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Research of Buying Habits of Private Label Goods in the FMCG Market

Summary

Changes in private label purchasing behavior in the FMCG market can be tracked domestically. The literature review and secondary research was carried out by comparative analysis of related publications of domestic and foreign authors. As primary research, we used observations as descriptive research, focus group interviews as qualitative research, and online questionnaires as quantitative research.

Qualitative research shows that women and larger households purchase more private label products.

Based on our quantitative research, there is no evidence that women and men differ in their preferences for retail or manufacturer brands. We only found significant gender differences in perceptions of the importance of private label product packaging. Households with larger household sizes spend only slightly more on private label goods.

Based on the primary research, we can in no way claim that private label products are of inferior quality to manufacturer brand products.

Keywords: private label, shopping habits, FMCG market, gender, household size, quality

Introduction

The coronavirus outbreak has brought significant changes to the retail sector. The impact of the epidemic on Hungarian retail sales is product and market segment-specific. There are product-specific differences in consumer behaviour, which are also reflected in the purchasing behaviour of private label goods.

Private label products take precedence over everyday purchases when making decisions for customers. The coronavirus epidemic has further strengthened the position of private label products (Kátai, 2020a). Daily shopping is mainly task-oriented and includes purchasing basic foodstuffs (Törőcsik-Szűcs, 2021).

A prominent factor in price competition among retail chains is the emergence of private labels. Since the outbreak of the epidemic, buyers have steadily increased their sensitivity to price, switching brands more frequently for better prices, brand loyalty has declined, and their willingness to switch brands has increased. In addition to competition between manufacturer and private brands, there is also competition between private labels in retail chains (Danyi et al., 2021).

The so-called "downshopping" process has begun, with shoppers choosing cheaper private label products over more expensive manufacturer-labeled products in many cases. Value for money is more important than ever, but high-income earners are switching to cheaper products to a lesser extent (Gyöngyössi, 2022).

Private label products are cheaper than private label products, not because there is a significant difference in quality, but primarily because the retail chain does not have to spend money to bring the private label to market and maintain its reputation. On the other hand, if private label products are successful, customer loyalty will be further enhanced (Érsek M., 2023).

Private label purchases increased in both value and volume. As demand declines, the shift toward cheaper brands has increased. Generally speaking, private label products experience larger price increases than manufacturer products and are therefore more expensive than manufacturer brands (Tamásné Szabó, 2023).

In the food market, sales of private label products fell by an average of 3% year-on-year between April 2022 and March 2023, while sales of manufacturer brands fell by 5%. Shoppers respond to price increases in specific categories, products, and brands by either switching to lower-priced products or to private labels (Tamásné Szabó, 2023).

Method

Through comparative analysis of relevant publications by domestic and foreign authors, literature review and desk research were conducted, focusing on the concept of commercial brands, their denominations, types, functions and demographic and psychographic factors that influence brand choice, as well as the current value and sales share.

As a primary study, we conducted descriptive, qualitative, and quantitative research, including observations, focus group interviews, and questionnaires. In our primary study, we examined demographic factors that influence commercial brand choice, including gender, age, and household size, as well as psychological factors, including customer perceptions, emphasizing levels of perceived quality variables, as well as price and attitude.

Observation

The observation as a descriptive research method was applied in June 2023 in three multinational chain stores (Aldi Hungary Food Ltd, Tesco-Global Áruházak cPlc, Penny-Market Ltd). We conducted our observations in discount store types (Aldi, Penny Market) and hypermarket store types, because these store types may be characterized by different shopping frequencies (daily versus bulk purchases).

Focus Group Interviews

Among the qualitative research methods, we chose focus group interviews to explore attitudes towards the purchase of private label food products in the FMCG market.

Focus group interviews were conducted in June 2023 in Debrecen and Hosszúpályi, Hajdú-Bihar County, Hungary. When selecting respondents, we ensured that participants with different sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, family size, and occupation) were included to explore the hypothesized different attitudes. Among the respondents, eight were in the 20-40 age group and five were in the 41-72 age group. A total of 13 interviewees participated in the two focus group interviews, including eight female interviewees. Interview scenarios include daily consumer product purchasing habits, brand selection, and commercial branding issues.

Questionnaire Survey

On the basis of our descriptive and qualitative primary research results, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1 For customers, private label products are of the same quality as producer brand products.

H2 The female gender is the most likely to buy private label products.

H3 Household size influences the purchase of private label products.

The questionnaire survey was conducted by sharing the questionnaire on online forums published on Google drive in the period of 19-26 September 2023. The sample size was 215 persons. SPSS Statistics 22.0 was used to process and evaluate the questionnaire responses.

The questionnaire consisted of 22 closed, open and 5-point Likert scale questions. The degree of agreement with the attitude statement was indicated on 5-point Likert scales. This scale is also a good measure of the quality and intensity of attitudes (Forgács, 2017).

The number of questionnaires that could be processed was 215, and the sociodemographic background variables of the respondents and their distribution are illustrated in Table 1.

Results

Literature and Seondary Research

During the purchase decision process, the evaluation of alternatives can focus on the product or service's features, price, brand and even its guarantee (Törőcsik – Szűcs, 2021). Among the attributes, we chose quality and brand as the focal point of our research.

The term "private label" has various definitions and in daily life can refer to retail, store, private label or commercial brand (Kotler – Keller, 2006). Private label products include goods sold under a retailer's brand name. The brand name can be the retailer's own name or a name specifically created by the retailer (PLMA, 2022).

A private label can be distinguished by the fact that the product bears the name of a trade company, i.e. it serves as a corporate brand. The use of a product brand, independent of the name of the retail chain, provides the retail brand with a fancy name, image and packaging. Typical characteristics of a brand distinguish a private label from a manufacturer's brand or a competitor's private label (Bauer – Kolos, 2017). The function of corporate and product brands is to create competitive advantage and increase sales and profits. However, corporate brands can only shape corporate image and enhance corporate loyalty, while product brands can only indirectly achieve these functions (Pénzes – Gyenge, 2010).

There are four types of private labelling strategies: generic, premium, imitative, or competitor. Rekettye (2009) does not consider generic private labels to be true private brands. Generic private labels target primarily price-sensitive customers; they serve price competition and protect retailers from price cuts by competitors. Premium private brands often have their own brand name, which requires marketing support, ongoing product development and quality control (Bauer –

Table 1 The distribution of respondents is the background variables of the questionnaire sample (N=215 capita)

Gender	Frequency (capita)	Distribution (%)
Female	168	78.1
Male	45	20.9
Other/ Does not wish to respond	2	1.0
Age	Capita	%
Between 22-33 years old	66	30.7
Between 34-40 years old	31	14.4
Between 40-50 years old	59	27.4
Between 51-60 years old	31	14.4
Over 60 years old	28	13.0
Residence	Capita	%
Village/municipality	123	57.2
City	43	20.0
County seat	38	17.7
Capital	11	5.1
Qualifications	Capita	%
Primary school or professional worker	33	15.3
Graduated	79	36.7
Higher education or higher education qualification	103	47.9
Number of household members	Capita	%
Single	29	13.5
2 people	69	32.1
3 people	51	23.7
4 or more people	66	30.7
How to run the household	Capita	%
Running an independent household	190	88.4
Not running an independent household	25	11.6
The financial situation of the household	Capita	%
Does not wish to respond	3	1.4
Having daily living problems	37	17.2
Barely living on the income	15	7.0
Living well, but cannot save	91	42.3
Living well, but cannot save much money	31	14.4
Living well and even saving money	38	17.7

Source: edited by the authors based on SPSS output

Kolos, 2017). Competing retail brands focus on quality and often use marketing strategies to attract the right target audience (Agárdi, 2017).

The advantage of private label is that shoppers can regularly buy high-quality food and non-food products at lower prices than manufacturer brands. Private label goods are made from the same or better ingredients than the manufacturer's brand (PLMA, 2022).

According to Kumar-Steenkamp (2007), this century is the century of private brands. Balló (2013) believes that private label market penetration is affected by three main factors: consumer, retailer and product category characteristics.

The choice of commercial brands can be viewed from the perspective of manufacturers and retailers (Raju et al., 1995; Dhar-Hoch, 1997) and from the perspective of consumers. First, the explanatory role of demographic factors in consumers' brand choice is studied. Due to its lower importance, the study was later expanded to include attitudinal and behavioral characteristics. However, despite researchers' suggestions, these studies have never attempted to integrate demographic and psychological factors to achieve greater explanatory power (Myers, 1967; Baltas-Doyjle, 1998). The purpose of Abishek's (2014) study was to integrate demographic and psychological factors that influence private label goods' choice. Demographic factors that are important to commercial brand purchases include age, education, income, and family size. Psychological factors better explain consumers' choice of private brands. These psychological factors include: shopping experience (also known as awareness of private label products), differential responses to marketing campaigns, customer perceptions of certain products (perceived quality variable level, perceived risk level, perceived value for money), consumer differential needs, customer perceptions of the importance of different products, prices and attitudes (Abishek 2014:54). The factors that influence private label choice in the logit model are the demographic and psychographic factors of customers (Abhishek 2014). Balló (2013) examined product characteristics when selecting commercial brands. Among product characteristics influencing commercial brand choice, there is a lack of research on Hungarian origin (Földi 2014, 2021).

In 2019, the share of Hungarian private label products was 29%, with a value of over 60% in the discount category (Gfk Consumerscan). According to the Nielsen Retail Index, private label sales value growth exceeded manufacturer brand growth by 2 percentage points in 2019 (Kátai, 2020a).

Private label share increased in 2020 in 14 out of 19 countries, according to Nielsen analysis of the PLMA Yearbook. In Hungary, the share of private labels is 34.8% by volume and 25% by value (Kátai 2020b).

Lidl launched its salt and sugar optimization programme in 2018 to support healthy eating among Hungarian consumers. It aims to reduce the added salt and sugar content of its own-brand products by an average of 20% by 2025. As of 2019, salt consumption was 532.1 tons, with 42 tons consumed annually, contributing to the health of customers (Pénzcentrum, 2021).

In April 2022, Pénzcentrum compared the prices of 15 nearly identical private label products from five online supermarket chains (Tesco, Auchan, Spar, Prima and Aldi). These fifteen products will be sold in Auchan at the lowest cart value (Biro, 2022).

Among the 17 countries studied by NielsenIQ, private label sales amounted to €302 billion in 2022, with Hungarian private label accounting for a 28% (10th) share (PLMA, 2022).

Store Insider magazine's Private Label competition took place in February 2023, with 54 out of 93 private label products making it to the finals. ALDI Hungary ranked first in about half of the categories, with a total of eight products winning the Private Label Product of the Year 2023 award. Another seven private label products were named "Outstanding Product" (Kovács, 2023).

Sustainability is one of the trends that retailers are keen to embrace and this aspect has been taken into account when developing private label products. High quality and affordable prices are also crucial for private label goods, which is a clear answer to consumer needs (Trademagazin, 2023).

Nielsen analysis of the PLMA Yearbook found that private label share increased in 2023 in 16 out of 17 countries. In Hungary, the share of private labels is 35.2% by volume (12th place) and 29.1% by value (Van Rompaey, 2023).

Primary Research

Observation

At Aldi discount stores, every customer's basket includes freshly baked own-brand baked goods "Fresh from the oven." Among the older age groups, the most popular dairy product is the brand "Milfina", with 20% sour cream 450g and "Cockaded" butter 100g being the most popular.

Clothing retail brand "F&F" is the brand of choice for Tesco hypermarket shoppers. Tesco's own brand Trappist cheese wheels were found in two customers' shopping baskets. From the perspective of chain stores, the items in the shopping basket are usually dry goods. Some shopping baskets contain fresh food (baked goods, dairy products). The "Tesco Finest" range was observed in the shopping cart, presumably because the quality own-label items are priced close to the price range of manufacturer brand items.

Observed at the Penny Market discount store, buyers mainly purchase dairy products under the brand "Sissy" and cold cuts under the brands "Carat" and "Spearheaded". Nearly all shoppers have fresh meat from the "Favorite Butchery" product range in their shopping carts. More customers preferred private label hygiene and beauty products ("Wippy", "Today") than in the other two chains. It has been observed that the younger generation purchases "Salty" private label chips and snacks.

To sum up our findings regarding observation, shoppers favoured fresh products (bakery, dairy, meat) for private label products, while they did not prefer dry goods and personal hygiene products.

Focus Group Interview

The buying behavior of most respondents is characterized by awareness, especially among women, but is also prone to impulsive buying, especially among men. The majority of respondents were action seekers. They were unable to define the term private label product as the respondents used the term "own-label". Private label products have increased their share of shopping cart value since the onset of coronavirus. Male respondents predominantly preferred manufacturer's brands and described private label goods as an area of experimentation.

They cited favourable price and quality as reasons for choosing private label.

One of the interviewees has been buying only private label products since the price of food has risen significantly, as this allows her to better budget her purchases. Her literal opinion: "I have found alternatives to all the manufacturer's label products. Some products I am willing to compromise on quality in order to save money. It is also important to mention that every day I get to know products whose quality is better for me than a manufacturer's branded product I have bought before."

Packaging of private label goods was rated as less eye-catching and unattractive. However, once they have tried it, the quality of the packaging is such that they will not be tempted to buy it again. Looking at product categories, respondents preferred dairy products (yoghurt, sour cream, cheese) to private label products. They expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of private label chemicals (cleaning and hygiene products). According to the interviewees, purchasing private label goods also depends on household size and income level, as well as the age and gender of the buyer.

Respondents who refused to purchase private label goods justified their decision by arguing that lower consumer prices meant lower quality and therefore did not meet their expectations of value for money.

Questionnaire Survey

Of the respondents who completed the questionnaire, 123 (57.2%) purchased private label products at least once a week and 69 (32.1%) purchased private label products at least once a month. Less than 4% of respondents never purchase private label goods.

The most popular private label products of the respondents are milk and dairy products (138 people, 64.2%), the second most popular are candy/snacks (75 people, 34.9%), and the third most popular are household cleaning products (74 people), 34.4%). The fourth most popular is dry goods (72 people, 33.5%). 26% of respondents (56) purchased private label goods in the meat products category, 23.3% (50 people) of respondents purchased in the cosmetics category, and 14% (30) of the respondents purchased in the clothing category. Based on respondent feedback, the category with the lowest purchase volume (9 people; 4.2%) was private label alcoholic and non-alcoholic products.

Respondents' favourite brand products are sold in Aldi discount stores (124 people; 58.2%) (Kokárdás, Milfina, Happy Harvest), followed by Lidl discount stores (86 people, accounting for 40%), followed by Tesco with 64 people (29.8%). 22.3% of respondents buy branded goods in discount market discount stores or Spar supermarkets.

Among the respondents, the most popular private label goods are sold in Aldi discount stores (124 people 58.2%) ("Cockaded", "Milfina", "Happy Harvest") and then in Lidl discount stores (86 people; 40%), followed by Tesco with 64 people (29 people, 8%). 22.3% of the respondents buy their private label goods in Penny Market discount stores or Spar supermarket stores.

The most common value for private label shopping carts is between HUF 5,000 and 10,000 (80 people, 37.2%), followed by more than HUF 15,000 (60 people, 27.9%). 18.6% of respondents (40 people) spent between HUF 11,000 and 15,000 on private label brands, while 16.3% (35 people) spent less than HUF 5,000 on private label brands.

To verify the first hypothesis, we examined respondents' recognition of the low quality of private label products using a five-point Likert scale. It was assumed that the quality of private label products is generally not low. So, if someone disagrees with this statement, they would consider that private label products are at least as good as manufacturer's labelled products. The cutoff point was set to the value 2, meaning that if a person chose a rating of 1-2, people do not think that private label products are of inferior quality. The mean across respondents is 2.12, but we use a T-test to examine whether it is possible that the true mean is lower than 2, and due to sampling bias, we only observe higher values. We first examined the average of the above responses. If the mean is less than 2, then the hypothesis is confirmed, i.e., H0: MU <=2, or H1: MU >2, where the null hypothesis is accepted. We performed a one-sample T-test, however, due to SPSS limitations we could only run a two-sided test for MU = 2. This has a p-value of 0.143, higher than the 5% significance level, so we cannot reject that the mean is 2, i.e., the null hypothesis is confirmed.

Since we could not run a one-sided test, we decided to use a different test aspect. 32.09% of the respondents who chose a value higher than two, i.e., almost one third of the respondents, do not consider the quality of private label products to be low. This proportion was tested using a one-sample T-test, and since there is also a lack of one-sided testing here, it was compared to an estimated test ratio of 0.4. H0: MU = 0.4; H1: MU! = 04, in which the null hypothesis could be rejected, since the p-value in this case is only 0.014. Based on these two tests, we concluded that there is no way to claim that private label products are inferior to the quality of manufacturer brand products based on consumer responses.

We attempted to demonstrate the female over-representation of private label purchases. Attitudinal agreement with the preferred private label brand was measured on a five-point Likert scale. Based on the mean of respondents by gender, there is very minimal variation, and in addition, the value is lower for males at 3, while the female value is 3.11. Significance was tested using an independent two-sample T-test. We were only allowed to run a two-sided test in SPSS, so the hypotheses of the test are H0: $MU_{female} = MU_{male}$ and H1: $MU_{female}! = MU_{male}$. We would like to keep H1 in any case, otherwise the hypothesis cannot be confirmed in any case. However, the p-value of the test (assuming equal variance) is 0.579, so we cannot reject the null hypothesis at any significance level, i.e., we cannot conclude that there is any difference between women and men in their preference for commercial or producer brands. We would prefer to keep H1 regardless of the situation, otherwise the hypothesis would not be confirmed in any circumstance. However, the p-value of the test (if the variance is equal) is 0.579, so we cannot reject the null hypothesis at any significance level, i.e., we cannot conclude that there is any difference between female and male respondents in their preference for private or producer brands.

With a mean of 3.47, men typically agree with the statement that the packaging of private label products is not as important, compared to a mean of 2.93 for women. When tested with an independent samples T-test, the gender difference is truly significant at a p-value of 0.009 at the 95% confidence interval.

People living in the capital and in villages attach less importance to the packaging of private label goods, and those living in cities, but especially in county seats, tend to attach more importance to packaging.

A correlation test was conducted to check whether there is a linear relationship between household size and the purchase of private label products. The study results showed that there is no significant correlation with most factors, only the amounts spent on private label products show a significant correlation. There is a significant and weak positive relationship between the two variables with a p-value of 0.011 and a correlation value of 0.173. This means that households with larger size spend slightly more on private label products. This is probably simply because more people mean they have to buy more. The study shows that they do not buy more often and do not prefer private label products. These two pieces of information also support the view that there is no reason for the increase in costs other than the larger quantity purchased.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of our secondary and primary research, we can conclude that private labels are increasingly important among Hungarian consumers.

Although consumers are familiar with private label products, they often cannot clearly identify them. They know them as private label brands.

The focus group interviews revealed that women and larger households buy more private label products.

Based on our quantitative research, there is no evidence that male and female consumers differ in their preferences for private or manufacturer brands. We only found significant gender differences in perceptions of the importance of private label packaging. Households with larger household sizes spend only slightly more on private label goods.

Our preliminary research shows there is no evidence that private label products are of inferior quality to private label products.

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