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Testing the effectiveness of functional versus sustainability message framing in enhancing consumer acceptance of imperfect produce

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Abstract

UK retailers discard approximately 30% of all produce before it reaches the shelves due to aesthetic imperfections, significantly contributing to the country's annual food waste total of 9.5 million tonnes (FAO, 2024; WRAP, 2020). To combat this, retailers have launched 'imperfect produce' lines, offering aesthetically imperfect produce at a lower price. However, the advertising campaigns promoting these lines often rely on uniform messaging that overlooks how socio-demographic factors influence the effectiveness of the message, creating a gap in efforts to promote wider acceptance of imperfect produce (Aydinli et al., 2023; de Visser-Amundson et al., 2023)

Drawing on Construal Level Theory and Value-Basis Theory, we investigated how socioeconomic status (SES) moderates message effectiveness by examining how different consumer groups cognitively process and interpret message promoting the consumption of imperfect produce (Castagna et al., 2021; Coffino et al., 2020; Florence et al., 2022). We examined whether effectiveness of functional versus sustainability message in promoting imperfect food consumption differ depending on individuals' SES.

In a between-subjects experiment with 120 UK consumers, participants were randomly assigned to view product information framed either functionally ("Same taste and nutrition") or with a sustainability focus ("Reduce food waste"). The results revealed a significant interaction between message framing and SES ($p = .0323$). Using the Johnson-Neyman (J-N) technique, we found that the sustainability-focused message was more effective at an SES value of 1.72 SD above the mean ($bJ\text{-}N = .97$, $SE = .49$, $p = .05$) or higher. Our findings indicate that message type significantly impacts only high-SES individuals, with food waste reduction messages proving more persuasive. In contrast, there was no significant difference in message effectiveness among low-SES individuals. Thus, our findings establish SES as a critical moderator of message effectiveness, challenging the assumption that sustainability-framed communications are universally persuasive across segments. These insights highlight the need for targeted marketing strategies that account for socio-demographic diversity when promoting imperfect produce.

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