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A Theory of Planned behaviour perspective for investigating the role of trust in consumer purchasing decision related to short food supply chains

Elisa Giampietri^{a,*}, Fabio Verneau^b, Teresa Del Giudice^c, Valentina Carfora^d, Adele Finco^a

^a Department of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences, Università Politecnica delle Marche, Ancona, Italy

^b Department of Political Sciences, University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy

^c Department of Agriculture, University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy

^d Department of Humanities, University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy

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ABSTRACT

To better understand the success and the growing number of Short Food Supply Chains in Italy, this study investigates consumer motivations and behaviours with regard to these alternative agri-food networks through an extended model of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). In particular, the paper focuses on the role of consumer trust towards purchasing at short chains, as well as the role of consumer rural residence and fair-trade purchasing preference, in addition to common TPB variables. To this purpose, an online survey was conducted on a convenience sample of 260 consumers in Italy. Structural equation modelling confirmed the role of trust as a direct antecedent of consumer intention to purchase food at short chains, as well as the best-supported attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control in the standard TPB model. The investigation found that consumer rural residence and fair-trade purchasing habits, in addition to intention and perceived behavioural control, influenced the behaviour. This evidence is interesting in order to suggest further marketing strategies for farmers in the direction of more ethical and trust-related forms of consumption.

1. Introduction

An intense movement in the debate on consumer trust in food choice is currently taking place. Indeed, due to many food scandals (Forbes, Cohen, Cullen, Wratten, & Fountain, 2009) and the progressive industrialization and globalization of agri-food chains, consumer scepticism about food quality and safety has increased over the past few decades (Toler, Briggeman, Lusk, & Adams, 2009). Although product or process certifications and labelling commonly succeed in solving this problem, sometimes they fail instead, as customers often ignore or misinterpret their meaning (Grunert, 2005). Furthermore, the perception of some food attributes, by their very nature, cannot be identified through a system of certification, as in the case of Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs) that boast some proper credence characteristics (Migliore, Schifani, & Cembalo, 2015). In recent years, these alternative circuits of food provision (e.g., farmers markets, on-farm direct sales) have increasingly gained ground all over Europe and particularly in Italy (Kneafsey et al., 2013; Marino & Cicatiello, 2012), representing a

sustainable alternative to global chains in terms of economic, social and environmental benefits (Giampietri, Koemle, Yu, & Finco, 2016a; Mundler & Laughrea, 2016). This is in line with current critical and ethical consumerism, which is highly related to both environmental and health impacts of food consumption (Grunert, Hieke, & Wills, 2014). As suggested by Galli and Brunori (2013), the concept of SFSCs has recently emerged as a response by concerned consumers to the prevailing conventional global markets, characterized by standardized production, anonymous industrialized food, long food miles and the unequal distribution of power along the food supply chain, which is increasingly dominated by retailers. However, the current literature on SFSCs suffers from a lack of exhaustive data to precisely describe the breadth of this phenomenon, mainly due to their wide variety of forms (Venn et al., 2006). In fact, the only official data available in Italy concern the number of farms involved in direct sales, representing nearly 26% of total farms according to the Italian Census (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica – ISTAT, 2010). Nevertheless, over the past several years, both the research and the political world have perceived the growing

Abbreviations: SFSCs, short food supply chains; TPB, theory of planned behavior; BEH, behavior; INT, intention; PBC, perceived behavioral control; ATT, attitude; SN, subjective norms; TRUST, trust; RESID, residential area; FAIRTRADE, fair-trade purchasing habit; SEM, structural equation modeling; CFI, comparative fit index; TLI, Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root mean squared residual

* Corresponding author at: Department of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences, Università Politecnica delle Marche, Via Brecce Bianche, 60131 Ancona, Italy.

E-mail address: e.giampietri@univpm.it (E. Giampietri).

¹ Department of Land, Environment, Agriculture and Forestry (TESAF), University of Padova, Viale dell'Università, 16, 35020 Legnaro, Padova (Italy).

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importance of this phenomenon: on the one hand, we find a flourishing literature on this topic, whereas on the other hand, we see a clear intention from the European Union (EU) to economically support the development of SFSCs for the first time, through specific resources within the second pillar of the new Common Agricultural Policy (rural development); in addition, the Regulation EU n.1305/2013 provided a clear definition of SFSCs for the first time (JEU, 2013)². Notoriously, SFSCs reconnect farmers and consumers (Kirwan, 2004), and those direct interactions between the actors provide consumers with a sense of trust that affects their purchasing decisions in relation to short chains (Holloway & Kneafsey, 2000).

To better understand the success and the growing number of such alternative agri-food networks, the present study examines consumer motivations for purchasing food at SFSCs (instead of conventional markets). In particular, in addition to exploring the influence of the main determinants of consumer intention and behaviour, it provides useful information about the role of consumer trust. Comparing an extended model of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) with a classic TPB framework, this work also investigates the role of both consumer residential area and fair-trade consumption habit in order to predict and explain SFSCs-related purchasing decisions.

2. Background

In developing the conceptual framework, we draw on one of the most widely cited alternative approaches to understand and predict human behaviour, namely, the Theory of Planned Behaviour by Ajzen (1991), which is rooted in social-psychology. Instead of relying on the utility evaluation of a product or a service, TPB focuses on a specific behaviour of interest, providing a comprehensive framework to explain and understand its determinants (Ajzen, 2015). Many studies (Cook, Kerr, & Moore, 2002; Louis, Davies, Smith, & Terry, 2007; Smith et al., 2008; Verbeke & Vackier, 2005) have already demonstrated the predictive power of this theory in relation to food purchase and consumption decisions. However, to the best of our knowledge, only little use of TPB has been applied to investigate consumers' preferences for buying food at SFSCs, as seen in some preliminary explorative analyses (Giampietri, Finco, & Del Giudice, 2015). For instance, by means of a first explorative survey on Italian university students, Giampietri, Finco, and Del Giudice (2016b) found that attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control had a positive effect on consumer intention to buy at SFSCs instead of conventional market. In particular, consumers' sustainability concern, the typicality of local food products and the loyalty with the farmer (based on the direct contact between producers and consumers) showed a significant and positive predictive effect, as opposite to convenience that was found to negatively affect the intention, thus showing that SFSCs contrast with consumers' propensity for money and time saving. However, this study did not provide precise evidences related to consumer behaviour, sparking the creation of a room for the present confirmative analysis that focuses on an additional determinant of the investigated intention, namely consumer trust towards SFSCs.

TPB's central premise is that a precise behaviour (BEH) is a function of the intention (INT) to perform it and the perceived behavioural control (PBC). The stronger these two determinants are, the more likely the behavioural performance will be. Furthermore, INT is determined by the combination of three factors, attitudes (ATT), subjective norms (SN), and PBC, with respect to the behaviour in question, and these are influenced by behavioural, normative and control beliefs, respectively. More favourable ATT and SN and greater PBC correspond to a greater likelihood of consumer intention to engage in the concerning behaviour. Furthermore, the academic literature suggests that some other factors can be considered as additional determinants of the intention

within the TPB original framework, such as past behaviour and self-identity (Carfora, Caso, & Conner, 2016), risk perception (Lobb, Mazzocchi, & Traill, 2007) and trust (Mazzocchi, Lobb, Bruce Traill, & Cavicchi, 2008).

With regard to the open debate on increased consumer distrust, during the past few years, we observed the decrease in consumer proximity to farming (Thorsøe & Kjeldsen, 2016) and the consequent increasing attention towards gaining new knowledge about the food we eat, e.g., where and how it is produced and by whom, known as consumer "quality turn" (DuPuis, 2000; Goodman, 2004). Accordingly, food safety and quality currently represent a black box for consumers, especially for those who live in urban areas that, by their very nature, are quite far from the production process and who have gradually lost their control over food. It is worth noting that the erosion of consumer confidence grows when the risk of moral hazard along the food chain prevails. Interestingly, trust represents a solution for those situations that are characterized by increasing complexity and lack of knowledge, as in the case of consumer trust in food and buyer-seller relationships (Frewer, Howard, Hedderley, & Shepherd, 1996; Lassoued & Hobbs, 2015).

Now, the need to rebuild and strengthen consumer trust towards food represents one of the main challenges in the marketing field. Thus, Ding, Veeman, and Adamowicz (2015) argue that trust, especially towards farmers (instead of retailers), represents a complex and hard-to-measure concept that plays an important role in decision-making, especially when the information is scarce or hard to assess, as for the food purchasing process. Therefore, customer trust can play a key role in solving this problem, especially in the case of SFSCs, because it can tackle the loss of both knowledge and control over the supply chain and drive food choices.

By fostering the reconnection between producers and consumers by reducing the number of actors and distances along the supply chain (Marsden, Banks, & Bristow, 2000; Parker, 2005), SFSCs are found to significantly contribute to many social, environmental and economic sustainable goals related to the agri-food sector (Forsell & Lankoski, 2014; Ilbery & Maye, 2005). Many authors (Hartmann, Klink, & Simons, 2015; Hunt, 2007; Schneider, 2008; Tregear, 2011; Trobe, 2001) have found that the direct interaction between farmers and consumers and repeated encounters can provide consumers with a sense of trust built on a shared know-how and a mutual understanding with farmers (Meyer, Coveney, Henderson, Ward, & Taylor, 2012). Indeed, these typical face-to-face initiatives (Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003) let producers and consumers interact, exchange information related to food and how it is processed and share personal values (O'Kane & Wijaya, 2015). Hence, trust tends to offset negative perceptions associated with food purchasing decisions (Ding et al., 2015), overcoming consumer confusion and fostering SFSCs' development and success among citizens. Moreover, by reducing the information asymmetry, trust can drive loyalty and new solid relationships between producers and consumers (Hartmann et al., 2015). To conclude, as a substitute for full knowledge (Greibitus, Steiner, & Veeman, 2015), the role of trust in influencing consumer food choice and purchasing decisions seems to be increasingly important today.

3. Material and methods

The methodology used is based on an empirical analysis carried out in Italy during the first semester of 2016. To investigate the determinants of consumer purchasing habits related to SFSCs as market locations, an extended TPB model was assessed through an online survey among a convenience sample of 260 Italian respondents³. The use of a convenience sample (Flick, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010), namely, people who were concerned about the precise meaning of SFSCs and thus who could provide reliable answers (in order to

² Short supply chain means a supply chain involving a limited number of economic operators, committed to cooperation, local economic development, and close geographical and social relations between producers, processors and consumers.

³ Among the initial 600 respondents that we recruited via social networks using snowball sampling technique, only 260 were selected as both incomplete questionnaires and those whose respondents affirmed they didn't buy at SFSCs were screened out.

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