

Facebook moms help! What to buy for Teething? The Impact of Social Proof on Consumer Decisions of Young Mothers

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Abstract: Young mothers often look for solutions to problems related to childcare in groups associating other mothers on Facebook. One can find there not only numerous advice on, among others, nutrition, care or even treatment of infants, but also learn about various consumer trends. The aim of the article is to determine the role of social proof on groups of young mothers on Facebook in making consumer decisions. The research method used was the content analysis on a selected Polish group for young mothers on Facebook. It was hypothesized that social proof on Facebook groups is important in making consumer decisions of young mothers regarding their children. This applies to all products intended for young children, from care products, food products, toys, accessories for children, to medicinal products. Young mothers are often influenced by the prevailing trends and opinions of other members of the group for young mothers, who may be real mothers or – which one may not be aware of - representatives of various brands.

Keywords: social proof, groups on Facebook, consumer decisions, young mothers

1. Introduction

Social proof is a way to influence human behavior. This is where the opportunities and threats for both social media users and brands lie. This is particularly visible in Facebook groups, e.g. those dedicated to young mothers, where product recommendations often dominate among the topics of published posts. This may influence the consumer decisions of young mothers.

The aim of the article is to determine the role of social proof on groups of young mothers on Facebook in making consumer decisions.

The article consists of three parts. The first part is a review of the literature on the role of social proof in making consumer decisions on Facebook groups. The second part presents methodology of research. The last part is about research results.

2. The role of social proof in making consumer decisions on Facebook groups

Social proof is described by Cialdini (2004) as one of the tools of influencing people. It is a psychological phenomenon where people conform to the actions or beliefs of others in order to fit in or to make decisions. Essentially, it means that people tend to trust and follow the behavior of others, especially those they perceive as similar to themselves, in order to make decisions about what to do or believe (Cialdini, 2004; Goethals & Darley, 1977; Miller, 1984). Social proof can take many different forms, such as online reviews, celebrity endorsements, the behavior of people in our social circles and the actions of strangers.

There are many studies showing that social proof also works in the online environment, including social media (Amblee, N., & Bui, T. 2011; Talib, Y. Y. A., & Saat, R. M. 2017; Awotunde, J. B., & Jimoh, R. G. 2019; Naeem, M. 2021; Sanak-Kosmowska, 2021). In these media users are constantly exposed to the opinions and behavior of others. In the context of social media, social proof can manifest in a variety of ways, such as likes, comments, shares, and followers. One of the most common examples of social proof in social media is the use of likes and followers as a metric of popularity and influence. Users often view profiles with a large number of followers or likes as more credible and trustworthy, and are more likely to follow or engage with those profiles as a result. This can create a self-reinforcing cycle, where users with large followings continue to attract more followers and attention, further amplifying their social proof.

Another form of social proof in social media is the use of user-generated content (UGC), such as photos, reviews, and testimonials. When users see others posting positive reviews or sharing their experiences with a product or service, it can influence their own opinions and behavior. Brands often leverage user-generated content as a way to build trust and credibility with their audiences, by showcasing the experiences of real customers and demonstrating the value of their products or services.

Overall, social proof is a powerful tool for building credibility, trust, and influence in social media, and can have a significant impact on user behavior and decision-making. Therefore social media play a key role in businesses

marketing communications. Companies use them to achieve various communication goals, mainly of a long-term nature, such as building customer loyalty and satisfaction, maintaining constant and direct contact with clients, constantly informing them about a change in the offer, creating a positive image of the company or implementing the concept of socially responsible marketing (see Smith, Wollan & Zhou, 2011; Mergel, 2013; Klososky 2011; Thomas & Barlow, 2011). This is because these communication channels are gaining popularity around the world.

In Poland there are 27 million users of social media which is 66.3% of total population. The most used social media platform is Facebook (87.5% of internet users aged 16 to 64 who use platform each month) (Digital Poland 2023). All generations have their representatives on Facebook. This is a great business potential for companies (and other organizations) that increasingly use Facebook in their marketing activities to achieve their goals. These types of actions can be referred to as Facebook marketing. There are many studies on Facebook marketing (Carter et al., 2012; Dunay & Krueger, 2009; Hansson, et al. 2013; Haydon, 2009; Holzner, 2008; Levy, 2010; Ramsaran-Fowdar & Fowdar 2013; Treadaway & Smith, 2012; Zarrella & Zarrella, 2010). One of the marketing tool on Facebook could be groups. They are relatively little explored by researchers (Holzner, 2008; Levy, 2010; Xia, 2009). According to Levy (2010, p. 60-61) "Facebook Group" is "a real-life interest or group or to declare an affiliation or association with people and things", where one can create "a community of people and friends to promote, share and discuss relevant topics" (Ibid). Each Facebook user can set up their own group or groups. This also applies to organizations. Groups can be associated with a fanpage. Their main advantage is that they have relatively large organic reach. One can say that they are in original form of social media, they provoke discussions and content exchange. Therefore they have the potential to boost engagement among users (Lupa-Wójcik 2020).

- Moreover, one can set up three different types of groups on Facebook:
- public (open) groups - anyone can join them and any activity in this group may be visible to outsiders (for example, friends of a group member),
- private (closed) groups - user has to request to join the group and it must be approved by the administrator; activity in this group is not visible to outsiders,
- secret groups - user must be invited into the group and the group is not shown in any searches; activity in this group is not visible to outsiders (Levy, 2010, p. 61).

Groups can be used for various marketing purposes, e.g. they can be dedicated to anyone interested in a given topic, or only for an elite group, e.g. customers or employees (Lupa-Wójcik 2020).

Groups on Facebook usually have their own regulations, defining e.g. rules for publishing posts, rules for marking them (e.g. an order to use certain hashtags), or e.g. rules for communication (e.g. prohibiting the use of invectives). Failure to comply with the regulations may result in the user being thrown out of the group by the administrator. Sometimes post moderation takes place before it is published on the group's page (first the administrator must approve it before it is published) (Ibidem).

Each group has its own specific purpose. On the example of the groups for young mothers:

- groups dedicated to specific issues (e.g. inspiration for moms, breastfeeding group, baby nutrition group, etc.),
- groups of members from specific locations (e.g. bringing together young moms from a given location, city, etc.),
- groups of "advertising column", where everyone can place their own advertisement (for example, "I will give ..." / "I will exchange ..." / "I offer ..." / "I search ...", etc.),
- strictly sales groups - these are groups with additional options, such as: price (marked in green with the possibility of raising and lowering it), name of the sold product, the ability to place its photos, the ability to set the location - the place of receipt, etc.

All these features of Facebook groups make them a very effective marketing tool which can be used in various ways considering social proof. In the context of Facebook groups, social proof can take many forms, including:

- The number of members of a Facebook group - if a group has a large number of members, it can signal to potential members that the group is active and credible;
- The level of engagement within a Facebook group - if a group has a high level of engagement, with lots of comments, likes, and shares, it can indicate that the content and conversations within the group are valuable and interesting;

- Testimonials from existing members - when members share their positive experiences and results from being part of the group, it can encourage others to join and participate;
- Expert validation - when experts or influencers participate in the group, or when the group is affiliated with a reputable organization or brand, it can increase the perceived credibility and influence of the group;
- Recommendations - when members recommend products, services, or resources to others within the group, it can signal that those recommendations are credible and trustworthy.

Overall, social proof can be a powerful tool in making consumer decisions on Facebook groups. Brands can use it for their own purposes or, on the contrary, social proof on Facebook groups can work against them (if, for example, someone in the group warns against buying products of a given brand).

3. Methodology

The aim of the research is to determine the role of social proof on groups of young mothers on Facebook in making consumer decisions.

The following research questions were formulated:

- What categories of posts are published in the studied Facebook groups and what percentage are topics related to product recommendations?
- What reactions (including comments) do individual categories of posts meet, including topics related to product recommendations?
- What kind of products are most often recommended in the studied groups for young mothers?
- What role does social proof play on studied Facebook groups in making consumer decisions by young mothers, including in the area of health?

It has been hypothesized that social proof on Facebook groups is important in making consumer decisions of young mothers regarding their children.

As a research method used was the content analysis on two Polish groups for young mothers on Facebook.

The first group named "Urodziłam w 2021 roku! Największa grupa dla mam" ("I gave birth in 2021! The largest group for moms") was private and at February 13, 2023 it comprised 42.6 thousand members. The group was founded on April 28, 2020 and had a name until January 2022 "Rodzę w 2021 roku! Największa grupa dla mam" (I am giving birth in 2021! The largest group for moms). Therefore, it gathered future and current mothers who gave birth in 2021. At the time of the study, these children were up to 2 years of age. In January 2023, 2039 posts were published in this group.

The second study group is called "Mama dla Mamy" (Mom for Mom) and it is public. It was established on July 5, 2021 and as of February 13, 2023 it had 59.5 thousand members. In January 2023, 1,174 posts were published on it.

Both groups are similar in terms of number of members, volume of activity, topics of posts, and age of the group.

In order to achieve the goal of the research, a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 100 random posts published on the mentioned private group and 100 random posts published on the mentioned public group on February 10-15, 2023 was carried out. The randomness of the posts selected for analysis was ensured by selecting the 100 most recently published posts in these groups as of February 10, 2023.

Collected posts from both groups were sorted by the following categories:

- request for a product recommendation - these are posts whose authors directly ask group members to recommend a product or service to them;
- request for advice on a product - these are posts whose authors have a product, but have a problem with its use;
- health advice - these are posts about the health problems of the child or mother; the authors of the posts usually describe specific medical problems and ask for advice;
- advice on the child - these are posts whose authors ask for advice on specific behavior of the child, but also ask for advice of an upbringing nature or problems may relate to the child's development;
- advice on nutrition - these posts deal with problems related to the child's nutrition;

- advice on financial matters - the authors of these posts describe specific problems related to, for example, the household budget, public benefits, as well as housing issues;
- legal advice - authors of this type of posts describe a specific situation and ask for legal advice;
- job offer - these are posts whose authors either ask for a job offer for themselves or offer some work.

The observation sheet analyzed each post quantitatively and qualitatively, noting:

- whether there are product recommendations in the post or in the comments below it (yes or no),
- whether in the post or in the comments below it someone advises against buying products (yes or no),
- what product was recommended in the comments (product category, e.g. drug/supplement, cosmetic, etc.),
- what product was advised against in the comments (product category, e.g. drug/supplement, cosmetic, etc.),
- number of brands reborn in the post or in the comments under the post,
- number of reactions under the post without comments,
- number of comments under the post,
- Was there any criticism/dispute/hate in the comments and if so, what was the reason?
- Observation and analyzes were carried out on February 10-15, 2023.

4. Findings

Based on the analysis of published posts, it should be stated that in both studied groups of young mothers on Facebook (private and public group), topics related to requests for product recommendations and health advice dominate (Figure 1).

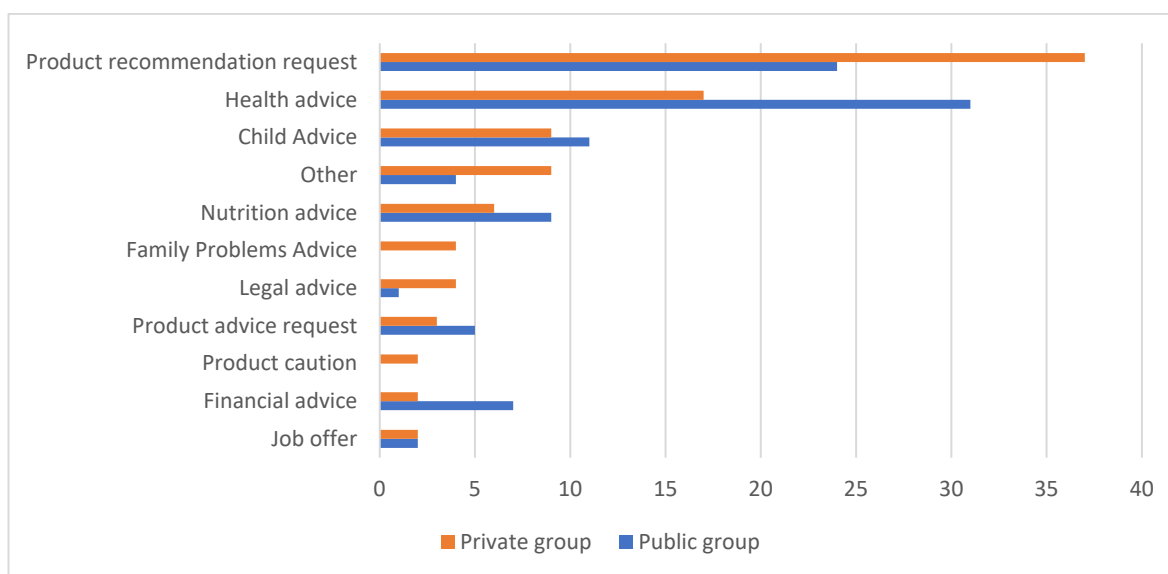


Figure 1. Thematic categories of posts in the studied private and public group (in %)

Source: own.

In the private group, as much as 37% are topics related to product recommendation, and in the public group - 24%. In the latter group, posts related to health problems prevail (31%), while in the private group, such publications account for 17%. Other popular topics in a private group are: advice on a child (behavior or upbringing) - 9%, advice on nutrition - 6%, advice on family matters - 4%, legal advice - 4%, request for advice on product (e.g. how to use it) - 3%, product caution - 2%, financial advice - 2% and job offers - 2%. In turn, in the public group: advice on the child - 11%, child nutrition - 9%, advice on financial matters - 7%, advice on using the product - 5% and job offer - 2%.

It is worth noting that the public group did not observe, for example, a topic related to family problems (i.e. problems with mother-in-law, partner). Perhaps this is due to the fact that these topics are more sensitive and people prefer to remain fully anonymous (although one can post anonymously on public groups).

Groups are definitely dominated by comments as a form of reaction to published posts. Other types of reactions (e.g. likes) are rare, they appear more often in comments. Most often, both in the public and private groups, posts related to product recommendations were commented on (cf. Figure 2 and Figure 3). This is important information, because it means that people who are looking for products to recommend on groups are most likely to find them. This shows the huge role social proof plays in consumer decision making.

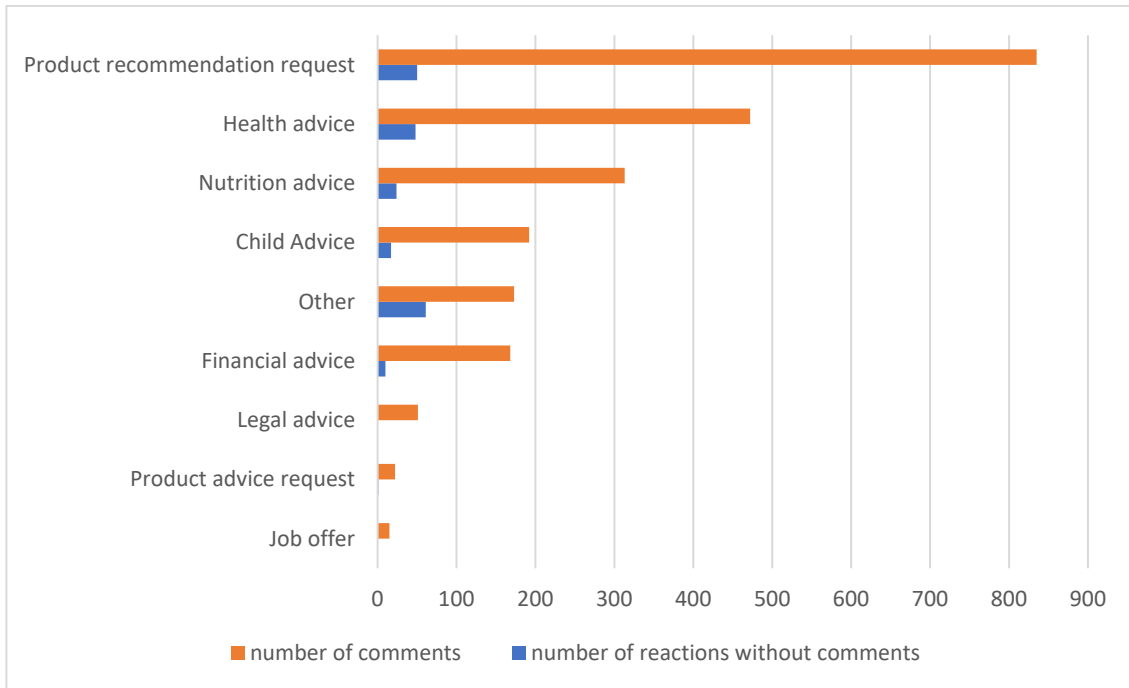


Figure 2. The number of reactions without comments and the number of comments on the public group by thematic category of posts in this group

Source: own.

Posts on other topics (e.g. health advice, nutrition advice, advice on how to behave or raise a child, and others) received much fewer responses (the second most popular topic in terms of the number of comments in both the private and public groups received almost twice as many comments). This data suggests that mothers' groups on Facebook are mainly focused on topics related to product recommendations.

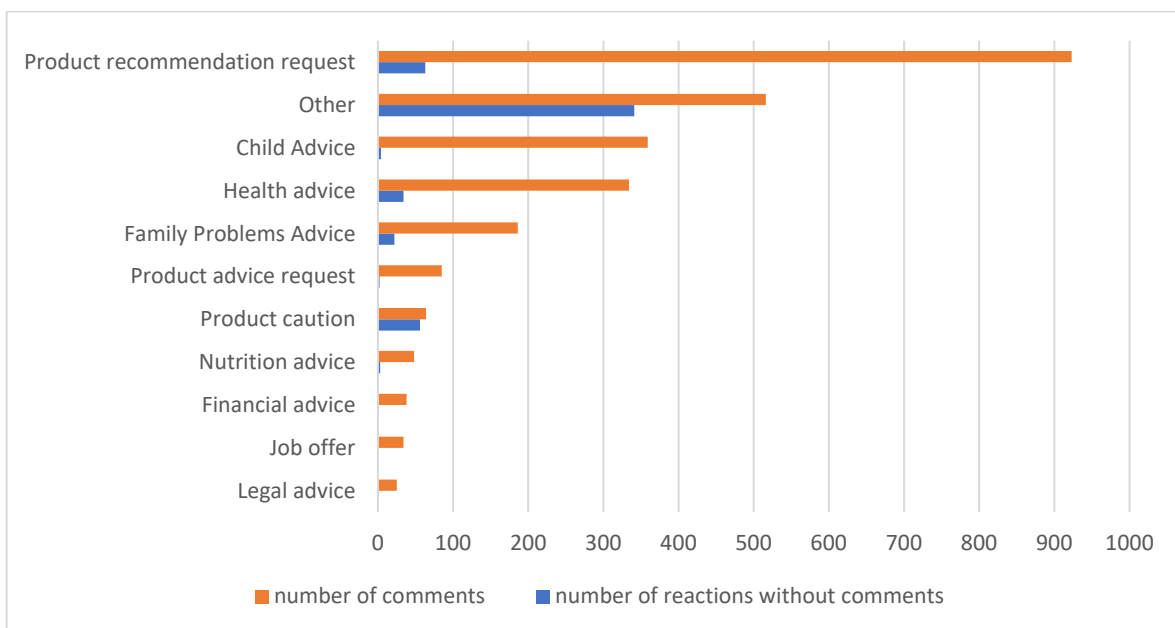


Figure 3. The number of reactions without comments and the number of comments on a private group by thematic category of posts in this group

Source: own.

As mentioned, reactions in the form other than comments are rare and usually concern some very controversial or humorous content. For example, the post with the most reactions in the public group was as follows: *"I would like to start a family. But I am paralyzed by the thought that I will give birth to a sick child. I will bring into the world a man who will suffer, and all because of my selfishness. A mere accident can make a child unhealthy. I can give to little one so much love that I didn't have myself.. I can give my baby so much love that I didn't have myself. I love to surround another life with care, empathy. I would never forgive myself if I gave someone a life of suffering. It's the only thing that stops me from having a baby.. Maybe I will find solution here among women with children who have struggled with similar anxiety."* This post received 41 reactions and 126 comments. The comments under this post were various. Some members of the group recommended a book that could help find the cause of the author's anxiety or suggested psychotherapy. Others referred to ideological issues, which was met with different reactions from the community, including the author of the post. Many people cited many examples from life that were supposed to show that it is worth overcoming own fears. In general, thanks to various advice and presenting different points of view, the author was able to find support in solving her problems.

In the private group, the post with the most reactions had a total of 391 (including 62 comments). It was a humorous meme in the form of a graphic divided into two parts. The first of them showed a clean kitchen with the description *"Whew, I finished cleaning ..."*, and the second with the description *"Meanwhile in the living room ..."* - a toy-messed living room with a child sitting in the center. The meme caused a lot of positive emotions and comments among the recipients of the group, as many mothers identified with it.

As for the qualitative analysis of the post with the highest number of comments, the post on the public group concerned the following query: *"Hello, today I visited the pediatrician with my daughter (she is 10 months old) and she told me that one cannot fry anything in a pan (pancakes, scrambled eggs). That she should eat only cooked vegetables and meat, etc. What do you think about this? I don't know what to give her for breakfast now. She said that even a waffle from a waffle iron cannot be done. I always fry it with a little olive oil."* This publication received 171 comments and 16 reactions. It caused quite a stormy discussion and divided the people speaking into those who shared the opinion of the author of the post and those who supported the doctor's opinion. People representing the first group mentioned that the pediatrician talks nonsense and frying does not harm the child. Many people were of the opinion that one can fry 2-3 days a week, but not every day. In turn, those who shared the doctor's opinion were often criticized for standing up for his opinion. In general, the post did not contain any substantive advice, supported by scientific knowledge. An example comment was as follows: *"Have any children died from fried food? No !! !! so tap your forehead. Let them eat what they like."* A few people referred to content found on the Internet, on YouTube, etc. This example shows that medical knowledge is undermined in groups, which is a huge threat to young mothers who, for example, get their knowledge about child nutrition from social media, and they trust the opinions found there more than the doctors.

In the private group, the largest number of comments was caused by the question: *"How many children do you plan to have?"*. Individual ladies entered how many children they planned, often smiling with the use of emoticons. When someone wrote that they were planning only one child, the author of the post asked about the reason for such a decision. The answers were different - the plans were determined by economic, ideological or other considerations.

It is worth emphasizing that the factor that may discourage young mothers from making entries in the group is the fear of criticism. In general, in the studied private group, it was observed that criticism / dispute appeared in 11% of posts, and in the public group - 2% of posts. This can be explained by the fact that posts in a private group can be seen only by people belonging to this group, and posts posted in a public group can reach friends and family of a given author. Therefore, the status of a public group forces a greater culture of expression and thus hate is present there to a lesser extent.

Social proof on moms' Facebook groups is an important factor in making consumer decisions. As many as 41% of posts or comments in the studied public group and 42% in the private group included a recommendation of products or services (the author of the post did not always ask for it, but such recommendations appeared anyway, which is why the data presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2, these percentages are smaller, as they cover only the topics of the posts). The example of Angelia's post asking for health advice illustrates this situation: *"My*

daughter has such dry patches on her cheek that make her itch and this spreads when scratching to most of the face. What does it look like to you? 😞😞". In the comment, the author of the post found a recommendation for a cosmetic for skin changes, although there was no such request in the post itself.

In total, 203 brands were recommended in all analyzed posts of the public group (i.e. an average of 2.03 brands per post), and 250 in the posts of the private group (an average of 2.5 brands per post).

In the public group, drugs or supplements were most often recommended (12%), cosmetics (8%), modified milk (6%), gifts (4%), while in the private group: toys (8%), furniture (5%), services (4%), medicines and supplements (4%), shoes (4%) and strollers (4%), clothes (3%), books (3%), cosmetics (3%) and others (Figure 4).

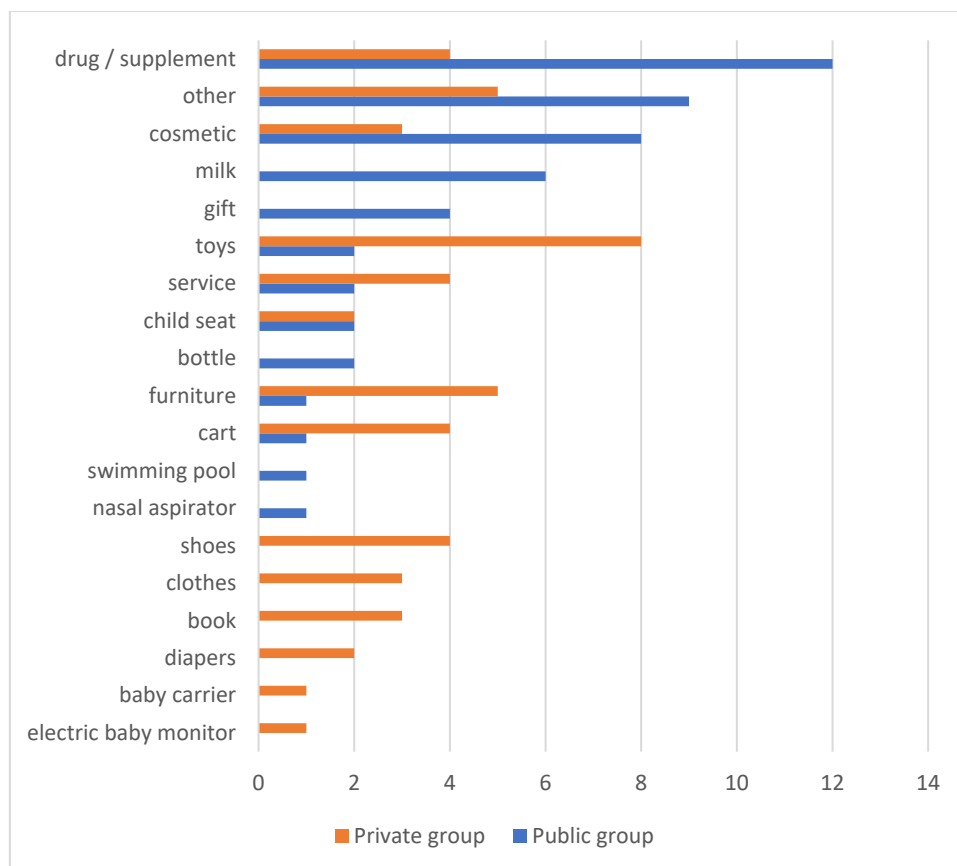


Figure 4. Recommended products in the posts and comments of the studied groups

Source: own.

On a private group, the post of the "product recommendation" category with the highest number of reactions (including comments) (93) read: "Goddaughter's 2nd birthday is coming. What toys/gadgets are such a hit with your 2-year-olds? I have no idea what to give as a gift 🤔". In the comments, the author of the post could find a lot of ideas and inspirations (e.g. a bicycle, sensory books, blocks, puzzles, furniture for a child, etc.). There were also links to direct purchase of a given product. This post directly recommends 43 different brands by name. In this way, mothers who come into contact with brand names can get used to these brands and when they come into contact with them later (e.g. in the form of advertising), they will be more likely to buy products of brands that have been recommended on a Facebook group.

On the public group, the post with the highest number of reactions (193) was: "Tell me what you can get for PLN 200 except perfume, underwear???". The author could also count on many unconventional ideas on how to please herself. Ladies in the comments shared their inspirations, pointed out specific products and brands, and often sent direct links to purchases.

It is worth noting that the posts also often contain, for example, information about special occasions (promotions), such as Ewelina's post: "I kindly inform you about the promotion in Rossmann 😊" with a photo of diapers discounted by 25%. It should be added that on groups, mothers often exchange e.g. discount codes or their loyalty cards.

In the studied groups, there were situations where someone advised against buying or using a product of a specific brand or even warned against it (this applies to 9% of public group posts and 9% of private group posts who advised against the product). It concerned such products as: medicines and supplements (3%), bottles (2%), toys (2%), car seat (2%), cosmetics (1%), modified milk (1%), strollers (1%), clothes (1%), services (1%), and others (Table 1).

Table 1. Products not recommended on the tested groups

Product not recommended	Public group	Private group
cosmetic	1	0
milk	1	0
bottle	2	0
drug / supplement	3	0
cart	0	1
clothes	0	1
service	0	1
toy	0	2
other	2	2
car seat	0	2
sum	9	9

Source: own.

For example, a post by Daria was published in a public group, asking for a recommendation of a cosmetic or medicine for irritated skin. In the comments, mothers advised against using some products, such as "Sudokrem" cream (some ladies praised it, others pointed out that it had the wrong composition), or the skin powder found both supporters and opponents.

Similarly, Iwona posted a post on a private group asking for a recommendation of sleepers for a child. She asked about a specific brand - Sinsay - if anyone recommended it. In the comments, some ladies said that they buy only products of this brand, and others advised against it because of the quality and suggested a different brand. Ultimately, the author of the post, based on the opinions presented, decided to buy a product of another brand (Smyk).

On these groups, one can also find posts by mothers who directly warn against buying certain products of a given brand. For example, Marzena published a post with a photo of a fruit mousse from the brand "Owolovo", which had mold, even though its expiration date was good. There were 118 reactions under the post, including 60 comments. Most mothers were surprised to find mold in such products. Some said that they feel remorse for buying ready-made mousses for their children, which may be poisonous. Now they prefer to prepare their own fruit mousses. Others said they test these mousses before giving them to their baby. In general, most mothers spoke negatively about this type of product (this and other brands) and declared that they would not buy it for their child again.

5. Conclusion

Considering Cialdini's principle that social proof works especially when other people are similar to us, it seems that the impact of product recommendations on Facebook groups of young mothers is particularly strong. This is confirmed by the research carried out for the purposes of this article.

Quantitative and qualitative data show that posts asking for product recommendations or health advice are most often published on the studied groups. These two categories of posts definitely dominate in the quantitative analysis of posts published by mothers in the groups. Topics related to product recommendations account for as much as 37% of all topics published in the studied private group and 24% in the public group. However, it should be emphasized that product recommendations appear in the comments of over 40% of posts published in both groups (e.g. if someone has a health problem, product recommendations appear under the post, which - according to group members - are supposed to help).

Posts related to product recommendations generate the largest number of reactions, mainly in the form of comments. This is important information, because it means that people who are looking for products to recommend on groups are most likely to find them. This shows the huge role social proof plays in consumer decision making. In the studied groups, drugs and supplements, cosmetics, milk, toys, services, furniture, prams and other such products are most often recommended for young mothers.

Based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis, it should be stated that social proof on Facebook groups is an important factor in consumer decision-making. The names of certain brands are repeated under given product categories, which means that group members have frequent contact with them and, according to the mere exposure effect phenomenon (see Zajonc 1968), they start to like them. This results in the fact that, for example, facing the choice of buying products of different brands on store shelves, they will prefer products of brands with which they had contact in these groups. However, there are posts in which someone warned against products of given brands (e.g. the product was defective). This, in turn, had a discouraging effect on group members, who declared that they would rather not buy a given product. Of course, it happened that during the observation, marketing activities of specific brands were recorded (sales offers were presented), but this was not a frequent phenomenon, because the surveyed groups are not of a sales nature (there is a ban in the regulations of these groups to publish sales content). There were probably activities in the area of word-of-mouth marketing, which, however, if properly practiced, is difficult to detect (e.g. employees of given brands can set up fictitious but reliable private accounts (i.e. accounts that, for example, have friends) and discreetly offer products to their brands). However, this should be done in a careful and authentic way, because regular members of a given group can quickly pick up on such activities.

Summing up, the hypothesis that social proof on Facebook groups is important in making consumer decisions of young mothers regarding their children was confirmed. The aim of the research has been achieved. However, the problem raised in this article is so important and complex that further research in this field is necessary.

6. Implications and limitations of the study

The obtained research results may have an important message for young mothers who use Facebook groups. It is possible to indicate many opportunities and threats for them. Opportunities include:

- the ability to stay up to date with consumer trends,
- support in problems related to motherhood (the group brings together people who are in a similar life situation),
- the possibility of obtaining many solutions to a given problem, the possibility of seeing the problem from many different perspectives.

However, young mothers should remember about many risks, including:

- undermining specialist/scientific knowledge by members of the group,
- diagnosing health problems by people who do not have the knowledge, experience and education to make diagnoses, especially on the basis of short entries,
- spreading false information or information based on unreliable sources,
- publishing photos of children, sometimes very intimate (e.g. half-naked bodies to show other members of the group a rash on the body for diagnosis),
- hating, which can lead to a depressed mood and even depression.

From the point of view of brands, both opportunities and threats can be identified. Social proof on groups for young mothers can be an opportunity if a given brand is recommended by group members, it appears relatively often in discussions with positive sentiment. However, social proof can also be a threat if the sentiment is negative. Posts that warn against products of a given brand are especially dangerous. By the way, such posts could be published by competitors to unethically harm a given brand. It is worth for the employees of these brands to be present at such groups in order to monitor the situation (in the case of public groups, they may use automated monitoring tools). They can conduct word-of-mouth marketing, but in a credible and authentic way. This will only be possible if employees of a given brand are willing to genuinely help group members in solving their problems.

The author is aware of some limitations resulting from the conducted research. The number of posts analyzed is not large due to the qualitative research of these posts. However, the author's observations showed that an increase in the number of posts would not affect the results of the study and conclusions.

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