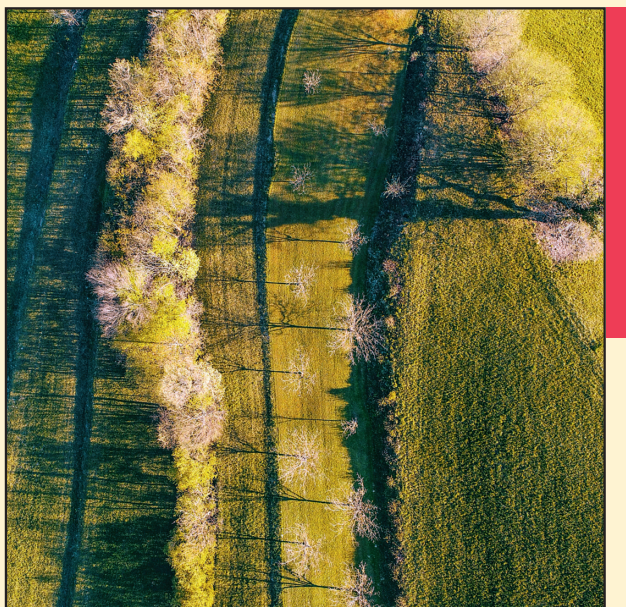


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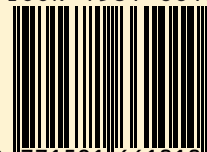
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**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
*Branding, labelling and certification*

EDITORS:  
Špela Ledinek Lozej  
Nika Razpotnik Visković  
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# BRANDING, LABELLING AND CERTIFICATION: GEOGRAPHICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

Špela Ledinek Lozej, Nika Razpotnik Visković



ŠPELA LEDINEK LOZEJ

Labels, certificates and brands on the food products from the Soča Valley.

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Špela Ledinek Lozej<sup>1</sup>, Nika Razpotnik Visković<sup>2</sup>

## **Branding, labelling and certification: Geographical and anthropological insights**

**ABSTRACT:** This article presents a theoretical and conceptual introduction to the special issue dedicated to branding, labelling and certification. The authors present the connections of these qualification instruments with regional development, multiscalarity, and actor networks from a geographical and anthropological perspective. The special issue contributes to a better understanding of the interferences and interconnections of various accompanying processes associated with branding, labelling, and certification, such as actors' practises and relationships, social power relations, alternative marketing strategies, long-term impacts on ethical values, and emotional concern.

**KEY WORDS:** geography, anthropology, branding, labelling, certification, regional development

## **Znamčenje, označevanje in certificiranje – geografski in antropološki (v)pregledi**

**ABSTRACT:** Članek je teoretski in konceptualni uvod v posebno številko, posvečeno znamčenju, označevanju in certificiranju. Avtorici predstavita povezanost omenjenih kvalifikacijskih instrumentov s teritorialnim razvojem, multiskalarnostjo in mrežami akterjev, in to z geografskega in antropološkega vidika. Posebna izdaja prispeva k boljšemu razumevanju interferenc med različnimi procesi, povezanimi z znamčenjem, označevanjem in certificiranjem, kot so različne prakse in povezave med akterji ter razmerja družbene moči. Izpostavljene so tudi alternativne trženjske strategije, dolgoročni vplivi na etične vrednote in čustvena vpletenost.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** geografija, antropologija, znamčenje, označevanje, certificiranje, regionalni razvoj

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# 1 Introduction

The focus of this special issue is on branding, labelling, and certification, particularly in the areas of agri-food, forestry, tourism, and regional development. Branding of food products and regions, labelling with different designations and awards, and certification under different schemes – such as EU schemes for geographical indications and traditional specialties, national, and regional certificates – are qualification tools for marketing purposes (Bardone and Kannike 2022; Fialová and Chromý 2022; Grasseni 2022; May 2022).

There are various definitions of branding and labelling in literature, such as marketing tool, governance method, assurance of the quality of products and services, etc. (see Razpotnik Visković and Logar 2022). These tools revolve around economic, social and symbolic values, that come from the interplay of work, knowledge and affect. At the same time, they generate connections between producers and consumers, as well as broader networks of actors, places, and things that (may) impact on place, heritage-making, territorial development and everyday life. For this reason, branding, labelling, and certification are getting attention also contemporary geographical and anthropological research.

In this special issue we present six contributions from geographical and anthropological perspectives that shape articles' methodology and epistemology. Methodologically, they range from qualitative ethnography, its thick description and »studying through« (Wright and Reinhold 2011) as applied by Christina Grasseni (2022) and Sarah May (2022), to participant observation by Ester Bardone and Anu Kannike (2022), to more quantitative and statistical geographical methods, such as structured interviews by Erik Logar (2022), Magdalena Fialová and Pavel Chromý (2022), and literature analyses by Nika Razpotnik Visković and Erik Logar (2022). The methods used enable an understanding of the interferences and interconnections of various processes related to branding, labelling and certifications, the practises and relationships of actors, social power relations, key economic logics and alternative marketing strategies, long-term effects on ethical values, and emotional involvement. Articles highlight factors that influence the success of initiatives and the potential to promote regional development, as well as challenges from the perspective of local producers, and provide an overview of research related to certification, labelling and branding.

In the first article »**The use of European Union instruments for branding and labelling regional food products in Estonia**« Ester Bardone and Anu Kannike examine how EU rural development measures and food quality schemes are used for creating added value to regional food products in Estonia. In order to understand these processes, national food and heritage policies are analysed to highlight a lack of national instruments that would protect and promote regional specialties.

Christina Grasseni presents article »**From branding to solidarity: The COVID-19 impact on marketing Strachitunt cheese from Val Taleggio, Italy**« in which she reveals the alternative marketing strategy of the cooperative of cheese producers who appealed directly to consumers and connected digitally with solidarity economy networks. The article shows how this appeal brought to the surface a shared understanding of proximity and solidarity, which are usually not employed in the language of certification and labelling.

Sarah May publishes article »**Labelling local wood: On the valorisation of regionality and sustainability in timber trade**« where she presents the implementation of an international programme of forest certification and deconstructs how the actors involved establish a link between ethical and economic concerns. By describing their everyday perspectives on the micro level, the article reveals shared aims, ideals and also contradictions.

In the article »**(In)visible agents in regional development: Active individuals and their networks as a driver of regional product labelling initiatives**« Magdalena Fialová and Pavel Chromý take the regional studies approach to examine labelling schemes on the example of the Association of Regional Brands in Czechia and identify positive and negative factors affecting the initiatives' success and potential for enhancing regional development.

Erik Logar focuses on the oldest territorial brand in Slovenia. In the article »**Place branding as an approach to the development of rural areas: A case study of the brand »Babica in Dedek« from the Škofja Loka Hills, Slovenia**« he analyses its socioeconomic conditions, impacts, and challenges from the perspective of local producers and demonstrates that the empirical findings are only partly aligned with the theoretical implications.

The last contribution in this volume is »**Certification, labelling and branding in tourism research: systematic review**« by Nika Razpotnik Visković and Erik Logar. Authors outline the spatial and temporal distribution of research linked to certification, labelling and branding, extract the theoretical definitions and characteristics of these three processes in tourism and analyse hierarchical and non-hierarchical relations among them.



## 2 General overview

The distinctions between branding, certification, and labelling are sometimes difficult to grasp because of the many overlapping in practice and inconsistent usage in the literature (Razpotnik Visković and Logar 2022). Yet based on the literature review and articles in the special issue, we assume that:

- branding is primarily a value-added process through which a destination or a company seeks to distinguish itself and its products from competitors in the market (e.g., with private and collective trademarks);
- certification is a process by which an independent organisation verifies that a product, process, or service meets certain standards regarding origin or territoriality (e.g., the EU quality scheme's Protected Designation of Origin and Protected Geographical Indication), and/or technology (e.g., EU quality scheme's Traditional Specialty Guaranteed).

Some qualifications meet the requirements of various references, e.g. Slow Food presidia are location-bound, emphasising traditional skills and production technologies at the same time. Brands might even be protected by intellectual property rights (e.g. (collective) trademarks). The process of labelling follows certification and branding and is a method of providing information about a product and a means of communicating with end users or visitors (Matus 2009; Tišler and Šuligoj 2020; Razpotnik Visković and Logar 2022).

The complexity of the (non)hierarchical, complementary and contested relationships between certification, branding and labelling is evident in the article by Razpotnik Visković and Logar (2022). The authors identify four relationships between certification, labelling and branding. First, certification is recognised as an important element of building a branding strategy for improving »green« image, emphasising excellence and reinforcing credibility. Second, certification and branding are seen as two incompatible or even opposite processes, one based on standardisation and unification criteria, while the other based on the uniqueness and speciality. Third, certification or label can be perceived as a brand on its own with different elements of branding, such as visual identity, logos and websites. Finally, certification, labelling and branding are also used as synonyms or as hierarchically equivalent but not competitive nor interlinked concepts.

The relations between the above-mentioned qualification tools can be viewed from different perspectives, united in the interdisciplinary research field on certification and valuation (Helgesson and Muniesa 2013). While most social sciences (business and economics, environmental sciences and ecology, sociology) focus on the financial, technical, and legal aspects of these instruments and their implications for distribution and consumption systems in globalised post-industrial society (Razpotnik Visković and Logar 2022), geography sheds light on their territorial implications and depletion of local economies, and regional development. Anthropology draws on ethnographic material and cultural analyses and focuses on the perspectives of actors, their participation, inclusion and exclusion from »global hierarchies of values«, and interferences with other social practices and processes, such as heritage-making (Bendix, Eggert and Peselmann 2013; Adell et al. 2015).

Expectations from branding, certification, and labelling of different actors involved vary and there are many discrepancies between written goals, expected outcomes, and recorded impacts (Razpotnik Visković and Logar 2022). The goals include interlinked environmental, economic, social, cultural and ethical aspects. From an economic perspective, they are intended to support production, by adding the value to products and keeping it within the region (Barham 2003; Fonte 2010; Kvam 2010; Parasecoli 2017; Tschofen 2017), enable better market opportunities for micro-producers (Bardone and Kannike 2022), support employment (Tregear 2003) and promote tourism. From a social perspective, labelling schemes can facilitate the creation of contacts and networks among participants in the certification process (Wiskerke 2009) and strengthen social capital. They enable communication as they can (re)establish, (re)discover, and raise awareness of predominantly local, and sometimes also regional and national place-based values associated with the environment, landscape, traditions, and sustainability, thus enabling territorial identifications and place-making processes (Barham 2003; Fonte 2010; May et al. 2017; Tschofen 2017; Ledinek Lozej 2020; Fialová and Chromý 2022). Actually, labelling schemes are means to convey not just different levels of protection (e.g., intellectual property, see Bardone and Kannike (2022)) but also, if not predominantly, different values (May 2022). Magdalena Fialová and Pavel Chromý (2022) define four success criteria for regional brands: first, viability and long-term sustainability (or, in words of Grasseni (2022), adaptability); second, increase of the number of products; third, active promotion; and, fourth, socio-cultural impacts.

Nevertheless, researchers admit that certification, branding and labelling can have a positive impact on territorial development, their potential is often overestimated (Coombe, Ives and Huizenga 2014; Ledinek



Lozej 2020; Logar 2022). Several critiques expose their deficiencies and weaknesses; the authors of this volume, Fialová and Chromý (2022) list the overuse, high diversity and inconsistency; May (2022) exposes unsuitability, redundancy, and unrecognizability of the majority of labels; Bardone and Kannike (2022) point out standardisation of production methods and ephemerality of some brands, due to their connection to short-term project founding; Logar (2022) lists non-inclusivity, predominance of top-down approaches, and absence of monitoring, evaluating and analysing of branding process. Grasseni's critique (2022) focuses predominantly on the shortcomings, evidenced in the emergency circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic, furthermore she points out also the neoliberal governance behind the instruments – claims to distinction, yet based on tradition or terroir (Jamšek Rupnik, Čuš and Šmuc 2016), are actually imbricated in global industrial production and distribution.

Despite all expressed critics, and sometimes also general unacceptance and unrecognition of brands, certificates, and labels, the geographical research shows the undeniable importance and potentials of branding for regional development.

### 3 Regional development

Regional development is transforming from predominantly economic progress (Brozzi et al. 2015; Knific and Bojnec 2015; Kozina and Clifton 2019) towards the more complex sustainable concept (Vintar Mally 2018; Kozina, Poljak Istenič and Komac 2019; Poljak Istenič 2019), taking into regard social, ecological and cultural dimensions (Šmid Hribar and Ledinek Lozej 2013). This is achieved mainly by activating endogenous capital of the regions and encouraging soft factors, that Fialova and Chromý (2022, 103) define as »socially determined and hardly measurable capacities and settings such as informal institutions and norms, trust, relationships, identities or knowledge«. The prevalent method to achieve this is bottom-up approach, assuring stable cooperation between actors involved in development, such as administrative authorities, the media, educational and research institutes, businesses, non-profit organisations, NGOs and individuals (Amin 1999; Komárek and Chromý 2020; Fialova and Chromý 2022).

Regional products are one of the important endogenous sources that are often included in regional development strategies. Labelling schemes are primarily used for promotion of these products, but their impact on regional development is manifold (Almeida and Cardoso 2022; Fialova and Chromý 2022). Labels can support production and add value, also through tourism, indirectly contribute to employment and maintain social stability (Stojanović et al. 2021; Jurinčič 2022). Creating and implementing regional labels means creation of stakeholder networks, organisation of training, consulting and exchanging the experiences. Regional labels help protect (or create) regional resources linked to landscape, environment, heritage and culture (Opačić et al. 2022).

Regional labels, territorial brands, European quality schemes or other certification initiatives are in line with the concept of new rural paradigm (Ploeg et al. 2000), promoting a multi-level, multi-actor and multi-faceted rural development (Ledinek Lozej 2021) where agriculture collaborates closely with other sectors in the territory, e.g. tourism. The EU plays an important role; besides its own quality schemes supporting regional production operating on top-down principle, the LEADER programme (EU's rural development policy tool) offers financial foundation for establishing bottom-up territorial product labelling schemes (Fialova and Chromý 2022).

Articles in this special issue point out various aspects of contribution to regional development. In German case study, May (2022) emphasises the direct monetary value of certified wood, increased visibility of regions beyond their borders and positive effect on other sectors (tourism, agriculture). The environmental aspect is pointed out by the author's interlocutor who mentions the importance of the regional processing of the product as well as the shortening of supply chains.

Grasseni (2022) adds another point of view – the evidence of solidarity economy, which was demonstrated in the case of certified local cheese near Bergamo. Direct marketing activities via social media during COVID-19 lock-down period immediately mobilised customers from the region, wanting to help local producers in time of extreme hardship.

The Estonian case study (Bardone and Kannike 2022), dedicated to Protected Geographical Indications (PGI) labelled cheese *sõir*, is an example of re-regionalisation of a food product, which was re-claimed to

be regional and not national speciality. Label has served as a communication tool mainly for domestic (not foreign!) consumers, reminding them about the importance of protecting their regional culinary heritage.

Logar (2022, 121) demonstrates the role of a territorial brand in improving image of the region from being closed, self-sufficient and inhospitable to more »attractive, entrepreneurial, and well-connected one«, but his study reveals also critical aspect of territorial branding on regional development: the lack of participation process can lead to the lock-in effect and to limited access to branding opportunities for some groups of producers. This decreases the economic and social cohesion in the area and raises internal development discrepancies.

## 4 Scalarity

Scale is an essential geographical concept (Leitner and Miller 2007) perceived not only through traditional fixed and bordered Euclidean or Cartesian definitions (Brenner 2001) but also as a social construction, focusing on process, evolution, and dynamism (Giovanardi 2015). Marston et al. (2005, 420) define scale as »the result of marking territories through boundaries and enclosures, documents and rules, enforcing agents and their authoritative resources«.

In certification, labelling and branding research, the concept of scale is relevant because it explains the particularities of these processes, actors involved, their relationships and the impact of their collaboration (Giovanardi 2015). It also helps to explain the conceptual frame of governance and three governance principles: inclusiveness, flexibility and multi-scalarity (Heslinga, Groote and Vanclay 2017). Heslinga, Groote and Vanclay (2019) illustrate the multi-scalarity on the example of tourism development and landscape, showing that governance processes in these fields are not taking place at only one level, but are influenced and often orchestrated from several scales. Nature protection for example is regulated by international and national laws, but concrete actions are implemented at local level (Paloniemi and Tikka 2008; Stojanović et al. 2014; Smrekar, Šmid Hribar and Erhartič 2016), affected by social positions and cultural activities of local community members (Heslinga, Groote and Vanclay 2019). This inevitably leads to discrepancies between the regulations and desired socio-economic activities of tourism entrepreneurs. Understanding the multiscalar tourism – landscape interactions is thus crucial for efficient management of protected areas (Paloniemi and Tikka 2008).

Klintman (2012) points out that multi-scalarity is a challenge also in the field of sustainability programmes and numerous environmental, sustainable or fair-trade standardisation schemes linked to it. Scales are often perceived as given and simplified (e.g. local-global), but as an alternative they can also be dynamic and »strategic«, driven by social actors with their own special political, economic or cultural interests (Klintman 2012). In this way the understanding of tensions can go beyond the simplistic local-global dualism and draws attention also to surrounding economic inequality, limitations to public participation, neglect of cultural and environmental values.

Studies on place branding were traditionally focused on single spatial level (e.g., national, urban, regional or other spatial levels) (Paasi 2004), but Giovanardi (2015, 611) suggests that place branding should be considered »as a multi-scalar phenomenon since it can emerge from actions on many scales, which can no longer be seen as nested in a static hierarchy, but instead seem to coexist.« The scale should be given relational understanding – this way the phenomenon of scale jumping (van Schendel 2002) can be better contextualised. This can be illustrated on the case of Tourin place making process, where sub-national territorial stakeholders (e.g. the Piedmont Region, the Province of Turin and the City of Turin) collaborate with foreign stakeholders (e.g. European capitals) but without full support of the national, »intermediate« level (Giovanardi 2015).

The multi-scalar character of certification, labelling and branding is demonstrated also in case studies, presented in this special issue. In an article discussing labelling of wood in Germany (May 2022) we can observe that the forest certification programme was confirmed at national level. The label »*Heimisches Holz aus ...*« (»Domestic wood from ...«) was established by national organisation for the purpose of certification of local regional wood. The label promotes sustainability, meaning that wood is bought, processed, sold and delivered mainly in the region, however some producers are selling it also on a global market.

Grasseni (2022) focuses on the local cheese *Strachtunt* with Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) label, which is an EU geographical indication for food. Despite its small production area and small production

quantities of cheese, the PDO products play an important role in international initiatives such as Bergamo's inclusion in UNESCO creative cities. Study reveals specific market conditions during the COVID-19 lockdown with the emerging importance of proximity and solidarity in that specific moment and the support of social networks, operating out of the context of traditional geographical scales.

The article of Bardone and Kannike (2022) shows the importance of stably structured scale hierarchy and the consequences if one level is missing. In the case of another EU designation – PGI. The authors demonstrate how the lack of national level support and engagement in Estonia results in a very modest number of designated products (only two). In addition, another important aspect is raised in the Estonian study: producers decided to go for complex application of EU geographical indication not to reach foreign markets with a niche product, but to convince the domestic consumers about the genuineness of their product.

Scalarity is also a crucial aspect to be considered at assessing the networking of actors, stakeholders, and following the recent theories (Latour 2005), also of non-human actants.

## 5 Networking

Multi-layered actor networks between human, governmental, and institutional actors (e.g., producers, regional and national administrative authorities, media, educational institutions, business, non-profit organisations, individual politicians, entrepreneurs, and organizational leaders), and also with non-human actors (e.g., brands, programmes, food and wood products; May 2022; Latour 2005), play important role in branding, certification, and labelling processes. Networking can be vertical (across different scales, e.g., national, regional, local), horizontal (between stakeholders and brands), and cross-sectoral – leaving aside for the moment the affectual relationships and possibilities of non-human (generated) networks. It is embedded in the tension between agency and power, and between ethical and economical demands.

The vertical connections and disconnections, set between top-down interventions and bottom-up activities, are explored in the article by Ester Bardone and Anu Kannike (2022). The authors discuss the interconnectedness of regional initiatives, national and EU policies using the example of food branding and labelling in Estonia. Despite the fact that the state is an important actor in agriculture and food production, Bardone and Kannike highlight the role of regional actors (the Local Action Groups) and their use of EU instruments (Leader funding) in creating regional food (brands). However, the authors also acknowledge that regional labelling schemes require complex management of short food supply chains - this could explain why the successful, well-functioning labelling systems tend to be located at higher regional or national levels.

The regional initiatives and schemes presented in this volume emphasize regionality and local character, and seek to overcome transregional and (inter)national dependencies, but at the same time – as highlighted in May's (2022, 96) article – global (commodity) flows »stand out as a dominant lines of action.« However, this is not necessarily the case, as some labels predominantly establish small-scale relationships. This (re)localization took on new aspects in new marketing styles triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, when the paramount importance of local food systems, networks and small-scale producers came to the fore. Grasseni (2022) – supported by a recent comparative study (Nemes et al. 2021) – shows an increase in innovations and adaptations that allowed local food systems to broaden their scope and include new actors, originating from bottom-up participatory initiatives. In addition to the local food networks mentioned above, which (can) play a crucial role in the solidarity economy, there are also industrial networks. For example, the association of dairies, an important in the agri-food sector, which participate in the geographical indications consortia, as described in the article by Grasseni (2022).

Horizontal networking in terms of competitiveness clusters (Razpotnik Visković and Logar 2022) is examined in the article by Fialová and Chromý (2022). The authors emphasise the crucial role of the active individuals – especially the coordinators of the labels and their working teams, their commitment, activeness, competences, innovativeness and sense of place, and on the other hand, the producers of certified products, cooperation and communication between them, mutual trust and personal contacts.

The cross-sectoral networking is described by Grasseni (2022). She shows that a number of public institutions and professional associations are dynamically involved in networks and alliances around cow-breeding and cheese production, e.g., local administrations such as municipal councils and mayors,

breeders' associations, farmers' unions and their agricultural extension services, chambers of commerce, tourism associations and various media. On the other hand, the case study discussed by Logar (2022) shows the lack of cross-sector collaboration that led to the general lack of recognition of the local brand.

The importance of informal networking practices of production and consumption emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, practices discussed by Grasseni (2022) that shifted the semantic implications from certificates and labels to the solidarity and »proximity«. These ruptures may have »the potentials for discovering changes in ethical norms, market logics and power structures« (May 2022, 96). They emphasise the importance of small-scale market relationships, connections and trust between consumers and producers, belonging, unofficial support, and local chains aimed at sustaining territorial economies (Grasseni 2022).

Finally, we focus also on the agency of non-human actors, the agency that comes from labels and certificates, things and materials. May (2022) explores the agency of wood, placing timber, its material and symbolic qualities at the centre of her research. She traces the material, its properties (and limitations) as a renewable resource that binds carbon dioxide, prone to the bioeconomy, and green growth, and its agency in creating the label's network. The other authors in the volume discuss the agency of the certificates and brands. Branded and/or certified products tend to be highly valued, and therefore central to broader epistemologies »that are acted on the ground, mediating personal, local and scalar levels of agency,« as Grasseni (2017, 4) shows through case studies of Italian cheese. They attract support and generate income, link knowledge economies with value-creation, evoke associative and affective connotations, shared knowledge, experience, norms and care. Thus they submit themselves to (re)localization, which is aiming towards a value-based and territorially embedded agri-food system (Grasseni 2022).

How this relocalised and other alternative distribution networks that reconnect producers and consumers – without brands, certificates and labels – will bring change to the dominance of the commodity form and the way it attempts to recolonize the alternative space is the question, that Pratt (2007) asked already two decades ago. And articles presented in this special issue reveal a great deal behind the mainstream and alternatively branded, certified and/or labelled systems.

## 6 Conclusion

Articles in this volume present geographical and anthropological views on branding, labelling, and certification. Five case studies from five European countries represent the area of agri-food, forestry, tourism, and territorial development. Despite the geographical and field variety we identified four common perspectives in all of them: development and links between different branding and certification schemes, their contribution to regional development, the multi-scalar dimensions of these processes and stakeholder networking linked to it. Articles contribute to a better understanding of interferences and interconnections of various accompanying processes connected with branding, labelling and certifications, such as actors' practises and relationships, social power relations, key economic logics and alternative marketing strategies, long-term impacts on ethical values and emotional involvement. They highlight factors influencing the success of the initiatives as well as their challenges and limitations, including the knowledge gap in measuring their long-term economic benefits.

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