



Consumers' perceptions of food risks: A snapshot of the Italian Triveneto area



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the food risk perceptions of people living in the Triveneto area (Northeast Italy), a territory characterized by a particular interest in the production of quality foodstuffs, to determine what aspects people associate with food risk and to understand what beliefs underlie these perceptions.

Four focus groups were conducted in the major towns of the target area ($N = 45$). A semi-structured interview was used that focused on beliefs about food risks, the use of information and media sources in relation to food risk, and the behaviours adopted when eating outside the home.

A homogeneous view of food risk emerged among the respondents, and a common definition of risky food was identified. The concept of risk was in opposition to the quality and controllability of food, which emerged as major strategies to cope with food risks. Quality was linked to freshness and local origin, whereas controllability reflected a direct (e.g., checking labels, having a relationship with the vendor, cultivating one's own vegetable garden) or indirect (e.g., control guarantees provided by suppliers and the government) means to check the safety and quality of food. Although people seemed quite informed about food risks, a common sense of impotence with regard to one's own protection prevailed, together with a fatalistic sense of incomplete control over risk.

The results identified food concerns for consumers living in this specific territory and might represent a starting point for public health authorities to increase compliance with responsible behaviours for risk mitigation and to define successful food policies for this area.

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1. Introduction

Promoting public health and food safety requires not only full commitment and attention to activities related to infectious disease control and risk evaluation and management but also listening and communicating with citizens (Wilcock, Pun, Khanona, & Aung, 2004) as part of a wider risk governance strategy (Dreyer & Renn, 2014).

It is widely recognized that concerns about food safety have increased in the last decade, together with recurrent demands for transparency and information (Grunert, 2002; Papadopoulou et al., 2012). In particular, rapid changes to the agro-food system, new or changed lifestyles for many groups of people and repeated

occurrences of food crises (e.g., avian influenza, *E. coli* epidemics, BSE) have deeply affected the relationships between consumers and food and between consumers and the public health agencies that are delegated with guaranteeing food safety (Cope et al., 2010; Holm & Kildevang, 1996; Kjaernes, Harvey, & Warde, 2007; Scholliers, 2008).

In response, national and international organizations have launched a variety of public initiatives and communication campaigns to provide adequate answers for consumers and to encourage responsible food habits and behaviours to reduce unjustified alarmism and provide consumers with concrete risk mitigation strategies (Infanti et al., 2013; Sixsmith, Doyle, D'Eath, & Barry, 2014; Tiozzo et al., 2011).

The effectiveness of food and health policies in terms of risk prevention is closely linked to the success of these communication interventions (McCarthy & Brennan, 2009; Van Dijk et al., 2008). Therefore, to design tailored risk/benefit communication campaigns, it is crucial to investigate how people perceive and manage food risks (Honkanen & Frewer, 2009; McCarthy et al., 2007;

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Wilcock et al., 2004).

1.1. Food risk perception and communication

Food risks are of great concern for consumers, who face daily food choices and must cope with possible hazards. Scholars use the term “food risks” to refer to hazards from food of microbiological (e.g., foodborne diseases), chemical (e.g., pesticides and contaminants) or nutritional (e.g., obesity and cardiovascular diseases) origin (Buzby, 2001). Both microbiological and chemical risks derive from industrial production and domestic practices, such as agricultural practices, the transport and processing of food, food storage and food consumption (Mol & Bulkeley, 2002).

As noted by Miles et al. (2004), “associated attitudes towards a particular hazard are driven more by psychologically determined risk perceptions than the technical risk estimates provided by experts” (p. 9). Public concern about food-related risks is mainly associated with chemicals, pesticides and other substances (European Commission, 2010), whereas experts judge microbiological hazards to be the main risk to health from food (Miles et al., 2004). Moreover, experts estimate that there is still a considerable burden of foodborne illness (Havelaar et al., 2010). In recent years, microbiological contaminations and foodborne infections (e.g. *salmonellosis*, *campylobacteriosis*) have increased significantly (Brennan, McCarthy, & Ritson, 2007; EFSA and ECDC, 2015; Redmond & Griffith, 2003). These infections are mainly acquired through the ingestion of contaminated food of animal origin, direct contact with infected animals, cross-contamination, environmental sources or person-to-person transmission (Losasso et al., 2012).

A number of studies have highlighted the diffusion of food pathogens in foodstuffs prepared at home (Byrd-Bredbenner, Scaffner, & Maurer Abbot, 2010; Milton & Mullan, 2010; Redmond & Griffith, 2003). Particularly in the domestic environment, incorrect beliefs about food storage, handling and preparation can expose consumers to the risk of foodborne diseases (Mari, Tiozzo, Capozza, & Ravarotto, 2012; Taché & Carpentier, 2014). However, safety measures taken by consumers have been shown to play a critical role in the prevention of foodborne infections. Therefore, the dissemination of tailored communication materials is crucial to improve food safety management at home. To succeed in increasing knowledge about correct food-handling practices, communication materials should be designed according to the target's beliefs, perceptions and attitudes about these risks. In addition, the socio-cultural context and the geographic territory should be regarded as factors that might influence personal strategies to mitigate risks (Lundgren, 1994; Lupton, 2003). Approaches to food risk management that do not specifically consider public and stakeholders' views have been shown to be inefficient in a number of high-profile cases (Shepherd, 2008).

1.2. Food safety in Italy: the Triveneto area

National food security policies must consider consumers' expectations and concerns about how food is produced and processed as well as its origin and impact on the environment and society (Brunori, Malandrini, & Rossi, 2013). A number of studies have demonstrated that differences in food consumption are also related to territorial aspects (Pieniak, Verbeke, Vanhonacker, Guerrero, & Hersleth, 2009).

Italy has usually been portrayed as a country with a strong and internationally recognized food culture, and the prominent role of the agro-food sector in the national economy and culture is well acknowledged (Ferretti & Magauda, 2006). As reported by Casini, Contini, Marone, and Romano (2013), any geographic area is generally characterized by different traditions and different

lifestyles. This is particularly true for the target territory of the current study, the Triveneto area.¹ This area has been renowned for its strong agricultural tradition, its wine and food sectors, and a substantial production of typical foods (i.e., products with high cultural and gastronomic value produced according to local and historical traditions) (Banca d'Italia, 2011, 2015; Centro Studi Unioncamere Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2015; Gallenti, 2014; Regione del Veneto, 2015). Moreover, the Triveneto area is characterized by a growing interest in the sale and consumption of traditional products, especially raw pork such as salami and ‘*sopresse*’, which are manufactured without starter cultures and ripened in a non-standardized environment. Because foodborne outbreaks can be associated to the consumption of such foodstuffs, the local government has recently implemented a simplified procedure to sell small quantities of those products directly from the producer to the consumer (Roccatto et al., 2017). In this way, the safeguarding of both food quality and the need for cultural identity (Demos & Pi, 2009) are combined with respect to food safety standards (De Cesare, Mioni, & Manfreda, 2007; Roccatto et al., 2015).

Despite the acknowledged quality of the local gastronomic products, Italians generally do not trust the food they eat. A recent Italian survey (Accredia, 2013) found that 74% of the respondents were concerned about food risks. In particular, respondents' feelings of anxiety and insecurity were mainly due to the mass media's depictions of risky food. These data have also been confirmed at the local level with specific reference to the Italian Triveneto area. In 2014, Demos and Pi (2014) found that three out of four people (74%) living in this area were very or somewhat concerned about food safety and food risks. In addition, the degree of this concern has increased in the last few years compared to previous surveys (Demos & Pi, 2009).

Based on these considerations, it is important to gain deeper knowledge of how people living in the Triveneto area cope with food risks and what characterizes their perceptions. To the best of our knowledge, there is little literature on consumer perceptions of food risks in this area. Arzenton, Neresini, and Ravarotto (2005) conducted a preliminary analysis that aimed to identify the most important factors that contribute to social perceptions of food risk for people living in the Veneto region. The findings revealed that consumers living in the Veneto region seemed to have adopted two specific strategies to restore trust in their food: purchases of local products and a propensity towards natural foods that are self-cultivated.

1.3. Aims of the study

The present study aimed to investigate how people living in the Triveneto area perceive and manage food-related risks to gain a deeper understanding of what they consider safe or risky foodstuffs and what strategies they adopt to cope with these risks. By means of exploratory focus groups, we investigated attitudes and beliefs towards food risks with reference to eating both at home and outside the home. Consumers' opinions about the role of media sources in delivering information about food risks were also explored to understand what information sources lay people trust and use for their informational needs about food risks.

This research extended the exploratory study conducted in the Veneto region by Arzenton et al. (2005) to the Friuli Venezia Giulia and Trentino-Alto Adige regions to obtain a snapshot of food risk perceptions throughout the Triveneto area.

¹ The Triveneto area refers to a geographic area situated in Northeast Italy. It is composed of the Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia and Trentino-Alto Adige (autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano) regions.

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