



Social media mediated interaction with peers, experts and anonymous authors: Conversation partner and message framing effects on risk perception and sense-making of organic food



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ABSTRACT

With the increased popularity of organic food production, new information about the risks attached to food products has become available. Consumers need to make sense of this information, interpret the information in terms of risks and benefits, and consequently choose whether to buy these products or not. In this study, we examined how social media mediated interaction with another person impacts risk perception and sense-making regarding eating organic food. Specifically, we investigated how risk perception and sense-making are influenced by the specific message frame, the identity of the conversation partner, the perceived similarity and expertise of this partner, and the initial attitude of individuals. An online interaction experiment, including a simulated chat in which we manipulated the message frame (gains vs losses vs uncertainty) and the conversation partner (expert vs peer vs anonymous) was conducted using a representative sample of Dutch internet users ($n = 310$). Results showed that chatting with partners who were perceived to be expert was associated with lower levels of risk perception, while chatting with partners who were perceived to be similar was associated with higher levels of information need, intention to take notice, and search for and share information. Results also showed that initial attitude had a strong effect. The more positive consumers were about eating organic food, the lower their risk perception and the higher their need for information, intention to take notice of, search for and share information following the chat. Implications for authorities communicating on food (risks) are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The Internet is one of the main sources currently used by consumers to search for information about food (Jacob, Mathiasen, & Powell, 2010; Kuttschreuter et al., 2014; Redmond & Griffith, 2006; Tian & Robinson, 2008). When surfing the Internet, consumers may end up on social media sites where they can find the opinions of others; in many cases these are peers or experts. A broad range of research shows that, generally speaking, both the opinions of peers and experts influence the individuals' attitudes and behaviour (Andsager, Bemker, Choi, & Torwel, 2006; Griskevicius, Cialdini, & Goldstein, 2008; Pornpitakp, 2004). However, previous research has mainly focused on face-to-face or non-interactive online communication. Furthermore, especially on the Internet, the opinions found are often from anonymous authors. The current importance of online media and the development of social media raise the important question: *to what*

extent does the exchange of opinions during online chats with peers, experts, and anonymous authors influence consumers' risk perception and sense-making and, subsequently, food purchasing decisions?

This experimental study was set up to increase our understanding of the way consumers respond to and make sense of risk and benefit information transmitted via social media. We focused on organic foods, in view of their increasing popularity and availability (Giraud, 2002; Hughner, McDonagh, Prothero, Shultz, & Stanton, 2007).

The main innovative aspect of this study was the inclusion of an anonymous author as online information source. Social media enables an altered interaction compared to traditional media and face-to-face communication (Dellarocas, 2003), and offers new possibilities for information transfer (Rutsaert et al., 2013a; Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Interaction via online social media has different characteristics compared to face-to-face communication, including the presence of anonymous authors. On social media, an individual can, for example, more easily be deceived, because users are essentially anonymous and can pretend to be someone other than who they really are (Dellarocas, 2003; Rutsaert et al., 2013a).

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This study also adds to the existing literature by examining the effects of providing consumers with risk and benefit information regarding a *positively* evaluated food topic.

This study, further, provides practical knowledge about the way the social environment influences consumers' processing of food-related information. This knowledge may enable food communicators to adapt their information supply to empower consumers to make well-informed choices. Knowledge of consumer information processing is also very important for food producers, as this knowledge facilitates understanding of consumer preferences and purchasing behaviour.

1.1. Risk perception, information processing and sense-making

Receiving information about the risks and benefits of particular foods may elicit the need to make sense of and to evaluate these risks and benefits more closely. The active process of seeking, processing and integrating information is labelled "sense-making" (Wilson & Wilson, 2013). This is the process by which individuals give meaning to the world around them, and sense is its outcome. Sense-making involves the need for information, taking notice of information, seeking information, and integrating new information in such a way that the individual perceives no obvious contradiction between this information and the individual's own original opinions and beliefs (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005; Wilson & Wilson, 2013). It takes place at both an individual and a collective level (Caughron et al., 2013; Miranda & Saunders, 2003).

Another means to sense-making is information sharing. Information sharing is related to sense-making in two ways. Firstly, the interaction and exchange of information between the consumer and other individuals or organisations is a means to collective sense-making (Caughron et al., 2013; Miranda & Saunders, 2003). Secondly, information sharing is a behavioural outcome of sense-making. After sense-making, the individual can decide to share information with others (Yang, Kahlor, & Griffin, 2013).

1.2. Perceptions and sense-making regarding organic foods

Research shows that consumers generally hold positive attitudes towards eating organic foods, focus on organic food's benefits (Magnusson, Arvola, Koivisto Hursti, Åberg, & Sjöden, 2001; Saba & Messina, 2003), and associate organic food with naturalness (Shafe & Rennie, 2012). They consider the microbiological risks and those of natural toxins to be small compared to the risks of pesticides (Williams & Hammitt, 2001), and perceive organic foods to be less risky than conventional foods (Hammitt, 1990). Consumers who are more positive about organic products tend to have less positive attitudes towards pesticide use (Dickson-Spillmann, Siegrist, & Keller, 2011; Saba & Messina, 2003) as in their perception, there are fewer benefits and more risks attached to the pesticide use (Saba & Messina, 2003). Such perceptions and attitudes are the main determinant of a preference for organic foods (Aertsens, Verbeke, Mondelaers, & Van Huylenbroeck, 2009; Hughner et al., 2007; Padel & Foster, 2005; Saba & Messina, 2003), however, this preference does not directly translate into actual purchasing behaviour; characteristics like taste and price play a role as well (Lee & Yun, 2015).

Many studies on food communication and sense-making focus on topics where consumers had ambivalent or negative attitudes, such as red meat (Regan et al., 2014; Rutsaert et al., 2015), or nanotechnology in foods (Frewer et al., 2014; Siegrist, Cousin, Kastenholz, & Wiek, 2007; Siegrist, Stampfli, Kastenholz, & Keller, 2008). How risk and benefit information affects the risk perception and sense-making of food products considered to be *favourable*, is still unclear.

1.3. Message framing

An online source can *frame* his/her viewpoint by emphasising specific information. This may have an impact on consumers' reactions. Framing can be defined as the way in which information is presented (Chong & Druckman, 2007). *Emphasis frames* (Chong & Druckman, 2007) are characterised by focusing the attention on certain aspects of a topic (e.g. gains versus losses). Emphasis frames may contain the same information, while putting the focus on different aspects or on different parts of the information.

An important question is whether it makes a difference with respect to consumers' risk perception and sense-making with respect to organic foods if a gains frame (e.g. emphasis on advantages) or a losses frame (e.g. emphasis on disadvantages) is used. These two frames correspond to the distinction between *promotion-focus* and *prevention-focus* made in Higgins' Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997).

Evidence for a differential effect of frames was reported in a recent study by Yan (2015), who showed that negative health frames induced higher levels of cognitive elaboration with respect to eating junk food compared to positive ones. In real-life situations, however, there often is no clear emphasis on one of the two, and consumers are left uncertain whether the risks outweigh the benefits or vice versa.

We therefore tested whether framing the message of the conversation partner (gains, losses, uncertainty) had an effect on risk perception and sense-making. We hypothesised that:

- *The framing of the message of the conversation partner affects risk perception (H1a) and sense-making (H2a). A losses frame is related to higher levels of risk perception and sense-making compared to a gains or uncertainty frame.*

1.4. Conversation partner, perceived similarity and perceived expertise

The author of a message and the way this person is perceived in terms of similarity and expertise have been found to influence consumers' information processing behaviour (Paek, Hove, Jeong, & Kim, 2011; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993). In the context of *online* interaction on organic food, the differential impact of three conversation partners seems most relevant to study: that of peers, experts and anonymous authors. In the past, consumers often relied on expert information (Lord, 2002). Nowadays, however, consumers mostly use the Internet to find the information they need. They often end up at user-generated webpages (Laurent & Vickers, 2009) containing information spread by other consumers (Helm, 2000). In an online context, peers are thus becoming increasingly important as information sources. Their contribution is not restricted to factual information, but also includes user experiences which have been shown to affect attitudes and behaviour (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009; Winterbottom, Bekker, Conner, & Mooney, 2008; Zhu & Huberman, 2014). It is yet unclear whether consumers rely more on opinions posted online by their peers or still follow professional advice (Dellarocas, 2003). A distinctive feature of the Internet is that the source of the information might be unknown. As a great deal of Internet information has no clear author, a third category of particular interest is that of the anonymous authors.

Peers have been found to be especially influential because individuals are likely to follow the lead of others, when the *perceived similarity* between the individual and the other is high (Festinger, 1954; Platow et al., 2005). This phenomenon is called social proof (Cialdini, 2001; Griskevicius et al., 2008). The more similar the other person is perceived to be, the more relevant the opinion of this person is for the individual's behaviour, attitudes and beliefs (Festinger, 1954; Pornpitakp, 2004; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978).

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