

How consumers deal with food leftovers in single and young family households in times of scarcity: Preliminary findings

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Abstract

We live in turbulent times. The effects of climate change are increasingly salient, visible and impactful. The war against Ukraine is also affecting food production and energy supply. This impacts food supply on a major scale. Indeed, from times where everything was available all times and in abundance, the prediction for the future looks quite different (Baker, 2022; Utkina, 2022; World Bank, 2022; OECD, 2022). Scarcity of food either because of failed production (e.g., spoiled crops due to climate change) or because of energy limitations (e.g., bakers who have to switch their ovens off) is becoming more common with soaring inflation and price increases as consequences (Utkina, 2022; FAO, 2022). Paradoxically in times when resourcefulness and full utilization of food resources are needed, we are still facing an enormous food waste problem. Consumers are responsible for 70% of all food waste in the United Kingdom where it is estimated that 1 out of 6 grocery bags ends up in the bin (WRAP, 2021). While there is ample literature documenting the reasons for food waste in households and various interventions to reduce it, there is little know about how consumers deal with leftover food (Van Geffen et al., 2020). We define leftover food as unused or partly unused products (e.g., half an onion or ingredients leftover without a specific destination in a recipe) as well as cooked and stored leftover food (Van Geffen et al., 2020). Over 70% of kitchen food waste is avoidable (De Visser-Amundson, 2020) and considering that there will never be a perfect equilibrium between what is purchased, prepared and cooked and what is consumed, leftovers will always be (at least to a certain degree) a constant factor. Thus also, a fundamental sustainability issue to tackle. This research takes a qualitative approach and investigates how single households and families (defined as high wasting household) specifically deal with leftovers and what the 'road to consumption' may or may not be for this food. Through in-depth interviews with consumers, the research aims to uncover their coping strategies with regards to food still left to be consumed. Particularly in these changing times of food supply scarcity, energy shortages and roaring price increases.

Keywords: leftover food, food waste, consumer behavior, coping strategies

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