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Seeking information about food-related risks: The contribution of social media



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ABSTRACT

In the current information landscape, there are numerous channels for consumers to find information on issues pertaining to food safety. The rise in popularity of social media makes communicators question the extent to which resources should be allocated to these channels in order to reach new segments or audiences which are hard to reach through more traditional dissemination channels. A segmentation approach was used to identify groups of consumers based on their inclination to use different channels to seek information about food-related risks, including traditional media, online media and social media. In the wake of the 2011 *Escherichia coli* contamination crisis, the study focused on a bacterial contamination of fresh vegetables. Results were obtained through an online survey among 1264 participants from eight European countries in September 2012. Four segments were identified: 'a high cross-channel inclination' (24%), 'an established channel inclination' (31%), 'a moderate cross-channel inclination' (26%) and 'a low cross-channel inclination' (19%). Results show that social media can act as a complementary information channel for a particular segment, but that it is not a substitute for traditional or online media. Individuals who showed an inclination to use social media in conjunction with other channels considered it more important to be well informed, were more motivated to find additional information, were more sensitive to risks in general and perceived the likelihood of a food incident in the future to be larger. The 'high cross-channel inclination' segment contained relatively younger and more Southern European participants.

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Introduction

The 2011 *Escherichia coli* contamination of fenugreek seeds in Europe and the 2011 listeriosis outbreak in contaminated cantaloupes in the United States generated considerable public attention and concern regarding the potential consequences of a food contamination incident, with both cases resulting in many illnesses and deaths (Laksanalamai et al., 2012; Mellmann et al., 2011). Typically when a food safety incident occurs, there is often increased anxiety and information seeking activity among consumers (Kuttschreuter, 2006). To develop effective communication strategies, it is crucial to understand the processes through which consumers encounter and search for information from different sources, as well as through different channels.

Many studies have highlighted the importance of information sources in food risk communication (European Commission, 2010; Frewer, Howard, Hedderley, & Shepherd, 1996; Kornelis, de Jonge, Frewer, & Dagevos, 2007; van Kleef et al., 2006). Consumers' intention to use particular communication channels has garnered less attention in food risk literature (Clarke & McComas, 2012; Frewer et al., in press). This study aims to fill this gap by investigating consumers' intention to use current prevalent online and offline information channels. Special attention is given to the opportunities that arise with regards to the current societal popularity of several social media applications. The growth of social media offers communicators new channels for improving the communication of food risks but must be considered alongside the classical media channels that are traditionally used (Barnett et al., 2011; Rutsaert et al., 2014). In other words, to what extent are consumers who are familiar with social media applications inclined to use these as a channel to seek information about food risks, compared to other more traditional mass media and Internet channels?

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Channel use in a complex media landscape

When seeking information about food safety, the public has the opportunity to access information through many different channels. Traditional media such as television, radio and newspaper have been recognized as key sources and channels of food risk information that have a profound influence on consumer perception of food-related risk (Houghton et al., 2008). The media is one of the arenas where risk messages are constructed, disseminated and transformed and communicators use media channels to spread their message (Noar, 2006). Traditional media also have designated as a potential amplification station of risk (Petts, Horlick-Jones, & Murdock, 2001). As food risks are the focus of considerable public concern (Kuttuschreuter, 2006), they are likely to be a topic of much media reporting. While experts may believe the media to be an outlet which only serves to create public anxiety, consumers often view this commodity in a more positive light and see the media as a valuable channel of risk-related information about food (Krystallis et al., 2007; Van Kleef et al., 2006).

In recent decades, the landscape of communication channels has undergone a number of substantial changes with huge implications for organisations and institutions with a remit in food communication. The Internet has become a key channel for consumers to seek food risk information (Jacob, Mathiasen, & Powell, 2010; Redmond & Griffith, 2006; Tian & Robinson, 2008). Search engines have become the main starting point for accessing a vast amount of information online (Brossard & Scheufele, 2013; Kobayashi & Takeda, 2000). By entering a specific set of search terms in the search engine, users can find relevant information about a diversity of topics, including food safety issues. Another option to obtain food risk information is to directly access the website of a particular trusted organisation. Also news websites are increasingly playing a role as a key online information channel (De Waal, Schönbach, & Lauf, 2005).

In the last decennium the Internet has seen a new array of technical innovations that go collectively under the name of 'web 2.0'. Web 2.0 has provided a platform for the evolution of social media which is defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61). Consumer engagement on different social media platforms is growing exponentially. Applications like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are extremely popular and used by millions of people every day. Tools such as YouTube make it easy for organisations to share videos, which can be used by viewers on websites, blogs or other social media applications. Social networking sites such as Facebook and micro-blogs such as Twitter have built-in search engines that allow one to seek information within their online community. Forums and blogs allow the individual to express personal views, share information and engage in citizen journalism (Tilley & Cokley, 2008). The high current societal popularity of social media raises the question as to how inclined consumers would be to seek food safety information through social media channels (Barnett et al., 2011; Brossard & Scheufele, 2013; Rutsaert, Regan et al., 2013).

Determinants of channel choices for seeking information about food risks

The determinants that motivate individuals to seek information have mostly been explored within the Risk Information Seeking and Processing (RISP) model, designed to account for predictors of information seeking and processing within the context of risk (Griffin, Dunwoody, & Neuwirth, 1999; Griffin, Neuwirth, Dunwoody, & Giese, 2004). Information provision to consumers should be properly managed and targeted to address particular

needs recognising that not all consumers are alike: "Individual characteristics such as uncertainty level, involvement, knowledge, or personality, as well as attitudes, lifestyles and socio-demographics account for differences in information needs and reactions to information" (Verbeke, 2005, p. 352). Kuttuschreuter (2006) defined three main determinants that could directly influence an individual's level of information seeking about food risks: risk perception, information need and affective response. Whether these determinants also result in different patterns of channel use has, to our knowledge, not been investigated.

One of the main determinants of information seeking according to the RISP framework is the information insufficiency of a consumer (Kahlor, Dunwoody, Griffin, Neuwirth, & Giese, 2003; Ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008). This perceived information insufficiency can be defined as the gap between information that is held and information that is desired. This concept has been found to be more predictive of information seeking than the actual level of knowledge held by an individual (Griffin et al., 1999). The media complementarity framework, introduced by Dutta-Bergman (2004), proposes that interested consumers will access and use different media such that each complements the other. This framework suggests that the level of interest in a particular topic is one of the main drivers to determine media usage. The notion of complementarity is in contrast to the focus of displacement theory (McCombs, 1972) which predicts that a new media channel will replace a previously employed media channel (for example the Internet replacing the newspaper). With respect to our study, this would mean that individuals might be interested in using social media information channels alongside other channels rather than the use of one replacing another.

People's perceptions of risks and affective response to a risk can influence one's judgment of the amount of information needed to cope with the risk according to Griffin et al. (1999). Results from Kuttuschreuter (2006) showed that risk perception and affective response were indeed positively correlated to information need and information seeking. Kornelis et al. (2007) focused on the sources consumers consult and found evidence for five distinct groups: heavy institutional-source users, moderate institutional-source users, social source users, non-selective heavy users and low users. Their results also indicated that those consumers who relied more heavily on their social network as a source of information displayed the highest level of trait worry. These results thus suggest that higher risk perception and a stronger affective response might result in an increased preference for information seeking. As a corollary of this, a trait risk sensitivity might lead to a higher preference for social media friends, family and peers as a source of information – central to many social media applications.

It is also important to consider that socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender and income can be significant for tailored information provision (Kornelis et al., 2007). Research has shown for example that older people and males have much lower trust in online health information channels than younger people and females (Hesse et al., 2005). The country in which consumers are residing may also be a key determinant of channel preferences as the traditional and social media landscape is not homogenous across Europe (de Almeida et al., 1997; European Commission, 2010).

Purpose of the study

The primary objective of this paper is to identify how consumers familiar with social media use it to seek information about food risks, vis-à-vis more traditional offline and online channels. Insights obtained from this study are relevant for the discussion on whether there is added value for communicators in investing resources in social media and whether this might allow communi-

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