Exploring the Concept of Mindfulness of Consumption

Sabrina Helm, University of Arizona, USA
Introduction: Motivation

- Hyper-consumption has been identified as one of the dominant drivers of environmental degradation and climate change.

- Hyper-consumption accelerates when individuals acquire and use a product/service for the sake of consuming and further intensifies when consumers (and producers) pay little attention to the natural environment from which the resources for goods and service production are drawn.

- Habituated consumption patterns or behavioral routines are a main driver of resource-inefficient consumption.
An Example: Food Waste

Household food waste refers to losses of foods in households that were "potentially recoverable for human consumption" (Hodges et al., 2011, p. 38)

Global food shortages pose a grave threat to humanity which is further challenged by population increase, drought and a changing climate. (UN, 2011; Escaler & Teng, 2011)

Estimates on food wasted in the United States:
- 40% of the total available food supply (Hall, Guo, Dore & Chow, 2009)
- $90-100 billion per year (Jones, 2006 cited in Parfitt & Barthel, 2010)
- 34 million tons (EPA, 2012)
- 25% of the total fresh water consumed in the United States is being used to grow crops that ultimately get discarded. (Hall et al., 2009)
- 300 million barrels of oil were required to grow the food that was thrown away in the US in 2003. (Hall et al., 2009)
- 1 billion dollars spent per year disposing of discarded food in landfills. (EPA, 2012)
Food wastage in the UK
An overview of the food that gets wasted in the United Kingdom

7.2 Billion tonnes of food are thrown away from homes every year
This has a value of 12 billion pounds

50% of the total amount of food that is thrown away comes from the homes.

0.30 of every 10 consumers spend on food away from home ends up in trash

Wasting food costs around £50 a month

Most wasted food

Fresh vegetables
Fresh fruit
Salad
Drinks
Bakery items

http://foodfighters2013.wordpress.com/2013/02/03/fight-for-food-famine-and-food-waste/
Consumers and Their Food Waste

- Consumers are waste averse and dislike the experience of throwing away food. (Bolton & Alba, 2012; Stefan, 2013).
- Demographic and cultural factors are related to food waste.
- Behavioral patterns drive increases or decreases in food waste volume for households: planning activities, inventory management and appropriate storage procedures. (Quested et al., 2013)
Pre-shopping planning is negatively correlated with food waste as people who make (and stick to) shopping lists and evaluate current inventory before shopping tend to buy fewer unnecessary items. (Corrado, 2007; Stefan, 2011)

Overbuying is a major contributor to overall food waste generation and is driven by:
- shopping infrequently (less than once a week)
- stocking up on bargains or discounted items
- plentiful kitchen storage space including backup freezers
- impulse shopping and
- purchasing in bulk, particularly of perishable goods
(Corrado, 2007; Stefan, 2011; Morisaki, 2011).

Poor food storage techniques contribute to greater waste such as ad hoc refrigerator cleaning systems, the absence of food rotation techniques or storing goods in inappropriate containers. (Glanz, 2007)
More mindfulness of consumers engaged in consumption behaviors may help to break with established routines and lead to an adaptation or change in routines in direction of more sustainable consumption patterns.

The goal of the current research is to better understand how mindfulness may be conceptualized in the context of overconsumption and environmental sustainability (Mindful Consumption), and how increased consumer mindfulness can contribute to behavioral changes in consumption practices.
Mindfulness is a mode of consciousness capability enhanced by actively attending to and being aware of present moment reality. It signifies “keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality.” (Hanh, 1976, p.11)

It is an innate, naturally occurring capacity that is prevalent among individuals at different degrees. (Brown and Ryan, 2004)

Mindfulness has been studied and practiced mainly through two different approaches.
Mindfulness is explained from the perspective of mindlessness (avoiding novelty or by being unaware of changes that occur).

Mindfulness is characterized by flexible and open "mindset" and is defined as "a state of openness to novelty in which the individual actively constructs categories and distinctions." (Langer, 1992; p. 289)
Mindfulness is defined as the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.

Affective/Cognitive Attitudes Inherent in the Eastern-Buddhist Approach
Kabat-Zinn, 2003
Outcomes of Mindfulness

Both socio-cognitive and meditation-based mindfulness have been found to lead to beneficial outcomes in
- learning (Langer, 1997)
- mental and physical health (Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Grossman et al., 2004)
- well-being (Langer, 2002; Brown and Ryan, 2003)
- behavioral regulation (Shapiro and Schwartz, 2000; Bishop et al., 2004)

It is further argued that mindfulness may tend to induce creativity, insight making, cognitive flexibility, self-acceptance, personal responsibility and authenticity in individuals. (Carson and Langer, 2006; Langer, 2006)
Mindful consumption encompasses consumer behaviors where an individual with a compassionate concern towards self, community and environment, carefully attends to and be aware of his/her consumption needs, while adopting flexible options and novel approaches in the purchase, usage and disposal of goods in order to reduce his/her overall consumption.
Concept Components of Mindful Consumption
(Sheth et al. 2011)

MINDFUL CONSUMPTION

CARING MINDSET

SELF

SOCIETY

NATURE

REDUCE/RECONSIDER

REUSE/REPAIR

RECYCLE/RE-IMAGINE

CARING CONSUMPTION

SELF

SOCIETY

NATURE
Mindful Consumption and Hyperconsumption

- Mindful consumption relates to consumption avoidance and selective acquisition and usage of goods and services that avoids routine/habituation (overcoming auto-pilot behavior).
- While considering the extant sustainable options, a mindful consumer should also be able to generate his/her own sustainable alternatives relating to consumption and to adopt an impartial view of consumerist lifestyle.
- This may further drive them to avoid the consumer treadmill by finding novelty and value in things that they already own (consumption avoidance).
- More mindful consumers may have a tendency to take personal responsibility for consumption-related decisions which might ultimately lead them towards sustainable consumption.
A Stepwise Model of Behavioral Change
Dahlstrand and Biel, 1997

- Activating values with regard to environment and or community
- Attending present behavior
- Considering alternative solutions
- Planning new behavior
- Testing new behavior
- Evaluating new behavior

Facilitators of Behavior Change
Mindfulness and Food Waste: Theoretical Implications

- Identify decision-making biases and routines that lead to food waste (planning activities, inventory management and appropriate storage procedures) as well as barriers, facilitators and points of intervention.
- Understand how mindfulness-interventions serve to break with routine.
- Do messaging, nudges, pledges, competitions increase food waste awareness and motivate consumers to change wasteful routines?
- Analyze the interplay of actors in production, retailing, consumption, waste.
Mindfulness and Food Waste: Managerial Implications

- Manufacturers’ aggressive marketing tactics result in encouraging mindless consumption.
- Retailers’ underpricing, bundle pricing, and other price-volume strategies increase food waste.
- Retailers need to find new ways to deliver value to consumers. How can retailers aid consumers in reducing food waste? (e.g., food purchase transparency; shopping lists; adaptive couponing)
- How can technological developments aid consumers in reducing food waste? (e.g., online menu planning; IoT – “smart” fridge)
- How can decreased food consumption (increased household food efficiency) and economic development be aligned? (e.g., price increases to account for external effects vs. decreased purchase per household)
Mindfulness and Food Waste: Policy Implications

- How can decreased food consumption (increased household food efficiency) and economic development be aligned? (e.g., price increases to account for external effects vs. decreased purchase per household)
- What infrastructure developments lead to reduced or increased food waste on the household level? (e.g., composting; taxes/subsidies; legal frameworks such as expiration date labeling)
- Paradigm shift from optimization of agricultural production efficiency (with diminishing marginal utility) to optimization of household consumption efficiency.
- Is the concept of mindfulness of consumers aligned with current perspective on responsible consumers?
“Everything is created twice, first in the mind and then in reality.”

Robin S. Sharma

Dr. Sabrina Helm

Associate Professor of Retailing and Consumer Sciences

The University of Arizona

e-mail: helm@email.arizona.edu