

Unveiling the Role of Digital Technologies for the Restaurant Sector Recovery During the Covid-19 Pandemic. Evidence from Italy

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The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly compromised the global economy. In this context, the restaurant sector has been particularly affected by the outbreak because restaurants operators and customers are particularly exposed to the risk of contracting the virus. Accordingly, authorities have imposed many restrictive measures on restaurants, which have determined negative impacts such as job loss, turnover reduction, and even closure of activities. This situation has also impacted customers' behaviors, showing their willingness to stay home due to the fear of being exposed to health risks. Consequently, customers' intention to go to restaurants has been considerably decreased. In this dramatic scenario, restaurant operators have started redesigning their business models to manage risks and survive. Accordingly, these needs have imposed service innovation, accelerating the digital transformation of the sector. Indeed, the implementation of digital technologies (i.e., digital menus, digital payment, touchless elevators, service robots, foodservice delivery apps, etc.) has been supported restaurant' operators in implementing risk-reduction measures from a service innovation perspective. Starting from this background, the present research has investigated digital technologies' role in the restaurant sector recovery during the Covid-19 pandemic. To this end, this study has explored how digital technologies may affect the customers' risk perception and their intention to visit restaurants. The theoretical framework adopted integrates two behavioral theories, i.e., the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Perceived Risk Theory. A survey on a sample of customers resident in Italy is performed. Multiple regression analyses were carried out to test the research hypotheses and to investigate if the relationship between digital technologies and the customers' intention to go to a restaurant is mediated by other variables retrieved in the literature. Moreover, a moderation analysis is performed to unveil the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the relationship between the use of digital technologies and the customers' risk perception. Lastly, robustness tests were also carried out to confirm the validity of the analysis. Our findings show that the customer risk perception is negatively influenced by the level of expected cleanliness and the level of expected interactions among customers and workers. However, digital technologies can reduce expected interactions and enhance expected cleanliness, positively affecting the risk perception and preserving customers' willingness to visit restaurants. This research provides theoretical implications, enlarging the literature on risk perception. Academics can conduct similar investigations in other geographical areas. Results may also be beneficial for restaurants operators who can use digital technologies to enhance cleanliness levels and reduce interactions among customers and workers to support the recovery of the foodservice industry. Lastly, policymakers can

rely on these results to develop guidelines and public fundings to facilitate the digital transition in small and medium-sized restaurants.

Keywords: *Covid-19, Customer Risk Perception, Digitalization, Perceived Risk Theory, Restaurant Sector, Service Innovation, Theory of Planned Behaviour*