a new sharing of knowledge. One of the most important knowledge sharing is a division of implicit and explicit knowledge. Knowledge is the individual's capacity that is essential for the assessment based on an understanding of context or theory. Knowledge can be defined as valuable information that is placed in context. When knowledge is connected with our own intuition derived from previous experience, we come to the wisdom gained through practice and experience.

Marketing knowledge is the foundation of marketing discipline, but a general definition of marketing knowledge is difficult to establish (Rossiter, 2001). A detailed definition of marketing knowledge is very important for its further development. As early as 1988 the American Marketing Association (AMA) stated in its report that there was a lack of effort aimed at the systematic development of marketing knowledge and so it triggered a debate on the generation, transmission and use of marketing knowledge (Churchill, Garda, Hunt, & Webster, 1988). Rossiter (2001) listed four types of marketing skills, namely marketing concepts, structural frameworks, strategic and research guides. Later Rossiter (2002), at the initiative of his colleagues, added a fifth form, namely empirical generalizations. According to his opinion, marketing knowledge is developed and expanded by academics and consultants, companies and managers. He assumed that the marketing knowledge is declarative ('know-what'), which means that it is based on facts, it is a separate entity and thus independent from the individual's ability to apply this knowledge in practice. From his definition of marketing knowledge, he also excluded tacit knowledge (values, beliefs, ideas, experience), data and the individual's ability or general mental ability, respectively.

When we talk about knowledge management, we are talking about the top management on one hand and the management of knowledge of every individual and across the organization on the other hand. Both are closely intertwined. The enterprise knowledge management usually means

Table 1 The Sample Structure Regarding Gender

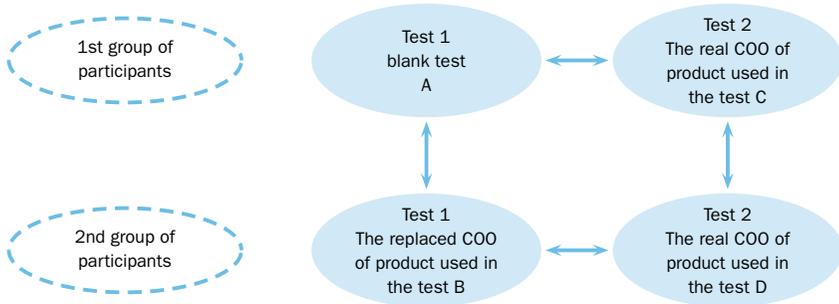| Gender	Participants		
	Group 1	Group 2	Total
Male	15	15	30
Female	15	15	30
Total	30	30	60

the systematic management and thus rational use of knowledge. It is a great technical and organizational challenge, which requires the development of appropriate human relations, as well as its effective integration with a wide range of new technological opportunities. The business world has fully adopted the belief that knowledge has become one of the most strategic resources of the organization, especially as a major factor in the competitiveness and performance of the company.

Research Design and Sample

Method and Sample

The paper focuses on the analysis of connections between food product origin and its consumer sensory evaluation. The aim of the research was to determine consumer perceptions of food product regarding its COO and to determine whether a known COO influences the sensory evaluation of other food product properties. A review of the existing literature and detailed research field – studying and analysing the connections between product COO and product sensory evaluation – arouse the basic research question: how is a food product perceived by consumers regarding its COO? The main hypothesis in the research was that, generally, a consumers' knowledge about product's COO results in better sensorical scores of its properties, respectively. Sixty persons were included in the research carried out at the central location of Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana. The participant were consumers of food products and were randomly divided into two groups of the same size ($N_1 = 30$, $N_2 = 30$). A structure of the sample consisting of participants was orderly regarding gender and age. The whole sample, as well as each defined group, had the same orderly structure. There were no age restrictions for the study, although all consumers were adults and most of them aged between 20 and 55 years. In order to ensure the same conditions in both groups, 50% of the consumers were males and 50% were females (Table 1).

Data was collected during the experiment. The established problem solving was exploratory. A question bank was selected for an *a priori* measurement of various scores for food product properties. The participants evaluated the selected properties by using a Likert scale. The questions were answered anonymously.

Figure 1   The Groups of Participants in the Tests and Comparison between the Tests

From a strict research point of view the basic conditions for performing an experiment are the following ones (Breakwell, Hammond, & Fige-Schaw, 2000; Churchill, 2002):

- participants are randomly selected from the population;
- participants are randomly assigned to experimental conditions;
- an independent variable is changed by a researcher;
- time series should be considered;
- at the same time a value of an independent variable is changed and other relevant variables are controlled.

Two different conditions were taken into account in the described groups of the participants, which is presented in Figure 1. Three product types from various countries were tasted in all the tests and evaluated by a range of questions.

Data Analysis

A multiple analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyse the data of repeated measurements, which is the main statistical tool for accepting or rejecting research hypotheses (Frewer, Risvik, & Schifferstein, 2001). It was determined that the analysis of variance is a statistical analysis frequently used in researches dealing with consumables (Jones, Drake, & Harding, 2008). In the experiment nine dependable variables (product's properties) were observed together with three independable variables (group, product type and test type). A central problem that needed to be solved was a simultaneous comparison of differences in undependable variables. Namely the differences could also be compared in each undependable variable separately (e.g. differences of dependable variables among product types, regardless of a group and a test). By that important information of possible interaction between two undependable variables would be missed. The ninth

question was about a general evaluation (score) of product. The question included all previous eight questions regarding product quality.

The first method we thought of was analysis of variance. Roughly this is a method used to determine a probability that differences between arithmetic means of dependent variables of several experimental groups are caused by sampling errors only. In other words, a variance of the results within the observed groups (the independent variable) is compared with a variance between the groups. A within-groups variance is called unexplained variance and, as a rule, it should not be greater than a between-groups variance (the latter reflects effects between groups).

Analysis of variance enables the observation of only one dependant variable (variate), so it belongs to the group of univariate methods for data analysis. In our case, there were more dependant variables that we wanted to observe simultaneously. In this case, a suitable method was the multiple analysis of variance, which enables observation of more variates (a multivariate technique). The second characteristic of the model was repeated measurements. A technique of multiple analysis of variance for repeated measurements was used. This technique divided the mentioned error variance or variation within the observed groups respectively to variance among procedures (independent variables) and residual variance.

In order to carry out the mentioned analysis, the results of dependent variables must be normally distributed, covariance matrices between groups must be equal and there should be linearity and multicollinearity between dependable variables. One of the requirements of the experiment that was met was the use of the Latin squares table and rotation of the questions and conditions in the market research slang. The Latin square designs consist of blocking of experimental units into rows and columns, so that each treatment appears once in a row and once in a column. The blocking by rows and columns is effective for controlling the variability among the experimental units (Gacula & Singh, 1984). The Latin squares technique is used in social and behavioural research, where the effect of successive stimuli presentation in repeated measurements is nullified. In order to correctly carry out the analysis of variance, a minimum of 20 people in each cell is requested. In the presented models, there were 30 people in each cell. This was the last requirement for the correct data analysis that was met. The described technique does not enable the correct analysis of the whole experiment, because the second test was the same for both groups of participants. This is why the difference analysis was first divided into two equal, independent parts regarding the group of participants. By that the testing of the main hypothesis regarding the impact of product origin on evaluation of other product properties was assured.

A Latin square table was used for rotating the questions. Variables rep-

resenting separate questions were scored by 1–5 scale where 1 means the least desirable property and 5 represents the most desirable property. The first nine questions were asked in all tests. The last three questions (packaging, trade mark in manufacturer) were answered in the test where the product of known origin was tested.

The independent variables were derived from the following facts:

- The sample of 60 persons was randomly divided into 2 more detailed groups (regarding gender and age). Each group was exposed to different stimuli. In all the tests the participants tested three types of products.
- Each group of participants participated in two different tests.

Three independent variables were derived from the stated above:

- 1st variable a *group* of participants – two groups;
- 2nd variable a *type of product* – three types;
- 3rd variable a *type of test* – two tests.

Within the second and the third independent variables, the results for dependent variables were obtained from the same participants. A combination of the conditions in the first and the second group were the same for all sixty participants. There was an experimental model for the repeated measurements for the second (product type) and the third (test type) independent variables.

Results and Discussion

In this part of the research, the basic descriptive statistics, useful to interpret the result interpretation, are listed. The research results were partially presented at a scientific conference International Food Marketing Research Symposium (Vukasovič, 2015). The results of nine questions (dependent variables) in blind trials or the results of twelve questions respectively (dependent variables) are compared in the trial with the known/visible COO. In both, i.e., in the blank trial, as well as in the trial using a known/visible COO, all three product samples were evaluated by a set of questions used for evaluation of likeableness of a certain product property. Variables representing separate questions were scored by Likert's scale where 1 means the least desirable property and 5 represents the most desirable property. Scores, used for likeableness of a certain product property, were the basis for the arithmetic mean calculation of the dependent variables. First, the arithmetic means of the scores and the standard deviation of all dependent variables and differences in scores regarding the trial were analysed. Changes of average evaluation of separate properties and similarities of

Table 2 The Average Score for Separate Properties of Different Product (Blank Test)

Category	Product A	Product B	Product C
Taste	3.03	3.26	3.42
Safety	3.32	3.10	3.23
Hardness	3.77	3.29	3.68
Price/kg	3.23	4.06	2.74
Colour	3.00	3.23	3.71
Fat content	2.39	3.10	2.94
Quality	3.32	3.39	3.65
Shelf life	3.77	3.32	2.94
General score	3.29	3.39	3.65

Notes Group 1, test 1 (blank test): A – the Italian food product, B – the Croatian food product, C – the Slovenian food product.

the scores regarding product type are presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4. By way of detailed statistical analysis, it was established whether the information about the origin of product had a statistically significant influence on the evaluation of the selected properties of product. There were differences between the blank trial and the trial with replace and the known/visible product origin. The changes in average grading of the selected properties of products in the blank trial are shown in Table 2.

In the blank trial (Table 2), it was determined that the arithmetic means of the estimated samples of products were similar for the four evaluated properties: safety, fat content, quality and general score. Differences among samples A, B and C were determined in the sample C for variables taste, shelf life and price per kilogram. In the blank test, it was determined that the average score for the product type C (from Slovenia) is generally the highest or very high, respectively. At the end of the blind trial, the respondents were asked which of the samples were of Slovenian origin. Nearly 42% of the respondents were able to identify the product of Slovenian origin. We assume they were led by likeableness and recognition of taste of the Slovenian product.

In the test with the replaced COO, the participants scored product B, which was Croatian, but was labelled with a Slovenian trade mark of a Slovenian manufacturer (the replaced COO), very high. It was determined that the trade mark and COO positively influence the product perception. The participants evaluated the tasted and scented product properties higher, when the latter were labelled with a Slovenian trade mark and as of Slovenian origin (Table 3).

In the next step, the respondents answered the questions regarding the property assessment of the product of the known COO. The respondents were informed about the COO of the product in separate tested samples

Table 3 The Average Score for Separate Properties of Food Product (the Test with the Replaced COO)

Category	Product A	Product B	Product C
Taste	2.97	3.68	3.35
Safety	3.13	3.74	2.94
Hardness	3.74	3.45	3.45
Price/kg	4.00	2.58	2.90
Colour	2.81	3.68	3.32
Fat content	2.39	2.55	2.84
Quality	3.13	3.68	3.29
Shelf life	3.35	3.13	4.10
General score	3.16	3.71	3.29

Notes Group 2, test 1 (the replaced COO): A – the Croatian food product, B – the Slovenian food product, C – the Italian food product.

Table 4 The Average Evaluation in the Both Groups of Participants

Category	Product A	Product B	Product C
Taste	3.05	2.90	3.48
Safety	2.85	3.19	3.55
Hardness	3.34	3.03	3.34
Price/kg	3.06	3.92	2.71
Colour	3.05	3.34	4.00
Fat content	2.76	2.74	2.63
Quality	3.08	3.08	3.60
Shelf life	3.98	3.32	3.05
General score	3.11	3.27	3.69
Packaging	2.40	2.76	3.94
Trade mark	2.48	2.44	4.32
Manufacturer	1.47	1.44	4.69

Notes Group 1, test 2 (the real origin): A – the Italian food product, B – the Croatian food product, C – the Slovenian food product. Group 2, test 2 (the real origin): A – the Italian food product, B – the Croatian food product, C – the Slovenian food product.

by way of the original packaging, which was, for this purpose, set on the table for each sample separately. The arithmetic means of product scores from the test with the known/visible COO was used are presented in the following section.

Table 4 shows the average evaluation in the second test for both groups of participants ($N = 60$), where product of the known COO was evaluated. The results undoubtedly show that the Slovenian product was evaluated much higher than the other two product types. The high scores came from knowing the manufacturer. Table 4 shows the average values of the observed variables. The average values for the variables packaging and trade

Table 5   *t*-Test for Differences between the Arithmetic Means of even Samples (the Repeated Measurements)

Item	Product C – product A	Product C – product B	Product A – product B
Packaging	12.02*	7.85*	–2.81*
Trade mark	12.94*	14.96*	$0.43^{0,67}$
Manufacturer	17.02*	16.33*	$0.27^{0,85}$

Notes   * Statistically significant at the 1% level. Superscripts denote sig. (2-tailed) differences between the pairs. *df* = 999.

mark for the product type C are much higher than for the other two product types. Consumers' knowledge about the manufacturer, packaging and trade mark have had impact upon sensorical product evaluation for the product type C. First, we were interested in whether the participants differently (statistically significant) answered the questions when asked about different product types. It was determined that the lower trust limit for Slovenian product (product type C) is much higher than the upper trust limit for the other two product types. Thus in those two questions the Slovenian product was highly probable scored much higher than the other two product types. This finding could be confirmed by *t*-test for differences between arithmetic means of even samples (the repeated measurements) (Table 5).

Statistically significant differences between the arithmetic means were found for all comparisons between different product types, except for the last pair A–B. This comparison actually showed that the scores for the variables packaging in trade mark could possibly be close together. It was determined that the participants evaluated the variables packaging and trade mark for the Slovenian product statistically significantly higher than for the other two product types of foreign origin.

The main hypothesis in this research was as follows: *Consumers' knowledge about a product's COO generally influences the evaluation of the product properties.* The main hypothesis was tested by the results obtained by repeated measures MANOVA, separately for both the first and the second group of participants. In the first group of participants, the product of unknown origin was first tested and later, in the second test, we tested the product of known COO. If there were differences between the tests, it can be said that the evaluation of other product properties was influenced by COO. When all the dependant variables were included at the same time, there were no differences between the tests. The affect of COO did not have a significant influence on differences between the tests either. On the whole, there were no differences there. Each variable was separately checked and univariate testing was used to determine whether there were differences in scores between the tests. Variable had significance level lower than 0.05 was checked for the variable test. Only the variable hardness had signif-

Table 6 The Multivariate Test: The Second Group of Participants

Within subjects effect		Value	F	Hyp. df	Error df	Sig.
Product	(1)	0.812	4.615	16.000	108.000	0.000
	(2)	0.338	4.768[a]	16.000	106.000	0.000
	(3)	1.513	4.917	16.000	104.000	0.000
	(4)	1.114	7.517[b]	8.000	45.000	0.000
Test	(1)	0.437	2.229[a]	8.000	23.000	0.063
	(2)	0.563	2.229[a]	8.000	23.000	0.063
	(3)	0.775	2.229[a]	8.000	23.000	0.063
	(4)	0.775	2.229[a]	8.000	23.000	0.063
Product x test	(1)	1.020	7.019	16.000	108.000	0.000
	(2)	0.233	7.090[a]	16.000	106.000	0.000
	(3)	2.202	7.157	16.000	104.000	0.000
	(4)	1.460	9.855[b]	8.000	54.000	0.000

Notes [a] Exact statistic. [b] The statistic is an upper bound on F that yields a lower bound on the significance level. Row headings are as follows: (1) Pillai's trace, (2) Wilks' lambda, (3) Hotelling's trace, (4) Roy's largest root.

icance level lower than 0.05. We wanted to determine a change in the average score for product hardness between the two tests. Results show that in the first test the participants evaluated a product to be softer than in the second one. Therefore COO negatively influenced evaluation of product hardness.

The second group of participants first tested product of the replaced COO and, after that, the product of known origin. We were interested in the differences between the tests due to changes in COO. The differences were expected, since in the first test the product type B was presented as a Slovenian product and later, in the second test, as a Croatian product. In that case, there was an interaction there – the impact of the product type on the test type. A statistically significant interaction between product and test is evident from the results presented in Table 6.

To the main hypothesis confirmation we can add that the consumers' knowledge about product's COO generally influences the evaluation of some product properties only in the first test. The consumers' knowledge about a product's COO importantly influenced the evaluation of product hardness. In the second test, COO had an important impact on evaluation of variables taste, safety, price, colour, quality and shelf life, between two tests.

In the existing literature, there is a proliferation of studies to document country-of-origin perspectives. From these studies, market and consumer behaviour researchers generally accept that a product's or brand's country-of-origin is an important factor, influencing the consumer decision-making process (Khachaturian & Morganosky, 1990; Knight, 1999; Piron, 2000). Most of the studies suggest that country-of-origin information, which is

indicated by 'Made in . . .' labels, serves several purposes in consumer decision-making processes. It acts as a salient attribute in a consumer product evaluation (Johansson, 1989), it stimulates the consumer's interest in the product (Hong & Wyer, 1989), it affects behavioural intentions through social norms and it influences buyer behaviour through affective processes, as in the case of consumer's patriotic feelings about their own country (Han & Terpstra, 1988). The overall evaluation of products is influenced by country stereotyping, that is, the image that consumers have about a certain country will influence their perceptions of products from that country (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Vukasovič, 2009).

Conclusions

In the research a correlation model for COO and consumer perception were formed and empirically tested. By testing the correlation model with multiple analysis of variance for repeated measures, it was determined that there was a statistically significant correlation between the factors. An influence of the COO on other product properties was determined as well. At the same time, a positive perception and knowledge of trade-mark of a Slovenian manufacturer was determined, because information regarding the Slovenian manufacturer and Slovenian origin had an impact on higher scores for the tested product properties.

The important contribution of the research is the surveyed issue and the approach to researching the impact of product origin on the scientific field of marketing and on the field of consumer behaviour. The research represents a deeper investigation of impact of COO on consumer perceptions. In particular, the research contributes importantly to the discussed issues by using the conceptual model in the scientific research, which combines separate product properties with effects of its origin. An integrated approach to the research of impacts of product origin was chosen in order to form interlinks between product origin and its other sensorical properties. The research results support manufacturers and marketing managers in understanding the role of COO in the domestic and international high-volume mass market.

A certain amount of restraint is needed in coming to conclusions based on the research results, since the sample was divided into two equally small groups and each group was separately exposed to different factors and separately tested. As a consequence, the group was artificially halved and the importance of results was decreased at the same time, but diversity in comparisons was gained. The mentioned research should be considered in the light of the methodology of scientific research, as the way of obtaining a result is sometimes more important than the power of its results in itself. Therefore, in the future, it would make sense to use one (blank test) of the models for a total population sample. By that, the results would gain recognition. We also believe that the model used in the research could be

utilized for other products and other target groups, although its correlation results would probably be different.

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