Chapter 7
Back to Basics:
How Technology May Relink Food Producers and Consumers – A Portuguese Outlook

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transformative role of technology in re-establishing connections between food producers and consumers, examining the current situation in Portugal. Using secondary data and desk research, the present study highlights that technology can bridge the gap by enhancing transparency, promoting local economies, and encouraging sustainable practices. By analyzing this landscape of food production, food retailing, consumption patterns, and technological advancements, the study highlights how digital tools can enhance transparency, foster local economies, and promote sustainable practices.

INTRODUCTION

With the recent centrality of environmental problems, a global movement towards sustainable orientation is noticeable, including pressures from international organizations, governments, economic agents, and consumers.

In fact, international organizations are putting pressure on sustainable practices in different parts of the world. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2024) was adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 and includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals, many of which are closely related to issues as Responsible production and consumption (SDG12), Sustainable

cities and communities (SDG11), Sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (SDG15), among others SDG as the End poverty (SDG 1), Ensure healthy lives and promotion of well-being (SDG2) and Economic growth (SDG8). The European Union drives sustainability policies and actions rooted in the goals of the European Green Deal. Indeed, rules and practices are to enhance natural capital, have no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050, have economic growth decoupled from resource use, have a toxic-free environment, and have no person or place left behind (EU, 2024).

On the other hand, consumers are also becoming increasingly aware of the importance of their purchase decisions and frequently value ethnocentric buying criteria that include reducing their impact on humans, animals, and the environment, preferring local productions (e.g., km0), closer relationships with producers, and greater authenticity (Fuentes et al., 2023). This growing consumer awareness has driven producers and retailers to adopt more sustainable practices.

At the same time, companies include more sustainable topics in their priorities to enhance their corporate socially responsible goals, respond to legal requirements and stakeholders' interests (namely shareholders, investors, and customers). In the food industry context, many producers and retailers have been adopting more sustainable and interactive practices, valuing proximity between different stakeholders. Farm shops, farmers' markets, bulk product sales, greater space allocated to local products by major traditional retailers (e.g., Lidl and Auchan), pop-up stores, and networks of stores specialized in these products (e.g., Whole Foods) are just some examples of this movement. These initiatives not only promote sustainability but also cater to consumers' desire for more authentic and locally sourced products.

This research seeks to increase understanding of the importance of sustainability issues in food retail and analyze retailers' use of digital touchpoints as an interactive tool associated with consumer expectations and buying behaviors.

SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOR

Sustainable or environmentally friendly consumer behaviors are consumer purchasing and consumption attitudes and behaviors leading to the satisfaction of individuals' needs joined with a concern for the welfare of society and a more rational and efficient use of natural resources (Nguyen et al., 2019; Taufique et al., 2014). It is a movement focused on the act of minimizing the negative environmental impacts that can arise from the consumption process. Moreover, it is a growing trend carried out in various sectors, including the energy sector, household, electricity, and food sector, among others (Kristia et al., 2023).

According to Hosta and Zabkar (2021), a responsible, sustainable consumer is an individual who carefully weighs his/her needs and considers the respective consuming impacts on others (nature, society). In this context, sustainable consuming behavior has two dimensions: environmental (nature) and social issues (other people and society) when buying and using a product.

The concept of sustainable consumption has been officially politically addressed since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, reinforced in 2012 at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and in 2015 with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Vergura et al., 2023). This consciousness translates, on the one hand, into sustainable consumption practices and, on the other hand, into the request for eco-friendly products.

A growing number of consumers analyze products' sustainable attributes among other buying criteria, such as price, brand, convenience, package, ingredients, and taste (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). Sustainable-oriented consumers tend to assume search and buying patterns that include products with

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