ORGANIC FOOD POSITIONING: HOW DO COMPANIES WANT THEIR BRAND TO BE PERCEIVED BY CONSUMERS?

Mihai STOICA
The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1454-1425
Email: mihai.stoica.91@gmail.com

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Abstract:
The intensification of consumers' concerns for personal health protection has conducted, among other things, to a change in purchasing behavior toward organic food. However, emerging markets are still characterized by low levels of organic food consumption. Therefore, companies present on this market are trying to find new ways to boost the consumption of organic food, along with placing their brands in the most favorable positions in the minds of consumers. This study aims to identify the positioning bases that companies want to highlight in order to outline the desired position of their brand. To achieve this goal, a qualitative research was conducted among producers/processors, distributors/importers, and retailers having organic food brands in their portfolio. The results of the research showed the focus of the companies on highlighting the attributes related to the product characteristics and the personal green benefits, at the expense of environmental, emotional, and symbolic benefits. Positioning bases related to consumption occasions, brand values, and association with fictional characters or celebrities play a secondary role in supporting the brand position. The research contributes to the classification and conceptualization of specific positioning bases for organic food brands, providing an overview of this topic at the supply chain level.

Keywords: green brand positioning, organic food positioning, brand positioning bases, organic food, emerging market.

1. Introduction

Increasing concern for personal health has led to greater consumer interest in buying organic food. Along the way, the characteristics of the production process have begun to play an important role in shaping consumer expectations and experiences of overall food quality. Thus, because organic food is produced using more “natural” production methods, which take into account environmental protection and animal welfare, it offers consumers guarantees about its origin and quality.

Amidst the intensification of these concerns among consumers, the market for organic products has become an autonomous sector (Willer & Lernoud, 2019). The transition of organic food from a niche to a mainstream market is rather valid only for certain product categories and in some countries, the organic market share being quite small compared to the size of the food market as a whole (Marian, 2014; Willer *et al*., 2022).

Thus, there are significant differences between the countries in the European Union in terms of the development of the organic food market (von Meyer-Höfer *et al*., 2015). In 2020, organic food had a market share of 4.7% of the total market. The highest market shares were recorded in Denmark (13%, the highest organic market share in the world), Austria (11.3%), Luxembourg (9.1%), Sweden (8.7%), France (6.5%), and Germany (6.4%). By contrast, in Central and Eastern European countries, consumers' expenses with organic food are still low. In countries such as Bulgaria (0.4%, 2019), Romania (0.2%, 2016), and Hungary (0.3%, 2015), the organic market share was still below 1% a few years ago (Willer *et al*., 2022). Therefore, in the case of these countries, the organic market is still a niche market.

In the case of countries with a small organic food market, sustained efforts are needed from decision-makers who can influence and support the development of this field (state institutions, non-governmental organizations, media, environmentalists, companies, and consumers). Among other things, these efforts should contribute to changing perceptions about organic food, specifically the social normalization of pro-environmental behaviors (Rettie *et al*., 2011). The need to change this perception is also underpinned by the fact that for most people (apart from those with deeper environmental concerns), living, shopping, working, traveling, and enjoying life, while also taking environmental principles into account, seems difficult. Therefore, the solution is to make these things easier and more intuitive (Grant, 2012).

In addition, in order to respond effectively to the continuing market growth, companies need to identify attributes that give organic food an advantage over conventional food (Lee & Yun, 2015). The need for strong differentiation is also imposed by the fact that organic food is often marketed within the sales areas of general retailers, therefore they have to compete with conventional products and their quality attributes (Schleenbecker & Hamm, 2013). Thus, intense competition in food markets has forced companies to make considerable efforts to differentiate themselves from competitors and make their products meaningful to consumers (Vega-Zamora *et al*., 2014).

The differentiation from conventional food is essential, but not sufficient to guarantee the brand's success. The concern of companies must be directed towards differentiating themselves from competing green brands. In this regard, many manufacturers are seeking to identify special product qualities that allow them to differentiate their organic food products (Padel & Gössinger, 2008; Padel & Zander, 2009), as green standards are increasingly adopted and risk losing their ability to provide differentiation (Chan *et al.*, 2012; Kapitan *et al*., 2019). Thus, differentiation from food products can be achieved through attributes derived from the requirements of the core green standards, while differentiation from the green competition can be achieved through the identification of the uniqueness of production processes and other specific activities (Zander *et al*., 2010; Chan *et al*., 2012; Kapitan *et al*., 2019). These approaches orient the brand strategy towards an “organic-plus” positioning (Howard & Allen, 2006; Padel & Gössinger, 2008; Padel & Zander, 2009; Zander *et al.*, 2010; Zander & Hamm, 2010; Schleenbecker & Hamm, 2013; von Meyer-Höfer *et al*., 2013; Zander *et al*., 2013; Marian, 2014; von Meyer-Höfer *et al*., 2015).

As a result, the brand positioning concept can prove important both for the whole market, as well as at an organizational level. Ćirić and Prodanović (2013) believe that the effective positioning of organic food products could contribute to the emergence of more organic production areas, to the revitalization and development of rural areas, increased income of farmers, improved public health, environmental protection etc. On the other hand, the value perceived by the customer could be influenced by positioning strategies specific to organic food brands (Wang, 2017; Aqueveque, 2016; Hartmann *et al*., 2005). In this regard, a firm's ability to produce successful brands (market acceptability) is influenced by how the firm positions the brand in the minds of customers (Dogbe *et al*., 2021).

In addition to selecting the elements (attributes, benefits, values, external elements of the brand etc.) that the company wants to highlight, it is also important to guide the entire positioning process according to a series of coordinates. Thus, companies must keep in mind that achieving successful marketing depends on the existence of a high level of consistency between the meanings the company wants to convey and those interpreted by consumers (Vega-Zamora *et al*., 2014). In this case, the gap between the formulation and implementation of the strategy, as well as how it is perceived by consumers (Blankson, 2004; Fuchs, 2008; Malär *et al*., 2012) are issues that should be of concern to corporate decision-makers.

However, until now, research interest has focused mainly on the perceived positioning concept, specialists being concerned with the development of perceptual maps and with the evaluation of advertising efforts (Blankson, 2016). As a consequence, the desired positioning concept is still little studied in specialized literature. Brand positioning is viewed from the perspective of identifying a competitive position in the market, rather than as a dynamic and intra-organizational process (Koch & Gyrd-Jones, 2019). Blankson (2016) notes that the proposed conceptual frameworks present in the literature lack operational specifications and do not provide managerial guidelines. Consequently, the positioning concept is insufficiently developed, both theoretically and practically, to provide guidance on the management and evolution of brand positioning over time (Park *et al*., 1986; Urde & Koch, 2014; Koch & Gyrd-Jones, 2019).

As there are still research gaps in this direction, this article aims to study the brand positioning concept from the perspective of companies. The purpose of this paper is to identify, describe and classify the positioning bases used by certified organic companies for organic food brands. Therefore, the study attempts to identify positioning bases characterized by various “shades of green” (Driessen *et al*., 2013), which, through a carefully chosen combination, serve to describe the desired brand position. In addition, through them, companies must try to balance a range of environmental requirements of different stakeholders while remaining financially stable and competitive (Hahn & Scheermesser 2006; Schmidt-Riediger, 2008).

In order to achieve the article's purpose, a qualitative research was conducted through an in-depth semi-structured interview. The target population includes organic certified producers/processors, distributors/importers, and retailers. Their certification is issued by certification bodies accredited by the Romanian Ministry of Agriculture and Regional Development (MADR). This methodological particularity increases the difficulty and complexity of the research approach because depending on the place occupied in the supply chain, the company shows a distinct level of involvement and flexibility in developing and communicating its positioning strategy. Nevertheless, the research aims to provide an overview of the coordinates of the studied phenomenon, and not necessarily to capture the full complexity of each type of organic certified economic operator.

The study focuses on the organic food products market in Romania, a market characterized by exports of organic raw materials and imports of packaged finished products that are found under international brands known among green consumers (Stoica *et al*., 2020). However, in recent years local organic food brands have also started to make their presence felt, especially in the dairy sector (Euromonitor International, 2022). In terms of organic food consumption, Romania is among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Thus, although in 2020 it ranks second in the European Union in terms of the relative growth of organic agricultural area (18.6%), Romania does not register significant sales of packaged organic food products (Willer *et al*., 2022). Euromonitor International (2022) mentions sales of 78.9 million Euros of organic food products for the year 2021, which represents an organic food consumption of less than 4 Euros per capita.

In addition, the topic of organic food positioning is insufficiently addressed both in theory and in practice by companies operating on the local market (Bozgă & Cristea, 2016; Bozgă, 2017; Stoica, 2021b). Therefore, conducting qualitative research is essential to deepen brand positioning in this area and to understand how companies adapt their brand position to the context of a niche market.

In approaching this topic, we study the organic food positioning concept starting from the green brand positioning concept. The 3rd Section includes the qualitative research methodology, while the 4th Section presents the results of the research, namely the identified positioning bases. The paper concludes with theoretical and practical implications as well as presenting research limitations and future research directions.

2. Literature Review

The complexity and specific features associated with green brands have led to the development, in literature, of the concept of green brand positioning. This concept has been a research concern among specialists for about two decades (Hartmann *et al*., 2004; Hartmann & Ibanez, 2005; Haung *et al*., 2014; Suki, 2016; Wang, 2016; Borah *et al*., 2021; Dogbe *et al*., 2021; Gong *et al*., 2021; Lin & Zhou, 2022; Wang *et al*., 2022), its development being driven by the increasing presence of the green brand in several important sectors and fields of activity.

As is the case with the general concept of brand positioning (Park *et al*., 1986; Urde & Koch, 2014; Blankson, 2016; Koch & Gyrd-Jones, 2019), research interest is directed toward studying consumer perceptions of brand positioning, in the case of green brand positioning also. In contrast, management and the evolution of brand positioning over time, namely the shaping of a perspective on the intra-organizational process, are less addressed in current research. Consequently, the green brand positioning concept is defined by the specific actions of the marketing mix that help communicate the brand position (actual positioning), as well as by the place in the perceptual space in which the consumer chooses to place the brand (perceived positioning) (Fuchs, 2008).

In this regard, green brand positioning involves active communication and differentiating the brand by accentuating its green attributes (Hartmann *et al*., 2005). Similarly, Suki (2016) believes that the positioning of a green brand is achieved through green attributes embedded in active communication campaigns, which could lead to a more positive brand perception among consumers. Thus, brand positioning is intended to influence the perceptions of consumers targeted by the brand's green initiatives, providing an essential basis for differentiating the green brand from its competitors (Huang, 2014).

However, it is important to remember that the implementation of deliberate and proactive management in activities aimed at positioning a brand against competing brands (Blankson, 2016) requires the involvement of internal decision-makers in selecting specific attributes, benefits, and values, and thus choosing the desired position that can build a strong brand (Koch, 2014).

Consequently, another important decision relates to how the company wants the brand to be perceived by the target audience (desired positioning), which involves choosing the positioning strategy. In this regard, the internal decision-makers must find an answer to the following question: “What does the organization want others (interested parties) to think about it and/or the brand in its portfolio?". Thus, out of all the possible attributes and characteristics, which ones should the organization try to communicate to its stakeholders? (Brown *et al*., 2006).

The opinions presented above (Hartmann *et al*., 2005; Suki, 2016) exclude the internal perspective on brand positioning. Integrating such an approach requires brand positioning to also be based on brand identity (Lammers & Ryll, 2016; Urde *et al*., 2011; Urde & Koch, 2014). In fact, positioning can be seen as a “filter” of the brand identity. The positioning “filter” “matches” the internal brand attributes with external market-specific factors: depending on external factors, the positioning “filter” “selects” the appropriate identity attributes that are still in a latent state at the brand level (Lammers & Ryll, 2016).

The view expressed by Huang (2014) is closer to an integrative approach to green brand positioning. Starting from the view expressed by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2002), Huang (2014) considers green brand positioning as part of the brand identity and of the value proposition related to green attributes, which needs to be actively communicated to the target audience. This approach corresponds to Kapferer's view (2008), which is based on the rationale that positioning derives from identity. This is also supported by de Chernatony (2010), who believes that the concept of identity provides an opportunity to better develop brand positioning and encourages a more strategic approach to brand management. Thus, the importance of brand identity as such (de Chernatony, 2006; Kapferer, 2008) and also in its various forms (such as core values, mission, and vision) has proven to be a useful source for formulating brand positioning (Koch, 2014).

As the green brand positioning concept becomes more refined, it also becomes specialized in areas in which green products have started to have significant importance on the total market. Thus, green brands have penetrated areas such as public administration (e.g. the green city brand concept), automotive, cosmetics and personal care, energy, electrical and electronic, agriculture and food, telecom, tourism and travel, and others (Stoica, 2020).

The organic food sector is one of the most visible green sectors, marked by growing consumer demand for this product category and increasing intensity of competition. Organic food is also the result of using a diverse number of smart and innovative production technologies (Bazaluk *et al*., 2020). These innovations need to be supported by effective marketing actions so that they are easily accepted by potential consumers. Moreover, Vehapi (2018) states that market success is largely defined by the effective creation and choice of appropriate marketing strategies.

Organic food brands operate in an intensely competitive environment, and there are many cases where companies have to relate to both organic and conventional competitors. These particularities make the positioning approach difficult and complex, requiring a significant consumption of resources and a significant effort from companies.

The organic food market can be delimited through economic operators who hold an organic certification. Thus, all companies with organic certification meet several requirements that are linked to the possession of certain attributes (von Meyer-Höfer *et al*., 2013, 2015). However, because these attributes are owned in one form or another by all economic operators, they can be used mainly as parity points. Moreover, Wymer and Polonsky (2015) explore the possibility that green attributes and benefits are viewed as hygiene factors. In addition, Kapitan *et al.* (2019) point out that those companies that rely solely on compliance with international standards for brand positioning are at risk, especially in a changing political environment. So compliance with government regulations and standards is only part of clearly signaling and articulating a brand's perceptions of greenness and sustainability.

For example, the EU organic logo is mandatory to appear on organic food packaging. Its use may help reassure customers that the products they purchase are green/organic (Ginsberg & Bloom, 2004), but it does not signal a deep company orientation in this direction.

Therefore, brands are forced to look for additional elements to those resulting from regulations, in order to position themselves as green or deep green brand (superior brands/products in terms of protecting the natural environment). Exceeding these standards would allow the brand to differentiate itself from competing green brands (Padel & Gössinger, 2008). In this regard, the company should be concerned with looking for the differences between production processes and basic environmental standards (Zander *et al*., 2010). For example, companies may aim to improve biodiversity protection or supply-chain equity by ensuring fair financing for farmers (Padel & Gössinger, 2008; Zander *et al*., 2010). Also, EU organic standards allow several food additives for processing organic products. However, not using these food additives can help to achieve a superior/more competitive position.

Thus, because the organic food market is heavily regulated, companies are impacted by changes regarding the mandatory organic standards (Kapitan *et al*., 2019). Consequently, brand positioning will be permanently influenced by these changes, as companies targeting consumers with deep environmental concerns must have a quick and relevant response in order to remain competitive in this market.

The last two decades have also seen a change in the perception of organic food. Thus, amid the “conventionalization” of organic food (Guthman, 2004; Schrank & Running, 2018), they have significantly penetrated the shelves of large generalist retailers. The intermediary position held by retailers in the supply chains between producers and consumers will helps retailers to drive green consumption (Bălan, 2021). This action was accompanied by the “democratization” of organic food products, namely more affordable prices for consumers (Stoica, 2021a). These changes have been possible because over time environmental and health standards have been systematically lowered to facilitate the growth of this market segment (Pollan, 2006; Schrank & Running, 2018). Thus, the development of this market has occurred through a so-called “industrialization” of organic food products, although they are rather seen as an “antidote” to industrialized agriculture and fast food (Mitić & Gligorijević, 2012).

These transformations have been based on a process of social normalization of pro-environmental behaviors, by portraying these behaviors as normal and day-to-day, rather than highlighting their exclusivity (uniqueness) (Rettie *et al*., 2011). The desire was to make organic food products more accessible and understandable so that they would be perceived as “normal” (and not the other way around) (Grant, 2012). Consequently, there is also a shift in positioning, from “niche” to “mainstream” brands (Gordon, 2002), namely a shift towards highlighting primary attributes and benefits (e.g. price, overall quality, comfort, etc.) at the expense of green attributes. In this situation, the company aims primarily to satisfy the basic needs of customers, its ability to reduce the negative impact on the environment and human health being a secondary focus.

Changes in this market, but also in the way organic food brands are viewed, are driving companies to identify new ways to make their brand position more attractive and competitive. The strong focus on innovation also leads to a strong evolution in the development of new specific positioning bases, which can be used by the company to better describe the desired position.

In this regard, some experts (Chamorro, 2003; Belz & Karstens, 2005; Driessen *et al*., 2013) consider that the choice of positioning strategy involves determining the need to position the organic food brand based on the combination of green attributes/benefits and traditional attributes/benefits specific to conventional products (general attributes and benefits), and determining which of these categories is dominant.

The importance of this decision is due to the fact that the centrality of a green attribute/benefit impacts the process through which consumers primarily evaluate the environmental friendliness associated with the product/brand (Lu & Ting, 2016). Brown *et al.* (2006) point out that one of the most important strategic-level decisions that managers make concerns brand positioning in the minds of stakeholders. Thus, of all the attributes, features, benefits, or other external elements of the brand, which of these should the organization try to communicate? Essentially, the basic question is: which of these elements does the organization want stakeholders to own as strong associations?

The result of this stage is represented by the choice of positioning bases (desired) corresponding to the selected strategic alternative. These can be seen as “tangible achievements” resulting from the process of choosing the brand positioning strategy (Koch & Gyrd-Jones, 2019), which have the role of representing the desired position of the brand.

Only after completing this stage, these “internal/external matches” are “translated” (encoded) into communication to implement the desired brand position in the market. Thus, all these steps taken and materialized through specific decisions resulting from communicative interactions between the different decision-making structures at the company level add to the outcome dimension (Koch & Gyrd-Jones, 2019).

Thus, the opportunities for positioning organic food products are found in a wide range of approaches. The key to understanding the nature of these alternatives lies in understanding the value created by offering green products to the customer and incorporating them into a company's value proposition (Dean & Pacheco, 2014).

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Study Overview

The method of gathering information was the in-depth semi-structured individual interview, conducted using an interview guide. Individual interviews were conducted, instead of focus-group interviews, because the interviewees are professionals who provide information about the specifics of their work, which may be highly confidential (Cătoiu *et al*., 2009). Moreover, in the case of a significant number of business research, the in-depth interview proved to be the best way to discuss with specialists (Malhotra *et al*., 2017).

Given the complexity of the subject matter and the poor development of marketing activity among a significant number of companies present in this market, the semi-structured interview option is the most suitable, as it offers the possibility of reformulating the questions according to the level of understanding of each interviewee. In addition, depending on the answers received, there is the possibility to ask additional questions to clarify certain information.

The research also aims to investigate the subject in depth, thus requiring a longer interview time for each specialist/expert (Cătoiu *et al.*, 2009). In this regard, the in-depth interview has the advantage of providing much more detailed information than other data-gathering methods (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Thus, this research technique can prove to be useful in situations where there is little information available from other sources (Malhotra *et al*., 2017).

The lack of studies on the positioning alternatives available to companies present in the organic food market in Romania has led to a shift of the orientation of research interest toward the study of specific positioning bases. Identifying these positioning bases provides a solid basis for defining positioning strategies that consider both the organic food sector and the particularities of a small market.

During the interviews, other research objectives were also followed, such as the link between targeting strategy and positioning strategy, the main differentiator used by companies, the importance of marketing mix elements in communicating brand position, and the results of implementing the positioning strategy. However, due to the research objective defined in this article, these issues have not been directly analyzed.

3.2 Sampling

Due to the fact that the local market is impacted by imports from the European Union (Stoica *et al*., 2020), international organic food brands occupy an important place in the minds and in the shopping baskets of green consumers. In this regard, the target population includes all companies that are present on the local market with organic food brands, regardless of whether they are brands owned by a company or are only distributed locally by a certain company.

Therefore, the research includes organic certified producers, processors, importers, distributors and retailers. Their certification is issued by a certification body accredited by the MADR. In addition, in order to better respond to the purpose of the research, several additional selection criteria were established (see Table 1). Thus, depending on its place in the supply chain, the company is in a different position towards the organic food brand in its portfolio, which may influence the specific context of developing and communicating brand positioning.

Table 1. Selection criteria for companies included in the target population

Criterion type	Type of Company	Selection criteria
General criteria	For all types of supply chain participants	• The company has organic certification granted by a control body approved by Romanian Ministry of Agriculture and Regional Development (certification valid at the time of the interview); • The company owns a registered trademark or holds a brand in its portfolio (but does not own it) that it distributes in the local market. The brand must represent the offer of organic food products. The existence in the portfolio of a sub-brand specially created for the offer of organic food products is also accepted; • The offer is represented by organic certified finished food products and packaged according to the criteria imposed by Regulation (EC) no. 834/2007;
Specific criteria	Producers/ Processors	• The company sells on the Romanian market the organic food products that it manufactures/processes in advance;
	Importers/ Distributors	• The offer of organic food products is also marketed to private customers;
	Retailers	• The company owns its own network of stores that sell food, including organic food products (they can be both general retailers and organic food retailers); • The company owns its own brand (or sub-brands) for the offer of its own organic food products that it markets through its own network of stores;

Source: Based on research conducted by the author of this study.

The sampling method is theoretical, the sample being small and unrepresentative from a statistical point of view, but rigorously selected, taking into account the studied problem (Cătoiu *et al.*, 2009). The sample structure was established by reference to the number of economic operators registered in organic farming in each category (FiBL Statistics, 2019). Also, the ratio between local organic food products and imported ones was taken into account, which led to an increase in the number of distributors included in the researched sample. In addition, the researcher's interest in companies that have local brands in their portfolio had an important contribution to the structure of the final sample.

3.3 Data Collection

The research was conducted among professionals with marketing responsibilities. Interviews were conducted over the phone or using software that allows for Internet video phone calls (Zoom and Google Meet). Also, due to the desire to have more control over the information communicated by the specialists, as well as the need to discuss with more members of the team to provide the necessary information for full coverage of the researched topic, four of the participating companies wished to provide answers in written form (two processors and two distributors). In this case, the researcher had the opportunity to follow-up with questions for clarification or additional details. The interview period was from November 2020 to February 2021.

The duration of the audio and/or video interviews ranges from 34 minutes to 120 minutes. The average length of the interviews is 1 hour and 6 minutes and the total length of the interviews available in audio format is 23 hours and 18 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Participants were informed that the discussion is being recorded and the responses will be used strictly for research purposes. Interviewees were assured of the confidentiality of the data provided. Also, the participants were informed that they have the possibility to withdraw their consent at any time if they find that the process is not in accordance with the aspects agreed upon before the conduct of the interview.

3.4 Participant Characteristics

The main characteristics of the 25 companies that participated in this survey are included in Table 2, along with the positions that respondents hold within these companies. In addition to the company's place in the supply chain, a distinction is made between companies having only organic products in their portfolio and those having a mixed portfolio of products (both organic and conventional food products). In addition, the main food categories included in the portfolio of the analyzed companies are mentioned. However, if the product offer is varied and complex, as is usually the case for distributors and retailers, then it is a mixed portfolio.

In order to respect confidentiality, the following coding was used: IP (interviews conducted with specialists from manufacturing/processing companies), ID (interviews conducted with specialists from importer/distribution companies), IR.S (interviews conducted with specialists from organic food retailers) and IR.G (interviews conducted with specialists from general retailers).

Table 2. Description of the companies that participated in the study

Company	Company Type	Product Type	Product Group	Position of the Expert Interviewed
IP1	Producer/processor	Organic	Pasta	Managing Partner
ID1	Importer/distributor	Organic	Mixed	Managing Partner
ID2	Importer/distributor	Organic	Mixed	Managing Partner
ID3	Importer/distributor	Organic	Food supplements, tea	Managing Partner
ID4	Importer/distributor	Organic	Mixed	Managing Partner
IP2	Producer/processor	Organic	Vegetables, fruits and their products	Managing Partner
IP3	Producer/processor	Organic	Flour, seeds and breadsticks	Owner
IP4	Producer/processor	Organic	Ready meals, cakes, juices	Managing Partner
IP5	Producer/processor	Organic	Cereals, flour, mustard, tea, spices	Managing Partner
IP6	Producer/processor	Organic	Compotes and jams	Managing Partner
IP7	Producer/processor	Organic	Vegan alternatives to cheese and yogurt	Managing Partner
IP8	Producer/processor	Organic	Jam, canned vegetables, dried fruits, bee products, food supplements	Managing Partner

IP9	Producer/processor	Organic	Wine	Marketing Manager
IR.G1	General retailer	Mixed	Mixed	Marketing Director
IR.S1	Organic food retailer	Organic	Mixed	Marketing & Communication Manager
IP10	Producer/processor	Organic	Bee products, frozen fruits, medicinal plants	Managing Partner
IP11	Producer/processor	Mixed	Milk, dairy products and cheeses	Corporate Affairs & Communication Manager
ID5	Importer/distributor	Organic	Juices	Director General
IP12	Producer/processor	Organic	Sweets, crackers, spices, pesto, jams, fruit juices, olives and olive oil	Marketing Specialist
ID6	Importer/distributor	Organic	Vegetable drinks	Managing Partner
IR.S2	Organic food retailer	Organic	Mixed	Owner
ID7	Importer/distributor	Mixed	Mixed	Group Brand Manager
IP13	Producer/processor	Mixed	Milk, dairy products and cheeses	Senior Brand Manager
IR.G2	General retailer	Mixed	Mixed	Marketing Manager
IR.G3	General retailer	Mixed	Mixed	Own Brands Manager

Source: Based on research conducted by the author of this study.

3.5 Data Analysis

Content analysis was carried out using the MAXQDA 2020 software tool, which facilitated the analysis of information obtained from the interviews. Given the type of data collected, we will not insist on statistical reporting in the data analysis.

The research was based on codes created by the researcher, following the research objectives, as well as the coordinates identified in the specialized literature. Therefore, a hybrid process of inductive (identification of new ideas and information) and deductive (based on ideas taken from the literature) thematic analysis was used to interpret the data obtained in this research (Fereday & Eimear, 2006; Malhotra *et al*., 2017).

All interviews were analyzed at least twice in order to revise or complete the codes. In the second analysis of the interviews, the codes were refined, being grouped into more general categories that could better represent the content identified during the in-depth interviews.

The information needed to achieve the purpose of this paper has been included in the code group "Positioning bases". The codes in this group are complex due to the divisions/branches and the number of distinct codes created. This group brings together 71 codes, which are also grouped into several subgroups (subcategories of positioning bases), taking into account theoretical criteria but also the connections observed in this research. The 71 codes had a frequency of occurrence of 826 among the analyzed interviews.

Following content analysis, the information has been reduced, simplified and organized into distinct themes. Finally, the codes obtained were examined for significance and interpretation. The software helped to make this complex classification of the codes obtained, as well as to analyze them according to the results they wanted to highlight. The software also offered the possibility of generating quantitative data to support qualitative data.

4. Results

The diversity of company types included in the investigated group, as well as their offer of products from different food categories, lead to identifying an important number of positioning bases. Table 3 presents the positioning bases identified in the data analysis stage, which are grouped, in particular, in the common categories that are also found in the specialized literature (attributes and benefits). However, as regards to the positioning bases, we have a personalized approach, from the perspective of the research results.

Table 3. Positioning bases used for organic food brands

Categories of positioning bases	Subcategories of positioning bases	Positioning bases
Attributes	Quality-price	Quality level; Superior/advantageous quality-price ratio;
	Sensory attributes	Taste;
	Absence of substances/ingredients harmful to the environment and human health, and the absence of GMOs (attributes derived from the organic food regulation)	No food additives or the presence of a small number of food additives, but accepted by the organic regulation; Absence of synthetic pesticides and chemical fertilizers; GMO-free; Non-irradiated product and without traces of heavy metals; No (traces of) antibiotics;
	Attributes describing the product as suitable for adopting a special diet or a healthy lifestyle, desired and/or imposed by certain beliefs	Without or with a reduced content of added sweeteners (sugar or artificial sweeteners); No salt; No fat (no trans fat, no saturated fat) or with a reduced fat content; Product intended for food intolerances (gluten-free, lactose-free); Vegan product/plant-based product/no ingredients of animal origin;
Attributes	Summary attributes related to the naturalness (natural content) of the product	Naturalness/product made only from natural ingredients; “Clean”/pure product (purity);
	Attributes related to how the processing of the organic finished product is carried out	Raw/unpasteurized/non-thermally processed/cold processed product; Whole product; Manufactured product; Fresh product/short shelf life;
	The packaging of the organic food product	Sustainable/recyclable packaging; Packaging that does not affect the qualities of the product;
		EU organic logo;

	Specific label for organic food products	Other certifications indicated by means of the label;
Benefits	Functional benefits	Green: benefits for human health, benefits for the environment;
		Traditional: convenience, food safety;
	Emotional/experience-based benefits	Creating a unique consumer experience; Association with certain feelings/emotions;
	Symbolic benefits	Asserting a certain social status or belonging to a certain group;
Other positioning bases	Values	Correctness; Transparency; Trust; Credibility; Faith/Spirituality; Tradition;
	Occasion or time of consumption	Main meals and snacks of the day;
	Particular user or group of users	Celebrities/specialists; Fictional characters;
	Product class	The delimitation of organic foods from the conventional food category;
	Country of origin	Affirmation of the Romanian origin;
		Association or delimitation with certain countries of origin.

Source: Based on research conducted by the author of this study.

4.1 Attributes Used in the Positioning of Organic Food Brands

(1) Quality-price

Quality is one of the main attributes that research participants mentioned in association with organic food products/brands (in 23 out of 25 interviews). In this regard, one of the specialists mentions that: "*organic food has an important component, superior quality, which should be emphasized over conventional products*" (IR.S2).

Quality is seen as an indispensable attribute, therefore improving quality is a constant concern for companies. However, in many cases (especially in the case of SMEs), such development is driven more by an entrepreneurial desire than by customer requests. An example in this regard is highlighted in the IP5 interview, presented in Table 4, along with other opinions concerning the quality-price ratio. Highlighting the superior/advantageous quality-price ratio is rather specific to large companies, which target the mass market, in an attempt to "democratize" green products (see IR.G1).

Table 4. Statements regarding the quality-price ratio

Interview	Statement
IR.S1	"*We started from the idea of offering the best products on the market, which have undergone the most verifications, certifications and analyses, 'best organic product money can buy' [...] We are very demanding with our products and we have conveyed this to our customers [...] For many of them, we are a guarantor of quality [...] The feedback is that there is a very high loyalty, and when people buy our brand they have the certainty of quality*";
IR.G1	*"I want to position 'organic' as a quality product, but I do not want to de-position from a price perspective. I do not want to create a gap, I do not create luxury products [...] A retailer makes its brand products to offer its customers an alternative to the brands that exist in the product range, a better alternative in terms of value for money. This is a tool that creates 'value for money'";* *"Our interest is to democratize organic, that is, to bring as many organic food products as possible at lower prices, accessible to a wider population, to more consumer segments";*
IP5	"*We are more expensive than most organic products because we position ourselves differently. We simply want maximum quality, not exactly at any price, but we are not willing to offer half the quality, even if it means reducing the price. We prefer to maintain maximum quality, at a higher price, because there are many compromises on the market, and we want to offer the maximum possible quality*";
IP11	*"What we offer and what we have tried to communicate is dairy excellence, meaning you cannot find anything better than that. This is also because a very important attribute of our products is quality and we are constantly developing, and all our efforts are to ensure products of the highest quality".*

Source: Based on research conducted by the author of this study.

(2) Sensory attributes

The taste is by far the most used sensory attribute by companies to help differentiate the products in their portfolio. As for the rest of the sensory attributes, they are little or not at all mentioned by the specialists.

Even if the specialists affirm that the main concern is to develop healthy organic food, they do not forget that when it comes to food products, the taste must be to please the consumers' liking. One of the specialists states the following: *"...when you consume that food every day, the taste is very important. Meaning that it should be a product made from 'clean' ingredients, but in the end, if it does not deliver taste, I do not think you should include it in your breakfast*" (IR.S1).

The description of organic food through taste is achieved by emphasizing some characteristics that show how good, pure, authentic, or different the taste of the products in question is compared to that of conventional products. The speech is complemented by "*explanations for the difference in taste*" (IP11), with the aim of providing a series of credible arguments to the public who have not yet tried the advertised products.

(3) Absence of substances/ingredients harmful to the environment and human health, and the absence of GMOs

Table 5 shows the frequency of occurrence of positioning bases grouped in this subcategory, along with the concepts identified in the interviews. These were identified in more than half of the interviews (16 interviews), the predominant ones being related to the absence of food additives, synthetic pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

Table 5. Frequency of occurrence for codes within the base "absence of substances/ingredients harmful to the environment and human health, and the absence of GMOs"

Codes	Concepts involved identified	Number of interviews	Number of assigned codes
No food additives or the presence of a small number of food additives, but accepted by the organic regulation	"no dyes", "no preservatives", "no artificial flavors or flavor enhancers", "no additives", "no sweeteners", "no additives", "no artificial additives", "no controversial additives", "no chemicals", "no bleaching agents";	11	25
Absence of synthetic pesticides and chemical fertilizers	"no synthetic pesticides", "no fertilizers", "no chemicals", "no synthetic substances", "unsprayed", "no fungicides", "no herbicides", "artificially grown";	9	20
GMO-free	"non-genetically modified varieties", "without genetically modified organisms";	2	4
Non-irradiated product and without traces of heavy metals	"without heavy metals", "non-irradiated";	1	12
No (traces of) antibiotics	"do not contain antibiotics".	1	2

Source: Based on research conducted by the author of this study.

(4) Attributes describing the product as suitable for adopting a special diet or a healthy lifestyle, desired and/or imposed by certain beliefs

The elimination or addition in small quantities of some ingredients in the finished product, as well as the simple use of some ingredients from a certain category (for example, vegan ingredients), offers the possibility for a brand to use a positioning base from the category "without" ("without" positioning) or to associate with the product category it represents (e.g. vegan product).

(5) Summary attributes related to the naturalness (natural content) of the product

Organic food can also be described by attributes that are more difficult to quantify and evaluate. They have the purpose of summarizing the essence of the characteristics of organic food in the form of more general attributes. As we can see in Table 6, attributes such as "clean" or "pure" manage to incorporate several characteristics of the product (especially attributes related to the absence of substances/ingredients harmful to the environment and human health), their role being to convey a series of rational elements in a form as easy as possible for the consumer to understand.

Table 6. Statements regarding summarizing attributes specific to organic food brands

Codes	Statement	Interview
“Clean” product	*“We have become a guarantor of quality. Even the products that we list as a retailer on the website must go through a rather tough selection process: country of origin, ingredients, to be clean, to have no additives, to be in no way harmful to health […]... we delist a lot when we have a signal from customers. This is how we manage to keep a very clean and very trustworthy brand...”;*	IR.S1
	“Besides the fact that they are ‘clean’ products, which have not had contact with chemicals throughout the production process, each brand communicates its attributes”;	ID7
	“My idea at the beginning, when I started this business, was to make ‘clean’ food accessible to as many people as possible”;	IP4
Purity/ “pure” product	*“What sets us apart is the fact that our products are natural and are exactly in their form, as they come from nature, from the beehive. Regarding the preparations that I mentioned before, they are only a complex of natural products that we sell, which themselves are obtained in the purest form”;*	IP10
	“We add absolutely nothing and do not use combinations of ingredients”;	IP11
	“In addition, the organic food range speaks of the purity of nature, of the pure taste that we can enjoy with minimal intervention on our part”.	IP12

Source: Based on research conducted by the author of this study.

(6) Attributes related to how the processing of the organic finished product is carried out

The presence of these attributes is explained by consumers' interest in less processed products (both in terms of intensity and duration), with a higher content of nutrients and a taste as close as possible to that of fresh products. “*Through refining, organic food loses these benefits, the competitive advantage is practically canceled*” (IP3). The specialist mentions that in this case “*you have nothing to promote. There remains some benefit in that no synthetic chemicals are used, but for human health this does not help*” (IP3). In this regard, certain processors aim to carry out the processing “*in the healthiest possible manner*” (IP6), being concerned about not affecting the quality of the organic ingredients used.

Specialists mention that attributes such as “raw” (processing below 40 degrees), “unprocessed”, “integral” or “manufactured” are of great importance in defining the positioning of the brand *(“The main element that would attract would be the fact that it is only made of fruit and that it is not thermally processed”* - IP8). The importance of these attributes is expected to increase *“as consumers understand more about nutrition, about what characteristics food must have to maintain or improve their health”* (IP3).

(7) The packaging of the organic food product

Apart from the design elements and the image of the packaging, some companies focus on how the packaging itself can be green (“100% recycled plastic”, “recycled paper”, “sustainable green ink”, “unbleached cellulose”), even if the legislation in force does not impose rules in this regard. Many of the analyzed brands have decided in recent years to make changes in this direction as well, as a result of the sensitivity of an important category of green consumers. Also, having a high level of exigencies, some brands are concerned with how the packaging keeps the product healthy and does not affect its quality. For example, one of the retailers, IR.S1, preferred to source packaging from Ireland, even though it was more expensive, as he found that those from China were contaminated with two heavy metals.

(8) Specific label for organic food products

The mandatory EU logo for organic farming helps consumers classify the product as organic food. However, there are cases, few in number (for example, producer of organic wine - IP9), in which specialists believe that the assertion of greenness does not benefit the brand, because of consumer perception of the performance of green products (primary attributes and benefits) compared to conventional ones. That is why some brands prefer to place the EU organic logo in the background of the product packaging.

4.2 Benefits Used in the Positioning of Organic Food Brands

(1) Functional benefits, particularly specific of organic food

A presentation of the green benefits is made by one of the specialists: "*There are two large categories of benefits, which respect the motto of the European Union for organic farming: 'good for nature, good for you' […] If we have an agricultural product, food, which is good for our health, implicitly that food has benefits for nature as well, be it soil or groundwater protection. So these benefits always work together, if a product is good for nature, then it is also good for our health, and vice versa*" (IP3). For the consumer, "*the personal benefits come first*", because "*each person looks first of all at his advantages*" (IR.S2), "*and only after the benefits for nature*" (IP3). The prioritization of personal health benefits is also seen in Table 7, these being mentioned in 24 interviews, compared to 12 interviews for environmental benefits. Regarding the number of assigned codes, the imbalance is much greater between the two categories of benefits.

Table 7. Frequency of occurrence for codes associated with green benefits

Codes	Number of interviews	Number of assigned codes
Human health benefits	24	99
Environmental benefits	12	21

Source: Based on research conducted by the author of this study.

Starting from the statement "*organic means healthier*" (IP7), one of the participants believes that organic food should be promoted as "*food - medicine*", but only if the producer/processor is careful "*during processing, to preserve these benefits for human health*" (IP3). Along the same lines, another specialist considers organic food as both "*adjuvant in the treatment of various disease conditions and having a preventive role*" (IP12).

On the other hand, the benefits related to environmental protection have a secondary role in supporting the brand's position. Examples in this sense being presented in Table 8. This positioning base is used by companies oriented towards biodynamic agriculture (IP9) or the support of certain actions, such as "1% for the Planet".

Table 8. Statements regarding the benefits for the environment

Interview	Statement
IP9	*"Through our slogan, we want to convey our documentation […]. That is, we are the only ones who do not use anything that contains pesticides, fungicides, herbicides and others. Respect for life in all its forms is most important to us [...] We consider the ecosystem, where every animal, insect, plant has its role...";*
ID1	*"Many of our producers are participants in those '1% for the planet'. Basically, 1% of what they sell to me goes to projects that help the planet become greener";*
IP7	*"From the beginning, we started as a green start-up and we were financed by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology precisely because we had a sustainable concept. We let ourselves be guided along this line because it also coincides with our philosophy. From the beginning, we had paper packaging, but for example, the plastic casseroles were highly criticized by customers who are concerned about recycling etc. Thus, we looked for sustainable solutions, we also took classes in this regard, not necessarily to get rid of people's criticisms, but because in the end, we did not feel good about polluting the planet".*

Source: Based on research conducted by the author of this study.

Consequently, "*marketing for organic food should be done by presenting the benefits for human health and the health of nature, protecting nature, because we do not use pesticides and chemical fertilizers*" (IP3). The accentuation of this benefit is closely related to several green attributes.

(2) Traditional functional benefits

Even though green benefits may be important for deep green consumers, a brand must not lose sight of the basic benefits offered by most brands.

The main traditional benefits identified in the interviews were the following:

- *Convenience*: especially ensuring the availability of the products in the sales areas suitable for the target audience ("*Organic food products have the same common factor, but differentiating factor, for us, is the distribution. The consumer can find us anywhere, we are at his fingertips, easy to purchase*" – ID7), but also the ease of consumption, by offering alternatives as close as possible to the need for consumption. Convenience also refers to assortment diversity, if the consumer is offered the opportunity to purchase as many products as possible from the same source (for example, from a single producer of vegetables - fruits);
- *Food safety*: product quality control has the role of avoiding contamination with external substances; these rigorous verifications are usually emphasized to consumers in order to increase the degree of trust. In addition, traceability is an essential concept in the field of organic food, especially in the situation where the producer has both conventional and organic food products in his portfolio.

(3) Emotional/experience-based benefits

The concern for providing a positive consumer experience is rather specific to retailers and, in some cases, distributors, because this is one of the components over which they have a high degree of control. However, even producers who develop direct and personalized relationships can offer memorable experiences to consumers.

In the case of certain organic food brands, the use of elements of an emotional nature in supporting the positioning of the brand has been noted. Entrepreneurs frequently describe making significant efforts to manufacture *products with 'soul'*. Conveying a state of well-being, emotional comfort, or peace of mind was among the mentioned desideratum. For example, an organic tea brand relies on *“true wellness”*, the company representative describing this differentiating element as follows: “*a three-element state of balance between body, mind and spirit. Our brand states that it is not enough to have this balance, you must also be in balance with nature, and then the fourth element appears; in fact, this is the true state of well-being, this inner and outer balance*” (ID3).

A perfect harmony between the emotional side and nature is considered essential by one of the specialists: “*Everything is emotion because you are at the hands of nature. You can work like a slave for a year and before you reap the fruits, hail falls and all your predictions, all your work, everything you have built crumbles in an hour without you being able to do absolutely nothing*” (IP9). Other companies want to be associated with states of joy, optimism, fulfillment, lack of worries, love of loved ones and nature, advertising a reunited, happy family etc.

(4) Symbolic benefits

The use of symbolic benefits is quite low among the analyzed brands, specialists not having yet found a strong consumer need in this direction. However, the brands that rely on a *“fresh” image* aim to attract consumers from among those who consider that “*organic is cool and healthy*” (IP5).

Recently, there has been an intensification of consumer concerns about asserting a certain social status or belonging to a certain group, especially on social networks. Some companies have identified this opportunity and encourage consumers to share their consumer experience with the general public.

4.3 Other Positioning Bases Specific to Organic Food Brands

(1) Values specific to organic food brands

The main values that companies rely on are based on developing a relationship of trust with consumers, which cannot be cultivated without transparency and fairness towards them (see Table 9). All these efforts have the role of building a trusted brand in the eyes of consumers, with the aim that the desired positioning can be perceived by the consumer as such (at the level designed by the company). These associations are also essential in the Romanian market, where it is recognized that a very large percentage of the population does not trust organic food (Bozgă, 2015). In addition, local brands rely on tradition, manufacturing recipes, taste, and in some cases even faith and spirituality.

Table 9. Statements regarding the specific values of organic food brands

Codes	Statement	Interview
Transparency	*“...being transparent, we chose to mention on the packaging who made the recipe, who the chemist is, and which is the country of origin, although we are not obliged. Even when we have products with several ingredients, we say where the ingredients come from, the country of origin and the certifications”;* *“All communication is transparent... meaning that, at the end of the day, we build in a sole direction. The speech is transparent, it is honest, without over-promising, because that is the only way you can be credible and have a brand at the end of the day”;*	IR.S1

Trust	*"We wanted to control the product, from the ingredient to how it is placed on store shelves. It is important to deliver quality, so that people come back and trust you"; "We have become a guarantor of quality";*	IR.S1
Faith/ Spirituality	*"Our products are not only organic food products, but they are also the gifts of God, the gifts of life offered to all people for healing, joy and comfort, and we just bring them closer to people"; "From working the land and picking medicinal plants, to packing them in containers that are as healthy as possible, but also beautiful, everything is intertwined with prayer";*	IP12
Tradition	*"...It helped us precisely because we have a tradition, our brand has always been targeted towards Romanians and we have had these products ranges available to them for a long time"; "What we try to do is to offer products with simple, authentic recipes, as close as possible to the way they were made in households, obviously to the extent that industrialization allows it".*	IP11

Source: Based on research conducted by the author of this study.

(2) Occasion or time of consumption

Providing a special consumption context is not a positioning base frequently mentioned by the interviewed specialists. This is rather a secondary positioning base, used most of the time to increase that category. In this regard, one of the specialists states the following: *"They intertwine, they are equally important. Actually, no, the product attributes are the most important, the consumption occasions set the context in order to be able to convey that message. In fact, we want people to find themselves in that context. That is why we come up with several types of moments of consumption, so that the consumer can say: 'Ah, look, I could also use this product for breakfast or for an afternoon snack'. The important thing is that they try, after that we expect them to become loyal"* (IP11).

(3) Particular user or group of users

Like the base related to consumption occasions, celebrity association is not so used in this market, mostly due to low budgets. However, there are celebrities recognized in this niche, who choose to support or collaborate with organic food brands. For example, in the case of wines, there is the possibility of associating the brand with famous oenologists, and in the field of bio-vegan or bio-raw-vegan products, there are collaborations between celebrities who promote this lifestyle and certain local green brands.

Associating with certain characters from cartoons or famous books, as well as building representative characters for a brand, is a suitable option for organic foods as well. The goal is to make *"the rigorous speech much friendlier […] Some characters just humanize a little and have a very funny speech. I mean, if you see the quotes on the packaging, I do not think that quote brings a smile to your face. Through colors, characters and quotes, we create this bonding. Otherwise, it was organic, non-irradiated, non-additive, very cold and very distant. We needed to come up with something extra and these characters created memorability"* (IR.S1).

(4) Product class

The positioning of organic food brands is done automatically by comparison with conventional products, to make a clear demarcation and assert superiority. As a rule, organic food products are presented as a healthy or healthier alternative to conventional food. Also, this is an efficient way to explain the price difference between the two categories of products.

“We have developed products that are healthier than any option that currently exists on the market, on supermarket shelves [...] And when we talk about healthy products, we have to offer healthy options to conventional products, real options, supported by nutritional values, ingredients, everything” (IR.S1).

(5) Country of origin

In terms of highlighting the origin of the ingredients used or the country of production/processing of the organic finished product, two important directions were noted: the affirmation of the Romanian origin and the association or delimitation with certain countries of origin.

- *Affirmation of the Romanian origin of the organic food product/brand*

Most specialists believe that Romanian consumers have started to prefer Romanian products and brands, especially in recent years. That is why the orientation of certain brands incorporates this external element in their brand positioning strategy.

“Consumers of organic food products are very selective. They know what they are looking for and they are informed. What I can say is that if they have a choice between two products of equal nutritional value, quality etc., even if the Romanian product is a little more expensive, because it is organic, Romanians prefer the Romanian one, if the benefits are well presented” (IP3).

“It is very important to have Romanian products because people care a lot about local production, more so in the last two years. There has been a general awareness of Romanians who want to support local producers and consume local products” (IR.G2).

- *Association or delimitation with certain countries of origin*

The companies' practice shows a strong orientation in terms of consumer preferences regarding the countries of origin of the ingredients used to manufacture organic food products, as well as the country of manufacture of the finished product or the country with which the organic food brand is associated. The results of the analysis of the interviews show two directions:

- Affirmation of the country of origin of the ingredients or the country of manufacture of the finished product, as well as the country with which the organic food brand is associated: it is known that certain countries enjoy greater trust in the eyes of consumers, but they are also recognized as countries with tradition in the field of organic food products. In addition, tradition is also important in the manufacture of certain food products (Italy - pasta, France - bakery products; see Table 10, ID1).

- Clear demarcation from certain countries of origin that do not have a good image in terms of organic production, accompanied by a strong orientation in this direction at the level of the product portfolio (see Table 8, IR.S1). - Asian countries, especially China, are usually included in this category. Other companies differentiate even between European countries: “*a brand from Germany is more trusted than a brand from Spain or Italy. Countries like Germany and Austria have more credibility than Latin countries*” (ID2).

Table 10. Statements regarding the association or delimitationof the brand with certain countries of origin

Interview	Statement
IR.S1	*"It is one thing to be certified in Europe, another to be certified in China. That is why, for us, products and ingredients from China are banned"; "We can be proud of a fairly educated customer base and over time we have seen that they look a lot at provenance and somehow this was an alarm signal... The fact that customers were attentive to these aspects, led us to mention on the packaging that the ingredients are of non-China origin. We have been doing this for years, it has nothing to do with the pandemic context";*
ID2	*"We try to differentiate even between our products. Let me give a concrete example: we have spirulina from China, but also from Europe, for customers who do not want it from China. From the point of view of microbiological analysis, there is no difference between the two, so there are no traces of pesticides or other chemicals in the Chinese one either. Both of them are double tested, in independent laboratories, but they are simply customers who want more premium than premium, and then we also offered them this option";*
ID1	*"I have had very positive reactions vis-a-vis French bakery products, which are unlike any other product. For example, for pasta, the French producers with whom we collaborate have certain pasta that is produced in Italy. They are under their brand, but they are made in Italy... So in the bakery area, a French product will always be preferred over one from Germany or Spain. On the pasta side, it will always be an Italian product".*

Source: Based on research conducted by the author of this study.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1 Main findings

The research targeted the identification of positioning bases specific to organic food brands at the level of different types of companies in the supply chain (25 interviews). Overall, it was noted that brand positioning is proving to be an extremely complex subject, especially in a niche market, characterized by several problems and a level of consumption which is still low (Stoica, 2021a; Andrusenko *et al*., 2022). Difficulties in achieving high-volume sales have determined many companies to refine their efforts to find additional attributes and benefits to differentiate their offer. These efforts must continue to face the increasing competition in this product category.

This research has taken a step in this direction, providing an up-to-date image of how the analyzed brands are positioned in the organic food market in Romania. In general, the decision to position a brand is seen as a complex and rigorous undertaking by large companies, which have a developed marketing activity, but SMEs are also aware of the need to develop one or more points of differentiation from the competition.

Choosing a mix of positioning bases to represent the desired positioning can be guided between the following possible options:

- *Attributes*: related in particular to the characteristics of organic food products, these refer to the ingredients used or discarded, the way they were cultivated/grown, the production/processing processes used and related technologies, product packaging, and certifications. Some of these bases may also be specific to conventional or conventional-plus products (Stolz *et. al*., 2011). In this regard, due to the coverage of a larger market, various concerns were identified in the direction of conceptualizing specific strategic positioning alternatives. For example, in terms of explicitly highlighting the absence of certain ingredients in the product ("free-from-products positioning food"), the following alternatives are available: "vegan positioning", which can have several meanings depending on the beliefs promoted - "Overtly Vegan: Anti-Meat positioning" and "Vegan Friendly: Plant-Based for Health positioning" (Sabet, 2018); "sugar-free positioning"/"no added sugars' positioning" (Banerjee, 2010; Brownbill *et al*., 2018; Grammatikaki *et al*., 2021); "gluten-free positioning" (Brown, 2014; Savarese *et al*., 2021) and "lactose-free positioning" (Ingredients Network, 2019; Savarese *et al*., 2021). Also, the attributes which are rather specific to organic food products refer to the absence of substances/ingredients harmful to the environment and human health. These have been identified and conceptualized by von Meyer-Höfer *et al*. (2015), starting from Regulation EC 834/07.

- *Benefits*: the content analysis highlighted the presence of the three categories of benefits (Park *et al*., 1986), but with different levels of importance. The results show the greater importance given to functional benefits at the expense of emotional and symbolic benefits. Furthermore, in terms of green functional benefits, personal benefits (human health) outweigh global benefits (environmental protection). These results are also consistent with what has been observed in consumer behavior. Numerous studies conducted on the Romanian market have shown that consumers are more motivated by personal benefits (health) than by concerns for society's well-being and environmental care (Bozgă, 2015; Voicu & Iliescu, 2015; Roman *et al*., 2015; Vietoris *et al.*, 2016; Petrescu *et al*., 2017). Moreover, the association between human health benefits and organic food is strong among green consumers (Padel & Gössinger, 2008). Along these lines, Vega-Zamora *et al*. (2014) propose a model that starts from the assumption that organic is synonymous with health. In the same direction, the current study showed the desire of companies to convey to consumers that organic food can be seen as "*food-medicine*" or "*adjuvant in the treatment of various diseases*".

By comparison with the other studies, the animal welfare benefits (Van Riemsdijk *et al*., 2017a, b; van Riemsdijk *et al*, 2020) and the ethical benefits (Padel & Gössinger, 2008; Zander & Hamm, 2010; van Herpen *et al.*, 2012; Zander *et al*., 2013; von Meyer-Höfer *et al*., 2015) were not brought up in the interviews. Furthermore, these two categories of benefits have been highlighted in certain studies as having a strong differentiating role when talking about the green offer (Howard & Allen, 2006, Zander & Hamm, 2010). Therefore, companies may not be willing to invest in such benefits, as consumers are less receptive to them.

- *Other positioning bases*: in this category are included associations with brand values, country of origin, consumption occasions, a specially created character or a personality deemed credible by the target audience, as well as the comparison with the conventional products class. These positioning bases can be considered surrogate positioning bases, being rather abstract and extrinsic associations of the product and brand (Crawford, 1985; Fuchs, 2008; Keller, 2013). Typically, surrogate positioning bases are secondary associations (Cristea, 2021), having the role of supporting a positioning based on attributes and/or benefits.

Generally, attributes are more dominant and diverse compared to benefits. This impact is also related to the level of development of the local market. In this regard, Bozgă (2017) considers that, given the low level of information and unclear image that Romanian consumers have about organic food products, highlighting some attributes can be extremely useful for the success of an organic food brand.

5.2 Suggestions and implications of the study

Regarding the managerial implications, the results of the research can be used by companies operating in the organic food market. The study offers a wide range of options in terms of positioning bases that can be used to define the desired brand position. Specialists are therefore able to create an optimal mix of positioning bases that responds to how the company wants the brand to be perceived by the target audience. At this point, specialists need to pay particular attention to the characteristics of positioning bases, as they can represent either points of parity or points of differentiation. In the case of organic food, the points of parity have the role of helping the brand to be perceived as green, while the points of differentiation have the ability to help differentiate the brand from other organic brands. However, the parity points can help to make a clear delimitation from conventional food products, an extremely important aspect in a market characterized by a low level of consumption penetration of organic foods and low awareness of consumers regarding green concerns. Also, the points of differentiation are usually considered to be those that exceed the mandatory standards of organic production, so the effort of companies in this direction must be constant. Thus, this dimension is not static, but subject to constant change and progress by adding new concepts to the existing basic concept (Padel & Gössinger, 2008). In addition, the study provides a number of coordinates in terms of positioning bases that can be described as specific rather to certain types of companies, depending on their size and place in the supply chain.

In terms of theoretical implications, this study contributes to research in the field of organic food brand positioning. Research on specific positioning bases is conducted from the company's point of view, a perspective not often addressed in the specialized literature. In this direction, the study takes important steps toward classifying and conceptualizing the positioning bases used by companies present in this market. Based on the vision of company specialists, the study provides a closer perspective on the internal positioning process and related internal decisions, thus giving due importance to the desired positioning concept.

5.3 Limitations and future study

Although this study has provided in-depth answers regarding the investigated subject, however, the results must be evaluated realistically, taking into account the limitations of the research. Similar to qualitative approaches (Ochieng, 2009; Queirós *et al*., 2017), the results cannot be generalized to the collective of certified organic companies that own or distribute at least one organic food brand on the Romanian market.

Depending on the size of the company, several difficulties were identified in the data collection stage, which can influence the results of the research. Thus, in the case of SMEs with low marketing activity, it was difficult to deepen the topic, requiring the intervention of the researcher to request additional information and to clarify certain questions. However, this aspect helps to present a situation as close as possible to the reality of the market, especially in terms of the development of marketing activity. On the other hand, among large companies, due to strict data privacy rules, some specialists approached certain questions with a higher degree of generalization, even if the confidentiality of the data provided was guaranteed.

A specific limitation of qualitative research is related to the role of the researcher in the research process. Thus, the researcher's subjectivity manifested unintentionally, can have a certain degree of influence, both in the stage of data collection and in the stage of data analysis and interpretation. Thus, in the case of semi-structured interviews, there is a risk that the researcher may tend to bias the participant's responses to some extent in order to obtain inductive data (Elo *et al*., 2014). Instead, in the data analysis stage, it is recommended to use representative quotes to enhance the credibility of the results (Cho & Lee, 2014). Also, in some cases, quantitative data may be presented to provide an overview of the whole result (Elo *et al*., 2014). These recommendations have been integrated into the methodology and results of the research.

Moreover, in terms of data analysis, some specialists (Burla *et al*., 2008; Schreier, 2012) recommend that this step should be carried out by more than one person to increase comprehension and provide an accurate interpretation of the data. In this regard, we point out that only one person was involved in the data analysis.

Starting from these limits, new research directions can be formulated in order to deepen the topic of organic food brand positioning. Some of the limitations specific to qualitative research can be removed or reduced by carrying out quantitative research, which continues the work in this direction. In this respect, it is essential to establish from a quantitative perspective the importance of the identified positioning bases and the degree of association between them. In addition, future research could establish the level of greening (Ginsberg & Bloom, 2004; Simula *et al*., 2009; Driessen *et al*., 2013; Kapitan *et al*., 2019) associated with each positioning bases, both from the perspective of companies, as well as depending on the perception of the consumer. This information can support companies' decisions regarding the selection of positioning bases that best describe the desired brand position.

The research has provided an overview of this research topic, while future research may focus on investigating an individual category of companies in the green supply chain. Further deepening and specialization of this research topic can also be achieved by studying a single category of positioning bases from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective.

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