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THE IMPACT OF INTERNET TECHNOLOGIES ON THE PRODUCER-CONSUMER-EATER RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract. The consumer is looking for good food and better nutrition. He understood very well that food and health are closely linked. What is confirmed today is the feeling of a change in the apparent balance of knowledge and power in relation to food, which requires some adjustment on the part of producers. This article, based on a review of the scientific literature, aims to understand how the use of the Internet changes the relationship between producer and consumer, resulting from the increase in the number of consumers of the Internet. According to the analysis, the development of food trade on the Internet contributes to changing this relationship between producer and consumer. The consumer no longer assumes the role of passive partner, but becomes more "empowered" or enters into more equal relations with brands thanks to digital devices.

Keywords: *Consumer-eater, food, power, health, empowered.*

Rezumat. Consumatorul caută mâncare bună și o nutriție mai bună. A înțeles foarte bine că hrana și sănătatea sunt strâns legate. Ceea ce se confirmă astăzi este sentimentul unei schimbări în echilibrul aparent de cunoștințe și putere în raport cu alimentele, care necesită o anumită ajustare din partea producătorilor. Acest articol, bazat pe o trecere în revistă a literaturii științifice, își propune să înțeleagă modul în care utilizarea internetului schimbă relația dintre producător și consumator, rezultată din creșterea numărului de consumatori a Internetului. Conform analizei efectuate, dezvoltarea comerțului cu alimente pe internet contribuie la schimbarea acestei relații dintre producător și consumator. Consumatorul nu își mai asumă rolul de partener pasiv, ci devine mai „împuternicit” sau intră în relații mai egalitare cu mărcile datorită dispozitivelor digitale.

Cuvinte cheie: *Consumator de alimente, alimentație, putere, sănătate, împuternicit.*

Introduction

Academic literature has been quick to report on the change in the producer-consumer relationship resulting from consumers' increasing use of the Internet. The context of a food system where we no longer know who produces the food or how it is produced is no longer compatible with the economic context in the age of the Internet with the emergence of a

responsible consumer who knows what they are eating. And as [1] writes, "If we do not know what we are eating, will not it be difficult to know not only what we are becoming, but what we are? ". It is hoped that the relationship between consumer and eater will improve thanks to a well-informed consumer so that informed consent and shared decision-making will take on their full meaning. However, the obstacles are numerous: information asymmetry, consumer distrust of branded products, the will to take charge of one's own health, the obesity problem that has mobilized public actors and consumers, the comeback of feminine values and, more generally, the search for well-being and reassurance in a context of generalized anxiety [2 - 5].

The current agro-industrial model is often associated with anonymous exchanges between contractors and a distanced relationship between producers and consumers [6, 7] [8]. This has become a source of conflict between large corporations and consumers whose knowledge of the food world is increasing. The context of a food system in which we no longer know who produces the food or how it is produced no longer fits the economic context of the Internet age with the emergence of a responsible consumer who knows what he is eating. Today's consumers want to eat well and better. They understand very well that food and health are closely linked. The increasing use of the Internet by consumers and eaters to obtain nutritional information, while not yet sufficiently appreciated by food manufacturers, is having an indirect impact on the relationship between manufacturers and consumers. Several studies have shown that the goals of digital information include raising awareness of the impact of food on health [9, 10], reducing food waste [11], and the benefits of a balanced diet [12]. A large number of applications developed to help consumers better understand nutritional information on products: Yuka, Open food facts, Scan eat... Nutrition and wellness websites seem to coincide with consumers' desire to take more responsibility for their own diets. This increase in consumer responsibility for what they consume and changing their eating habits to benefit their health and the environment is due to the increase in nutritional information offered by Internet technologies. This fact should encourage manufacturers in the agri-food sector in their efforts to increase the transparency of their offer and strengthen the health positioning of their brands.

The redefinition of power between consumers and brands is the result of the emergence of new Internet technologies that have transformed the consumer from a passive consumer, unaware of his food GDL (good dominant logic) [13], to an active consumer, aware of what he eats and able to choose his food through his collaboration with brands SDL (service-dominant logic) [13]. Today, it is the consumer who signals to food manufacturers what products he wants to find in supermarkets and hypermarkets: he becomes the consumer stakeholder (SDL). Consumers are taking on an important role in shaping the food world of tomorrow. Thanks to digital devices, they have more and more power and are advocating for an equal relationship with brands.

State of Art

1. Internet Technologies as a Source of Redefinition of Roles between Producer and Consumer-eater

1.1 The relation being jostled towards a dialogue between producers consumers/eaters

Internet technologies have transformed how the consumer has access to nutritional information for food choices. This consumer is more and more informed and becomes an

actor in his diet. The consumer can now have access to multiple sources of information when buying a food product, in addition to the information provided by brand producers, distributors or any other food professional. The mass of nutritional and culinary information on the Internet is therefore now involved in the decision-making of the consumer and food producers must therefore take this into account.

As stated [14] in the pre-Internet economy, consumers do not have expert power because of information asymmetries; information being held mainly by brands. Many consumer-eaters do not fully understand the nutritional information provided on labels or how to interpret it when choosing a food offer. In addition, dietary characteristics have important effects on healthy consumption [15]. But various barriers to healthy eating include the ability to manage time and make healthy food choices [16].

Thanks to the strong pressure of Internet technologies, consumers are now surrounded by all kinds of nutritional information when choosing their products. But information alone is not enough to make a healthy choice. Therefore, consumers must take on the role of analyzing and interpreting nutritional information. He is asking manufacturers to share product attributes and not hide any of the information that is important in making a food choice. This is done through a nutrition rating system on packaging to help consumers make healthier food choices in stores [17]. Or use nutrition apps that provide summary information about the nutrient content of foods, sometimes using colour-coded labels such as the nutrition index on the packaging. They help users process the nutrition information.

The spread of the Internet is helping to reduce information asymmetries and improve market transparency for consumers [18 - 24]. Consumers can learn about brands, products, and services more cheaply and very quickly. The boom in social media, food websites, and nutrition apps has expanded the information available to consumers and contributed to the emergence of new practices for sharing culinary and nutrition information, leading to changes in attitudes, behaviours, and food culture [25 - 26].

1.2 The relationship between consumer/eater/producer is moving towards immersion

As [27] says, people become what they eat. Today's consumers are oriented to foods that give them a sense of their appearance and identity and connect them to producers. They orient themselves to healthy products, responsible and ethical signs and symbols of their identity and belonging to a consumer society. Food is no longer a simple necessity of life but becomes a means of pleasure, a means of social integration and a reflection of one's image. "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are [28]. Food has always been part of the construction of religious, social, regional or national identities. The choice of food even defines the essence of a person and it would then be possible to define his identity by what he eats. The act of eating is involved in the construction of one's identity and connection with the environment through one's life experience.

The choice of food is considered as a means of communication [29] social bonding, a sign of distinction [30 - 32] and social integration [33, 34], as well as a transmission of collective norms [35]. "Food is no longer just an element for survival but becomes an instrument in the service of health, pleasure, social integration, appearance, or the expression of a certain ethic" [36].

In the agri-food sector, the management literature has often studied consumption in terms of consumer experience [37, 38]. This change has been observed since the late 1990s, which mark the emergence of a hedonistic consumer, more interested in subjective

parameters such as symbolic meaning, emotions, sensationalism, and more generally in the irrational and affective dimensions of consumer behaviour [39 - 42].

The importance of a healthy diet is increasingly part of the broader concept of well-being and goes far beyond the narrow notion of health and the search for a purely 'medical' outcome [43]. This observation allows food companies to clearly understand that this new consumer does not only want to talk about the environmental and health quality of the product, but also wants to live experiences full of emotions, a sense of identity and enjoyment through healthy food. So today's consumption is more focused on responsible, hedonistic and sociable enjoyment.

1.3 The relation between consumer/eater/producer is moving towards co-creation

New Internet technologies have legitimized the power of consumers, manifested in their ability to directly influence brands. These technologies would further enhance the legitimate power of consumers by challenging the traditional division of roles within the market relationship [44]. Traditionally, it is the manufacturer who determines the characteristics of the product and is seen as legitimate for doing so. Returning to the three strategies of [45], consumer decisions are essentially about buying - or not buying - the product rather than defining the product itself.

The brand would then be legitimised to design a product and offer it at a certain price, the legitimate consumer could evaluate it and accept or reject the offer. This means that consumers have long been the second most important actors in food production, after industrialists and supermarkets. They are passive members of the production chain. This view has its roots in the prevailing logic of GDL, which sees consumers as passive actors who destroy value. Nowadays, with new Internet technologies, the producer/consumer/eater relationship is being rethought. The consumer has the right to participate in the creation of the product from the beginning of the production chain and is seen as a source of expertise that can create value together with brands [13]. This is very possible today as the Internet allows brands to build strong online communities where they can listen to and interact with thousands of customers around the world [46 - 49].

The new Internet technologies are turning the consumer who buys into a consumer who produces and who is able to engage and collaborate with brands. These new technologies are fostering the emergence of an empowered consumer who is rebalancing the exchange between brands and consumers, and the balance of power tends to be reversed [50]. In short, new Internet technologies are transforming the relationship between producer and consumer or eater from a silent one to an active one. This starts with consumers being able to open a dialogue with producers on a range of information about products that should extend from the production chain to consumption through lighting and transparency of product ingredients. Through clear, legible and understandable labels or through the targeted digital use of nutritional applications. Then, identifying their nutrition through immersion in experiences that are charged with meaning and emotion.

And finally, the ability to create their own product by participating in online platforms that are upstream of the food chain and focused on connecting with consumers whose goal is to consume healthy products. Producers are perplexed by the new practises of consumers, who are surrounded by a wealth of nutritional and culinary information that technology enables and gives back to them the power over their food choices. This gradual change in relationships has been defined by [51] as a state of consumer empowerment.

2. Internet technologies and empowerment

In the logic of active consumer-eater-partner and collaborative food production decision SDL (service-dominant logic) [52], information is not only a means for more efficient nutrition and better health. It is also the medium for a change called empowerment. The term is difficult to translate because it encompasses several dimensions: Accountability, empowerment, facilitation or enabling, allocation of power [53]. To achieve these goals, the use of the Internet is an important platform. The concept of empowerment has become a strategic issue for food stakeholders, which is one of the goals of food prevention, promotion, and health protection.

Thanks to the Internet, the relationship between producer, consumer and eater has reached a higher level: consumers are better informed and make better use of food resources to find out which products should be consumed. Knowledge is better shared, which promotes information sharing in general. Consumers - eaters - feel empowered, responsible, have more control over their food, and are better able to make choices or actively participate.

The time you spend buying food is better spent because you have already learned the basics before you buy. There are other benefits as well: Online support groups are a source of encouragement and exchange between consumers and eaters; thanks to access to data on nutritional applications, to websites dedicated mainly to nutrition, and through exchanges with like-minded people, manufacturers improve the quality of their products and put more emphasis on them. The use of the Internet could also encourage consumer and eater participation in food production.

Today, consumers can choose which food producer they want to interact with. This aspect is very important given the new Internet technologies that promote the consumer's right to participate in food production online. There is also the possibility to visit the production facilities and see how the product is made from production to consumption: This strategy is followed by a group of brands whose goal is to involve consumers in the production of their own product, and has proven successful in the food sector: As in the case of the consumer brand "c'est qui le patron?". A new food brand launched in the French market at the end of 2016 that aims to involve consumers.

At the end of 2016, a new food brand entered the French market with the aim of empowering consumers. This brand stands out for its efforts to empower consumers. (On the brand's website, you can select the future products of the range and their main characteristics). As a result, the brand "dyalna" was launched in several countries around the world and finally in Morocco. In marketing, this process is called an empowerment strategy. This is a strategy initiated by companies to involve consumers in the development of new products. There are two main strategies used by these companies [54]: empowerment to create and empowerment to select. The use of online food information sources could help consumers better meet their own food needs. Indeed, consumption of online food information helps reduce information asymmetry between producers and consumers and encourages them to participate in the product development process. The notion that Internet use has an "empowering effect" on consumers is widespread in the academic literature [22], [55 - 57].

Empowerment is a force that can help consumers develop and maintain healthy behaviours related to chronic disease. It is a behaviour change process that focuses on the individual. Today's consumers clearly understand that food and health are closely linked. Maintaining good health requires good nutrition. Eating healthy is a major concern for them, but apart from the will, it takes knowledge and time to research and process all the

information about the many foods they compare and choose every day. In this context, the use of new Internet technologies seems to be a solution to simplify information processing and decision making. These Internet technologies help consumers make healthy food choices. And why? Because consumer behaviour has completely changed. For them, a healthy diet contributes to achieving important goals such as health and well-being.

Eating is the most important action of any person who pays attention to what he eats and the one that can have the greatest impact on his health. A healthy diet helps maintain health in a society of individualistic, thoughtful consumers who rely on their wits to make food choices. Indeed, the Internet has long been considered by various experts to be "one of the axes of individual responsibility" for one's health [58], [59]. In other words, individuals who are aware of the relationship between food consumption and health. This process is called psychological empowerment in marketing: It is defined by [60] as "a subjective state of consumers associated with the perception of having more power than before."

Conclusion

This literature review suggests that the development of the food internet, and in particular the way consumers and producers use it, is helping to change the relationship between producers and consumers. The most important finding concerns the shift in the balance of knowledge and power in food. This shift requires a new attitude on the part of food producers: they must adapt to this new context. If the relationship is destabilised today, consumers' use of the Internet is not a threat. Rather, it is an opportunity for brands to reshape their relationship with their consumers. They need to show their commitment to healthier and more responsible food to meet the expectations of new consumers. These changes in consumer behaviour are mainly due to technological advances, the health crisis, distrust of food, etc. The result is a new postmodern, even "hypermodern" consumer. Also, the current mutation of food and the new demand, which has become more demanding, diverse and variable, are increasingly focused on the quality of products in terms of health.

The current agricultural and food market is characterised by a wide range of offers. Therefore, the professionals of the sector must offer good and healthy products that are increasingly specific. The new consumer seeks dialogue with producers about the quality of the product, he wants to have pleasant, unique and unforgettable experiences that involve sharing creations and sharing values with brands. And he wants to be involved with industrialists in the production of the product. This encourages manufacturers to adapt to this complex environment and go beyond the purely utilitarian dimensions of consumption. To gain a competitive advantage in food consumption, it is necessary to take into account the new consumer trends, which necessarily involve the experiential, symbolic, emotional and creative dimensions of the consumer who is aware of what he consumes, or rather, the "empowered" consumer.

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