Healthy eating and nutritional values have received much publicity in recent years. At the same time, food manufacturers are expected to take responsibility in general and especially for health in both food production and retail. In this study, we examine how snack companies brand their products as healthy and responsible without specific health claims. We analysed interview material from five cases through the lens of Kujala et al. (2011) concept of responsible branding. Living in harmony with nature was common to all case companies but emphasizing responsibility was rarely the goal of branding. The companies had to balance the conflicting needs of different stakeholders and make difficult choices, especially about the taste and healthiness of the snack. Our research articulates for that the perception of responsibility is contextual, and thus responsible brands require modifications to operate in different markets.

Keywords
Responsible branding, brand, health, food, snacks

Introduction

Ethical consumption has received academic interest since the late twentieth century (Harrison et al., 2005). Ethical here often refers to green or ecological choices (Carrigan et al., 2004), although wider definitions have also been used. Harrison et al. (2005) referred to political, environmental, social or other motives behind the consumer’s decision to prefer one offering over another. They claim that ethical consumption implies that some other decision criterion is used in addition to price or quality. Cowe and Williams (2001) emphasized the consideration of conscience in, for example, animal welfare, fair trade
or sustainable farming in the context of purchasing decisions. Kushwah et al. (2019) suggested that in the food sector, for example, the consumption of organic food or ethical practices such as fair trade refer to ethicality; however, factors related to food quality and health have also been considered indications of ethics (Hamelin et al., 2013).

In response to the growing importance ascribed to responsibility and ethicality in business, Kujala et al. (2011) introduced the ‘responsible brand’ concept. They focused on building responsible brands. The American Marketing Association (AMA, 2019) defines a brand as ‘a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller’s goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers’. These definitions have been criticized for focusing only on an individual brand name and visual appearance (de Chernatony & Riley, 1998). Instead, Davis (2002) looked at how people perceive the brand, viewing it as more than just a competitive goal promoted by marketing and advertising.

In this study, we address responsible branding in the food market. Public debate is increasingly concerned with nutritional patterns and eating habits as part of people’s overall health (Chrysochou, 2010). Healthy food consumption has social implications, as diet affects public health. The companies we examine in this study aim to bring to market products that help people eat healthier. They all operate in the snack market and emphasize the healthiness of their products in unusual ways. The aim of this research is to shed light on how a healthy and, thus, responsible brand is built for a snack product without health and nutritional claims. The research question we address through qualitative interviews with five snack company representatives is this:

How do companies create a responsible brand for their snacks without health and nutrition claims?

**Theoretical Background**

**Brand Identity**

Symbols such as a name, package and colours all aim to personalize a product so that it might be identifiable and distinct from others, thereby helping customers with their purchase decisions (Romaniuk et al., 2007). Brassington and Pettitt (2012) highlighted personality and identity as branding foci. Brand identity gives a brand its direction, meaning and purpose; thus, identity is a key part of the strategic vision of a brand. It stands for and implies a promise to customers from organization members (Aaker, 2011).

However, brands also help customers to express lifestyles, values and belonging to certain social groups (Fan, 2005). Thus, selling identifiable products to a customer is only one goal of branding. The main goal is to form a bond between the brand and a specific consumer group (Aaker, 2011) and make the brand relevant through functional, symbolic and social characteristics (Guèvremont et al., 2021). Through a brand, a company tries to influence customers’ decisions, behaviour and perceptions; thus, brand identity should be carefully designed.

Several models of building a brand have been introduced in the literature. For example, Aaker (2011) introduced a comprehensive brand identity planning model highlighting a brand as a product, organization, person and symbol to ensure that brand identity has texture and depth. de Chernatony (2003) presented a model that progressed over time and emphasized, for example, purpose, culture and objectives followed by contextual analysis, implementation, resourcing and evaluation steps. Such step-by-step models of product or corporate branding are also discussed by, among others, Boatwright et al. (2009) and Keller (2003). Kujala et al. (2011) found that vision, key stakeholder analysis, identity, goals, implementation and finally, evaluation were common in these models. These themes also serve as building blocks for responsible branding.
Responsible Branding

Setting a clear vision is important, especially for responsible branding, to focus company efforts (Kujala et al., 2011). According to Jones (2010), brand vision provides a ‘powerful tool for communicating’ to identified stakeholders while also guiding the future of the company. A vision, however, must be integrated into company values (de Chernatony, 2003), and both the company’s staff and external stakeholders should be able to embrace its core message (Kujala et al., 2011). As credibility is assessed by key stakeholders, building responsible brands requires in-depth knowledge of stakeholders (Aaker, 2011).

Although a responsible brand identity helps in standing out from competitors, companies have to strike a balance between mainstream and ethical niches (Kujala et al., 2011). If the goal is set high in terms of responsibility, all actions should be directed towards this goal. Otherwise, challenges can arise both within the company on the part of the staff and with customers and partners. Kujala et al. (2011) reminded us, however, that a responsible brand must redeem its place in the minds of consumers and other stakeholders. This is achieved by communicating and delivering the brand’s message to the target audience.

In this study, we apply the conceptual model of building a responsible brand in Kujala et al. (2011) to the snack product category. In the literature, snacks are defined as either meals between actual meals or smaller amounts of food consumed once (Njike et al., 2016). While healthier snack options exist, companies struggle with the unhealthy image of ‘snack foods’ (Hess et al., 2016). Therefore, we define responsibility in branding in terms of consumers’ investment in health, that is, the motive behind consumers’ purchasing decisions rather than product quality or price (Harrison et al., 2005).

Healthy food product branding can benefit customers since a brand can communicate health in an understandable way (Anker et al., 2011). Such branding spares the consumer the need to try to understand the product label and the nutritional content of the packaging, which saves time and energy (de Chernatony, 2009).

Health branding also has societal implications: research has shown that branding related to public health can guide and motivate people to lead healthier lifestyles (Anker et al., 2011). Evans et al. (2008) conducted a systematic literature review on health branding and found it to contain a variety of communicative ways to prevent disease, promote health and, increasingly, promote healthy eating. This demonstrates that in addition to building a relationship between the brand and the customer, brands also communicate product benefits to the customer.

Research Methodology

In this case study, we collected data about the responsible branding of snack products by interviewing branding professionals from five companies selling snack products in Finland. We chose snack markets since snacking has not received such extensive research attention as food consumption in general (Syrjälä et al., 2017) although revenue in the snack food segment in Finland is expected to reach US$646.40m in 2022 meaning the average volume per person about 7.8 kg (Statista, 2022). The case study approach enabled us to study branding in a real-life setting. Thematic, semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with branding professionals served as a primary data set, which was supplemented by documentary data collected from the company websites and social media, and sensory data about product packaging and products. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for qualitative content analysis.

We noticed that previous studies such as Chrysochou’s (2010) study of marketing mix elements in creating a healthy brand image did not fit the research question. Therefore, we decided to apply the
responsible branding model of Kujala et al. (2011) as a framework for analysing data under the themes of vision, key stakeholder analysis, identity, goals, implementation and finally, evaluation. Before going deeper into the findings, we briefly introduce our case companies which were selected because they represent domestic and international players of different sizes and ages, all of whom operate in the Finnish snack market.

Case Descriptions

The first company (henceforth Company 1) is a national unit of an international corporation. Its main raw material is various cereals, and the company focuses not only on the taste and healthiness of the food but also on the environmental impact of manufacturing. The person interviewed was responsible for a variety of brands in one product category. He said that young women were the main target group because women are interested in lifestyle, nutrition and exercise. Company 1 had launched its own research program on healthy foodstuffs and environmental responsibility.

The second company (Company 2) is a small start-up that focuses on children’s food. The brand refers to family values. The multidisciplinary team had developed products that contain less sugar and no artificial colours or flavours. The brand stands out from its competitors with its higher fibre content, domesticity and nutritional facts. Company 2 has applied for an official visual label indicating that the products follow the national nutrition recommendations in salt, fat, sugar and fibre content.

The third company (Company 3) is a cooperative with a long tradition. The snack brand was launched a few years ago, and the products are based on extensive experience with a certain raw material. At first, the company benefited from being the first to market; however, competition has since intensified sharply. The marketing director mentioned that the taste and composition of a company’s products differentiate them from those of its competitors. Company 3 has differentiated its snack product brand from its company brand.

The fourth company (Company 4) attempts to change nutritional habits; thus, it has developed plant-based products as an alternative to existing dairy products. Like Company 2, Company 4 uses nutritional and other facts in its packaging and communication. The company also seeks to influence consumers’ eating habits extensively and not just by promoting its own products, as noted by the marketing specialist interviewed.

The fifth company (Company 5) has a long history of serving cereal products in various categories. The officer responsible for brand communication said that the company strives to facilitate healthy everyday food choices with its product range. The company has a strong current market position, and the brand is well known in its home market. According to the interviewee, the company had made its entire snack category healthier, and other companies have now followed their example.

Brand Vision

de Chernatony (2003) stated that an effective brand vision is built on the desired future environment after 10 years, the purpose or reason for the brand’s existence, and the values that correspond to the potential customer. Purposefulness and striving for future change were also reflected in the vision of our case companies:

We want to change the world’s food culture to a more sustainable, healthier, and more delicious one so that nature is preserved for future generations and we see that change happen with the world’s best oat-based products. (Company 4)
Preserving nature for the next generation was an important vision for several brands. Although this vision was rather vague, it was tightly tied to the company’s products and product development. The company professes a strong belief in the uniqueness of the raw material it uses, as well as in its ability to solve environmental problems, believing that *the best raw material in the world* is a simple and engaging message to stakeholders, including personnel. However, the company also remembers its place as a food business operator and emphasizes deliciousness in addition to other health- and nature-related values.

Other companies try to solve customers’ day-to-day and very practical problems:

> We want to make it easy for people to eat even though the world is full of conflicting messages. There are new recommendations all the time about what should be eaten and what should not be eaten. (Company 5)

Company 5 referred to the ongoing debate in the media about what should and should not be eaten to keep an individual healthy. Company 5 seemed to assume that consumer choices were not guided so much by ecological values as by an individual’s personal concern for their own health. Acting on behalf of the customer is also reflected in the vision of other companies:

> Our idea is to fight the childhood obesity epidemic…. It is important that we can influence children’s eating habits and other habits in families even before they go to school…. Emotionally, you are a better parent because you care about what your children are eating. (Company 3)

Here, the issue is not customers’ concern for their own health but for the health of their children. Company 3 did not refer to the media; however, the basic idea was the same with Company 5: to help the customer make better decisions in a contradictory world. The message strongly appeals to the customer emotionally: by buying a product, you may not be a perfect parent, but at least you have done something for your child’s healthy future.

**Key Stakeholder Analysis**

Customer analysis, competitor analysis and self-analysis (Aaker, 2011) provide companies with a thorough understanding of the underlying forces that impede or promote a brand (de Chernatony, 2003). The object is to build on the company’s strengths and values that resonate with the customer’s values while simultaneously avoiding competitors’ strengths. Ryder (2003) reminded us that customers are the only reason for companies’ existence; thus, customer analysis is of paramount importance. However, for responsible brands, self-analysis and also analysis of distribution and delivery channels are crucial, as all actions of a company must fulfil the moral promises it communicates (Kujala et al., 2011). However, in our data, no such detailed stakeholder analyses had been performed and companies relied on general industry reviews or their own observations of changes in consumption patterns:

> For years, consumers have been wondering why there aren’t salty snack biscuits [since] when you’re hungry for a snack, you don’t always want to eat [something] sweet. These savoury biscuits are now the result of consumer expectations. (Company 5)

The product was once launched focusing on the morning hours, but then it was concluded that it doesn’t fit our consumption habits…. so the reference to the morning disappeared [from the packaging] precisely because it is not a terribly relevant moment of consumption for us. (Company 1)
In the case of Company 5, the assumptions of consumer expectations led the company to develop its offering not only by adding flavour options but also by creating an entirely new product category. Instead of occasional consumer surveys, Company 5 seems to listen to consumers closely on an ongoing basis. Consumer wishes may not be met immediately, but their potential is consciously developed to suit the company’s values and goals. For Company 1, the changes are also based on general customer knowledge. Although Company 1 has achieved a large market share, it failed to understand the differences in consumption patterns between different market areas. The poorly addressed packaging was later changed to meet the regional differences.

In addition to customers, there are other stakeholders that exert a direct influence on product development as well:

Doctors opposed the use of sweeteners because they affect, among other things, the bacterial strain in the gut.... This issue was then discussed, and it was decided with the working group that we will reduce the amount of fructose in our juices but add regular sugar. (Company 2)

After listening to stakeholders, Company 2 chose the option it deemed best to allow it to maintain its position in the market. The example shows that a company’s stakeholders may have conflicting needs that are impossible for the company to meet fully. In the food industry, companies often need to strike a balance between unwanted ingredients, such as fats and sugars (Chrysochou, 2010), and desired features, such as taste, fewer calories and a certain price level:

Unlike many competitors who focus on vegans and those who follow a plant-based diet, which is only 3–7% of the population, we focus primarily on that large and broad target group, milk users, because we really believe in their changes in eating habits. (Company 4)

Company 4 has studied its competitors and its focus on a certain customer group. However, the company wants to focus on its own strengths in developing plant-based products as an alternative to existing dairy products and to target markets with higher volumes.

**Brand Identity**

A strong and visible link between values and brand characteristics forms a responsible brand identity (Maio, 2003). At the heart of the brand is the unchanging core value, which is closely related to the organizational values. Around this core are extended brand identities, such as features and communicable messages that can be changed as needed (Aaker, 2011). For consumers of organic food, Zagata (2014) identified three core values: living in accordance with nature, usefulness to humans and living a good quality lifestyle. At the product attribute level, these were aimed at, for example, healthiness, chemical-freeness, sensory quality and taste. Although we did not focus on organic food, naturalness and closeness to nature were at the heart of the brands of many snack companies:

Naturally healthy and kind of familiar and safe. (Company 5)

Physical characteristics are very, very important to us, and we have made sure we are not cheating anywhere. We have no artificial sweeteners or dyes or preservatives. (Company 2)

We see that we have such a relationship with nature, and we want to take responsibility for [improving the] cycle of nature. In this country, [which] grows the world’s best oats and the purest raw materials, [which contribute
to] the quality of our products..., we cherish and respect nature, and, in fact, it is our success that grows out of nature. (Company 4)

The descriptions of the brands above describe living in harmony with nature. For these companies, nature is not a remote and exclusively protected object; rather, it is also a resource from which the company’s competitive factors and success are drawn. Especially for Company 4, nature is a long-term resource and source of its uniqueness and competitive advantage. Naturalness and health are also emphasized in product packaging, as Company 4 describes:

In the product packaging, we emphasize the properties that bring healthiness. It is stated that there is no added sugar, that domestic berries and whole-grain oats are used, and that the product is gluten-free. (Company 4)

The brand identity attributes include chemical-freeness, healthiness and locality in terms of country-of-origin support, which Zagata (2014) called living a quality lifestyle. Some companies also highlighted good living and happiness as at the core of their brand identities:

A sunny brand and such a positive brand…. It comes as a good day—when you get a snack. Most of the time, it puts you in a good mood. (Company 1)

However, also in the case of Company 1, there was an extensive responsibility program behind the polished ‘sunny and positive’ outer shell, which focused on the characteristics of the cereals used and sustainable and environmentally friendly farming methods. A similar goal-orientation based on long-term research and development was also evident for Company 2. Although the packaging was Disney-like and shiny, product development was supported by a wide range of physicians and nutritionists.

In addition to a common interest in nutritionally valuable and healthy snacks, all the companies also highlighted taste and texture as important product features:

What sets our products apart from other products is that our products taste good…. Once the consumer has tasted the product and it tastes good, then re-purchases take place. (Company 2)

Deliciousness is possible in a healthy way. There was once a popular pudding [on the market], and our products are more pudding-like. (Company 3)

Company 3 emphasizes that good taste is not always due to excess sugar. The texture and its familiarity can also evoke different taste memories. However, in the food sector, healthiness does not guarantee market position if a product does not meet taste expectations.

Usefulness to humans (Zagata, 2014) was aimed at through convenience:

Practicality is a big and important thing in these products, and that’s why we’ve been thinking about how these products are packaged to be as convenient as possible. Since the idea is that it is difficult to take the whole 300-gram package with you, then there are smaller packages inside. (Company 1)

Two case companies emphasized convenience as an integral part of their brand identity, and they also offered operational benefits to customers. With the help of these brands, the product was tailored to a specific time and purpose, as their products travel comfortably to, for example, school, work and leisure destinations without cold storage.
Goals

de Chernatony (2003) argued that a brand vision needs to be communicated with clear long-term and short-term goals in order to define anticipated future achievements. Strict long-term goals are constantly monitored while developing the brand in order to verify the organization’s commitment to them. Short-term goals stand along the path to longer-term objectives. Maio (2003) stated that building a responsible brand demands a long-term approach because trust and credibility are not formed quickly:

Attention is paid not only to taste but also to healthiness, the right size and reasonable portion size, and to environmental issues such as the carbon footprint. So that we can provide consumers with snack products without forgetting our responsibility in sustainable development. (Company 1)

The challenge for many other brands is that they make unhealthy products, candies, chocolates, and so on at the same time, and then, at the same time, they make healthy products. (Company 2)

The functions of Company 1 all pursue the same goal, which is responsibility. The company takes a stand supporting consumers’ healthy choices and strives to minimize the environmental impact of its production. Through this integrative view on responsibility, a company builds the credibility of its brand. Company 2 also finds it more credible to operate in all product sectors with an emphasis on health. Both companies operate with responsibility as their core value, not just as an addition to something else, as with many other companies. The following extracts especially highlight the companies’ differentiation from their competitors or a ‘we vs. they’ approach to business:

We’re just ordinary parents fighting the big bad corporate world. (Company 2)

At the beginning, of course, when we were the first domestic manufacturer to enter the market, we started to challenge imported products and, in a very short time, took market leadership in this product sector. (Company 3)

Small domestic brands position themselves as good ones versus what is big, foreign and somewhat bad and unknown. However, data from a global manufacturer showed that large companies have huge resources that can also be utilized to support responsibility, for example, through sustainability programs. Very few quantitative targets were presented in our data set; however, Company 4 implicitly referred to market share in its goal:

We want to win market share from dairy brands and look for new consumers. The product category is running so hard that we kind of have to be constantly nervous about developing new products that meet the wishes and needs of consumers. (Company 4)

The goal shows, firstly, that Company 4 aims to beat its dairy-based competitors and, secondly, to stand out from other providers of plant-based products through continuous product development.

Implementation

Even if a company has built its brand carefully internally, implementation is a critical part of success. Building a responsible brand requires effective communication (Kujala et al., 2011):

It is a conscious choice that we do not bring out the name of the company but that [product] brands speak to consumers. (Company 5)
Company 5 has chosen to separate its brand communication from its company communication. This is in line with its goal of launching a brand internationally as the ‘company’s second international brand.’ The company relies on its traditional brand image referring to local nature and culture in the snack category. However, the company is pushed to change its packaging to better serve international markets. This localization for foreign markets was also seen with Company 2, which was also about to expand internationally:

> In the export market, we change [the package]. Instead of ‘Naturally,’ it reads ‘From Finland’. (Company 2)

What is seen as informative for domestic markets needs to be clarified for international markets. This highlights regional interpretations of responsibility. What is considered responsible in one country, such as domesticity, may not be seen as a similar virtue in another country. The use of ‘local berries’ or ‘produced by local farms’ hardly communicates health in the same way in China as in Europe. For food brands, responsibility often refers to healthiness that must be communicated in an understandable and consistent way (Anker et al., 2011):

> Consumer perceptions are created elsewhere [such] that, after all, quite a small percentage of consumers, for example, in a shop before making a purchase decision, actually get to know the contents of a product. (Company 5)

This excerpt shows how product labelling and ingredient lists can be too difficult for consumers to make spontaneous purchasing decisions. One way to communicate health is to use well-known certificates and labels (de Chernatony, 2009):

> Whenever we develop new products, our starting point is that we get it with the [name removed] certificate. (Company 5)

> With the design update, we will have a watch symbol that communicates that the blood sugar will remain constant after eating this snack for four hours. (Company 1)

In Europe, health claims are governed by additional specific legislation and regulations, which require that claims be based on substantiated scientific evidence. Health claim regulation requires that all such claims be approved beforehand (Lähteenmäki, 2013). Company 5 seeks to add a certain label to its packaging that demonstrates healthiness in its product category. Company 1, for its part, uses a familiar symbol to communicate the result of a scientific study, which showed that the raw material contained in the product had a proven health effect.

There was great variation among the cases regarding which channels they used to communicate about their brand. For some, the main channel was mass media, but some relied on individual social media influencers. Often, however, companies emphasized the educational nature of communication:

> What we want to teach the consumer is to find these alternatives better. Part of the educational work is also the fact that a lot of recipes are offered…. We teach the consumer how to use our products and explain why these products should be used. (Company 4)

> There will be an info box [in the shops] in the future, where we tell more about this program and responsible farming. (Company 1)

Raising public awareness of more responsible alternatives seems important to Company 1 and Company 4. This common concern for health and biodiversity was reflected in interviews with other company
representatives and in their marketing communications. Healthy food brands also have a social impact as they seek to steer consumers towards better public health options (Anker et al., 2011). This approach includes general education about healthy diets, increasing consumers’ understanding of nutrition labels (Grunert & Wills, 2007), and promoting certain food product categories, such as fruits and vegetables (Trondsen et al., 2003.)

**Evaluation**

Creating a brand identity is a strategic activity that aims to develop a value proposition, reflect on brand positioning and choose the kinds of things the brand represents (Aaker, 2011). How well this identity performs requires continuous assessment. The brand performance is evaluated through long-term business-based and consumer-based criteria, which are interrelated since business-based measures, such as market share are dependent on consumers’ responses to a brand (de Chernatony et al., 1998). Comparing results against the vision provides a chance to see if the brand objectives are reached. The entire brand-building process can also be assessed to find out what must be improved (Kujala et al., 2011).

Only one company referred to specific assessment regarding their brand. This brand awareness survey, however, was commissioned by a third party:

> According to the latest brand awareness survey, 99% of the people in this country know our brand. (Company 5)

The lack of brand evaluation studies may be due to the quite small size of the companies and their focus on small domestic markets. The information firms did study formed the basis for many of their operations; however, the most widely used information was related to the benefits of the raw materials used or the consumption habits of consumers:

> We conducted a study asking how well people know the properties of oats, so more than 80 percent knew that oats are good for the stomach and have a lot of fibre in them. (Company 5)

> Yes, studies show that eating snacks is increasing, and in one study, more than 80% of parents buy snacks for their children. (Company 5)

The companies developed their products according to current market knowledge and expected trends. Company 5 had conducted a survey to ensure that customers really understand the health benefits of the main raw material in their products; however, quite often, companies seem to rely first on the common knowledge base of their customers and second on secondary sources of information. They assume that consumers understand how food and its ingredients affect the body and that consumers utilize this knowledge to make food choices (Chrysochou, 2010). However, studies have shown that consumers have a strong tendency to make quick decisions when buying food (Grunert, 2002) rather than looking closely at product labelling (Bettman et al., 1998):

> The segment of snack products will continue to grow, and there will certainly be more options here over the years, both in the biscuit format and probably also in the bar format. (Company 1)

> Large trade operators receive information based on their own data and what is bought from the store through the cash register, so some information based on that data is obtained. (Company 1)
Company 1 had not inquired about the growth of the market but had examined the available information, discussed the matter internally and reflected on the information from its own findings regarding sales of its products. Due to the structure of the domestic market, several companies pointed out that they do not have accurate information on the market shares of their own products.

In our data, numerical business goals, such as market share or profit, were not highlighted. Company 2 even claimed that they are not that interested in profits but rather health benefits:

Our main goal is not to make a profit, but our main goal is to contribute to the well-being of children. (Company 2)

This is an extreme example of a food sector manufacturer that is willing to compromise on its profits to promote social and, in this case, health values. This reflects well the increased corporate social responsibility in the food sector (Jones et al., 2006). On the other hand, no clear indicators or assessments of the success of this kind of strategy emerged in our data.

Discussion

In this research, we studied responsible branding of snack food products. We focused on how companies create a responsible brand for their snacks without health and nutrition claims. We applied the concept of responsible branding of Kujala et al. (2011), including six integrated building blocks: vision, goal, implementation, stakeholder analysis, identity and evaluation.

Protecting nature through the sustainable use of raw materials and helping customers make better, healthier and more sustainable choices were at the heart of the snack producers’ vision. This vision was formulated as the goal of being responsible in all activities in order for the brand to create a responsible overall image. This supports de Chernatony’s (2003) finding that a brand vision is built on a desired future environment. In this case, the environment referred directly to nature but also to social welfare. Although we focused on product branding in the interviews, company representatives did not indicate much difference between product brand and corporate brand core values. Still, they had created different brands for different product groups, and some wanted to keep the company name separate from the brand names. Our research highlighted the contextual nature of responsibility, which has received little attention in previous branding studies. The word choices used in packaging and communication, the raw materials used, or the countries of production that were considered a sign of responsibility in one market did not necessarily communicate the same message in another market.

In implementation, brands concerned about health issues seem to compete with less healthy brands more than with each other. What was noteworthy was the common desire to educate and guide consumers to make more responsible choices, as assumed by Grunert and Wills (2007). To help consumers, accurate information on the use and effects of healthy products and sustainable farming was provided, and health-related information was visualized on packaging through certificates, labels and other symbols. In other words, instead of detailed information, the healthiness of products on a general level was communicated. This supports Aschemann-Witzel et al. (2012), who promoted a simple and clear marketing message that combined health with benefits such as good taste and ease of use.

Consumers were the main stakeholder group that the companies constantly listened to in order to find out about changes in customer behaviour and preferences. However, companies had to balance the conflicting messages of their stakeholders and make hard choices, especially about taste and health. They also needed to balance their brand identity, which, on one hand, was based on the value of living
in harmony with nature (Zagata, 2014), although, on the other hand, nature also served as a main source of raw materials for many companies. In addition, the taste of the product often required raw materials that were questioned from a health perspective.

In contrast to Kujala et al. (2011), the analyses and measurements played little role in branding. The snack companies focused mainly on secondary sources about market trends and consumer behaviour, partly because few grocery trade operators controlled, for example, accurate data on current market share. It is also likely that the small size and focus on the domestic market of the companies surveyed reduced their ability to make assessments.

The research results confirm that creating a healthy brand identity is based on a genuinely healthy product made from high-quality and pure ingredients (Chrysochou, 2010). Good taste is enough to differentiate companies and products from their competitors and make customers buy products again. For snack companies a responsible brand is the result of the company’s sustainable efforts to meet the needs of customers for a tasty and healthy snack, rather than the conscious goal of branding the product responsibly with the building blocks proposed by Kujala et al. (2011). This may be due to the fact that the market for snack products is still evolving, in which case product branding is not yet as important as in an established and therefore competitive market, or it may be a feature of the food industry as a whole. Although these were health-emphasizing brands, the most important thing for them was the good taste of the product.

Conclusions

This study broadened the understanding of how foods can be marketed healthy and responsible without statutory health and nutrition claims. In emerging markets, such as the snack product market, branding a product responsibly is not an end in itself, but companies rely on the different product features of their products, especially taste, as a competitive factor. Responsibility is reflected in food companies, especially in the consideration of natural values in production and in promoting the well-being of customers at the product level. Thus, the corporate social responsibility in the food sector deserves further research.

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