

# FOOD PRODUCTS BUYING DECISION PROCESS, STORE BRANDS VERSUS MANUFACTURER BRANDS

## Abstract

The increase of store brands (SB) in the market is becoming more pronounced, with a SB share in the Spanish market of 52% in 2015. This, added to the change in consumer perception towards store brands, which are perceived cheaper and with a similar quality to manufacturer brands (MB) (Puelles & Puelles, 2011), has determined the study of the buying decision process when comparing SB and MB food products. To this end, the used methodology has been an exploratory qualitative research. By means of six discussion groups with private label consumers who buy in different supermarkets, has been identified some factors and variables that influence the purchasing of SB vs. MB. The findings, following the model of Santesmases (2004), confirm that the consumer uses very similar evaluation criteria to compare SB products and MB products, while criteria such as price are not part of the evaluation when comparing different private label food products. The main conclusion is that situational determinants, price and perceived quality are the purchasing key drivers when comparing SB and MB food products.

*Key words: store brand, manufacturer brand, buying decision process, perception.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Store brands food products, from now on SB, disposed for sale in the distribution channel, are becoming more and more numerous and their consumption is gradually growing.

This growth has been continuous in Spain, rising from 39% SB volume share in 2009 to 52% in 2015, holding second place in the European ranking, according to data collected by Nielsen for PLMA (Private Label Manufacturer Association).

In the food sector, SB market share in Spain, excluding beverages, reached 40.1%, with a 1.3 points growth compared with the previous year (Nielsen Annuals, 2010 y 2011).

For its part, according to "Competitive Assessment of the Spanish Food Supply Chain" study by Battle Group, purchase frequency in large supermarkets has increased and we can observe a greater SB' participation in this kind of commercial format, reaching rates of 50.3% in 2010, compared with 24.2% and 35.8% participation in hypermarkets and small supermarkets respectively. According to data published by Kantar Worldpanel, in 2012, LIDL and Dia reached 80% and 55% SB participation respectively, which confirms store brands proliferation depending on commercial format, being their increase in sales connected with the growth of household shopping in discount stores.

Some authors expressed interest in the space dedicated to SB in sales establishments' shelves, arguing that sales increase of these brands might be due to the greater space they occupy in shelves compared with the space manufacturer brands occupy (Agustín e Iniesta, 2001). This is confirmed by Gómez and Rozano (2009), when they compare shelf space reserved to different categories of SB food products in many supermarkets and state that Mercadona's private labels (Hacendado and Bosque Verde) occupy

a far greater space than manufacturer brands.

As has been observed, the increase of store brands in the food sector in Spain is remarkable. This is what Puelles and Puelles (2011) argue and defend when they state that in the last few years, with a recession economic situation, SB market share has increased and can be observed a change in consumer's behaviour, who perceives that SB have a better price and the same quality as manufacturer brands, from now on MB.

Therefore, we have considered interesting to analyse, from a qualitative perspective, consumer's buying decision process for food products, specifically in reference to brand, i.e., if these products are store brand products or manufacturer products. Thus, the main objective of this analysis was to identify the drivers the consumer considers when he has to select between a SB food product and a MB food product.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Loudon and Della Bitta (1979) define the consumer's behaviour as "the decision-making and individual physical activities process where acquisition, assessment and economic use of goods and services are involved".

In this sense, the buying decision-making process is based on the appearance of a necessity; followed by an information search, to, after that, proceed with the assessment of the different buying alternatives. After this phase, the choice will take place, as well as post-purchase feelings.

From this simple model, focussed on the appearance of a necessity, various authors such as Howard and Sheth (1968), Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1968), Bettman (1979) and Assael (1982) included consumer's internal and external variables, and even marketing variables (Santesmases, 1991), to try to explain consumer's behaviour.

External variables that affect purchasing

behaviour are determining factors that surround the individual and, therefore, have some effect on his conduct. Some of these variables, according to Santesmases (2004), belong to the macro-environment – economy, environment, technology and culture and can affect both the market and the consumers.

### **2.1. Variables that affect the decision to buy store brands food.**

Following the model of Santesmases (2004), the economic environment is an external factor that affects the buying decision and is one of the factors which most seems to have influence on the decision to buy SB products. Historically, difficult economic conditions proved to be a determining factor for the growth in the consumption of such brands (Herstein, 2007; Pandey, 2010; Alarcon del Amo et al. 2013).

For their part, other external variables such as reference groups, family or friends, affect beliefs and attitudes, regulating individual's behaviour (Assael, 1998), who is different depending on his susceptibility to the influence of the group. In this sense, Ailawaldi (2001) postulates that individual's compliance towards SB purchasing depends on the importance the subject gives to social influences in the SB purchasing process. Likewise, Tran et al. (2014) recently demonstrated the existence of social groups' influences over the consumer's purchase intent when he compares MB and SB.

On the other hand, the literature review, despite the lack of unanimity, allows us to conclude that personal characteristics (Baltas, 2003; Martinez and Montaner, 2008; Martos and Benito, 2009; Manzur et al., 2009), perception, experience and attitude (Richardson et al., 1994; Baltas, 1997; Sethuraman and Cole, 1999; Garretson et al., 2002; Gonzalez et al., 2006; Glynn and

Chen, 2009; Manzur et al., 2009; Beristain 2010) are the internal variables that affect SB products consumer's behaviour.

In relation to personal characteristics, there aren't significant differences in the SB purchase depending on consumers' age (Baltas, 2003; Martinez and Montaner, 2008), as the generic products' consumer is placed in a wide range of ages – from 26 to 55 years old – according to Herstein (2007).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the most common opinion, endorsed by various authors such as Zbytniewski and Heller (1979), Granzin (1981) and Wilkes and Valencia (1985), was that households with more family members were the most interested in generic products, as their acquisition allowed them to save in food expenditure. Nevertheless, household income happened to be an interesting variable, since, contrary to what was expected, middle-income households revealed they were prone to buy store brands (Zbytniewski and Heller, 1979; Sethuraman and Cole, 1999). This concept seemed to contradict the stereotype of the private label products consumer characterised by a low income (Prendergast and Marr, 1997).

Likewise, other studies demonstrated that middle and middle-high incomes consumers have a higher propensity to SB (Baltas and Argouslidis, 2007; Herstein, 2007), as well as higher social classes (Baltas, 2003; Baltas and Argouslidis, 2007; Martos and Benito, 2009), unlike what might be expected, thus breaking the old stereotype of the generic products consumer.

With regard to education, most recent studies carried out in Europe identify a greater propensity to buy SB products in consumers with a higher education level (Herstein, 2007; Baltas and Argouslidis, 2007; Martinez and Montaner, 2008).

Neither in the investigation undertaken by Abril et al. (2009) where SB regular users'

profiles are analysed and classified in three classes depending on their SB' perception, significant differences among the three groups can be found according to socio-demographic variables.

In conclusion, it seems that any consumer is likely to buy SB products if we consider age, social class, education or income. For this reason, this investigation does not analyse consumers' purchasing process depending on their socio-demographic differences, but on the contrary, it focuses on identifying the variables that affect this process and the decision to buy a SB food product or a MB product depending on the various features that define the product.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research can be defined as "the set of all the things done to track markets and detect the features which characterise people and things – products, goods, services, activity sectors – , their properties and attributes, whether natural or acquired" (Baéz and Pérez de Tudela, 2007).

On his part, Llopis (2004) based qualitative method on the fact that "the social world is made of meanings and symbols", which determines procedures to use for its decoding and understanding. Thus, qualitative methodology allow us to understand buying experiences and phenomena connected to marketing, which contributes to a better understanding of consumer's behaviour from an interpretative perspective (Shankar and Goulding, 2001). In this sense, the aim of qualitative research in this investigation tries to deeply understand food products' buying decision process. For that purpose, we considered using discussion group qualitative technique, or focus group, since it is the technique that studies individual's manifestations as social discourse reflections and not as individual opinions (Baéz and Pérez de Tudela, 2007), while its

goal is to get to know situations, problems or phenomena deeply (Grande Esteban and Abascal Fernández, 2007).

With this aim, qualitative research – focus group – was conducted following Santesmases' (2004) buying decision process phases.

In this way, analysing consumers' stories and speeches when being asked about their reality when buying either SB or MB food products, we could identify the factors that influence the choice to buy the former or the latter.

#### 3.1. PARTICIPANTS

We use a 48 informers sample divided into three discussion groups, being each group constituted by 8 participants.

The number of participants for each group was chosen according to scientific literature (Fern, 1982, Merton et al. 1990, Báez and Pérez de Tudela (2007), which considers 6 to 10 participants the optimal group size for moderator management to be effective (Llopis, 2004). Participants were consumers living in Zaragoza city, with a B (high) and C (medium and medium-high) Esomar<sup>1</sup> socio-economic status, aged between 29 and 65, all SB food products regular buyers.

Similar age ranges groups were performance to avoid lack of dialogue due to generational gap (Baéz and Pérez de Tudela, 2007). Thus, three consumers discussion groups aged between 29 and 45 – youth group – and three groups aged between 46 and 65 – elderly group – were created.

Informant selection was made through a non-randomised sampling for convenience or type, participants being selected for their accessibility or for fulfilling specific

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1 ESOMAR Socio Economic Status (SES), determined by the socio-economic classification matrix, obtained from these variables: main householder's education level and occupational category.

conditions for the study (Quintana A., 2006; García Ferrer G., 2002; Morales and López, 2008).

### 3.2. DISCUSSION GUIDE AND MEETING REGISTER

To carry out the group session and for subsequent analysis, necessary tools such as the session guide and the recording equipment (Morales and López, 2008) were taken into account.

In this sense, a discussion guide with open questions sufficiently specific to achieve investigation's objectives was developed (Greenbaum, 1998) with the aim that informants can talk freely and say whatever they feel. Firstly, the group talked about food buying reasons, kinds of food products bought depending on buying circumstances and places, in particular with regard to store brands such as Hacendado, Alcampo, Carrefour and Día. Subsequently, the researchers asked about the kind of search for information made when buying food products, for then investigate the valued factors in the assessment of different store brands in food product buying. Lastly, open questions connected to the final buying decision and post-buying feelings that go with store brands food product's consumption were added.

Meetings were carried out in a conditioned room with an ambient microphone and a video camera, which allowed audiovisual record in AVI format.

### 3.3. DATA ANALYSIS

Considering that qualitative research pays attention to verbal data, narrations and stories, its analysis focuses on discourse, whether on what it is said – content and locutive aspects – and on the way it is said – tones used and illocutive aspects and the way it is expressed or perlocutive aspects

–.

In this sense, data analysis employed inducement to describe general behaviours from individual discourses (Baéz and Pérez de Tudela, 2007), produced in the same context and on the same subject (Morales and Pérez, 2008).

In this way, each general interpretation obtained from the informants' replies was categorised depending on the buying decision process phases – the backbone of the qualitative guide –, and was illustrated with the incorporation of the literal transcriptions of participants' interventions – *verbatim* –.

## 4. RESULTS

In the buying decision process of any product, consumer sequentially moves through a series of phases, with more or less intensity depending on the type of the purchase in question. In this sense, qualitative analysis was developed following the buying decision process phases established by Santesmases (2004) and considering that, the difficult in the buying decision of food products is low, since they are frequent and repeated purchases with a low consumer's engagement.

### 4.1. Appearance of the necessity

The appearance of the necessity originates the buying decision process based on individual's motivation. Since this is what impulse the individual to obtain what he wishes, the motivation towards food products buying meets the basic need to stock up on food to survive.

Thus, the main reason that leads individuals to make a food purchase is to obtain products which serve as nutritive substances and, therefore, enable them to survive, as a participant explains: "*Why do I buy food products?... To survive. Because I need to feed me....*"

As expected, it is such an individual's

motivation towards survival that food products purchase correspond with the physiological necessity of eating, as Maslow's necessities classification (1975). See the following literal speeches: *"you buy food because you have to eat. If you don't eat, you die"* and *"we feed ourselves to live. And for this reason we have to buy food."*

On the other hand, the fact that, nowadays, consumers cannot stocking up in-house production food has consequences on the necessity to go to a commercial establishment to buy such products. In this sense, informants state that, nowadays, it is impossible to provide food without going to a supermarket. This is reflected in the following discourse: *"If you haven't a vegetable garden, neither cows, nor hens... So?... Well, maybe people in the past could survive with what they had planted in the field... but this no longer exists. Now everyone goes to the supermarket."*

In this sense, retail comes to be a fundamental point in the food buying process, being commercial distributor and the products he offers a decision-making factor in the process.

Furthermore, when buying food products, the individual has different psychological motivations depending on the circumstances he finds himself. Thereby, informants consider that the buying of certain food products depend on how they will be used. This matter can be a situational determinant, i.e., how, when and where a product will be used, bought or consumed, as the product's benefits can be perceived differently whether we are in one situation or another. Miller and Ginter (1979) demonstrated that the selection of the restaurant to go to eat largely depended on whether it was a weekday's meal or a family meal, varying the importance given to the attributes of each restaurant depending on the current situation.

In this sense, if food products are part of a meal with family or friends, or if it is a party

or a celebration, consumers recognize that it is common to buy delicatessen products. See the following speech fragment: *"For everyday meal you buy standard products. Something different is when you celebrate an event or you invite someone to your home. For Christmas, New Year's Eve... dinners with friends... For that, you buy better and more special products... jabugo ham, sirloin, foie, seafood...."* This kind of motivation reflects, on one hand, esteem and social status priority for the individual (Maslow, 1975), who needs acceptance, esteem and appreciation, and, on the other hand, the necessity to buy selected food products, result of the situational determinant depending on how you will use such product.

### 4.2. Search for information

Once the need to purchase food products is raised, consumers initiate the second phase in the buying decision process: the search for information. This phase implies the collection by the consumer of external information regarding what he wishes to buy. This can be more or less deep or even inexistence, depending on the consumer's experience and level of the involvement in the purchase. In this sense, the lesser the implication in the purchase of the product, and the more routine it is, the lesser the search for external information is (Howard and Sheth, 1969).

With regard to food products, consumers who usually do the shopping state that they do not previously search for information about the products they need, since they consider unnecessary to seek out information on ordinary products that they feel familiar with since they buy them frequently. However, it is not the same when they buy delicatessen products to be used in lunches or dinners with guests. In such cases, we have a purchase with a greater involvement and with a greater

risk perceived, both for the price destined for it and for the consumer's emotional component. Therefore, it demands a more active and deeper search for information, which increases the lesser the consumer's buying experience is. This is reflected in the following speech: *"when I first bought Cascajares I investigated very much. As they are so expensive ready meals, I couldn't trust them. I got on the web, I looked for opinions on the Internet, I asked people I knew if they had tried... Finally, I saw it in the supermarket and I decided. Now I've been buying it for New Year's Eve for two years."*

In this sense, consumers who search for information about delicatessen collect information about price, brand, raw material origin and, if they are ready meals (pre-cooked or cooked) they gather information about the composition – ingredients used in their cooking –. This search is generally made through word of mouth or on the product manufacturer's web page, blogs or forums on food and cooking.

Even if consumers do not carry out an active information search about basic products' characteristics, the current economic context has meant that more sensitive to prices and promotions consumers, regardless of the product category, search for information about the price in the point of sale, as a consumer explains when he says: *"I pay attention to price, I won't lie. Nowadays you look at the price and make comparisons between supermarkets. I like to know where the cheapest one is and where more offers are made."*

For its part, when it comes to buying green products or special foods, such as those targeted to infants or people with special physiological conditions – diabetics, coeliacs, etc. –, the search for information is intensified. The functional risk of buying a food product unfit for their nutritional needs increases its implication in the buying process, as Assael (1998) describes. Thus,

consumers search information about price and food composition, checking on the label if they are suitable for their special nutritional needs.

Finally, it is important to note that information on food products in the market, either SB products or MB products, is mainly obtained in the points of sale while buying, through word of mouth or advertising, as a consumer states: *"it is in the market where you find out. You're buying and you see if there is a new product... Sometimes you didn't see it, but someone who has proved it tell you about ... And also, there are others that appear on the TV."*

#### 4.3. Evaluation of alternatives

The evaluation of alternatives is a fundamental phase in which the consumer evaluates purchase options for a food product, either basic or selected, depending on the desired benefits. In this sense, despite the findings obtained on buying motivation for selected products, the present study have not been deepened on the following phases of the purchase process for such products, because they are not object of this analysis. When consumer has to buy any basic food product, regardless of the category, he spontaneously states that products evaluation depends on quality and price.

It can be said that price represents a fundamental utility for the consumer, who wishes a product with an attractive and economical price. When evaluation the price, consumer compares different brands, being these SB and MB, of same class products.

In this way, the consumer makes comparisons between products belonging to the same class and with the same price range, avoiding the comparison with gourmet products. This is reflected in the following speech: *"When you do the shopping you compare the prices of*

*different brands. You pay attention to which is the cheapest one, which is on sale... Eventually, you observe the differences between one brand and another...."*

In this sense, consumers state that SB products' prices are becoming increasingly similar, and differences neither in price nor in quality can be found, unlike what can be perceived when comparing MB and SB products, where price appears to be the distinctive attribute in favour of SB. This opinion is observed in the following speech: *"when comparing private labels there is not a big difference in the price. There is a bigger difference in quality; there are private labels with higher quality than others. However, between lifetime brands (leading brands) and private labels there is a price difference, the purchase will be significantly cheaper if you buy private labels."*

These findings are linked with the investigations carried out by Baltas (1997), Prendergast and Marr (1998), who see in more price sensitive consumers a greater propensity to buy SB products, as they are the cheapest price alternative compared to MB products.

Thus, price difference between MB and SB is perceived rather pronounced, especially for more price sensitive consumer, who value discount MB positively: *"I pay more attention to leader brands price, those that are not private labels. I look for discounts. When there is a two-for-one offer or a 70% discount in the second product, I buy them because they are generally much more expensive."*

For its part, talking about quality and according to Steenkamp (1990), the perceived quality of a brand depends on some intrinsic attributes which cannot be modified without physically altering the product – taste, smell, composition, appearance and texture –, and others, extrinsic, which are not part of the physical product – price, design, brand or store

image –. In this way, the perceived quality of a food product is the sum of the consumer's attitude and perception towards its intrinsic and extrinsic attributes, depending on situational and personal factors of the purchasing context.

In this sense, if we ask a consumer what he means by quality in a food product, he answers mentioning attributes, both intrinsic and extrinsic, as it can be seen hereafter: *"I mean that quality, of course, is when a product is good, tasty, looks good... if it is not so, bad. Also the brand influences the evaluation. There are brands that you know they are good, these are better-quality brands. There are others unknown brands..., as some private labels that you see in the supermarket and, depending on how they look, you take a chance or not. When the packaging seems shabby, it gives the impression that it will be bad."*

Thus, historically, trust placed in SB products has been better than that placed in MB ones, as Bellizzi et al. (1981), Hawes et al. (1982) and Cunningham et al. (1982) explain.

Nevertheless, although a quality food product is the one that *"is good, tasty and looks good"*, considering quality according to attributes such as taste, smell, texture and physical appearance, consumer also refer to the *"good or bad"* a brand is according to advertising or what they have *"heard"*. This is true, especially, when talking about SB products.

Thus, the more advertising a food brand makes, the greater the knowledge consumer has about it, and the greater brand prescription through "word of mouth" is, the bigger its reputation is.

This demonstrates, as Cunningham et al. (1982) show, that when comparing between MB products and SB products, the latter have been in inferior conditions regarding to packaging, advertising and brand awareness. However, currently, it seems that "word of mouth" has consequences on SB' reputation, positive or negative. In

this sense, see the following statement: *“if everyone speaks well of a brand is because it’s good. This is what happens with Hacendado<sup>2</sup>, everyone says it’s the better private label. Whatever is Hacendado is good... It’s a highly renowned brand.”*

In that way, with a communication strategy based on public relations through events with potential customers, where products’ promotion in client meetings is very common and mass media advertising is nothing usual, SB management achieve that reputation and brand notoriety have an impact on the perceived quality of their products.

Concerning the packaging, consumers perceive that SB products with more modern packaging design, with different colours, easy to open and with characteristics similar to those of MB products, have a higher quality than private labels with slight differentiation in packaging. This is evident by group consensus when affirming that: *“For me, Hacendado is better than Auchan<sup>3</sup>, has better quality..., products are more attractive and more modern designs... This brand take care of its image, their products look different....”*

Thus, it seems that SB’ greater success depend on a product’s better quality and a minor perceived quality difference when compare to MB (Hoch and Banerji, 1993; Batra and Sinha, 1999; Salvador et al., 2002; Glynn and Chen, 2009).

Furthermore, talking about quality, consumers argue that, in addition to the mentioned attributes, SB with a greater assortment have higher quality, since the product breadth and its depth are attributes that generate perceived quality. This is reflected in the next discourse: *“If I compare Auchan and Mercadona products, actually, Mercadona ones seem to me better. Hacendado is better than Auchan, among*

2 Hacendado: Mercadona insign’s food products private label.

3 Auchan: Auchan group’s private label, commercialised in Alcampo and Simply group’s chains.

*other things, because Hacendado has it all. Mercadona focuses on his brand and that is why it has a wider variety. His brand is really good, because they focus on their brand; they only sell their own brands.”*

Based on the above, we can concluded that, when assessing SB food products’ perceived quality, these are evaluating to the same quality criteria as MB products, in terms of taste, smell, appearance, brand and packaging. As exception criteria we can find price, not perceived as a differentiating element between SB products, and variety as a potential extrinsic quality attribute for SB products.

#### 4.4. Purchase decision

After evaluating alternatives, consumer choice to buy a product or another, or not to buy it. When deciding whether to buy a SB product or a MB product, informants, consensually, recognise that the price factor is determining, being this more attractive for the former than the latter. This core idea was confirmed in the study carried out by Glynn and Chen (2009), that verifies that the larger price sensitivity and the lesser quality difference between SB and MB are, the greater the tendency to SB is.

In this sense, it can be said that perception towards price and towards product’s quality are determinant factors in the purchase of a SB or a MB. However, concerning the purchase of different SB, the perceived quality of intrinsic and extrinsic attributes of the products is the factor that determines the purchase, since, as an informant states: *“price among private labels is very similar. Sometimes you buy ones and other times others... the fear of trying private labels has been lost.”* Thus, the individual considers buying any option of SB, as long as sufficient quality of the product is perceived, price not coming into play.

However, as Shiffman and Lazar Kanuk (1997) state, sometimes, perceived quality is exclusively based on product’s

extrinsic stimulus, as it is impossible to assess product's intrinsic factors during the purchase. It is in these cases when consumer assesses perceived quality according to attributes such as packaging, variety, brand reputation, and the good or bad he thinks the product is.

For its part, it must be noted that there are other variables such as food use situation or the context surrounding this use, which determine the purchase of a product or another, as an informant states: *"for everyday use you buy standard products. But, other times, you buy label and more expensive products (MB). Depending on if you have a whim for something in particular. If I buy chocolate, I buy Lindt... but for making pastry, I don't care, I buy private labels and they are just as good. It's like when you have dinner guests. In this case, when you buy beer, chips and other stuff, you buy branded ones (MB)."* Consumption context (Miller and Ginter, 1979), in this case everyday use or special situation use, seems to be a determinant factor in the purchase of a MB product or a SB one.

In conclusion, in the absence of situational determinants, the main driver to choice a SB or a MB product is the perception of a similar quality between them, added to an attitude of rejection towards the higher prices of MB products compared to private labels; whereas the buying decision between different SB is exclusively determined by the perceived quality. Thus, quality perception depends on packaging, brand reputation, variety of the assortment and *"the good or bad you think it is"*, i.e., the food product's perceived sensory quality.

### 4.6. Post-purchase feelings

Once you purchased the product, post-purchase feelings arise, and these may be positive or negative depending on the consumer's satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Rao and Monroe (1988) demonstrated that experience provided information and knowledge on the product, so that consumers used it to assess its quality.

For the consumers who buy SB, its sensory quality determines their post-purchase feelings, being satisfactory when the product is value positively in relation with its taste.

In this sense, consumers recognise that the satisfaction when using and trying the product has a direct impact on the repeat purchase behaviour. On the contrary, if when trying the product the taste is not value positively, an attitude of rejection towards such product arises, feeding back into a non-repetition purchase. See the following speech: *"I'm clear, if I try a private label product and I don't like it, I won't buy it anymore. I buy products I like. That happens to me with Carrefour, I absolutely don't like Carrefour's gazpacho. When I wish gazpacho, I have two options, not to buy gazpacho this day or go to Alcampo, since Auchan's gazpacho is the one I like the most."*

With regard to post-purchase feelings, it seems that these affect the attitude towards SB' perceived quality, in the sense that the more positive sensory experiences a consumer has with a specific SB food product, the more positive his attitude towards such brand is, and vice versa. This is reflected in the following speech: *"Originally, I bought everything at Mercadona and one day I went to Día, just to try.... There are things in Día I don't like, as in Mercadona. But Día's yoghurts and dairy products are great... now I buy at Día and at Mercadona, in my opinion both have a good private label."*

For its part, this also means that consumers' perception towards SB and MB products' quality is increasingly similar, arguing that the taste and aspect of higher quality SB are very similar to those of MB.

For his reason, consumers that are more

likely to buy SB seem to be those with a higher level of experience, who, according to Dick et al. (1995), use it to understand that SB have a higher quality one might expect in the absence of purchase experience.

In short, it seems that with a greater purchase experience for a specific SB, the assessment given to its products' quality is higher and, thus, the propensity to repeat the purchase is greater.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Even though SB are considered to be the most viable economical alternative, as Pons (2009) states, this is not the determinant factor on its own. For the sample consulted, use or consumption context affects the decision to buy between SB's and MB's.

Given such distinction, it can be said that the lower the implication and the more routine the product's purchase, the lower the external information search about the product is done. However, the higher the implication depending on use or consumption contexts, so that a higher perceived risk exists, the information search is more active and deep, raising the lower the consumer's buying experience is. In this sense, information about price, brand and, elaboration and composition, in the case of prepared food, is collected.

In the comparison between SB and MB products, price is compared, whereas the comparison between different SB labels is not so much based on price as on the other perceived quality attributes.

In this line, when comparing products of different SB, brands with a wider product assortment are perceived of higher quality, since breadth and depth are attributes that generates perceived quality. Likewise, the more modern and attractive the SB products' packaging, the higher the perceived quality is, moving away from other private labels which are perceived of low quality, due to their lack of differentiation.

In addition to the above, it must be said that the reputation of a MB product is strongly influenced by the advertising carried out by the brand, which is not the case for SB, which base their communication strategies on different public relations tools. Thus, advertising of their products through customer meetings is a regular action, promoting a word of mouth effect which causes a better reputation for the brand, what decisively influence the perceived quality of their products.

Therefore, it can be stated that, when evaluating food products' perceived quality, SB and MB are evaluated under the same criteria – taste, appearance, packaging and brand reputation –, except for the price, which is not perceived as a distinctive element between SB products, and for the assortment as a potential SB products' extrinsic quality attribute.

As a result, it can be concluded that price perception and product's quality perception are decisive factors whether to buy a SB or a MB. However, with regard to the buying of different SB, it is the perceived quality of product's intrinsic and extrinsic attributes what determines the purchase.

In conclusion, in the absence of situational determinants, the decisive aspect to buy either SB or MB products is the attitude of rejection towards MB products' higher price compared to SB and the perception of an increasingly similar quality between them. Deduction aligned with the demonstration carried out by Tran et al. (2014) that the greater the difference perceived between SB and MB, the lower the intention to buy a SB is.

For its part, the decision to buy either a SB or another is exclusively determined by the perceived quality, which depends on packaging, brand reputation, assortment and perceived sensory quality for the food product into question.

In this sense, post-purchasing feelings have an impact on food products' quality

perception, especially on SB, so that the real experience with the product affects SB quality assessment.

#### 6. FUTURE RESEARCH LINES

This analysis allowed us to identify product's intrinsic and extrinsic attributes – packaging, assortment and taste – as variables that affect SB products' buying decision process. Thus, a future line of research may deal with the study of the importance of these attributes when assessing different store brands, in order to find out if, indeed, attributes that define perceived quality have the same weight when different store brands are assessed or the importance varies depending on the brand in question.

For its part, and in accordance with the investigation carried out by Vahie and Paswan (2006), who demonstrates that store atmosphere affects the store brands' perceived quality, it could be very interesting to demonstrate how the store's own characteristics, especially breadth and depth, may be involved in the SB' perceived quality.

#### 7. IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

It should be said that, since quality assessment of the various SB submits to criteria related to product's intrinsic and extrinsic attributes, and not to price, distributors should bear in mind that, when they are managing their brands, differentiation through packaging, product assortment and brand reputation are decisive aspects to become more competitive.

Likewise, this study allowed us to learn that a positive sensory experience with a food product has a positive effect on the perceived quality of the SB that sells it, so that the SB products sampling in the store itself is a useful tool to increase SB'

purchase repetition and, therefore, fidelity towards the distributor brand.

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