



# Consumer Confidence in Food Quality and Food Safety

## Introduction

Consumers are increasingly interested in where their food comes from and how it was produced, and are exposed to a variety of messages about food safety, food quality, and the health attributes of food products: some of which are positive, some negative.

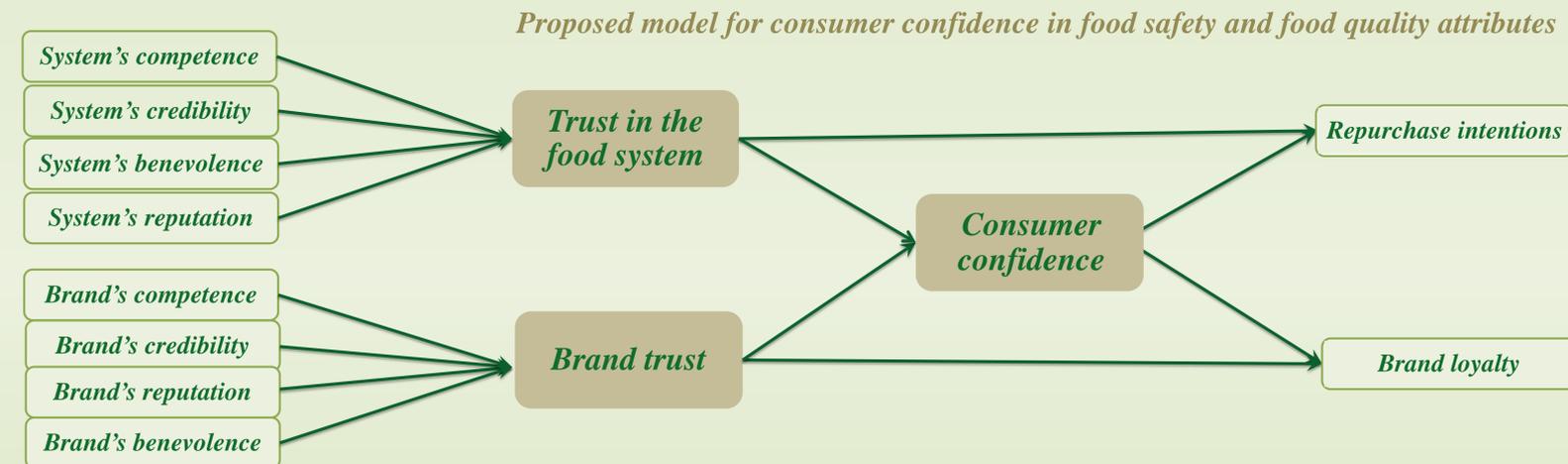
This project analyzes the factors that determine consumer trust in the food system, including trust in the various actors within the food supply chain (farmers, food manufacturers, food retailers, and government), as well as whether brands act as an effective quality signal to help build and maintain trust. Furthermore, the study examines how consumer confidence in food influences purchase intentions and brand loyalty, and the extent to which these effects are product-specific.

## Research questions

- What are factors that build into consumers' confidence in food?
- What drives Canadian consumers to trust **the food system** responsible for food safety and quality?
- What drives Canadian consumers to trust **brands** as a means of signaling quality?
- How do trust and confidence impact purchase intentions and brand loyalty?

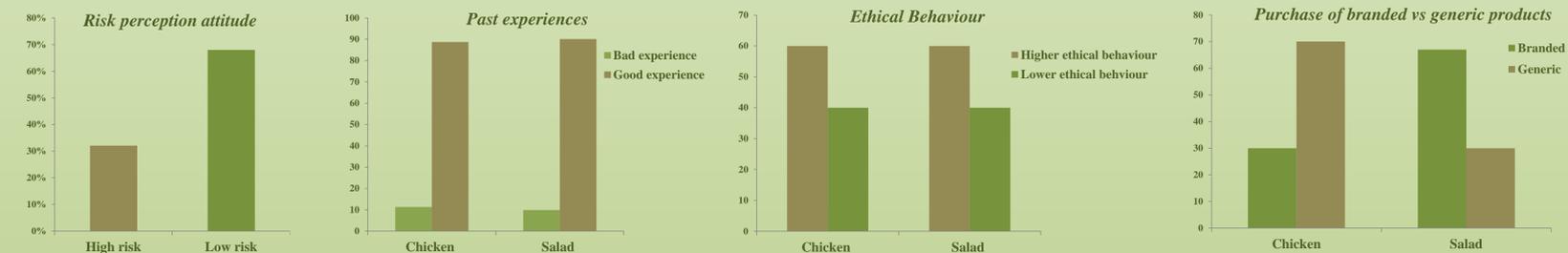
## Model

Inspired from a thorough synthesis of the literature on consumer trust, consumer confidence in food attributes is predicted to be jointly determined by **the trust in the food system** and **brand trust**. As well, consumers are assumed to perceive an actor or a brand as trustworthy through the **credibility**, **competence**, **benevolence** and **reputation** dimensions that are among the well accepted antecedents of trust in the context of food products. The set of the causal relationships feeding into consumer confidence are displayed in the figure below.



## Data

Data were gathered through an **online survey** administered nationally in Canada in 2012. The questionnaire asked about participants' trusting beliefs and perceptions towards actors within the food system (government, farmers, food manufactures and retailers) and food brands. The survey focused on two products: **fresh chicken meat** and **packaged green salad**. A total of 926 usable questionnaires were retained for the final dataset. The population sample is reasonably representative of the Canadian population with respect to gender, age and geographic location, and slightly biased toward higher income and better educated respondents. Furthermore, the sample is dominated by individuals with low levels of risk perceptions, good past experiences and reasonably high levels of ethical behaviour as shown in the charts below.



## Findings

The analysis shows that public trust is a complex phenomenon and consumers do not trust all food products in the same fashion. While credibility of the food system matters in building trust in the case of a bagged salad product it is less relevant for chicken. In contrast, branding appears to play a stronger role in building consumer confidence in chicken products than is the case for the packaged salad sector. Nevertheless, consumer confidence in salad brands leads to product loyalty, which is not the case for chicken. That is loyalty does not automatically flow from branding. The discussion of the results suggest that trust dimensions are so intertwined and operationally inseparable. Furthermore, findings show that trust in the food system as a whole exhibits a stronger impact on consumer confidence than trust in food brands, regardless of the nature of the food product.

## Conclusions

Brands are useful signalling mechanisms yet they are not sufficient to enhance consumer confidence in credence attributes and may not work for every food category. In fact, the level of public trust in market actors such as farmers, manufacturers and retailers, as well as trust in regulatory institutions, influence the level of consumer confidence in food much more than trust in individual food products and brands. This provides particular managerial implications for the agri-food industry and policymakers. Raising public awareness about the competent practices and benevolent intentions within the whole food system, promoting the appropriate involvement of all actors in managing food quality along the supply chain, communicating effectively, and providing transparent information should foster public confidence in safer and higher quality food.

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