EXPOSÉ

Social media impact on consumer’s food choice

Submitted by
Andres de Oliveira Cornejo
European Master in Business Studies
Universität Kassel

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ABSTRACT

Title

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Background

Studies about consumer behavior and the motivations behind it have been investigated for a long time and are still a very debated topic (Ajzen, 1991, 2002; Armitage & Conner, 2001; Sheppard, Hartwick, & Warshaw, 1988). When it concerns food, and more specifically, food choice, there are many sides and aspects which can be debated. Psychologic, biologic, sociologic, business and management contexts are only few within many other possibilities (Quevedo-Silva et al., 2016; van der Laan, Ridder, Viergever, & Smeets, 2011; van Huyslenbroek, Aertsens, Verbeke, Mondelaers, & van Huyslenbroeck, 2009). The role and definition of social media has been presented in different studies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and even if some definitions are not exactly the same, one thing is common and validated, that the use of this tool on consumer’s life’s changed in somehow not only the way of choosing products, services, but also looking for food (Abbar, Mejova, & Weber, 2015; Russo & Simeone, 2017).

Purpose and Contribution

The aim of this study is to correlate the use of social media with consumer’s food choice, and by doing so provide managerial implications to the restaurant and food industry. More specifically, digging up on this area, what is the impact that user generated content (UCG) or consumer generated images (CGI) have on consumers decisions before decide either or not going to a restaurant. To the best of the author’s knowledge this is a very recent topic and there are only few studies which analyzed this phenomenon and provided managerial implications. Indeed, this topic is very important and some researches confirmed the importance of social network (perhaps the biggest platform where social media can be shared), being the second most cited topic in the management, business and food study field between 2000 and 2015 (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). The relevance of User Generated Content (UGC) is also presented and analyzed by other authors (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016; Luca, 2015; O’Hern & Kahle, 2013). Hence it enables companies and why not consumers to understand the relation and implications of the use of technology, by assessing causes and consequences in these topics.
Method

Independent variables related with consumer’s food choice would be utilized, for instance quality, tastiness perception, type of occasion, trendiness, healthy or unhealthy associations, price. Those and other variables will be supported by the Theory of Planned Behaviour which consider beliefs, subjective norms and perceived control factors. Those variables will be correlated with the dependent variable which is food choice (final affected behavior). Therefore, online questionnaires, designed with Sphynx IQ2 will be addressed to men and women who utilize social media as a tool of food choice. Approach used is of quantitative deductive type. Data will be analyzed using regression analysis.

Keywords: social media, user generated content, images, consumer behavior, food choice.
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Introduction

Background

The last decade and a half was marked by important transformations of marketing. Technological innovation is a constant phenomenon and present in the development of digital, social media, and mobile (DSMM) marketing. Among the innovations the advance and access to Internet came as one of the main important benefits, either to the consumer and even before, during the 70’s to companies. Speed of connection, social media websites and apps like Messenger, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and the combination of those platforms were the final and current results of the globalization and spread of information around the world. (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016, p. 159).

A content platform, Olapic, made a research together with Censuswide with the objective to provide insights, based on an online survey, into why, what and how users (consumers) of platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat) create, find and enlist with user-generated content (Olapic, 216, p.3). Results showed that around 45% of the 4,578 interviewees look at user-generated images for inspiration once a day or more. Also, seventy-four percent of them have uploaded images followed by hashtags about a brand. When it comes to awareness and brand advocacy it was found that consumers trust more on images published on social media by other consumers than any other advertisement. This data is of extremely importance when someone considers that one of the most shared “products” on the social network is food. The options for doing so increase every year and set competition between companies which are mentioned on those platforms and also companies who are still not mentioned but who want to get its own part on this niche.

Technology has facilitated novel market behaviors, interactions and experiences. Apps like Instagram enabled people to communicate, share moments, feelings, experiences, but also created possibility to companies to understand more what consumers are thinking, how they behave, where they buy, what do they prefer (Gallegos, 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). At the same time, consumers gained more power, on the decision process, on the variability of choices, on their preferences, and on the purchase and choice intentions. Images, texts, reviews, videos, all those types of data are of extremely importance and can be used by the consumers to determine their behaviors but on the other hand it also shape their actions (Spence, Okajima, Cheok, Petit, & Michel, 2016). Social networks count for the second most mentioned topic between 2000 and 2015. Citations correlated to this overpass more than 1,100 and other topics
are also correlated, for instance consumer-focused and user generated content. The former describes and investigates buyer and consumer behaviour, and the last also important for this study assess content inserted by consumers in online platforms, most of them are online reviews but it can be also considered images (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Still in the beginning of this century the Internet was considered a very important element, in fact Lamberton & Stephen described it: “Internet could help individuals by providing access to other consumers, either as audience members or as information sources. Qualitative researchers drew attention to the fact that consumers sought self-definition through expression in both personal portals and online communities” (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016, p. 152).

**Mobile marketing**

There are many types of mobile marketing applications which can be used for different purposes, depending on the goal of the company or business. For instance, one of the most famous types is mobile social media (Yadav, Joshi, & Rahman, 2015, p. 336) which is a strong and powerful tool mechanism of communication. Said that, communication do not only involve the exchange of information among users but also enable a third element, for instance a company, to establish any kind of relation with the consumer (Yadav, Joshi, & Rahman, 2015). This relation implies offer of one service or product in exchange of money, what is known as purchase. The phenomenon seems quite easy to understand, however the explanation of how this relation between consumer and company became fast, direct and auto regulated is not so simple.

Communication is the basis for this whole process and to describe the role of the user of a mobile cell phone nowadays it is necessary to comprehend through which channel it occurs. This relation would not be possible without the existence of the internet, more precisely the network. Login in any social platform can be made by the use of wireless local area network or phone carrier signal for example. Yadav, Joshi, & Rahman defined the omnipresent network as the platform where mobile marketing is done and where any person who possess a dispositive (computer, netbook or mobile phone) can be part of the system and exercise different activities within this virtual space (Yadav et. Al, 2015).

**User Generated Content**

UGC is totally different nowadays from what existed during the 80’s. 2017’s user-generated content encompasses technological drivers (extremely fast connection and powerful devices), economic drivers and social drivers, the millennials or “digitally born” are an example of the
last driver. Moreover, UGC presents a new relation of who creates and who sees what has been created, thus this is characterized by a shift of power from the enterprise to the consumer (O’Hern & Kahle, 2013).

This shift of power enable gives the possibility to consumers to express their opinions, perceptions, evaluations, experiences and also a more subjective type of information which is feelings. One may argue that consumers had this power before, indeed they had, however before the emergence, boom and expansion of social media websites like Facebook or Twitter or Instagram, the speed and range of people who were getting in contact with any type of information was not that huge (O’Hern & Kahle, 2013).

Social media

The term social media belongs to another previous important event which was the creation of “Open Diary” by Bruce and Susan Abelson, this was an old version of what we know as social networking site which allowed users to publish texts into one community. The advent of the concept of blog came right after and the participation of people as users on the internet were just increasing at the same time that the access and advance of technology was happening as well (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60). More and nowadays well-known social networking sites started to appear in the beginning of 2000’s, for instance, MySpace and Facebook. With those platforms the term Social Media aroused and became stronger.

Social media comprises two directly related concepts which are User Generated Content and Web 2.0. The Web 2.0 basically implies the utilization of the World Wide Web with the additional tool of modifying content previously created and published. So, for example, Adobe Flash is considered one of the outcomes of the Web 2.0 enabling users to add animations and audios to web pages (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Following this line of reasoning Kaplan & Haenlein define Social media as: “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61)

Problem statement

Satisfaction of food and appreciation can be assessed through sensorial perceptions tests. Most of the studies did it showing real food to respondents and applying Fixed-point scales (FPS) or visual analogue scales (VAS), which are examples of rating methods (Andersen & Hyldig,
2015, p. 9). Through social media websites, platforms and applications, only two basically sensorial perceptions can be played: vision and hearing. Therefore, suggesting and determining which factors impact consumer’s food choice when using a mobile and having access to user generated content seems easy because only two sensorial perceptions are involved. Conversely it is not, due to the high complexity of possible associations which come to a person’s mind when a picture or video of food is showed to him or her.

Furthermore, visual presentation can change also taste, odor and even flavor perceptions (Delwiche, 2012; van der Laan et al., 2011). Thus, as also presented by another author, “the way in which a food is plated (i.e., presented visually) exerts an impact on people’s flavour perception, and can modify people’s subsequent food choices” (Spence et al., 2016, p. 55) or as suggested by a restaurant consultant and publisher of the CODE Bulletin: “I’m sure some restaurants are preparing food now that is going to look good on Instagram” (Saner, 2015). That said, the number of possibilities, restaurants, types of foods, reviews are way higher in numbers on the internet than the variables that a consumer who is walking on the streets has. What also leverages another phenomenon which is the exacerbation of physiological hunger due to the enormous and frequent exhibition of virtual foods (images and videos), which directly or indirectly affect consumer decisions (Spence et al., 2016, p. 54). By considering all the information mentioned above, it is evident that the food industry and business relies quite a lot on what consumers “post, upload, share” on different social networking platforms. The content comes in the form of images, videos, and also texts, which can be considered as reviews for example. For this study images are the most important factor, and all the possible subjective, objective, cognitive and other type of relations are extremely considered for delineating the final consumer behavior.

The sight of images (food) is the problem and solution at the same time for understanding the reasoning and justification of consumers decision’s. Any behavior, according to the Theory of Planned Behavior can me motivated by beliefs, subjective normal and perceived control. More about this theory will be presented in the section Theoretical Background. For now, it is important to understand that emotional, situational and objective factors are outcomes and interpretations of what a person sees on her or his Instagram story or another Instagram profile for example. Those above-mentioned factors will shape the intentions of the consumer and therefore his final behavior which can be going to eat restaurant A, not going to eat or for example choosing another restaurant with the same type of food or even changing completely the type of food and restaurant.
Structure
After explaining terms and concepts of Social Media, Social Networking and User Generated Content, the research questions and hypotheses will be elaborated and tested. The methodology of this study will be designed based and in function of the theoretical background of the Theory of Planned Behavior. The study will be conducted in Germany, but also other countries may be target of questionnaire and analysis. The final conclusion will possibly, based on the TPB explain the main reasons for determined type of food choice (behavior) and it is assumed that from the data analysis, managerial suggestions to specific or maybe in an overall, companies will be made.

Theoretical Background
Theory of Planned Behavior will be used as the theoretical background of this study.

Theory of Planned Behavior
The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is an extension and continued model of the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen 1985, 1991; Ajzen and Madden, 1986). This research model has been used by many authors when trying to predict behavioral intentions, therefore it is present either in social psychologic studies or in marketing and management, which is the case of this Master Thesis. Some previous researches (Armitage and Conner, 2001; Collins and Carey, 2007; Hansen et. Al, 2004) have been made and also different experiments which in somehow tested the valence and applicability of this theory (Coary & Poor, 2016; Collins & Carey, 2007; Hansen, Møller Jensen, & Stubbe Solgaard, 2004; Thompson, Haziris, & Alekos, 1994; Thompson & Vourvachis, 1995; Yazdanpanah & Forouzani, 2015; Zanoli & Naspetti, 2002)

The theory, as mentioned by other author “is one of the most widely researched models for predicting behavioral intentions by social psychologists (Armitage and Conner, 2001; Collins and Carey, 2007; Fielding et al., 2008; Norman et al., 2007)” (Chen & Tung, 2014).

The two components which affect the Behavioral Intention, attitude and subjective norm can be independently measured. Attitudes towards the behavior is composed by beliefs about the results of a certain behavior, which in this case considers the likelihood of the consumer to perform a behavior. On the other hand, subjective norm is predicted by normative beliefs about what relevant other people (salient referents) say or commend, measured by motivation to comply with what has been said by them.

The model is defined according to this figure:
Figure 1: The Theory of Planned Behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001).

![The Theory of Planned Behavior](image)

**Literature Review**

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Research Gap, Questions and Hypotheses

Research Gap
After the overview of the above-mentioned literature and other many articles, a research gap was founded and it concerns, as mentioned before, the impact of social media (more specifically user generated content) on consumers’ food choice. A recent study published in the Journal of Consumer Marketing has analyzed how consumer-generated images shape consumption of products and services on the food domain (Coary & Poor, 2016). However, the author analyzed the choice for healthy versus indulgent food and how the delay caused by the CGI impacted consumers’ savoring.
The research gap which this study tries to answer was also suggested by Coary & Poor. Social media, consumer’s food choice and consumer behavior are not definitely new topics. As mentioned before they were already discussed, debated and explained in different literatures and fields. The topic of this study and the research gap emerge from the combination of those three terms wrote before. Understand the impacts that the internet has caused in consumers life is one of the first steps, afterwards it is also important to associate this with the advent of the use of mobile devices and the so-called social media in this last century. Moreover, the creation of networking platforms made possible that people started sharing what they like, what they do, how they do, when they do and so on. Said that, food as a topic of discussion between friends, families and groups just came naturally. The possibility of sharing it gave consumers more power and “weakened” the food industry. This comes with brackets because the right use of social media as a tool to target consumers’ needs is what will delineate the success or not of a company. And within this tangled scenario, understanding the role of social media on consumer’s behavior is more than a company’s choice, it is a must.

Therefore, this research will try to find the possible reasons, motivations, norms and other possible determinants (which may appear in the short future with the study) associated with consumer-food-choice in social media.

**Research Questions**

Based on the research gap explained above, the possible research questions emerge from the most cited and famous terms associated with hunger, savoring, tasting and food (Jacobsen, Tudoran, & Lähteenmäki, 2017; Köster & Mojet, 2015; Quevedo-Silva et al., 2016; van der Laan et al., 2011; van Huylénbroek et al., 2009). The research questions are:

RQ1: Does the level of food involvement make consumers decide what they eat, by using the social media as a source?

RQ2: Does consumer decision directly impacts on another consumer’s behavior? If yes, how this relation occurs when deciding what to eat by using user generated content?

RQ3: Did consumers start being more critical or demanding or strict towards food quality and taste after the emergence of social networking applications?

RQ4: Do emotions play an important role before the food choice?
Hypotheses

Below-presented hypotheses try to address possible answers associated with the four main research questions made before.

H1: Food involvement is highly related with consumers food choice. However, it does not determine the use of social media as a tool for searching options. Consumers’ use of social media for food choice may occur independently of the level of food involvement. One example can be a child of 15 years old which is highly involved with social media, not with food, nevertheless appealing images of food are capable of catching his attention.

H2: Consumers’ decisions directly impact others, and on the internet, this can be determined by number of shared images, likes or posts. User-generated content is also a determinant on food choice.

H3: Social networking platforms opened fruitful discussions but do not made consumers more critic or demanding when the subject is food.

H4: Positive emotions play an important positive role before deciding what to eat. However, negative emotions do not affect consumers decisions on social media because when sad or mad they do not use social media as a source of research. Therefore, only positive emotions are associated (imply) with the use of social media and food choice, combined.

Limitations of the research

Limitations of this research will be probably associated with the frame, volume and type of respondents. This study relies a lot on consumers which in specific utilize social networking platforms and social media as a tool of food choice. Moreover, the involvement of those consumers with food can dramatically impact the final results, for example some respondents may not consider price as a determinant factor because they already have a good economic life condition. Therefore, the study will try to select the maximum numbers of respondents, in the beginning focusing on consumers with an age between 15 and 50 years old.

Methodology

This last part is dedicated to the elaboration of the methodological part which will be applied in the study. In order to get answers to this research, a quantitative deductive approach you will used. Theory of Planned Behavior will be used as a support of already determinants of
consumers’ behavior. However, the possible associations with this behavior which in this case is the decision of what and where to eat, come from different studies and possible assumptions that may appear during the development of this Master Thesis. A quantitative research will be elaborated by using a software called SphinxIQ2 and afterwards through google platforms and other networking websites an online survey will be launched. The initial target is composed by residents in Germany and Brazil, age between 15 and 50 years old, both genders and who are users of social networking platforms, therefore have access to social media.

**Food involvement**

For this topic, first of all it will be interesting to define the consumers type, between food involved or not. The assess the level of social network activity of this consumer, therefore if he or she access social media once a day, tree times during the week or once a month for example. By doing those two steps, the third would be assess the answer for the main questions and see how those two factors correlate together.

**Consumers’ decision**

First question might be useful to start this second topic, because if consumers do not frequently make food choice on internet, probably the impact on others consumers’ decision will be lower. Still there must or not be an impact and this is probably related with the frequency of access to user generated content.

**Social Networking**

That social networking platforms revolutionized the way people communicate everyone knows, however is it true that the more access to information, data and shared content made consumers more critical? Does this affect their food decisions? Being demanding and critical can be also a determinant of the second question, this relation will be studied.

**Emotions**

The last part of the study is dedicated to emotions. Not towards food, emotions before the sight of food. There’s a slight but very important difference here. Because the study does not want to investigate which emotions are related with food, and neither which emotions are created when people see food. This is an important topic, but which would be addressed in another research. Said that, it is important to understand if people emotions impact their food choice, which indirectly and before, implies login into social networking applications and start looking for food.
## Work Plan

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<td>Exposé</td>
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<tr>
<td>Now – 15.11.17</td>
<td>Formulate Research Questions and Hypotheses. Delineate the methodology and Work on Questionnaire design &amp; pretest.</td>
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<tr>
<td>16.11.17 – 05.12.17</td>
<td>Field Research, Launch online survey</td>
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