Consumers’ Responses To Health Inspection Report: The Effect Of Source Credibility And Message Style

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ABSTRACT

Restaurant inspection reports are an important source of information for the public to evaluate food safety practices at restaurants. This study examined the effect of information source and message style on consumer responses to restaurant inspection reports. The study employed a three (Information source: local health department, newspaper or consumer blog) x three (Message style: numeric, letter grade or narrative) full-factorial experimental design. Results showed that message style significantly influenced consumers’ responses while the information source did not have a significant effect on consumers’ responses. In addition, consumers’ threat and coping responses to restaurant inspection reports were positively related to their intention to modify behavior.

Key words: food safety, restaurant inspection reports, information source, message style

INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of people consume food prepared away from home. Those consumers want to know if the food they eat has been prepared safely. Health inspection reports can be used by the public to judge the cleanliness of the restaurant and safety of food. Health inspection reports can be viewed on local health department webpages, newspapers, consumer Web blogs, or other sources. Readers frequently rely on the information from reliable sources rather than less credible sources, yet the value of information sources is based on personal perception. Consumers responded differently to food safety information based on its source (Mazzocchi et al., 2008). This study is unique in that it evaluated consumers’ responses to the information source and the message style using restaurant health inspection reports. It also investigated how threat and coping responses affect consumers’ behavioral intention. This study will offer useful information to health inspectors and restaurant managers about how food safety information can be better communicated to influence consumer responses.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Source credibility is a significant concern when it comes to believability of information. It has been shown that the level of source credibility plays an important role in persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Governmental information sources have shown high credibility for food safety information (Mazzochi, et al., 2008). Newspapers have proven to be one of the information sources from which consumers obtain food safety information, due in part to their broad leadership (Ralston et al., 2002). Individuals seem to pay more attention to the message when it is generated or delivered by someone who shares similar interests (Berger & Rand, 2008; Mackie et al., 1990). Of the many information sources, highly credible sources lead to more behavioral compliance than low credible sources (Tybout, 1978) indicating arguments could be affected by source credibility (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Source credibility also directly influences the persuasion process (Mandfredo & Bright, 1991). Therefore, this study posited that higher source credibility is likely to be associated with greater threat and coping responses.

Hypothesis 1a: Among the three message sources, a local health department source will elicit the greatest threat response from consumers as compared to newspapers and consumer Web blogs.

Hypothesis 1b: Among the three message sources, a local health department source will elicit the greatest coping response from consumers as compared to newspapers and consumer Web blogs.

How the message is presented is as important as who delivers the message. Health inspection reports can be presented in different formats such as narrative (descriptions of critical and non-critical violations), letter grades, numeric scores, and others. Previous literature suggested that individuals responded differently to different message styles. Among different message styles, narrative message will more likely to induce greatest threat and coping responses from consumers. Therefore, this study proposes the following set of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Among the three message styles, exposure to a narrative message will elicit the greatest threat response from consumers as compared to a letter grade and a numeric score.

Hypothesis 2b: Among the three message styles, exposure to a narrative message will elicit the greatest coping response from consumers as compared to a letter grade and a numeric score.

Previous studies found a significant interaction effect between information source credibility and purchase intention (Harmon & Coney, 1982) and between message style and organization type (Bell, 1984). Hence, in accordance with previous literature, the present study proposes that information source and message style interact with each other to affect consumer responses. The hypotheses are summarized as below:

Hypothesis 3a: There is an interaction effect between message source and message style in that the health inspection report presented in a narrative message style from a local health department will elicit the strongest threat response as compared to newspapers and consumer Web blogs.

Hypothesis 3b: There is an interaction effect between message source and message style in that the health inspection report presented in a narrative message style from a governmental source will elicit the strongest coping response as compared to newspapers and consumer Web blogs.

Behavioral intention has been conceptualized as a substitute indicator of actual behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). This study attempted to examine when these PMT variables affect consumers’ intention to modify their behavior in the context of food safety reports. This study proposes the following hypotheses:
Hypothesis 4a: Threat response is positively related to consumers’ intention to modify their behavior.
Hypothesis 4b: Coping response is positively related to consumers’ intention to modify their behavior.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study used an experimental design to assess participants’ responses to health inspection reports. The study employed a three (Information source: health department website, newspaper, or consumer blogs) by three (Message style: narrative, numeric score, or letter grade) between-subject factorial design. A total of 310 questionnaires were distributed in a local festival and 245 were returned, resulting in 234 useable responses. To control for the effects of individual differences on the results, the study included measures of individual involvement with health (Gebhardt, Van der Doef, & Paul, 2001) and individual involvement with the restaurant inspection information (Chandon & Wansink, 2007) as covariates in the data analyses. It is important to know if an individual has high involvement with a specific topic as high issue relevance motivates diligent processing of message content (Pornpitakpan, 2004). To examine the impact of information source and message style on threat and coping responses, the MANCOVA procedure was performed. Threat and coping responses were run as dependent variables while information source and message style were run as independent variables. Health involvement, restaurant sanitation involvement, and experience with foodborne illness were included as covariates.

**RESULTS**

The MANCOVA results revealed significant effects of covariates on threat and coping responses. Individual involvement with restaurant inspection information had a significant effect on consumer responses (Wilks’ lambda = 0.96, F(2, 171) = 6.42, p < 0.01, partial eta squared = 0.07) and on foodborne illness experience (Wilks’ lambda = 0.97, F(2, 171) = 3.38, p < 0.05, partial eta squared = 0.04). The main effect of the information source was not significant (Wilks’ lambda = 0.95, F(4, 342) = 6.72, p > 0.05, partial eta squared = 0.02). Therefore, Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b were not supported. MANCOVA results showed a significant multivariate main effect of message style on consumer responses (Wilks’ lambda = 0.86, F(4, 342) = 6.72, p < 0.001, partial eta squared = 0.07). Given the significance of the overall test, the univariate main effects for message style were obtained for threat responses (F(2, 172) = 6.75, p < 0.05, partial eta squared = 0.07) and coping responses (F(2, 172) = 11.42, p < 0.001, partial eta squared = 0.12). The multiple comparison results showed that threat and coping responses were significantly different among the three message style conditions. Threat response to the narrative message (M = 4.48, SD = 1.10) was significantly stronger than that to the numeric score (M = 3.96, SD = 0.92). Coping response to the narrative message (M = 4.78, SD = 1.20) was also significantly stronger than that to the numeric score (M = 3.88, SD = 1.14) or letter grade (M = 4.02, SD = 1.04). Therefore, Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 2b were supported. The results are shown in Table 2. No interaction effect between information source and message style was found. Hence, Hypothesis 3a and Hypothesis 3b were not supported. To investigate the relationship between consumer responses and behavioral intention, multiple regression analyses were performed. Threat and coping responses were used as independent variables and behavioral
intention was used as a dependent variable for the regression model. Table 3 shows the result of multiple regression analysis; the adjusted $R^2$ indicated that approximately 44% of the variance in behavioral intention was explained by the model. Threat and coping responses were significantly related to behavioral intention ($F(2, 233) = 90.88, p < .001$). Threat response ($\beta = 0.64, t = 8.03$) and coping response ($\beta = 0.35, t = 5.04$) to the message were significant predictors of consumers’ intention to modify behaviors, thus lending strong support to Hypothesis 4a and Hypothesis 4b.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Results of this study suggested that threat and coping responses significantly influenced consumers’ intention to modify their behavior. High threat and coping responses to the message appears to be directly related to consumers’ intention to modify their behavior. Therefore, messages should contain certain degrees of threat information to influence the believability so individuals are more likely to modify their behavior according to the message.

REFERENCES


