

The Effect of Service Recovery on Buying Intention – The role of perceived food safety

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ABSTRACT

The present empirical research aims to examine the influence of consumers' perceptions of food safety and service recovery on their decision making (buying intention). To meet research goals, data were collected through a survey using a structured questionnaire administered to the general public. Using a small intercept interview, a random sample of 836 usable questionnaires were collected. The study was conducted in Greece. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to validate the proposed construct. The fit and predictive accuracy of the proposed model was estimated using AMOS software. The study finds that perceived food safety partially mediates the effect of service recovery on customer buying intention. The current research also indicates that consumer attitudes towards the relationship of food safety and buying intention differ according to their demographic characteristics.

Keywords: food safety, quality labels, trust, service recovery, buying intention.

1. Introduction

In recent years, numerous food scandals and foodborne diseases have revealed food safety as an important issue for public health and economic prosperity (Ramplet *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, the rising demands for balanced diets and healthy foods highlight food safety as a major concern in food industry worldwide (Misra and Singh, 2016). Food safety refers to the assurance that food will not harm the consumer's health and that it does encompass all essential nutritional qualities (Grunert, 2005). Governments and foundations such as the "European Food Safety Authority" (EFSA) based on the principles of consumer health protection are responsible for setting food safety regulations and conducting inspections of all food chain partners to ensure that the standards are met (Wilson *et al.*, 2015). Worried auditors of foodstuffs are also themselves consumers (Zhao *et al.*, 2016; Wang, 2015). Consumers, mainly in developed countries, have become more discriminating in their food product choices: fresh healthy food that requires correct handling from production through consumption (Aoki, 2015; Yeung and Yee, 2012). Their food evaluation is based on intrinsic and extrinsic variables (Rijswijk and Frewer, 2008).

Consumer purchase decisions have been shown to be guided by the extent to which food products meet certain evaluative criteria about safety (Feng *et al.*, 2012; Iopet *et al.*, 2006; Yeung & Yee, 2012). The relationship between food safety perception and consumer behavior is usually studied in relation to specific products or product categories. However, the current paper tries to focus on consumers' judgements of perceived food safety in more general terms (Rijswijk & Frewer, 2008). Moreover, to our knowledge, no previous study has focused on how complaint-handling constructs may affect both perceived food safety and customer buying intention, prompting call for further investigation. Finally, the literature indicates that consumer attitudes towards the relationship between food safety and buying intention differ according to consumers' demographic factors, such as gender, marital and parenthood status. Thus, the proposed relationship accounts for possible moderators. The following part of the paper briefly refers to the concept of perceived food safety and presents the proposed theoretical

model. Methodological analysis and results are described in the two subsequent parts, and then the final parts of the paper present the conclusions and practical implications of the present study.

2. Literature review

Consumers are very interested in, and often critically evaluate, their food choices with regard to a variety of criteria. Perceived food safety is a multidimensional construct that can be dichotomized into intrinsic and extrinsic attributes (Mora *et al.*, 2011). Intrinsic variables are the physical properties of the product (color, aroma, size, flavor, homogeneity, texture) and were measured using untrained panels that evaluated overall acceptance or preference of food products (Iopet *et al.*, 2006). However, it is difficult for the general, non-expert public to assess food safety and merely emphasizes extrinsic attributes in the formation of the perceived food safety (Bernués *et al.*, 2003). Extrinsic attributes include quality labels, context, country of origin, production method, producer, price, availability, packaging type, brand, and so on (Chamhuri and Batt, 2015). Among a broad range of applicable extrinsic variables that affect consumers' perceptions of food safety, three received attention in the current study as possible safety indicators: cues related to product attributes, quality labels, and trust in the producer. These product attributes are cued at the moment the purchase is made and are important for quality selection. Specifically:

Product attribute is referred to the product ingredients such as fat percentages, nutritional value - information that is included in the product label, the packaging, the characteristic shape, etc.

Trust in the producer is defined as a customer's intention to accept a certain vulnerability that is based upon positive expectations of the producer's behavior. Taking into consideration that the consumer operates in an environment of uncertainty and asymmetric information distribution, trust becomes highly important.

Quality labels refer to particular quality signals, such as brand, quality or geographic origin labels (Verbeke *et al.*, 2010).

These extrinsic factors have also been included in studies with the aim of gaining a better understanding of consumers' behavior and successful design marketing strategies (Ozimek & Żakowska-Biemans, 2011). The relationship between food safety perception and consumer behavior is studied in relation to specific products or product categories. Specifically, previous studies have been conducted in the fields of fruits (Feng *et al.*, 2012), meat (van Wezemael *et al.*, 2010; Verbeke *et al.*, 2010; Mørkbak *et al.*, 2010) and fishery products (Wang *et al.*, 2009). Espeje *et al.* (2008) found that the place of origin and trust in regulatory councils lead the consumer to infer a safety badge and food quality, which helps them to develop feelings of satisfaction and loyalty, along with a greater predisposition to rebuy the product. Fandos and Flaviá (2006) also empirically tested the relationship between the perceived quality of the intrinsic and extrinsic quality attributes of a protected designation of product origin on consumer loyalty and buying intention. The concept of buying intentions reflects consumers' foreseeable behavior (what products or brands they will buy) in their short-term future buying decisions (e.g., next shopping trip) (Espeje *et al.*, 2008). Thus, it is logical to assume that the perceived quality of the intrinsic attributes has a positive and significant effect on consumer buying intention, as prior studies have shown (Wee *et al.*, 2014; Hsu *et al.*, 2016).

Of course, in any industry, some delivery failures are inevitable. A failure occurs when the quality of provided food does not reflect customers' expectations. Food safety is an implicit part of food quality, given that consumers expect safety when they purchase food; when they do not receive the expected safety, a recovery process is necessary (Keast, 2009). Such a recovery process enhances customers' perceptions of the food quality (Michel *et al.*, 2009). In addition, purchase intentions will remain stable or even increase when service recovery is effective (Battaglia *et al.*, 2012; Bijmolt *et al.*, 2014). Conversely, an unsuccessful recovery effort by a food service organization could drive customers away (Chua *et al.*, 2010). However, the degree of success may depend on the type of failure that occurred as well as the type and the speed of response. However, the degree of success may depend on the type of failure that occurred as well as the type and the speed of response. A dissatisfactory recovery effort on food service organization could drive customers away (Chua *et al.*, 2010). Thus, the following hypothesis is formed:

H1: Perceived food safety mediates the relationship between service recovery and buying intention

Customer evaluation and behavior regarding food efficacy can be differentiated based on the customer's demographic profile. In other words, different consumers use different methods to evaluate information relating to food safety (Koç and Ceylan, 2009). For example, customers who buy organic food products tend to have a higher education level and more disposable income, to be families with children, and to be older than those who do not buy them (Wang & Tsai, 2014). Kumar and Kapoor (2015) supported that consumers' age and income play an important role in influencing their buying behavior for vegetarian food products. A recent survey found that female and married customers had significantly higher food safety knowledge compared to males and singles (Tabriziet al., 2017). The aforementioned surveys highlighted that consumers' demographic characteristics influence their safety-oriented choices. Thus, the hypotheses are:

H2a: Gender moderates the relationship between perceived food safety and buying intention

H2b: Marital status moderates the relationship between perceived food safety and buying intention

H2c: Parenthood moderates the relationship between perceived food safety and buying intention

The conceptual framework of the study is depicted in Figure 1.

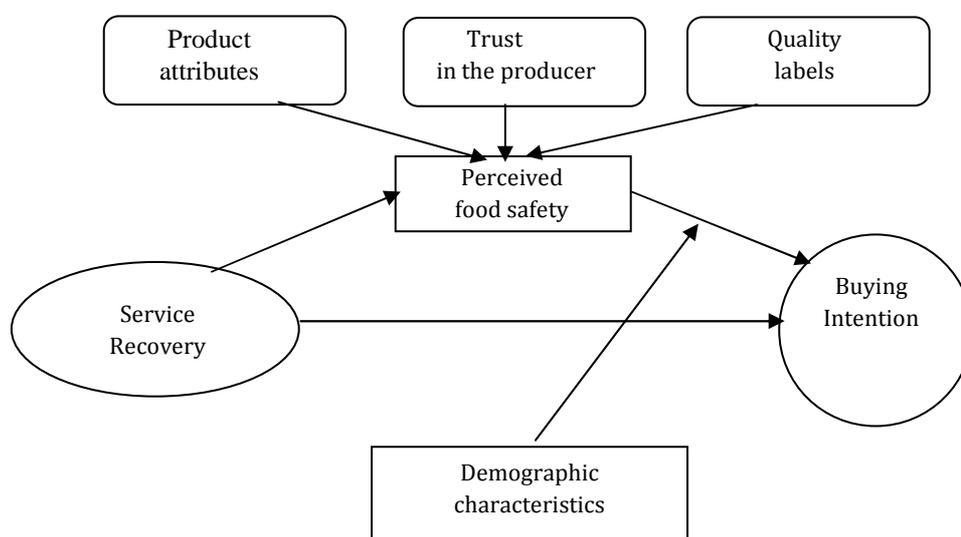


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling process

Data were collected through a survey using a structured questionnaire administered to the general public. The only conditions for the inclusion of respondents were having purchased agricultural products within the 12 months prior to the data collection period and being an adult (over 18 years of age) at the time the survey was conducted. Using a small intercept interview, we collected a random sample of 910 questionnaires, of which 74 were excluded from the results because they were ineligible or incomplete. Hence, the total usable sample for analysis consisted of 836 questionnaires. The purpose of this academic study was explained to the respondents, and they were assured of total confidentiality and anonymity. The questionnaires were filled out within three weeks, with January 2016 used as a start date for data collection. The survey was conducted in Greece, which is considered a significant agricultural producer within the EU; it is ranked 11th in the EU in total quantity of fish caught (87.461 tons).

3.2 Establishing the constructs

A structured questionnaire was administered to the sample. The concept of perceived food safety is based on extrinsic attributes because that information constitutes the main cue to inform the consumer on search quality concerns, such as safety. Thus, the concept of perceived food safety consists of: cues related to

product attributes, trust in the producer and quality labels. Three items represent product attributes: packaging, characteristic shape, and ingredients. Three items for trust in the producer were based on Ozimek and Żakowska-Biemans's (2011) measurement instrument. A sample item is: "The producer shall ensure the quality of food". Quality labeling was measured using a 3-item scale based on previous instruments (OzimekŻakowska-Biemans, 2011; Yaya *et al.*, 2011). Three items to measure respondents' actual purchase intention were adapted from the work of Fandos and Flaviá (2006). A sample item is: "I intend to continue buying the product". The target variable, service recovery, was operationalized through three items following the recommendations of Hanif *et al.* (2010). A sample item is: "I think the procedure used to solve the problem was adequate".

The items were translated into the Greek language and took the form of a 7-point psychometric Likert scale (anchored by 1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree"). The self-administered questionnaire also included a series of questions related to the demographic characteristics of the respondents, such as gender, age, marital status, and education level. The demographic profile of the respondents is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the respondents (N=836)

Type of Classification	Category	Number of respondents	Percentage
Age group	18-24 years	141	16.93%
	25-34years	230	27.5%
	35-44years	264	31.6%
	45-54years	105	12.6%
	55-64years	96	11.4%
Educationbackground	Received a master degree	258	31%
	Higher education	395	47.5%
	Completed tertiary education	179	21.5%
Gender	Male	472	43.5%
	Female	364	56.5%
Marital status	Single	394	29.9%
	Married	435	52.5%
Parenthood status	With kinds	406	48.9%
	Witout kids	425	51.1%
Joboccupation	Freelancer	435	70.1%
	Privatesectorworker	226	27.1%
	Publicsectorworker	213	25.6%
	Housekeeping	138	16.6%
	Unemployed	47	5.6%
	Petired	54	6.5%
	UndergraduateStudent	39	4.7%
Family monthly income group	< 600€	163	19.8%
	601 – 900€	117	14.2%
	901 – 1.200€	169	20.5%
	1.201 – 1.500€	126	15.3%
	1.501 – 2.000€	117	14.2%
	>2.000€	131	15.9%

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Confirming the constructs dimensionality

Principal components analysis with varimax rotation was employed to the concept perceived safety quality. The factor analysis of the scale proved a good fit that revealed three factors that explain 68.5% of total variance. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin statistic was 0.737. The Bartlett test of sphericity also provided satisfactory results. In order to further examine the factors structure of the scale, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was utilized. The three-factor structure shows an adequate model [$\chi^2(24) = 55.414$, $p = .000$, NFI = .98, CFI = .99, TLI = .98, GFI = .98 and RMSEA = .04]. The test for reliability instrument provided alpha equal to 0.71. In addition, the Cronbach α values for the factors ranged from 0.68 to 0.88, suggesting that the constructs had adequate internal consistency. The measurement of the concept was based on previously developed instruments, so that content validity was assured. The analysis also verified that the factor loading of the concepts exceed the 0.5 threshold on its parent factor with low cross-loading, which supports that the measurement instrument reached convergent validity. Examining the discriminant validity of the instrument, it was found that the square root of AVE was greater than the coefficient, which demonstrated discriminant validity between the construct. As far as service recovery concept, the factor analysis revealed a one-dimensional factor that explains 75% of total variance. Cronbach's alpha was .83. Finally, the factor analysis of the buying intention instrument revealed a one-dimensional factor that explains 70.2% of total variance. Cronbach's alpha was 0.78. The results of both tests KMO and Bartlett were considered satisfactory.

4.2 SEM analysis

Structural equation modelling was used to validate the proposed model (Figure 1) and verify the cause-and-effect relationship among constructs. To estimate the parameters of the model, and given that the data examination revealed no semantic normality violation, the maximum likelihood method and covariance matrix were used. The model indicates that the χ^2 is 285.207 with 84 dfs ($p < 0.000$), supporting the assertion that the χ^2 relative value to degree of freedom (χ^2/df) does not exceed the proposed cut-off point of 5 (Wheaton *et al.*, 1977). The other indicators showed that the estimates for a set of recommended indices (NFI=0.94, CFI=0.96, TLI=0.95, GFI=0.96) were above to the accepted threshold of 0.90. The RMSEA was equal to 0.05, which is considered adequate for the sample characteristics. Thus, the proposed model has an acceptable fit.

The relationship between service recovery and perceived food safety is significant ($r^2 = 0.495$, $p = 0.000$). The results also indicate that service recovery has a direct and positive effect on buying intention ($r^2 = 0.116$) at the p value $< .05$. In addition, the relationship between perceived food safety and buying intention is significant ($r^2 = 0.565$, $p = 0.000$). The direct path between service recovery and buying intention was also tested and found a significant relationship ($r^2 = 0.355$, $p = 0.000$) (Table 2). The path coefficient (service recovery and buying intention) is reduced when the mediator enters into the model but it is still significant. Since the direct effect and the indirect effect are significant, the mediation is partial. In other word, perceived food safety partially mediates the relationship between service recovery and buying intention. Thus, H1 was accepted. Thus, the results indicate that customer buying intention will increase if the customer perception of food safety is high, and/or if the customer experience a high level of service recovery.

Table 2: Structural equation path coefficients

Relationships	Coefficient t	CR (t value)	p value
<i>Direct effect</i>			
Service recovery - Buying intention	0.355		0.000
<i>Indirect effect</i>			
Service recovery – Perceived food safety	0.495	6.337	0.000
Service recovery - Buying intention	0.116	2.027	0.05
Perceived food safety - Buying intention	0.565	2.027	0.000

Note: t-values greater than 1.96 are significant ($p < 0.05$)

In order to test the moderating effects, a multiple group SEM analysis was selected, by using the unstandardised beta coefficients of the different groups. First the two models were tested unconstrained allowing all the parameters to vary freely across the sub-groups. Next equality constraints were imposed on all the regression weights across the two sub-groups. The moderator was the respondents' gender. Each group have almost equal and adequate sample size (male=4724 and female=364). Both models (unconstrained and constrained) provided a good fit to the data (Table 3). The results indicate that gender doesn't show significant differences at a moderate level in the relationship between perceived safety quality and buying intention. Therefore, hypothesis 2a was not supported. The responded were also categorized into groups (single or married). Each group have almost equal and adequate sample size (single=394 and married=435). Both models (unconstrained and constrained) provided a good fit to the data (Table 3). The χ^2 difference was significant, providing evidence that the relationship between perceived food safety and buying intention are different between married customers ($r^2=0.65$, $p=0.000$) and single ones ($r^2=0.30$, $p=0.000$). Thus, hypothesis 2b was supported. The same analysis was carried out for the third moderator. Each group have almost equal and adequate sample size (with kids=406 and without kids=425). The χ^2 difference was also significant, providing evidence that the relationship between perceived safety quality and buying intention are stronger for customers with children ($r^2=0.57$, $p=0.000$) compering to those without children ($r^2=0.47$, $p=0.000$). Hence, hypothesis 2c was supported.

Table 3: Moderation Tests

Model	χ^2	Df	GFI	CFI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	Sig.
<i>Moderating variable: gender</i>								
Unconstrained	203.736	100	0.96	0.97	0.035			
Constrained	213.143	111	0.96	0.97	0.033	9.407	11	p=0.5
<i>Moderating variable: marital status</i>								
Unconstrained	204.740	100	0.96	0.97	0.036	22.061	11	p<0.05
Constrained	226.801	111	0.96	0.97	0.036			
<i>Moderating variable: kids</i>								
Unconstrained	205.760	100	0.96	0.97	0.036			
Constrained	227.524	111	0.96	0.96	0.036	21.764	11	p<0.05

5. Conclusion

The present study focuses on the food industry and empirically tests the mediating role of perceived food safety on the relationship between service recovery and buying intention. The mediating role of perceived food safety was partially supported. A growing body of extant literature has analyzed the direct and indirect relationships between service recovery and buying intention, but these relationships have not been previously comprehensively tested in the context of food products (Rudawska, 2014). In addition, this paper enriches the existing literature on food safety by examining the distinct role that consumer perceptions play in forming purchase intention, also highlighting the importance of firms' recovery efforts. This fact implies a relevant contribution, since the literature simultaneously analyzes the concepts of service recovery, perceived food safety and buying intention; a type of analysis that is very scarce in this particular context. The results obtained from this analysis offer a better understanding of consumer behavior toward food safety, encouraging and supporting food companies to successfully design their marketing strategies. Food safety issues also have become increasingly important in international trade, which makes it essential to understand consumer perceptions and behavior toward food safety.

What the results of the current study do show, is that resolving customer problems related to food, has a strong impact on perceived food safety and thus customer buying intention. From a practical point of view, this highlights food managers the importance of having an effective service recovery process because it influences directly customers' retention rates but also impacts on perceived food safety. Food managers' planning to enhance customers' perceived food safety need to consider extrinsic variables such as product attributes and quality labels, trust in the producer. The socio-demographic profile of consumers (gender, marital status and parenthood status) significantly influences the underlying factors of product and market attributes in food purchase decisions. This result makes it difficult for food marketing managers to create a single and general strategy for all customer niches.

Finally, this study does have some limitations. Firstly, the context of the research should be tested in other countries to be able to make cross-cultural comparisons. It should also be pointed out that there are other intrinsic and extrinsic variables that could influence the perceived food safety and that could be included in future research. Given the lack of existing empirical study on food safety and recovery strategy, further quantitative studies are desirable.

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Authors' Backgrounds

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