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QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AS KEY DRIVERS OF COMPETITIVENESS IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY: INSIGHTS FROM PODRAVKA d.d.

Abstract: In today's dynamic business environment, marked by increasing competition, rapid technological advancements, and increasingly demanding consumers, quality management of business processes represents a crucial factor in achieving competitive advantage and long-term sustainability. This scientific paper analyzes quality management within the company Podravka d.d. through the implementation of certifications and international standards, emphasizing their role in shaping customer satisfaction and brand perception. The primary objective is to determine how structured approaches to quality assurance and improvement influence consumer perception, loyalty, and the frequency of complaints. The research applies a mixed-method approach—qualitative analysis of professional and academic literature on quality management and consumer behavior, along with a quantitative survey conducted among Podravka's customers. Using a quantitative research method based on a questionnaire, this study examined consumer satisfaction with various aspects of Podravka's products: quality, value for money, consistency, availability, and ecological features. The results indicate that consumers perceive Podravka as a high-quality brand, characterized by strong loyalty and positive attitudes towards environmentally conscious practices. Key factors of satisfaction include consistent product quality and a favorable price-to-quality ratio, while sustainability has emerged as an increasingly important criteria in purchasing decisions, especially among younger consumers.

Keywords: consumer perception; customer satisfaction; international standards; product quality; quality management

1. Introduction

In today's dynamic business environment, marked by intense market competition, rapid technological advancement, and increasingly demanding consumer expectations, product and service quality has become a fundamental factor of organizational success. Quality management is no longer merely an operational function, but a strategic component that enables value creation, the achievement of competitive advantage, and long-term business sustainability. A systematic approach to quality, through the implementation of internationally recognized standards and certifications such as ISO 9001, HACCP, IFS, and BRC, ensures process consistency, regulatory compliance, and enhances consumer trust (De Feo, 2016). These systems allow for monitoring and controlling all stages of production, reducing the risk of non-compliance, and increasing consumer trust (Oakland, 2014). In the food industry, cus-

tomers' satisfaction has become a key indicator of success, as it is directly related to consumer trust in product quality. To achieve these goals, companies implement global quality standards that optimize production processes and improve their reputation among consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2021). Understanding how quality management systems affect customer perception and loyalty has become important for every food producer. Podravka d.d., as one of the largest and most recognizable food producers in Croatia and the wider region, has recognized the importance of quality as a strategic determinant of its business operations. Through decades of experience and development, Podravka has continuously invested in improving its quality management systems, thereby securing a stable position in both domestic and international markets. By employing integrated management systems and applying international certifications, the company not only meets legal and safety requirements, but

also systematically improves its processes with the aim of increasing customer satisfaction. This scientific paper analyzes quality management of business processes in Podravka d.d. through the lens of certification and standard implementation. The main objective is to explore how the application of standardized quality management systems contributes to achieving high levels of consumer satisfaction, strengthening brand perception, and maintaining competitive advantage. Special emphasis is placed on consumer perception of product quality, value for money, environmental sustainability, and the impact of certifications on purchasing behavior. To achieve this goal, an empirical study on consumer satisfaction with Podravka's products was conducted, aiming to identify key factors influencing loyalty, quality perception, and the significance of sustainable practices. The research results provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of existing quality management systems and serve as a basis for formulating recommendations for further improvement of business processes within the organization.

2. Quality Management and Customer Satisfaction

In the modern business environment, where competition is constantly increasing, organizations must ensure high quality of their products and services in order to build and maintain a competitive edge. Quality management and customer satisfaction are two key factors that shape the success of companies. In the food industry, where the safety and reliability of products directly impact consumer health, quality management becomes essential to meet market demands and regulatory standards. The quality of products or services is of critical importance as it directly influences customer satisfaction, which is considered one of the most important indicators of business success (Kotler & Keller, 2021). Customer satisfaction can be defined as the degree to which products or services meet or exceed customer expectations (Oliver, 1980). Therefore, customer satisfaction is not just a subjective impression but a result of comparing customer expectations with the actual experience of a product or service. Satisfaction has a strong impact on customer loyalty, which is key to long-term business success (Zeithaml et al., 2017). Satisfied customers often become loyal and recommend the product to others, thereby increasing the company's market share (Anderson et al., 1994). In the context of quality management, this refers to a systematic approach to plan-

ning, implementing, and continuously improving processes within an organization to ensure consistent high quality of products and services (Juran & Godfrey, 1998). Quality management covers all aspects of business, from sourcing raw materials to delivering finished products to customers, thereby creating a comprehensive framework for meeting market demands. In the food industry, the implementation of quality management systems such as ISO 9001 and HACCP ensures compliance with international standards, enabling organizations to increase customer trust and reduce the risk of negative health consequences for consumers (Awuchi, 2023).

Customer satisfaction is defined as the emotional response of consumers that arises from comparing their expectations with the experience they have while using a product or service (Oliver, 1980). When products and services exceed or at least meet customer expectations, it results in a positive experience, which increases the likelihood of repeat purchases and loyalty to the brand (Kotler & Keller, 2021). On the other hand, a negative experience can lead to dissatisfaction, resulting in customer loss and a negative impact on the brand's reputation (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Quality management is a systematic approach that involves monitoring and improving all business processes to achieve consistent high quality of products and services (Juran & Godfrey, 1998). It includes strategies and technologies aimed at improving all stages of the production process, including product design, raw material procurement, production, distribution, and customer feedback. In the food industry, systems such as HACCP and ISO 9001 are essential for ensuring quality, as they enable organizations to direct their processes towards risk reduction and ensuring food safety (Awuchi, 2023). The combination of quality management and customer satisfaction creates a synergy that allows organizations to not only meet but also exceed their customers' expectations, thereby increasing competitiveness and long-term sustainability in the market.

Customer satisfaction analysis is a crucial component for organizations seeking to improve the quality of their products and services. Several theoretical frameworks and models allow for a detailed measurement and quantification of the various factors shaping customer experience. These models explore all the dimensions that make up the overall customer perception, providing organizations with valuable insights to help optimize their business processes and strategies. They enable precise understanding of the difference between expectations and actual experiences of



users. One of the most recognizable models used in satisfaction analysis is SERVQUAL, developed in 1988 by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry. The foundation of the SERVQUAL model consists of five key dimensions related to service quality: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. By using this model, organizations can identify the differences between customer expectations and the actual experience they provide, which allows them to direct resources toward improving specific aspects of their services and products (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Similarly, the Kano model, formulated by Noriaki Kano in 1984, analyzes the impact of different product characteristics on customer satisfaction. This model divides product characteristics into three categories: basic characteristics, which must be present to meet minimum customer expectations, performance characteristics, which directly affect satisfaction, and excitement characteristics, which, though not necessary, can drastically increase satisfaction when present (Kano et al., 1984).

The Expectancy-Disconfirmation model, developed by Richard L. Oliver in 1980, is based on the theory of dissonance and provides a framework for understanding customer satisfaction through comparing their expectations with actual experiences. According to this model, satisfaction occurs when the actual experience exceeds expectations, while negative experiences lead to dissatisfaction. The model distinguishes between three types of disconfirmation: positive, negative, and neutral, based on the difference between predicted and actual experiences (Oliver, 1980). For assessing customer loyalty, a popular and simple tool is the Net Promoter Score (NPS), introduced by Fred Reichheld in 2003. This model is based on the question of how likely a customer is to recommend a product or service to their family, friends, or colleagues. Based on the responses, users are classified into three categories: promoters, neutrals, and detractors. By using NPS, organizations can quickly and clearly assess the level of customer loyalty, helping them identify specific areas requiring improvement (Reichheld, 2003). In addition to these models, tools such as Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT) and Customer Effort Score (CES) are also widely used in practice. CSAT allows organizations to measure the overall satisfaction with a particular product or service, while CES assesses how much effort the customer must exert to achieve the desired outcome or solution. These tools provide quick data collection, which helps organizations identify negative aspects of the customer experience and offer timely solutions.

Quality management and customer satisfaction form a crucial link between operational excellence and market sustainability in the food industry. The implementation of standards such as ISO 9001:2015, HACCP, and IFS ensures transparency in production processes and helps build trust, a key element of customer satisfaction (Food-DrinkEurope, 2023). The multidimensional nature of service quality, hygiene, staff professionalism, accuracy, and speed of delivery, has proven to be a significant driver of satisfaction. Almohaimmeed (2017) confirm this relationship in the restaurant industry, while Jusufbasic and Stevic (2023) show that in the fast food sector, customer value is returned through a combination of product and service quality. Advanced innovations in products, packaging, and digital experience enhance the emotional connection between consumers and brands. Parikshat Singh Manhas et al. (2024) demonstrate a strong effect of such innovations on satisfaction in QSR (Quick Service Restaurant) sectors, mediated through customer experience. In parallel, new approaches in sustainable packaging (e.g., circular practices, biosensors, zero-packaging) not only enhance perceived quality but also foster loyalty. Ada et al. (2023) identify key circular packaging drivers, while Dörnyei et al. (2023) provide a holistic framework for sustainable food packaging. Adoption of zero-packaging practices further demonstrates a positive impact on customer loyalty. Technology also adds significant value: biosensors and time-temperature indicators (TTI) improve consumer trust in product safety, while IoT and blockchain enable transparent, traceable supply chains, a new standard in value chains 4.0. Research further shows that environmentally and socially oriented marketing (green marketing) and green product attributes are powerful tools for boosting customer loyalty. Farradia et al. (2021) confirm that all four elements, green product, promotion, distribution, and pricing, strongly contribute to brand loyalty in the food sector. Moreover, in a digital economy, the quality of information (accuracy, accessibility) and the user experience of food ordering apps significantly influence satisfaction and repeat purchases, as highlighted by recent research from China (Gao et al., 2024). All of these dimensions, standardized systems, service quality, innovative and sustainable solutions, and digital customer experience, act synergistically in building trust, satisfaction, and long-term customer loyalty. Food companies today cannot overlook any of these components if they wish to maintain competitiveness and build a robust, sustainable market position.

3. International Standards and Certifications in the Quality Management of Business Processes at Podravka d.d.

In the modern business environment, marked by globalization and increased competition, managing the quality of business processes occupies a central position in corporate strategic planning. The integration of international norms and certification systems has become a key tool for achieving excellence in operations, especially in the food industry where product safety and quality are paramount. Podravka d.d., as one of the leading food producers in Southeast Europe, consistently implements a policy of compliance with globally recognized quality, safety, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility standards, which is clearly evident through the wide range of certificates applied in its business processes. One of the fundamental quality management systems used by Podravka is ISO 9001, an international standard that defines the requirements for a quality management system, focusing on continuous improvement, customer satisfaction, and a process approach (Croatia Standards Institute, 2015). ISO 9001 serves as the foundation for integrating other systems and is used as a tool to optimize operational activities, ensuring process efficiency and transparency. In the field of food safety, key standards include IFS Food and BRCGS. The IFS Food standard allows for the evaluation of food suppliers based on uniform criteria and ensures compliance with regulations and consumer expectations (International Featured Standards, 2020), while the BRCGS Global Standard for Food Safety sets high standards for hygiene management and traceability, minimizing risks to consumer health (British Retail Consortium Global Standards, 2022).

Podravka also applies specialized certificates such as AOECs (for gluten-free products), Halal, and Kosher, which open access to consumers with specific dietary needs and religious beliefs, positioning the company as an inclusive and responsible producer (Association of European Coeliac Societies, 2022; Centre for Halal Quality Certification, 2023). Additionally, certificates such as BIO (ecological product), Vegan (for products without animal ingredients), and RSPO (for sustainable palm oil use) reflect Podravka's commitment to environmental protection, ethical production, and transparent communication with customers (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, 2022). A key tool for managing production risks in food manufacturing is the HACCP system (Hazard

Analysis and Critical Control Points), which enables the identification, assessment, and control of potential hazards within the production process, ensuring the health safety of products (Codex Alimentarius Commission, 2009). In the context of information security, Podravka applies ISO/IEC 27001, a standard that ensures the protection of sensitive data and reduces risks associated with cyber threats (ISO/IEC, 2023). Additionally, the implementation of ISO 45001 confirms the company's responsibility toward employees by systematically managing health and safety at work, while ISO 26000 directs the company to adopt socially responsible practices, including human rights, labor relations, environmental sustainability, and corporate governance (ISO, 2023; ISO, 2020). Podravka's sustainability strategy foresees the further integration of systems such as ISO 14001 for environmental management and ISO 50001 for energy management. ISO 14001 allows for the identification and control of environmental aspects and minimizes the negative impact of operations on the environment (ISO, 2024), while ISO 50001 provides a framework for energy-efficient operations through systematic energy consumption management (ISO, 2024). Thanks to the comprehensive integration of these systems, Podravka not only ensures compliance with regulatory requirements and market expectations but also creates a competitive advantage in both domestic and international markets. The application of certificates and standards thus becomes a strategic tool for strengthening reputation, business sustainability, and long-term value creation for all stakeholders.

Excellence in business process quality management is a key element for the sustainability and competitiveness of Podravka in the global market. Over the years, Podravka has secured numerous awards and recognitions that confirm its excellence in quality management. Awards for quality excellence represent acknowledgment for the commitment to implementing and maintaining quality management systems in line with international standards, as well as for the high quality of products and services. Podravka is known for its long tradition of producing high-quality food products that have won numerous awards in the food industry. Awards for the excellence of Podravka's products confirm the commitment to high standards of quality and innovation. Among the awards Podravka has received are recognitions such as the Golden Basket 2019, when products like Lino Lada Gold and Vegeta Natur were recognized in the industry. These products have become some of the most beloved and well-known on the market,



thanks to their superior quality and taste that have won the hearts of consumers. Awards such as the Superior Taste Award, which Podravka has regularly won over the years, confirm the quality and taste of its products. This award, granted by the International Taste & Quality Institute in Brussels, recognizes products that stand out for their exceptional flavors and quality (<https://www.podravka.hr/kompanija/o-podravki/nagrade/>). Among the products that have received these awards are Vegeta smoked sweet paprika, Lino Lada Gold, and Cream soup with broccoli and cauliflower. Podravka has also won the title of Product of the Year in various categories, including Lino Lada Coconut in Croatia and Dolcela Coconut Pudding. This is another recognition highlighting the outstanding popularity and quality of products in various countries. Podravka has also been recognized for its sustainability efforts, winning the Deloitte Award for Sustainable Development Reporting, which confirms its commitment to sustainable practices and transparency in business. In addition to numerous awards for product quality, Podravka has also won prestigious awards such as the Golden Kuna, which was awarded to Podravka as the most successful company in Koprivnica-Križevci County, and the Superbrands Award for brands such as Vegeta and Lino. For 2025, Vegeta Fine Blend won the prestigious recognition of „Product of the Year“ (<https://www.podravka.hr/kompanija/o-podravki/nagrade/>). This product, synonymous with quality, exceptional flavor balance, and convenience, has won the hearts of consumers and become indispensable in many households. Through its continuous innovations and commitment to quality, Podravka has become synonymous with top-tier products in the region, and these awards testify to its dedication to providing the best products to its consumers.

4. The Influence of Product Quality on Customer Loyalty: A Case Study of Podravka d.d.

4.1. The research methodology

For the analysis of customer satisfaction with Podravka d.d. products, an empirical study was conducted using a quantitative method of data collection through a structured questionnaire. The survey was created using Google Forms and distributed via digital channels, with a focus on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. A key role in increasing the survey's reach was played by Croatian influencer Ana Pulić, known

by her username annie.xo.xo.. Ana Pulić has been a long-time collaborator of Podravka, and she regularly uses their products, as evidenced by her social media, where she shares her experiences and recommendations regarding Podravka's products. This collaboration facilitated the collection of data from a large number of users, ensuring the relevance and diversity of the sample. The research was conducted from February 15, 2025, to March 20, 2025, using a non-probability sampling method, where participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate. The aim was to gather data from various demographic groups, including variables such as age, gender, education, and monthly income. A sufficient number of responses were collected to allow for a detailed analysis of consumer satisfaction with Podravka's products. The survey contained 24 questions covering key aspects such as product quality, price-to-quality ratio, product availability, customer support, and ecological factors. The research also posed several specific research questions that focused on analyzing the relationship between different variables, such as purchase frequency, price perception, product quality, demographic factors, and experiences with customer support. The aim of these questions was to gather concrete answers regarding consumers' expectations and attitudes toward Podravka's products and their quality. Based on the above analysis and the specific objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

Research Question 1: To what extent does the perceived quality of Podravka's products contribute to the development of consumer loyalty?

Research Question 2: Does the presence of environmentally certified products in Podravka's portfolio influence purchasing preferences and brand perception among environmentally conscious consumers?

These research questions are designed to provide a deeper understanding of the key factors shaping overall customer satisfaction with Podravka, with particular emphasis on quality, value for money, and eco-friendliness of products. The questions aim to explore how quality management and sustainability influence customer loyalty and how these factors can be leveraged to further improve business practices in the food industry.

One of the key limitations of this research relates to the gender structure of the respondents. Specifically, as many as 96% of the participants are women, which significantly limits the generalizability of the obtained results to the overall

consumer population. Such an imbalance in the sample may affect the interpretation of the data, particularly in the context of brand perception, loyalty, and preferences, which can vary depending on gender. Future research is advised to apply more balanced sampling methods, such as stratified sampling by gender, in order to ensure a more representative structure of respondents. This would enable a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior and attitudes, as well as greater external validity of the research findings.

4.2. Results and discussion

This chapter presents the results of the research on customer satisfaction with Podravka d.d. products, conducted through a survey questionnaire, aimed at analyzing consumer attitudes, opinions, and perceptions regarding various aspects of the company's products. The collected data was analyzed to gain insights into the key factors influencing satisfaction, and the results are organized and interpreted in a manner that facilitates a clear presentation of the findings. The first part of the research includes demographic data that allows for a detailed analysis of the respondent composition. A total of 818 participants took part, 96% of whom are women, while a smaller percentage are men or chose not to disclose their gender. This demographic balance suggests the dominance of female consumers, which may be relevant for future marketing strategies aimed at specific groups. The classification of respondents by age shows a broad spectrum of users, with the majority being aged 18 to 34 (70.4%), suggesting

that Podravka has a strong consumer base among young adults. These data indicate a need to target younger consumers through innovative marketing campaigns that meet their needs and preferences. In terms of education, the majority of respondents (53.9%) have a high school education, while 16.4% have completed a graduate degree. This data suggests that most consumers possess an education level that enables rational analysis of product quality and price, while also highlighting the need to educate consumers about the specific advantages of Podravka's products. Looking at the place of residence, most respondents live in urban areas (58.9%), while a smaller percentage reside in suburban and rural areas. This result may indicate greater availability of Podravka products in urban areas, but also presents an opportunity for expanding distribution into rural areas, where additional customer satisfaction could be achieved.

Analyzing the employment status of the respondents, it is evident that the majority (52.6%) are employed full-time, with a significant number being students (23.2%). These data could serve as a basis for creating products and services targeting working individuals as well as students who are looking for practical, quick, and healthy options. Data on household monthly income show that the majority of respondents have an income between €801 and €1,500 per person (44.9%), while a smaller percentage earn above €2,000. These data can serve as an indication for setting the price of products that would be acceptable for most consumers, with an emphasis on maintaining market competitiveness. The second part of

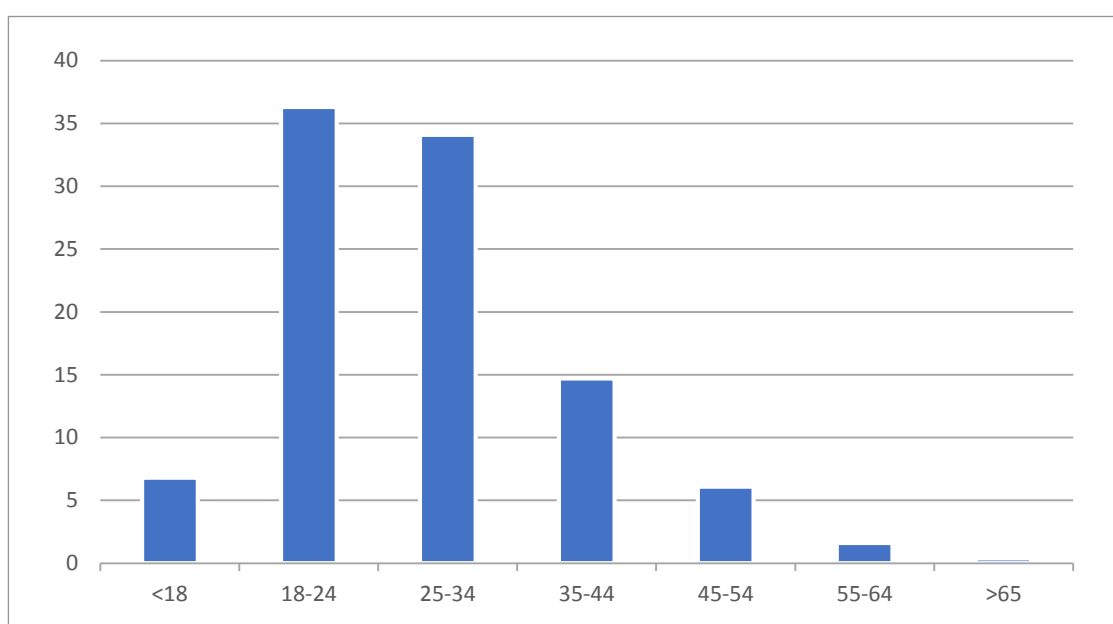


Figure 1. Age of respondents (Source: Authors work)

the research covers questions related to specific aspects of consumer satisfaction with Podravka products. The results show high satisfaction with product quality (52% completely satisfied), freshness and taste (50.7% rated highest), and consistency of quality (58.6% believe that Podravka mostly maintains consistency). These results confirm a high perception of product quality and reliability, which is crucial for long-term customer retention. When it comes to customer support, most respondents rate the service positively, with 40.7% giving it the highest rating. This data indicates a need for further improvement in customer support services to meet quality standards and consumer expectations. Questions related to product availability show that most respondents believe Podravka products are always or mostly available (90.7%), while only a small percentage feel the products are not always accessible. This result indicates stable distribution and product presence in the market, but there is still room for improvement regarding availability across all market segments.

Regarding environmental aspects, 54.9% of respondents believe that Podravka generally pays attention to sustainability, while 49.1% consider ecological factors important when choosing products. This indicates a growing interest in environmentally friendly products, which is important for the future development of ecological and sustainable initiatives in production. The research shows a high level of satisfaction among customers of Podravka products, with positive attitudes towards quality, service, and product availability,

while environmental aspects are becoming increasingly important in the eyes of consumers. Podravka should use this information to further adjust its products and services, focusing on sustainability, innovation, and accessibility.

Based on the conducted research, several key conclusions can be drawn regarding consumer attitudes toward Podravka d.d. products, particularly their satisfaction and its correlation with product quality, value for money, environmental sustainability, and consistency in quality. This chapter interprets the results in the context of the research questions and analyzes the theoretical and practical relevance of the findings. The findings confirm that product quality and consistency are key factors in shaping a positive brand perception and building a long-term relationship with consumers.

Research Question 1: To what extent does the perceived quality of Podravka's products contribute to the development of consumer loyalty?

One of the key conclusions of the research is that perceived product quality is directly linked to the development of consumer loyalty, which confirms the first research question. The research results indicate a high level of consumer satisfaction with the quality of Podravka products – 52% of respondents stated they are completely satisfied with the quality, while an additional 40% expressed partial satisfaction. Furthermore, 58.6% of respondents believe that Podravka mostly maintains consistency in quality. These findings strongly suggest that the perception of high and stable quality is

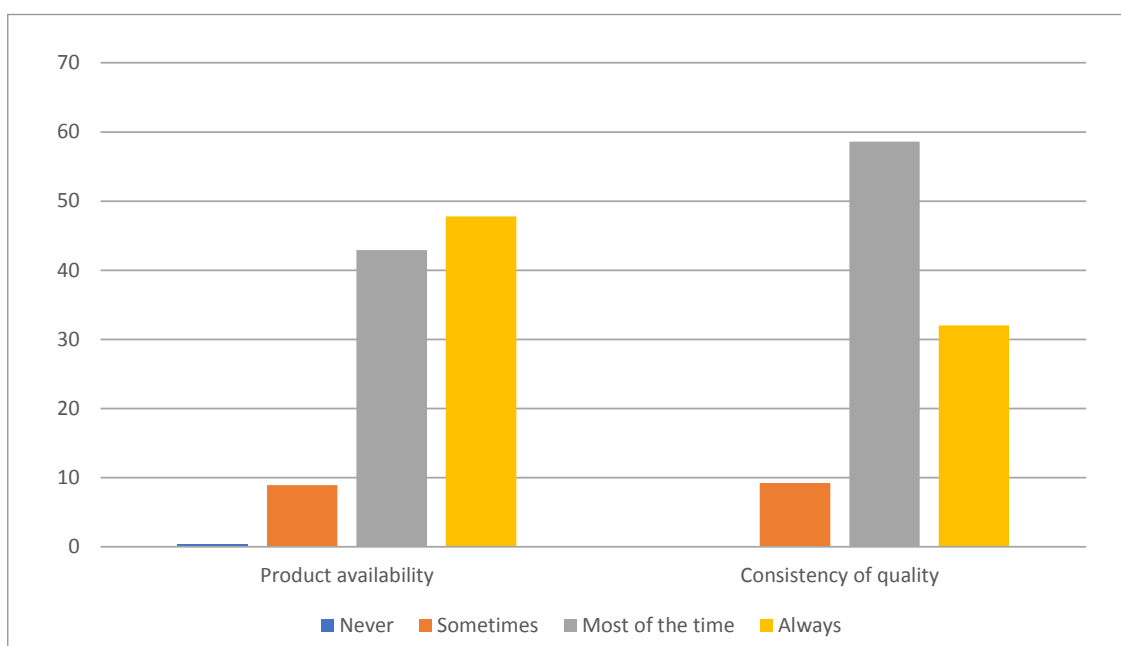


Figure 2. Product availability and consistency of quality (Source: Authors work)

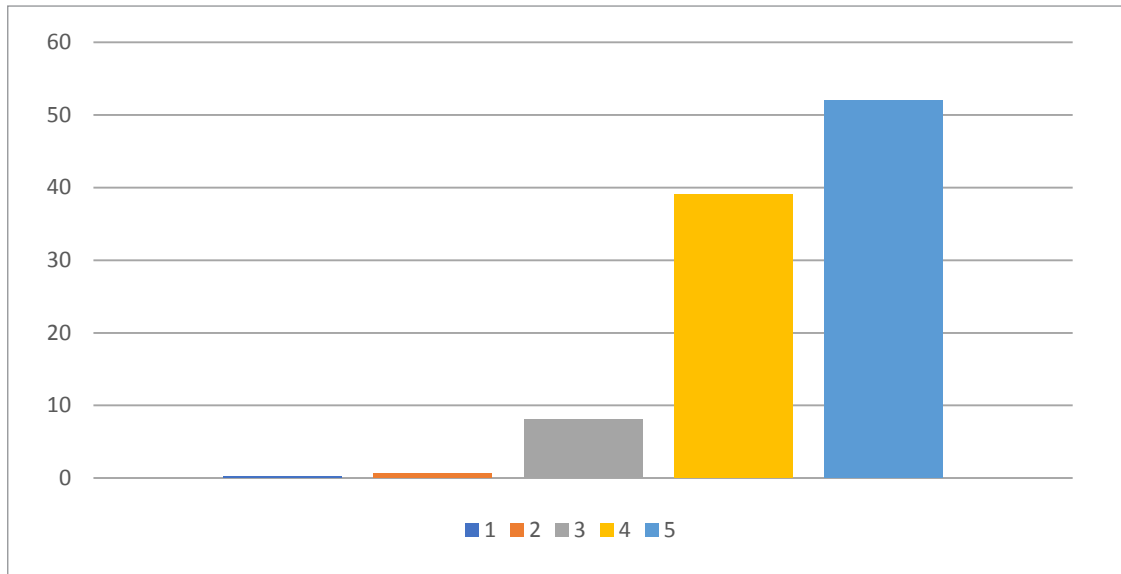


Figure 3. Customer satisfaction with product quality (Source: Authors work)

one of the main factors influencing the development of customer loyalty. This perception of quality stability can be a significant differentiator in the competitive food industry market. Consistent product quality fosters brand trust, reduces perceived purchasing risk, and increases the likelihood of repeat purchases, which is also supported by numerous theoretical models of consumer loyalty. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a strong correlation between perceived quality and consumer loyalty toward Podravka's products. Similar findings are noted in the studies by Kotler and Keller (2016), who emphasize that quality is the foundation of loyalty, especially when consistent over time and across different product lines.

Research Question 2: Does the presence of environmentally certified products in Podravka's portfolio influence purchasing preferences and brand perception among environmentally conscious consumers?

The results show that 54.9% of respondents believe Podravka pays attention to sustainability, while 49.1% stated that environmental aspects are important when choosing products. These data point to a growing trend of environmental awareness among consumers, whereby the presence of ecological certifications and sustainable initiatives positively influences brand perception. Although not all respondents expressed an environmentally oriented preference, nearly half of them reported environmental criteria as relevant in their purchasing decisions. This can be interpreted as an opportunity for Podravka to further position itself as a socially responsible and environmentally conscious company, which could increase its com-

petitive advantage, especially among the younger population (18–34 years), the most represented age group in the sample. These findings align with research such as that conducted by Grunert et al. (2014), who concluded that sustainability awareness significantly influences purchasing decisions, especially among younger and more educated consumers. Eco-conscious customers expect transparency, clear communication, and certifications that confirm environmentally friendly practices. Although Podravka already implements sustainable elements in production and packaging, there is room for further promotion of these practices through branding and marketing channels.

The demographic structure of the respondents, where women (96%) and younger adults (70.4% aged 18 to 34) dominate, may indicate the profile of the typical Podravka product user in digital communication channels. This group is also the most sensitive to health, quality, and sustainability issues, which is confirmed by Nielsen's (2018) research, showing that millennials and Generation Z are more willing to pay higher prices for products from companies that operate sustainably. The findings confirm theoretical assumptions about the importance of perceived quality, value for money, and environmental sustainability in shaping customer satisfaction and loyalty. In the context of Podravka d.d., these factors clearly influence consumer behavior, indicating the necessity for continuous investment in quality, transparent communication regarding sustainability, and maintaining a favorable price-to-quality ratio. The findings also provide valuable guidance for future marketing strategies and product development, aiming to strengthen consumer trust

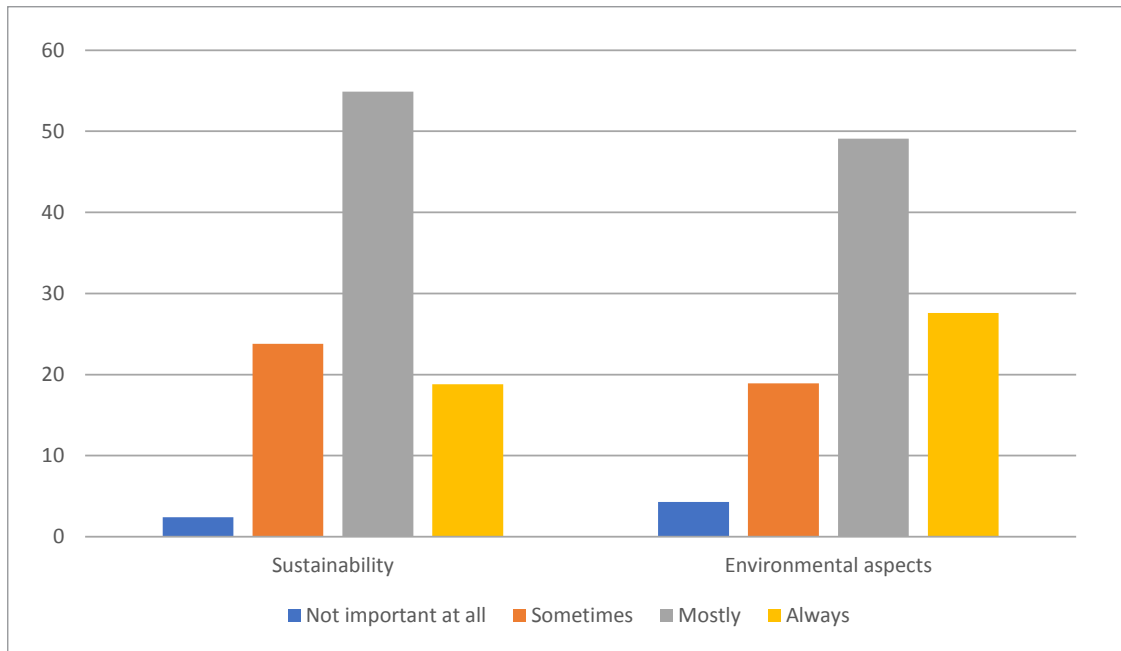


Figure 4. The importance of attention to ecological and sustainable practices (Source: Authors work)

and long-term brand competitiveness. By analyzing all the results, it is possible to generalize that Podravka, as one of the leading food manufacturers in the region, enjoys a high level of consumer trust based on quality, affordable prices, and an increasingly present ecological approach. However, the results also point to certain challenges, such as the need to improve customer support and further strengthen distribution in rural areas, ensuring even wider product availability. By comparing the obtained results with previously published works in the fields of quality management and consumer behavior, their alignment and relevance to the current market context are confirmed. This research contributes to the scientific and professional discussion by providing empirically grounded data that can serve for Podravka d.d.'s future strategic positioning in the market.

4.3. A comparative overview of similar studies

In the modern food sector, quality and sustainability are increasingly at the center of attention for consumers, regulators, and producers alike. Although Podravka stands out as a strong brand with a long tradition and high trust among domestic consumers, its market position can be better understood and improved by examining it within the broader European context and consumer expectations. According to the latest Eurobarometer (2023), more than 90% of Europeans consider it important that food products are produced

sustainably, and almost half (45%) explicitly take sustainability into account when purchasing food. Alongside price and taste, product quality, clear labeling of origin, and production transparency are becoming key factors in consumer decision-making. In this context, Podravka's longstanding reputation for reliability and product safety represents a strong competitive advantage, while also creating an obligation to further communicate and operationalize sustainable practices. A comparison with practices in other European food companies reveals that many have for years been integrating innovation and sustainability strategies as foundations for growth. For example, data from the FoodDrinkEurope Data & Trends Report (2023) shows that as many as 78% of food manufacturers invest in sustainable technologies and raw materials, while only a third of them are transparent in reporting the effects of these investments. This opens an opportunity for companies like Podravka to further capitalize on openness and the communication of their initiatives, especially those related to local sourcing, waste reduction, and energy efficiency. Perceptions of innovation also play a significant role in positioning food brands. According to the EIOPA Consumer Trends Report (2022), an increasing number of consumers in the EU demand evidence of producers' credibility, expecting clear communication, certifications, and independent quality controls (EIOPA, 2022). In this regard, quality management systems such as HACCP, ISO 22000, and IFS become fundamental tools not only for ensuring internal processes but also for building trust with end users. Podravka

has been implementing such standards for years, positioning itself as one of the leading food companies in the region regarding systematic quality management. Hass et al. (2021) highlight the importance of innovative solutions in developing healthier products, reducing waste, and optimizing logistics processes, which significantly contribute to a sustainable value chain. Podravka already applies certain innovation aspects, especially in plant-based product development and packaging redesign, yet there is still room to strengthen its position based on sustainable innovations, particularly in functional foods and supply chain digitalization. Scientific literature emphasizes that innovation is a key driver of long-term sustainability and competitiveness in the food industry. Research by Bigliardi and Galati (2016) indicates that innovations in the food industry are often focused on the development of healthier products, packaging optimization, and the digitalization of supply chains. In this regard, Podravka has an opportunity to further expand its innovation portfolio through the introduction of new functional products and smart solutions in logistics and distribution, which would allow it to stand out more strongly in the European market. Studies focused on sustainability practices in the food industry, such as the one by Djafar et al. (2024), emphasize the growing trend of using renewable energy sources, waste reduction, and collaboration with local suppliers. These practices are not only environmentally responsible but also directly influence brand perception among consumers, especially younger generations who increasingly favor socially responsible companies. Compared to regional competitors, Podravka already demonstrates a significant level of local involvement and transparent communication, but greater inclusion of consumers in the innovation process and co-creation of offerings could further strengthen its market position. Although Podravka enjoys a certain degree of brand recognition outside Croatia, stronger internationalization requires mapping differences in consumer expectations within the EU. For instance, while consumers in Scandinavia and Western Europe increasingly prefer plant-based alternatives and products with a minimal environmental footprint, Southeastern Europe still places more value on tradition, taste, and affordability. This presents an opportunity for strategic brand repositioning across different markets using a personalized approach, as well as leveraging universal values such as safety, nutritional value, and environmental responsibility. By integrating comparative insights from relevant literature and research, it can be argued that Podravka has solid foundations for stronger posi-

tioning in the European market through systematic trend monitoring, investment in innovation, and active communication of sustainability. At a time when consumers increasingly recognize and reward socially responsible corporate behavior, strategically aligning with these values represents not only a necessity but also an opportunity for long-term growth and differentiation.

4.4. Recommendations for Practical Application and Directions for Future Research

Although the key findings of this research have already been presented through the analysis of business processes and quality management in the food industry, particularly using the example of the company Podravka, in order to increase the practical relevance of the results and contribute to further scientific development, it is important to formulate concrete recommendations. These relate both to the improvement of organizational practices and to guidelines that could serve as a foundation for future research. From a practical standpoint, it is recommended that Podravka, as well as similar companies, further develop the practice of publishing structured and quantitatively supported sustainability reports based on ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) standards. This approach would not only enhance stakeholder trust but also position the company more strongly as a leader in responsible business within the European market. Additionally, it would be beneficial to implement participatory mechanisms with consumers, such as digital surveys, focus groups, or online platforms for co-creating products. These tools would boost innovation and align the product offering more closely with actual consumer needs. Investments in digitalizing the value chain also represent a critical step, integrating modern technological solutions into quality management, raw material traceability, and logistics could significantly enhance operational efficiency and strengthen market competitiveness. Finally, in the area of human resources, the development of internal training programs is recommended. These programs should familiarize employees with sustainable development goals, the importance of quality certifications, and current trends in the food sector. Ongoing professional development is essential for organizations to adapt to market challenges and drive innovation from within. From an academic perspective, future research could focus on a comparative analysis involving a broader range of regional and European food brands, providing



deeper insight into similarities and differences in strategies related to quality, sustainability, and innovation. Furthermore, there is room for quantitative evaluation of the impact of ESG practices on business performance, for example, through regression analysis that could reveal how sustainable practices affect financial outcomes or brand reputation. Studies on consumer perceptions of quality and sustainability in food brands can also offer valuable insights, especially if conducted on representative samples in various EU countries, uncovering potential cultural and market differences in expectations and behavior. Moreover, given the rapid pace of digital transformation in the industry, further research could explore the role of new technologies, such as the Internet of Things (IoT), blockchain, and artificial intelligence, in enhancing quality control and food safety systems, with the aim of understanding their real-world application and added value in business practice.

5. Conclusion

The conducted analysis of consumer satisfaction with Podravka d.d. products provided valuable and comprehensive insights into the key factors shaping consumer perception and purchasing behavior. The majority of respondents expressed a high level of satisfaction with product quality, which positively influenced their perception of the price-to-quality ratio and further strengthened brand loyalty. Consistency in product quality emerged as one of the most important factors in building and maintaining consumer trust. Moreover, the research confirmed the growing importance of awareness regarding sustainability and ecological aspects of production in consumer decision-making. Consumers increasingly value transparency and corporate social responsibility, especially in areas such as packaging, the origin of raw materials, and environmental certifications. Podravka is recognized as a brand actively

embracing these values, which further enhances emotional engagement with the brand and its long-term competitiveness, particularly among younger generations that emphasize ethical business practices.

The findings clearly show that perceived product quality directly influences the development of consumer loyalty, while the evaluation of the price-to-quality ratio strongly correlates with overall satisfaction. In the context of the growing interest in sustainability, Podravka should further emphasize its ecological and socially responsible practices through clear and transparent communication, especially targeting younger consumers. Maintaining high and consistent product quality remains a key prerequisite for retaining existing customers and encouraging positive word-of-mouth recommendations, which are among the most valuable marketing channels. Additionally, marketing activities that highlight Podravka's social responsibility and sustainability innovations could significantly strengthen the brand's market position.

Despite providing valuable insights, the study has certain limitations. The sample was predominantly female (96%), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Data were collected via an online survey shared on social media, thus excluding segments of the population less active in digital environments. Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of emotional loyalty and behavioral patterns was not conducted, which could offer a deeper understanding of consumer preferences. Therefore, future research is recommended to apply mixed-method approaches such as focus groups and in-depth interviews and to target different demographic and market segments. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking changes in consumer perceptions and behaviors over time, particularly regarding branding, pricing, and sustainable practices, would be beneficial.

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