Guilt and Loathing in the Kitchen: Why Sustainable Consumers Waste Food

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This paper studies how and why consumers justify failure to lowering food waste, focusing on their reflections relative to the role of the individual in addressing sustainability issues. It complements existing understandings of sustainable consumption by introducing three types of customer responses to their lacking limitation of food waste.

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Guilt and Loathing in the Kitchen. Why Sustainable Consumers Waste Food

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable consumption has developed into a rich yet complex research theme. Existing research has debated over the gap existing between consumers’ attitude towards sustainability and their behavior (Eckhardt, Belk, and Devinney 2010), over the relative importance of individual or communal actions (Papaoikonomou and Alarcón 2015, Gollnhofer 2017), as well as concerning the plural articulations of sustainable consumption (Pecoraro and Uusitalo 2014).

Yet our understanding of sustainable consumption remains incomplete when it comes to consumers’ critical evaluation of sustainability and the realism of its applicability, specifically when it comes to the lowering or avoidance of food waste. Such knowledge is important from an academic angle to better understand consumers’ reluctance to lower food waste when it is a central feature of sustainability (Connolly and Prothero 2003). From a public policy angle, understanding why consumers who support sustainability in other domains of their life fail to lower food waste allows to develop communication strategies addressing this specific side of consumer behavior.

This paper therefore asks how and why consumers justify failure to lower their food waste, with a special focus on their critical reflections relative to the role of the individual in addressing sustainability issues. To investigate this question, we focus on consumers’ practice of buying and cooking, with special attention given to their practices of food waste disposal (also called disposition), one of the key elements of the “squander sequence”, food waste occurring during the consumer decision-making process (Block et al 2016). Such a perspective involves paying close attention to consumers’ practices, “a routinized type of behavior” (Reckwitz 2002) that provide insights into the way in which consumers approach issues of food waste in their everyday consumption behavior. A qualitative research design combining observations, diaries and in-depth interviews allows for recording such practices as well as understanding consumers’ rationales.

The findings of this study, which identify three types of consumer responses (apathetic, overwhelmed and pragmatic), advance current knowledge relative to the gap existing between consumers’ attitude towards sustainability and their behavior (Eckhardt et al. 2010). They further provide indications as to the ways in which consumers’ apathy, their feeling of being overwhelmed and pragmatism can be countered by promoting hope for individual agency in sustainability measures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumers’ ability to express moral preferences through consumption has been widely studied (Hilton 2004; Hilton and Daunton 2001). Yet while consumers view the adoption of sustainable consumption practices as desirable, many fail to do so in practice (Eckhardt et al. 2010; White, MacDonnell, and Ellard 2012). Among the factors explaining this gap between attitudes and behaviors are consumers’ economical rationalization about the excessive cost of ethical consumption, a focus on the institutional dependency of sustainability that limits individual actions, and developmental realism, which claims that unethical practices are unavoidable in successful economies (Eckhardt et al. 2010). Furthermore, individual desire for ethical consumption is hindered by doubts and insecurities (Connolly and Prothero 2008) as well as a licensing effect where consumers allow for non-ethical behavior if they behave ethically in other domains of their life (Khan and Dhar 2006). Furthermore, if consumers believe in the existence of a fair world order, they are more enthusiastic to consume ethically than when they are disillusioned about the fairness of the world (Luchs et al. 2010; White et al. 2012).

The role of social groups and communities has been promoted, advertising connectedness as solution to difficulties in adopting ethical consumption behaviors (Casey, Lichrou, and O’Malley 2016; Papaoikonomou and Alarcón 2015; Rotka and Moisander 2009). Attempts at encouraging ethical consumption behavior further focus on considering ethical consumption as a tool for positive image-building (Connolly and Prothero 2003; Naderi and Strutton 2013). Communication focused on self-accountability is for instance promoted over the generation of feelings of guilt (Peloza, White, and Jingzhi 2013). Yet aside from individual factors, existing research increasingly addresses the role of macro-economic and –social structures in shaping consumption behavior (Dolan 2002). Individual agency increasingly becomes seen as a myth aimed at discharging public and private organizations of their responsibilities (Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2015; Giesler and Veresu 2014; Holt 2012). While this critical perspective gains traction in marketing research, consumers’ viewpoints on this seemingly misguided focus on the individual has not been investigated. Specifically when it comes to the increasing plurality of ethical consumption behaviors, how consumers manage these different trends becomes challenging. Existing studies demonstrate that consumers combine different ethical consumption practices (Pecoraro and Uusitalo 2014), where some behaviors, such as buying local products are preferred to reducing meat consumption (Niva et al. 2014). Further understanding is needed about consumers’ criticality towards and potential dismissal of specific ethical consumption practices despite their beliefs in the need for ethical consumption.

The case of product disposal is particularly understudied despite the centrality of recycling and waste problems in sustainability (Connolly and Prothero 2003; Guillard and Roux 2014). Existing research has shown that while reduction and reuse link to individual-level environmental values and knowledge, recycling is more closely linked to adherence to societal norms (Barr 2007). Further, different logistics co-exist for recycling household waste, which means that sustainability is not solely a question of motivation, but also of logistics (Monnot, Reniou, and Rouquet 2014). We study these logistics specifically when it comes to the case of food waste. Awareness about issues of food waste has been shown to lower wasteful behavior (Principato, Secondi, and Pratesi 2015; Whitehair, Shanklin, and Brannon 2013), yet the role of criticality towards individual action and responsibility requires additional research, which the following sections detail.

METHODOLOGY

This paper relies on qualitative interpretive data, emerging from the combination of three data collection methods: in-depth interviews, observations and diaries. Firstly, food disposal diaries were kept for one month by the respondents to record their habits in discarding food (Hackley 2003; Smith-Sullivan 2008). In order to facilitate data collection, the respondents were encouraged to take pictures of the discarded food using their mobile phones. They then sent the pictures, along with information relative to the reason for discarding the product to the first author, who registered the data. Secondly, the first author collected observational data during joint shopping and cooking with the respondents. These observations took place in the respondents’ usual shops and their kitchens, in order to remain as
close as possible to their habitual context (Marvasti 2014). Thirdly, the insights from the diaries and the observations were discussed during in-depth interviews, to understand consumers’ discourses about food waste. Semi-structured interview guides with open-ended questions served as basis for interviewing (Ayres 2008).

In order to favor depth of insights over population representativeness, we chose to concentrate in depth on a small sample of respondents (Carfagna et al. 2014; de Ruyter and Scholl 1998). 10 consumers participated in the study, aged 20-29 years, which is appropriate as young consumers represent the highest shares of food wasters (Principato et al. 2015; Rosenbauer 2011). Purposive sampling allowed to reach an equilibrated distribution in terms of gender and age within the segment (Hackley 2003). All respondents possessed high educational level, which reflects the usual customer type aware of and sensitive to sustainability issues (Olli, Grendstad, and Wollebaek 2001). Data collection took place in Germany, a country where sustainable food consumption has been actively promoted and supported (Thøgersen 2010). All respondents were therefore knowledgeable about sustainable consumption and had the possibility of adopting it. The interviews were fully recorded and transcribed. Hermeneutical comparison between data and literature allowed for data interpretation (Thompson 1997), which involved both individual and comparative analysis of the respondents’ statement (Maxwell and Chmiel 2014).

**FINDINGS**

Data analysis generated three types of responses to food waste and its avoidance. These responses differ on the basis of the level of relative activity, the former (apathetic) response reflecting a lower self-drive than the two following responses. In the following, we highlight specific expressions and words from the interviews that support the response type. Full excerpts are gathered in table 1.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type of “wasting” response</th>
<th>Illustrative quotes</th>
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| Apathetic                  | Refusal to think about sustainability  
“sustainability, it’s nothing I am occupying myself with every day or often. It’s an important topic, but nothing I am confronting myself with extremely” (Lukas)  
“I didn’t really think that much about this topic so far.” (Jan)  
Avoiding conscious effort  
“when it works that it all comes from this region, then this is nice, but I think you don’t need to force it at all cost” (Jan)  
Resistance to fashionability  
“Climate change? Well I think that actually everyone is right now joining this trend […] everyone is suddenly green and offers vegan and green products […] I think you can also exaggerate it” (Jan)  
Fatalism  
“when it’s expired, then it would be for sure food waste for me, because if I would have taken care about the date and it wouldn’t have expired if I would have eaten it.” (Daniel)  
Information overload  
“you are literally overloaded, you – I mean us in the industrial countries – hardly can protect yourself from all this information” (Tobias)  
“when you know too much then you worry too much about different things and I think in some cases this is not very good” (Laura)  
“There is so much to question that I am not able to question everything and I think that’s stupid” (Anna)  
Guilt management  
“For example I threw away my cheese, even though I knew: ‘oh now you have to eat it, because it gets dry, and then you leave and don’t eat it’ and then after a week you check it and think: ‘oh now it molds, hm what a pity, now I throw it away’. […] That’s actually a bit of a fraud, so you don’t have to have a bad conscience.” (Katharina)  
you start to kind of suppress this, that’s what I do I think. Because the moment you occupy yourself a lot with this, you recognize that there is so much and then you just behave like ‘ok I don’t know anything’” (Anna)  
Feeling insignificant  
“In my opinion, all this is not avoidable. The whole climate change, I don’t think you can still save this. […] I just think this is unstoppable in any kind of way.” (Laura)  
“you feel like a mini ant in a huge mass. […] You just feel so small in our industry and the whole. […] There is so much wasted that you just feel very small. You have the feeling that you could do something right, but you cannot really change something” (Katharina)  
Individual responsibility  
“you’re not interested in what you’re eating, you also do not appreciate food and then it doesn’t hurt, when you throw something away.” (Julia)  
“you can just make sure for yourself that you to some extent live in the right way and that you can arrange this with your conscience.” (Julia)  
“you do not only feel better personally, but you also do your bit for society.” (Christian)  
The impossibility of perfection  
“I maybe also already give a nudge towards this, by talking to others about it, maybe not that someone directly changes the next day, but that he takes a bit more care” (Christian)  
“You can’t be 100% consequent…only if you try, the way towards this or at least 60-70% I think is awesome” (Christian) |
Apæthetic: Rejecting Sustainability Efforts Through Indifference

The first type of response reflects apathy, customers being aware of sustainability questions as well as appropriate behaviors but not engaging in it. The respondents refer to sustainability as something they “do not confront themselves with” (Lukas), they do not “think that much about the topic” (Jan). As a consequence, apathetic consumers consider food waste as an unfortunate outcome of their lack of attention, but not something that could have been avoided consciously: “when it’s expired then it would be for sure food waste for me, because if I would have taken care about the date and it wouldn’t have expired I could have eaten it.” (Daniel). By refusing to let sustainability questionings come to the fore, customers diminish the importance of this trend, banalising it through the expressions such as “everyone is joining this trend right now” (Jan). While the respondents at times reflect about their wasteful consumption, they do not want to “exaggerate it” (Jan). Apathetic customer responses thereby focus on resisting the “trendy” or fashionable factor of ethical consumption more than its underlying principles. The focus lies on signaling indifference, by diminishing the relevance of adopting sustainable consumption practices.

When sustainability and reduction of food waste becomes a standard discourse, customers are thus saturated, they approach sustainability as one trend among others, which they want to remain indifferent to, in order to not exaggerate.

Overwhelmed: Consciously Allowing for Food Waste to Reduce Guilt

The second type of response reflects customers’ awareness of sustainability’s importance, but also their feeling of being overwhelmed by the task. The respondents refer to information “overload” (Tobias), the fact that they “cannot know everything” (Anna), which curbs their initiatives in reducing food waste, paralyzing them: “when you know too much then you worry too much” (Laura). They highlight the small effect that their individual actions would accomplish, displaying fatalism in claiming that “this (climate change) is unstoppable anyway” (Laura). They admit that at times, they commit “fraud” (Anna), knowingly letting products perish in order to have an excuse for throwing them away instead of eating them. Customers suppress their feeling of guilt in this type of response and choose to waste food at times in order to be relieved of the perceived pressure. Their perception of lacking importance and power to address climate change hinders them from accepting the extent of their individual contribution, resulting in maintenance of wasteful practices.

This second type of customer response highlights the sense of incapacity resulting from information overload concerning sustainable consumption behavior. This perceived incapacity leads to conscious food waste of a type where customers wait for products to perish to a level where throwing away remains the only option. They thereby try to suppress their sense of guilt, minimizing their own influence.

Pragmatist: Maintaining Idealism While Limiting Initiatives

The third type of response refers to customers’ pragmatism, where idealism is tempered by fact-checking concerning the relative efficiency of sustainable behavior as well as the realities of everyday life. The respondents profess rationality, highlighting their numerous actions for reducing food waste, to “do your bit for society” (Christian). They support maintaining high food prices, as otherwise “it doesn’t hurt when you throw something away” (Julia). Despite a relatively low income, these respondents display a strong support for a responsible way of consuming, such as buying organic, seasonal or local products. Yet simultaneously, they limit their initiatives for lowering food waste, acknowledging that “you can’t be 100% consequent” (Christian). While they hope to convince others, they concentrate on their own behavior, in order to “arrange this with your conscience” (Julia). By focusing on pragmatism, customers thereby moderate their idealism in reducing food waste, supporting small individual steps in order to eventually attain a sustainable lifestyle.

The third type of customer response reflects the balance customers aim to strike between idealism and the practicalities of everyday life, acknowledging the time-consuming character of consciously avoiding food waste.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This study contributes to existing research by providing insights into consumers’ rationales relative to food waste, more specifically their considerations when it comes to their failure to avoid such waste. It demonstrates that even consumers who are aware and concerned about sustainability, as illustrated in the overwhelmed and pragmatist types of responses, develop rationales that for them justify wasting food. Among others, consumers exonerate themselves from wasteful behavior by acknowledging the difficulty of behaving sustainably on all fronts, as illustrated in pragmatist types of responses.

These additional insights contribute to existing research about sustainability and consumption by providing further information concerning the gap between consumers’ attitudes towards sustainability and behavior. In contrast to the rather rational argument found in previous studies (Eckhardt et al. 2010), the present findings paint a picture of young consumer abandoning efforts, explaining this decision by relativization, pragmatism and lost hope. While reducing food waste should be one of the most central practices in sustainable consumption behavior (Connolly and Prothero 2003), the studied consumers fail specifically to reduce food waste. These insights also add to existing research differentiating between deliberate and unintentional food waste behavior (Block et al 2016) by showing that while consumers may be aware of their wasteful behavior, they feel unable to address it, a state of mind going beyond the previously described licensing effect where consumers balance virtuous and less virtuous behaviors (Khan and Dhar 2006, Block et al 2016).

The paper provides practical insights concerning strategies for supporting sustainable consumption that goes against some existing findings. While existing research has repeatedly argued that raising also young consumers’ awareness to the food waste problematic can lower food waste (Principato et al. 2015; Whitehair et al. 2013), our findings point to the limits of such a strategy. The respondents feel conversely paralyzed by the excess information. Knowing precisely how to behave sustainably inhibits them from reducing food waste.

Such a finding is in line with existing research highlighting how consumers’ pessimism regarding their future well-being facilitates sustainability (Kaida and Kaida 2016). However, this doesn’t seem to be the case regarding food waste reduction. The respondents’ responses, such as feeling apathy, disbelief, guilt and being overwhelmed reflect a rather negative outlook on environmental matters. The outcomes therefore support existing assumptions that younger people tend to numb when they are confronted with information about environmental problems too unpreparedly and too extensively (Hicks and Bord 2001). In addition to experiencing doubts and insecurities (Connolly and Prothero 2008), consumers feel less empowered, they lose hope. The only improvement of wasteful food consumption practices seems to be connected with the generation of hope. Existing research about the role of hope in connection to
consumer agency is brought to a new level through our contribution (Courville and Piper 2004). The pragmatist consumer response indeed allows for potential reductions in food waste through supporting hope. Apathetic consumers in contrast may remain less responsive to messages of hope. The hope of overwhelmed responders could in contrast be rekindled, highlighting that individual action does play a role. Therefore, food consumption practices seem to be rather changed by influencers like hope than information about environmental problems, hence increased knowledge.

**Limitations**

Given that the methodological choice for this study was to investigate a limited number of participants in depth, the study could benefit from a broader, if less deep, exploration of consumers’ discourses about food waste that includes a larger number of participants. Also, the data point to a small predominance of male customers adopting the apathetic response rather than the two other types of responses. Given the potential gender differences in sustainable consumption attitudes (Brough et al. 2016), it would be relevant to quantitatively assess this issue, in order to identify potential correlations between food wasting behavior and gender.

**REFERENCES**


