

# Why do Consumers Waste So Much Food? Understanding Food Waste and Strategies to Decrease It

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## Abstract

Food waste is an important societal problem with negative consequences for food security, the environment and consumer well-being. In industrialized countries, per capita food waste amounts up to 95-115 kg per year; the global carbon footprint of food waste ranks third amongst the top-emitters of CO<sub>2</sub>. Although consumers are the single largest contributors to food waste in industrialized countries, food waste has not received much attention in the consumer behavior literature. The objective of this special session is to present recent insights on why food waste occurs and to discuss strategies to prevent consumer food waste. The papers jointly strive to shed light on the pressing question: Why do consumers waste so much food? We will discuss determinants of food waste in all phases of the consumption process, that is, food acquisition, consumption, and disposal.

The first paper “What A Waste: Effects of (Un)planned Consumption on Consumer Food Waste” by Marit Drijfhout, Jenny van Doorn, and Koert van Ittersum draws on construal level theory to explain why food waste occurs. In three field studies covering the whole consumption process from acquisition to actual consumption to waste, they show that food waste is driven by consumers making more virtuous food choices for future compared to present consumption. The second paper “Promoting food for the trash bin? A review of the literature on retail price promotions and household-level food waste” by George Tsalis, Birger Boutrup Jensen, and Jessica Aschemann-Witzel highlights how food waste is determined in the acquisition stage. They show that price promotions can, but do not have to increase waste, and advise retailers to pair promotional activities with initiatives to decrease food waste.

The third paper “The defaulted doggy bag: The effects of changing the default and offering choice on overcoming a counter-attitudinal social norm” focuses on consumer behavior between the consumption and disposal stage. Erica van Herpen and Ilona de Hooge show that changing the default into taking a doggy bag is an effective influence strategy to entice consumers to take home leftover food, without transferring food waste from the restaurant to the home. The fourth paper, “Doing good by wasting” by Jenny van Doorn and Tim Kurz shows that laudable initiatives aimed at turning waste into something useful may lead consumers to psychologically frame their waste as a donation to, for instance, producing biofuel or beer, and therewith to more wasteful behavior.