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**Consumer Confidence in Food Attributes:
A Two-Phase Approach to Structural Equation Modeling**

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The agri-food industry has undergone a plethora of changes in recent years that have contributed to the emergence of trust and distrust issues in food markets. Much of the work on trust in the social science disciplines has focused on how institutional trust and its dimensionalities contribute to consumer confidence in credence attributes. However, the question of 'How brand trust builds into consumer confidence in credence attributes?' has not yet received as much attention. Motivated by this question, the study attempts to explore the factors that may affect consumer confidence in credence qualities originating from three different entities: the food system, food products and brands, and consumer characteristics.

Inspired from a comprehensive synthesis of the literature on consumer trust, the theoretical background of this study suggests that consumer confidence in food attributes is jointly determined by the trust in food system (system-based trust) and brand trust (product-based trust), and it is moderated by consumer characteristics (personal-based trust) – namely: perceived risk, past experience and ethical involvement. As well, consumers are assumed to perceive an actor or a brand as trustworthy through the credibility, competence, benevolence and reputation dimensions, among the well accepted antecedents of trust in the context of food products.

Grounded on established theory, a two-phase procedure to Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is employed. Phase 1 refers to the measurement component of the model; phase 2 consists of a path analysis where the posited relationships are tested for significance. Data for the SEM application was gathered through an online survey-tool applied to a national sample of Canadians. Fresh chicken meat and packaged green salad were selected as the two products of the study.

Preliminary results of the path analysis show that the perceived competence of the food system, its credibility, its benevolence and its benevolence are positively affecting trust in that food system as expected. Furthermore, almost 90% of the variance of trust in the food system is accounted for by its four dimensions. For brand trust, all hypotheses are supported except the one related to the credibility which was found to have a negative and insignificant impact on brand trust in the case of chicken product. Such a result is not surprising as other research work found that food safety information may have a negative impact in the category of meat. Furthermore, consumer confidence in credence attributes is positively affected by trust in the food system and much more by brand trust. Empirical analysis is ongoing.

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As no well-documented explicit model of consumer confidence in food attributes exists, this research breaks new ground in providing a comprehensive model in a framework that simultaneously assesses multiple dimensions of trust in the food system and brand trust. By combining institutional and individual components, this work endeavours to contribute new knowledge to our understanding and measurement of consumer confidence in credence qualities from a Food Economics perspective. By doing so, it is hoped that this work will provide new perspectives on the trust literature by bringing a meaningful contribution to consumer confidence and, in particular, the role of brand trust in the marketing of agricultural and food products. The assessment of trust from the consumers' perspective should provide insights for both private and public actors in the food chain into the factors determining consumers' and should inform effective communication strategies to address issues of public trust/distrust concerns around food quality and safety.

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