

Love food, hate the brand that I waste: The effects of product waste on brand evaluations

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In 2010, the total generation of waste in the European Union amounted to 2 506 million tons (Eurostat). This represents a huge loss of resources and of 'unused utility': throwing away of functioning appliances, unused products, and edible foods. Yet, wasting is not a carefree activity for consumers. Consumers follow complex procedures in managing the residual value of discarded food items to lessen anxieties about wastage (Evans, 2012; Graham-Rowe et al., 2014; Parizeau et al., 2015). Moreover, a distaste for waste affects consumers' choices, such as favoring options with less unused utility (Bolton and Alba, 2012) or persevering in a failing project when stopping would involve waste (Arkes, 1996). The current research provides insights into this contradiction between wasting a lot and not wanting to waste, and reveals the consequences of waste for brand evaluations.

Waste and brand evaluations

Waste can be understood as the result of not using a product to its full capacity. Whereas both throwing away a food container that still holds leftovers and throwing away an emptied food container would lead to the generation of waste, there is an important difference in the unused utility that is wasted, in this example in the form of uneaten food. This salient unused utility is aversive for consumers (Bolton and Alba, 2012). According to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), the occurrence of "nonfitting" relations among cognitive elements (which could entail attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors) is unpleasant and leads to psychological discomfort (also termed dissonance). Thus, consumers would like to solve this dissonance in the current waste situation. Because attitudes can be altered more easily than previously displayed behaviors, attitude change is a common way in which people reduce dissonance (Galinsky et al., 2008; Simon et al., 1995; Starzyk et al., 2009). Therefore, we expect that wasting a product with left-over utility would generate cognitive dissonance, and that this dissonance would be solved by decreasing evaluations of the wasted brand.

Importantly, when a product with left-over utility is discarded, the left-over utility is not necessarily wasted. Different disposition behaviors are possible: throwing it away, giving it away, trading it, and selling it (Jacoby et al., 1977). If unused utility can be transferred to another person, the level of psychological discomfort should be lower than if unused utility is lost. Thus, we expect that wasting a product with left-over utility leads to more cognitive dissonance and more decreased brand evaluations than other ways of disposing a product.

Finally, the predicted effect should depend on brand salience. Dissonance reduction through brand evaluations should be less likely when the brand itself is not salient when wasting the product (i.e., when the brand is not visible, and there is thus no reminder of the brand name).

Studies

We tested our hypotheses in four studies. The first three studies were scenario studies. Study 1 examined the effect of different ways of disposing products on dissonance feelings. Results showed that wasting a product (irrespective of whether it was thrown away or recycled) lead to more dissonance than transferring utility to another person (irrespective of whether the product was used in its original intended purpose). Study 2 tested the effects of wasting on brand evaluations. Respondents imagined that they had purchased a drink they could not consume entirely, and that they either threw the remaining product in the bin (waste condition) or gave it to a friend (no-waste condition). Brand evaluations were lower in the waste condition than in the no-waste condition. Study 3 ruled out alternative explanations (transfer of disgust, cf. Morales and Fitzsimons, 2007, and attribution of waste to the brand).

Study 4 investigated waste in a situation with real product consumption, to generalize our results beyond imagined situations. It also tested the moderating effect of brand salience. Respondents prepared and ate a salad in the lab. In the brand-salient condition, product containers with the same brand name were placed next to bowls with ingredients, whereas in the brand-not-salient condition only unlabeled bowls were provided. In both conditions, respondents were aware of the brand through the instructions. The amount of ingredients provided ensured that there were leftover ingredients. As dissonance is more likely when people believe that they freely choose their behavior (Harmon-Jones, 2000), in the waste condition respondents could ask for sandwich bags to take leftover ingredients home or put leftover ingredients in a bin (only six respondents asked for bags). In the no-waste condition, respondents could take leftover ingredients home or leave these on the table for future respondents (none took ingredients home). All participants then evaluated the brand.

Our results showed the expected waste x salience interaction effect ($F(1, 120) = 5.32, p = .023$). When the brand was not salient, wasting did not affect brand evaluations ($p = .156$). In contrast, when brand was salient, brand evaluations were marginally higher when ingredients were left on the table ($M = 5.19$) than when these were wasted ($M = 4.75, p = .069$). Mediation analyses showed that dissonance was a mediator when salience was high ($b = 0.27, CI [0.05, 0.58]$) but not when salience was low ($b = 0.13, CI [-0.15, 0.48]$).

General discussion

Our research shows that consumers can reduce dissonance from wasting a product with unused utility by decreasing their brand evaluations. This was found both in scenario studies and in a food consumption context. Results furthermore reveal that brand devaluation does not occur when the brand is not salient at the moment of wasting. This provides new insights to literature on consumer disposition behavior that help clarify the paradox in which consumers both waste products and do not want to waste. It also has important managerial implications. The realization that brand evaluations suffer when consumers waste products with unused utility could inspire companies to spend additional efforts on preventing this. It also provides brand managers with compelling arguments to tackle the waste issue.

Quantitative sustainability information in the supermarket – a semi-field experiment

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Abstract

We systematically investigated the effects on consumer purchasing behaviour of increasingly precise information formats displaying the environmental impact of products. We displayed 29 vegetable and fruit products in a virtual supermarket to customers in an actual supermarket and compared their incentivized choices under three labelling regimes. We find that displaying both complex and simplified environmental information leads to a change in consumer choice towards more environmentally sustainable products.

Introduction

Over the past decade, governments, ngos and food producers have started to display environmental effects of products on Front of Pack (FOP) logos and in-store information. Simultaneously, apps have been developed that give consumers insight in their footprint or the sustainability of their choices (Questionmark, goodguide etc). Some producers report the estimated costs of the environmental impact (True Price) of their products (f.i. Puma, Akzonobel). Despite this variety of ways to display environmental impact, the effectiveness of different formats and