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## Grocery Retailers' Approaches to Discussion on the Food Waste Issue on Social Media

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### Food Waste as a Topical Concern

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 12.3 focuses on halving per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and on reducing food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses. Food waste can be defined as food that is left uneaten, due to various reasons, within the food system. The food system is often described as consisting of every actor from “farm-to-fork”. Food waste is an important issue in grocery retailers’ everyday business operations: They struggle with efficiency and financial losses related to food waste but at the same time aim to meet consumer needs with a broad assortment and adequate amounts of products always in stock. It has been estimated that retailers directly account for 13% of overall food waste (UNEP, 2021). The indirect effect is, however, bigger as retailers’ marketing standards, practices and activities may also increase food waste at other stages

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along the food chain. For instance, retailers' quality standards may prevent food producers from selling misshapen fruit and vegetables, and price promotions may encourage consumers to over-purchase (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2016). As retailers have a crucial position within the food system, they may also play an important role in solving the problem. This is especially relevant in the Nordic countries where the grocery retail sector is rather concentrated and thus holds a considerable amount of power within the food system.

For grocery retailers, several food-related sustainability issues are directly connected to their business, with food waste being one such example. As an issue, food waste reduction enables retailers to combine the different aspects of sustainability; i.e. environmental, social and economic. Thus, they have adopted versatile practices to reduce their food waste and are actively involved with different food waste campaigns and programmes as part of their corporate social responsibility strategies (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2016). Furthermore, many retailers are today increasingly getting interested in participating in debates on societally relevant topics such as sustainability-related issues. To understand their social environment, retailers—like any kinds of companies today—need to actively participate in public debates as the outcomes of these often affect them in differing ways. Today, many of these debates take place on social media. Participating in discussions provides companies with a way of keeping track of public discussions on the topics relevant to them, in addition to making it possible for them to air their own views on the issues in question (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). Furthermore, as powerful market actors, they have a stronger voice in the discussion, and the possibility of steering it in a desired direction. It is thus important to learn more about the extent of retailers' participation in debates on food waste reduction, and especially the ways in which they do this.

The purpose of this study is to examine how grocery retailers construct the food waste issue through discussion on social media. We use the theoretical concept of the issue arena and empirical social media data generated in Finland where food waste reduction has been gaining momentum in public discussions over the past decade. The study's findings shed light on how retailers not only participate, but also actively shape and steer the food waste discussion, additionally attempting to influence other actors

within the food system. Thus, retailers hold considerable power in shaping the future of food waste reduction. Furthermore, the issues missing from the discussion also provide important lessons on the areas still neglected by retailers. For instance, retailers seem to be avoiding discussing some of the contradictions between their profitability goals and reducing food waste. The chapter ends with implications for the future potential of retailers to address sustainability issues through social media. The chapter contributes towards building research understanding in the field of sustainable retailing and social media. The insights provided by the chapter can also be of interest to practitioners in the field of retail who either strive to reduce food waste or are involved in corporate communications related to sustainability.

## Retailers in Issue Arenas

### Issue Arenas as Sites for Public Discussion

In this chapter, we view issue arenas as sites for public discussion. Issue arenas can be defined as 'places of interaction where an issue is discussed by stakeholders and organizations both online and within the traditional media' (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010, p. 315). The same topic can be debated in multiple issue arenas at the same time, for example, on social media and in the traditional media, with the direction that the discussion takes in one issue arena possibly influencing the discussion in other arenas. Therefore, when an issue arena dealing with a certain topic expands and involves more actors, it may start to shape public perceptions of that issue. Issue arenas are dynamic and constantly changing with interactions: They also gather several actors whose share of the voice in the arena varies (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010).

The theoretical concept of the issue arena was first introduced into the corporate communications literature to highlight the importance of organisational participation in various issue arenas (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). In this chapter, we use the concept of the issue area as a theoretical tool for investigating the discussion on food waste, which seems to gather

different actors with different interests and agendas. More specifically, we examine the role of the retailers in this issue arena. As dominant market actors, they hold considerable power in the complex discussions concerning the topic.

## **Social Media as a Context for an Issue Arena**

Today, issue arenas are increasingly emerging on social media. The online environment differs from the offline setting in many ways. One characteristic of online interaction is its openness and the low-threshold participation opportunities for many actors, including companies, non-profit organisations and individual consumers. Secondly, issue arenas on social media are easily brought together by hashtags, posts and re-posts. Social media platforms also offer various opportunities for discussion, including images, videos and text. In this study, we focus on the issue arena on Twitter, which has its own conventions and rules of conduct, for example, in terms of length and style of posts.

In addition to allowing different kinds of market actors to participate in the discussion, social media can also make understandings and perceptions of food waste that are otherwise implicit visible and open to change (Sutinen & Närvänen, 2022). However, research on food waste is only beginning to conceptualise and theorise the role of social media in how actors perceive, create and disseminate the socio-cultural meanings related to food waste (Närvänen et al., 2018).

## **Studying Food Waste Discussion on Social Media**

The starting point of this research is that the ways in which issues are discussed have the potential to shape the understandings, practices and even institutions linked to the issue. From this perspective, issues like food waste are continually being constructed through different actors'

words and sayings. Hence, how issues are discussed in public is not irrelevant. The study's methodological approach is qualitative. Thus, the focus is on understanding the phenomenon rather than identifying its causes or consequences. The study utilises a netnographic approach combined with data gathering through social media monitoring tools, referred to as netnographic sensibility (Reid & Duffy, 2018).

While retailers actively take part in different types of issue arenas, the focus of this study is social media, which has become one of the most influential sites for discussions and communications for today's companies. Social media represents a context where actors can participate in the discussion and thus it provides a more fruitful site for this type of study, compared to traditional communications channels. The data is drawn from public online discussion on Twitter during Food Waste Week 2018. This one-week period was chosen as appropriate for data generation as there was a noticeable peak in the number of posts during it—thus providing evidence of an issue arena with rich qualitative data for analysis. The whole dataset was collected for a major project, and has also been used by the authors in a previous study (Sutinen & Närvänen, 2022). The study data of this chapter consists of the public posts by means of which grocery retailers, grocery retailer representatives (e.g. employees and store owners) and retail unions took part in the discussion (n ~400 posts). As was noted throughout the dataset, these posts, initially posted by retail actors, were widely re-tweeted by other actors, thus showing that retailers were playing a powerful role in the arena. This study focuses on the content of the posts shared by the retailer actors. After separating the posts initiated by grocery retail actors, we conducted our analysis inductively, with a focus on the ways in which the grocery retailers were taking part in the discussion. Different ways of discussing food waste were given codes and these were then categorised into the three main approaches employed by the retailers. Finally, issue arena theory was utilised to interpret the findings as regards the power position of the retailers vis-à-vis the other actors, as well as the implications of this for their role in food waste reduction. Here, the focus was also on critically reflecting upon the topics that were not covered by the retailers.

## Grocery Retailers' Approaches to Food Waste: Reporting, Assisting and Initiating Discussion

### Reporting on Reducing Food Waste

The first approach identified was grocery retailers reporting on reducing retail food waste. During the discussion, grocery retailers highlighted the activities, practices and product offerings through which they reduce food waste. Some of their efforts were also highlighted using numbers and percentages. This discussion focused mainly on actions in the past or currently ongoing, for example, campaigns and initiatives as part of Food Waste Week. Quite often, participation in the food waste campaign and the fight against food waste was highlighted, as in the quotation below.

We are part of the “hävikkitalkoot [‘hävikki’ is the Finnish word for food waste while ‘talkoot’ is the word for unpaid, voluntary work to help others and/or for the common good]”: We’ve reduced our food waste by 17% over the past three years. This amounts to 5 million kilograms of food. #foodwaste #responsibility [link to a website].

The Finnish grocery retail market is highly concentrated, with two major companies each having a large market share and a third competitor having a smaller market share. Thus, all three companies were involved in the issue arena, which presented them with an opportunity to publicly announce their actions relating to food waste. Furthermore, the very small retailers that are focused on sustainable or surplus food offerings also took part in the issue arena.

Food waste week is near the end, but [retailer name] is tackling food waste every single day of the year. We keep the volume of food waste under 1.5% by planning and predicting, training and discounting early enough. Read more here: [link to a website].

The above quote highlights the fact that the grocery retailers want to portray themselves as highly committed to the issue of food waste, finding solutions for it in their everyday operations. The examples mentioned

in the posts draw a fairly positive picture of the solutions to the problem of food waste. There are no critical considerations regarding the potential struggles along the way. Furthermore, while the volumes of reduced food waste are highlighted, there are no clear statements about the previous levels of food waste or the previous activities contributing towards these higher levels of food waste in the past.

This approach is heavily involved with retail food waste and reducing it. One could, however, argue that a focus on only one phase of the food chain often overlooks the overlaps and the importance of the interfaces between the different actors. Reducing food waste in one part of the food chain may (often unintentionally) produce food waste in other parts of the food system. For example, the currently rather common retail practice of discounting products near their expiry dates can encourage the over-purchasing of food, which may contribute to households wasting food. Sometimes, retail standards regarding the appearance of fruit and vegetables may prevent waste at stores (as consumers do not want to buy imperfect produce) but cause an increase in the food wasted at farms.

## Assisting Households in Reducing Food Waste

The second identified approach used by retailers was that of assisting and advising households in reducing food waste. When adopting this approach, grocery retailers took on the role of information disseminator, a behaviour change perspective that is often used in food waste initiatives. For instance, retail actors highlighted the amount of household food waste and equated it with, for instance, monetary costs, as in the following quote:

Did you know that a Finnish family of four throws away food worth approximately 500 euros? Smaller #foodwaste = bigger saving and less emissions #foodwasteweek #responsibility.

In addition to sharing information about food waste with consumers, they also gave advice on how consumers can reduce their household food waste via their own actions. Quite often, retailers shared tips as regards avoiding over-purchasing, or cooking with leftovers, as the following quote illustrates:

This week is Food Waste Week. Did you know that surplus beverages can be used in versatile ways, for example, in cooking? Check out here for 10 tips. #[retailer name serves] #foodandbeverages [link to a website].

While the major part of the advice given was connected with consumer actions beyond the retailer (e.g. cooking at home), there were a few posts where the focus was on the actual interface between the retailer and the consumer. These include, for instance, statements about avoiding shopping when hungry and providing information about why some shelves are sometimes empty for reasons to do with reducing food waste. These important interfaces between the actions of retailers and those of consumers, as well as their impact on each other, were quite narrowly addressed in the issue arena, however.

While the approach described previously focused heavily on retail food waste, this approach concentrated on household food waste, and how to reduce it. This can also be interpreted in terms of retailers attempting to responsabilise consumers for the problem of food waste, and to shift attention to them as a focal actor group (Mesiranta et al., 2022).

## Initiating Discussion for Reducing Food Waste

The third approach of the retailers was initiating discussion for reducing food waste. Due to the power of the retailers as significant market actors, with many followers on social media, this approach accelerated the issue arena. On social media, this type of open invitation to participate is possible as everyone can participate. Retail actors, for instance, shared several posts encouraging other market actors to participate in the discussion by asking them to share their own tips on reducing food waste, as in the following extract:

This week is Food Waste Week. How do you control your food waste?

Furthermore, there was also an example of a retailer facilitating its own food waste chat on Twitter involving several market actors. There were pre-designed discussion areas offered by the chat-facilitating retailer, but other participants were also able to raise further questions:



Question: Food waste is a global environmental concern and [retailer name] aims to reduce food waste actively. According to the EU circular economy package, food waste should be reduced by 50% by 2030. What are the best ways of reducing waste? #wastechat.

Initiating discussion may also include some concerns due to the uneven power dynamics between the different actors. While the arena in itself is an open forum, for everyone to participate in, it is typically the one with the biggest number of followers with the loudest voice in that arena. Having a loud voice may contribute towards steering the arena in a desired direction. The approach of initiating discussion and inviting others to participate, however, can enable a more balanced distribution of power among the different participants in the issue arena.

Within this approach, there was no explicit emphasis on any specific form of food waste. Of course, when asking consumers to share their food waste reduction tips, the prevailing assumption is that the focus here is on household food waste. Furthermore, while there was no especial focus on a certain types of food waste, there were some types of food waste that were not discussed by the retailers. For instance, the retailers did not initiate any discussion on food waste occurring during food production or due to logistics.

## Summary of the Findings

As discussed above, the retailers adopted different approaches in the food waste issue arena during Food Waste Week. The major themes connected with the three approaches identified are summarised in Table 10.1.

**Table 10.1** Retailers' approaches

Reporting on reducing food waste	Assisting households in reducing food waste	Initiating discussion for reducing food waste
Showcasing own activities, practices and product offerings through which they manage to reduce food waste. <i>Focus on reducing retail food waste.</i>	Sharing information about food waste, giving advice and tips for customers on how to reduce food waste. <i>Focus on reducing household food waste.</i>	Encouraging different actors to share their tips on reducing food waste, facilitating multi-actor discussions on food waste. <i>No specific focus on certain type of food waste.</i>

## Retailers as Shapers of the Future of Food Waste

As the deadline of 2030 set by the United Nations, to halve the amount of food waste, is quickly approaching, it is very likely that the food waste issue arenas will grow even wider and larger. For focal food system actors, for example, grocery retailers, participation in the issue arena is not optional, but something that is expected by the other actors, especially the consumers. As the findings illustrate, grocery retailers have already adopted versatile ways of taking part in the discussion. In their ways of participating, retailers report on their own actions, aim at assisting their customers and act as the initiators of discussions. All these can be regarded as important ways of steering the issue arena towards these approaches' main agendas. As seen in social media monitoring tool statistics, retailers' posts are seen and shared often, thus playing a major role in shaping and steering the discussion. Having significant discursive power within society (Fuchs & Kalfagianni, 2009), grocery retailers' ways of constructing the food waste issue, in their public posts, can be regarded as having an influence on what kinds of meanings and discourses become connected with the issue.

In issue arenas, there are always power balances at play between the participants. Similarly, it can be assumed that grocery retailers have their own motivations and reasons for participating in an issue arena when compared with, for instance, researchers or individual consumers. The identified approaches to the discussion highlight retailers' proactive attitude towards solving the problem. By emphasising the actions taken towards reducing food waste, retailers are also contributing towards making these types of actions the norm, thus putting pressure on other retailers (e.g. Fuchs & Kalfagianni, 2009).

In addition to the ways in which the grocery retailers took part in the discussion, issues not brought up by them also provide some interesting insights. Although being active in the matter and reporting their own efforts, the issues raised by the retailers lack criticism of their own actions. Merely reflecting upon what has been done well in order to reduce retail food waste, without reflecting upon mistakes or malpractices, portrays

retail food waste as something that has already been solved. Furthermore, the role of food producers is heavily being downplayed in the discussion. The applied approaches do not take into account the systemic nature of food waste, or the importance of the different crossing points of the different actors, all of which are intertwined with each other. For instance, some solutions, for example, discounting products, are portrayed as having a direct effect on reducing food waste, even though this action may involve pushing the problem further in the direction of households to deal with (and possibly discard) such products when they are no longer edible.

As illustrated in the findings, retailers have also made efforts to highlight the role of consumers in food waste reduction. However, urging consumers to reduce their food waste is framed as being separate from the food system as a whole. For example, retailers suggested that consumers should use their surplus food products in a creative way, instead of reflecting upon the possibility of the food industry providing more versatile packaging sizes. Assisting consumers in reducing their household food waste is mainly done using the outsider perspective of telling consumers what they should do, rather than reflecting upon, and showcasing, opportunities regarding how some shifts in practice at the retailer-consumer interface could help with this. For example, there were only a few instances of retailers discussing how consumers could avoid over-purchasing or impulse purchasing while in-store, or how customer tolerance of occasionally empty shelves (as a consequence of the improved alignment of supply and demand) could be increased as a joint effort between retailer and consumer.

When it comes to retailers shaping the consumption around food waste towards sustainability, the identified retailer approaches reflect a stance that supports either retaining the status quo or merely applying small fixes (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). There would be some potential for retailers to construct the food waste issue using a more transformative approach, by acknowledging and highlighting the pitfalls of the current food system. These include the need to sell more in order to remain profitable, while at the same time reducing food waste. For instance, retailers could initiate more discussions on customer requirements in order to have wide assortments, or fresh produce and bread every day, and

throughout the day. Instead of accepting that this is what the customers want, retailers could help them to question this “need” from the point of view of the food waste issue. Furthermore, using the issue arena, retailers could also ask customers about their ideas regarding how to boost household food waste reduction using customer data or mobile applications, for instance.

While issue arenas provide retailers with many fruitful opportunities to take part in the fight against food waste, and also to contribute towards creating a more sustainable future (Vadakkapatt et al., 2021), there are, however, certain tensions with regard to this domain. It is often said that with great power comes great responsibility. There is a potential risk of the arenas to be used to only portray different actors and their actions in a good light, and to divert attention. In order to actually engage in making changes to sustainable consumption, retailers should avoid the pitfall of not seeing the big picture while boasting about their own achievements and deflecting the need for change towards other actors. The approaches identified in this study do not indicate that retailers are fully immersed in the necessary change towards significantly lower levels of food waste. In the future, it is hoped that retailers are brave enough to also bring controversial discussion points into the issue arenas. At the same time, it is important that the topics of discussion are not just a matter of talking the talk, but also of actually walking the walk. There are examples of some retailers refusing to sell energy drinks to the under-aged, removing gambling machines from stores, and removing unsustainable eggs from the assortment. It remains to be seen whether some retailers are willing to take bold actions against food waste, for example, reducing their assortment or sharing their customer data with the food industry, in order to better align the supply and demand of food.

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