Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences
Doctoral School of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising
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THE ROLE OF BRANDING IN AGRIBUSINESS

DOCTORAL THESIS ABSTRACT

Doctoral Student: Horațiu Oliviu Buzgău
Scientific coordinator: Prof.univ.dr.habilit. Smaranda Adina Cosma

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Abstract

The resources that humanity possesses are indispensable and vital elements for ensuring our existence and evolution in all respects. A millennial activity that satisfies a basic human need is agriculture. Increasingly consistent investments have given a new dimension to the agricultural and agri-food sector, both in Romania and in other countries. Growing competition and the trend of change reflected in consumer needs and desires have led companies to invest heavily in differentiating their offer, respectively in creating a strong connection with consumers. In this endeavor, the brand plays a decisive role, being an intangible link between the economic entity and the clients.

This doctoral thesis is divided into three parts, following the fulfillment of the established research objectives:

1. Determining the role played by the brand within agribusiness companies;
2. Identifying the main dimensions of the brand and determining the relationships and interactions between them;
3. Identifying the importance of brands for the stakeholders involved in agribusiness;
4. Studying the role of the main dimensions of agribusiness brands among consumers.

The first part is of a theoretical nature, aiming to fulfill the first two objectives, with the focus oriented towards identifying the main dimensions of the brand and determining the relationships between them, conducting in this sense a review of the specialized literature using the PRISMA 2020 model. This method involves going through specific steps: identifying and selecting relevant studies, evaluating their quality, synthesizing the data and interpreting the results. Thus, 209 articles were selected from the Clarivate and Scopus databases, published between 2010 and 2022, of which 55 articles were analyzed in depth.

The practical section of the doctoral thesis gathers the second and third part of the paper, having at its center the stakeholders of the company Holiv Ecoplant SRL, a company that served as a case study. The majority of stakeholders were interviewed through an in-depth interview, while increased attention was paid to individuals, whose opinions were collected through a questionnaire-based interview.

In the study dedicated to corporate stakeholders, we used the in-depth interview as the research method. Thus, 11 stakeholders considered relevant for the Holiv Ecoplant SRL company were interviewed, such as: employees, landowners, representatives of public authorities, clients, competitors, suppliers, financial institutions, the company's management, media partners and non-governmental organizations. The interview was structured on 14 questions, intended to validate the established research hypotheses. The analysis and interpretation of the collected data was carried out using a scale from 1 to 5, to evaluate the importance, relevance and impact of certain indicators, and for the questions with multiple answers, an analysis of the frequency of these answers was performed.

The study addressed to stakeholders - individual customers, used the personal interview method based on a questionnaire, applied both online and face-to-face. The questionnaire was structured on 21 questions, intended to test the established research hypotheses. Participants were questioned about the behaviors and preferences related to certified organic food products. A descriptive analysis of the data was carried out to study the frequencies and proportions of the responses in different categories. A factor analysis was also performed to identify the factors that influence consumer choice of products. Non-parametric tests, such as the Kruskal-Wallis test and Spearman's correlation analysis, were used to test the hypotheses.

These studies, using a combination of qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (questionnaires, statistical analyses) research, allowed the authors to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of branding in agribusiness, from the perspective of stakeholders and consumers.

In this way, the present research work brings a significant contribution to the understanding and use of these strategic value-generating tools, having notable contributions in the processes of streamlining the actions carried out, penetrating new markets and implicitly, increasing the business.

Keywords: Agribusiness, Brand, Branding, Stakeholders, Consumers, Strategic Tools

Chapter 1. The concept of agribusiness and its particularities

The concept of agribusiness was formed by combining the words "business" and "agriculture" as early as the 1950s. This new approach to agriculture and the food industry represented a turning point in terms of the complexity of the field, underlining its relevance and usefulness. Researchers have emphasized the need to understand and approach agriculture from a business perspective to increase efficiency and profitability. Agribusiness is defined as the combination of all operations involved in the manufacture and distribution of agricultural goods, as well as the storage, processing, and distribution of finished goods and products.

Agribusiness is a complex and interconnected field, and its components are: the supply of agricultural inputs, production, processing, and marketing of agricultural and food products. At the center of this mechanism is the final consumer, and the main forces that come together to satisfy their needs are: the input supply sector, the production sector, and the processing sector, all of which are linked through marketing.

Agribusiness plays an essential role globally, contributing significantly to food security, economic growth, and community development. The main regions analyzed from this perspective are: Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Europe, and Oceania. Each continent presents unique particularities regarding agribusiness, influenced by factors such as climate, culture, economy, and available resources.

In Asia, China and India are among the largest agricultural producers, using modern technologies to increase productivity. Africa is characterized by an agricultural sector essential for the subsistence of the majority of the population, where small farmers and traditional methods predominate. North America and South America have advanced and well-developed agricultural systems, with extensive use of modern technologies. Europe is characterized by the diversity of agricultural practices, influenced by climatic and cultural variability, with a focus on food safety, high environmental protection standards, and sustainable practices. Australia and New Zealand in Oceania have developed and diversified agricultural sectors, focusing on the use of advanced technologies and ecological practices.

Agribusiness stakeholders represent a complex network of interconnected entities and interests that influence and are influenced by the agricultural and food industry. These include: farmers and/or associative forms from which they originate, processors, distributors, the retail sector, consumers, government and non-governmental organizations, investors, and researchers. These stakeholders have undergone significant transformations over the years, reflecting changes in economic, technological, social, and environmental dynamics.

Agriculture is a key sector of the economy, being determined by factors such as the growing demand for agri-food products, changes in the business environment, and market dynamics. Evaluating competitiveness in agribusiness involves analyzing vectors such as: farm size, company capital (technology, human resources, know-how), collective actions in which the company is involved (cooperatives, associations), and sustainability (environmental policies, alternative energy sources). The use of the competitiveness polygon allows a comparative analysis of economic actors in this sector, identifying their strengths and vulnerabilities.

The case study conducted on the Holiv Ecoplant SRL company highlights its competitive advantages compared to its main competitors, based on size, capital, collective actions, and sustainability. The results show that Holiv Ecoplant has a competitive advantage in the areas of sustainability and collective actions, while competing companies are better positioned in terms of size and capital.

The pandemic generated by the presence of the COVID-19 virus has been a major challenge for the entire economic spectrum, including the agribusiness field. Companies have had to reshape their identity and marketing mix to transfer and add value, especially for end consumers. The brand has played a crucial role, being an intangible bridge that has strengthened entrepreneurial capital.

The analysis of agribusiness companies present in the international and national (Romania) rankings shows that the pandemic has not produced significant changes in the value and rating of brands. Thus, the most valuable and appreciated brands globally and nationally have maintained their position, even if there have been some fluctuations. This suggests a certain resilience of these brands to the disruptions generated by the crisis.

The results highlight the importance of branding in agribusiness, playing a crucial role in transferring value to consumers and strengthening the competitive position of companies, even in times of crisis.

Among the future trends in agribusiness are: technological advances, automation and digitalization, sustainable agriculture and corporate social responsibility, product diversification and food security, leveraging the principles of the circular economy and efficient waste management, developing partnerships and stimulating collaboration, adapting to climate change. These trends will significantly influence the way agribusiness stakeholders will act in the future.

In conclusion, agribusiness is a complex and dynamic field, with vital global importance, facing challenges and emerging trends. Understanding the particularities of each region, the role of stakeholders, and emerging trends is essential for the sustainable development of this strategic sector.

Chapter 2. Considerations on brand and its importance in agribusiness

The concept of brand and the branding process have evolved significantly over time, reflecting the profound changes in society and the field of marketing. In the past, the brand was perceived only as a physical mark indicating the origin of the products. However, the concept has gradually become more complex and abstract, coming to represent more than just a product label.

According to the literature, a brand is now a name that has an attached symbol or even a specific design, with the purpose of identifying the goods or services of a manufacturer/provider or a group of manufacturers/providers and differentiating them from those of the competition. Thus, the brand has evolved from a simple identification mark to an essential element in the marketing strategy, capable of profoundly influencing buying behavior and consumer perceptions.

Branding is a complex process, specific to the modern world, relevant for both organizations and individuals. It involves a complex strategy that includes the creation and

management of a distinctive image and identity, in order to differentiate oneself in a competitive environment. The relevance of branding derives from the need to communicate effectively with the public and to build strong connections between products, services, the company, and consumers.

A strong brand can create loyalty and trust among consumers, influencing purchase decisions and leading to market success. The evolution of branding has been strongly influenced by social, technological, and economic changes that have occurred over time. From the manufacturing brand that indicated the origin of the products, the concept has evolved towards the construction of complex images with an emotional tint. Currently, branding is based on storytelling and consumer experience, encouraging interaction and engagement.

Brands and branding are not limited to the commercial domain, but have become omnipresent in society. Whether we are talking about products, organizations, public figures, or even nations, they all build and promote a distinctive identity. The impact of branding on society is substantial, affecting the attitudes, behaviors, and preferences of consumers. Moreover, it is a powerful tool in influencing public opinion and contemporary culture.

According to the literature, branding is not just a marketing tactic, but a strategic discipline essential for creating and managing value in an experience and relationship economy. It represents a vehicle through which organizations can communicate and share their story with the public and can influence how people perceive and interact with the surrounding world. Thus, branding represents not only a marketing technique, but also an art form and a tool for shaping perceptions and behaviors, with an impact on the economic, social, and cultural realms.

Analyzing a series of scientific works, we can identify how researchers have synthesized four essential stages of the branding process, which represent a strategic framework for marketers:

1. Identifying and establishing the brand's position and values. This stage involves clearly defining the brand's identity and positioning in the market, identifying the distinctive elements and fundamental values it promotes.

2. Planning and implementing marketing programs aimed at the brand. This stage involves developing and executing appropriate marketing and communication strategies that support and effectively promote the brand among consumers.
3. Measuring and interpreting the brand's performance. In this stage, the results achieved by the brand in terms of awareness, reputation, loyalty, and consumer preferences are evaluated and monitored.
4. Growing and maintaining brand equity. The final stage of the branding process involves the continuous strengthening and development of brand equity over time, by maintaining the consistency and relevance of the brand in the face of market changes and business environment evolutions.

These four stages represent a useful guide for marketers in the efficient development and implementation of branding strategies, facilitating the construction and consolidation of strong and relevant brands.

Branding in agribusiness includes the strategic process of developing a distinctive identity for products or companies in the agricultural and food industry. This aspect often becomes a strategic objective of major importance. The purpose of branding in agribusiness is to differentiate products or companies from competitors and create a positive perception in the minds of consumers. Branding plays a crucial role in building customer trust and loyalty in agribusiness.

There are various strategies for increasing the value of a brand in agribusiness, including:

1. Improving customer satisfaction through efficient management of product delivery time.
2. Horizontal or vertical integration in the agri-food chain.
3. Transparency in communication and building long-term trust relationships between the company and consumers.
4. Associating the product with various certification organizations, which has a direct impact on the brand.

Studies show a clear correlation between the financial performance of agricultural cooperatives and the brand equity of the products they market. Consumer Willingness to Pay (WTP) is particularly influenced by the food safety attributes of the products. Although increased familiarity with products and knowledge of their origins can increase WTP, the consequences do not always coincide with the objectives of economic entities.

Company reputation and significant investments in advertising are factors that influence the pricing process for agri-food products. The trust that consumers place in an agri-food brand is a crucial indicator, with significant resources invested in evaluating and consolidating it. Customer loyalty is an essential indicator of success, being closely monitored by companies that focus on consumer needs and desires.

Studies reveal the influence of brand equity on brand value, and this, in turn, affects the trust associated with a brand, leading to customer loyalty. All these aspects contribute significantly to the competitiveness of economic actors in agribusiness.

In conclusion, the brand and branding play a crucial role in agribusiness, being an important piece in the business strategy of companies in this field. Building and consolidating a strong brand, capable of generating trust and loyalty among customers, is a priority for agribusiness entities. At the same time, the involvement and perception of stakeholders, both individuals and legal entities, is crucial for the success of brands in this industry.

Chapter 3. Analysis of the role of stakeholders in agribusiness. Case study of Holiv Ecoplant SRL

Stakeholders are essential actors in the journey of an economic entity, having the capacity to positively or negatively influence its evolution. Analyzing the perception of stakeholders on the activity of a company is crucial for calibrating entrepreneurial decisions, with the aim of increasing efficiency and, implicitly, the added value generated by the firm.

In a context marked by the dynamism of the market and the ever-increasing expectations of consumers, efficient collaboration between the company and its stakeholders becomes imperative, especially when we are talking about niches characterized by the

existence of knowledgeable consumers, attentive to the smallest details. The involvement of these key factors in the decision-making process confers a significant competitive advantage, capable of creating a notable difference between the economic entity and its competitors.

In the analysis of the role of the brand for the stakeholders of Holiv Ecoplant SRL, the in-depth interview was used. This was structured on 14 questions, designed to test four research hypotheses. The main stakeholders of the company were identified and interviewed, and their responses were analyzed, largely confirming the ideas of the company's decision-makers.

The complex perception of stakeholders on common subjects, but interpreted differently depending on the experience and genetic background of each individual, is evident in the responses received. Each interviewee seeks a long-term partnership, based on values such as transparency, a win-win approach, strategic coherence, open communication and professionalism.

Frequent, sometimes even turbulent changes, lead to the need for a flexible approach and entrepreneurial maturity. Adaptability becomes essential for success, and resources are allocated accordingly to expand and consolidate the presence at the industry level.

The company's reputation is periodically re-evaluated, and repositioning on the market is carried out according to the experience offered to the partner. The flexibility and adaptability of the commercial policy, combined with the constant quality of the products and the promptness of decision-making, contribute to strengthening the company's market position.

Integrity, responsibility and good cooperation are unanimously expressed requirements by all stakeholders. The lack of these aspects can lead to the replacement of a partner, although this action can generate a significant cost.

The agricultural and food industry represents a strategically important field, with ample prospects for expansion and improvement, and collaboration between economic actors is vital for achieving common goals. Informing and educating the market are essential for the foundation of actions and stimulating the participation of final beneficiaries in economic processes.

Chapter 4. Study on the role of the agri-food brand among consumers

The study on the role of the agri-food brand among consumers was structured based on an appropriate methodological design, which allowed the obtaining of relevant and conclusive results. The research particularly targeted the perceptions and preferences of individual customers of Holiv Ecoplant SRL, which sells certified organic nut-based food products.

The study was designed to analyze how individual consumers perceive and evaluate brands in the agri-food sector, with a focus on organic products. For this purpose, a questionnaire was developed and addressed to the customers of Holiv Ecoplant SRL, which can be consulted in Annex 2 of this doctoral thesis. The questionnaire was structured on 21 questions, intended to contribute to the testing of the formulated research hypotheses.

The participants in the study were selected using the snowball sampling method, aiming to collect as many relevant observations as possible. The geographical area targeted was the entire territory of Romania.

The questionnaire was applied through two main techniques: online interview and face-to-face interview. The online interview was conducted within the specialized online groups that promote a healthy and active lifestyle, as well as on the social media pages of the ALLU brand (Holiv Ecoplant SRL company). The face-to-face interview was applied during fairs and exhibitions dedicated to natural, organic and local products, where the research team participated.

The data collected through the two questionnaire application methods were centralized and processed for analysis. The final dataset included 769 valid responses, after eliminating entries with missing values, duplicates, and minor respondents.

The data cleaning and recoding process allowed aligning the dataset to the analysis requirements. Ordinal variables were recoded to reflect their nature, and Likert scale variables were adjusted to highlight the order of importance or agreement.

To test the research hypotheses, non-parametric tests, such as the Kruskal-Wallis test and Spearman's correlation, were used, due to the deviation of the data from the normal distribution. The analysis was performed both in Microsoft Excel and in SPSS v. 26.

The descriptive analysis of the data revealed a series of relevant information regarding the purchasing behavior of consumers of organic food products. Thus, the majority of respondents (50.20%) stated that they purchase organic food products weekly, reflecting an increased interest in this type of product. Also, over 50% of the participants stated that they are willing to pay a higher price for their favorite organic brands, although some mention financial constraints as a limit to this willingness.

A significant proportion of respondents (62.02%) indicated that they would be willing to allocate between 100-500 RON monthly for the purchase of organic food products. The main sources of information about these products have been video content and social media images.

The demographic analysis of the sample revealed that the majority of respondents come from urban areas (80.49%), are female (57.87%), have university or postgraduate studies (82.06%), and are in a relationship or married and have children (50.72%). The financial profile of the participants shows that the largest group earns over 6000 RON per month (39.92%).

Testing the research hypotheses used a multivariate approach, starting from the results of the descriptive analysis. Factor analysis highlighted three main factors that influence the process of choosing organic agri-food products by consumers: product quality and safety, economic and practical considerations, and logistics and branding aspects. Additionally, factor analysis identified three relevant factors regarding brand attributes: brand history and authenticity, trust and reliability, and sustainability and social responsibility.

Testing the hypotheses regarding the differences in perception between consumer categories with different willingness to pay a higher price for organic products revealed statistically significant results. It was found that people willing to pay a higher price have a more positive perception of the quality, image, satisfaction, awareness and ethics of the brand, compared to those who are not willing to pay a higher price or are conditioned by financial factors.

Regarding the relationships between latent variables, the analysis revealed positive and significant associations between trust and brand equity, between trust and loyalty, as well as between brand equity and loyalty. These results emphasize the interdependence of these brand dimensions in influencing consumer buying behavior.

In conclusion, the study on the role of the agri-food brand among consumers revealed a series of trends and preferences of individual customers, with a focus on organic products. The analysis highlighted the key factors that influence the decision-making process of consumers, especially in terms of their willingness to pay a higher price for products with a recognized brand. The results also outlined the complex relationships between brand dimensions, such as trust, brand equity and loyalty, providing a comprehensive perspective on the role of branding in the agri-food sector.

The robust methodological design, combining descriptive analysis and advanced statistical modeling, allowed the obtaining of relevant and well-founded conclusions, which can guide the branding strategies of companies in this sector. The study makes a significant contribution to enriching the literature on consumer behavior regarding organic food products, as well as to understanding the crucial role of branding in influencing purchasing decisions in the agri-food sector.

Chapter 5. General conclusions

This chapter synthesizes the general conclusions of the thesis, highlighting the main findings and contributions of the research. It also reaffirms the strategic importance of the brand in agribusiness, the role of stakeholders, and consumers' perceptions of agri-food brands. The conclusions emphasize the importance of collaboration between all the involved actors for the success and sustainability of agribusiness.

Moreover, this chapter highlights the crucial role of the brand in creating market differentiation and in attracting and retaining consumers. Strong brands can influence consumer preferences and purchasing behavior, bringing significant benefits to companies in the agricultural and food sectors. The last chapter of the thesis also reiterates the importance

of brand dimensions, such as brand value, brand equity, brand trust, and brand loyalty, in building a powerful and recognized identity in the market.

The conclusions also show the importance of stakeholders in the success of agribusiness. Each group of stakeholders, including farmers, processors, distributors, consumers, investors, researchers, and governments, plays an essential role in the value chain and contributes to the sustainability of the sector. Efficient collaboration between these actors is crucial to address challenges and capitalize on opportunities in agribusiness.

Finally, this part also emphasizes the need to adopt modern technologies and sustainable agricultural practices to optimize production and manage resources efficiently. Innovation and research play a crucial role in the development and modernization of agribusiness, providing solutions to the challenges facing the industry.

The chapter concludes that the success of agribusiness depends on a holistic approach that integrates economic, social, and environmental aspects. Strong brands, efficient collaboration between stakeholders, the adoption of modern technologies and sustainable practices, as well as a favorable policy and regulatory framework are essential for the development and sustainability of agribusiness.

5.1 Research Limitations

Despite the efforts invested in conducting a comprehensive and meticulous research, this doctoral thesis presents some limitations and restrictions that must be clearly and openly exposed. The literature review was the first study of this research work, and in this respect, we can identify a potential limitation of the research that results precisely from the complexity that is characteristic of agriculture and the food industry. The diversity of approaches and analysis criteria constitutes an important research limitation, as the analyzed field has many components in continuous expansion. Additionally, a certain degree of subjectivism in the process of selecting stakeholders can be identified, and extending the study to the international level could contribute to the elimination of this limitation. Finally, time and other resource constraints, as well as the external context, which is extremely volatile, represent other limitations of the research.

5.2 Future Research Perspectives

Analyzing the research limitations mentioned above, we can identify several paths for new research perspectives, the results of which could act complementarily to the efforts made so far. First, by capitalizing on the international valences of agribusiness, it would be useful for the research targeting stakeholders to be extended to the international level. Additionally, it would be relevant for the case studies to also focus on other areas of agribusiness, as it is a field characterized by a variety of components. At the same time, in order to counteract the limitations related to time and other resources, it would be useful and even relevant, as a starting point for new academic endeavors, to involve mixed teams of researchers from multiple countries. Finally, the constraints determined by the atypical socio-economic and geopolitical environment must be acknowledged, as we cannot influence them, which is why it would be appropriate for new research efforts to be carried out after the current tensions and extensive changes have been resolved.

5.3 Managerial Implications

This research highlights a series of relevant managerial implications for companies in the agribusiness sector. First, the study emphasizes the importance of developing and consolidating the brand as an essential strategic tool for increasing competitiveness, ensuring customer satisfaction, and fostering loyalty. The focus should be on creating a distinctive identity and a memorable experience for consumers, through effective communication and alignment with market trends and preferences. Additionally, the study reveals the importance of partnership and efficient collaboration with various stakeholders, including through the formation of strategic alliances and integrations, to increase efficiency and add value. Finally, companies must be attentive to brand dimensions, such as perceived value, brand equity, trust, and loyalty, as these are key factors in building a strong brand and ensuring a sustainable competitive advantage.

The doctoral thesis presents aspects of novelty and originality regarding the analysis of the role of branding in agribusiness, as follows:

1. Interdisciplinary approach: The paper integrates perspectives from the field of business administration (marketing, management, finance) with aspects from the field of agricultural sciences to analyze the impact of branding in the field of agribusiness. This constitutes an innovative approach that goes beyond the limitations of traditional mono-disciplinary analyses.
2. In-depth study of stakeholders: The research includes an extensive case study on the Holiv Ecoplant SRL company, through which the perceptions and expectations of key stakeholders (employees, tenants, public authorities, customers, competitors, suppliers, financial institutions, management, media, non-governmental organizations) regarding the role of the brand are analyzed in detail. This participatory approach is innovative in the literature on agribusiness.
3. Integration of modern branding concepts: The work capitalizes on concepts such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainability, technological innovation, value co-creation, as key elements in the development of powerful brands in agribusiness. This modern perspective represents a significant improvement over traditional approaches.
4. Comparative analysis at the national and international level: The thesis includes a comparative analysis of the main actors in agribusiness at the global and national level, providing an overview of the trends and characteristics of this field. This comparative approach is useful for better understanding the dynamics and evolution of branding in agribusiness.
5. Integrated qualitative and quantitative research: The combination of qualitative research methods (in-depth interviews with stakeholders) and quantitative methods (survey applied to consumers) allows for a deeper understanding of the role of branding and its impact on all involved parties. This combination of approaches represents a significant improvement over previous research.

In conclusion, the doctoral thesis makes a relevant academic contribution through an interdisciplinary approach, in-depth analysis of stakeholders, integration of modern branding concepts, comparative analysis at the national and international level, and the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. These elements of novelty and originality strengthen the scientific value of the work and open new research directions in the field of agribusiness.

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