



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Journal of Business Research



## Facebook users' intentions in risk communication and food-safety issues☆

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 1 September 2014

Received in revised form 1 March 2015

Accepted 1 April 2015

Available online xxx

## Keywords:

Food safety

Risk communication

Risk perceptions

Emotion

Social trust

Social support

## ABSTRACT

This research attempts to address Facebook use intention for food safety issues in the social media context. This new open-access information environment, which coexists with traditional media and other new media channels, poses new questions about the effectiveness of Facebook use in the social media era. The study aims to examine the risk communication strategic impact by Facebook in the context of food safety issues. Specifically, this study adopts a web survey, multiple regression analysis and FsQCA analysis to address the research hypotheses from 652 consumers. Research results find that risk perception, emotion, social trust and support are the key determinants of Facebook use intention for the potential power of Facebook as an efficient tool of risk communication. The author also discusses theoretical and managerial implications of research findings.

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## 1. Introduction

The development of new information communication technologies makes the dissemination of information faster and wider (Brown & Venkatesh, 2005; Huarng, 2011, 2015). More importantly, the social media technical features allow people to participate in public affairs. Social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are business tools (Patterson, 2012). Social media are online application, platform and media which facilitate interactions, collaborations and sharing of content and take a variety of forms, including Facebook, weblogs, social blogs, microblog, wikis, podcasts, pictures, video, rating, and social bookmarking (Kim & Ko, 2012).

These food safety issues in Taiwan include the infamous Sanlu Melamine-tainted baby formula incident in 2008, the Shuanghui Clenbuterol-tainted pork incident in 2011, and the gutter cooking oil incident in 2014. To date, social media provide an alternative platform for the internet users to seek, learn and share risk information. The affective and cognitive responses of Facebook users who engage themselves in risk communication activities fail to examine, the current study aims to fill the gaps.

Companies and governments shift their attention from technology to services (Buck, 1985; Huarng & Ribeiro-Soriano, 2014; Ribeiro-Soriano & Huarng, 2013; Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014) as Facebook evolves rapidly over time, there is a need to understand the strategic impacts of consumers' decision making (Alpert & Kamins, 1995; Bagomolova, 2010). Facebook use into the consumer market raises the need to understand consumers' use intention other than technology adoption. Therefore, the research on the use of Facebook in risk communication for the food safety issue should gain attention. Some variables for the risk communication research constructs such as risk perception, emotion, social trust and support still require further investigation.

Risk communication includes using precaution advocacy to warn the public, using crisis management to reassure the public and guiding the public to go through the risk (Sandman, 2006). Prior research fails to provide a consistent theoretical framework to advance our knowledge of this risk communication phenomenon for the food safety issues. However, due to the lack of empirical data to support this framework, the validity of this approach still requires additional investigation in the risk communication context.

## 2. Literature review

## 2.1. Social media and risk communication

The use of social media for risk communication purposes is an active area of study in recent years. Risk communication is the process of conveying to interested parties (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012; Fiksel & Covello, 1987). Hence, Ding (2009) and Ratzan (2011) urge physicians, scientists, government agencies and other authorities to

☆ The author thanks Arch Woodside (Boston College), Kun Huang Huarng (Feng Chia University), Wen-Hsiang Lai (Feng Chia University), and other researchers at the 2014 GIKA-Asia/Pacific Conference on Innovation and Diffusion of High-Tech Products, Services, and Systems for comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript. The author thanks two anonymous referees for valuable comments on earlier versions of this work. The author acknowledges the financial support from the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST-103-2511-S-005-004) in Taiwan. The author is responsible for any remaining errors.

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make use of social media and mobile communication systems to counter the amount of misinformation on food safety issues.

The study of social media business communication contexts is flourishing. Extant literature examines the use of social media on building public relations (Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Verhoeven, Tench, Zeffass, Moreno, & Verdid, 2012), developing strategic risk communication (Bardus, 2011; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011; Schultza, Utza, & Goritzb, 2011) and marketing products (Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2012). Social media become new tools to share risk information (Takahashi et al., 2009). They also makes risk communication easier and more efficient and allows the users to share the message or leave a message (Anderson, Rainey, & Eysenbach, 2003; Bass et al., 2006). More importantly, social media enable the dissemination of risk information in a timely fashion.

## 2.2. Risk perception

To gain a better understanding of the food safety issues, it is useful to examine the concept of risk. This risk concept consists of two types: risk as a physical attribute and risk as a social concept (Bradbury, 1989). The risk contains three elements including undesirable outcomes, possibility of occurrence, and state of reality (Ratzan, 2011). The concept of risk as a social concept raises considerable academic interest among researchers from different disciplines including risk assessment, cognitive psychology, and communication (Grabill & Simmons, 1998; Tucker, Whaley, & Sharp, 2006). By contrast, cognitive psychology theory provides a research framework to examine the risk perception, affective and behavioral responses of the public (Mirel, 1994; Slovic, 1987). A conventional standard of success for risk communication indicates the efficient knowledge transfer (Grabill & Simmons, 1998; Tuner, Rimal, Morrison, & Kim, 2006). The unknown risk seems to be unobservable, unknown and new hazards as the basis for contemporary risk research (Fleming, Thorson, & Zhang, 2006). Knowledge of food safety issues is crucial in risk perception (Frewer, Shepherd, & Sparks, 1994; Shaw, 2003; Whaley & Tucker, 2004). However, risk perception affecting consumers' Facebook use intention for the food safety issue remains unclear. Therefore,

**H1.** Risk perception affects consumers' Facebook use intention for the food safety issues.

## 2.3. Emotion

Emotion plays a role in consumers' decision making (Buck, Anderson, Chaudhuri, & Ray, 2004; Deng & Poole, 2010; Laros & Steenkamp, 2005). Previous emotion research proposes an individual's affective system and assigns positive or negative valence to an environment (Ferreira, da Rocha, & da Silva, 2014; Ha & Lennon, 2010; Russell & Pratt, 1980). Emotion refers to cognitive, motivational and relational configurations whose status changes with changes in the person-environment relationships (Brunner-Sperdin & Scholl-Grissemann, 2014; Jang & Namkung, 2009; Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Mummalaneni, 2005). From the perspective of attribution theory, three emotions including sympathy, anger, and joy from others' pain are salient factors in risk management (Brunner-Sperdin & Scholl-Grissemann, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Lee, Ha, & Widdows, 2011). Yalch and Spangenberg (2000) and Richins (1997) deal with emotional responses within a discrete positive and negative emotion scheme instead of a pleasure and arousal scheme. Derbaix (1995) focuses on consumers' emotional responses to advertising, when Phillips and Baumgartner (2002) examine the mediating role of emotions on the satisfaction of consumers. Other researchers concentrate on one or several specific emotions, such as regret (Izzard, 1993), sympathy and empathy (Edson & Stern, 2003) and anger (Bougie, Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2003;

Taylor, 1994; Tuner, 2006). Research posits that emotion affects consumers' Facebook use intention for the food safety issues.

**H2.** Emotion affects consumers' Facebook use intention for the food safety issues.

## 2.4. Social trust

Social trust refers to the average level of generalized trust of people (Portes, 1998). Social trust is a characteristic of an interpersonal relationship and develops over time through interactions between the two parties (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Kasperson, Golding, and Tuler (1992) suggests that good institutions may create and maintain incentives for behaving trustworthily and result in social trust including commitment, competence, caring, and predictability. The public becomes cautious about whether to trust any social institution in a social climate (Rowan, 1991).

Trust plays a crucial role in sound social interactions (Erturk & Vurgun, 2015). Research scholars identify trust at different levels including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral intention (Kasperson et al., 1992; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Social trust is an individual's expectation that other persons and institutions can act with competent and predictable (Erturk & Vurgun, 2015). Social trust is an important influence on human behavior. Therefore,

**H3.** Social trust affects consumers' Facebook use intention for the food safety issues.

## 2.5. Social support

Lochner, Kawachi, and Kennedy (1999) suggest that social support is a feature of the social structure, not of the individual actors within the social structure. Individuals seek social support when facing difficult times, such as serious illness (Takahashi et al., 2009). During a risk or disaster, social media provide latent functions of social support (Macias, Hilyard, & Freimuth, 2009; Perez-Lugo, 2004; Thelwell & Stuart, 2007). Social support research includes three themes: uncertainty reduction, self acceptance and social integration (Adelman, 1995). Social support gains considerable academic attention. Therefore,

**H4.** Social support affects consumers' Facebook use intention for the food safety issues.

## 3. Research methodology

### 3.1. Variable definition and measurement

After reviewing the management and marketing literature and conducting a pilot study with 20 consumers in Taiwan, the study uses five major groups of construct: Facebook use intention, risk perception, emotions, social trust and social support in Fig. 1. The dependent variable is Facebook use intention. The independent variables are risk perception, emotions, social support and social trust.

The research develops risk perception scale from Fife-Schaw and Rowe's (1996) and Fleming et al.'s (2006) on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "(1) not concerned at all" to "(7) very concerned." Emotion uses selected items from Buck's (1999) and Izzard's (1993) scale on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "(1) never" to "(7) all the time." Social trust employs the selected items from Erturk and Vurgun (2015), with ranging from "(1) not at all" to "(7) very much." Finally, the study adopts Thelwell and Stuart's (2007) scale to measure social support by 7-point Likert scale. Facebook use intention uses the selected items from Quan-Haase and Young (2010). On the basis of literature review, this research identifies key constructs and opinions from a panel of experts and researchers.

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