

Ewom and 2.0 Opinion Leaders in the Food Context: A Study with a Sample of Spanish Food-Related Weblogs

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ABSTARCT

There is no doubt that the arrival of the internet has modified dramatically the way and rhythm of our lives which it reflects directly on our consumption patterns and the way in which individuals interact and search for information. Online platforms, generally known as web 2.0, are usual websites where consumers read reviews from other consumers before making a final decision. In turn, opinion leaders emerge preponderantly within this context exerting an unequal amount of influence on the decision of others. The food sector is not apart from this scenario. This study dives into web 2.0 and ewom with reference to food topics in the Spanish arena. For that purpose, a group of opinion leaders in regard to food aspects is selected. Afterwards, the content of the ewom they emit is determined by means of a cluster analysis. This information is of great importance for businesses and professionals in marketing. Discussion and further lines of research are also included in order to guide interesting future studies.

KEYWORDS

Ewom; food context; food-related lifestyle (FRL); opinion leaders; weblogs

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Word-of-mouth communication and the Internet

There is no doubt that the arrival of the internet has modified dramatically the way and rhythm of our lives, providing us as consumers with a range of advantages that offline channel does not.

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This circumstance reflects directly on our consumption patterns, which are today quite different from what they were only some years ago. In this regard, the purchase behavior represents a fair example as the online channel is becoming, for lots of consumers, the most common way of acquiring many product categories.

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According to data retrieved from Statista (2016a, 2016b), in 2015, 41.3% of global internet users purchased products online, figure which is expected to grow to 47.3% in 2018. These percentages amount, in terms of sales, to 1.67 trillion U.S. dollars in 2015 and a projection of 2.99 trillion U.S. dollars in 2018 and 3.55 trillion in 2019, which confirms the growing trend.

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Not solely that, but the internet has also modified the traditional way in which individuals interact (King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014). A recent study (Global Web Index, 2016) points that, worldwide, the typical internet user spent at around 1.77 hours per day on online social networking in 2015, while it was 1.61 hours back in 2012. 40

The fact is that users have rapidly integrated this instrument (online networking) into their decision-making processes (Zhu & Zhang, 2010) and, hence, their routine of search for information. Online weblogs/vlogs, discussion forums, opinion websites, social network platforms themselves... are all websites consumers visit more often to read reviews from other consumers and/or to generate reviews for other consumers (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006; López & Sicilia, 2013; Luo, Luo, Schatzberg, & Sia, 2013; Serra & Salvi, 2014), tools that conform the so-called Web 2.0, that is, the participative and interactive web emerged in about 2000 and created by and for users from collective intelligence (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; O'Reilly, 2005). 45 50

For instance, in terms of the findings of the Local Consumer Survey (2015), 92% American and Canadian consumers read online reviews with 33% of those doing so on a regular basis. For its part, in the Spanish market (AIMC, 2016), 80.1% of online customers stated to read comments and reviews coming from other customers before making a final decision with 50.9% of them trusting those reviews. 55

Marketing researchers have termed this phenomenon with the broad appellation of online Word-of-Mouth communication, Word-of-Mouse communication, or electronic Word-of-Mouth (ewom hereafter). Continuing the line adopted by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004, p. 39), ewom can be defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet". 60

The significance of WoM communication research lies in its considerable commercial impact due to its capacity to influence and to determine attitudes and behavior of consumers toward a product, service, brand or organization (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Christiansen & Tax, 2000; Nadeem, Rashid, & Niazi, 2011; Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, & Hogg, 2006; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012) even more so than the traditional mass media such as radio, press, and television. 65 70

This influence on consumer attitude and behavior does not reflect uniquely, then, in the purchase decision, but rather among four different stages at least, after having reviewed the related literature (Cafferky, 1995, 1997; Chan & Ngai, 2011; Edelman, 2010; Lee, Park, & Han, 2008; Pan & Zhang, 2011; Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 2005; Villanueva, Aced, & Armelini, 2007; Xia & Bechwati, 2008). Ewom impacts, firstly, on a cognitive level, facilitating and raising awareness about a product/brand/company hitherto unknown; secondly, on an affective or emotional level, encouraging 75

assignment of feeling, sense, or meaning to it; thirdly, on a conative and behavioral level, motivating response, either acceptance/purchase, inaction or rejection; and finally, on a post-behavioral or feedback level, stimulating outcome about experiences as a result of consumption/non-consumption. 80

Apart of that, it should be noted that issues such as credibility, accuracy, or quality of ewom communication are, undoubtedly, of higher interest in the great majority of publications to date (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Cheung, Sia, & Kuan, 2012; Elliot, Li, & Choi, 2013; Gupta & Harris, 2010; Kim & Park, 2013; Munz & Sergiunaite, 2012; Park & Lee, 2009; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007; Pattik, 2012; Smith et al., 2005; Steffes & Burgee, 2009; Xia & Bechwati, 2008). 85

Nonetheless, it is not about a new trend at all since ewom, as with traditional WoM, which has been subject of research in marketing for over 50 years (Martin & Lueg, 2013), is also based on that informal exchange between people of positive or positive information about products, services, brands or organizations (Arndt, 1967) but conducted this time through the media provided by the internet (Feng & Papatla, 2012; Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2012; Park & Lee, 2008; Taylor, 2010). 90 95

In spite of the similarity between traditional and electronic wom, three important and helpful differences exist that facilitate the freer and quicker flow of information. Ewom transcends local boundaries and the small, intimate, and private groups in which traditional wom usually occurs (from one person to another); consumers are connected with other consumers beyond their personal circle (comprising relatives, friends, acquaintances, etc.) and outside their geographical and sociocultural borders. In other words, they are connected with consumers they do not and probably never will know, but with whom they share a common interest. Supported by the worldwide scope of the internet, opinions and experiences are transmitted globally through ewom from a single person to the entire world (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Dellarocas, 2003; Gupta & Harris, 2010; Mauri & Minazzi, 2013; Munz & Sergiunaite, 2012; Serra & Salvi, 2014; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). 100 105

Moreover, ewom is usually written in an asynchronous way, passing from informants to recipients of information who are separated in terms of time and space, contrary to the case of traditional wom, where the conversation is oral and immediate (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Datta, Chowdhury, & Chakraborty, 2005; Hung & Li, 2007; Munz & Sergiunaite, 2012; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). This also implies that the information uploaded onto the internet remains available worldwide, anywhere, and at any time, rendering information to flow exponentially. 110 115

Resulting from the previous one

Ewom, given its specific characteristics of format and persistence over time, is more easily observable and measurable (Chatterjee, 2001; Cheung and 120

Tadani, 2012; Hsueh & Chen, 2010), against traditional WoM, which entails more or less private conversations, pretty hard to be traced.

Opinion leaders and ewom

The consequence of ewom is obvious

Thanks to the internet, individuals have access to much more knowledge and information at a much lower cost than ever before. Now customers can evaluate products, brands, and so forth and also obtain opinions from other consumers, decreasing risk in their purchase decisions and modifying the perception of brand images, among other outcomes. 125

Consumers abandon their passive role, progressively attaining a position of control, authority, and prominence in their own consumption activities and, consequently, in the success or failure of products and services, a phenomenon referred to by multiple authors as *consumer empowerment* (Gil & Romero, 2008; Harrison, Waite, & Hunter, 2006; Labrecque, vor dem Esche, Mathwick, Novak, & Hofacker, 2013; Newholm, Laing, & Hogg, 2006; Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006). 130 135

However, as noted by Chatterjee (2011) many participants on web 2.0 are not truly active posters; they are searching for information regarding common interests or new products or brands that they are willing to try. Depending on their behavior, it can be distinguish between passive consumers or opinion seekers and active consumers or opinion givers (Chu & Kim, 2011; Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996; Reynolds & Darden, 1971; Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004). Opinion seekers mainly focus on the search for information, devoting most of their time to read comments and experiences previously posted by other consumers before making a decision or taking action, when they perceive a risk in a certain situation, or when they are not familiar with a topic or product. 140 145

On the contrary, opinion givers share their opinions with other consumers, posting their judgments in diverse forums, platforms and websites. According to AIMC (2016), 40.1% of Spanish users, i.e., stated to have written any kind of review about a product or service during 2015. Opinion givers, also called opinion leaders, are trusted by opinion seekers to provide knowledgeable advice (Piiro, 1992; Walker, 1995; Weimann, 1994), and considered for this reason key players in interpersonal communication, constituting thus, the origin of wom/ewom (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). 150 155

Theoretically, opinion leaders are individuals who exert an unequal amount of influence with relative frequency on the decisions and behavior of others, through interpersonal and informal communication. In addition, 160

since they are the most inquiring and informed people with respect to a given subject area, they become points of reference for those with whom they are connected (Flynn et al., 1996; Hoffmann & Soye, 2010; Rogers & Cartano, 1962; Summers, 1970).

Opinion leaders show, therefore, particular high rates of social involvement and interest in certain product fields, which empowers them to influence others exposing themselves on the Web 2.0, generating, discussing, and spreading new contents about products and services among the internet (Gil Mártel, 2009; Jeong & Jang, 2011; Litvin et al., 2008; Sun et al., 2006).

Consequently, the internet not only facilitates information searching for opinion seekers, but also greatly provides opinion leaders with efficient ways to disseminate information.

Ewom and opinion leaders in the Spanish food context: Aims of the study

The food sector, of course, is not apart from this scenario. Even though the e-commerce of food products is a somewhat weak retail channel worldwide (it only represents a small part of food spending across a majority of markets), it is an area with considerable growth potential in the medium term both in developed markets, such as the UK, or the US, and in emerging markets, such as China (Just-food, 2016).

Referring to the UK market again, one cannot ignore that online food purchases are quite popular here and that nearly a third of British consumers (29% concretely) stated to buy food online, which is, undoubtedly, the highest proportion in the European markets (Postnord, 2015).

For its part, in the Spanish market, about 3 million of consumers purchased food products via the internet in 2015, which represents more than 11% of consumers who shopped online that year (Postnord, 2015).

Whereas the e-commerce of food goods is still in its early stages, food-related ewom is otherwise a well-settled practice. According to Nielsen (2014), 52% of internet users performed roles as opinion seekers, carrying out online processes of search for information about recipes, gastronomy, nutritional details of products, reviews of restaurants, or consumption experiences with brands before making a final decision about a purchase.

On the other hand, in terms of opinion giving, 32.3% of internet customers generated, either positive or negative, online reviews about products, services, or food brands during 2014 (MAGRAMA, 2015). Food-related ewom in the Spanish digital context is widely developed. Proof of that are some annual awards such as 'Premios Bitácoras' (2015) or 'Premios Vlogger' (2016) where food/gastronomy/cuisine represent one of the remarkable categories.

The fact is that these opinion leaders in food topics, actively present on social networks, are propelling the flow of information online, revolutionizing thus the relationship between consumers and brands, and contributing to increase the standards of demand.

In consideration of the above, the present research paper conducts an approach diving into web 2.0 with reference to food issues, considered these within their wider spectrum: gastronomy, restaurants, cooking, products, etc. For that purpose, two main objectives are established:

- Firstly, to select a group of customers generators of ewom content in regard to food aspects and assess and prove afterwards if they are effectively performing roles of opinion leadership;
- and secondly, if this condition is fulfilled, considering the power and the capacity of this group to influence the behavior of others, to determine the tone in the content of ewom they emit, and to perform, if possible, a classification with the intention to ease the use that concerned actors may do of it.

Method: Sample and questionnaire

‘Weblogs’, or just ‘blogs’, are undoubtedly a distinctive service enabled by the so-called Web 2.0 and frequently used by consumers to share their opinions, comments, and reviews about products, facilitating ewom communication. Moreover blogs, compared to other Web 2.0 platforms (discussion forums, social networks, opinion websites...) benefit from higher levels of credibility and power (Bae y Lee, 2011; Hu, Liu, Tripathy, & Yao, 2011; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012).

A blog is a website easily created through free software in a few minutes which is chronological and regularly updated by its creator, author or ‘blogger’ with all sorts of contents (comments and personal experiences, pictures and videos, news, links to other websites...) along with comments posted by viewers in response, their new contents and/or links.

Faced with the impossibility of establishing a precise number of spanish-speaking blogs related to food topics (nutrition, gastronomy, recipes., etc.) due to the absence of a complete directory of existing blogs from which a random group of individuals can be effortlessly extracted, the representative sample size must be estimated through the following equation, suited for infinite or unknown populations (Murray & Larry, 2009):

$$n = \frac{0.25z^2}{\alpha^2} = 384.16$$

where:

- n is the minimum sample size required (384.16 records),
- 0.25 is the value of the pxq product that equals the maximum standard error (that is, $p = q = 0.5$),
- α represents the permissible error, a value of 0.05 in this case (confidence level of 95%),
- and z is the number of units of standard deviation for a two-tailed test with a rejection area equal to α (1.96 for a confidence level of 95%).

The sampling was conducted through random searches performed on ‘Google’ search engine (www.google.es) from October 2011 to January 2012. Initially, of 2.951 authors of food-related weblogs written in Spanish who were contacted via e-mail, 428 responses were received, from which 22 were rejected, resulting, therefore, a final sample of 406 records (see technical details in Table 1). In detail, the questionnaire was auto-administered online by respondents themselves but under control of SphinxOnline 3.1.2., a software specialized in digital surveys.

Respondents completed a questionnaire made up of three parts. With the aim of addressing the first objective referred in previous section, levels of opinion leadership in the sample were measured asking respondents to give their view on an adaptation of the psychometric scale (Table 2) developed by Flynn et al. (1996), based on the definition of opinion leadership coined decades ago by various authors such as Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), Rogers and Cartano (1962), Summers (1970), Darden and Reynolds (1972), or

Table 1. Technical Data

Population	Authors of personal food-related weblogs
Contacted sample	2.951 authors
Rejected sample	22 records
Final sample	406 records
Sampling method	Simple random sampling
Sampling error	$\pm 4.86\%$
Response rate	14.5%
Date	October 2011–January 2012

Source: Authors.

Table 2. Opinion Leadership Scale Adapted to Food Topics

Items
- My opinion on food aspects is relevant to other people.
- Other people turn to me for advice when they choose food products/services.
- People that I know decide about food products/services based on what I have told them.
- I frequently persuade other people to buy the food products/services that I like.
- I often influence people’s opinions about food topics.

Source: Adapted from Flynn et al. (1996).

Rogers (2003). The response format took the form of a one-to-five-point Likert-type scale running from ‘Strongly disagree’ to ‘Strongly agree’.

In second term, in order to determine and classify the content generated and emitted by respondents in their blogs (second objective), an adaptation of the Food-related Lifestyle instrument—FRL (Brunsø & Grunert, 1995; Brunsø, Scholderer, & Grunert, 2004) was also included in the questionnaire (in Table 3). The FRL model has been widely and successfully applied to various European and non-European food cultures since its creation and its validity and reliability are beyond any doubt. This instrument attempts to explain behavior toward food purchase through examining the food related lifestyle of individuals by looking at the importance of five interrelated aspects: ways of shopping, quality aspects for evaluating food products, meal preparation methods, consumption situations, and purchase motivations. The FRL adaptation consisted of 28 statements and the response modality took here the form of a Yes/No type question.

Table 3. Adapted FRL Instrument

Ways of shopping
- I read information labels and compare products.
- Information from advertising helps me to make buying decisions.
- I am influenced by what people say about food products.
- I just love shopping for food.
- I like buying food products in specialty food shops.
- I always check prices.
- Before I go shopping for food, I make a list of everything I need.
Quality aspects
- I prefer to buy natural products, i.e. products without preservatives.
- I always try to get the best quality for the best price.
- I like to try new, innovative foods.
- I always buy organically grown food products.
- I find the taste of food products important.
- I prefer fresh products to canned or frozen products.
Cooking methods
- I just love cooking.
- I like to try out new recipes.
- We use a lot of ready-to-eat foods in our household.
- I try to involve the whole family in meal chores.
- I always plan what we are going to eat a couple of days in advance.
- I consider the kitchen to be the woman's domain.
Consumption situations
- I used to nibble between meal times.
- Going to restaurants is a regular part of my eating habits.
- I attempt to follow mealtimes.
- We often get together with friends/relatives to have dinner in a restaurant.
Purchasing motives
- I like to be praised for my cooking skills.
- Eating is to me a very exciting sensation.
- A traditional dish gives me a sense of security.
- I only buy and eat foods which are familiar to me.
- The most important thing when having dinner with friends, is that we are together.

Source: Adapted from Grunert, Brunsø and Bisp (1993), O'Sullivan, Scholderer and Cowan (2005), and Wycherley, McCarthy and Cowan (2008).

Moreover, a set of questions concerning sociodemographic variables was also administered.

In the next section, empirical results will be finally presented. First of all some demographics will be given in order to offer a general depiction about respondents. After that, the verification of opinion leadership will be addressed in the second step, and lastly the analysis of the different food-related lifestyle segments/contents will be taken in the third step.

Results

Profiling

As can be seen from Table 4 almost 80% of the respondents were female between the ages of 30 and 49 (about 70% of the sample). It is shown as well that most of respondents were higher educated (high school, university, and master/PhD represent more than 92%), and either self-employed (24.1%) or employees (46.8%). Households conformed by two people embody 35% of the sample, those by four people 29.3%, and by three people 20.9%. At last,

Table 4. Sample Demographics

Variable	Distribution
Gender	Female: 323 (79.6%). Male: 83 (20.4%).
Age	19–29: 67 (16.5%). 30–39: 179 (44.1%). 40–49: 102 (25.1%). 50–59: 45 (11.1%). 60 and older: 13 (3.2%).
Education	Elementary school: 29 (7.3%). High school: 129 (31.8%). University: 190 (46.8%). Master/PhD: 57 (14.0%).
Profession	Student: 15 (3.7%). Housekeeper: 50 (12.3%). Self-employed: 98 (24.1%). Employed: 190 (46.8%). Unemployed: 45 (11.1%). Retired: 8 (2.0%).
Household members	One: 21 (5.2%). Two: 142 (35.0%). Three: 85 (20.9%). Four: 119 (29.3%). Five and over: 39 (9.6%).
Annual net household income	Up to 11,000€: 57 (14.0%). 11,001€—19,000€: 96 (23.6%). 19,001€—27,000€: 92 (22.7%). 27,001€—35,000€: 78 (19.2%). From 35,001€: 83 (20.4%).

Source: Authors.

the sample revealed important variability in terms of income levels (also in Table 4).

Opinion leadership 290

In order to assess the validity of the construct ‘opinion leadership’, data facilitated by respondents in that scale were used to execute a Factorial Exploratory Analysis via the software SPSS 21.0.0.0. The analysis reported a *Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin* (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy certainly satisfactory (0.785) according to Kaiser (1970, 1974) and a *Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity* (Bartlett, 1954) statistically significant at 99% level of confidence ($p < 0.01$). 295

After the pertinent Principal Component Analysis, one main dimension emerged explaining 61.32% of the total variance. Furthermore, factorial loadings were higher than .50 for all items in that dimension, providing strong evidence of convergent validity to the scale (Barclay, Higgins, & Thompson, 1995). 300

Moreover, it was also examined the internal consistency of the opinion leadership scale by verifying the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient (α), which is considered tolerable when stands above .70 (Nunnally, 1978; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The reliability of the scale is ensured since α coefficient was higher than .70 (0.824 concretely). 305

Subsequently, in order to determine the degree of participants to act as opinion leaders, first this scale was subdivided into three levels (low, including anchors 1 and 2 of the scale; medium, referring to the anchor 3 of scale; and high, including anchors 4 and 5) and after absolute and relative frequencies were counted for it. 310

As Table 5 confirms, a large portion of respondents pointed performing leading profiles in food-related topics with respect to the ‘opinion leadership’ scale (87.73% of mentions matched with medium-high levels, and specifically 67.68% of them with high levels). 315

Hence, in relation to the first objective set above, it can be assumed, certainly, that the online selected sample met opinion leadership patterns in food-related topics.

Once satisfied this point and known the capacity of this group of opinion leaders to determine the behavior of individuals, an adaptation of the food- 320

Table 5. Distribution of Responses According to the Different Levels

		Low level (anchors 1 and 2)	Medium level (anchor 3)	High level (anchors 4 and 5)
Opinion leadership	Mentions (no.)	249	407	1374
	Mentions (%)	12.27%	20.05%	67.68%

Source: Authors.

related lifestyle instrument (Brunso & Grunert, 1995) was used to segment them. This way, it will be possible to detect common details or patterns about food topics that may drive comments, reviews, and other content generation in the weblogs they write.

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Clustering

With the aim of accomplishing the second objective set in section 3, a *k*-means Cluster Analysis was conducted using SPSS 21.0.0.0 in order to segment opinion leaders who were selected. After several preliminary trials, this statistical procedure distinguished three groups of individuals which come together through similarities in various FRL aspects. At the same time, up to ten statements of FRL instrument (see Table 3) were not statistically significant, which means that these variables are not good enough to establish differences between respondents, being aspects equally shared by all of them.

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Taking into account these not-significant statements (Table 6), it can be stated that authors of food-related weblogs are, generally speaking, hardly impressionable by advertising and comments of other people about food topics. They all also like everything relating to the act of cooking itself (they love cooking, trying new products and recipes, and avoid purchasing ready-to-eat foods). Moreover, these people tend to have and enjoy meals at home with a strong social component. The authors of food-related weblogs attach, thus, great value to food.

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Aside from this, there are particularities that justify a further distinction among those same opinion leaders. On this point, as it was mentioned above, three differentiated groups were highlighted when the cluster analysis was performed (Table 7). After interpreting and comparing characteristics and

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Table 6. Non-significant FRL Statements

Non-significant statements	Sample levels
<i>Ways of shopping</i>	
Information from advertising helps me to make buying decisions	Low for all
<i>Cooking methods</i>	
I just love cooking	High for all
I like to try out new recipes	High for all
We use a lot of ready-to-eat foods in our household	Low for all
I consider the kitchen to be the woman's domain	Low for all
<i>Consumption situations</i>	
I used to nibble between meal times	Low for all
We often get together with friends/relatives to have dinner in a restaurant	Low for all
<i>Purchasing motives</i>	
I like to be praised for my cooking skills	Low for all
Eating is to me a very exciting sensation	High for all
I only buy and eat foods which are familiar to me	Low for all

Source: Authors.

Table 7. Clusters' Size

Clusters	Cases	Percentage
Conservative savers	150	36.9%
Gourmets	107	26.4%
Greens	149	36.7%
Total sample	406	100%

Source: Authors.

patterns of each cluster, different segments were labeled with the names 'Conservative savers', 'Gourmets', and 'Greens'. Specific features of each cluster found in this research are presented below.

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Conservative savers, 36.9% of the sample, are very price conscious and hence also the most interested in the price/quality relation (Table 8). *Conservative savers* pay quite attention to shopping lists and planning for

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Table 8. Significant FLR Statements' Scoring in Clusters

FRL dimensions and statements	Cluster scores			p-Value
	Conservative savers	Gourmets	Greens	
<i>Ways of shopping</i>				
I read information labels and compare products	.4	.5	.8*	.000**
I am influenced by what people say about food products	.1	.2	.1	.002**
I just love shopping for food	.6	.9*	.5	.000**
I like buying food products in specialty food shops	.1*	.6*	.3	.000**
I always check prices	.8*	.1*	.4	.000**
Before I go shopping for food, I make a list of everything I need	.7	.5	.7	.003**
<i>Quality aspects</i>				
I prefer to buy natural products, ie products without preservatives	.7	.6	.9*	.000**
I always try to get the best quality for the best price	.9*	.4*	.5	.000**
I like to try new, innovative foods	.1	.2	.0	.000**
I always buy organically grown food products	.1	.1	.8*	.000**
I find the taste of food products important	.5	.9*	.1*	.000**
I prefer fresh products to canned or frozen products	.4*	.6	.6	.000**
<i>Cooking methods</i>				
I try to involve the whole family in meal chores	.2*	.4	.5	.000**
I always plan what we are going to eat a couple of days in advance	.5	.3	.3	.000**
<i>Consumption situations</i>				
Going to restaurants is a regular part of my eating habits	.1	.3	.1	.000**
I attempt to follow mealtimes	.9*	.7	.9*	.000**
<i>Purchasing motives</i>				
A traditional dish gives me a sense of security	.2	.2	.4	.000**
The most important thing when having dinner with friends, is that we are together	.8*	.7	.6	.012**

* Best characterize the segment (highest/lowest scores).

** Significance level of 95%.

Source: Authors.

menus. Moreover cooking, for this segment, does not have to be time-consuming and complex nor involve the whole family in it. They value social relationship aspects of having lunch/dinner the most, and they do so following mealtimes. *Conservative savers* can be characterized by the following statements: 355

- I always check prices. 360
- (NOT) I like buying food products in specialty food shops.
- Before I go shopping for food, I make a list of everything I need.
- I always try to get the best quality for the best price.
- (NOT) I prefer fresh products to canned or frozen products.
- (NOT) I try to involve the whole family in meal chores.
- I always plan what we are going to eat a couple of days in advance. 365
- I attempt to follow mealtimes.
- The most important thing when having dinner with friends is that we are together.

Gourmets represent 26.4% of the sample (Table 7). This group enjoy shopping for food the most and use specialty shops more than others (Table 8). On the other hand, this group is not as much concerned as the rest about prices. *Gourmets*, *sybarite* and *hedonistic* food consumers, consider taste as the most relevant indicator of quality. They also differ from other segments in their foresight, since these tend to be more impulsive and spontaneous when going shopping and planning menus. Eating between meals is not particularly common and social interaction at mealtimes is also important for this group. These are the characteristics that better define the group: 370

- I just love shopping for food.
- I like buying food products in specialty food shops.
- (NOT) I always check prices. 380
- (NOT) I always try to get the best quality for the best price.
- I find the taste of food products important.
- (NOT) I always plan what we are going to eat a couple of days in advance.
- I attempt to follow mealtimes. 385
- The most important thing when having dinner with friends is that we are together.

Finally, *Greens*, 36.7% of respondents (Table 7), are characterized by a strong interest in product information and quality aspects as healthiness, freshness, and ecology-naturalness (Table 8). In contrast, they attach the least value to taste of all segments. Eating between meals is not particularly 390

common for this group. Moreover, *Greens* are more price conscious and farsighted than *Gourmets* but less compared to *Conservative savers*. *Greens* also tend to involve the whole family in cooking tasks while the social side of eating for them is not, maybe, as much important as it is for the other segments. These are the statements that characterize *Greens* the most:

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- I read information labels and compare products.
- Before I go shopping for food, I make a list of everything I need.
- I prefer to buy natural products, i.e. products without preservatives.
- I always buy organically grown food products.
- (NOT) I find the taste of food products important.
- I try to involve the whole family in meal chores.
- (NOT) Going to restaurants is a regular part of my eating habits.
- I attempt to follow mealtimes.

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At this point, once the data derived from factorial and cluster analyses have been interpreted, it can be reliably confirmed that the sample retrieved from the internet plays roles of opinion leadership and mainly follows three differentiated and consistent food-related lifestyles (*Conservative savers*, *Gourmets*, and *Greens*) which will guide the ewom communication they emit when writing their own weblogs.

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Final considerations

This study has revealed information of great importance that reflects in implications for businesses and professionals in marketing.

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Altogether, the methodological approach used in the present paper is a pretty suitable way to examine ewom generators' food consumption style in a rather simple and efficient way. In reference to this latter, there is reason to believe that those aspects which are in tune with the preferences and opinions of these opinion leaders will most likely be supported and penalized, in contrast, those which are not.

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Anyway, ewom must be viewed and treated as opportunity rather than a threat, since it enables a more efficient communication, capable of reaching a greater number of consumers. Direct contact with ewom generators allows food producers to identify the consumers who talk about their products and services, to determine their profiles and to obtain first-hand information concerning comments with such a great effect on their corporate image. By gaining knowledge of ewom in this way, industry will be able to face complex situations if necessary and to emit a suitable response to the market, which will lead to higher levels of trust and customer loyalty.

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The results of this paper also contribute to better understanding of influencing consumers' needs and their food-related lifestyles. The identification

of three different consumer segments provides with clues to food industry to adjust production to these preponderant segments and their preferences in buying and consuming food. Moreover, this paper is as well of substantial help for marketers to design better adapted communication policies to these segments in order to perform more efficient diffusion campaigns. All of these are basic aspects that will have direct impact on sales and results. For this purpose, further research could be conducted on food-related lifestyles targeting some specific food categories, for instance, meat, vegetables, or convenience foods.

Furthermore, the present study can be intended as a starting point to foresee changes in the marketplace. Opinion leaders are heavy involved individuals in their areas of interest, which makes of them a valuable information source for new product ideas. At this point, collaborative research from the academic and business perspective would appear to be an extremely attractive option.

Discussion forums and/or working groups incorporating these consumers would constitute ideal scenarios for implementing techniques such as the Delphi method (Landeta, 2002; Linstone & Turoff, 2002) or the information acceleration method (Richard, Coltman, & Keating, 2012; Urban et al., 1997; Urban, Weinberg, & Hauser, 1996), which can extract first-hand information about the market. Such information is of great use in the innovation process, for instance in terms of deciding which communicative approach to take for a new product about to be marketed, of detecting and characterizing unfulfilled needs, or of verifying the accuracy of forecasts about future trends.

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