

Influence of Consumers' Self Perception on Devaluation of Ugly Produce – Marketing Strategies to Reduce Food Waste in the Indian Context

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Abstract

Ugly produce refers to aesthetically imperfect fruits and vegetables and also fruits and vegetables with minor blemishes. Ugly produce does not refer to spoiled, rotten, or germ-infected fruits and vegetables. The basic premise of this study is from self-signaling and self-perception theories. The self-signaling theory states that when people make a choice, they disclose something of their character and personality not just to others, but also to themselves. Self-perception theory (SPT) developed by psychologist Daryl Bem asserts that people develop their attitudes by observing their own behavior and further concluding what attitudes must have caused it. Classically, consumers undervalue ugly produce because of altered self-perceptions; simply visualizing the consumption of imperfect produce acts as a self-indicative signal that negatively affects how consumers view themselves. Due to this, the unattractive produce, even though perfectly edible and with the same taste and nutritional value, is rejected by consumers merely based on shape or some other cosmetic blemish. We discussed the strategies adopted by Indian startups and organizations to reduce food waste. Deep discounting is the strategy followed by food retailers worldwide to sell ugly produce, however, this is not the best strategy as it leads to losses for both the retailers as well as the farmers. We suggested alternative strategies successfully followed by foreign retailers, such as spreading awareness, boosting self-confidence and esteem among consumers, attracting kids, etc., which can be followed by Indian food retailers for selling ugly fruits and vegetables.

Keywords : ugly produce, self-signaling, self-perception, food waste

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Food wastage is a major problem worldwide. Global food waste is estimated to be 1.3 billion tons, which accounts for one-third of the total worldwide food production (FAO, 2011) ; 61% of food waste comes from households, 26% from food services, and 13% from retail (UN Environment Programme, 2021). Improved agricultural productivity combined with the selectiveness of retailers and end consumers has led to the gradual rise in food waste in the past few decades. Farmers discard up to 30% of produce primarily due to the reason that they do not find it attractive enough for retail sale (Berkenkamp & Nennich, 2015). Filtration of unattractive produce happens in various stages, such as leaving entire crop fields unharvested, refusing to pick such unattractive produce at the farm level, and removing cosmetically compromised products before packaging (Gunders, 2017). In the retail outlets, consumers refuse to purchase unattractive produce, resulting in unsold produce that amounts to billions of pounds of waste. Even though the edible value is not affected by appearance, the rejected fruits and vegetables are not purchased due to the appearance of minor defects and cosmetic blemishes.

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Approximately \$58 billion was spent by consumers on produce in grocery stores in 2015, constituting almost 12% of all supermarket sales (Food Marketing Institute, 2016). According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), retailers discard \$15.4 billion of edible fruits and vegetables annually (Buzby et al., 2014). “Ugly fruits and vegetables” discarded on the farms or at the retailer level due to abnormal appearance have not received sufficient attention. Multiple screening of fruits and vegetables takes place, and only produce having a standardized appearance end up in the food retail outlets. Ugly produce is usually rejected even though its edible value is not affected by its appearance.

Retailers have addressed the problem of ugly produce by either substantially reducing the selling price or positively highlighting its abnormal appearance. Offering deep discounts for imperfect produce is a method usually followed by retailers worldwide but with limited success. Some organized retailers have developed campaigns highlighting the positive effects of consuming imperfect produce. Retailers have also tried to boost consumers' self-esteem by highlighting the positive environmental impact of consuming imperfect produce. Ugly produce delivery services like Misfits Market and Imperfect Foods, which retail imperfect food, have door delivery services directly to the consumers' homes in the form of food boxes (Jessica, 2021).

Impact of Self-Signaling and Self-Perception on Consumer Choice

According to the self-signaling theory, when we make a choice, we disclose something of our character and personality, not just to others, but also to ourselves. Depending on whether we are impressed or disappointed by our own choices, this can be a source of pleasure or pain in the aftermath of making the choices. Even before making the actual choice, the anticipation of future pride or remorse can influence what we choose to do (Bodner & Prelec, 2003). This theory can be applied to understand why consumers are reluctant to buy ugly fruits and vegetables that are otherwise perfectly edible. According to the self-signaling theory, the thought of buying and consuming unattractive food makes consumers feel low. Hence, consumers try to avoid buying imperfect or ugly produce and try to consume aesthetically attractive or perfect produce. So, the main challenge for food retailers is reducing the negative feeling associated with purchasing unattractive produce. Various marketing campaigns have been conducted by retailers positively highlighting the abnormal appearance of ugly produce, including Giant Eagle's 'Produce with Personality,' Asada's 'Wonky Produce,' and Whole Foods 'Imperfect Produce' (Aubrey, 2016; Smithers, 2016). In all these campaigns, 30%–50% price discount was combined by retailers (Aubrey, 2015; Godoy, 2015) along with marketing efforts to change consumer perceptions of abnormal appearance to be more positive (Zamon, 2015).

Past literature in consumer psychology reveals that people use their own behavior (as well as brand and product choice) to deliberately self-signal attractive personal traits and characteristics. For instance, customers who self-doubt their own competencies have a higher tendency to choose goods that indicate their competence to their own self (Gao et al., 2009), and customers feeling low power display have an amplified longing to buy premium goods as a means of gesturing their own self-worth (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008).

Self-perception theory can also be effectively applied to the marketing of unattractive produce. Self-perception theory (SPT) developed by psychologist Daryl Bem asserts that people develop their attitudes by observing their own behavior and further concluding what attitudes must have caused it (Bem, 1972). Normally, when people make wrong or inferior choices, there is a tendency to feel bad or feel lower self-esteem. Classically, consumers undervalue ugly produce because of altered self-perception: simply visualizing the consumption of imperfect produce acts as a self-indicative signal that negatively affects how consumers view themselves, consequently lowering their willingness to pay (WTP) for imperfect produce in comparison to equally safe, but more attractive, alternatives (Grewal et al., 2019).

Marketers can use the self-esteem theory to their advantage. One classic example is the foot-in-the-door technique, which is a widely used marketing technique for persuading target customers to buy products. The basic

premise of this technique is that once a person agrees to a small request, she/he will be more likely to agree to a more extensive request related to the initial request (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). This theory can be used by retailers to market ugly produce. Retailers can grab consumers' attention towards ugly produce by encouraging them to fill out a basic questionnaire or answer a few questions about their willingness to buy imperfect produce.

Beauty-is-Good and the Ugly-is-Risky Stereotype

Past research on perception has recognized the presence of the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype, whereby beautiful people are evaluated as more socially skilled, intelligent, occupationally competent, and ethical (Langlois et al., 2000). This visual premium noted in human-to-human relations broadens the perception of consumer products (Liu et al., 2017; Townsend & Shu, 2010; Wu et al., 2017).

Consumers' inclination for high aesthetics products (beauty-is-good stereotype) is a major contributor to food waste levels. Visual appeal is an important factor in consumers' evaluation of food products using which they infer about the food quality, freshness, and flavor (Zellner et al., 2014). The 'beauty-is-good' bias can be analyzed from various perspectives of human psychology, varying from the search for potential partners (Griffin & Langlois, 2006) to products (Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2013). Since food products, including fruits and vegetables, have an impact on health, consumers have a dominant innate instinct to search for the perfect products. Consumers try to avoid low aesthetic food products as they associate their consumption with food hazards or ill health (ugly-is-risky bias). Since aesthetics has a high impact on consumer decisions, it can be stated that one of the critical determinants of food waste is the search for food products with perfect appearance (Göbel et al., 2015). Consumer food perceptions are distorted by the meticulous quality standards involving the appearance, size, and shape of the products established by big distributors and retailers (Loebnitz & Grunert, 2018).

Intuitively, shoppers seek signs that indicate safety and quality, particularly concerning goods that are precisely associated with health, such as food products. Dutton (2009) found that when shoppers are shown attractive goods, there is an involuntary positive attitude even before making a rational decision. Thus, the positive instinctive reaction negates the rational stimuli when it comes to the high aesthetics of beautiful products (Wu et al., 2017).

Ugly Produce in the Indian Context

The urban Indian customers are reluctant to welcome ugly produce into their kitchens. As per Mr. Mohit Khattar, CEO and MD of Godrej Nature's Basket, the vast majority of Indian consumers demand aesthetically appealing perfect fruits and vegetables when they shop for them. According to him, if the fruits and vegetables don't look good, it is sure that they won't find buyers. Even when consumers order through the phone, Godrej Nature's Basket is cautious about sending only handpicked and good-looking produce. According to Chandra Bhushan, Deputy Director-General, Centre for Science and Environment, organic food will have blemishes as no pesticides are used. He pointed out that advertisements mislead consumers into believing that waxed fruits and vegetables look fresh due to the use of pesticides and chemicals as suitable for consumption. He strongly feels that this 'beautiful is good' stereotype needs to be negated with awareness campaigns highlighting that organic and natural food comes in all colors, sizes, and shapes. Lack of awareness among people is the major reason for food waste, according to Swati Agarwal, regional head of Foodhall. She further stated that consumers must be made aware that even though genetically modified food always looks attractive, it may not taste good. The urban consumer is caught in a fix between aesthetically perfect produce and organic food. In her opinion, many customers think that imported fruits are tastier. She further opined that the demand for imported fruits and vegetables is higher in big cities with larger disposable incomes (Fernandes, 2016).

Nandi et al. (2014) investigated the consumers' preferences regarding the purchase places of organic products

in Bangalore, India. The results of their study revealed that the most preferred places of purchase for organic food products were specialized organic stores and supermarkets. The least preferred purchase places were conventional retail shops and the local open markets.

Initiatives to Reduce Food Waste by Indian Startups and Organizations

Few Indian startups and organizations are working to reduce waste. DesiVDesi Foods is an innovative Indian start-up started by Mumbai's Institute of Chemical Technology alumni. It helps farmers overcome the problem of perishable produce getting wasted due to logistical problems. It has developed solar dryers that help farmers dehydrate their produce, thus increasing its shelf life up to a year by removing 90% of the moisture. This start-up creates awareness among farmers and distributes its solar dryers even in remote rural areas. The solar dryers are provided at a cost-effective price ranging from \$100 to \$500. The farmers can buy these solar dryers individually, but many marginal farmers buy them collectively or at the village level. These dryers are especially useful in preserving the seasonal produce that farmers can consume or sell later at a better price. DesiVDesi Foods also distributes about 10 different dried fruit and vegetable products under their brand name. The company's products are available in a few select food retail outlets in Mumbai and on Amazon. They are also exploring tie-ups with foreign investors to expand into countries including the United Kingdom, United States, Dubai, and Thailand (Richmond, 2017).

Back2Basics and Farm Direct Online are farm-to-door delivery services encouraging consumers to eat fresh, organic, local, and seasonal fruits and vegetables. These firms patronize local farmers and procure fresh produce from local farms. The bi-weekly or weekly home-delivery service offered by these firms reduces logistical problems, cuts down costs, and ultimately reduces food waste. The Robin Hood Army, a volunteer-based organization, re-distributes surplus food collected from restaurants to the less fortunate and needy people, thereby doing their part to help the cause of food waste reduction (Sprig & Vine, 2017).

Marketing Strategies to Reduce Food Waste

Display In-Store Advertising Messages that Raise Consumers' Self-Esteem

A study by Lauren Grewal and co-researchers found that advertising messages aimed at raising consumers' self-esteem increased the willingness to pay for unattractive or ugly produce. Their study also found that consumers' choice of ugly produce increased because self-esteem enhanced in-store advertising. These researchers suggested that the tendency of shoppers to make inferences about the self from their purchase behavior can be weakened by designing and displaying advertisements boosting consumers' self-esteem. Retailers can use this method of display in-store advertising to communicate positive messages encouraging consumers to buy unattractive produce and thus reduce retailers' dependency on discounting to sell unattractive fruits and vegetables (Grewal et al., 2019).

Marketing Ugly Fruits and Vegetables to Kids

A study by doctoral student Annesha Makhil at the University of Otago, New Zealand, examined how children saw deformed fruits and vegetables. She found that children are far more accepting and, at times, excited about the irregular shapes of ugly produce than adults. This researcher armed nearly 100 children between the ages of 5 and 11 with shopping baskets who were given a shopping list and asked to choose two of each fruit or vegetable item on the list. The researcher mixed regular, perfect, and aesthetically appealing fruits and vegetables with weird-

looking funny/ugly counterparts. The children preferred vegetables and fruits with funny, twisted shapes compared to regular perfect shapes. However, the children avoided produce with bruises or brown marks. The retailers can appeal to the kids' attraction to wonky/funny food and thus indirectly influence their parents to buy ugly produce (Fagan, 2019).

Ugly produce marketers can target children through attractive advertisements highlighting ugly produce's funny shape and features such as taste and freshness. Sivathanu (2017) studied the impact of food marketing techniques on children's food choices. He found that repetition of the message, celebrity endorsements, brand image, attention-getting products, viral marketing, premiums, integrated marketing strategies, and product placements had a substantial influence on children's food choices.

Offering Discounts

This is the most commonly used technique of selling ugly produce used by retailers worldwide. This strategy is somewhat successful in selling unattractive food and vegetables but may not be profitable to the retailers and farmers. Also, offering discounts may further reduce consumers' self-perception while purchasing ugly produce, but it may also signal that the consumer is getting a just deal using a lower price for unattractive produce. A study involving a survey of independent retailers who were a part of a Swedish Chain found that 34% of the retailers reported offering a steep discount to sell unattractive produce. Store owners stated that they needed to offer a 45% discount to sell it (Grewal et al., 2019).

Some consumers will be interested in buying unattractive fruits and vegetables because they cost lesser. Cost savings must be emphasized in marketing efforts to these consumers (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2015). Carrefour, a large hypermarket chain, partnered with the company 'Too Good To Go' to sell baskets of food products a day or two before their expiry dates. These food baskets helped sell about to expire food that could have ended up as waste by reducing almost 70% of the total price. As of 2019, Carrefour saved 2,374 tonnes of unsold food by selling 11.2 million food baskets (Ramakrishnan, 2020).

Educating Consumers and Spreading Awareness

Food safety is an important factor for consumers, especially when they make decisions about purchasing fresh groceries (De Hooge et al., 2017). Ugly fruits and vegetables only differ in appearance but are as safe as their perfectly shaped counterparts, but this is not known by the majority of consumers. Creating awareness about the safety of ugly fruits and vegetables will make consumers more positive about purchasing and consuming them. Saleem et al. (2017) found that consumers' knowledge about particular food products positively impacted their attitudes and their purchase intentions of those food products.

Consumers are unaware of the problems created by their avoidance of ugly produce, such as the problem of food wastage (Loebnitz et al., 2015). Consumers are myopic in their view of personal food consumption and may not relate their rejection of unattractive food with food waste. Making consumers aware of the food waste problem is a precondition to solving it (Dou et al., 2016). If consumers' level of awareness is increased about the food wastage problem due to their rejection of unattractive produce, then it is likely that they will show pro-environmental behavior by buying these imperfect fruits and vegetables (Loebnitz et al., 2015). Relating food waste to environmental responsibility is an ideal method to spread awareness among consumers regarding consuming ugly produce. Das (2015) found that older people displayed greater concern for the environment than younger consumers. His study also revealed that married people were more environmentally conscious than unmarried people.

Conclusion and Implications

From the self-perception and self-signaling theory, it is evident that there is a chance of consumers' reduction in self-esteem due to the purchase of ugly produce, but the same may not hold when institutional buyers purchase fruits and vegetables for commercial purposes. Unattractive produce can be sold in bulk to chain restaurants and food caterers at a significant discount. When marketers are trying to sell ugly produce to consumers for self-consumption, they need to boost the consumers' self-esteem by employing positive messages at the point of sales. As discussed in this research paper, some organized retailers in the USA, France, and other European countries have successfully run marketing campaigns to sell ugly fruits and vegetables. Few of these marketing campaigns aimed at increasing consumers' self-esteem by displaying messages such as 'you are wonderful, buy ugly produce.' Organized food retailers in India can also start similar campaigns to boost the urban Indian's self-esteem before purchasing ugly produce, thus creating positive self-perception among consumers post-purchase.

Unattractive produce can also be sold as cut fruits and vegetables. Since these fruits and vegetables are perfectly edible, the problem of unattractive shape can be overcome by presenting ugly produce as cut fruits and vegetables. Many supermarkets already have a fresh juice counter, and some big supermarkets have a cooked food section. Ugly fruits can be used for preparing fruit juices which can be sold to customers at attractive prices. Unattractive vegetables can be used to prepare cooked food, which can be marketed to customers shopping in the retail outlets. Selling ugly fruits and vegetables using online portals is a suitable method used by specialized food retailers in developed countries.

There is generally a lack of awareness among urban consumers that the irregular shape of ugly fruits and vegetables does not influence the taste or nutritional value. Hence, it is vital to increase the awareness of urban consumers about the safety of irregular-shaped unattractive produce. Siddiqui and Siddiqui (2021) found that a strong positive relationship existed between trust and buying intention; whereas, a negative relationship existed between trust and perceived risk. Hence, retailers need to increase consumers' trust towards the consumption of ugly produce by highlighting that there is no difference in taste and nutritional value. Certifications by nutritional experts regarding the safety of consuming ugly produce will increase trust and reduce consumers' perceived risk.

The deep discounting strategy may work in the Indian market but is not the best strategy for selling ugly produce. This strategy drastically reduces the margins of retailers and farmers by training consumers to be bargain hunters. Hence, other techniques discussed in this research paper, such as spreading awareness, boosting self-confidence and esteem among consumers, attracting kids, etc., are better strategies for selling ugly fruits and vegetables.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

The current study is based on secondary data and published articles. However, there is scope to conduct primary research by surveying Indian consumers concerning their willingness to purchase ugly produce. A separate survey can be conducted for the organized Indian food retailers regarding the marketing strategies to sell ugly produce. Qualitative studies like focus groups and in-depth interviews can also be conducted for consumers and retailers.

Authors' Contribution

Dr. Avil Terrance Saldanha is the first author as well as the corresponding author. He contributed to writing all the sections of this research article, including the abstract and conclusion. Dr. Rekha Aranha contributed to writing some sections of this research article. She also did the proofreading and editing of this research article.

Conflict of Interest

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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