

# Short food supply chains from a social media marketing perspective: a consumer-oriented study in Spain

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## Abstract

*The increasing use of internet, especially the proliferation of social networks has offered companies of all sectors the opportunity to keep in contact with their consumers; getting their feedbacks and complains on a daily basis and even to create short online chains enabling consumers to buy their products. This trend is found to be rather limited in the case of food products. The main objective of this article is to deal with consumer's perceptions towards the potential use of social media to create online short supply chains for food. Projective techniques (Sentence completion tasks) have been used in this study. As, they allow researchers to uncover motivations, emotions and beliefs that drive consumer's perception and behavior which may not be detected by straightforward questioning. The findings of this study have allowed to obtain insight into those aspects that consumers regard as opportunities or barriers of such potential short food chains. The main aspect is to put food enterprises in the picture about what is going on in consumer's mind. This might open new possibilities for food businesses to develop a new short food chain.*

**Keywords:** Social media marketing, E-marketing, Short food supply chains, Projective techniques, Sentence completion task.

## 1. Introduction

In the current context of globalization and widespread use of internet, one of the increasing trends that shape the markets is the use of cyberspace in performing marketing activities (e-marketing).

Generally, e-marketing refers to the application of digital technologies to contribute to the marketing activities of an enterprise so as to strengthen the relationship with customers and create added value for the product (Elghannam

*et al.*, 2017). Although, for the most part, companies rely mainly on the usage of traditional websites for promoting or selling a certain product or service, some companies have recently noticed the potential of social networks – with their millions of users and their huge flow of information – to increase their market competitiveness, improve the company position and create a strong brand image. As a consequence, it has been noticed a greater presence of enterprises from all sectors on social networking sites

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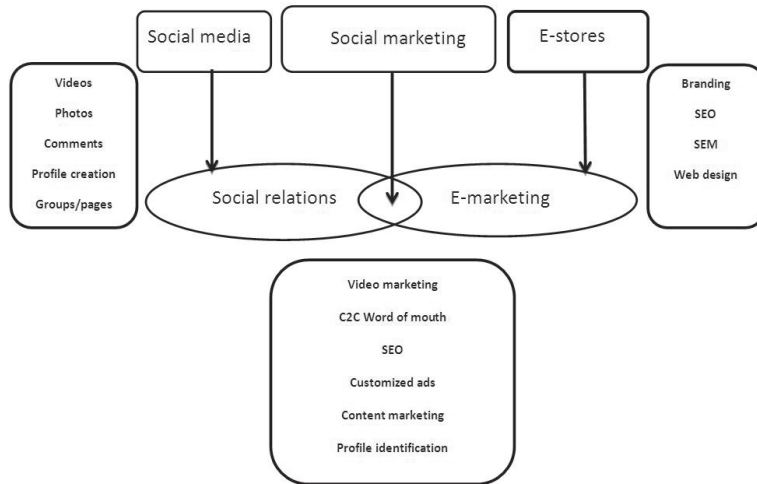


Figure 1 - Concept of social media marketing.

and new concepts such as “social marketing” – or “social media marketing” have been forged, meaning the use of social networks as an e-marketing chain, as it can be shown in Figure 1.

As social networks can be defined as «those internet websites that allow individuals to build public or semi-public profiles, create connections and share information with other users within the system» (Boyd and Ellison, 2010). It can be considered that one of the main features of social marketing is that consumers can browse or purchase certain products or services online, but taking into account the comments, evaluations and recommendations of other internet users within the system, in which is commonly known as electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) which is one of the most powerful marketing actions to influence the online purchase decision (Kim and Park, 2013).

Social marketing also allows companies to identify their customers’ profile, their preferences and the way they perceive certain products so they can address their actions to a specific group of users with regard to age, sex, interests and habits.

As it is the case with other internet marketing tools, social media can allow marketers to take advantage of the distinctive helpfulness that users display on social networks (Subramani and Rajagopalan, 2003). Producers can also pay to boost ads to specific people who might be interested in their message. Moreover, so-

cial media sites give a feedback to advertisers about how many people look at or clicked on their advertisements. This information can help marketers to evaluate the impact of their ads on customers, which would help them to improve its content and show better and interesting ads to people.

It is worthy to highlight that marketing is the core factor of success for social networks, as they mostly offer their services for free, depending on advertisement revenues to cover their costs.

Recently, Facebook, Google+, Twitter and Instagram are already turning out to become social marketing platforms by adding new call-to-action buttons to companies’ pages. These buttons are used to book, call, contact, send a message, use application, play, ask for more information, register, view video, send an email or even to buy directly. Customers can, therefore, purchase through the company’s page without the need to visit the website. Following the same procedure that can be found in other online purchasing platforms, all the process from choosing the product to payment and delivering would be carried out through the social platform.

Within the current food market trends, direct consumer-producer relationships are a powerful incentive for food producers, who can take profit from the increasing number of citizens who want to know what they eat and how it has been produced. In this context, the creation of short food supply chains (SFSC) where producers deal di-

rectly –or almost directly – with their customers and where the food chain is shortened, could be an opportunity for agribusiness. Short supply chains could also facilitate the traceability of products and provide a better price transmission between producers and consumers.

According to the above, the widespread increase in the social media use gives companies the potential to build new short supply chains for promoting and selling their products in a quick, cheap and direct way. In this sense, social media could have various advantages, as it would facilitate the role of marketing managers to identify their customers' socio-demographic profiles, their demands and the way they act with certain products or brands. Consequently, companies may perfectly define their target segments and adapt their marketing strategies to satisfy their customers' needs.

Furthermore, this new system which enables online purchases to be proceeded through social media platforms can be considered a facility for producers to turn social networks into a powerful web-based short chain.

Although this trend can be found – with different levels of development – in companies of all sectors, in the case of food products these movements are still rather limited. This may be due, on the one hand, to the basic features which characterize the food items (perishable nature, high weight in proportion to cost, etc.) and on the other hand to the attitudes and perceptions of consumers towards the use of such new chains which are unrelated to those commonly found in food purchasing.

Although encouraging the creation of physical short supply chains within the food sector is a well-studied topic in the literature on both the international (Filippini *et al.*, 2016; Mastronardi *et al.*, 2015; Wubben *et al.*, 2013; Aiello *et al.*, 2017; Abatekassa and Peterson, 2011; Schimmenti *et al.*, 2017; Giampietri *et al.*, 2016; Marsden *et al.*, 2000) and the Spanish level (Calatrava and Gonzalez, 2012; Guzman *et al.*, 2012; Mauleón, 2001), this article deals with a new approach through a social media marketing perspective.

These facts triggered the development of the present study in order to analyze consumer's predisposition and perception towards social net-

works as a short food marketing chain. Specifically, the article aims to address how consumers would perceive social networks as a marketplace for foodstuffs, analyzing whether they might be willing to deal with it and delving into the motivators and guarantees which could increase their likelihood of adopting such this initiative.

It was considered that the novelty of the topic could lead to possible biased answers from consumers if traditional questioning would have been used. Hence, it was decided to use projective techniques, as they allow researchers to uncover unconscious deep motivations and beliefs that drive consumer's perception. These subjective aspects would not be necessarily detected by more straightforward questioning (Steinman, 2009).

Projective techniques are qualitative research methods based on the assumption that consumers' unconscious perceptions and beliefs can appear when individuals face forms with ambiguous or poorly structured questions. As respondents are free to respond with their own point of view, it can be expected that they will show their unconscious feelings in their answers (Donoghue, 2000).

Among the different projective techniques, it was decided to use completion tasks, where participants are requested to complete unfinished stimuli (sentences or stories). In this study, sentence completion has been applied since it is useful to understand consumers' perceptions and it also fits to be used online (Kujala *et al.*, 2014). In addition, it is a simple and suitable technique to be used in circumstances where respondents are facing a completely new perspective such as the use of social networks as online short food chains.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Data collection

Given the nature of the study, where social media is being studied as a food marketing tool, the target population was set at regular users of social networks and it was also decided to use social media to spread the survey in order to ensure that all participants fulfilled the previous requisite. A non-probability convenience

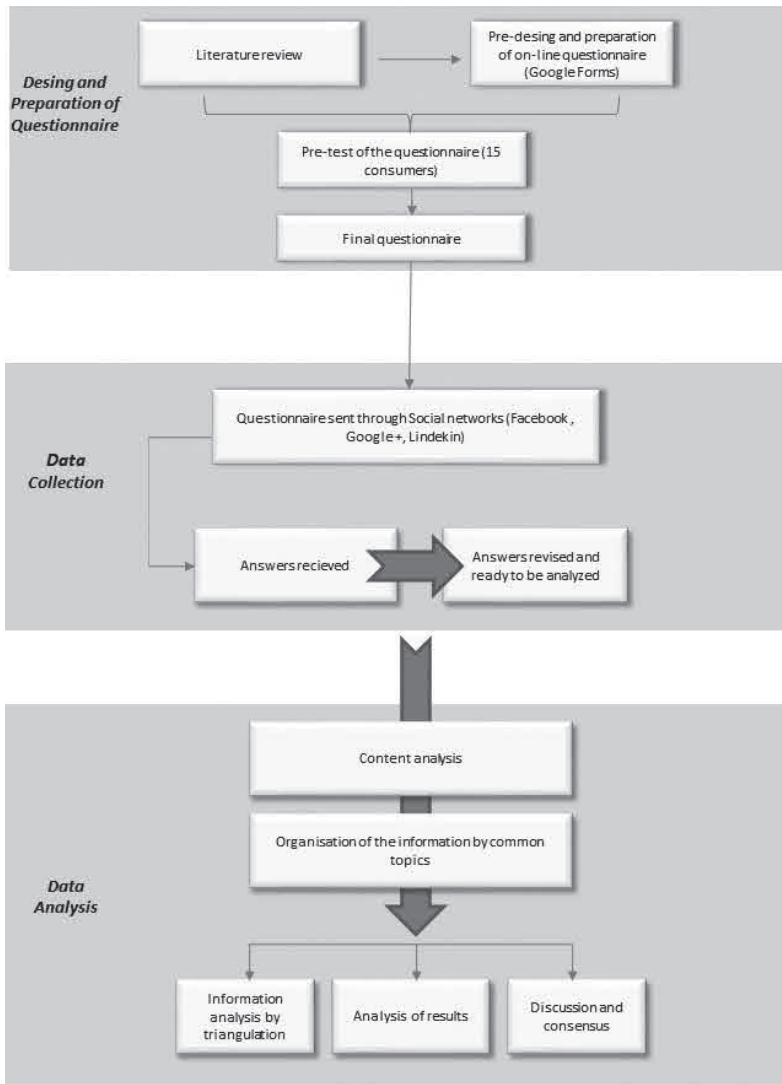


Figure 2 - Methodological procedure.

sampling has therefore been used in this study, a common approach used in qualitative research when the aim is to get an insight into a particular topic (Kinnear and Taylor, 1993). The final sample involved 209 Spanish consumers.

The online survey was developed during January- February 2016 using Google Forms – online ([www.docs.google.com](http://www.docs.google.com)). A link to the questionnaire was posted and spread throughout three different social networks (Facebook, Google+ and LinkedIn) together with an introductory message about the definition of a short food supply chain. Then, they were given the follow-

ing specific message: «Although at present it is still not common, some platforms are developing new tools that would give you the opportunity to use them as online short chains to buy foodstuff». Then they were asked to fill out the questionnaire. Initially, a pre-test was performed with 15 consumers in order to assure the validity of the questionnaire and aiming to correct those questions which received improper answers or that were difficult to understand. These questionnaires were not included in the final sample.

Figure 2 describes the whole methodological procedure followed in this research.

Table 1 - The study's main topics and related sentence completion questions.

<i>Perceptions of consumers</i>	<i>Reactions on food advertising</i>
For me, using social networks as a direct food marketing chain seems...	If I am using my social media and I watch food advertising, I think of...
I would buy food from a short food chain on social networks if...	I would not buy food from a short food chain on social networks because...
<i>Incentives</i>	<i>Hinders</i>

## 2.2. Sentence completion task

Among the projective techniques applied in market research, completion of statements is one of the most frequently used, being also widely found in food research (Vaca and Mesias, 2014; Vidal *et al.*, 2013; Masson *et al.*, 2016). Within this methodology, respondents can be asked to finish a varied type of stimuli: sentences, stories, arguments or conversations (Donoghue, 2000), although. The most common completion procedures are sentence completion and story completion (Steinman, 2009).

In sentence completion, respondents are given incomplete sentences and are requested to finish them with the first words that come to their mind, while in story completion tasks the participants receive part of a story that they must conclude with their own words.

In our research, it was decided to apply a sentence completion task (Sacks and Levy, 1950), as it permits a wide range of responses and can be adapted for different research purposes. Also, it helps researchers to obtain respondents' perceptions in an indirect and informal manner (Holaday *et al.*, 2000; Dykens *et al.*, 2007).

Participants were asked to complete four different completion sentences as it is shown in Table 1.

At first, respondents were suggested to fill in the blanks mentioning their ideas about the use of social networks as short chains for food purchasing; they got the task «for me, using social networks as a direct food marketing chain seems...». They were then asked to complete another question related to food advertising on social media. This question intended to get their different reactions to food ads that may appear while browsing social media sites.

Furthermore, consumers were requested to indicate the conditions that, from their point of

view, could encourage them to adopt this initiative. Finally, in the fourth task, respondents were guided to mention reasons why they would not be willing to deal directly with a food producer on social networks.

## 2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis, based on the use of content analysis, was performed similarly in each of the completion questions. All answers provided by respondents were subsequently analyzed in a qualitative way and separately for each question. To do this, first and foremost, those expressions or words with similar meanings were identified and grouped into different categories. This task was held independently by each of the members of the research team, considering both the strict meaning of the expressions used and the possible synonyms. This methodology, usually called triangulation, aims to improve the validity of the results by analyzing them from several points of view (Patton, 1999; Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Once this step was done, definitive categories were agreed upon in a subsequent meeting and their names were defined. The frequencies in every category were determined by counting the number of consumers that used the same word or an equivalent term. Similarly to what can be found in other qualitative research papers, only those concepts mentioned by more than 5% of the participants were considered (Vidal *et al.*, 2013; Eldesouky *et al.*, 2015; Elghannam and Mesias, 2018).

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Consumers perceptions towards the use of social media as short food marketing chain

As previously stated, in this task participants were asked to elicit their feelings about the

Table 2 - Categories identified regarding perceptions towards the use of social media as short food marketing chains.

Category	Example	Percentage of mention (%)
Good and useful	Good idea; interesting and useful; great option; it is awesome	33.5
Weird and unusual	Weird; ridiculous; absurd; bad; uninteresting; unusual	23.6
Risky	Untrustworthy; insecure; sort of risky; not reliable	15.4
Unnecessary	Unnecessary; inadequate	10
Innovative	Innovative; a new alternative that can make life easier; novelty; a future trend; an advance	9.3
Practical and convenient	Accessible; rapid; convenient; practical; helps to save time	8.2

use of social networks as a food short chain by filling in the sentence «for me, using social networks as a direct food marketing chain seems...». Table 2 shows a summary of the answers together with some examples provided by the participants.

As can be observed in Table 2, 51% of respondents described the idea as a good, useful, practical and innovative one, a finding which is in line with the original objective of replacing or enhancing the traditional market chains by the creation of what can be called a webshelf or web-based storefronts (Molla and Licker, 2001). However, 49% of the participants claimed that it seems to be a strange, weird, risky and unnecessary option. In this case, even though double-edged results have been found, the positive connotations overweighed the negative ones. These findings open an undeniable opportunity for food marketers that is a large part of those surveyed would be willing to accept the social media in their online purchases of food, This result is consistent with the study of Kumar *et al.* (2015) who reported that using Facebook as a means for selling products on brand's page will positively affect consumers' intentions to use it as a source for online buying.

Some of the positive aspects highlighted can be linked to modern family structure, with an increasing integration of women in the workforce with less time available for household chores and therefore more involved in buying online (Stark and Meier, 2001). It is, therefore, a group

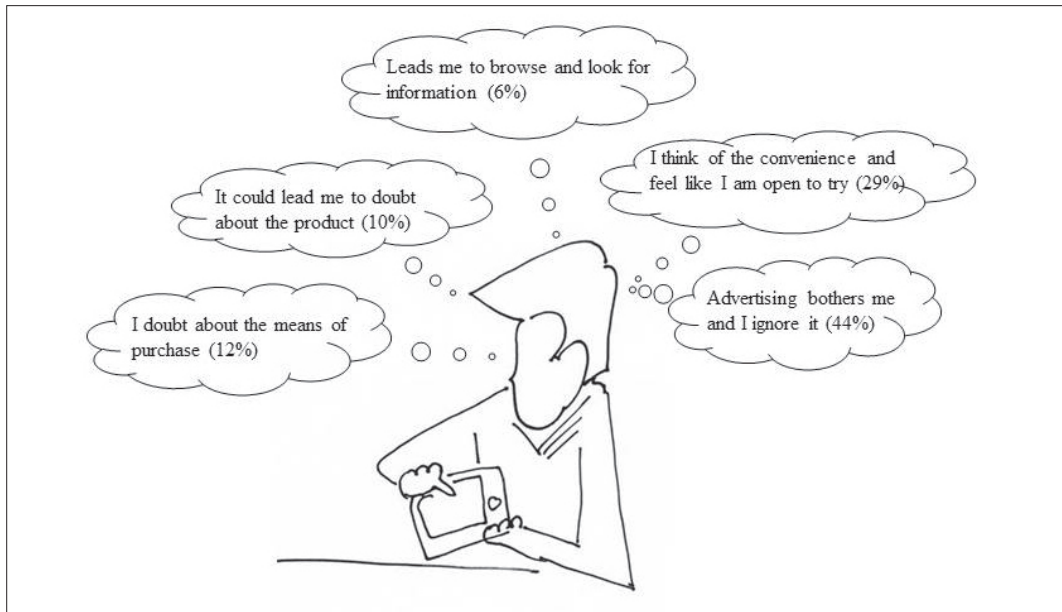
of people who can find an opportunity with any innovation leading to saving time at home.

Despite the growing usage of social networks, it is shocking that more than 23% of the answers refer to terms linked to weirdness or oddity. The explanation for this fact may lie on consumer habits, where food is mainly bought in the physical shop. This is in line with the study of Visser and Lanzendorf (2004) who suggested that physical shopping trips depend on the type of product and are significantly higher for groceries than for any other product. Changes in food consumer behavior and perceptions of new food chains would, therefore, imply previous information actions that may be far of reach for many producers and agri-food industries.

A second question was intended to find the associations between social media marketing and food. Although consumers are quite used to receive advertising when they browse the internet, it could be assumed that food advertising on social media might generate suspicion or rejection among users. Figure 3 shows the main comments brought out by the respondents.

As shown in Figure 3, most of the comments refer to the fact that consumers are annoyed by this type of advertising and therefore, they tend to ignore it. Moreover, if we take into account that it also raises doubts in more than 20% of the participants about products and payment systems, it can be concluded that social media is still not considered as an optimal chain for food advertising, at least nowadays.

Figure 3 - If I am using my social media and I watch food advertising, I think of... (% of mentions).



### 3.2. Guarantees that could encourage the use of social networks as food chains

Consumers were then asked to reveal the conditions that could foster their use of social networks as a food marketing chain. In this sentence, and to obtain a different perspective from the respondents, purchasing was adopted as a proxy of usage. Results obtained from this question are summarized in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, the trust in the brand and company or even to have a good experience in previous purchases is the most frequently mentioned reason that can motivate consumers. These results are in agreement with those included in some studies dealing with the determinants of e-commerce development (Canavari *et al.*, 2010; Lehman *et al.*, 2012). These authors found that customers perceive electronic purchases as riskier than conventional ones. Therefore, the creation of trusted relationships in an online environment is a core factor for the adoption and development of a direct social marketing chain.

Another important issue highlighted by the participants was quality assurance. This means that consumers are interested in products that have a certificate of quality assurance or that

fulfil certain regulations that would ensure its reliability. In one way or another, this result is linked with that of lack of trust, so consumers are seeking for some sort of guarantee that could enhance their adoption of such short chains. This can open up an opportunity for food companies which are registered under PDO or PGI systems to expand more on social media sites to promote and even to sell their products.

Our findings also indicate that consumers give a certain importance to price, as it is the third mentioned category. As it is shown, a competitive price, lower than that of conventional chains, could motivate consumers to deal directly with producers through social networks. This result is in line with other previous studies which reported that consumers aim to get the best value for their money (Kang *et al.*, 2014) and they tend to be comparison shoppers (Kamaruddin and Mokhlis, 2003).

In addition, results show that there are possibilities for products that are not easily found in conventional points of purchase. In this regard, it is interesting to highlight that some consumers mentioned exotic and organic food, as both types of food have sometimes distribution difficulties that can generate problems for their regu-

Table 3 - Categories identified regarding the question “I would buy food from a short food chain on social networks if...”

Category	Example	Percentage of mention (%)
Confidence in the company or brand / self-experience	I knew them beforehand; if I know the brand; I trust the producer or the webpage	19.3
Quality assurance	I was offered quality assurance; the products meet certain quality standards; the products have some kind of certification; guarantee the product and its reliability and the processes it has followed	14
Lower price than conventional channels	If it was not more expensive than in the supermarket; they were reasonably priced; there were any special promotions	12.5
If it were the only possible alternative	I do not have any other option closer; it was not possible to go out of my home; I have no time to go shopping	9.4
Products not found at regular outlets	It was difficult to find them in supermarkets; hardly found in traditional channels	8.9
Non-perishable / long-lasting food	Non-perishable; were not fresh products; packaged and canned	7.8
Fast and efficient delivery service	If it gets home quickly; if they gave me the guarantee that the order arrives in a short time and fresh; if I am offered home delivery service; if I am sure about the time I will receive the requested product	6.8
Word of mouth / peer effect	Some friends would have recommended it to me; if people around me have done this before; if it was a friend's recommendation; if people speak well of it	6.3
Trustworthy online platforms / (payment platforms)	If there are secure payment platforms; if the form of payment and management of processes is reliable; a secure payment process	5

lar users to get them. Taking advantage of these new online chains may allow accessing this type of consumers, who also tend to be particularly loyal in the case of organic foods.

Our study suggests that consumers prefer not to buy fresh or perishable food; nevertheless, they are willing to buy packaged or canned foods. These results agree with other studies related to food sale through online platforms that have found consumers also preferring non-perishable products (Ramus and Nielsen, 2005).

In this case, the possibility of creating short food supply chains using social networks, where the consumer could know the origin of the food, its system of production, date of harvest, etc., could encourage the incorporation of new consumers, since they would get additional utilities that are not provided by traditional chains.

Another interesting result is that of delivery service, as consumers consider that efficient delivery systems are a key motivation to accept this kind of online transactions. This result is in agreement with that of Chen *et al.* (2014) who found that a little-developed delivery service in the agri-food sector is identified as a constraint to the growth of online outlets. Therefore, the agri-food companies that intend to create new marketing/distribution chains in social media must be aware of the need of fast and reliable distribution systems, as a way not only to meet consumers' expectations but also to create new values and services (direct information about origin and production system, ripening, harvesting...) that should open new market niches.

The results also highlight the role of friends' recommendations (word of mouth) in food con-



sumer's acceptance of social websites. This is a positive outcome regarding the future increase of this trend as many other studies have indicated that consumers who show loyalty to a brand tend to recommend it to others on a social networking site (Anderson *et al.*, 2014; Chan *et al.*, 2014; De Vries and Carlson, 2014; Gamboa and Gonçalves, 2014; Gummerus *et al.*, 2012; Labrecque, 2014; Laroche *et al.*, 2012; Rapp *et al.*, 2013; Zheng *et al.*, 2015).

### 3.3. Obstacles that would hinder the development of short food chains on social networks

In this last task, respondents were encouraged to elicit the negative aspects why they would not be willing to use social networks for food marketing purposes. Although this question complements the former to a certain extent, it was considered that the negative approach could reveal some features that had not emerged previously. Table 4 shows the answers generated in this question.

As can be observed in Table 4, the first obstacle identified by the participants is the distrust in hygiene guarantees and quality of products, a finding in accordance with those mentioned in the former section, It is remarkable that confidence appears here with a negative character and linked to wholesomeness and quality, while in the previous question the participants elicited

other trust-related issues such as payments or brands. That is, the mistrust in intrinsic attributes – health and quality aspects – is a barrier for the incorporation of new buyers, while the confidence in extrinsic attributes – such as the firm or the online payment systems – are incentives. Although trust in extrinsic features can be easily generated and transmitted – e.g. through the use of secure and familiar payment platforms such as PayPal – companies must have a more direct control regarding food quality and safety, which should be improved and transmitted to their target consumers in order to eliminate their reluctance towards these new marketing chains.

Another important reason why consumers are not willing to engage in social media short food chains is that they prefer to purchase directly in the shop, as they consider that in this way the process will be more efficient and they will be able to choose better products. This result is in line with other research (Daugherty *et al.*, 2005; Sarkar, 2011) who stated that the limited sensory input is one of the biggest limitations associated with the web experience in comparison with the direct experience (Daugherty *et al.*, 2005). This reaction may be expected since many consumers prefer to touch, feel, smell, or even taste the food before they buy. Therefore, it is likely that those consumers with high hedonic shopping motivations will show a higher preference towards the direct interaction and would rather go to tradi-

Table 4 - I would not deal with a short food chain on social networks because...

Category	Examples	Percentage of mention (%)
Distrust in health and hygiene guarantees and product quality	It seems unsecure; I do not trust that the quality is the expected; I'm not sure of its origin; traceability; quality	40
They prefer to do it physically because they think it would be more efficient	I think that the purchase will be more efficient; I can get a better product	19
They prefer to do it physically for social aspects	I like more being in contact with people in a shop or supermarket than with a machine; I prefer to go to the supermarket and leave home	15.5
Unfamiliarity	I am not convinced; for lack of habit	7
Lack of trust in post-purchase process	What if they arrive in a bad state; how can you complain if the product is not in good conditions?	7

tional shops (Sarkar, 2011). The lack of a clear post-purchase policy was found to be another obstacle, as consumers can be concerned about their money in case of giving back any product that doesn't meet their expectations.

#### 4. Conclusions

In the food market, where producers and agri-food industries are losing power in relation to large-scale distribution, the use of social networks as a new food chain is a tool that can offer exciting opportunities in food marketing. The advantages are clear for both consumers and producers, since establishing short distribution chains may allow improving trade margins while at the same time providing new services highly valued by consumers.

The novelty of the use of social networks in food marketing, where respondents may be prejudiced led us to the selection of qualitative research in this research. In this context, the use of projective techniques has allowed to obtain insight into those aspects that consumers regard as barriers or facilitators regarding their foody use of social networks. The main aspect highlighted is that a large part of the participants would be willing to use the short food chains created on social media, which could be considered an undeniable opportunity for food companies.

Regarding the incentives, results have shown that the first reason which motivates consumers is having confidence with respect to the brand or even to have a good experience in previous shopping with the same company.

Furthermore, consumers are requesting products with quality guarantees and complying with regulations and standards. This finding can encourage food companies to produce under a certain type of quality schemes in order to take advantage of social media platforms to promote and sell their products. Likewise, it was found that a competitive price – lower than that of conventional chains – would also motivate consumers.

Regarding the barriers and apart from the distrust that has been previously mentioned, the main obstacle is that a large part of consumers still prefer to buy food physically in conventional outlets either because they perceive it the best

way or even for unfamiliarity with online food purchasing. Food companies must, therefore, educate consumers by showing them the great advantages they can get through more direct and immediate contact with the firms.

The outcomes of this research might open new possibilities for food agribusinesses, and especially for the smaller ones, as the combination of social media marketing and short food supply chains could lead to the development of new shopping channel, which could allow producers to increase sale levels and, therefore, improve their profitability.

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