



## Understanding responses to posted restaurant food safety scores: An information processing and regulatory focus perspective



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### ABSTRACT

Ensuring the safety of food served in restaurants continues to be an essential issue in the hospitality industry. An important part of the efforts to stem the outbreak of foodborne illnesses are the mandatory inspections of any entity that serves food to the public. Unfortunately, while posting food safety scores is intended to help consumers make better dining choices, interpreting these scores can often be difficult and confusing. The purpose of this study is to use information processing theory as a framework to investigate how consumers evaluate food safety inspection scores. To achieve this goal, this research provides an account of the effect of food safety concern on consumers' attitudes toward restaurants under conditions of both positive and negative health inspection results. The results identify a moderating effect of health score in the formation of consumers' attitudes toward restaurants. The downstream effects on expected satisfaction and behaviors are also established.

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### 1. Introduction

Incidents of foodborne illness outbreaks in the United States are climbing despite the increase in food safety management programs and the implementation of the Food Safety Modernization Act in 2011 (FDA, 2011). The recent outbreaks of foodborne illness at Chipotle restaurants and on commercial cruise lines have served to highlight the fact that food safety is an ongoing issue in the hospitality industry (CDC, 2016; Food Safety News, 2016). In fact, in 2013 (the latest year for which data are available), the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported 13,360 cases of foodborne illness, a 38% increase from the year before, and projections suggest that this number will continue to grow (CDC, 2013).

As outlined in the Food and Drug Administration's Food Code (2013), an integral part of preventing such outbreaks is the food establishment inspection process wherein health inspectors regularly inspect restaurant food handling practices and subsequently rate these establishments on adherence to food safety guidelines. Results of these inspections are public information, and many states

require the public posting of inspection results in the form of an alphabetic letter, usually an A, B, or C (McVicar, 2011). Accordingly, the issue of food safety is an important one for restaurants, as the negative publicity associated with a poor health rating can result in loss of consumer trust, public relations problems, and legal costs (DiPietro et al., 2011).

Food safety is also of importance to a restaurant's customer base (Fatimah et al., 2011) as consumers often look to posted food safety scores to make dining decisions (Henson et al., 2006). However, while consumers can benefit from the disclosure of restaurant inspection results, interpreting posted food safety scores can often be difficult and confusing (Filion and Powell, 2011). To better understand this phenomenon, previous studies have investigated the delivery of food safety rating information, such as format, location, and information source (e.g., Choi et al., 2013; Filion and Powell, 2001). While such research has advanced the knowledge of consumer reactions to restaurant food safety in a general way, very few studies have explored (1) the cognitive traits consumers use to interpret food safety scores and (2) the ways in which food safety information is used to make assessments about the establishment. Accordingly, very little is known about how individual personality traits affect consumer's perceptions of food safety inspection results and the interpretation of posted scores.

The purpose of this study is to bridge this gap in the literature by using information processing theory as a framework to inves-

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tigate the how consumers evaluate posted restaurant food safety inspection scores. Understanding the extent to which individually varying traits affect food safety perceptions is important because the evaluation of food safety information can affect beliefs about a restaurant's food, service expectations, and consumer behavior (Henson et al., 2006). To achieve this goal, this research investigates the effect of food safety concern on consumers' attitudes toward restaurants under conditions of both positive and negative health inspection results. The hypotheses inherent to the proposed framework are tested using data from a sample of restaurant consumers in the United States. Upon establishing the moderating effect of health score in determining consumers' attitudes toward restaurants, the effects on expected satisfaction and behaviors are examined. The implications for restaurant operators and those involved in developing food service policy are discussed.

## 2. Literature review

Food safety inspection programs in the U.S. vary according to state, regional and city food safety management programs. Codified by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), authorized health agencies are approved to execute inspection programs and have flexibility in evaluation methods and reporting nomenclature. Inspections are conducted by trained sanitarians, otherwise known as health inspectors, and methods of inspection are developed by the local agency. Adopted methods and evaluation criteria are used to guide the evaluation as sanitarians visit restaurants for inspections, which are usually conducted twice per year; however, with the recent implementation of the Food Safety Modernization Act, those entities qualifying as high risk can be inspected more often (FDA, 2011, 2016). Inspections can be based on the 2009 or 2013 adopted FDA Food Code or on the guidelines established by authorized health agencies (FDA, 2009, 2013).

Regardless of the food safety inspection protocol, inspections are conducted and results are reported and summarized. After the inspection has been conducted, the food establishment is informed of any violations and the criticality of identified issues. Based on the level of violation(s) received, restaurant operators are notified of specific areas of concern and the actions that should be implemented to correct the noted violations. If a violation is considered to pose a significant safety risk to the consumer, the establishment can be closed for a number of days until the situation is corrected. If correction is not accomplished in the timeline designated by the inspector, the establishment can be permanently closed (Waters et al., 2013).

The practice of posting food safety scores is important for a number of reasons. Posted inspection notices impact consumer choice, heighten the motivation of food service establishments to receive high scores on food safety inspections, and serve as a marketing advantage, whether overtly or covertly, for food establishments (Choi et al., 2013; Tarca and Murphy, 2014). Unfortunately, the methods of communicating such information to the public are inconsistent in the U.S., and the results are often confusing for customers (Baker-White, 2014; Fatimah et al., 2011). As follows, information processing theory and regulatory focus theory are used to provide a framework for consumer interpretation of posted food safety inspection reports (see Fig. 1; H = Hypothesis).

### 2.1. Information processing theory

Information processing theory (Chaiken, 1987; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) suggests that individuals process new pieces of information either heuristically or systematically. Heuristic processing is based on shortcuts, clues, proxies, or stereotypes to evaluate a situation and can be advantageous as it is more efficient

and requires less cognitive energy than deeper processing (Chaiken, 1987; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). The disadvantage of using heuristics is that this process is less detailed and can result in less accurate conclusions, resulting in potentially incomplete gathering of information.

Conversely, systematic processing is a deeper and more cognitive processing of information (Chaiken, 1987; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Systematic processing entails gathering a plethora of information, analyzing it, and using it to arrive at a conclusion. This process is much more time-intensive, effortful, and cognitively demanding than heuristic processing, but the result often leads to a more accurate conclusion or evaluation.

The information processing model suggests that when determining whether an individual will process a new piece of information heuristically or systematically, people tend to be inherently predisposed to the conservation of cognitive resources (Taylor and Fiske, 1978). This conservative approach leads to heuristic processing whenever possible, unless the individuals are otherwise motivated to expend the extra time, energy, and cognitive effort on systematic processing. Previous studies have found that motivations to engage in systematic information processing can include importance, relevance, outcome dependency, mood, need for cognition, and desire for control (Neuberg and Fiske, 1987; Petty et al., 1981; Pittman and D'Agostino, 1989).

Positive cues result in heuristic processing, while negative cues often lead to systematic processing. For example, a good mood or positive environment can result in evaluations that are creative, simplified, and characterized by less attention to detail (Mackie and Worth, 1989; Schwarz et al., 1991). Positive cues send a message that "all is as it should be," and there is no need to further evaluate the situation; thus, the heuristic-based conclusion will be adequate. Contrariwise, a bad mood, a negative environment, or an adverse occurrence often leads to more systematic processing (Bohner et al., 1994; Schwarz, 1990). Some researchers suggest that such negative cues signal threats or danger in the environment, prompting a person to look carefully, gather detailed information, and analyze it critically to solve problems (Frijda, 1988; Schwarz, 1990; Schwarz et al., 1991). Negative cues send a message that "something is not right," or "possibly dangerous," and in such cases, systematic processing is a way of minimizing the possibility that one might arrive at a wrong, and possibly dangerous, conclusion.

The present research uses information processing theory as framework to understand consumers' reactions to posted health inspection scores in a restaurant environment. However, equally important to the proposed framework are the constructs of promotion and prevention focus. According to regulatory focus theory, these constructs are proposed to affect consumer attitudes and behaviors when positive or negative visual cues are presented. Thus, the premise of the present research is that individually varying traits affect consumers' perceptions of food safety inspection scores and subsequently determine whether they use heuristic or systematic processing to form attitudes about the restaurant. These specific traits are discussed as a part of the following account of regulatory focus theory.

### 2.2. Regulatory focus theory

The concept of regulatory focus suggests that people are motivated by two different kinds of goals: promotion goals and prevention goals (Higgins, 1998; Lockwood et al., 2002). Promotion goals are oriented toward maximizing positive outcomes and prevention goals are oriented toward minimizing negative outcomes. Regulatory focus is an inherent, individual-level trait, but can also be primed by the situation, as in the presentation of a health inspection score.

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