

Why Feeling Like a Food Rescue Hero Is Not Enough: The Effect of Reputational Cues on the Acceptance of Ugly Food

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Abstract

We examine how reputational cues can enhance consumer acceptance of fruits and vegetables with visual flaws. In one field and three online studies, we demonstrate that the common strategy of framing consumers as food rescue heroes fails when retailers do not offer visible reputational cues. Conspicuous and “loud” cues, such as hero stickers, increase preference for ugly food by transforming their consumption into a signal of status. Consumers’ anticipated status gains explain this positive effect. Drawing on competitive altruism and conspicuous consumption, we introduce the problem of ugliness to the sustainability and reputation literature and show that social mechanisms matter in consumer decisions regarding ugly food. Our findings provide retailers with a simple and scalable intervention to promote imperfect food and reduce waste.

Track: Social Responsibility & Ethics