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The Host's Dilemma: Identity Conflict as a Moderator of Perceived Shortage Risk and Food Over-Preparation

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Abstract

Despite holding negative attitudes toward food waste, consumers frequently over-prepare food due to conflicting self-identities. Specifically, the "Good Food Provider" (GFP) identity motivates hosts to over-prepare food to signal hospitality and care, directly opposing a "Pro-Environmental" (PE) identity focused on waste minimisation. This tension creates an internal conflict between avoiding food shortages and preventing waste, driving inconsistent food provision behaviours. Methods: Two online experimental studies on Qualtrics investigated how identity conflict — the tension between PE and GFP self-identities — moderates the relationship between perceived risk of shortage and over-preparation. Canadian adult participants (Study 1: N = 100; Study 2: N = 128) were recruited via the Prolific platform. In Study 1, chronic GFP and PE identities were measured using adapted multi-item Likert scales to predict over-preparation intentions (e.g., deliberately ordering excessive food). Study 2 established causal dynamics by manipulating identity salience (GFP vs. PE vs. control) through a short reading-priming task, capturing actual food preparation behaviour via a portion allocation scenario (determining the adequate number of meatballs for seven guests). Perceived risk of shortage in both studies was assessed through randomised trials, where participants rated the likelihood of shortage for hypothetical groups of five or nine guests given specific food quantities (e.g., "Ordering 28 meatballs for five people may not be enough for everyone."). Results: Across both studies, identity conflict significantly shaped responses to perceived food shortage risk. In Study 1, stronger PE identity reduced intentions to over-prepare food, whereas stronger GFP identity increased them. A significant three-way interaction ($b = 0.449$, $p = .005$) revealed that the influence of perceived risk of shortage depended on the relative strength of these competing identities: PE identity mitigated over-preparation intentions only when GFP identity was weak; when GFP identity was strong, it dominated and PE identity no longer reduced over-preparation intentions. Study 2 confirmed this identity prioritisation pattern — perceived shortage risk increased the quantity of prepared food, particularly when GFP identity was activated, whereas PE identity weakened this effect. Conclusion: These findings identify identity conflict as a key psychological driver of food over-preparation and potential household food waste. Concern about being a good host can outweigh environmental values when consumers anticipate food shortages, helping explain why food waste persists despite widespread awareness of its negative consequences. Interventions may be more effective if they disrupt traditional hospitality norms rather than merely appealing to environmental values.

Keywords: Food waste behaviour, Identity conflict, Good food provider identity, Pro-environmental

identity, Perceived risk of shortage

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