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Feel Sorry For the Cake in Trash? the Effect of Food Types on Consumers' Food Waste Perceptions

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Consumer perceptions and feelings associated with food waste remain unexamined. The present research proposes that consumers deal with food waste with a varying degree of cognitive and affective reactions, depending on the types of food (virtue and vice) wasted and food consumption goals (taste and health).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Over 30% of all the food produced in the US is wasted (US EPA 2010). The average US household generates food waste that costs up to \$2,275 annually (Bloom 2011). Food waste presents a significant environmental concern, but a dearth of studies has investigated the psychology of food waste. To our knowledge, no prior study has examined how food types affect the perception of food waste. We propose that consumers deal with food waste with a varying degree of cognitive and affective reactions, depending on the types of food wasted (virtue and vice, Wertenbroch 1998) and food consumption goals (taste and health). Having a better understanding of how consumers perceive food waste and related feelings will help reduce food waste and help consumers improve their food consumption decisions both before the purchase and after the consumption.

According to Sen and Block (2009), valuation goals are activated in the pre-purchase stage, while consumption goals are more salient in the post-purchase stage. Valuation goals reside in the avoidance regulatory system (Metcalf and Mischel 1999) characterized by more reason and long-term-orientation, while consumption goals are in the approach regulatory system characterized by desire for sensory pleasure and immediate gratification. When consumers make food purchases, valuation goals and avoidance motivations are more active; hence, they tend to put more weight on long-term health benefits than immediate sensory pleasure, often preferring virtues to vices. When the food consumption is imminent in the post-decision stage, on the other hand, consumers tend to prefer vices to virtues to fulfill their consumption goals and approach motivations that are guided by sensory pleasure and immediate gratification. Time discounting theory and the immediacy effect suggest that people prefer delayed virtues but immediate vices, because the vices offer a larger reward in the present (Reed et al., 1999). Thus, the preference of vices over virtues in the post-decision stage is fortified by the tendency to prefer immediate vices and delayed virtues since only imminent food consumption remains in this stage. The liking of vices in the post-decision stage should translate into stronger waste perceptions of vices than virtues. In summary, we hypothesize that consumers will feel more wasteful when discarding unconsumed vices than virtues. We demonstrate that consumers perceive a higher level of food waste in vices than virtues (Study 1) and anticipate that they are less likely to waste vices than virtues (Study 2). In Study 3 we explore

a condition that moderates the effect of food types on waste perceptions and show that having a sense of taste goal progress eliminates the differential waste perceptions between vices and virtues.

In Study 1 we offer an initial test of whether waste perceptions vary between two food types. Participants received a scenario in which they purchased either a vice or a virtue. In both scenarios, sometime after the purchase they found they had to discard the food item as it was past its expiration date. Participants then rated how wasteful they felt about the discarded food. We found that participants felt more wasteful about the unconsumed vice than the unconsumed virtue.

In Study 2 we examine whether the differential waste perceptions identified in Study 1 will transfer into differential anticipation of food waste. We hypothesize that people will predict higher likelihood of waste of virtues than vices. The logic is that waste aversion should be stronger for food items that induce stronger waste perceptions when discarded. Since unconsumed vices (vs. virtues) induce stronger waste perceptions, people should be more reluctant to waste vices than virtues, which should be reflected in their prediction of food waste. Participants were asked to imagine they purchased three vice items or three virtue items. Then, they evaluated how likely they were to waste at least some portion of each food item. Results showed that participants in the vice (vs. virtue) condition predicted lower likelihood of waste. This finding suggests that people are less willing to waste vices than virtues, presumably because waste aversion is stronger for vices than virtues.

In Study 3 we explore the psychological mechanism underlying the vice-virtue perceptual difference. Fishbach and Dhar (2005) argue that consumer choices are driven by multiple goals, and having a sense of progress in one goal liberates consumers to pursue another goal. Building on this finding, we hypothesize that increasing one's sense of consumption (i.e., taste) goal progress will decrease the person's waste perceptions of vices, thereby reducing the differential waste perceptions between vices and virtues. We used a 2 (goal: taste goal vs. no goal) X 2 (food: vice and virtue) design with food waste perceptions as dependent variable. Participants in the taste goal condition received consumption goal manipulation while participants in the no goal condition did not. Results showed that in the no goal condition, waste perceptions of unused vices (vs. virtues) were stronger, but in the taste goal condition, there was no such difference. This

Table 1: Summary of Study Results

	DV	Food Type		Scenario Perspective	Goal Type
		Vice	Virtue		
Study 1	Food Waste perceptions	6.23	5.25		
Study 2	Food waste likelihood	7.05	10.23		
Study 3	Food Waste perceptions	Vice	Virtue	Self	No goal
		5.15	4.65		Consumption goal
		4.75	5.15	Third-person	No goal
		5.29	4.55		Consumption goal
4.99	5.30				

finding suggests that the differential food waste perceptions between vices and virtues are driven by consumption goal that is more salient in the post-purchase stage and resulting preference of vices to virtues.

The present research extends prior research on the psychology of waste by advancing our understanding of the relationship between food categories and waste perceptions of unconsumed food. It also explores the impact of this relationship on food waste aversion. We showed that consumers feel more wasteful when discarding unconsumed vices than virtues, and they are more reluctant to waste vices than virtues. Yet, the differential food waste perceptions fade away when consumers have a sense of consumption goal progress.

Our findings suggest the possibility that consumers buy more virtues than needed as they do not strongly feel wasteful when they discard unconsumed virtues. On the other hand, waste aversion may be one reason why people consume vices beyond satiation. Salience of waste during consumption of vices and resulting waste aversion in the form of consumption beyond satiation may have detrimental effects on consumer satisfaction and welfare as they may suffer from overconsumption of vice foods.

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