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## **Communicating local products on the web: a comparison between Italian and English-language blogs**

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**Abstract:** The web is increasingly ranged as one of the options available to agri-food small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in order to face the challenge on how to provide personal taste experiences and manage differentiation in a global market. This research aims at analysing users' lexical choices in unstructured web sources, identifying the essential determinants in the local products web communication, while highlighting the latter's contribution to both consumer empowerment and SMEs' competitiveness. A content analysis of Italian and English-language agri-food blogs was done, in order to retrieve the most frequent concepts from and detect the language used in such sources, thus guiding SMEs in their market decisions. Managerial implications are discussed, due to the sector's role in the development of the whole Mediterranean area and its ability to gain local preservation and territorial sustainable development.

**Keywords:** local products; web communication; technology marketing; innovation; Italy; agri-food; small and medium-sized enterprises; SMEs; blog; marketing intelligence.

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## 1 Introduction

Two main phenomena are generally recognised as revolutionary both in managerial practices and in consumers’ everyday life during the last 20 years: *globalisation*, that is to say a greater interdependence among world’s economies often considered as a synonym for ‘standardisation’, and the shifting from *production* to *information* as a key for competitiveness (Sambamurthy et al., 2003). With this regard, if technology was defined by Levitt (1986) as the powerful force driving the world toward a converging commonality, new technologies are now considered as the most powerful drivers towards differentiation, since they promote new forms of sociality and create a more interactive relationship with stakeholders.

Even though it cannot be properly defined a technology in itself (O’Reilly, 2007), the web undoubtedly re-designed the enterprise – customer relationship, by

imposing a meaningful overturn in both traditional marketing approaches and business communication paradigms (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). In fact, on the one hand it extended the learning process between producers and clients to consumers, who can easily exchange information and consumption experiences through virtual communities; on the other, it made the market 'a forum of conversations and interactions' (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004), where the hierarchal and mono-directional (from the producer to the client) communication between two subjects has been replaced by a network model, in which the enterprise is just one of the different web users involved in a peer relationship (Esch et al., 2006). This has triggered off innumerable processes of co-created *content* (Vargo and Lush, 2008), *meanings* (Galimberti, 2011) and *values* (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004), thus giving the consumer a more active role within the value chain.

Moreover, in a world defined by rapid changes, with a greater challenge towards social and environmental problem-solving, the web is increasingly ranged as one of the options available to small and medium-sized enterprises (hereinafter SMEs) in order to compete in a global scenario. In fact, while production systems have become interconnected and supply chains have become supply nets, SMEs using the web not only as a communication tool, but rather in business applications for both market sensing (or monitoration) and insight (or design of marketing activities), may reach different benefits: in terms of effectiveness in promotional strategies, numbers of market to be in contact with (even aside from e-commerce), establishment of channels that facilitate loyalty in purchases and commitment in production (Kotler et al., 2014).

This is particularly true with regard to 'local products', where their origin from a specific geographical area is highlighted, as it conveys a high degree of differentiation (in terms of organoleptic features as well as of production techniques, which guarantee specific qualitative standards) thanks to the strong relationship developed with the territory where the product comes from (Maizza, 2010).

Such unique characteristics are not perceptible exclusively in reference to the *geographic component* (intended as a localisation of the production area) but also in its coexistence with a specific *cultural* (converted in values, beliefs, knowledge, and traditions, that make peculiar the production process), *social* (relationships, sense of community, and rules of behaviour well known and diffused among the producers of the related territory), *climatic* and *historical* heritage that permeates the entire production chain (Scorrano et al., 2013). However, for such a heritage to be transformed into an economic value, local firms have to act similarly to the Marshallian districts (Rullani, 2004), by sharing cultural basis and mechanisms of value which enable the creation of quality, the reproduction of knowledge and the interaction with external markets. Moreover, a strong *brand name capital* is necessary (Kapferer, 2012), which, acting through *image* and *reputation*, confers local product *awareness* (that is to say a clear identification, as a result from the collective action of tangible and intangible resources of a specific territory), *appeal* and *fame* (Rosato and Scorrano, 2011).

For this purpose, communication has a fundamental importance (Scorrano, 2013) in making people aware of those territorial features that have a decisive impact on the agricultural production and, conveying a series of symbolic and experiential elements geared at creating positive perceptions and unique associations in the consumer's mind. In fact, beyond the cognitive or tecno-functional content of the message transmitted, the 'story' of the relationship between a product and its territory (which cannot exclude, for

example, the eno-gastronomic culture or the connection among raw materials, cultivation techniques and organoleptic features of the product) causes local SMEs to join their forces and to be constantly, enduringly and coherently committed to the protection and conservation of territorial resources, by guaranteeing the quality and authenticity of the food products.

The growth of such a complementary relationship between the territory and the product boosts, in the perspective of systemic consonance (Golinelli, 2000), the competitive and innovative potential of both. In fact, the strong linkage to the territory, the distance from mass production practices, the ability to valorise food varieties in local markets and to produce specialities for niches, give the product an image of uniqueness and healthiness which is not reproducible by competitors and which represents a great source of differentiation able to increase a producer's reliability. This image in turn involves a consumer into highly committed experiences that strengthen his/her brand loyalty by allowing him/her, to taste a product's authenticity and to dive into the atmosphere and mood of its territory. It also reduces perceived risks and transactional costs connected to the purchase, because the territory guarantees certain qualitative attributes incorporated by the product (Fait et al., 2014). Moreover, allowing those benefits deriving from marketing efforts to be spread from the product itself to the whole farming area, a well-known local product is able to reinforce local attractiveness and strengthen the territory's brand value, demonstrating that it is not the result of a fictitious or short-term process but the proper realisation, in a long-term perspective, of the promises conveyed through communication.

As such, the local product becomes the facilitator of attention for the territory, and the territory becomes the facilitator of attention for the local product. Therefore, when this synergic and mutual relationship is established, an even more complete strategy of customer involvement could take place by promoting engaging experiences, by encouraging word of mouth to positively affect the branding processes, and by exploiting all possibilities included within the web instruments (Pelka and Kaletka, 2011).

Based on the assumption that the web is a precious instrument to valorise local economies and to increase the opportunities for agri-food SMEs to de-localise their products thanks to its ability to offer policy makers a deeper and valuable insight of the consumption dynamics (Canavan et al., 2007), the aim of the current research is twofold. First, it is to highlight the contribution of web communication to agri-food SMEs competitiveness, particularly in terms of shifting away from traditional marketing techniques; and second is to analyse users' lexical choices in unstructured web sources, by identifying the essential determinants in the local products web communication.

The paper is structured as follows: after a literature review on how internet marketing has boosted consumer empowerment, marketing strategies and communication patterns related to local products are discussed. Then, the main results of an on-field content analysis of Italian and English-language agri-food blogs are discussed, in order to retrieve the most frequent concepts from and detect the language used in such sources, thus guiding SMEs in their market decisions. Managerial implications are further explored, due to the sector's role in the development of the whole Mediterranean area and its capability to gain local preservation and territorial sustainable development.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 *The connection between web communication and SMEs' competitiveness in the agri-food sector*

The possibility of sharing information, experiences and meanings in *flow* situations (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), which are much more emotionally involving and intensely experiential than when they occur in traditional contexts as, for example, in retail stores or through mass media advertising, has given web users the power of orientating other users' attitudes and behaviours, in all phases of the purchase process (Berthon et al., 2007). In addition, the birth of the semantic Web 3.0, which is defined as a mesh of information linked up to be easily processable by machines on a global scale (Siau and Tian, 2004), and its coexistence with the people-centric Web 2.0, which links people and users thus generating user content capability (Murugesan, 2009), have provided a large number of information sources and virtual spaces, as well as growing sophistication in terms of efficiency and effectiveness of the virtual communities and software instruments for knowledge extraction and discovery. In this way, informative asymmetries between the enterprise and the consumer have been weakened, while individuals' learning circuits have been widened, thus enabling the production of new knowledge through interactions and shared experiences and simultaneously leading to the reinforcement of the consumer empowerment process (Pires et al., 2006).

In particular, the latter is recognisable in:

- a the reduction of the enterprise's control of communicational content and flux (Gorry and Westbrook, 2009) through the development of a never-ending dialogue where access, transparency and understanding of risk-benefits are the pivot for value co-creation
- b the generation of more informed and aware paths of consumption, thanks to the possibility to easily monitor and promptly report inconsistencies or non-fulfilment in companies' behaviour, thus triggering word of mouth on a global scale (Fombrun et al., 2000)
- c the increase of the user's power of weighing on brand reputation, influencing the success or failure of a brand, product or service (Brown and Reingen, 1987).

Therefore, SMEs need to seriously evaluate their customer orientation that, far from the mere adoption of a specific technology, is connected to its culture and reputation: that is to say, it has to take shape in the enterprise's growing capacity of real-time listening and quick answering to consumer requests, need, tastes, interests, and feedbacks, as well as in that of analysing the way its brand is discussed and perceived on an even more pronounced multi-channel purchase process. Otherwise, the risk is the breakdown of trust relationships and loyal behaviours; the latter made even more ephemeral by the reduction of the lock-in effect which, on the contrary, grows in presence of informative asymmetries. This is the reason why, to be effective, communication and marketing strategies for SMEs in the sector have to rely on a cognitive, a relationship, and cooperative level.

In the current era, new hedonistic needs have found in technologies a perfect solution to develop interpersonal relationships in spite of the long distances among actors and local firms can develop their strategies on a global market without losing their locality or their linkage with the territory, thus increasing consumers' appreciation of localisms and traditional specialties. The cognitive dimension is related to the concept that is not the information (whose overabundance can disorientate the consumers in taking a decision) by itself, but its relevance for the consumers, that becomes a key point. The most direct consequence of that is when SMEs extract knowledge on customers' interests from their own conversations, by defining a topic, by searching the most-used keywords and by identifying other semantically related words within the reference domain of interest (Caione et al., 2013). This allows them to gather functional suggestions for a complete improvement of the product/service and towards the development of innovation (Cova and Dalli, 2009).

The relationship dimension, on the other hand, is based on the capability of the producers, or the distributors, to create a strong linkage with consumers. That is to say, SMEs have to delve into a stream of intersubjective and multidirectional conversations, in order to build and nourish a set of connections through one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one and many-to-many tools (Hoffman and Novak, 1996) that enhance the customers' possibility to express their own identity and creativity through storytelling and socialisation (Brown et al., 2005), as well as to live unique, deeply engaging and memorable experiences. In terms of competitiveness, these connections increase corporate reputation, as they generate trust through transparency, and fasten affective ties, by developing different forms of *brand interaction* (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) and *brand engagement* (Wenyu and Krishnamurthy, 2007), that both make the buying process more acknowledgeable, interactive and enjoyable.

Finally, to stabilise the relational and trust aspects in transactions on the web, increase the amount of clear information conveyed to the market and strengthen their own competitive advantage, SMEs are also called to share objectives and values on the basis of collaboration, by restructuring B2B relationships in terms of greater interaction and value co-creation (Grieger, 2003). In fact, if initiating cooperation with other players along the entire production chain is effective in allowing the development of creative learning processes, it is just essential in the agri-food industry, where products are a mixture of organoleptic peculiarities, culture, and history, where the perception of quality is influenced by the evocative power of places of origin (Thakor and Lavack, 2003), and where consumption is not only a nutritional matter, but it rather involves emotionally the consumers, who seek for personal and evocative tasting experiences (Sims, 2009). Hence, the capability to differentiate one product from another depends on behaviours and cooperation models developed in the territory and embedded in the product itself, while the improvement of trading functionalities and the expansion of value-added services are the primary lines for the development of platforms projecting the emergence of a more networked agri-food industry with an embedded web infrastructure (Andreini, 2011).

### 3 Research goals and methodology

The current research aims at analysing users' web communication patterns, particularly in terms of verbal content conveyed and with regard to how communication itself is transmitted, in order to highlight the contribution that monitoring of web conversations

has on SMEs' competitiveness. For this purpose, the authors decided to focus on the agri-food industry because of the significant changes that have occurred in the sector (Eastham et al., 2001), and because the interest on local products has been growing year after year. Moreover, changes in food consumption trends have highlighted a major attention to health, organoleptic quality and the rediscovery of people's cultural roots through gastronomic pleasures (Spaargaren et al., 2013), while the European community has reinforced the strong linkage to the territory and the protection of regional recipes, by defending farmers from imitations and consumers from fraud through specific legislative rules. Moreover, within the Horizon 2020 framework program (European Commission, 2011), the primary role of the agri-food sector in the development of the whole Mediterranean area has been widely recognised, thanks to its ability to gain local preservation and territorial sustainable development.

Previous studies (Fritz and Schiefer, 2008; Duffy et al., 2005) have suggested that effective communication is one of the most important determinants for competitiveness in the agri-food sector, both in terms of adequate frequency and information quality. Important research has been conducted on Greek (Manthou et al., 2005; Matopoulos et al., 2007; Baourakis et al., 2002) and UK (Leat and Revoredo-Giha, 2008; Sparkes and Thomas, 2001) SMEs. Thus, there appears to be high demand for research on how the internet's potential as a new engagement tool is exploited in other countries (like Italy, where the agri-food sector covers 9% of the whole GDP).

**Table 1** Data collection

	<i>Italian-language blogs</i>	<i>English-language blogs</i>
N. of texts	1	1
N. of context units	1,816	2,001
Words	12,291	9,569
Lemmas	8,951	7,295
Occurrences	74,182	86,308
Threshold value	7	10
Keywords	938	785

*Source:* Compiled by authors

Aiming to contribute to research, an on-field research of the top ranked Italian and English language blogs has been conducted, analysing users' lexical choices in unstructured web sources. Unstructured sources were preferred over structured since only a small part of the information available online is in a structured format, while the majority is in a semi-structured or unstructured form. During the first step, the top ranked web sources on local products in both the Italian and English language were mapped: the analysis was conducted on January 2015 via Google (as it is the most common search engine) through the queries 'migliori blog agroalimentare' and 'best agrifood blog'. Then, through Alexa, the identified links were evaluated in terms of their global rank, in order to select the first 50 URLs for each language: the global rank was calculated using a combination of the average daily visitors to each source and the page views on the same source over the past three months. Finally, a further validation was conducted by eliminating those sources (social network pages or websites) that were not relevant to the purpose of the survey.

For each language analysed, both basic and in-depth research was conducted. With reference to the text of the identified blogs (74,182 occurrences in Italian sources, 86,308 in English ones), an exclusion list and an algorithm for the normalisation of words with the same semantic root was enforced. The elements on which the research concentrated on were, firstly, the analysis of frequencies, to set the *porosity* of the words, and the identification of specific topics, by grouping words in semantic clusters. Then, correspondence analysis, co-word analysis, and cluster analysis took place through T-Lab; the use of this software is justified by the possibility of identifying not only the most used words but also connections activated by specific words, with the help of neural network models. Finally, through MDS (Sammon's method) similarity matrices were analysed, in order to provide a visual representation of the relationships among the data within a space of reduced dimensions. The input tables were produced using square matrices which contain proximity values (dissimilarities) derived from the calculation of an association index, while the degree of correspondence between the distances among points implied in the MDS map and the matrix input is measured (inversely) by a stress function.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Topics of conversation in Italian and English language agri-food blogs

From the analysis of the first 800 unique and most-frequently used words on each of the analysed blogs, it is possible to identify differences connected to the lexical choices of web users that communicate in Italian compared to the English-speaking ones (see Table 2).

**Table 2** The ten unique words used most frequently by Italian and English speaking web-users referring to agri-food products

<i>Italian-language blogs</i>		<i>English-language blogs</i>	
<i>Word</i>	<i>Single occurrences</i>	<i>Word</i>	<i>Single occurrences</i>
Product	464	Food	384
Italy	282	Land	254
Firm	228	Project	251
New	174	Soil	251
Food	164	Work	232
Quality	171	Rural	190
Sector	137	Development	186
Our	136	Technology	185
Time	102	Business	180
Price	93	Market	167

*Source:* Compiled by authors

The basic informational requirements of Italian-speaking web users focus on product features such as its:



- a origin: see 'Italy' (282 single occurrences), 'our' (136), 'area' (72), or 'campania' (50), all of which are evidence of the value, in terms of competitiveness, of the uniqueness originating from the relationship between a local product and its territory
- b 'quality' (171) which, considered as a synonym for 'safety' (82), is properly guaranteed by the 'law' (122) and expressed through the 'label' (56) and 'certification(s)' (48), the main channels for 'information' (60)
- c 'time' (102), meaning the respect of local traditions and production methods, even though a certain desire for innovation shines through (see the 174 single occurrences of the word 'new')
- d 'price' (93).

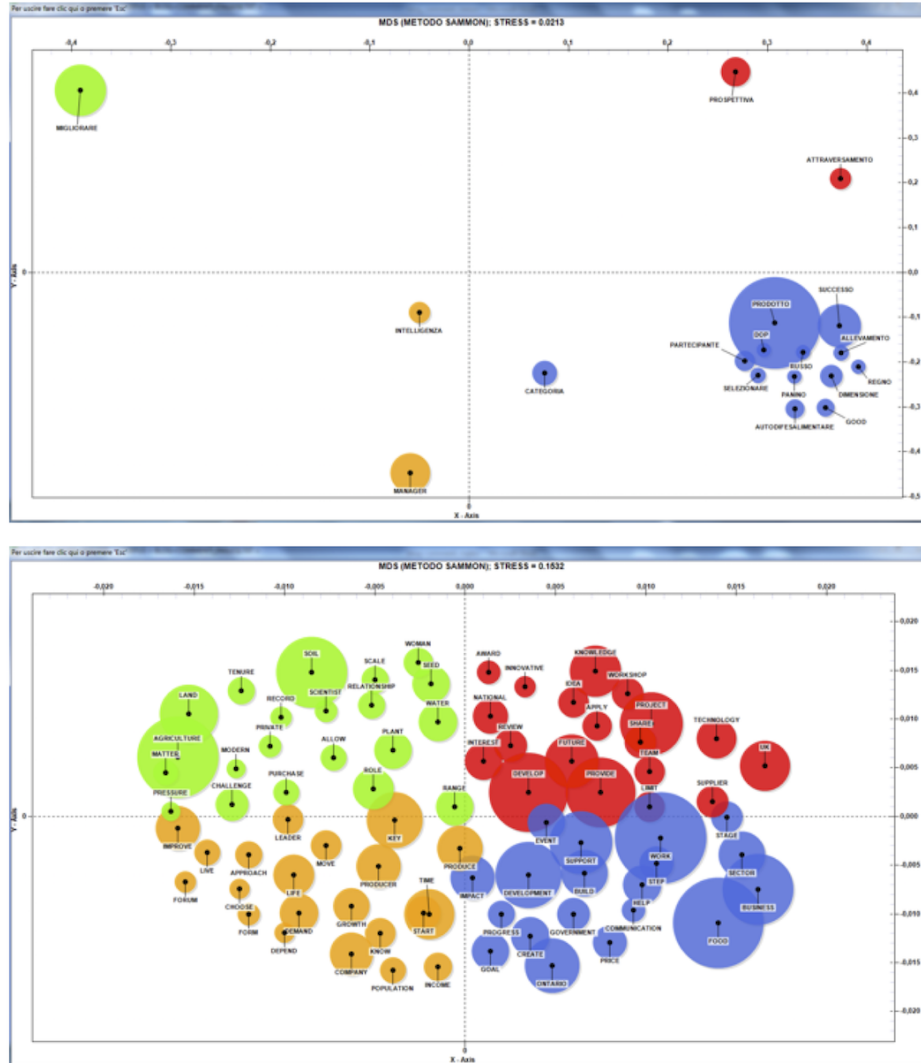
Not only are 'food' (164), 'oil' (103), 'wine' (53), 'milk' (46) and 'meat' (45) evaluated as proper 'product[s]' (329), with great attention paid on the 'firm' dimension (282), the whole 'sector' (137) and the 'supply chain' (47). In this sense, two are the main key drivers for competitiveness perceived by the users: continuous professional 'training' (59) for operators and the respect for the 'environment' (52), even through the development of 'biological' (45) techniques.

On the contrary, even though native English-speaking users mainly perceive the agri-food products as a 'food' (384 single occurrences) whose quality is related to the 'soil' (251) and a guarantee of 'health' (86), their web conversations are influenced by the economic environment and the sustainability issue, both capable of influencing the competitive scenario by exerting pressures and expectations. With this regard, the occurrences of words such as 'project' (251 single occurrences), 'work' (232), 'development' (186), 'business' (180), 'market' (167), 'strategy' (142), 'management' (132) and 'policy' (121) could be considered, and analysed in connection with the attention paid to the 'rural' (190) dimension. 'Knowledge' (130), 'information' and 'innovation' (127) – the latter to be pursued through 'technology' (185) – are perceived as the main triggers for differentiation, even though a certain interest emerges in reference to the 'land' (254) or the 'country' (100) of the product itself.

It is worth noticing that Italian-speaking web users pay greater attention to the 'quality' (quoted 171 times) with respect to 'price' (93), in contrast to English-speaking users (46 and 56 times, respectively), while, regarding marketing mix tools, in both cases essential elements are 'product' (quoted 112 times on English-language blogs and 446 times on the Italian-language ones) and 'price'.

If MDS maps activated by the most-used word on Italian and English-language blogs are compared, many overlapping appear in both cases; however, it seems that Italian consumers (see Figure 1) have a more *process-orientated* approach, as shown by the higher co-relationship of the word 'product' with words such as 'success' and 'participation' and the lower co-relationship with aspects connected to 'category or 'dimension' and 'results', while English speakers are more *output-orientated*, as demonstrated by the fact that the word 'product' correlated to 'food', 'work' and 'development'.

**Figure 1** MDS maps in Italian and English-language blogs (see online version for colours)



Source: Compiled by authors

When studying the clusters, specific topics created by more significant words were identified. Three areas of meanings in particular may be found, linked to the following (see Figure 1):

- a *Contextual elements*: words referring to the sphere of features linked to the geographic area of the product, which are utilised by web users as indicators of product quality (Steenkamp and Geyskens, 2006). Explicit reference to local ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ is also considered, thus emphasising the role of relational and social capital in conferring locality, uniqueness and fame to the product as the result of the collective action of a territory’s tangible and intangible assets.

- b *Cognitive elements*: terms that refer to the intrinsic and extrinsic features of the product and the product line (in this area, terms referring to organisational or marketing elements have been found), which are able to influence consumer decisions to reduce the quantity of information potentially available online (Enneking et al., 2007).
- c *Experimental and emotional elements*: words that link the product within a perceptive system (Tregear and Ness, 2005), which is able to bring to life intense experiences and unique emotions. Within this area of meanings, there is also the interaction with 'consumers' and the respect for their needs as well as the needs of the enterprises of production and the environment, showing how the requests of the triple bottom line increasingly enter web users' conversations.

Finally, the presence of a high number of terms with low frequency but an elevated co-relationship with the words 'territory' and 'quality' has been considered, with a particular reference to 'service', 'information', 'business' and 'results'. This fact shows the need, particularly for Italian agri-food SMEs, to establish a more effective communication relationship with their consumers and to build services based on a constant exchange of information.

## 5 Conclusions

This paper tried to demonstrate how the use of the web as a marketing and business tool provides agri-food SMEs with considerable competitive advantages, particularly in terms of information quality, efficiency and economic feasibility, thus supporting innovations. In this sense, the development of an integrated digital environment is described as a viable way to provide platforms for the reorganisation of sector activities, by giving birth to virtual networks that can change the way communication to and with consumers is built. Moreover, these platforms could fill the gap between the agri-food SMEs and consumers, by easing the problem of limited communication budgets and, above all, by engaging all participants in the production and distribution of products with respect to the wider establishment of collaborative supply chains.

A dynamic strategic approach in the adoption and utilisation of the web is needed. In particular, the topics perceived by consumers as being the most relevant and most discussed during their conversations, may be considered as a dataset of keywords around which a more efficient online communication of agri-food products can be arranged. This should be suggested to SMEs as the most effective way for a complete improvement of the product/service towards the development of innovation, while fastening affective ties that increase brand loyalty and corporate reputation.

Finally, this dataset provides support for competitiveness since it increases the amount of clear information conveyed to the market, calling SMEs to restructure B2B relationships in terms of greater interaction and value co-creation. For enterprises that have already started these processes, the dataset may contribute to satisfying the need to control. For enterprises that have not yet adopted these processes, the current analysis appears useful because it stimulates interest in and consideration of web marketing themes and proves the need to be adequately aware of them.

This study has also tried to understand whether web communication may be based on single words or if there are groups of words able to communicate more persuasively the

locality of the agri-food product. The study of co-relationships among words, in particular, intends to move from a purely *lexical* program to a *semantic* one, so as to have a more realistic picture of the neural itinerary users follow when they communicate on the web.

Moreover, the research has demonstrated how the characters of *web communication* (absence of space-temporal restrictions and full involvement of web users) ease the perception that the capability to differentiate one product from another plays on behaviours, values and traditions developed in the territory and embedded in the product itself (thus conveying its such unique characteristics), while the improvement of trading functionalities and the expansion of value-added services are the primary lines for the development of platforms projecting the emergence of a more networked agri-food industry with an embedded web infrastructure.

Finally, this study offers a contribution to the appreciation of local production, favouring the protection of specific rural geographic areas; as such, in line with the European program Horizon 2020, the 'local' product can be preserved, intended as the harmonious combination of a territory's tangible and intangible assets. SMEs are called to plan a strategy and a device of contact that appear to be important in the temporal-space combinations in which the user is found, with the aim of satisfying at best his/her informative needs and establishing long-term relationships. Should such an action be successful, SMEs will consolidate their competitive advantage and simultaneously contribute to the sustainable development of the territory in which they operate. In fact, when efficient local production communication strategies are developed on the web, the benefits are reaped not only by the individual enterprise but also by the entire geographic area referred to, allowing the pursuit of forms of socio-economic developments compatible with the tradition and culture of places.

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