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MARKETING PROGRAM STANDARDIZATION: THE EXPERIENCE OF TNCs IN POLAND

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the rate of standardization of marketing programs in transnational corporations in the consumer goods market in Poland, which currently is one of the fastest growing markets in the world. An important research objective was to observe how Polish consumers adopt the marketing patterns and related lifestyles from countries of Western Europe and the USA. The empirical tests and data, collected in a sample survey of 35 transnational corporations and their 140 products, and using varied methods of statistical inference, allowed to formulate the following conclusions. The analyzed TNC's adopted a clear standardization strategy in the Polish market. Among the analyzed products, 2/3 of them have been entirely transferred from foreign markets into the Polish market. A detailed analysis has indicated that the standardization rate of product and its items in the FMCG market in Poland is high and very high, and significantly higher than the pricing and advertising strategy standardization rates. The product standardization rate in the Polish market has been slightly higher than the rate in the developed countries, yet the pricing standardization has been significantly lower. The standardization of advertising strategies showed similar features.

Keywords: Marketing Program Standardization, Transnational Corporations, Business Environment, Poland

1. Introduction

Transnational corporations, which expand onto markets diversified in terms of cultural, socio-economic and geographical conditions, need to consider in their strategic planning a number of challenges provided by a turbulent international environment. The results and performance of multinational firms depend on the choice of appropriate global business strategy considering the existing unique combination of internal and external factors. The growing pressure of globalization has forced multinational companies to redesign their global strategies and to adopt a new perspective on the globalizing markets (Lemak and Arunthanes, 1997). In the executive perspective, which refers to the instrumental aspect of marketing strategy, decisions are made about the degree of adaptability of the globally applied marketing programs to dynamic local conditions. The need to determine the optimal degree of standardization or adaptation in marketing operations in various international markets is vital for managers of large multinational companies (Agrawal, 1995).

Apart from traditional expansion markets, TNC's are in the search for new market opportunities. It is facilitated by trade liberalization process worldwide as well as growing

significance of emerging markets and new technologies of communication with customers. Among the markets of particular interest for investors and business is Poland – the largest CEE country. It is a key FDI recipient among the countries of the former Eastern bloc, and the only European country to avoid the recession of 2008-09.

And yet the knowledge on strategies executed by corporations in the Polish market, and in all post-Soviet states, is limited to few publications. Particularly critical is the lack of the global marketing theory for the former socialist countries, which would be firmly grounded in thorough empirical tests. Moreover, the current profound changes in this region of the world have resulted in the risk increase among investors e.g. from the USA (Paul and Wooster, 2008). This paper is a contribution to further research on marketing program standardization in relation to the global marketing strategy (GMS) theory (Zou and Cavusgil, 2002). Its key purpose is to determine the rate of standardization of marketing programs in transnational corporations in the consumer goods market in Poland, using the empirical research and rigorous statistical inference on a representative sample. Such approach, in which the sample is composed of a group of multinational firms in the Polish market, is unprecedented.

2. Marketing Program Standardization

The range and intensity of standardization has been researched globally for over 50 years. Sorenson and Wiechmann's study (1975) has become a classic publication in the subject of standardization extent in international markets. A comprehensive research on the extent of standardization in particular instruments of the marketing mix in the long-term outlook was conducted by Boddewyn *et al.* (1986). It analyzed the operation of the U.S. firms in the European Economic Community market.

Beside the EEC/EU and Japanese markets, or more specifically beside the Old Europe countries, mainly the markets in Asia (India, China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Turkey), Central Eastern Europe and Latin America were researched for standardization (Zou *et al.* 1997; Sakarya, 2014). A very high extent of product standardization (M= 6.13) and relatively high extent of price standardization (M= 4.17) were observed in the marketing operations of the TNCs in Turkey (Ozsomer and Simonin, 2004). The analysis results of the standardization of marketing strategies in the U.S. firms expanding onto the Indian market showed a low extent of advertising message standardization, including the advertising slogan standardization (M= 2.67), while the packaging standardization extent was higher than the scale midpoint (M= 3.34) (Griffith *et al.* 2003). Samiee *et al.* (2003) studied the extent of advertising strategy unification in divisions of the U.S. and Japanese enterprises operating in the countries of South Eastern Asia (adopting the same 1-5 scale). The extent of advertising strategy standardization in China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan was defined relatively low¹ (Samiee *et al.* 2003). In Turkey, on the other hand, the extent of promotion standardization may be defined relatively high² (Ozsomer and Simonin, 2004).

The research into the expansion of Columbian enterprises onto the Latin American markets indicated that the highest standardization extent was for product-related items (M= 4.45) and for budget-related promotion activities (M= 4.91). However, the product core item (M = 1.75), distribution (M= 2.23) and pricing and promotion strategies (M= 2.65) were adapted (Zou *et al.* 1997).

The analysis of standardization in Central Eastern and Eastern European countries was the subject of a limited number of publications in the world literature (e.g. Okazaki and Skapa 2008; Schuh, 2000). The most comprehensive attempt to evaluate the extent of standardization and to define the factors which determine the unification level in the transforming countries of the post-Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) was made by Schuh (2000). He found the extent of marketing program standardization in the studied enterprises in all five markets to be high and very high (Schuh, 2000).

¹ The means were 2.84, 2.90, 2.86, and 2.81 respectively.

² M = 4.17 on the 1-7 scale.

In general, the research on the standardization of marketing programs, which has been conducted ever since the first half of the 1960, allowed to recognize three major trends: a) defining the standardization factors, b) measuring the standardization extent, and c) analyzing the economic and organizational effects of applying a unified marketing strategy in corporations. Empirically, the studies of the first two trends have still not been documented enough (Samiee and Roth, 1992). They cannot be considered fully representative as they do not encompass the post socialist markets, including Poland, to the extent that would allow for general conclusions. The studies include only the developed countries and the trade blocs integrating the developed economies (EEC/EU), Turkey, and several Asian countries. Consequently, it is justified to take up the research work on the standardization of marketing strategies in transnational corporations in the Polish market, as a result of major gaps in the current theoretical and empirical knowledge.

3. Research Questions and Hypothesis

In this paper, which aims to determine the extent of standardization of marketing programs in transnational corporations in the consumer goods market in Poland, several valid questions and hypotheses were proposed. An important research objective was to observe whether the preferences of the Polish buyers are unique and individual. In particular, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. What is the extent of standardization of the selected instruments of the marketing mix (in the Polish FMCG market): a) product (product form, brand and graphical design, packaging size and shape, label, available variants), b) price, c) advertising strategy including advertising communication channels (channel type and advertising intensity) and advertising message in the following advertising media: television, print media, outdoor, cinema?

RQ2. What are the correlations among particular dimensions of marketing strategies in the context of their standardization?

Additionally, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H1. The extent of standardization of the marketing mix instruments in the Polish market is higher than in the markets of the developed economies where consumers tend to individualize their needs.

H2. In the Polish market product and product brand are standardized more frequently than product price and advertising strategy.

4. Research Methodology

The research includes the transnational corporations which operate in the Polish FMCG market and have subsidiaries in Poland to execute the marketing strategy on behalf of their supervising units and under their control. The information on the home country of a particular enterprise or corporation was verified based on the data collected by Polish Information and Foreign Investment Agency, a national agency located in Warsaw, Poland. The home country (where the enterprise originated) was assumed to be the country of the head office or the country where a regional office (e.g., for Europe or East-Central Europe) is located provided that major executive decisions on behalf of the head office are made there, including the decisions on the extent and types of standardization of marketing strategies.

The collection method of the data necessary for the research was designed to have the form of a questionnaire. Its final version was adopted by the author of this study after a pilot testing in 5 TNCs. The questionnaire included 24 specific questions in 4 parts.

4.1. Sample and Data Collection

The number of transnational corporations operating in the FMCG market in Poland was determined and then verified with the use of generally accessible source materials. These were related to foreign firms doing business in the entire Polish market, including the fast moving consumer goods market. The unit selected to be studied was an operating subsidiary of a TNC. The choice of subsidiary as the basic research unit resulted from the fact that only several largest transnational corporations in the Polish FMCG market work by splitting into relatively independent and standalone business units (BU). At the time when the research survey was conducted, 128 enterprises met the set criteria. The questionnaire was sent to directors, marketing managers of the studied corporations, CEOs, senior brand managers and sales managers in all 128 subsidiaries of transnational corporations.

The responses were provided by 35 companies, which is 27.3% of the studied group. The response rate is comparable to earlier studies in similar field, conducted in international markets: Japan – 33%, United Kingdom – 26%, EU – 23.5% (Ozsomer and Simonin, 2004; Theodosiou and Katsikeas, 2001; Taylor and Okazaki, 2006). However, it is significantly higher than the obligatory response rate (adopted in the literature on the subject) in the research conducted among senior managers (15%-20%).

4.2. Measuring Method of the Standardization Rate

The extent of standardization of the selected marketing mix instruments was defined (for product, for price, and for advertising strategy) for the purposes of granting it an operational character and measuring it during further research. The product standardization rate was measured with a seven-point Likert scale (7= fully standardized, 1= fully adapted) (Sorenson and Wiechman, 1975). The same seven-point Likert scale was used to measure the extent of price standardization. High standardization rate (7= fully standardized) was awarded when price in the host market was identical to that in the home market (where the sample product originated), taking into account currency differences and product variants (Theodosiou and Katsikeas, 2001; Sorenson and Wiechmann, 1975). The extent of advertising strategy standardization was measured by the mean score of two standardized partial variables for the given product (Taylor and Okazaki, 2006; Sorenson and Wiechmann, 1975), which were the rates of advertising message and advertising channels standardization (Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos, 1997).

The respondents evaluated the standardization degrees of product, price and advertising for four product lines developed by their company. These included (i) A. Product with highest sales growth dynamics, (ii) B. Product with lowest sales growth dynamics, (iii) C. Product with largest market share, and (iv) D. Product with smallest market share.

The studied products could meet two of the above criteria at once, e.g. a product with the highest sales growth dynamics could also have the largest market share, or a product with lowest sales growth dynamics could also have the smallest market share. Adopting four ventures (major products which are representative of their enterprises) was intended to increase the validity of the results. In the research of marketing programs standardization so far usually only one product was studied. And usually it was selected for study due to being the most significant for a corporation in a given market. Occasionally, several major products were analyzed for the extent of their standardization, by averaging the responses provided by respondents. The research method employed in this study is innovative and designed to qualify the results of standardization processes in corporations. It has not yet been employed.

The scales to measure the extent of product and advertising strategy standardization are reliable. The investigation paved the way for determining that each point is necessary, no point is redundant, and eliminating any point would significantly reduce the reliability of the scales. By means of the exploratory factor analysis it was determined that each scale is uni-dimensional, which confirms that the Cronbach alpha α was appropriately employed, and proves high factor validity of the scales. Using an eigenvalue of one or greater as the factor

selection criterion in each case allows to single out one factor, and the factor loadings are appropriately high.

4.3. Statistical Analysis Methods

The research material was collected in specially designed tables and then analyzed statistically. To evaluate whether the method of designing a product form is not significantly different for the four studied products, the stochastic independence test was employed χ^2 . And to evaluate whether the extent of standardization is affected by which of the four products is analyzed, the non-parametric repeated measures ANOVA test (the Friedman test) was employed. To analyze whether the extent of standardization is significantly higher than the scale midpoint (4 on the seven-point scale or 3 on the five-point scale), the Student's *t*-test was employed. To compare the three rates of standardization of product, price and advertising strategy for the same products, the Friedman test χ^2 was employed. The same test was used to compare the seven product items and three elements of the marketing communication.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Degree of Tested Products Transfer from Home to Polish Market

The extent of standardization of marketing strategies is related to the degree of their possible modifications in the host market compared to the home market. It has been measured for the products which originated abroad and were transferred to the Polish market in the same form, as well as for the products which were slightly adapted from their original form to accommodate Polish business environment. Products originated entirely in Poland were not studied. Table 1 exhibits the results of the analysis with respect to the degree of product transfer from their home to the Polish market.

Table 1. The selected products analysis in terms of the degree of their form transfer from their home market to the Polish market

Product Form Created	All Products		Product A		Product B		Product C		Product D	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
a) entirely abroad	52	42.98	14	40.00	15	42.86	11	31.43	19	54.29
b) mostly abroad	15	12.40	7	20.00	4	11.43	5	14.29	3	8.57
c) partly abroad and partly in Poland	5	4.13	2	5.71	1	2.86	3	8.57	2	5.71
d) mostly in Poland	6	4.96	2	5.71	2	5.71	2	5.71	0	0.00
e) entirely in Poland	43	35.54	10	28.57	13	37.14	14	40.00	11	31.43
Total	121	100.00	35	100.00	35	100.00	35	100.00	35	100.00
Products which were transferred from abroad to Polish market in various degrees (A to D)	78	64.46	25	71.43	22	62.86	21	60.00	24	68.57

Notes: Product A – product with highest sales growth dynamics, Product B – product with lowest sales growth dynamics, Product C – product with largest market share, Product D – product with smallest market share. $\chi^2 = 7.896$; *df* = 12; *p* = 0.793. No significant differences were measured among products A, B, C and D when considering the degree of product form transfer from foreign market to Poland.

In all 35 enterprises the data on four products (A, B, C, and D) was collected, which translates into a group of 140 products potentially transferred from foreign markets to Poland. However, the studied products could meet two of the above criteria at once, e.g. a product with the highest sales growth dynamics could also have the largest market share, and a product with lowest sales growth dynamics could also have the smallest market share. There were 19 such instances, which reduced the sample size to 121 products. In the entire group the majority of

products (65%) were transferred variably to the Polish market (78 products), while 43 products (which is 35% of the sample) were created entirely in Poland. These are not included further in the analysis and the article itself since the study is focused on the products originating abroad.

Among the 78 products originating abroad before transfer to the Polish market as many as 66.7% (n= 52) have been developed entirely in a foreign market. It is also a significant rate (43%) among all 121 studied products. The rate is growing for products designed entirely and mostly abroad (jointly) to reach 86% (among 78 products) and 55% (among 121 products). It may suggest that transnational corporations deciding to introduce the products initially designed for their home markets (or even for global markets) into the Polish market are willing to standardize their products and are not interested in adapting them (even slightly). In few cases only (n= 6 that is less than 5%) the products originating abroad were significantly adapted to accommodate the Polish market conditions, which resulted in modification of most of their original features.

It may be assumed, based on a high proportion of the studied products which were transferred to the Polish market without any modifications (43%) or with slight changes (65%), that transnational enterprises successfully apply product standardization strategy in the Polish FMCG market (see Table 1). It is a major strategy in the studied sample. The degree of price standardization, and of the studied advertising strategy instruments, did not differ significantly for particular products A, B, C and D. The degree of product, price and advertising strategy standardization is not affected by whether the studied product is A, B, C, or D. Consequently, further in the article all 78 products were analyzed jointly.

As of extent of advertising strategy standardization for studied products jointly, Table 2 exhibits the analysis results of the degree of standardization of product (with selected product items), price and advertising strategy (divided into the degree of advertising message standardization and the rate of advertising communication channels standardization) for all studied products jointly.

Table 2. Extent of standardization of product, price and advertising strategy for studied products jointly

Marketing instruments	n	M	SD	t (M= 4)	p
Product (jointly):	78	6.02	1.48	12.069	0.00
- Product form	78	6.05	1.67	10.872	0.000000
- Packaging size	78	6.15	1.71	11.10	0.000000
- Packaging shape	78	6.28	1.69	11.929	0.000000
- Brand (name)	78	6.22	1.75	11.206	0.000000
- Brand graphical design (logo, font, color)	78	6.27	1.66	12.040	0.000000
- Line-up (available variants)	78	5.71	1.89	7.951	0.000000
- Label	78	5.49	2.02	6.509	0.000000
Price	78	3.76	1.61	-1.34	0.184080
Marketing strategy*	59	3.83	1.25	-1.026	0.309177
a) Advertising message in media	61	3.86	1.99	-0.535	0.594576
b) Advertising communication channels:	70	3.77	1.79	-1.093	0.278389
- Communication channel type	69	3.49	2.24	-1.881	0.064269
- Advertising intensity	68	2.60	1.96	-5.89	0.000000

Notes: * for advertising strategies n<78 means that while the research was conducted, not all products in the market were advertised.

The product standardization extent jointly (for 78 studied products) was 6.02 ± 1.48 , and was significantly higher than the extent of price standardization ($M= 3.76 \pm 1.61$) and of

advertising standardization jointly ($M= 3.83\pm 1.25$) ($\chi^2= 50.549$; $p= 0.000$). The price standardization degree did not vary significantly from the advertising standardization extent.

The results of the study of the 78 products suggest that the standardization degree of particular product items of these products (see Table 2) is significantly different ($\chi^2= 53.222$; $p= 0.000$). The standardization extent of product form, packaging size and shape, brand and graphical design, is significantly higher than the degree of product label and product line-up (i.e. available variants) standardization. Among all analyzed product items the highest extent of standardization was observed for packaging shape ($M= 6.28$) and brand graphical design ($M= 6.27$). A very high degree of standardization was also noted for product brand ($M=6.22$) and packaging size ($M= 6.15$). Also, product form demonstrates a high extent of unification ($M= 6.05$). When compared to analysis results of studies conducted in foreign markets with the employment of a similar research method, the product standardization extent in Poland is higher ($M= 6.02$) than in Japan ($M= 5.88$) and slightly lower than in Turkey ($M= 6.13$) (Ozsomer and Simonin, 2004). The product standardization degree in both developing markets (Polish and Turkish) was slightly higher than the degree of product standardization in the developed market (Japan).

The results of price standardization analysis ($M= 3.76$) indicate that it is the marketing mix instrument which was not clearly standardized or clearly adapted in the studied enterprises. The data collected in the Polish FMCG market is different than the latest data on price standardization in other target markets. In markets of developed economies, for that matter, pricing standardization strategy was executed to a greater extent than in Poland. It was the result of the multinationals operating in European markets (British, German etc.) having their home markets in other developed countries with similar marketing environment (e.g., similar consumer disposable income) (Theodosiou and Katsikeas, 2001). On the other hand, the research conducted in developing markets, where a subsidiary's cultural and economic distance to the home market was larger than earlier, indicated that the pricing strategy was adapted to local conditions of the host market (Ozsomer and Simonin, 2004; Ozsomer *et al.* 1991). The pricing standardization degree in Poland was listed between the pricing standardization degree in economies with high GDP per capita and the pricing standardization degree in developing countries (Ozsomer and Simonin, 2004; Sousa and Bradley, 2009).

The studied elements of advertising communication channels differed significantly in standardization rate for all products ($\chi^2= 59.018$; $p= 0.000$). The lowest degree of standardization (that is high adaptation) was measured for advertising intensity ($M= 2.60\pm 1.96$). The mean scores for communication channel type (3.49 ± 2.24) indicate that this instrument of marketing communication was not clearly standardized or clearly adapted (see Table 2).

The independent-samples median test χ^2 suggests that the extent of advertising message standardization in particular media (TV, printed press, outdoor and cinema) was significantly different ($\chi^2= 38.697$; $p= 0.000$). The dominant strategy, applied by the studied enterprises which advertise on TV, was the strategy of very little modification. It was adopted for 50% of the analyzed products. Despite high degrees of TV advertising message standardization, the total extent of advertising message standardization for all studied media is lower than the scale midpoint and is measured at $M= 3.86$. It is attributed to the fact that the significant degree of TV advertising message standardization was diminished by high degree of print and outdoor advertising adaptation.

When compared to other foreign markets where similar empirical research with similar method was conducted, the degree of advertising strategy standardization in the Polish market is assumed lower for this promotion mix element in the selected EU markets (Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands - the subsidiaries of trans-nationals, set up in these countries, were studied as originating in Japan and the USA). On the 1-5 scale, the advertising standardization degree in the EU was measured at $M= 4.12$ for Japanese corporations and at $M= 4.68$ for American corporations, which is considered high and very high (Taylor and Okazaki, 2006). Although for multinationals from the USA and Japan the geographical distance to the markets of the five studied EU countries is greater, to apply standardization was easier for them than it was for the analyzed transnational corporations with their head offices in Europe, to standardize in the Polish market, which is near geographically but far in terms of

marketing conditions. The degree of advertising strategy standardization in the Polish FMCG market was rather similar to that observed in the Asian Tigers, China and India (Griffith *et al.* 2003; Samiee *et al.* 2003). The mean scores for advertising standardization in India, Taiwan, China, Singapore and Hong Kong were between M= 2.67 and M= 2.90 (on a five-point scale). They were listed slightly below the scale midpoint, similar to the scores in the Polish market.

6. Conclusions

The present study is an attempt to demonstrate the actual extent of standardization of the marketing mix elements (product, price and advertising) in the FMCG market in Poland. The research results allow formulating several conclusions. The analyzed trans-nationals adopted a clear standardization strategy in the Polish market. 2/3 of the studied products have been transferred from foreign markets into the Polish market entirely or extensively. The products created exclusively for the Polish market (or those which had been in the market for some time and were taken over from Polish companies) are in minority in the offer of the studied enterprises. The socio-economic transformation processes which Poland experienced during the late 1980 and early 1990 resulted in the market opening for new consumption patterns and new products from Western Europe. Polish consumers began to adopt blindly the consumption patterns specific for the developed economies of the EU and the USA. The power of marketing campaigns by large multinationals, and promoting particular lifestyles in the media, contributed to further strengthening of the "ideas import" model in the transition years, which has continued to date.

Detailed analysis of the standardization degree of the studied products has indicated that the standardization rate of product and its items in the Polish FMCG market is high and very high, and significantly higher than the pricing and advertising strategy standardization rates. It may be assumed, therefore, that hypothesis 2 (H2) has been substantiated. On the other hand, hypothesis 1 (H1) which stipulated that "the extent of standardization of the marketing mix instruments in the Polish market is higher than in the markets of the developed economies where consumers tend to individualize their needs" has not been validated by the research results. Where the product standardization rate in the Polish market was slightly higher than the rate in the developed countries, the pricing standardization was significantly lower. Similarly, the standardization degree of advertising strategies in the Polish market was lower than in the markets of the selected Western European countries.

7. Managerial Implications

Learning how unique (different) or standard (similar) the Polish market of consumer goods is, when compared to foreign markets, is a contribution to research and evaluate the directions of market structures development in Poland. The empirical data and research conclusions presented in this article can be applicable not only for transnational corporations already present or preparing to enter the Polish market, but also for Polish enterprises with international aspirations, and interested in successful and cost-effective expansion onto former socialist markets (Adamczyk and Sagan, 2015). This knowledge may also be valuable for local enterprises operating in the consumer goods market in Poland as it demonstrates the methods and operation range of the powerful international competition. It should, therefore, be an indication of which competition tools and activities would be the appropriate answer to marketing decisions of foreign corporations.

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