

# 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

46 introduction of the international OPLs or aim at development of new PLs based on the  
47 analysis of consumers' preferences. There are several factors behind the decision to introduce  
48 or extend the premium OPLs i.e. to expand the assortment of organic products and green  
49 products line, to increase category margins and to enhance retailer's image among customers.  
50 Other large retailers create the OPLs with special product line design focusing on health- and  
51 environmental related attributes and high quality guaranteed by the organic regulations and  
52 the certification. The process of the introducing the premium PLs should be influenced by the  
53 inherent characteristic of organic food and its production methods that respect the principles  
54 of the sustainable development.

55

56 **Keywords:** organic private labels, competitive advantage, retailing,

## 57 **1. Introduction**

### 58 *Private label*

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

62 Products under PLs are sold under a retailer's brand, which may be the retailer's own name or  
63 a name used exclusively [13] and known as home brands, store brands or own label brands  
64 [14]. PLs can also be described as retailer-owned private label brands (PLBs) [15], private  
65 label brands (PLB) [9], store brand [2,5,16–18], own brand [5], private label [1,10,18–23] or  
66 private brands [11]. Some researchers use other description i.e. private label (store) brand [6]  
67 or private label product [24].

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

77 In Poland, PLs have been growing for about 20 years. Initially, PLs were introduced as  
78 economic brands characterized by a lower price by about 40-50% than producer brands and a  
79 small assortment diversity [34]. Their dynamic development resulted in the growth of market  
80 shares and the strengthening of the competitive position of the individual retail chains. This  
81 influenced the decision of the retailers to introduce the PLs in new product categories, i.e.  
82 with more added value [35]. Currently, PLs are available in almost every product category,  
83 constituting an important element of the competition. Changing consumer preferences and  
84 growing interest in organic food has become a factor determining the development of the PLs  
85 [35,36].

86 Over the years, the evolution of the PLs perception is observed due to price-quality strategy,  
87 product types and differentiation. Trade researchers present three types of the PLs: economy  
88 PLs (low-quality tier or generics), standard PLs (mid-quality tier) and premium PLs (top-  
89 quality tier) [21,37]. Some retailers introduce standard and economy PLs to complement the  
90 standard line of private label products (SPL) with a special “economy” private label (EPL)  
91 [8,19]. The economy PLs positioned as budget, low-priced or value private label comprises  
92 elementary products in basic types or varieties with little marketing support [19]. The  
93 standard PLs are perceived at higher quality level than economy PLs [8].

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

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

105 In recent years, the PLs are analysed as a tool to create and achieve competitive advantage  
106 [12]. PLs can build store loyalty [40,41] and influence the products usage [22]. It can be  
107 associated by the opportunities of companies differentiation [2,40,42] and positioning [2].

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

### 113 *Organic food sector in Poland*

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

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

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

#### 144 *Competitive advantage*

145 Competitive advantage is defined as ‘an advantage of higher ability of competition, it is the  
146 core of capacity of economic and business activities in the markets, where competition exists’  
147 [48]. It is described as something, what separates the enterprise from others and keeps it alive  
148 and growing [49].

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 198 **2. Methods and methodology**

### 199 *Aim of the study and research gaps*

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 251 *Research methods*

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

254 The semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection strategy in which the researcher  
255 asks informants a series of predetermined but open-ended questions [62]. It is used to gather  
256 focused, qualitative textual data. This method offers a balance between the flexibility of an  
257 open-ended interview and the focus of a structured. This method can ensure gathering data on  
258 the experiences of participants. Such information can help to develop the investigation  
259 process from general topics (domains) to more specific insights (factors and variables).  
260 [63,64]

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

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

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

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

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

## 278 *Data collection process*

279 Data were collected from August to November 2017 within a research project entitled  
280 “Marketing, promotion and market analysis of the organic production in Poland, including  
281 opportunities and barriers of development” financed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural  
282 Development. The objective of this part of study was to identify the OPLs development with  
283 the aim to get more insights into the competitive advantage of the retailing companies.

284 For the purpose of this study, we conducted 17 in-depth semi-structured interviews with  
285 experts (purchasing manager, sales manager) of food retailing companies and producers. The  
286 sample of the surveyed enterprises consisted of 9 retailers with organic food, 7 organic food  
287 producers and one producer who was also a distributor. The group of 17 surveyed enterprises  
288 was divided into two sub-groups, taking into account the OPLs offer (in the case of retailers)  
289 and the production of organic food on behalf of the OPLs retail chain (in the case of  
290 producers). The first sub-group consisted of 6 enterprises, including 2 ones producing under  
291 OPLs, 3 retailers owning the OPLs and one producer and distributor. During the in-depth  
292 semi-structured interviews conducted in this group of enterprises, the issue concerning the  
293 OPLs was deepened.

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

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

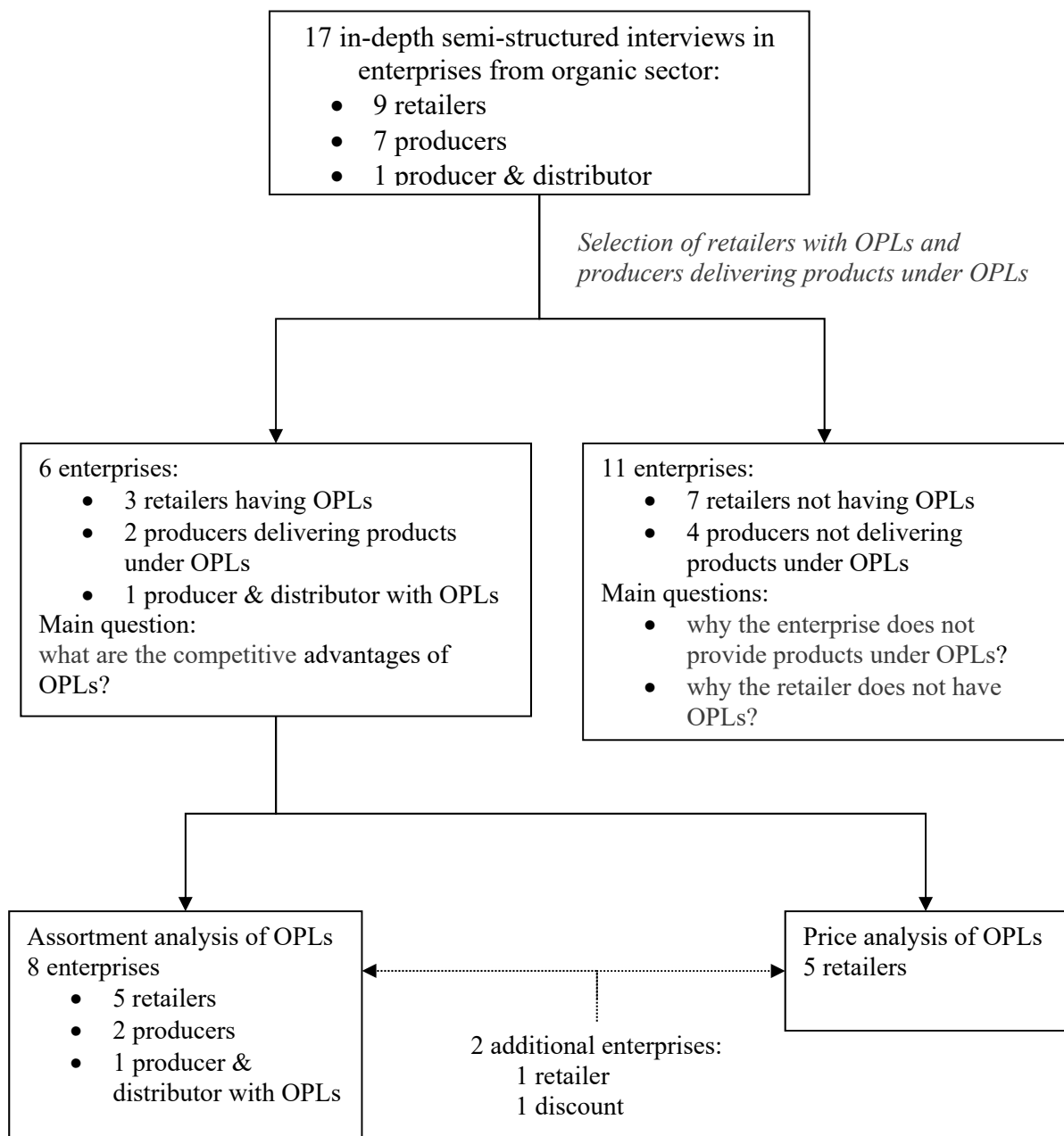
307 Commencing each interview, the expert researchers introduced themselves and explained the  
308 purpose of the study. Each interview was conducted by two or three experts.

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

311



312 Figure 1. Data collection process



313

314 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

	(8) Promotion (9) Financial situation (10) Risk factors (11) Perspectives of development
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315

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

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

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

334

335 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• basmati rice, long grain rice</li> <li>• coffee</li> <li>• sunflower, rapeseed oils</li> </ul>	Product prices divided into: premium PLs economy PLs organic PLs producer brands imported brands

336

337 *Participants*

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

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

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

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

367 Participant no. 5 (Lidl Stiftung&Co.) is a German global discount supermarket chain that  
368 belongs to the Schwarz Gruppe. It is private family-owned German retail group operated over  
369 10,000 stores (around 9900 Lidl stores, of which 3200 in Germany, and around 1190  
370 Kaufland hypermarkets, of which 640 in Germany).

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

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

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

### 391 **3. Results and discussion**

#### 392 *Organic PLs in retailer enterprises*

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

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

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

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

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

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

- 435 • the foreign OPLs and the foreign supplier
- 436 • the foreign OPLs and the domestic supplier
- 437 • the OPLs created for the Polish market and the Polish supplier
- 438 • the OPLs created for the Polish market and the foreign supplier

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

- 441 1. the deliveries of the organic food
- 442 2. the deliveries for the PLs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

475

#### 476 *Competitive advantage of OPLs*

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

480 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• type of PLs</li> <li>• brand name</li> </ul>
Assortment-based competitive advantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• number of product categories</li> <li>• types of categories</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• specific products categories</li> </ul>
Organic attributes based competitive advantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• health</li> <li>• naturalness</li> <li>• certification</li> <li>• lack of preservatives</li> <li>• wellness</li> <li>• organic quality</li> </ul>
Sustainability-based competitive advantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• certification</li> <li>• social aspects</li> <li>• environmental protection</li> <li>• sustainable development</li> <li>• animal welfare</li> <li>• trust based relationships</li> <li>• Social Corporate Responsibility</li> </ul>
Price-related competitive advantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the price difference between organic products sold under PLs and producer brand</li> <li>• the price difference between organic products sold discount OPLs vs non-discount OPLs</li> <li>• the price difference between products sold as OPLs and PLs</li> </ul>
Retailer-based competitive advantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• quality guarantee</li> <li>• retailer awareness</li> <li>• PLs awareness</li> <li>• PLs perceived quality</li> <li>• reliability</li> <li>• good market position</li> <li>• trend creation (forecasting)</li> </ul>

481

482 *OPLs based competitiveness*

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

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

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

500

501 Table 4. Description of the OPLs of retailers

Name of the OPLs	Description of the OPLs
Carrefour Bio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• organic PLs of the Carrefour Group</li> <li>• sub-brand</li> <li>• double brand</li> <li>• supporting element: Carrefour as the corporate brand</li> <li>• element ensuring individualization and identification of the organic category: Bio</li> <li>• double associations: with the retailer brand name and the organic products</li> </ul>
Auchanbio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• organic PLs of the Auchan Holding</li> <li>• new brand of France Auchan Retail offering customers easier access to a wide range of quality organic products at affordable prices.</li> <li>• sub-brand for organic products and new retailing format</li> <li>• double brand with supporting and supported elements</li> <li>• supporting element: Auchan as the corporate brand</li> <li>• element insuring the individualization of the organic category: bio</li> <li>• double associations: with the retailer brand name and organic products</li> </ul>
Tesco Organic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• organic PLs sub-brand of the Tesco PLC</li> <li>• other PLs: Tesco value and Tesco Finest</li> <li>• double brand with supporting and supported elements</li> <li>• supporting element: Tesco as the corporate brand</li> <li>• element insuring the individualization and the identification of the organic category: organic</li> <li>• double associations: with retailer brand and organic products</li> </ul>
Bio Organic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• organic PLs of the Lidl Stiftung&amp;Co.</li> <li>• category PLs dedicated to the organic product</li> <li>• brand name of the OPLs without corporate name</li> <li>• single association: with organic products</li> </ul>
goBio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• organic PLs of the Jeronimo Martins</li> <li>• category PLs dedicated to the organic products</li> <li>• brand name of the OPLs without corporate name</li> <li>• single association: with organic products</li> </ul>

502

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

#### 514 *Assortment-based competitiveness*

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

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

525 *“more room for maneuver (...) comprehensive approach, trend forecasting, client*  
 526 *searches for such products, so we must have them in the offer...”*

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

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

533 Table 5. The overview of the PLs and organic products including number of categories and  
 534 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

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

535

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

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

546 The different approaches to the category of organic food are used among the analyzed hyper-  
547 and supermarket chains (Table 6). The largest number of organic products available under the  
548 producers brands (274) and the OPLs (30) was observed in Carrefour. Tesco has the smallest  
549 number of organic products in the analyzed product categories (105). In Auchan, there are  
550 193 organic products but the number of products available under the OPLs is low.

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

556 The presented differentiation of the assortment related to the OPLs fits into the treatment of  
557 the own brand as an important tool for distinguishing itself from competitors [2,40,42]. At the  
558 same time, it ensures an appropriate market position due to the adopted positioning strategy  
559 [2].

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

564 Taking into account the comparative advantage, there are interesting assortment items that  
565 distinguish the retailer's offer of the OPLs from the offer of others. It is compatible with the  
566 description of the comparative advantage analyzed as something what separates the enterprise  
567 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
syrops (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

570



571 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

572

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 594 *Organic attributes based competitive advantage*

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

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

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

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

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

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

611

#### 612 *Sustainability-based competitive advantage*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

641 *“... our goal is to maintain cooperation with suppliers as long as possible”*

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

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

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

656

#### 657 *Price-related competitive advantage*

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

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

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

- 666 • the difference between organic products sold under the PLs and the producer brand
- 667 • the difference between organic products sold under discount OPLs vs non-discount  
668 OPLs
- 669 • the difference between products sold as the OPLs and the PLs

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

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

683

684 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
<b>Organic Imported Brands</b>					
BioPlanet	Amaizin	basmati quick boiled	26,68	26,53	77,1%
BioPlanet	Davert	whole grain	26,38		
<b>Organic Producer Brands</b>					
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		
<b>Organic Private Labels</b>					
Carrefour	Carrefour BIO	basmati white	14,98	14,98	100%
Auchan	AuchanBio	long grain brown	14,98		
Tesco	Tesco Organic	basmati white	14,98		
<b>Organic Discount Private Labels</b>					
Jeronimo Martins	goBio	basmati white	11,98	11,98	- 20,0%
Lidl	Bio Organic	long grain	11,98		
<b>Non-organic Private Labels</b>					
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		
<b>Non-organic Private Labels (economy)</b>					
Auchan	Auchan economy	long grain	3,85	3,32	- 77,8%
Tesco	Tesco Value	long grain	2,79		
<b>Non-organic Discount Private Labels</b>					
Jeronimo Martins	Supreme	long grain	7,13	7,13	- 52,4%

685

686 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
<b>Organic Imported Brands</b>				
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		
<b>Organic Private Labels</b>				
Carrefour	Carrefour BIO	79,96	68,81	100%
Auchan	AuchanBio	55,96		
<b>Organic Discount Private Labels</b>				
Jeronimo Martins	goBio	39,98	39,98	- 41,9%
Lidl	Bio Organic	39,99		
<b>Non-organic Private Labels (premium)</b>				
Carrefour	Carrefour	43,96	48,09	- 30,1%
Auchan	Auchan	43,96		
Tesco	Tesco Finest	56,34		
<b>Non-organic Private Labels (economy)</b>				
Auchan	Auchan economy	29,90	29,91	- 56,5%
Tesco	Tesco Value	29,93		
<b>Non-organic Discount Private Labels</b>				
Jeronimo Martins	Biedronka	51,96	51,96	- 24,5%

687

688 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
<b>Organic Imported Brands</b>					
BioPlanet	Dary Natury	rapessed oil	34,56	31,01	+95,4%
BioPlanet	Poloniak	rapessed oil	31,04		
BioPlanet	Planette	rapessed oil	27,44		
<b>Organic Private Labels</b>					
Carrefour	Carrefour BIO	rapessed oil	18,65	15,87	100%
Auchan	AuchanBio	rapessed oil	15,99		
Tesco	Tesco Organic	rapessed oil	12,99		
<b>Non-organic Private Labels</b>					
Auchan	Auchan	rapessed oil	4,99	4,54	- 71,4%
Tesco	Tesco	rapessed oil	5,09		
<b>Organic Imported Brands</b>					
BioPlanet	Planette	sunflower oil	23,64	22,48	+ 35,0%
BioPlanet	Planette	sunflower oil	21,32		
<b>Organic Private Labels</b>					
Carrefour	Carrefour BIO	sunflower oil	18,65	16,65	100%
Auchan	AuchanBio	sunflower oil	14,65		
<b>Non-organic Private Labels</b>					
Auchan	Auchan	sunflower oil	4,68	4,69	- 71,8%

Tesco	Tesco	sunflower oil	4,69		
<b>Non-organic Private Labels (economy)</b>					
Tesco	Tesco Value	sunflower oil	4,69	4,69	- 71,8%

689

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 716 *Retailer-based competitive advantage*

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

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

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



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

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

737 *“Owning the PL builds a market position, one is not anonymous on the market”*

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

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

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

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

758 *“it is rather constant cooperation. We have many examples of such suppliers, which we*  
759 *have from the first day, nearly 20 years”*

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

## 763 4. Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

797

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811 results and discussion as well as and conclusion sections. Hanna Górska-Warsewicz, Sylwia  
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815

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