8. REPORT ON PhD THESIS EVALUATION

General information and PhD candidate contact information		
Title, first and last name of the PhD candidate	Martina Ferenčić, MSc	
Provider(s) of the study programme	Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Rijeka	
Name of the study programme	Postgraduate Doctoral Study Program in Economics and Business Economics	
Identification number of the PhD candidate	126/14	
Title of the PhD thesis	*Language of the thesis*	English
	Croatian	LOJALNOST MARKAMA PREHRAMBENIH PROIZVODA: UTJECAJ CLEAR LABELA NA PERCEPCIJU KVALITETE PROIZVODA I KREDIBILITET MARKE
	English	EXPLORING FOOD BRAND LOYALTY: THE EFFECTS OF CLEAR LABEL CONCEPT ON PRODUCT QUALITY AND BRAND CREDIBILITY PERCEPTION
Area/field	Economics/Marketing	

1. SUPERVISOR(S) AND PhD THESIS EVALUATION COMMITTEE

1.1. Supervisor(s)

Title, first and last name	Institution, country
Associate professor Jasmina Dlačić, PhD	Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Rijeka

1.2. Co-supervisor(s)

Title, first and last name	Institution, country

1.3. PhD thesis evaluation committee

Title, first and last name	Institution, country
1. Bruno Grbac, PhD, professor emeritus, Committee Chair	Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Rijeka, Croatia
2. Full professor Mirna Leko Šimić, PhD, Committee member	Faculty of Economics, University of J. J. Strossmayer in Osijek, Croatia
3. Full professor Aleksandra Pisnik, PhD, Committee member	Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Maribor, Slovenia

*2.1. PhD thesis evaluation**
(the evaluation must specify original scientific contribution and/or new finding)

The committee assessed that the dissertation written by Martina Ferenčić entitled "Exploring food brand loyalty: The effect of clear label concept on product quality and brand credibility perception" covers an extremely important and insufficiently researched topic in marketing. The research on the mentioned issue is well structured and organized. Introduction, theoretical framework, hypotheses and methodology are clearly defined. The theoretical framework relies on relevant academic research with a selection of recent research results. The proposed conceptual model is clear and illustrative.

The doctoral candidate, Martina Ferenčić, M.Sc. based her theoretical overview on three concepts that were used in empirical research: perceived food product quality, consumer loyalty and clear label. She provided a critical analysis of contemporary research on customers' loyalty, food product quality perception and food labelling. Although there are numerous studies on these concepts separately or in dual relations, identification of complex relations and influences between all the three is recognized as a research gap in existing studies. Based on the literature review the candidate created a conceptual model of these relations and influences and tested it empirically. The methodology included both qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (survey) approach.

Based on the extensive literature review following hypothesis and sub-hypotheses are formed, and conceptual model was proposed:
H1: Level of Perceived product quality positively affects the Food brand loyalty.
H1a: Level of Perceived product quality positively affects the Attitudinal loyalty.
H1b: Level of Perceived product quality positively affects Complaining behaviour.
H1c: Level of Perceived product quality positively affects Propensity to be loyal.
H1d: Level of Perceived product quality positively affects Resistance to competing offers.
H2: Brand credibility positively affects the Food brand loyalty
H2a: Level of Brand credibility positively affects the Attitudinal loyalty.
H2b: Level of Brand credibility positively affects Complaining behaviour.
H2c: Level of Brand credibility positively affects Propensity to be loyal.
H2d: Level of Brand credibility positively affects Resistance to competing offers.
H3: Introducing Clear label elements to food product design has moderating effect to the relationship between Perceived product quality and Food brand loyalty elements.
H4: Introducing Clear label elements to food product design has moderating effect to the relationship between Brand credibility and Food brand loyalty elements.

The research methodology is well designed and implemented. Doctoral student Martina Ferenčić uses a number of standard scientific methods in her work to collect, analyze and present results. Given that the focus of the research is "Clear label", as a current trend in the food industry. The scales for measuring the constructs are correctly adapted to the context of food brands. Testing and validation of the newly designed scales was carried out through a pilot study, and the results of the pilot study were analyzed and discussed in a focus group with marketing experts. Testing the validity and reliability of the scales confirmed their quality.

The research was carried out on two groups of respondents (test, control), which enabled comparison of results and argumentation for drawing conclusions. A large sample size was used for both groups of respondents, which are larger than the required minimum for testing research results. This improves the reliability of the research results.

Doctoral student Martina Ferenčić appropriately uses descriptive statistics to describe data, which ensures an understanding of data distribution. Various statistical methods were used in testing the hypotheses, including exploratory factor analysis, multivariate regression analysis and hierarchical regressions. The research tested the moderating effect of "Clear label" on the relationship between several key variables.

The research results are well analyzed and presented. The research confirms several hypotheses about the relationship between the perception of product quality, brand credibility and loyalty to food brands. However, the results indicate that "Clear label" does not have a moderating effect on these relationships, and Martina Ferenčić cites several relevant reasons why "Clear label" does not have a moderating effect, including already high product loyalty, product category and lack of brand recognition.

Following from the above, Martina Ferenčić invests effort and additionally investigates the mediating effect of the perception of "Clear label" on the relationship between key variables. The results show that nutritional and natural content and origin have a significant mediating role in the relationship between the perception of product quality, brand credibility and loyalty to food brands.

Doctoral student Martina Ferenčić made a theoretical and applied contribution in her dissertation titled "Exploring food brand loyalty: The effect of clear label concept on product quality and brand credibility perception". The theoretical contribution of the dissertation results from the expert systematization and analysis of previous research on packaging design, trends, brand loyalty, quality perception and brand credibility. On this basis, it provides a new conceptual model for researching the relationship between these factors under the influence of "Clear label". By developing a new scale for measuring "Clear label" and adapting the existing ones, a methodological contribution was made in the dissertation.

The applied contribution of the dissertation comes from the implications of the research results for business subjects operating in the food market - how they can use the "Clear label" approach in packaging development to improve communication with consumers and regulatory authorities. In this way, to management bodies in business subjects are offered answers about the approach of adapting to the dynamics of the food market.

In conclusion, Martina Ferenčić's work "Exploring food brand loyalty: The effect of clear label concept on product quality and brand credibility perception" is a scientific work with original scientific knowledge and contributions, and it meets the propositions of the doctoral dissertation.

2.2. Opinion and recommendation

Based on all the aforementioned facts and findings, the Expert Commission for the Evaluation of the Doctoral Thesis of Martina Ferenčić, brings the following:

CONCLUSION

- that the doctoral dissertation of Martina Ferenčić, "Exploring food brand loyalty: The effect of clear label concept on product quality and brand credibility perception" is a scientific work that the doctoral student independently created, which contains original and scientific contributions and insights;
- that Martina Ferenčić has a good command of the methodology of scientific and research work, both in the expression and in the formulation and interpretation of the obtained research results;
- that doctoral student Martina Ferenčić knows the subject of the research, thesis provides an overview of the importance of the Clear label in food marketing and its influence on perceptions of product quality, brand credibility and loyalty and that the scientific approach in the research leads to new scientific knowledge, conclusions and proposals;
- that this doctoral dissertation, by its content, methodology, and presented research results, indicates the fact that the Martina Ferenčić has the necessary knowledge, which as a researcher creatively and meaningfully uses in the field of economic sciences, the field of marketing;
- that the doctoral student investigated the set scientific hypotheses in this doctoral thesis, which were elaborated in the introductory part of the dissertation and presented in the conceptual research model;
- that Martina Ferenčić in accordance with the information from this report of the Committee for the Evaluation of Doctoral Thesis, fulfills all the legal requirements for joining the defense of the doctoral thesis and obtaining the academic degree of Doctor of Economic Sciences, field of economics, branch of marketing.

Based on previously stated in this Report, the Committee for the Evaluation of the Doctoral Thesis, authored by doctoral student Martina Ferenčić, amounts to the following:

PROPOSAL

To the faculty council:
- to accept the Report on the evaluation of the doctoral thesis authored by Martina Ferenčić under the title "Exploring food brand loyalty: The effect of clear label concept on product quality and brand credibility perception",
- to continue the process of obtaining the scientific degree of Doctor of Economic Sciences of Martina Ferenčić,
- to appoint the Committee for the Defense of Doctoral Thesis;
- to appoint the recorder and determine the time and place of the defense of the doctoral thesis.

2.3. PhD thesis evaluation committee

Title, first and last name, institution, country:	Signature:
1. Bruno Grbac, PhD, professor emeritus, Committee Chair	
2. Full professor Mirna Leko Šimić, PhD, Committee member	

| 3. Full professor Aleksandra Pisnik, PhD, Committee member | Aleksandra PISNIK | Digitalno podpisal Aleksandra PISNIK
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2.4. Meeting of the competent authority and item on the meeting agenda under which the Committee was appointed

2.5. Additional comment
(if applicable)

M.P.

Bruno Grbac, PhD, professor emeritus, Committee Chair

Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Rijeka, Croatia

In Rijeka, 19/03/2024

SCINETIFIC REVIEW OF THE PhD THESIS	
Title, first and last name of the PhD candidate	**Martina Ferenčić, MSc**
Title of the PhD thesis	EXPLORING FOOD BRAND LOYALTY: THE EFFECTS OF CLEAR LABEL CONCEPT ON PRODUCT QUALITY AND BRAND CREDIBILITY PERCEPTION

The dissertation written by Martina Ferenčić entitled "Exploring food brand loyalty: The effect of clear label concept on product quality and brand credibility perception" covers an extremely important and insufficiently researched topic in marketing. The research on the mentioned issue is well structured and organized. Introduction, theoretical framework, hypotheses and methodology are clearly defined. The theoretical framework relies on relevant academic research with a selection of recent research results. The proposed conceptual model is clear and illustrative. Hypotheses are logically derived from the theoretical framework and relevant research and clearly defined.

The research methodology is well designed and implemented. Doctoral student Martina Ferenčić uses a number of standard scientific methods in her work to collect, analyze and present results. Given that the focus of the research is "Clear label", as a current trend in the food industry. The scales for measuring the constructs are correctly adapted to the context of food brands. Testing and validation of the newly designed scales was carried out through a pilot study, and the results of the pilot study were analyzed and discussed in a focus group with marketing experts. Testing the validity and reliability of the scales confirmed their quality.

The research was carried out on two groups of respondents (test, control), which enabled comparison of results and argumentation for drawing conclusions. A large sample size was used for both groups of respondents, which are larger than the required minimum for testing research results. This improves the reliability of the research results.

Doctoral student Martina Ferenčić appropriately uses descriptive statistics to describe data, which ensures an understanding of data distribution. Various statistical methods were used in testing the hypotheses, including exploratory factor analysis, multivariate regression analysis and hierarchical regressions. The research tested the moderating effect of "Clear label" on the relationship between several key variables.

The research results are well analyzed and presented. The research confirms several hypotheses about the relationship between the perception of product quality, brand credibility and loyalty to food brands. However, the results indicate that "Clear label" does not have a moderating effect on these relationships, and Martina Ferenčić cites several relevant reasons why "Clear label" does not have a moderating effect, including already high product loyalty, product category and lack of brand recognition.

Following from the above, Martina Ferenčić invests effort and additionally investigates the mediating effect of the perception of "Clear label" on the relationship between key variables. The results show that nutritional and natural content and origin have a significant mediating role in the relationship between the perception of product quality, brand credibility and loyalty to food brands.

Doctoral student Martina Ferenčić made a theoretical and applied contribution in her dissertation titled "Exploring food brand loyalty: The effect of clear label concept on product quality and brand credibility perception". The theoretical contribution of the dissertation results from the expert systematization and analysis of previous research on packaging design, trends, brand loyalty, quality perception and brand credibility. On this basis, it provides a new conceptual model for researching the relationship between these factors under the influence of "Clear label". By developing a new scale for measuring "Clear label" and adapting the existing ones, a methodological contribution was made in the dissertation.

The applied contribution of the dissertation comes from the implications of the research results for business subjects operating in the food market - how they can use the "Clear label" approach in packaging development to improve communication with consumers and regulatory authorities. In this way, to management bodies in business subjects are offered answers about the approach of adapting to the dynamics of the food market.

In conclusion, Martina Ferenčić's work "Exploring food brand loyalty: The effect of clear label concept on product quality and brand credibility perception" is a scientific work with original scientific knowledge and contributions, and it meets the propositions of the doctoral dissertation.

Bruno Grbac, PhD, professor emeritus, Committee Chair

Full professor Mirna Leko Šimić, PhD, Committee member

Faculty of Economics, University of J. J. Strossmayer in Osijek, Croatia

In Osijek, 05/02/2024

SCINETIFIC REVIEW OF THE PhD THESIS	
Title, first and last name of the PhD candidate	**Martina Ferenčić, MSc**
Title of the PhD thesis	EXPLORING FOOD BRAND LOYALTY: THE EFFECTS OF CLEAR LABEL CONCEPT ON PRODUCT QUALITY AND BRAND CREDIBILITY PERCEPTION

Due to contemporary trends of food purchasing in self-service types of retail on one hand and increased consumers' interest in food quality and its health impacts, the issue of labeling is clearly one of the key marketing communication tools in supporting consumers in their choices and purchasing decision-making. Clear label of one of the newer trend in food marketing and definitely deserves scientific attention. Therefore, the topic of this thesis is highly relevant. The candidate, Martina Ferenčić, M.Sc. based her theoretical overview on three concepts that were used in empirical research: perceived food product quality, consumer loyalty and clear label. She provided a critical analysis of contemporary research on customers' loyalty, food product quality perception and food labelling. Although there are numerous studies on these concepts separately or in dual relations, identification of complex relations and influences between all the three is recognized as a research gap in existing studies. Based on the literature review the candidate created a conceptual model of these relations and influences and tested it empirically. The methodology included both qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (survey) approach. Of particular value is the effort for additional research that the candidate used for explaining partial confirmation of the conceptual model.

I find this complex methodological approach, including the self-created clear label measurement scale, the major scientific contribution of the thesis. In terms of theoretical contribution, the clear label concept is rather new and rarely included in research on food marketing, which is also evident for the literature review. Therefore, this research provides new empirical evidence on the topic, which also, presented in research results, can contribute to food marketing practice improvement, both from managers' and consumers' perspective.

I find this thesis to be of high quality, original, very relevant in the area of food products marketing, with clear scientific and applicative contribution. The thesis corresponds to all the scientific requirements and I suggest its positive evaluation.

Full professor Mirna Leko Šimić, PhD, Committee member

Full professor Aleksandra Pisnik, PhD, Committee member

Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Maribor, Slovenia

In Maribor, 22/03/2024

SCINETIFIC REVIEW OF THE PhD THESIS	
Title, first and last name of the PhD candidate	**Martina Ferenčić, MSc**
Title of the PhD thesis	EXPLORING FOOD BRAND LOYALTY: THE EFFECTS OF CLEAR LABEL CONCEPT ON PRODUCT QUALITY AND BRAND CREDIBILITY PERCEPTION

Doctoral student Martina Ferenčić in her doctoral dissertation "Exploring food brand loyalty: The effects of clear label concept on product quality and brand credibility perception" is exploring how constructs such as Perceived product quality, Brand credibility and Brand loyalty of packaged food products influence each other. It also investigates how one of the contemporary trends, described as Clear label, influences the relationship between the aforementioned constructs. By examining the influence of the Clear label as a contemporary trend, this research contributes to the understanding of consumer behavior and provides practical insights for food brand management. Also, the findings presented in this thesis contribute to the overall understanding of the Clear label trend, where Clear label is described as a communication concept integrated into food packaging design (food labelling) based on consumers' increased search for transparency in food products ingredients and transparency in communicating ingredients on the front of the package.

Based on the extensive literature review following hypothesis and sub-hypotheses are formed, and conceptual model was proposed:

H1: Level of Perceived product quality positively affects the Food brand loyalty.

H1a: Level of Perceived product quality positively affects the Attitudinal loyalty.

H1b: Level of Perceived product quality positively affects Complaining behaviour.

H1c: Level of Perceived product quality positively affects Propensity to be loyal.

H1d: Level of Perceived product quality positively affects Resistance to competing offers.

H2: Brand credibility positively affects the Food brand loyalty

H2a: Level of Brand credibility positively affects the Attitudinal loyalty.

H2b: Level of Brand credibility positively affects Complaining behaviour.

H2c: Level of Brand credibility positively affects Propensity to be loyal.

H2d: Level of Brand credibility positively affects Resistance to competing offers.

H3: Introducing Clear label elements to food product design has moderating effect to the relationship between Perceived product quality and Food brand loyalty elements.

H4: Introducing Clear label elements to food product design has moderating effect to the relationship between Brand credibility and Food brand loyalty elements.

The theoretical contribution of this thesis lies in the systematisation of previous research in food marketing in connection with food labelling, new trends, brand loyalty, quality perception and brand credibility. The expansion of marketing knowledge is seen in the linking of brand loyalty theory with new trends in food marketing, such as the Clear label described here (gap-filling contribution).The results of the study demonstrate a basis for considering the Clear label as a communication element in packaging design, but also provide guidelines for deciding if certain products can be described as Clear label. The proposal of a conceptual model to analyse the relationship between Perceived product quality, Brand credibility and Brand loyalty in food products under the influence of Clear label perceptions is seen as a theoretical contribution.

Methodological contribution is seen primarily in the development of measurement scales for measuring Clear label constructs (Nutritional and natural content or NANC and the Origin or ORI scales). The developed scales were tested and validated twice. First in the pilot study on a small sample and then in the main study on a larger sample. Hence, it is expected that they should be considered as reliable scales for future research concerning the measurement of the construct Clear label. Another methodological contribution can also be seen in the adaptation of scales for measuring brand loyalty of food products.

Research findings offer practical insights for packaged food companies, helping them refine their branding and communication strategies to better meet consumer demands for transparency and ethical production practices. The research underscores the importance of clear and transparent labeling in fostering brand loyalty, highlighting how Clear Label can mediate the relationship between product quality, brand credibility, and loyalty. In addition, the research results could serve also with authorities and regulators (e.g., inclusion of guidelines for legal requirements and mandatory information on packaging). At the same time, these results can inform interactions with authorities and regulators by incorporating guidelines that meet legal requirements and advocate for the mandatory inclusion of information on product packaging.

Finally, this thesis provides an overview of the importance of the Clear label in food marketing and its influence on perceptions of product quality, brand credibility and loyalty.

In conclusion, doctoral dissertation "Exploring food brand loyalty: The effect pf clear label concept on product quality and brand

credibility perception" is a scientific work with original scientific knowledge and contributions, and it meets the propositions of the doctoral dissertation.

Full professor Aleksandra Pisnik, PhD, Committee member

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