

Potential thesis topics

Please find several topics for MSc theses below. These are topics that fit the research interests of myself (Erica van Herpen) and/or of PhD students that I collaborate with. Feel free to contact me -or the PhD student that is indicated- if you are interested, to discuss further.

Flexipes: Can flexible recipes induce cooking creativity?

A recent anti-food waste campaign has used flexible recipes (“flexipes”) that consumers can use to use up food that is left (<https://www.hellmanns.com/us/en/food-waste.html>). The flexipes urge consumers to think in terms of 3+1 for their meals: the meal needs a base, vegetables/fruits, and protein, with as “+1” a magic touch through for instance a condiment (sauces, seasonings, herbs). The flexipes provide examples of these.

A main difference between flexipes and recipes is that the flexipes offer consumers with different options for ingredients. What is unclear, is what the effect of such flexipes is on consumer behaviour. Will consumers become more creative and flexible in their cooking, when they read these? In other words, will consumers use leftover ingredients that they have at home more easily when they have read a flexiple than when they have read a recipe (assuming that ingredient is not mentioned in either)? What is needed to stimulate this more creative cooking style; is offering an example of an alternative ingredient enough, or do consumers need more stimulation?

Writing your MSc thesis on this topic, you will examine the literature on the “consider an alternative” debiasing strategy as a potential theoretical basis to draw upon for the conceptual framework. You may develop an experiment in which participants are confronted with different recipes and the hypothetical content of their cupboard and fridge, to test your hypotheses.

Topic for an MSc thesis

Preferred start date: September 2022

Supervisor: Erica van Herpen

Consumer responses to supply disruptions

Recent events such as the pandemic and the war in the Ukraine have caused disruptions in the production and supply of food products. How do consumers respond to such disruptions in the supply of food products? When and why will they start to stockpile products? Writing your MSc thesis on this topic, you will explore the literature on consumer responses to out-of-stock situations and to the amount of product inventory in store, to develop a conceptual model on consumer responses to supply disruption. The focus will be on situations in which a product is still available, and information about an upcoming shortage is communicated. You

can examine effects on purchase likelihood (when will people rush to the store to buy it), purchase amount (when will people start to stockpile), and/or consumption (when will people start to ration their consumption of the product). The expected research method is an experiment.

Topic for an MSc thesis

Preferred start date: September 2022

Supervisor: Erica van Herpen

Turning recipes into shopping baskets

Recently some grocery stores have started to develop their online shopping platforms to allow consumers to buy food groceries according to recipes. For instance, in Albert Heijn (<https://www.ah.nl/allerhande>), consumers can first select a desirable dish and input the number of persons who will eat this dish, then they can directly add all the included ingredients to shopping baskets via a simple click. Meanwhile, consumers can also add, delete, or replace some ingredients. Since this is a relatively new retail practice, we do not know enough about how it influences consumers' purchase and consumption of food, as compared with traditional food purchase. Would consumers like this new retail practice? Would this function of turning recipes into shopping baskets set an anchor for the amount of food that consumers purchase? Would this lead to more purchases because consumers lose precise track of what exactly they buy? We're interested in how this new retail practice influences consumer behaviors related to food waste, preferably using experiments.

Topic for an MSc thesis

Preferred start date: September 2022

Supervisor: Erica van Herpen, Yi Zhang

Surprise boxes: How do they affect food shopping

Surprise boxes represent a relatively new way of purchasing food items. Consumers buy boxes of products that are close to expiration at a high discount, not knowing in advance which products they will obtain exactly. Buying such boxes may affect grocery shopping behaviours in various ways, and for this thesis we are interested in obtaining insight about substitute and complementary shopping activities.

On the one hand, purchase of a surprise box may compete with other ways of obtaining food (e.g., purchasing ingredients, buying take-away). To what extent does the purchase of a surprise box substitute for other purchases that the consumers would have made otherwise?

On the other hand, purchase of a surprise box may lead to complementary purchases that fit with the items in the surprise box. To what extent does the purchase of a surprise box entice consumers to make additional purchases in the store?

For companies that contemplate handing out surprise boxes, it is important to gain insight into the extent to which these surprise boxes compete with regular purchases in their store (their own customers buying surprise boxes instead of products at regular price) and the extent to which these surprise boxes increases sales (e.g. by attracting new customers who purchase products in addition to the surprise box).

This study will be done in collaboration with Too Good To Go, and there is an opportunity to run a survey among their customers.

Topic for an MSc thesis

Preferred start date: September 2022

Supervisor: Erica van Herpen

Using mental simulation to facilitate the purchase intentions of suboptimal food (MSc. thesis)

Suboptimal food is defined as food deviating from optimal food on the basis of cosmetic specifications (e.g., ugly food), date labeling (e.g., near-expired food), or packaging (e.g., dented packaging) while its intrinsic quality remains the same (van Giesen & de Hooge, 2019). Because suboptimal food is a big cause of food waste at the retail level, facilitating the purchase of this food is important for retailers as well as for sustainability development. In this research, we aim to investigate a new potential strategy to help sell suboptimal food—mental simulation, such as imagining the feelings and behaviors during preparing and consuming a smoothie (process simulation) or after having consumed a smoothie (outcome simulation). According to the literature, mental simulation of the process versus the outcome of food preparation and consumption have different consequences. Would these mental simulations reduce the differences in the perceptions of suboptimal food and normal food and subsequently motivate consumers to buy suboptimal food? If so, which type of mental simulation works better (process vs. outcome simulation)? We're interested in how process and outcome mental simulations of food preparation and consumption influence consumers' willingness to buy suboptimal food, preferably using experiments.

Topic for an MSc thesis

Preferred start date: September 2022

Supervisor: Erica van Herpen, Yi Zhang

The influence of social norms on the warm glow from purchasing suboptimal food (MSc. thesis)

Encouraging consumers to buy suboptimal food is important for reducing food waste. One strategy to do this is to communicate about the social norms related to buying suboptimal food, such as via a descriptive norm (e.g., “many consumers buy suboptimal food”) or an injunctive norm (e.g., “most consumers believe that people should buy suboptimal food”). According to the literature, people may experience a sense of joy and satisfaction after engaging in prosocial or pro-environmental behaviors, such as after buying suboptimal food. These good feelings generated after prosocial and pro-environmental behaviors are termed as warm glow. However, how do social norms influence consumers’ warm glow from purchasing suboptimal food? If a person is motivated to buy a product due to social norms, will warm glow diminish? What are the behavioral consequences (i.e., next purchase) of this influence? We’re interested in whether and how (descriptive and injunctive) social norms impact consumers’ warm glow from purchasing suboptimal food and possibly further behavioral consequences. Data collection preferably takes the form of experiments.

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