

Waste of Edible Food from a College Student Perspective

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BACKGROUND

Students at a US Southwestern university completed a module on food safety, security, and healthy nutrition that included a section on consumer food handling and waste. Subsequently they wrote reflective essays that bridged module concepts with personal experience as they shared observations on food waste and incorporated relevant evidence-based facts.

OBJECTIVE

Summarize student perceptions of choice, action, and consequences in what they viewed as waste of edible food.

DESCRIPTION

During fall 2021 students enrolled in a freshman nutrition class wrote essays in response to the following prompt: “does food waste matter?” Prior to writing essays, students completed an online module on how to write a Think Piece, a reflective essay that incorporated concepts from class as they inspected their own perceptions about a topic. The essays were both opinion and an analysis of information that informed thought.

Fifty essays out of 110 submitted were selected for content analysis. Patterns emerged around three topics: location, alternatives, and knowledge. This study qualified for exemption by the Institutional Review Board.

DATA ANALYSIS

A thematic analysis with pre-figured categories complimented interpretive reading of question response sets by two researchers. Data was systematically coded until themes emerged. Debriefings included debating emergent understanding, negative instances, and compatibility with pre-figured categories.

RESULTS

Location – Food waste was described as in three main areas: grocery stores, restaurants, and homes.

Alternatives – Suggestions for choice included grocery store donations to food banks and pantries, smaller portions in restaurants, and moderate food offerings at events.

Knowledge – The students felt that greater confidence in judging food quality and safety was key. They questioned why grocery stores relied on date labels in disposing of edible food and restaurants routinely overproduced food items that were discarded after a prescribed time. In terms of personal food handling practices, the students outlined barriers that impacted their ability to shop, store, and prepare food, as they described how limited knowledge about food labeling and safety resulted in waste.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Results suggest an opportunity to impact waste through changes in retail food management and education on food safety in the home. In addition, young adults are passionate about food waste and open to smaller portion sizes that reduce waste in restaurants and during events.

QUOTABLE QUOTES

Location

“Grocery stores will not hold inventory past sell by date...food is still safe, it is the date that grocers view as a guaranteed freshness.”

“Working in a grocery store {throwing} away perfectly good produce because it was not visually appealing”

“Restaurants {should} not make large portions for people do not like to eat leftovers.”

“Households where we refrigerate our vegetables and fruits for too long, forget about them, and they start to spoil.”

Alternatives

“Choosing food based on overall quality rather than general appearance can cut down on food waste.”

“Fixing expiration dates to {be} more realistic or making customers more aware of the life of food products like fruits and vegetables.”

Knowledge

“I don’t know how much to buy and I buy way too much for me...the groceries expire before I eat them.”

“We need to gain respect for food, as well as the farmers who produce it, the natural resources that go into producing it, and the people who go without it.”

WORK CITED

Zillmar A. The Relationship between Social Media and Nutrition. Fresh Writing. University of Notre Dame. 2020. <https://freshwriting.nd.edu/volumes/2017/essays/the-relationship-between-social-media-and-nutrition>.