ORGANIC PRIVATE LABELS AS A TOOL TO ACHIEVE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE - THE CASE OF INTERNATIONAL RETAILERS OPERATING IN THE POLISH MARKET

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Abstract

The main aim of the study was to analyze/determine how international modern retailers' chains can achieve a competitive advantage by introducing private labels (PLs) in the organic category and in turn stimulate consumption of food produced with respect of sustainability principles.

Following a review of the relevant literature data collection process involved two steps. First, to select retailers with organic private labels (OPLs) and producers delivering products under OPLs, there were conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with the representatives of the management board of 17 enterprises. A group of 6 enterprises was selected, including 3 retailers having OPLs, 2 producers delivering products under OPLs and one enterprise that was categorized as producer and distributor. Based on the results of the interviews, six sources of the competitive advantage of the OPLs were identified and further discussed. Second, to analyze more in depth assortment-based competitive advantage of the OPLs, 8 enterprises (5 retailers having OPLs, 2 producers delivering products under OPLs and one enterprise categorized as a producer and distributor) were approached for the interviews. To explore price-related competitive advantage three products offered under the premium PLs, the economy PLs, the organic PLs, the producer brands and the imported brands were selected for the subsequent analysis.

Increasing competition in the food retailing sector pose many challenges on the retailers and stimulate them to develop the PLs that is in line with global trends. In case of the OPLs, the more popular strategy while introducing them is to differentiate the PLs with quality and image related attributes comparable to leading producer brands. Retail chains introducing the OPLs achieve the competitive advantage related to six sources: price, range of assortment, type of PLs, image of retailer, sustainability and specific process and product related attributes of organic food. Additionally the retailers use their reputation and image of retailers' brand to guarantee the quality of new organic products introduced under the PLs.

To achieve or maintain the competitive advantage, retailers tend to introduce the OPLs positioned as value added PLs. They perceive the OPLs as a way to influence the consumers' decision to buy and increase their loyalty towards store brands. The strategies of the retailers evolve and the largest retailers decided to create the premium OPLs, the others focus on introduction of the international OPLs or aim at development of new PLs based on the analysis of consumers' preferences. There are several factors behind the decision to introduce or extend the premium OPLs i.e. to expand the assortment of organic products and green products line, to increase category margins and to enhance retailer's image among customers. Other large retailers create the OPLs with special product line design focusing on health- and environmental related attributes and high quality guaranteed by the organic regulations and the certification. The process of the introducing the premium PLs should be influenced by the inherent characteristic of organic food and its production methods that respect the principles of the sustainable development.

Keywords: organic private labels, competitive advantage, retailing,

1. Introduction

Private label

Private labels (PLs, i.e. own brands) are becoming increasingly important [1] in the consumer decision making process of the PLs [2–11] and support the creation and the achievement of the competitive advantage of various enterprises [12].

Products under PLs are sold under a retailer's brand, which may be the retailer's own name or a name used exclusively [13] and known as home brands, store brands or own label brands [14]. PLs can also be described as retailer-owned private label brands (PLBs) [15], private label brands (PLB) [9], store brand [2,5,16–18], own brand [5], private label [1,10,18–23] or private brands [11]. Some researchers use other description i.e. private label (store) brand [6] or private label product [24].

PLs are available in a wide range of products categories from food to cosmetics and other shopping products like textiles, household appliances, and electronic devices [25]. Recently, retailers have begun offering PLs in such categories as organic, health and wellness products. Some studies point that consumers are interested in products produced in a health-, environmental- and social- friendly way [26] [27] [28–32]. It is linked with growing consumer concern in relation to product origin, environmental impact and nutritional value. For example in such products available under PLs like coffee, tea, cocoa and palm oil, there are important environmental issues i.e. waste management, water saving, soil erosion and crop protection [33].

In Poland, PLs have been growing for about 20 years. Initially, PLs were introduced as economic brands characterized by a lower price by about 40-50% than producer brands and a small assortment diversity [34]. Their dynamic development resulted in the growth of market shares and the strengthening of the competitive position of the individual retail chains. This influenced the decision of the retailers to introduce the PLs in new product categories, i.e. with more added value [35]. Currently, PLs are available in almost every product category, constituting an important element of the competition. Changing consumer preferences and growing interest in organic food has become a factor determining the development of the PLs [35,36].

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Over the years, the evolution of the PLs perception is observed due to price-quality strategy, product types and differentiation. Trade researchers present three types of the PLs: economy PLs (low-quality tier or generics), standard PLs (mid-quality tier) and premium PLs (top-quality tier) [21,37]. Some retailers introduce standard and economy PLs to complement the standard line of private label products (SPL) with a special "economy" private label (EPL) [8,19]. The economy PLs positioned as budget, low-priced or value private label comprises elementary products in basic types or varieties with little marketing support [19]. The standard PLs are perceived at higher quality level than economy PLs [8].

Very important stage in the PLs development was the introduction of premium PLs positioning in the higher price-quality segments. Some retailers distinguish premium private labels (PPLs) from value private labels (VPLs) [37], premium from economy PLs [23]. Some of them use brand positioning strategies to distinguish premium PLBs from classic PLBs [9] and standard PLs [38]. From the other hand manufactures often refuse to produce the economy PLs taking into consideration supplying the premium ones due to satisfying consumer needs and maintaining positive image [17].

The introduction and development of the PLs determine a broad range of advantages for retailers [3]. PLs have higher profit margins than other products which result in greater profits leading to maximizing total retailer profitability [13]. But retailing companies introduce the PLs not only to gain profits [13,39].

In recent years, the PLs are analysed as a tool to create and achieve competitive advantage [12]. PLs can build store loyalty [40,41] and influence the products usage [22]. It can be associated by the opportunities of companies differentiation [2,40,42] and positioning [2].

PLs can also build and strengthen strong consumer relationships [42]. It is the result of adequate relationship management leading to consumer satisfaction trust and commitment. Successful PLs can personalize a customer's shopping experience with greater acceptance that can create higher customer loyalty [25,42]. PLs are also perceived as a mean for competing for the rational consumer with value innovator [13].

Organic food sector in Poland

The organic farming sector in Poland, like in many other Central and Eastern European countries, experienced a tremendous growth in the last decade in the production area due to policy driven incentives for conversion to organic production. In 2016, the number of farms reached 22,369 and 536,579ha were under organic production (approx. 4.0% of AUL). Despite the significant growth of organically managed land in Poland the domestic organic market is still considered as immature [43]. Even though there were 705 organic processors in the year 2016 representing various branches, the supply of domestic organic processed products remains low [44]. As a result, the range of products offered in organic quality is limited. A serious impairment to creating a diverse assortment offer is the reluctance to cooperation, lack of professional organization dealing with organic logistic and sales that negatively impacts on the potential for creating a common offer, particularly in relation to small sized organic farms. Another issue that appears to be a crucial factor towards further

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development of organic food market in Poland is the structure of the sale channels and the prices for organic products.

Wier and Calverley [45] in their multifaceted analysis of factors determining the development of organic food markets in Europe in the late 90s, argue that the conditions for developing organic food markets are related to a high level of supermarket sales. However, sales through supermarkets pose various challenges to organic sector in countries with low supply because they demand large quantities of organic products of homogeneous qualities, delivered to schedule and supported by professional promotion [46]. These conditions despite many policy related initiatives and financial support are still difficult to meet for the organic sector in Poland. Nevertheless, there is evidence of an increased retail focus on organic, with PLs gaining share from branded organic sales. In the past organic packaged food was only available in a very limited number of specialized outlets. However, there has been a growing presence of organic products, including in mainstream channels such as discounters and hypermarkets, which was one of the key drivers of the current value growth of 10% that was recorded in 2016 [47]. An improving economic climate and a growing focus on health are the main reasons for the increased interest in the organic category, with 19.4% of Polish saying that they buy organic food at least once per week. The top categories purchased according to the recent consumer survey are eggs, vegetables and cereal products.

Competitive advantage

Competitive advantage is defined as 'an advantage of higher ability of competition, it is the core of capacity of economic and business activities in the markets, where competition exists' [48]. It is described as something, what separates the enterprise from others and keeps it alive and growing [49].

There are two basic types of the competitive advantage leading to three generic strategies: cost leadership, differentiation and focus. The last strategy exists in two variants as cost and differentiation focus strategy. The sources of cost competitive advantage depend on economies of scale, proprietary technology, preferential access to raw materials and other factors. The company may achieve cost leadership and the objective is to become the lowest cost producer. Such state can be achieve mainly by high capacity utilization, high productivity and effective use of technology [48].

The differentiation strategy allows the enterprise to be unique on the market in relation to one or more attitudes valued by consumers. It is associated with premium positioning resulted in higher quality and higher prices. This strategy can be realized using (1) branding strategies leading to consumer loyalty towards brands, high brand equity and strong consumer relationships, (2) unique products and superior product quality, (3) wide distribution and promotional support. The focus strategy has two variants related to the target segments. In cost focus strategy, the company uses a cost advantage in its target segment based on low prices. In differentiation focus strategy, the differentiation in target segment is the main business activity concerning the special needs and preferences of consumers [48].

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Barney [50] distinguish competitive advantage from sustainable competitive advantage. “A firm is said to have a competitive advantage when it is implementing a value creating strategy not simultaneously being implemented by any current or potential competitors. A firm is said to have a sustained competitive advantage when it is implementing a value creating strategy not simultaneously being implemented by any current or potential competitors and when these other firms are unable to duplicate the benefits of this strategy” [50]. Resource-based theory indicates that a competitive advantage can be created by a firm strategic resource that must be valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and nonsubstitutable [50]. Some studies analyzed implementation of resourced based theory in strategic management [51]

Many authors have analyzed the ways of competitive advantage creation and the drivers of the competitive advantage [50,52–56]. For example Kitson et al. [57] suggested that the basis of the regional competitive advantage were as follows: human capital (the quality and skills of the workforce), social and institutional capital (the extent, depth and orientation of social networks and institutional forms), cultural capital (the extent and quality of cultural facilities and assets), knowledge and creative capital (the presence of an innovative and creative class), infrastructural capital (the size and quality of public infrastructure) as well as productive capital (an efficient productive base to the regional economy) [57].

Very important way to achieve the competitive advantage is the implementation of the sustainable strategy with the aims of sustainable development including environmental protection, reduction of poverty and global warming. Detailed activities include eco-efficiency, development of environment friendly products, and reputation building [58].

Presented above two sources of the competitive advantage resulted in market-oriented and resource-based approach can be extended by measuring the outcome of competitive efforts through firm performance (e.g. profitability) or market share stability [52].

Some authors indicated that market orientation has a positive effect on business performance in both the short and the long run to achieve the sustained advantage [59]. On the other hand, the resource-based approach focuses on the internal environment that is considered to be crucial. It can be extended to resource-and competence-based view [60].

Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyze/determine how international modern retailers’ chains can achieve the competitive advantage by introducing OPLs. Six sources of the competitive advantage were distinguished/identified, including price, range of assortment, type of the PLs, image of retailer, sustainability and specific process and product related attributes of organic food.

2. Methods and methodology

Aim of the study and research gaps

The main aim of the study was to analyze/determine how international modern retailer chains can achieve the competitive advantage by introducing the OPLs. The scope of the research covered:

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- analysis of factors determining the retailers decision to introduce the OPLs,
- analysis of the sources of the competitive advantage including type of the PLs, assortment, specific attributes of organic food, sustainability, prices and retailer based advantages,
- identification and analysis of drivers of the competitive advantage in relation to each source,
- assortment and price analysis of the OPLs offered by the retail operators in the Polish market,
- analysis of the OPLs branding elements.

This study attempts to fill important gap in the literature related to the OPLs and their importance as a tool to create and maintain the retailer's competitive advantage. There is lack of research in the area of the OPLs analyzed from the producer and the retailer point of view in the context of the competitive advantage. This approach requires analyzing the strategies of the retailers being the leading companies and conducting research in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews to allow some flexibility during the interviews.

A considerable amount of literature has been published on factors related to consumer behavior and factors determining the food and the non-food PLs decision making process. In the consumers behavior analyses, the PLs are perceived as high-quality products at attractive prices [9,19]. The special attention is given to perceived price due to the expectation of advantageous prices [3].

Many researchers focused on other factors influencing the decision making process of the PLs purchase i.e. store image [2–4,7,10,11,24,61], perceived risk [2,3,5–7,10,24] and perceived quality [1,4–9,40,41]. In some studies the PLs image associated by product signatureness enhance quality perception and purchase intention of the PLs [11].

There is also quite some data on consumer behaviour towards the PLs including demographic and socio economic characteristics as well as type of product categories i.e. convenience goods and durable products [42], dry grocery products, frozen food products, and refrigerated dairy products [25]. The others analyzed selected retailers i.e. a supermarket retailer in the Northeast United States [25].

Some authors analyzed the PLs in the context of private labels brand equity creation [3]. It is allowed by the PLs in-store communications, the PLs distribution intensity and the perceived price. [3]. Others focused on the brand awareness [6,7,9,37,40] to achieve and maintain better market position. The role of the PLs is perceived via brand authenticity made of four dimensions: integrity, credibility, symbolism and continuity. This aspect has theoretical approach and empirical evidence [9].

Literature identifies many factors of successfully introduction of the PLs, because in recent years many products carrying PLs available from a retailer chain have been introduced with varying degrees of success [2]. For example, evaluations of the PLs is influenced by product-related ethical attributes (i.e. attributes that reflect concern about social and environmental issues) [15]. PLs have a higher propensity to succeed when a society gets urban and its

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consumers educated [10]. The success of premium vs economy PLs depends on the image and awareness of a producer. When the products under PLs are produced by a well-known manufacturer or the retailer do not moderate consumer preferences for premium vs. economy PLs. The PLs market share is influenced by various stakeholders like consumers, manufacturers, retailers and product-market characteristics [18].

The review of the literature confirms the lack of publications referring to the PLs of the organic food particularly in immature markets like Polish one. At the same time, this indicates the originality of this publication.

Research methods

The research was conducted with the use of a qualitative approach i.e. in-depth semi-structured interviews and structured observation.

The semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection strategy in which the researcher asks informants a series of predetermined but open-ended questions [62]. It is used to gather focused, qualitative textual data. This method offers a balance between the flexibility of an open-ended interview and the focus of a structured. This method can ensure gathering data on the experiences of participants. Such information can help to develop the investigation process from general topics (domains) to more specific insights (factors and variables). [63,64]

A semi-structured interview combines predefined questions like those used in structured interviews with the open-ended exploration of an unstructured interview [65]. There is a set of questions on an interview schedule, but the interview is guided by the schedule rather than dictated by it [66].

Interviewers using the semi-structured interview approach generally follow a document called an interview guide or interview schedule that includes the following: (1) an introduction to the purpose and topic of the interview, (2) a list of topics and questions to ask about each topic, (3) suggested probes and prompts and (4) closing comments [65]. The questions in the interview guide are described, to achieve the richest possible data [67].

The detailed structure of the interview guide used in this study in provided in Table 1.

In case of semi-structured interviews the researcher has more control over the topics of the interview than in unstructured interviews [62,64,68,69]. Therefore, we decided to use this approach as the most appropriate for the purpose of the study.

For the assortment and price analyses, we used the structured in store observation [70]. It entails the collection of data according to a set of predefined topics and rules. The structure of the observation as well as the predefined variables were developed in line with the main purpose of the study [71].

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Data collection process

Data were collected from August to November 2017 within a research project entitled "Marketing, promotion and market analysis of the organic production in Poland, including opportunities and barriers of development" financed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The objective of this part of study was to identify the OPLs development with the aim to get more insights into the competitive advantage of the retailing companies. For the purpose of this study, we conducted 17 in-depth semi-structured interviews with experts (purchasing manager, sales manager) of food retailing companies and producers. The sample of the surveyed enterprises consisted of 9 retailers with organic food, 7 organic food producers and one producer who was also a distributor. The group of 17 surveyed enterprises was divided into two sub-groups, taking into account the OPLs offer (in the case of retailers) and the production of organic food on behalf of the OPLs retail chain (in the case of producers). The first sub-group consisted of 6 enterprises, including 2 ones producing under OPLs, 3 retailers owning the OPLs and one producer and distributor. During the in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in this group of enterprises, the issue concerning the OPLs was deepened.

In the second subgroup, there were 11 enterprises, including 6 retailers that did not have the OPLs in their offer and 5 producers not delivering organic products under the OPLs on behalf of the retailer. An additional question asked to retailers during the in-depth interview concerned the reasons for the lack of the OPLs, while the producers were asked why they do not produce organic products under the OPLs. The detailed description of the data collection process is provided in Figure 1.

In-depth semi-structured interview questions were developed based on a the analysis of literature including qualitative studies related to organic food products, corporate reports and interview with two stakeholders namely a producer and a distributor. All questions were divided into 11 subcategories (Table 1). The particular sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed into text transcripts and coded. In the process of data analysis the transcript were compared with brief notes taken by interview experts to ensure no information was missed and further analysed in a qualitative way. The interviews took from 120 to 150 minutes.

Commencing each interview, the expert researchers introduced themselves and explained the purpose of the study. Each interview was conducted by two or three experts.

Interviews were held over a three-month period with the general board director supported if relevant by the category managers and marketing specialists.

Figure 1. Data collection process

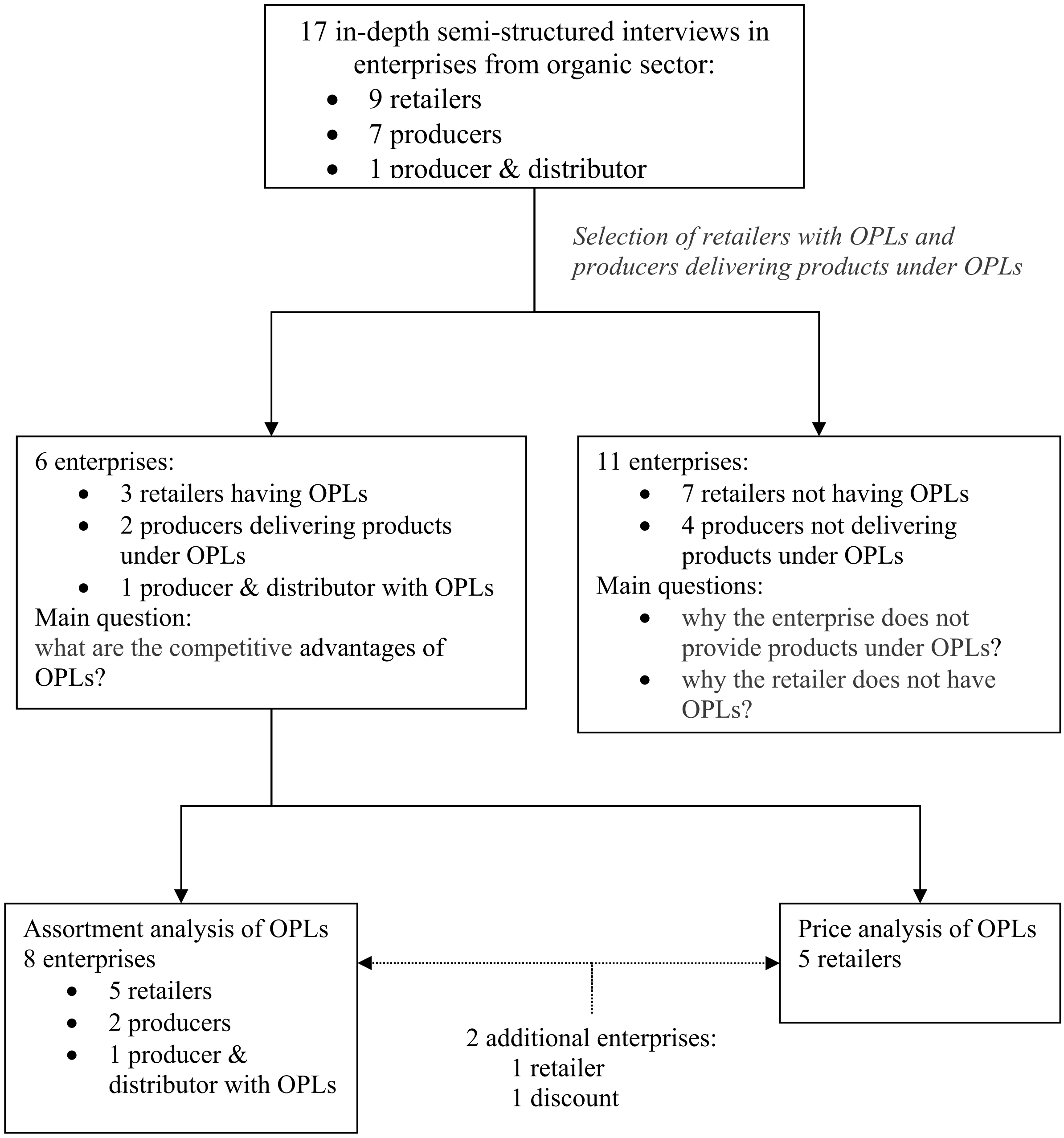

Table 1. Structure of the semi-structured questionnaire

Type of category	Scope of topics
Topic category	Organic food
Main categories	(1) Retail chain policy in the field of the organic food (2) Factors influencing the introduction of the organic food (3) Share of organic food in total sale (4) Availability and quality of the organic food (5) Environment and competition (6) Marketing strategies (7) Private labels – detailed analysis for the purpose of this study

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	(8) Promotion (9) Financial situation (10) Risk factors (11) Perspectives of development

For the assortment and price analysis we selected three retail enterprises Carrefour, Auchan and Jeronimo Martins that participated in the semi-structured interviews and additionally we covered by the analysis TESCO and Lidl since they are important players in the Polish retail market.

To present the prospects of domestic entities, the largest Polish producer and distributor of organic products (BioPlanet) and the largest Polish producer of organic products under their own brand and for the OPLs (Symbio) was selected. The producer (Wytwórnia Makaronu BioBabalski) delivering products under OPLs was also included in the group of surveyed production enterprises.

The assortment analysis covered 23 product categories (Table 2). In relation to the surveyed enterprises, the number of assortment items available under the PLs, the number of product categories with organic products and the number of organic products available under the PLs were taken into account. For the comparative analysis of prices, three organic products (coffee, oil and rice) available under the PLs were selected in all retail chains surveyed. In case of some products available under the PLs like coffee, tea, cocoa and palm oil, there are important environmental issues i.e. waste management, water saving, soil erosion and crop protection [33]. Therefore, it is crucial to extend the assortment of such products to stimulate sustainable consumption.

Table 2. Organic product categories covered by the assortment and the price analysis

Organic product categories included in the assortment analysis	(1) sugar (2) ketchup, mayonnaise, mustard (3) cereal bars and oatmeal cookies (4) flour (5) rice (6) barley, groats and brans (7) dried fruits and nuts (8) organic preserves (9) canned vegetables and fruits (10) coffee (11) tea (12) milk and milk drinks (13) cheeses (14) butter (15) rice, soya and oat drinks (16) oils (17) pasta (18) syrups (maple, date) (19) crunchy, musli and rolled cereals (20) honey	1. number of food product items available under the PLs 2. number of organic products available under the producer brands 3. number of organic products available under the OPLs 4. number of categories with the organic products 5. number of product items per 1 category

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	(21) jams (22) superfood (23) legumes	
Organic products included in the price comparison	• basmati rice, long grain rice • coffee • sunflower, rapeseed oils	Product prices divided into: premium PLs economy PLs organic PLs producer brands imported brands

Participants

Participant no. 1 (Carrefour) is one of the largest multinational retailing chains in the world operating in more than 30 countries, in Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa. The French Group's stores offer a variety of formats and channels, including hypermarkets, supermarkets, convenience stores, cash&carry stores and e-commerce. It has three operational models: integrated, franchised and partnership stores. The Group is interested in products sourced from local or national suppliers, which in 2016 represent close to 74% of all brand food products sold. In addition to the brand-name products, Carrefour offers own-brand food products: Carrefour, Carrefour Bio, Carrefour Selection, No Gluten, Carrefour Baby and Carrefour Kids, Carrefour Ecoplanet, Reflets de France, Terre d'Italia, De Nuestra Tierra, Viver, Bon App', Veggie, etc. [72]

Participant no. 2 (Auchan) is a multiformat retailer operating in 18 countries through city centre superstores, out-of-town hypermarkets, online shopping and drive outlets. Auchan Holding brings together 3 independent companies with complementary businesses: as a retailer, banking services and commercial real estate services. Auchan Holding offers own-brand food products mainly: *Les Produits Auchan* (Auchan products), *Le Moins Cher* (the least expensive), *Rik et Rok* (products designed for children), *Les Produits Régionaux* (the regional products), *Mieux Vivre Bio/Sans Gluten* (Live Better Organic/Without Gluten) – Auchan products that are either bio or without gluten. [73]

Participant no. 3 (Tesco PLC) is a British multinational retailer leading supermarket, hypermarket and superstores under such brands as: Tesco Extra, Tesco Superstores, Tesco Metro, One Stop and Tesco.com Only Stores. Tesco has diversified geographically and into various areas of business activity as: the retailing of books, furniture, toys, clothing, electronics, petrol and software, financial and internet services. It has over 6 550 stores in 12 countries across Europe and Asia offering products ranging from its "Tesco Value" items to its "Tesco Finest" range.

Participant no. 4 (Jerónimo Martins) is a Portuguese corporate group operating in the food distribution sector in Portugal, Poland, and Colombia. In Poland, Biedronka is the Food Retail sales leader, operating 2,722 stores across the country. Biedronka offers wide assortment of PLs under individual or category brands. [74]

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Participant no. 5 (Lidl Stiftung&Co.) is a German global discount supermarket chain that belongs to the Schwarz Gruppe. It is private family-owned German retail group operated over 10,000 stores (around 9900 Lidl stores, of which 3200 in Germany, and around 1190 Kaufland hypermarkets, of which 640 in Germany).

Participant no. 6 (Bio Planet S.A.) is the Polish market leader in the production and distribution of the organic food. Since 2006 the company has been offering certified organic products catering to the needs of consumers interested in bio food. The portfolio assortment consists of over 4000 products including 350 products under Bio Planet brand (about 250 packed products in constant offer). Bio Planet promotes the idea of the organic nutrition with the mission: "Bio Planet wants to face the challenges of the developing world, spreading environmental awareness among consumers and promoting natural dietary components". Bio Planet deliver organic products under Bio Planet brand name and distribute products of well-known manufacturers [75].

Participant no. 7 (Symbio Polska S.A.) is the one of the largest producers of the certified organic food in Poland manufacturing over 300 products under Symbio brand. The main areas of activities are as follows: production and export of food intermediates used in food production as well as production and distribution of retail products for the domestic market and exports. The mission is formulated as "Pure nature. Nature products 100% from nature". In the structure of total sales revenue in 2016, 75,1% was generated by domestic sale. [76].

Participant no. 8 (Pasta Manufacturer BioBabalski, in Polish: Wytwórnia Makaronu BioBabalski) has been operating in the sector of organic food producers since 1991. It specializes in the production of whole grain pasta, cereal flakes and many types of flour and groats available under producer brand and OPLs of retailers. As a mission, this enterprise treats the popularization of old cereal seeds.

3. Results and discussion

Organic PLs in retailer enterprises

Introduction of the OPLs in the retailer enterprises in Poland – on the one hand – is in line with the objectives of the PLs in food, and – on the other hand – it is related to the specific attributes of organic food as a product category. The first aspect concerns expanding the range of products available under the PLs with the aim to (1) increase the number of assortment items in categories with the existing PLs, (2) introduce the PLs into new product categories. This is determined by the strategies of the retailers aimed at increasing competitiveness and strengthening the market position. The second goal of introducing the OPLs results from the specific attributes of this product category and growing consumer demand for organically produced food. It is related with the certification process guarantying the products adequate quality and safety. Such aspects are analyzed as sources of the competitive advantage of the described in chapter "organic attributes based competitive advantage", "sustainability-based competitive advantage" and "retailer-based competitive advantage". It is also discussed in the

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literature that the retailers use specific standards in relation to the PLs for several reasons: to provide quality and safety assurance to consumers; to improve the environmental sustainability of food production; to coordinate supply chain operations; to gain access to new segments of demand; to increase and defend their reputation; to complement their brands; to define niche products [33].

In the companies surveyed, the OPLs are available in the assortment ranging from a few years to more than a decade and were created specifically for the Polish market or transferred from a parent company operating in the foreign market. The strategy of the OPLs introduction used by the retailers mimics the strategies of the parent companies and focus on gradual expansion of products to the markets of other countries. The decision to introduce the OPLs is driven by the supply of organic products. The timing of this process results from the implementation of the adopted strategic goals at the corporate level.

> *"Since the first years there have been mainly imported products, from the very beginning of the market opening we had PLs products, only our PL is local and international."*

Retailers' decisions to introduce the PLs are undertaken at the highest levels of the corporate hierarchy. The reasons are varied, determined by external and internal factors. The external conditions relate to the market position, macroeconomic trends, changes in consumer behavior, country specific implementation of corporate strategies towards the PLs. The growing consumer interest in health, environmental and social aspects in food production process is observed [26] [27] [28–32]. The internal factors cover enterprise management, products portfolio and product category. In this issue on the Polish organic food market – compared with other markets [32] – growing interest of producers and retailers towards environmentally-friendly practices and social responsibility in food production is observed. This is connected with the growth and spread of the sustainability certifications on the PLs and the other branded products. Sustainability certification allows to gain the premium price and the premium image [33].

An important issue related to the decision to introduce the OPLs is the topic of suppliers of the organic products. The decision to introduce the OPLs is determined by the factors related to the capacities of the suppliers. There are several strategic options that can be distinguished:

- the foreign OPLs and the foreign supplier
- the foreign OPLs and the domestic supplier
- the OPLs created for the Polish market and the Polish supplier
- the OPLs created for the Polish market and the foreign supplier

The choice of a specific strategy is determined by the market conditions related to ensuring the continuity of supplies in the appropriate quantity and quality:

1. the deliveries of the organic food
2. the deliveries for the PLs

In the first option, it is possible to have several suppliers for one assortment item to ensure the continuous presence of the product on the shelves. This approach allows eliminating the fluctuations in the deliveries from the individual suppliers.

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The second option requires a comprehensive approach. It is necessary to acquire – for a specific product – usually one supplier, which will ensure continuous supply in the right quantity and quality. This is determined by the fact that products will be available under the brand of the retail network constituting an additional mark guaranteeing quality. Different approach to domestic and foreign suppliers results from the requirements posed by the internal quality assurance systems adopted by the retailers.

> *"It is difficult to say whether the requirements are different for products, whether domestic or foreign. If we import a product from a local supplier, at the outset we determine what the quality level must be, what requirements the product must meet. Those that are imported do not assume our requirements here, it happens at the level of the country from which the product comes. Each country introducing a product takes into account the market for which the product is introduced. The products that we have on sale are made either only for our parent market or for other countries."*

> *"If the supplier is a big player then expanding the PLs will not negatively affect his portfolio. If it is a local supplier, it cannot produce PLs because there is no such capacity. Introducing a PL with someone else may be a threat to him. The emergence of the PL may also be a chance to cooperate."*

Retail chains introducing the PLs of organic food use a differentiation strategy, described in the literature by Porter [48]. The distinguishing attributes are higher quality combined with a higher price achieved by products from a controlled production process confirmed by a certificate. At the same time, retail chains provide wide distribution and promotional activities.

The PLs constitute an important element of strategic management of international retail chains, which is reflected in their visual identification and adopted positioning strategies. In this respect, the PLs can be treated as a strategic resource of a given network, non-substitutable and difficult to copy. This perception of the PLs allows to treat them as a valuable asset in accordance with the resource-based theory described by Barney [50].

Implemented strategies for introducing the PLs of the organic food allow the identification of competitive advantage sources, described in next chapter.

Competitive advantage of OPLs

The competitive advantage resulting from the introduction of the PLs in the category of organic food is a multifaceted issue. Six sources of the competitive advantage to be distinguished are summarized in Table 3 and further discussed in the following sections.

Table 3. Sources and drivers of the competitive advantage of the OPLs

Sources of the competitive advantage	Drivers of the competitive advantage
PLs based competitive advantage	• type of PLs • brand name
Assortment-based competitive advantage	• number of product categories • types of categories

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	• specific products categories
Organic attributes based competitive advantage	• health • naturalness • certification • lack of preservatives • wellness • organic quality
Sustainability-based competitive advantage	• certification • social aspects • environmental protection • sustainable development • animal welfare • trust based relationships • Social Corporate Responsibility
Price-related competitive advantage	• the price difference between organic products sold under PLs and producer brand • the price difference between organic products sold discount OPLs vs non-discount OPLs • the price difference between products sold as OPLs and PLs
Retailer-based competitive advantage	• quality guarantee • retailer awareness • PLs awareness • PLs perceived quality • reliability • good market position • trend creation (forecasting)

OPLs based competitiveness

The introduction of the OPL requires the retailer to decide on the type of the brand. It is determined by the well-established position of the PLs and their existing strategies in the food and non-food products categories. The decisions process of the retailers to introduce the OPLs were driven by the type of the PLs (new or existing PLs, sub-brand or single brand, product or corporate brand) and the positioning strategy of the OPLs (economy OPLs or premium OPLs). In the literature, such type of the PLs are described as eco-brands or sustainability-oriented brands [32].

In the case of the large retailers, most often the corporate brand was adopted as an umbrella brand for all assortment items (Table 4). It results from the business strategy at the corporate level. The presence of the corporate brand in the OPLs name is a supporting element and at the same time it provides a specific quality guarantee. The second element (bio or organic) supports the individualization and the identification of the organic category.

Such a strategy is common for the further development of the PLs in the retail and the discount chains with the PLs in the basic product categories [8,19]. It allows to extend green product lines [32] and distinguish the premium PLs from the economic ones [9,38] since it is related to positioning in the higher quality and price segment [37] and aimed to satisfy consumers' needs [17].

Table 4. Description of the OPLs of retailers

Name of the OPLs	Description of the OPLs
Carrefour Bio	• organic PLs of the Carrefour Group • sub-brand • double brand • supporting element: Carrefour as the corporate brand • element ensuring individualization and identification of the organic category: Bio • double associations: with the retailer brand name and the organic products
Auchanbio	• organic PLs of the Auchan Holding • new brand of France Auchan Retail offering customers easier access to a wide range of quality organic products at affordable prices. • sub-brand for organic products and new retailing format • double brand with supporting and supported elements • supporting element: Auchan as the corporate brand • element insuring the individualization of the organic category: bio • double associations: with the retailer brand name and organic products
Tesco Organic	• organic PLs sub-brand of the Tesco PLC • other PLs: Tesco value and Tesco Finest • double brand with supporting and supported elements • supporting element: Tesco as the corporate brand • element insuring the individualization and the identification of the organic category: organic • double associations: with retailer brand and organic products
Bio Organic	• organic PLs of the Lidl Stiftung&Co. • category PLs dedicated to the organic product • brand name of the OPLs without corporate name • single association: with organic products
goBio	• organic PLs of the Jeronimo Martins • category PLs dedicated to the organic products • brand name of the OPLs without corporate name • single association: with organic products

An important element shaping the competitive advantage of the OPLs is their image, depending on the type of the PL and the image of the retail chain. These factors strengthen the image of the organic food perceived as one product category. For this reason, it is understandable to introduce sub-brands as the OPLs to ensure more accurate identification. This allows distinguishing between the PLs in the organic food and the PLs in the conventional food in the process of communication with consumers. It is also a tool for facilitating merchandise related activities, for example, by helping to arrange products on the shelves and to introduce uniform visual identification. The growing role of a brand in positioning organic products is showed in the literature. Brand communication could play important role in triggering higher levels of consumer awareness and reinforce consumer confidence, trust, and safety of usage [27] .

Assortment-based competitiveness

The existing structure of the retail trade in Poland determines the strategic objectives of the retailers covered by the research and focus on the provision of a comprehensive assortment of products. The assortment range of organic products is enlarged by expanding the premium segment and the economy one as well as by developing the PLs. Such decision can be perceived as a strategy involving sustainability goals aimed at the development of new environmentally safe products, sold at the premium price [58]

This is a consequence of the ongoing competition between the retail chains that have different formats of the retail outlets on the one hand, and – on the other hand – it reflects the changing consumer attitudes. The growing global demand for organic products determines the decisions of the management boards of the retail chains to introduce such product items under the PLs.

> *"more room for maneuver (...) comprehensive approach, trend forecasting, client searches for such products, so we must have them in the offer…"*

> *"The variety of the products is our strategy, we want to meet the expectations of those consumers who are looking for gluten free, healthy, ecological, local, national and other products."*

The number of food products available under the PLs in the analysed product categories ranged from 193 (Auchan) to 401 (Tesco). This diversification results from different business strategies including introduction of new products and new categories under PLs.

Table 5. The overview of the PLs and organic products including number of categories and total product items

Type of the enterprise	Enterprise	Type of products and PLs	Total product items	Number of categories	Product items per one categorie
Retailer	Carrefour	food products under PLs	203	19	10,7
		organic products under producers brands	274	18	15,2
		organic products under PLs	30	13	2,3
	Auchan	food products under PLs	219	16	13,7
		organic products under	193	17	11,4

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		producers brands			
		organic products under PLs	22	12	1,8
	Tesco	food products under PLs	401	17	23,6
		organic products under producers brands	105	13	8,1
		organic products under PLs	26	12	2,2
Discount	Biedronka	food products under PLs	257	17	15,1
		organic products under producers brands	8	1	8,0
		organic products under PLs	26	12	2,2
	Lidl	food products under PLs	352	16	22,0
		organic products under producers brands	9	5	1,8
		organic products under PLs	29	11	2,6
Producer and disctributor	BioPlanet	food products under PLs	1539	19	81,0
		organic products under producers brands	270	10	27,0
Producer	Symbio	organic products under PLs	198	12	16,5

A detailed assortment analysis indicates a different approach of the super- and the hypermarket chains as well as the discount ones to introduction of the PLs. Discount chains develop the PLs and the OPLs, without or with little share of the products available under the producer brands.

Comparing the number of products introduced in the discount chains, it should be pointed out that there are more items of organic food, including those available under the PLs in the Lidl chain than in other retailers. This is a consequence of the adopted strategy towards the development of the category of organic food and food perceived as natural and healthy. Most assortment items offered as organic are imported and available in all countries where Lidl operates.

The different approaches to the category of organic food are used among the analyzed hyper- and supermarket chains (Table 6). The largest number of organic products available under the producers brands (274) and the OPLs (30) was observed in Carrefour. Tesco has the smallest number of organic products in the analyzed product categories (105). In Auchan, there are 193 organic products but the number of products available under the OPLs is low.

All the analyzed retailers when starting with the OPLs tended to introduce the organic products other than their competitors. Exclusiveness is an important competitive advantage of a particular retail chains. Organic pasta is available only in Tesco and Jeronimo Martins (Biedronka) chains while organic sugar is offered only in the Carrefour chain. This indicates the willingness to stand out and introduce the OPLs other than the competing chains.

The presented differentiation of the assortment related to the OPLs fits into the treatment of the own brand as an important tool for distinguishing itself from competitors [2,40,42]. At the same time, it ensures an appropriate market position due to the adopted positioning strategy [2].

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The number of the assortment items of the organic products under the PLs ranges in the hyper- and supermarket chains from 22 in Auchan to 30 in the Carrefour, while in the discount stores it is under 30. Few comparable organic products are available in the offer of all the retailer and discount networks/chains surveyed (Table 7).

Taking into account the comparative advantage, there are interesting assortment items that distinguish the retailer's offer of the OPLs from the offer of others. It is compatible with the description of the comparative advantage analyzed as something what separates the enterprise from the other [49].

568 Table 6. Overview of product items offered as OPLs, PLs and as producer brands

Organic product categories	Symbio	Bio Planet		Carrefour			Auchan			Tesco			Biedronka			Lidl		
	O	O	OPLs	PLs	O	OPLs	PLs	O	OPLs	PLs	O	OPLs	PLs	O	OPLs	PLs	O	OPLs
sugar	1	22	5	1	2	2	1			3	2		1			2		
ketchup, mayonnaise, mustard	3	23		10	6	3	8	3	1	13			13			9		
cereal bars and oatmeal cookies	9	141		23	28	9	14	11	1	21	7	2	37		2	41		
flour	29	82	33	2	21		3	16		8			2			4	1	2
barley, groats and brans	22	61	26	5	15	2	8	9		4	37	4	10			6	2	2
rice	7	37	19	5	5	1	7	3	1	13	6		8		2	6		1
dried fruits and nuts	56	137	67									1						
organic preserves	15	59		15	10		5	5	3				4		2			
canned vegetables and fruits		146		20	15	2	11	10	0	11	0	3	8		2	12		
coffee		85		7	15	2	47	5	1	28	4		18		1	21		1
tee		273		15	35	2	35	21	0	77	0		50		6	55		
milk and milk drinks				14	34	1	13	43		45	10		26	8	2	60		5
cheeses				38	29	1	31	11		64			38		1	68	2	2
butter				1		2	4	3		9			7			5	1	
rice, soya and oat drinks									5		3	5						3
oils	7	101		2	7	2	10	20	1	7	4	2	5		2	10		4
pasta	12	103		18	30		20	7	5	36	17	1	20		3	17		1
syrups (maple, date)		44	5	2	6			20										3
crunchy, musli and rolled cereals	25	98	61							20	14	1				20		5
honey		36		4	4													
jams				15	10			5	3	28			4		2	16	3	
superfood		19	18															
legumes	12	70	34															

569 PLs – food products under private labels, OPLs – organic products under PLs, O – organic products under producer brands

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Table 7. Organic products available under the PLs

Popular organic products available in particular retailers under the OPLs	
Organic products available in all analysed retailers under the OPLs	basmati rice, long grain rice coffee sunflower oil, rapeseed oil
Specific organic products available in particular retailers under the OPLs	
… in Carrefour as Carrefour Bio	canned tomatoes, canned green lentils bulgur, French mustard apple mousse, apple - pear mousse, apple - banana mousse, apple-peach mousse
… in Auchan as Auchanbio	tomato sauce, thyme natural soy drink, chocolate soy drink, soy drink with calcium oat drink, almond drink spelled pasta, rye pasta orange jam, apricot-strawberry jam
… in Tesco as Tesco Organic	salty spelt sticks, salty spelt pretzels, dried tomatoes, soya rice-almond drink, rice drink, oat drink
… in Lidl as	linen flour bread flour musli
… in Biedronka	frozen strawberries passata, granadine drink coconut oil, hummus, green tea

In the Polish companies different strategies are observed i.e. a larger number of product categories and a greater number of assortment items. The assortment development is directed towards products with higher value added, which should be treated as an important competitive advantage.

For example in flour category, following items are available in addition to standard items: wheat bread flour, rye graham flour, whole rye flour, rye bread flour, buckwheat flour, oat white flour, whole oat flour, amaranth flour, millet flour, corn flour, spelt white flour, spelt bread flour, rice flour, soy flour, cassava flour, chestnut flour, quinoa flour, coconut flour and almond flour. Basic types of flour are available in the offer of foreign retailers.

The assortment-based competitiveness is also reflected in the introduction of such categories of the organic food under the PLs as superfoods, including baobab powdered, hemp protein powder, camu camu powdered, chlorella powder, guarana powdered, acai powdered freeze dried, kale powdered, lucuma powder, psyllium seeds, spirulina powder.

Introduction of the innovative product categories should be analyzed as comparative advantage of Polish producers and distributors of organic food. It is compatible with the description of comparative advantage as the advantage of higher ability of competition [48] and something what keeps the enterprise “alive and growing” [49].

The Polish enterprises implement the differentiation focus strategy with the organic food as the main target of business activity. They compete based on uniqueness and target market

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with specialized needs gaining a comparative advantage through product innovation and brand marketing.

Organic attributes based competitive advantage

The competitive advantage resulting from the introduction of the OPLs is healthiness that is a key attribute of the organic products and the main driver of the organic food consumption. It can be also analyzed as the exemplification of the healthy lifestyle trend. Another attribute of the primary importance is the production process perceived as traditional particularly in terms of processing methods used.

> *"...for the retailer, OPLs mean <<promoting health>>"*

> *"... ecological products also bring with them the issues of tradition, environmental protection, what is related to it, they have a lot of advantages related to limiting the level, processing and complexity of the product"*

> *"It is pesticide-free food, health is a benefit; crops less harmful to the environment than conventional ones; in Poland the egoistic approach dominates - health benefit "*

> *"...a safe product, devoid of herbicides or pesticides, is not genetically modified. (...) it is in one dimension, such a health ... "*

It is widely discussed in the literature in the relation to adequate product quality and safety, new segments of demand [33], healthy aspects [27–33,46,77–79] as well as sustainable consumption [29,78].

Sustainability-based competitive advantage

The approach to the OPLs is determined by the perception of the organic food in the context of the sustainable development and the environmental protection. This is an additional dimension and an additional attribute that allows shaping the competitive advantage. Organic products are also related to benefits in terms of animal welfare.

> *"Other dimensions, such as environmental protection, sustainable development and animal welfare (...) organic food is not only healthy, but also the philosophy of life, that is taking care of environmental protection, sustainable development and animal welfare, which is very important."*

Some researchers indicate that enterprises can use brands to promote the sustainability to their consumers, industrial customers and other stakeholders [59] as well as to improve sustainability of food production [33]. It is related with consumer perception and interest as well as the enterprises strategies [80–82]. For some enterprises the sustainability is the core mission and is used as a tool to make societies and ecosystems vulnerable [26].

An important aspect determining the introduction of the PLs in the category of organic food is also social responsibility. It is understood as the introduction of products produced by methods less harmful to the environment on the one hand, and on the other as a response to the needs of ever larger groups of society.

> *"Each retail network will build PLs, social responsibility is important"*

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Another issue is sustainable consumption [29,78] and the role of the OPLs in assuring the more sustainable levels of consumption. It was observed in the Romanian retail system [78] as well as on the German [33], Italian [30,33] and Belgium market [28].

Sustainability incorporated into marketing strategies indicate five topics related to: external-internal focus, social-environmental emphasis, legal-ethical-discretionary intent, marketing assets, and financial performance [80]. Therefore it is very important for the Polish market of organic food as well as for the OPLs introduced into the Polish market.

The retailer achieves the competitive advantage by perceiving it as a reliable business partner building trust-based relationships with suppliers. This image is important for the cooperation with the current and future suppliers, it is also important for other stakeholders.

> *"... our goal is to maintain cooperation with suppliers as long as possible"*

Building trust-based relationships with the suppliers of organic products is particularly important for this product category to ensure the adequate quality of organic products and proper way of their production. It can be used – as mentioned in the literature – to build the companies' reputation by increasing environmental efficiency [58].

> *"For us, the risk is one - failure to maintain the quality of the product. We sell as organic, and then after the results of research it turns out that the non-ecological product must be withdrawn, a media crisis is emerging. The issue of disloyalty and falsification of the product - here is the risk. This is mainly about our brand, where we sign our logo."*

There are signals that for the producer it may be unfavorable to offer the same organic products under the PLs of the retailer and the producer's brand. It should also be assumed that for larger producers / suppliers of organic products under the PLs, the PL is not a threat. However, for smaller ones it may be difficult to keep the price and the volume of the deliveries in a long time.

Price-related competitive advantage

Price competitiveness of the OPLs is determined by two factors. The first one is the price being proposed by the suppliers due to costs of the organic production. The second one results from the price strategy adopted by the retailer in relation to a given PL positioned in the lower or the higher price segment.

> *"(...) our weakness, (...) the barrier is price. Perhaps now this barrier is smaller, but until recently the prices proposed by the suppliers were very high, we have a rule that our own brand must be available to the customer in a given price range. "*

Price competitiveness of the OPLs should be analyzed in three areas:

- the difference between organic products sold under the PLs and the producer brand
- the difference between organic products sold under discount OPLs vs non-discount OPLs
- the difference between products sold as the OPLs and the PLs

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The price analysis for three products (rice, coffee and oils) allowed for determining the price differences. Organic products available under producer brands were offered in the higher price segment. In the case of imported products, the highest level of retail prices was found. The lower prices related to organic products available under PLs as OPLs of retail chains (Carrefour BIO, AuchanBio, Tesco Organic) are observed. Discount stores were characterized by a lower price level, which concerned such PLs as: goBio and Bio Organic. Non-organic equivalents of organic products offered under the organic PLs of super- and hypermarket as well as discount chains were positioned in the lowest price segment.

On the markets perceived to be more advanced in terms of promoting food sustainability, the price of many products with sustainability certifications is not higher than the price of the corresponding product without the environmental label [33]. This difference can be explain by the degree of the organic sector development and particularly high share of large retailers in organic sales [45].

Table 8. Prices of rice under organic PLs, PLs and producers brands (in PLN per 1 kg)

Enterprises	Brands	Products	PLN per kg	Average price	Price difference
Organic Imported Brands					
BioPlanet	Amaizin	basmati quick boiled	26,68	26,53	77,1%
BioPlanet	Davert	whole grain	26,38		
Organic Producer Brands					
Symbio	Symbio	basmati white	25,98	18,38	22,7%
Symbio	Symbio	basmati brown	23,98		
BioPlanet	BioPlanet	long grain brown	13,10		
BioPlanet	BioPlanet	long grain white	12,54		
BioPlanet	BioPlanet	basmati whole grain	16,88		
BioPlanet	BioPlanet	basmati white	17,78		
Organic Private Labels					
Carrefour	Carrefour BIO	basmati white	14,98	14,98	100%
Auchan	AuchanBio	long grain brown	14,98		
Tesco	Tesco Organic	basmati white	14,98		
Organic Discount Private Labels					
Jeronimo Martins	goBio	basmati white	11,98	11,98	– 20,0%
Lidl	Bio Organic	long grain	11,98		
Non-organic Private Labels					
Carrefour	Carrefour	basmati white	9,98	5,49	– 63,3%
Carrefour	Carrefour	long grain	5,38		
Auchan	Auchan	long grain	2,78		
Tesco	Tesco	basmati white	6,98		
Tesco	Tesco	long grain	3,98		
Non-organic Private Labels (economy)					
Auchan	Auchan economy	long grain	3,85	3,32	– 77,8%
Tesco	Tesco Value	long grain	2,79		
Non-organic Discount Private Labels					
Jeronimo Martins	Supreme	long grain	7,13	7,13	– 52,4%

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Table 9. Prices of coffee under organic PLs, PLs and producers brands (in PLN per 1 kg)

Enterprises	Brands	PLN per kg	Average price	Price difference
Organic Imported Brands				
BioPlanet	Cafe Michel	87,08	88,97	+ 29,3%
BioPlanet	Alce Nero	83,20		
BioPlanet	Oxfam	80,96		
BioPlanet	Lebensbaum	98,48		
BioPlanet	Ale Cafe	105,48		
BioPlanet	Alternativa	78,60		
Organic Private Labels				
Carrefour	Carrefour BIO	79,96	68,81	100%
Auchan	AuchanBio	55,96		
Organic Discount Private Labels				
Jeronimo Martins	goBio	39,98	39,98	– 41,9%
Lidl	Bio Organic	39,99		
Non-organic Private Labels (premium)				
Carrefour	Carrefour	43,96	48,09	– 30,1%
Auchan	Auchan	43,96		
Tesco	Tesco Finest	56,34		
Non-organic Private Labels (economy)				
Auchan	Auchan economy	29,90	29,91	– 56,5%
Tesco	Tesco Value	29,93		
Non-organic Discount Private Labels				
Jeronimo Martins	Biedronka	51,96	51,96	– 24,5%

Table 10. Prices of oils under organic PLs, PLs and producers brands (in PLN per 1 kg)

Enterprises	Brands	Products	PLN per kg	Average price	Price difference
Organic Imported Brands					
BioPlanet	Dary Natury	rapessed oil	34,56	31,01	+95,4%
BioPlanet	Poloniak	rapessed oil	31,04		
BioPlanet	Planette	rapessed oil	27,44		
Organic Private Labels					
Carrefour	Carrefour BIO	rapessed oil	18,65	15,87	100%
Auchan	AuchanBio	rapessed oil	15,99		
Tesco	Tesco Organic	rapessed oil	12,99		
Non-organic Private Labels					
Auchan	Auchan	rapessed oil	4,99	4,54	– 71,4%
Tesco	Tesco	rapessed oil	5,09		
Organic Imported Brands					
BioPlanet	Planette	sunflower oil	23,64	22,48	+ 35,0%
BioPlanet	Planette	sunflower oil	21,32		
Organic Private Labels					
Carrefour	Carrefour BIO	sunflower oil	18,65	16,65	100%
Auchan	AuchanBio	sunflower oil	14,65		
Non-organic Private Labels					
Auchan	Auchan	sunflower oil	4,68	4,69	– 71,8%

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Tesco	Tesco	sunflower oil	4,69		
Non-organic Private Labels (economy)					
Tesco	Tesco Value	sunflower oil	4,69	4,69	– 71,8%

Price competitiveness results from the actual price differences; it is also determined by the consumers' perception of prices. This perception of price consists of the perception of the price of organic products on the one hand, and on the other one - the perception of the price of the PLs. Organic food is perceived by the consumers as more expensive than conventional food. Organic products due to the price level are also perceived as premium food. At the same time, the PLs are perceived in the lower price segments. The combination of these two images is an interesting research area from the point of view of producers, the retail chains as well as the consumers.

> *"The price can be a strong point, showing that organic products are not only exclusive products, intended only for a selected social group that can afford such food. We increase the availability of this product group"*

> *"Price difference between organic and conventional food depends on the product, but these are the upper limits, a few years ago it was 45% and not 20."*

> *"Organic food under the PLs will be cheaper (...) It seems to me that if someone is looking for an organic product, someone does not look whether it is PLs or national brand".*

In the literature there is quite some evidence how the price of the PLs influence the perceived value and the brand equity. For example, the price discounts and the brand's perceived quality exerted significant influence on the perceived value [41]. Some studies indicate that the environmental and health information placed on the organic labels can influence the willingness-to-pay of the consumers for labeled organic products [28].

On the other hand, the perceptions of the PLs quality are driven by the complexity, price level, average interpurchase time, and quality variance of the product category [16]. Such price perception is particularly important for organic products available under the PLs due to the image of organic products as premium food on the one hand, and on the other one - in the context of a lower price of PLs.

Retailer-based competitive advantage

An important group of attributes for shaping the competitive advantage based on the OPLs are conditions related to a given retail network. One of them is the perception of the added value resulting from the image of the retailer PLs as a guarantee of the quality. Research conducted on the German and Italian market indicated that the PL products with the sustainability certifications could determine the image improvement leading to positive impacts on the other retailer brands [33].

For the consumers, the labeling of organic products with the PL of the retailer is an additional element that guarantees the product quality and the proper production process. The PLs also allow the retailers to be in full control of the product and take independent initiatives.

> *"Here, there can be added value to the overall values attributed to eco-friendly products if the retailer convinced that these products under their PLs were subject to special*

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supervision and were selected. This is a double value. This is a sign of the quality of this retailer, we take responsibility for it, we checked it. We guarantee that although this product is certified and safe, we have checked and verified it. If the retailer convince consumers to organic products under the PL of the retailer, they will be a competition for organic products under the producer brand, because this is a lower price and a double certificate."

The introduction of the OPLs is part of the implementation of the adopted strategies for extension of the assortment. This allows the market position of the retailer to be strengthened on the total food market and to be a specialist in the organic food category.

"Owning the PL builds a market position, one is not anonymous on the market"

"consumers of the organic food are more interested in the origin of the product, its path from field to table; owning a PL helps to give credence to the fact that they are familiar with the production of such food"

Strengthening the market position also applies to the consumer-retailer relationship. Consumer loyalty towards the retailer and the PLs is the result - on the one hand - of the adopted marketing strategies and the competition strategies, and on the other one, results from the consumers' conviction about product quality, the reliability of the retailer and the way of business activity. This determines the positive image of the retailer in the competitive market.

The analysis of literature show the importance of the PLs in the context of building and strengthening relationships with consumers [42] since greater loyalty resulting from satisfaction is built [25,42]. "Social quality" of the PLs plays an important role in perceived quality and intention to consumers' loyalty to be improved [83].

The importance of the OPLs in the context of building a competitive advantage should also be considered in the group of suppliers. Cooperation between the retailer and the producer based on relationship management is very important. Long-term cooperation contracts are based on the mutual benefits connected with the trust and the partner relations as well as eliminates frequent rotations. It is stressed in the literature that environmental certification determine the reorganization of the supply chain relationships aimed at higher bilateral dependency among the supply chain players. Additional aspects can be analyzed in the terms of the reduction in product uncertainty and an increased degree of vertical coordination [33].

"it is rather constant cooperation. We have many examples of such suppliers, which we have from the first day, nearly 20 years"

"...just as every brand builds its trust, it will be the case with the domestic supplier. Every supplier builds their trust, the known one will be better perceived, and less known worse, or vice versa - it's better because it's from my region and I know the supplier."

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4. Conclusions

PLs became an important tool in the retail chain development. Introduction of the OPLs allows achieving the competitive advantage related to six main aspects: type of PLs, assortment range, sustainability and attributes of organic food, price and image of retailer.

The competitive advantage of OPLs resulting from the type of the OPLs and the assortment is due to the strategies applied by the competitors. The retailers offer exclusively certain organic products that are not available in the competing chains. This gives the opportunity to underline the uniqueness of the product offer and to attract the consumers looking for products with the specific added value at the affordable prices.

Sustainability and organic attributes are very important sources of the competitive advantage of the OPLs. It is associated with health and naturalness, organic quality and certified process of production, and from the other point of view – with socio-ethical aspects, environmental protection and animal welfare.

Another important area of the competitive advantage of the retailers achieved by the OPLs is the management of the relations with suppliers. Long-term cooperation based on trust helps to achieve mutual benefits and to reduce the risk of inadequate quality. At the same time, the perception of the PLs related to the image of the retailer constitutes an additional element guaranteeing in the eyes of consumers the quality of an end product and becomes an important source of the competitive advantage for the retailers.

Price positioning places the PLs of organic food below the producer's brands and above the PLs for non-organic products. The favorable price combined with the attributes of organic food determines the growing interest of consumers in the PLs. At the same time, separate sub-brands highlighting various attributes of organic food are created for the PLs of organic food. This supports the use of positioning strategies placing the OPLs in the higher quality and price segments.

Our study has also some limitations. The analyses process focus on qualitative data in relation to the OPLs. This research did not address a wide range of other food products to provide more insights. To evaluate the complex retailers' strategies towards PLs, the additional research should investigate other food and non-food products.

The future studies should cover also the management of the supplier relations, that is important in relation to the organic products. Identification of factors determining cooperation is a critical element to ensure continuity of supply and proper quality of end products. It will also be the basis for making decisions about expanding the range of food products available under PLs of the retail chains.

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