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THE USEFULNESS OF BRANDING IN AGRICULTURAL MARKETING

ABSTRACT

The post-pandemic landscape has ushered in significant changes in food and agricultural markets, with a call from policymakers for proactive transformation towards a climate-neutral, digital, and inclusive food sector. Despite policy recommendations, market trends are primarily shaped by consumer behaviour, and many consumers remain hesitant to embrace circular economy practices and sustainability paradigms. Thus, policymakers must consider consumer preferences and willingness to change consumption patterns. In this context, branding emerges as a crucial tool in agricultural marketing, capable of influencing consumer preferences and promoting agricultural products, contributing to the sector's overall success. A traditional view of agricultural marketing involves the logistics of moving products from farms to consumers. However, in this evolving landscape, branding transcends mere logos and slogans, encompassing the holistic image, reputation, and perception of agricultural products. This article explores the role of branding within the agricultural supply chain and delves into the importance of branding by examining strategies and case studies in agricultural markets. It also underscores the challenges in agricultural branding while offering potential solutions.

Key words: branding strategies, agricultural commodities, agri-food products.

JEL Classification: M31, O14.

1. INTRODUCTION

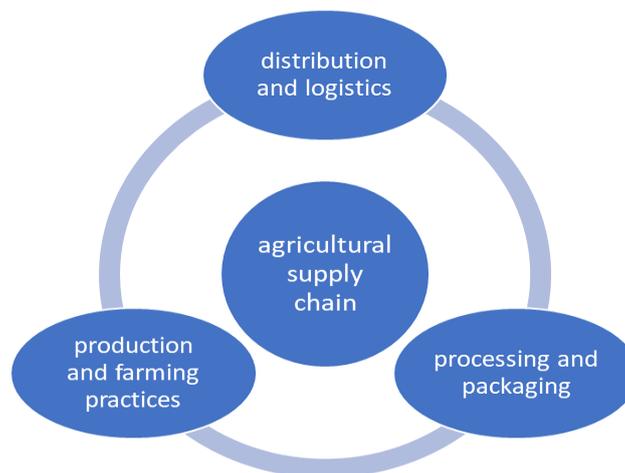
After the global pandemic, significant changes have happened in food and agricultural markets. Policy makers advocate that the transformation of the food sector should be proactive concerning food safety, circular by valorising several bio resources and short supply chains towards a climate neutral economy, digital, and inclusive (Galanakis, 2023). The Ukrainian-Russian conflict and the fast entering of Generation Z in the labour force exacerbate these changes. But market trends are dictated by the market and not by policy makers. Most often, consumers are not willing to embrace the practices related to a circular economy (Hazen, Mollenkopf, & Wang, 2017) or do not sufficiently engage towards shifting towards adopting the sustainability paradigm (Kiss, Ruszkai & Takács-György, 2019). There is a strong need that policy makers should take into account consumers' preferences and their willingness to change their consumption and purchase patterns. In these circumstances, branding may play a pivotal role in agricultural

marketing by influencing consumer preferences and promoting agricultural products, thus contributing to the overall success of the agricultural sector.

In a traditional approach, agricultural marketing encompasses the activities involved in getting agricultural products from farms to consumers (Norwood *et al.*, 2021). However, in this compounded system, branding is useful in creating value, building trust, and driving demand for agricultural products. For agricultural marketing, branding is not just about logos and slogans; it encompasses the entire image, reputation, and perception of agricultural products. In this article, we will look into the role of branding in the supply chain for agricultural products. Afterwards we will investigate the significance of branding in agriculture by analysing branding strategies for agricultural markets and their impact in practice by examining various branding case studies for agricultural commodities. We shall conclude by calling attention towards the main challenges in agricultural branding and highlight possible solutions.

2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

The multifaceted role of branding within the supply chain of agricultural commodities transcends conventional marketing and consumer-oriented facets (Burch & Lawrence, 2005). Branding exerts a discernible influence across multiple junctures of the supply chain, encompassing facets such as production, processing, distribution, and retail. In this scholarly examination, we will conduct an in-depth exploration of the repercussions of branding on various dimensions of the agricultural supply chain depicted in Figure 1.



Source: Routroy & Behera, 2017.

Figure 1. Dimensions of the agricultural supply chain.

2.1. PRODUCTION AND FARMING PRACTICES

Brands operating within the realm of agriculture frequently serve as powerful symbols of commitment to quality (Innes, Kerr & Hobbs, 2007). They represent far more than just a name; they encapsulate a set of values, practices, and standards that resonate with both producers and consumers. Primarily, brands in agriculture are synonymous with a commitment to consistent excellence. They convey the idea that the products bearing their name meet or exceed specific quality standards (Wang *et al.*, 2022). For consumers, this symbolizes reliability and the assurance of a superior product. It is a promise of taste, freshness, and nutritional value that they can rely on.

For producers, aligning with a reputable brand signifies an allegiance to the best agricultural practices. Brands often set stringent guidelines for the cultivation and harvesting of their raw materials. By adhering to these standards, farmers can improve their methods and techniques, ultimately leading to a more robust and consistent supply. Moreover, branded agricultural products often command higher prices than unbranded or generic counterparts (Camanzi *et al.*, 2017).

For farmers, this means adhering to specific quality standards and best practices. Therefore, branding requirements may stipulate things like pesticide use, organic farming methods, or animal welfare standards. These standards are mandatory in practice in terms of implementing a successful branding strategy.

It is imperative to acknowledge that farmers affiliated with robust agricultural brands may experience enhanced accessibility to markets and distribution channels. This phenomenon can be especially advantageous for small-scale and regional producers, as branding has the potential to facilitate entry into expansive markets and intricate distribution networks (Tselempis *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, the practice of branding frequently entails the standardization of production processes and product specifications. This standardization has the potential to yield heightened efficiency in agricultural operations, as farmers endeavour to align with the quality and consistency criteria stipulated by the brand. (Camanzi *et al.*, 2017).

2.2. PROCESSING AND PACKAGING

In the contemporary landscape of supply chain management, an increasing number of brands are implementing traceability as a fundamental requirement (Sarpong, 2014). Traceability signifies the capacity to track every product back to its origin, thereby fostering transparency and accountability throughout the supply chain (Opara, 2003). This practice is especially crucial in industries related to food production, where food safety and quality assurance are paramount. One of the primary reasons for the implementation of supply chain traceability is to ensure consumer safety. For example, in the event of a product recall or contamination, traceability systems enable swift and precise identification of affected batches,

minimizing the risk of widespread health crises. This is particularly crucial in a globalized world where products often traverse vast geographical distances.

Moreover, traceability bolsters brand accountability (Opara, 2003). By demanding detailed information about the production process, brands can monitor their suppliers' practices more effectively. This fosters responsible and ethical sourcing, which can enhance a brand's reputation and consumer trust. Therefore, the integration of traceability in supply chains is essential for safeguarding both consumer health and brand reputation. As the world becomes more interconnected, ensuring the quality and safety of products is a collective responsibility. Brands that prioritize traceability demonstrate their commitment to transparency, accountability, and well-being of their customers.

It must be noted that the role of processing facilities and packers within the supply chain is of paramount importance in upholding product quality and consistency (Kontogeorgos, 2012). Brands, keen on maintaining their reputation and delivering reliable products to consumers, impose rigorous quality control measures on these key players.

Processing facilities serve as critical intermediaries between raw materials and finished products. They are entrusted with the responsibility of transforming raw materials into the final product while maintaining its quality. Brands necessitate that these facilities adhere to stringent quality control protocols. This not only ensures that the final product aligns with the brand's established standards but also minimizes variations that may occur during processing (Opara, 2003). This consistency is essential for consumers who expect the same quality and taste every time they purchase a brand product.

Similarly, packers play a pivotal role in preserving product integrity. Packaging is more than just an outer covering; it serves to protect the product from external factors that can affect its quality, such as moisture, light, or air (Kwaku & Fan, 2020). Brands insist on rigorous packaging standards to safeguard the product's quality, prevent contamination, and extend shelf life. As a result, the way agricultural products are packaged and presented can have a significant impact on consumer perception (Riesz, 1979). Therefore, in practice, branding influences the design, labelling and packaging materials used, all of which affect the agricultural product's appeal and shelf presence.

2.3. DISTRIBUTION AND LOGISTICS

Brands associated with agricultural products commonly employ specific distribution channels as a strategic approach to effectively connect with their intended audience (Wang *et al.*, 2022). This practice entails collaborating with particular retailers or distributors whose values and target market align with the brand's objectives. This alignment plays a pivotal role in ensuring the success and resonance of the brand within the agricultural landscape.

One key motivation behind this strategic approach is to bridge the gap between the brand's ethos and the expectations of their target consumer base. By selecting distribution partners who share similar values and serve a customer demographic that mirrors the brand's intended market, agricultural brands can ensure that their products are placed in outlets where they are more likely to be appreciated and understood (Utami, Sardeli & Perdana, 2016). Moreover, working with compatible distribution channels enhances the brand's ability to convey its unique identity and value proposition effectively (Kim, Kim & Lee, 2010). Retailers or distributors that are in harmony with the brand's mission can better communicate the brand's story, ethos, and product attributes to consumers, thus creating a more compelling and persuasive narrative. Subsequently, the selection of specific distribution channels in the agricultural industry is a deliberate and strategic choice made by brands to connect with their intended audience more efficiently. The alignment of values and target demographics between brands and their distribution partners not only facilitates market penetration but also fosters a deeper understanding of the brand's identity, thereby enhancing the brand's overall impact and success in the agricultural market.

Under these circumstances, efficient inventory management becomes crucial in the distribution phase. Brands may provide in practice specific guidelines on inventory turnover, shelf life, and stock levels to ensure that products maintain their quality and freshness. Also, building an agri-food brand or a cooperative brand may enhance collaboration with logistics partners to optimize the supply chain for timely and cost-effective delivery (Beverland, 2007). This may include factors such transportation methods, storage conditions and delivery schedules.

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

SIGNIFICANCE OF BRANDING IN AGRICULTURE

Whereas non-branded and unpackaged agricultural products lack distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from those offered by competitors, the marketing of packaged and branded agricultural produce confers an inherent "brand value" upon these products. This added value empowers sellers to command premium prices for their offerings. For agricultural products, a viable and comprehensive branding strategy creates brand value in five different areas (Figure 2).

In a highly competitive agricultural market, branding helps products stand out (Panwar & Khan, 2020). It provides a distinct identity that separates one product from another (Nandan, 2005). In consequence, in the fiercely competitive landscape of the agricultural market, the significance of branding as a differentiation strategy cannot be overstated. In practice, branding serves as a powerful tool for agricultural products that seek to establish a unique identity and stand out in a sea of similar offerings. Therefore, branding offers a distinct identity

that sets one product apart from another, thereby conferring a competitive edge (Nandan, 2005). A compelling illustration of this differentiation is the contrast between a branded organic apple and its generic counterpart. The branded organic apple, bearing the emblem of a recognized and trusted brand, embodies a commitment to quality, sustainable practices, and health-conscious consumer values. This distinct identity allows it to rise above the generic apple, which lacks these symbolic associations. Consequently, the branded organic apple can command premium prices, foster consumer loyalty, and secure a dedicated market segment.



Source: processed after Panwar & Khan, 2020.

Figure 2. Added “Brand value” for agricultural products.

In this context, branding not only distinguishes products but also encapsulates the product’s story, quality, and values (Ghodeswar, 2008). It communicates the promises and ethos associated with the brand to consumers, thus evoking trust and loyalty. Moreover, it empowers consumers to make informed choices based on their preferences and beliefs, further fuelling the demand for branded agricultural products (Hillenbrand *et al.*, 2013).

Brands often represent a promise of quality (Smit *et al.*, 2007). Branding in agriculture carries profound significance, serving as more than just a label; it embodies a promise of quality that may deeply resonate with consumers. This promise of quality is a vital factor in shaping consumer behaviour and reducing perceived risks associated with purchasing agricultural products. When a consumer encounters a reputable brand in the agricultural sector, it communicates an assurance of quality and consistency (Landon & Smith, 1997). This consistency ensures that the product’s taste, nutritional value and safety meet or exceed specific standards, regardless of variations in factors such as weather, geography, or production methods.

This promise of quality carries immense significance for consumers. In a market flooded with agricultural products of diverse origins, quality assurance becomes a critical factor for consumers seeking reliability and trustworthiness

(Landon & Smith, 1997). By associating a reputable brand with dependable quality, consumers can mitigate the perceived risk of inconsistent or subpar products. This assurance empowers them to make better choices. Furthermore, this association between brands and quality creates a vital element of consistency in the marketplace. Agricultural brands that consistently deliver on their quality promise foster consumer confidence, which, in turn, cultivates long-term relationships. Such relationships can lead to brand loyalty, translating into continued consumer support and repeat business.

Strong agricultural brands also build trust and credibility with consumers (Smit *et al.*, 2007). When consumers encounter a reputable agricultural brand, they perceive it as a promise of quality, safety, and consistency. This promise fosters trust, mitigating the perceived risk associated with making a purchase (Smit *et al.*, 2007). Trust and credibility are essential elements that simplify the decision-making process for consumers, empowering them to make informed choices and fostering brand loyalty. This phenomenon contributes not only to the success of agricultural brands but also to the overall stability and growth of the agricultural industry.

Trust, once established, is a powerful determinant of consumer behaviour in agricultural markets (Dierks, 2007). It leads to greater consumer confidence in the brand's offerings, making consumers more inclined to choose those products over other alternatives. Trust functions as a stabilizing force in an increasingly complex and diversified agricultural market, where consumers are flooded with choices (Dierks, 2007). It simplifies the decision-making process by providing consumers with the confidence that they will receive a product that aligns with their expectations.

Furthermore, the credibility of strong agricultural brands is a function of their consistency in delivering on their quality promise (Ngo *et al.*, 2020). Credibility is an essential component of trust, as consumers must believe that the products themselves substantiate the brand's quality claims. Over time, as the brand consistently meets or exceeds consumer expectations, its credibility solidifies, strengthening the consumer-brand relationship.

In the modern era of global trade and competition, agricultural producers are constantly seeking opportunities to expand their market reach and gain a competitive edge. This competitive edge is conditioned in the agricultural sector by gaining and retaining market access. One of the primary ways in which branding facilitates market access for agricultural producers is by opening doors to higher-value markets (Abimbola, 2006). Generic agricultural products often face fierce competition in commodity markets, where price becomes the primary differentiator. However, branding enables producers to transcend these commodity markets and access niche markets that value specific attributes, such as quality, sustainability, and origin (Cooke, 2008). For example, a farmer who brands their coffee as "Organic, Single-Origin, Fair Trade" can target consumers who are willing to pay a premium for such attributes. This not only increases the potential customer base but also allows the producer to fetch higher prices.

Branding plays a crucial role in facilitating market access for agricultural producers by allowing them to access higher-value markets and command premium prices for their products. It transforms agricultural commodities into distinct and marketable brands, differentiating them from generic competitors (Ngo *et al.*, 2020; Smit *et al.*, 2007). As agricultural markets continue to evolve and diversify, branding remains a powerful tool that empowers producers to not only gain access to more lucrative markets but also to secure a premium for their products (Smit *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, in an increasingly competitive and globalized world, agricultural branding stands as a testament to the transformative power of marketing in the realm of agriculture.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In order to highlight the practical implication of branding in the agricultural sector it is important to understand the different types of branding strategies used by agri-food producers. It also must be noted that branding strategies in agriculture are tailored to the unique characteristics of the industry. The main five branding strategies used in practice are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Branding strategies used for agri-food products

Branding strategy	Description
Product Branding	This involves branding specific agricultural products, such as fruits, vegetables, or dairy products. The focus is on highlighting the unique qualities of the product, such as its taste, freshness, or nutritional value.
Farm Branding	Some agricultural businesses choose to brand the entire farm. This strategy emphasizes the farm's practices, values, and commitment to sustainability or organic farming.
Geographical Branding	Geographical indications (GIs) are a form of branding that associates a product with a specific geographical area known for its unique qualities.
Cooperative Branding	Farmers often form cooperatives to collectively brand their products. This approach allows small-scale farmers to access larger markets and pool resources for branding efforts.
Sustainability Branding	With growing environmental concerns, sustainability branding is gaining traction. Agricultural products that are produced using sustainable practices or are certified as organic often feature sustainability-focused branding.

Source: Processed after Norwood *et al.* 2021.

Product branding focuses on building a strong brand identity for a specific agri-food product or product line (Klimchuc *et al.*, 2013). In practice, the aim is to establish a product's reputation for both *quality* and *consistency*. In return, this helps consumers recognize and trust a particular agri-food product within a brand's portfolio and facilitates brand loyalty, as consumers associate the product with positive experiences.

Farm branding associates the agri-food product with a specific farm or agricultural source (Kim & Park, 2012). In practice, the aim is to highlight the origin and authenticity of the product by displaying the farm's practices and values. In return, this branding strategy builds a connection between consumers and the farm, fostering trust and transparency. It also contributes to supporting small-scale and local agriculture by promoting individual farms and their products.

Geographical branding emphasizes the regional or geographical origin of the agri-food product by leveraging the reputation and unique characteristics of a specific location (Tregear & Gorton, 2005). In practice, it involves geographical indications (GIs) or appellations of origin and quality certification schemes. As a result, consumers who value products with a strong sense of place and heritage are strongly attracted towards the brand and the perceived quality and authenticity of the product are enhanced.

In practice, *cooperative branding* involves multiple farmers or agricultural producers working together to create a shared brand that is promoting the collective commitment to quality and sustainability (Mic & Eagle, 2019). This allows small producers to combine resources and reach larger markets. In return, this branding strategy provides small-scale producers with better access to distribution and marketing opportunities. Also, from a competitive advantage standpoint, cooperative branding strengthens the cooperative's bargaining power in the marketplace.

In practice, *sustainability branding* highlights sustainable farming practices, eco-friendly packaging, or fair trade principles and most often is supported by third-party certifications (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). In return, this branding strategy appeals to environmentally conscious consumers, thus increasing market share. It also demonstrates the brand's social responsibility, which can lead to positive consumer perception.

In order to examine the significance of branding in agriculture, for each strategy presented above we shall further examine various branding case studies for international agricultural commodities (Table 2) and from Romania (Table 3).

Table 2

International case studies for agri-food branding strategies

Branding strategy	Case study
Product Branding	Chiquita
	Chiquita has successfully branded its bananas with the iconic blue sticker featuring Miss Chiquita. This branding strategy has made Chiquita one of the most recognized banana brands globally. Their commitment to quality and consistency has allowed them to maintain a dominant position in the banana market.
Farm Branding	Blue Diamond Almonds
	Blue Diamond Almonds has successfully branded its almond products, highlighting their quality, innovation, and variety. Their branding includes flavours like "Smokehouse" and "Wasabi & Soy Sauce," catering to diverse consumer preferences.

Table 2 (continued)

Geographical Branding	<p align="center">Parmigiano-Reggiano</p> <p>Parmigiano-Reggiano is an Italian cheese with strong geographical branding. Only cheese produced in the Parma region of Italy can carry the Parmigiano-Reggiano name. This branding strategy protects the authenticity and quality of the product.</p>
Cooperative Branding	<p align="center">Organic Valley</p> <p>Organic Valley is a cooperative of organic farmers in the United States. Their brand emphasizes organic and sustainable farming practices. This branding has enabled them to build trust with consumers who seek organic and ethically produced dairy and agricultural products</p>
Sustainability Branding	<p align="center">Kashi</p> <p>Kashi, a brand under Kellogg's, has successfully branded its cereal products as natural and wholesome options. The branding focuses on whole grains, organic ingredients and sustainable practices, resonating with health-conscious consumers.</p>

Source: Author's own research.

Table 3

Romanian case studies for agri-food branding strategies

Branding strategy	Case study
Product Branding	<p align="center">LaDorna</p> <p>LaDorna, a prominent Romanian brand renowned for its specialization in dairy commodities, encompasses a diverse product line, comprising milk, yogurt, cheese, and butter. The brand has earned distinction for its unwavering dedication to excellence and the preservation of product freshness within the ambit of dairy offerings. LaDorna evokes favourable consumer sentiments, particularly among those with a predilection for premium dairy products. The product branding paradigm is deliberately orchestrated to underscore attributes of quality and unwavering consistency, thereby nurturing the perception of the products as distinctly premium in nature.</p>
Farm Branding	<p align="center">Agricola Bacău</p> <p>Agricola Bacău is a Romanian poultry producer that has built a strong brand for its chicken products. Their branding focuses on quality, safety, and traceability. This branding has helped them secure partnerships with major retailers and export their products to international markets.</p>
Geographical Branding	<p align="center">“Telemea de Ibănești”</p> <p>“Telemea de Ibănești” underscores the rich heritage and cultural prominence of cheese production in the Ibănești locale, with roots extending into centuries-old traditions. This branded appellation instils within consumers a sense of assurance regarding the genuine nature and superlative quality of the cheese, thereby engendering trust and bolstering confidence in the product.</p>
Cooperative Branding	<p align="center">“Cooperativa agricolă Țara Mea”</p> <p>Among Romania's prominent agricultural cooperatives, ‘Cooperativa Agricolă Țara Mea’ commands a noteworthy position. Established with the primary objectives of enhancing the bargaining capacity of small-scale farmers and catering to the requirements of hypermarkets with locally sourced products, this cooperative invokes sentiments of deep-seated nationalism and fervent patriotism. In addition to fostering a sense of national pride, the brand conscientiously advocates for the consumption of locally produced goods, highlighting their inherent quality and their accessibility at competitive price points.</p>

Table 3 (continued)

Sustainability Branding	Biosano Organic Vegetables
	Biosano Organic Vegetables has strategically adopted a sustainability-oriented branding approach, thereby manifesting a steadfast dedication to ecologically sustainable agricultural methodologies. This particular approach resonates with consumers who prioritise environmentally responsible and health-conscious dietary preferences, effectively establishing a foundation of consumer trust. The sustainability branding strategy conveys a resolute commitment to ethical and environmentally conscientious farming practices, thus fostering consumer confidence and assurance.

Source: Author's own research.

While branding offers significant advantages in agricultural marketing, it also presents challenges. A summary of these challenges and possible alternatives is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Challenges and solutions in branding agri-food products

Challenge	Possible strategic alternative
Resource constrain	Cooperative or farm branding
Consumer education	Sustainability, farm or geographical branding
Lack of consumer trust	Sustainability or geographical branding
Market saturation	Farm, product or geographical branding
Supply chain complexity	Cooperative branding
Product variability	Cooperative or geographical branding
Counterfeit and fraudulent products	Geographical branding

Source: Author's own research.

First, there is the problem of *resource constraints*. Small-scale agricultural enterprises and individual farmers may encounter constraints in allocating their financial resources towards the establishment of a robust branding strategy. The cultivation of a potent brand identity typically necessitates substantial investments in marketing and promotional endeavours, a burden that may pose formidable challenges for entities operating on a more modest scale within the agricultural sector.

Secondly, there is the challenge of *consumer education*. Consumers might lack a comprehensive understanding of the import of agricultural brands, the level of quality they signify, or the additional value they bring. The task of enlightening consumers regarding the significance of branding and the advantages associated with branded products can be an extensive and financially demanding endeavour. In this process, trust can also become an issue. After a brand has successfully instilled trust among its consumer base, the preservation of this trust assumes paramount importance. Instances of quality deficiencies, product recalls, or adverse publicity can swiftly undermine consumer faith and tarnish the brand's standing (Gellynck *et al.*, 2006).

Thirdly, *market saturation* and *supply chain complexity* can be serious interlinked issues. Within certain market domains, the prevalence of numerous brand entities can lead to a state of market oversaturation, thereby imparting formidable challenges upon prospective entrants in their quest to carve a niche for themselves. This market phenomenon is fundamentally driven by the commanding presence of well-established brands, which typically enjoy a competitive edge owing to their wide-ranging recognition and substantial market share (Aday & Phelan, 2015). To adequately understand the dynamics at play in such saturated market segments, it is imperative to delve deeper into the implications of *brand recognition* and *market share* on both established and budding entities.

Brand recognition, often a by-product of longstanding and consistent market presence, bestows upon established brands a distinct advantage (Khurram *et al.*, 2018). This brand equity, accumulated through years of market engagement, enables these entities to command consumer trust, thereby facilitating their ability to entrench their market position. In contrast, new entrants often grapple with the daunting task of building brand recognition from scratch, which necessitates substantial investments in marketing, public relations, and consumer education.

Moreover, *market share*, reflective of the proportion of a market controlled by a given brand, significantly contributes to the competitive prowess of established brands. A substantial market share endows these entities with economies of scale, enabling them to achieve cost efficiencies, often unattainable for newcomers. Furthermore, a dominant market share translates into a heightened ability to influence market dynamics, pricing strategies, and the formulation of industry standards.

Hence, it is evident that the prevalence of oversaturation in certain markets, coupled with the resultant competitive advantages enjoyed by established brands, poses a formidable hurdle for emerging players, necessitating well-considered strategies to overcome these market-entry challenges.

The orchestration of branding endeavours throughout the multifaceted stages of the supply chain presents an intricate challenge. The endeavour to guarantee the meticulous adherence of all stakeholders involved in these processes to the prescribed branding standards and guidelines introduces a noteworthy logistical conundrum. This challenge, rooted in the imperative of maintaining a consistent and unifying brand identity, necessitates a comprehensive approach to brand management (Ahlert Köster, 2004).

Effective coordination across the supply chain is indispensable to ensure that the brand, its attributes, and messaging remain cohesive and undiluted throughout the entire journey of a product or service (Ahlert Köster, 2004). Inconsistent branding can lead to a disjointed customer experience, erode brand equity, and impede brand recognition. Therefore, managing this complexity requires meticulous planning, clear communication, and a robust framework of guidelines.

Furthermore, the complexity intensifies when considering global supply chains, where cultural and regional nuances must be harmonized with the overarching brand strategy. This involves not only maintaining visual branding consistency but also ensuring that the brand's values and messaging are culturally relevant and resonate with diverse audiences across the supply chain (Li *et al.*, 2018).

Finally, it is essential to acknowledge that diminishing *product variability*, as well as reducing the prevalence of *counterfeits and fraudulent products*, represent substantial impediments to be addressed when endeavouring to establish strong brands for agri-food products.

Agricultural commodities undergo inherent fluctuations arising from environmental variables such as climatic conditions, soil composition, and pest incidence. The pursuit of ensuring a uniform and unwavering standard of quality within this context poses a formidable challenge, particularly in light of its profound significance as a fundamental prerequisite in the branding process.

The agricultural sector, by its very nature, is beholden to the capricious elements of weather, which can significantly impact crop yields and their attributes. Moreover, variations in soil composition and pest pressures can introduce substantial divergences in the quality of agricultural products. As such, the endeavour to maintain a consistent and premium level of quality assumes paramount importance in the process of branding agri-food products. Achieving this uniformity is pivotal, as it directly influences consumers' trust and loyalty to a brand.

To address this challenge, agricultural producers often implement sophisticated quality control measures, precise farming practices, and advanced technologies to mitigate the effects of natural variations. The confluence of these efforts is crucial in ensuring the consistent quality and integrity of agri-food products, thereby facilitating their brand establishment and sustainability in the marketplace.

In certain instances, deceptive entities exploit branding components to perpetrate fraudulent and counterfeit schemes, thereby engendering a concerning predicament for consumers and legitimate producers alike (Munteanu *et al.*, 2014). Preserving the genuineness of branded agricultural products constitutes a pronounced and intricate challenge, particularly when considering the higher-value segments such as wine and olive oil. The prevalence of counterfeiting and fraudulent activities within the purview of the food industry represents a substantial apprehension due to its potential deleterious consequences. These repercussions encompass not only the immediate health hazards posed to consumers but also the erosion of trust in established brands and the concomitant harm to the reputation and viability of legitimate enterprises.

Addressing this issue necessitates a multifaceted and vigilant approach that involves the deployment of advanced authentication mechanisms, rigorous quality control, and comprehensive regulatory oversight. It is imperative to recognize the far-reaching implications of these challenges, extending beyond mere economic concerns to encompass broader issues of public safety, integrity, and the trustworthiness of the entire agricultural and food product supply chain.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Within the supply chain pertaining to agricultural products, branding represents a multifaceted and indispensable element that exerts influence across virtually every phase of the process. From the establishment of quality benchmarks during production to the assurance of transparency and traceability in processing and distribution, branding serves as the cohesive thread that interconnects the agricultural supply chain. It serves to cultivate consumer confidence, advocate for sustainable agricultural practices, and stimulate product innovation. As the agricultural sector continues its evolutionary trajectory, branding will persist as a foundational instrument for both producers and consumers, thereby shaping our perceptions and interactions with agricultural commodities within the global marketplace. Whether in the form of an iconic logo adorning a cereal box or as a pledge to endorse organic and sustainable farming methodologies, branding transcends conventional marketing functions, evolving into an emblem of quality, trustworthiness, and underlying values within the agricultural supply chain.

In practice, branding role in product differentiation within the agricultural sector is critical. It enables products to rise above the competitive noise, communicate their unique qualities, and foster a connection with consumers who share their values. In the complex marketplace, branding is a potent instrument for agricultural products to assert their individuality and thrive.

In order to pursue a competitive advantage through branding, five branding strategies are possible for agri-food products: product branding, farm branding, cooperative branding, sustainability branding and geographical branding. These branding strategies are crucial for agri-food products as they help create a distinct identity, foster consumer trust, and differentiate products in a highly competitive market. By employing these strategies effectively, agri-food businesses can gain and retain a competitive advantage, align with consumer values, and meet the growing demand for transparency and authenticity in food products.

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