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The perceptions of Italian farmers' market shoppers and strategic directions for customer-company-territory interaction (CCTI)

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Abstract

In recent years, farmers' markets have been rapidly spreading due to their ability to meet the needs of consumers who are guided by ethical, responsible and green values. By purchasing fresh, organic and local products at farmers' markets, consumers satisfy their current concerns for nutrition, health, well-being and a return to a "normal" way of living, while also supporting local farmers. Several studies have investigated this phenomenon from either an economic or from a rural-agricultural point of view. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the first stream of studies, and it particularly aims at analyzing the behavior of shoppers who frequent farmers' markets. Through an empirical analysis conducted on shoppers at three Italian farmers' markets, this study identifies the profile of such shoppers and determines the reasons for their satisfaction at farmers' markets. Using a regression analysis, this study suggests and successfully tests the impact of a factor known as "perceived customer-company-territory interaction" (CCTI) on shoppers' satisfaction. CCTI registers the perceived (intangible) value created through the social-economic interactions among customers, local companies (farms) and their territory. Thus, we found that the shoppers' satisfaction was not only influenced by tangible aspects, such as the product quality and the comparative price convenience, but that satisfaction is also influenced by the complementary impact of an intangible factor, CCTI. The findings in this study might assist in the development of useful and strategic insights to manage this "new" phenomenon. In particular, the study offers suggestions to several players, including public policy makers, public organizations, farmers' markets' organizers and traditional retailers.

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1. Introduction

Farmers' markets "are market outlets where farmers bring their produce for sale directly to consumers" (Onianwa et al., 2006, p. 119) and include "farmers, growers or producers from a defined local area [who] sell their own produce, directly to the public" (Archer et al., 2003, p. 488). More precisely, the produce includes mainly fruit, vegetables, meat, fish, dairy, eggs, baked goods and preserves grown or reared and prepared by the seller. Because of their ability to interpret the needs and attitudes of the "new normal" consumer, farmers' markets are registering a growing popularity (Alonso and O'Neill, 2011). Such a consumer is trying to restore a balanced and sustainable way of life, which includes his model of consumption. Thus, there are a remarkable number of shoppers concerned with either the food quality and safety or the ethical, social and environmental aspects of food (Szmigin et al., 2009). Such

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needs are generating the trend towards the purchase of local products, which can be purchased through short food supply chains, such as farmers' markets.

Several scientific contributions are available on the phenomenon of farmers' markets. These studies generally alternate between either a rural-agricultural or an economic perspective. Most studies taking the economic perspective analyze the food shopper's demographic and economic profile (Eastwood et al., 1999; Wolf et al., 2005; Zepeda, Li, 2006; Zepeda, 2009; McEachern et al., 2010; Alonso and O'Neill, 2011). In a few other cases, the strategic perspective of the company serving such consumers is taken into consideration (Lülfes-Baden et al., 2008; Murphy, 2011). However, the role of the factor "interaction among the customer, the company and the territory" (where such interaction takes place) in explaining the success of farmers' markets has been overlooked. Thus, by suggesting and measuring a new construct labeled as the perceived "customer-company-territory interaction" (CCTI) and evaluating its impact on farmers' markets shoppers' satisfaction, this study aims to fill this research gap. Drawing on an empirical study conducted in three farmers' markets in Northern Italy, the paper will also analyze the profile of the farmers' market shoppers in Northern Italy, thus enriching current knowledge, which is mainly related to the United States, Canada, Australia and UK.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: the second section includes a review of available studies to position our study and to highlight its expected purposes and contribution to existing knowledge; in the third section, we present a brief overview of the farmers' market phenomenon in Italy, the research methodology and the empirical results; in the final section, the results are discussed to derive useful strategic implications.

2. Literature review and positioning of the study

We can easily suppose that the short food supply chains connecting the agricultural producer to the consumer have existed for centuries. It is a fact that self-production and the exchange of primary goods were the basis for subsistence economies. In connection with the urbanization process that spread economic development, this distributive form has spread as well. Several studies have examined the farmers' markets nature and their diffusion in different countries, such as the United States (McGrath et al., 1993; Tippins et al., 2002; Baber and Frongillo, 2003; Onianwa et al., 2006; Brown and Miller, 2008; Elepu and Mazzocco, 2010; Alonso and O'Neill, 2011; Francis and Griffith, 2011; George et al., 2011), Canada (Feagan and Morris, 2009), New Zealand (Guthrie et al., 2006; Cameron, 2007; Murphy, 2011), Australia (Adams, 2002; Fischer, 2004), China (Liu et al., 2012) and Europe with specific regard to Scotland (Lyon et al., 2008; Carey et al., 2011), UK (La Trobe, 2001; Kirwan, 2006; McEachern et al. 2010), Germany (Lülfes-Baden et al., 2008) and Italy (Pascucci et al., 2011).

Most of these studies about farmers' markets are recent, as they were conducted in the last decade. Nonetheless, the first farmers' markets labeled as such date back to the 1940s. Brown (2002) has gathered and provided a comprehensive review of several studies and reports on this issue from 1940 to 2000, identifying some recurring themes, such as the profiles of both producers and consumers that are more likely to join farmers' markets and the economic and socio-political impact of such markets. Additionally, it is interesting to note that Reed's study from 1958, which was among the first to analyze this topic, highlighted the following factors that were likely to lead to the increased popularity of farmers' markets: the growth of the population, an increase in purchasing power, urbanization and suburbanization, better transportation and the growth of industrial facilities.

Our comprehensive literature review of the available studies, which contains a particular focus on those studies conducted in the last decade, allowed us to identify four recurring issues in the analyses about farmers' markets: (1) the growth and increased popularity of farmers' markets; (2) the potential benefits of farmers' markets; (3) the profile of farmers' markets shoppers; and (4) the shopping motivations of farmers' markets shoppers.

As regards the first point, several studies (e.g., Wolf et al., 2005; Onianwa et al., 2006; Feagan and Morris, 2009) note that farmers' markets have been spreading mainly because of their ability to provide an answer to the new needs, desires and attitudes of consumers, i.e., the increasing demand for fresh, high quality foods directly from the farm, and a growing sensitivity to the environmental impact (and unsustainability) of conventional food production systems. By shopping at farmers' markets, customers satisfy their need to obtain a great variety, selection and appearance. Additionally, the customers are able to obtain food at a reasonable price, shop in the market's pleasant atmosphere (Onianwa et al., 2006) and provide support to the local producers (Archer et al., 2003). In sum, farmers' markets represent a successful answer to the "the real food revolution", i.e., the desire for authentic food (Adams, 2002) that is becoming increasingly popular among a growing number of conscious consumers (Zepeda and Li, 2006).

The second recurring issue concerns the potential benefits of farmers' markets for several stakeholders, such as the local community, farmers and consumers (Vaupel, 1989; Lyson et al., 1995; Govindasamy et al., 1998; Griffin, Frongillo, 2003; Kirwan, 2006). McEachern et al. (2010) conducted a review of the main benefits that have emerged in the literature. In general, it is important to highlight that the farmer market serves as a place where producers and

consumers socialize (Feagan and Morris, 2009), renew their respective trust through the exchange of information (La Trobe, 2001) and create a sense of moral responsibility (Szmigin et al., 2009). According to Alkon (2008), farmers' markets can also serve as a forum for the development of other social aspects, such as ecological sustainability or even social justice issues.

The third recurring issue focuses on the profile of the shopper at farmers' markets. In sum, the available studies have highlighted the following traits of the "average shopper": female, married, higher income, has an interest in food and cooking, a concern for nutrition, health and well-being and a sophisticated food consumption style (Wolf et al., 2005; Zepeda and Li, 2006; Aguirre, 2007; Lülfs-Baden et al., 2008; Varner and Otto, 2008). Thus, such a shopper is searching for high quality food products, even if this choice implies premium prices (Loureiro and Hine, 2002; Lyon et al., 2008; Conner et al., 2009). Additionally, farmers' market consumers shop in groups and interact more heavily than they would do in the supermarket setting (La Trobe, 2001).

The fourth issue concerns the shopping motivations of farmers' market customers. Several studies found that customers attending farmers' markets are guided by ethical, green and other specific values associated with food choice (Sanderson et al., 2005; Alkon, 2008; Connell et al., 2008; Szmigin et al., 2009; Alonso and O'Neill, 2011). More interestingly, Feagan and Morris (2009) identify three non-economic values (in contrast to motivations related to monetary transactions) representing the motivations to buy at farmers' markets: a) social embeddedness, which concerns social interaction, a sense of belonging, knowledge of the sellers, tradition, place and loyalty, b) spatial embeddedness, which is associated with local farms and community support, and c) the natural embeddedness, which is concerned with ecological values, organic production and "food-miles".

In sum, the literature review revealed the existence of both breadth and rigor in the studies on this issue; moreover, the review indicated that the existing studies take either an economic or a rural/agricultural point of view. A relatively small number of studies examine the topic from the point of view of consumer behavior (La Trobe, 2001; Lülfs-Baden et al., 2008; Feagan and Morris, 2009; Zepeda, 2009; Alonso and O'Neill, 2011; Carey et al., 2011). The purpose of our study is to contribute to this stream of research in several ways.

First, this study examines the customer profile of farmers' market patrons and their behavior in Italy. This focus serves to extend the current knowledge of the subject, which is mainly related to the United States, Canada, Australia and the UK. To our knowledge, there is only one study available regarding the Italian context (Pascucci et al., 2011). That study, which was conducted in 12 different farmers' markets in Italy, investigates only one specific aspect, i.e., how attendance at farmers' markets might affect consumers' willingness to change food habits toward high-quality products. In contrast, our analyses will provide a wider overview of the profile and satisfaction of the farmers' market shoppers.

Second, this paper introduces a new construct that is labeled as perceived customer-company-territory interaction (CCTI). CCTI is able to provide further insights into the role and success of farmers' markets. Because CCTI suggests that a significant portion of the value and success of farmers' markets derives from the social-economic interactions among customers, local companies (farms) and their territory, this construct can be viewed as a development of the concepts of social and spatial embeddedness (Hinrichs, 2000; Winter, 2003; Feagan and Morris, 2009). In particular, the construct CCTI includes the following dimensions: trust between customers and sellers, support to the local economy, seller's kindness and friendliness, and the agricultural context/atmosphere at farmers' markets. This paper also develops a measurement scale for this construct.

Finally, this study evaluates the impact of CCTI, product quality and comparative price advantage on the satisfaction of farmers' market customers. To our knowledge, there is a significant gap in the existing literature concerning this point. We found only one study (Lülfs-Baden et al., 2008) analyzing the antecedents of customer satisfaction for buying at an on-farm store, which is a store that might be considered quite similar to farmers' markets. According to Lülfs-Baden et al. (2008), customer satisfaction in food retailing has the following three main antecedents: the quality of products, value for the money and customer service. In our study, we use the first two factors but, in the context of farmers' markets, interpret them as product quality and comparative price advantage. Additionally, we replace customer service with the CCTI, and we estimate their impact on shoppers' satisfaction. Using this analysis will make it possible to derive strategic insights for several players, including public policy makers, public organizations, farmers' markets' organizers and traditional retailers.

3. Empirical study

3.1. Research background: farmers' markets in Italy

The direct sales channel involving farmers and their customers has a long tradition in Italy. Nonetheless, the "farmers' markets" channel was formally regulated only in 2007 (through a Decree of the Ministry for Agricultural

Resources, November 20, 2007). Such regulation is quite detailed, and it indicates who can participate as a seller at farmers' markets, the products that can be sold, and the formal procedure to receive the authorization to organize a farmers' market. Data provided by the farmers' associations indicate that currently in Italy there are approximately 880 farmers' markets, mainly located in the northern part of the country and organized on a weekly basis (usually on Saturday mornings). In particular, in the region of Lombardy, where the research was carried out, there are currently 126 farmers' markets.

3.2. Methodology

A cross-sectional approach was selected to answer the research questions. A questionnaire-based survey was conducted among the consumers at three farmers' markets (Mantova, Ostiglia, Porto Mantovano) in the Lombardy Region in Italy. The questionnaire was developed using the results that emerged from previous scientific studies, from previous analyses conducted by the farmers' associations (Coldiretti) that organize the farmers' markets and from extensive discussion with several shoppers and sellers during the pretest phase.

In particular, the questionnaire was designed to collect information about the following points: respondents' demographics (including age, sex, the distance between the respondent's place of residence and the farmers' market, etc.), shopping habits and expenditures, the choice between farmers' markets and alternative distribution channels, and the consumers' satisfaction with the farmers' market. The questionnaire was administered by giving personal interviews to every tenth customer passing by a defined point in the market. A total of 120 questionnaires were collected, with 47 (39.2%) collected from the Mantova market, 21 (17.5%) from the Ostiglia market and 52 (43.3%) from the Porto Mantovano market. The collected data were then analyzed, and the main findings are described in the following section.

3.3. Results

3.3.1. Farmers' markets shopper's profile

The data indicates that farmers' market shoppers are primarily female (table 1), average 53.84 years old and have an average number of 2.74 components in their households. The majority of shoppers visit the farmers' market weekly, and they live within 15 minutes of the market. Moreover, 50% of the respondents use a bicycle to reach the farmers' market and another 29.2% walk to the market.

Table 1. Demographic and general information of visitors.

Visitors' sex	N (%)
Female	79 (65.8%)
Male	41 (34.2%)
Distance between place of residence and the farmers' market	N (%)
< 15 min.	106 (88.3%)
16-30 min.	11 (9.2%)
31-60 min	3 (2.5%)
> 60 min.	0 (0%)
Means of transport to reach the farmers' market	N (%)
By bicycle	50 (41.6%)
On foot	35 (29.2%)
By Car	35 (29.2%)
Frequency of visit to the farmers' market	N (%)
Once a week	96 (80.0%)
Once every two weeks	14 (11.7%)
Once a month	1 (0.8%)
Depending on the need	6 (5%)
It's my first visit to a farmers' market	3 (2.5%)

Interestingly, the large majority of participants discovered farmers' markets through word-of-mouth (table 2). Regarding the food shopping expenditures (table 3), the findings indicate that those interviewed spend approximately one-fifth of their weekly food budget at farmers' markets (€ 22.51 out of a weekly budget of € 104.90). The remaining part of the budget is spent mainly at supermarkets (n=82) and hypermarkets (n=29). Finally, it is useful to observe that these findings are consistent in all aspects (including demographic variables and shopping expenditure) with previous surveys conducted in other countries (for example Alonso and O'Neill, 2011).

Table 2. Source of information concerning the existence of the farmer market.

Source from which the respondent obtained information about the existence of the farmer market (more than one answer allowed)	N
Word-of-mouth	74
Local daily newspaper	20
Posters	15
Promotional events	8
Local magazines	6
In other farmer markets	4
Brochure	4
Web pages	2
Radio	0

Table 3. Food shopping expenditure of visitors.

Weekly expenditure for food shopping	
At the farmers' markets	€ 22.51
For the food purchase in general	€ 82.39
Total	€ 104.90
Channels where the respondents usually spend most of their money for their weekly food purchase (farmers' markets excluded and more than one answer allowed)	
Supermarkets	82
Hypermarkets	29
Small retailers	17
Shops selling organic products	14
Farms	10
Discounts	6
Marketplace	2

3.3.2. Measurement of the construct known as perceived customer-company-territory interaction (CCTI)

The second purpose of this study was to develop a measurement scale for the construct known as "perceived customer-company-territory interaction" or CCTI. After having conceptually defined the construct (Churchill, 1979), the items were primarily developed through a review of the literature (in particular, from the study by Lülfs-Baden et al., 2008) and through discussion with several shoppers and sellers during the pretest phase. The items were measured on a five point important-unimportant Likert-type scale.

An exploratory factor analysis was then estimated. To verify the factorability of the correlation matrix, we performed Bartlett's test of sphericity, which estimated the probability that the correlations in the matrix were 0 (Worthington and Tiffany, 2006) and obtained a significant value (Chi-square=133.947; sig.=.000). As suggested by Worthington and Tiffany (2006), we also estimated the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy to provide additional evidence for scale factorability and obtained a value of .785, which is greater than the minimum level of .60. The final CCTI scale, which is summarized in table 4, indicated high factor loadings. Additionally, the value of the Cronbach's Alfa is .791, which is greater than the recommended cutoff value of .70. This result thus demonstrates a satisfying level of the scale's internal reliability (Cronbach, 1970).

Table 4. CCTI scale: factor loadings.

Item	Factor loading
Trust between the customers and sellers	.81
Support to the local economy	.79
Seller's kindness and friendliness	.74
Context/atmosphere at the farmers' markets	.79

3.3.3. The antecedents of customer satisfaction for shoppers at farmers' markets

The last step of the analysis estimated the impact of the CCTI and of other factors on the satisfaction of shoppers at farmers' markets. In particular, we tested a model for farmers' markets that was similar to Lülfs-Baden et al. (2008), who indicated that customer service, the quality of the products and the value for the money were the three main antecedents of customer satisfaction in food retailing. Specifically, we ran a regression that included CCTI, product quality and comparative price convenience in the context of farmers' markets as the independent variables and shoppers' satisfaction as the dependent variable. For the CCTI, we followed well-diffused analyses techniques (e.g., Homer 2008) and used the average of the four items in the analysis. Product quality was measured using a five-point Likert scale (very low-very high). For the comparative price convenience, we used a three-point scale that compared the customer's perception of the price level at farmers' markets to the price level found in supermarkets and other distribution channels. More specifically, the three points in the scale indicated that the price level was higher, equal to or lower than the price level found in the other distribution channels for the same products. Finally, the shoppers rated their satisfaction on a five-point Likert scale (very low - very high). Table 5 indicates the results of the regression's estimation.

Table 5. Linear regression analysis. Dependent variable: shoppers' satisfaction, R squared: 0.344.

Independent Variables	Standardized Beta	t	Sig.
CCTI	.193	2.305	.02
Product quality	.430	4.878	.00
Comparative price convenience	.173	1.929	.05

The results of the regression analysis demonstrate that all of the suggested independent variables have a significant impact on the satisfaction level of farmers' market shoppers. In detail, product quality is the independent variable with the largest impact on the level of satisfaction ($\beta=0.430$, $\text{sig}=.00$), followed by CCTI ($\beta=0.193$, $\text{sig}=.02$) and the comparative price convenience ($\beta=0.173$, $\text{sig}=.05$). Thus, the CCTI is able to explain a greater share of variation in the level of satisfaction than the comparative price convenience, which indicates that the customers appreciate the intangible value of the perceived customer-local farmers-local territory interaction more than they appreciate a low price level.

4. Managerial implications

The results of the analysis shed new light on the driving forces behind the perceptions, behavior and satisfaction of farmers' market shoppers. The customer feels reassured at the farmers' market and trusts that the products are healthy and authentic (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). Above all, the regression estimation demonstrates that such shoppers are looking for valuable experiences that are derived from their interaction with local producers and their local territory and that this customer need is even stronger than the desire for mere comparative price convenience. Of course, product quality remains a central aspect, but the "new normal" consumers also appear to prefer farmers' markets because they consider the markets to be a practical tool that honors the consumer's values (the support of local producers, the importance of buying green food, etc.). On this point, it should be noted that normality is a peculiar trait of the "new" consumer. Having a face to face interaction with the producer, listening directly to the history of the product being purchased, reducing intermediate steps, protecting local cultural and agricultural traditions, and economically sustaining his or her territory while having the opportunity to shop at a fair price are all expressions of social behavior which is consistent with the prevailing values within the society and groups of reference. Such values are the base of the farmers' markets success.

The farmers' markets also represent significant opportunities for small and micro firms. At the same time, this phenomenon represents a threat to traditional retailers that have to face the development of such a new format. As a consequence, traditional retailers are pushed to guarantee a sufficient shelf space to local, "Made in Italy" products.

From these insights, two strategic directions involving both public organizations/policy makers and private retailers can be derived. Basically, these directions deal with the collaborative relationships and the communication activity among the players within the territory that are needed to reinforce the CCTI.

First of all, the social-interaction aspects should be supported, emphasized and extended beyond the mere purchase moment. It might be valuable to strategically enrich these relationships using tools and initiatives that link the products to the local tradition and the agricultural techniques used by the producer. Additionally, it might be helpful to practically demonstrate how the purchase of local products contributes to the sustainability of the local economic system.

Despite the wide diffusion of farmers' markets in Italy, the customer still feels the need to obtain more information about them, the place where they are organized, etc. At the local level, adequate information about the existing farmers' markets and where they are organized is missing. Several stakeholders could spread news about the existence of such markets. The stakeholders should then support the farmers' markets with simple (and usually cheap) communication initiatives. For example, informational/promotional posters created by farmers' markets or by the local community could be placed at cafés or other places where socialization takes place. Some farmers' markets located in Lombardy and in other Italian regions (Alto Adige, Emilia Romagna, Toscana, Triveneto e Lazio) have also started a door-to-door service to deliver goods, thus allowing the farmers' markets to get in contact with customers.

An increasing strategic collaboration between farmers' markets and retailers should be fostered. By including products and brands that make the relationship between the retailer and its territory tangible, or by applying visual merchandising techniques to create a rural atmosphere similar to the one present at the farmers' markets, several retailers have already adjusted their offerings to meet the demand of consumers.

Beyond enriching the assortment with a product from the local territory (and hence different from region to region), retailers could also attract the attention of consumers by emphasizing communication through local dialect. Using the local dialect would become a signal of the retailer's link with the local territory and of the ability of the retailer to listen to the needs of real consumers and to provide an answer using the same clear language. Such a communication (in and out of the store) can create increased emotional involvement between the message and the customers, thus creating a stronger relationship between the retailer and the people from the local territory. Additionally, the presence of the farmer at the retailer's point of sale could be significant in creating the same welcoming and homely atmosphere which arises at farmers' markets and in providing all of the information about the product being sold (origin, information about the farm, suggestions for cooking, etc.). The point of sale thus becomes a place for meeting and educating the customer (Lai et al., 2010). Nevertheless, for the delivery of high service quality, the choice of suitable farmers is crucial because the local producers do not usually have the ability to sell their products while being open to interaction with the customers. Because most farmers are not natural communicators, it is fundamental to select only those farmers with sufficient communication abilities.

The activities mentioned above are useful in reinforcing the diffusion of local values and, in general, fostering a sustainable local development while pursuing a profit and paying attention to the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the other stakeholders. In particular, sustainable development requires competitive choices to be balanced with the needs of the local community and of the other stakeholder (suppliers, distributors, customers and citizens). Various authors have applied different labels to this concept: e.g., conscious business (Kofman, 2008), consonance (Golinelli, 2010) and harmonic company (Baccarani, 1991).

In sum, the territorial bond represents a value not only for customers and companies, but also for the territory in which the customers-companies interactions take place. As a matter of fact, the interactions between the local stakeholders enhance the wealth production and distribution in the local area. Because local products are becoming increasingly important, local brands should be strategically created not only at a company level but at the territory level as well. A local brand is able to create bonds between the players, and it can act as a guarantor for the quality of the offering for the consumers. The success of a product, and in general of the territory where it is produced, derives from the ability of the local stakeholders to generate a demand for such local products and to protect their specificities from every possible imitation. For example, thanks to their links with the territory where they are produced, local Italian products, such as mozzarella di bufala from the Campania region, the taleggio cheese from the area of Bergamo and the ham from the area of Parma, have become examples of the success of the "Made in Italy" food products all over the world.

5. Conclusion, limitations and further research

This study has contributed to the extension of current knowledge about farmers' markets by considering a new context (Italy), introducing a new factor (CCTI) and evaluating the impact of the CCTI, product quality and price convenience on shoppers' satisfaction.

At the same time, several limitations should be noted. First, our measurement of the CCTI is limited to only one of the involved subjects, i.e., consumers. Given that CCTI involves the interaction among consumers, companies (farmers) and territory, a complete evaluation of the CCTI would require collecting data from farmers attending the farmers' markets and from other relevant stakeholder of the territory as well. Moreover, the sample size is quite limited, and further analyses with larger samples are required before generalizing the results.

Several others research opportunities emerge from this study. It would be interesting to analyze the micro-projects (such as supporting the adoption of a healthy diet or fostering the consumption of local products that provide benefits to the local community) introduced by those retailers that host farmers' markets activities at their point of sale. This type of study might then be extended to the other stakeholders of the territory.

Finally, it would be valuable to evaluate whether the integration between farmers' markets and traditional stores is able to increase consumer traffic at the point of sale while also increasing the revenues and the level of the consumer's satisfaction (through the increase of the level of CCTI).

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