

Fighting shame as a threat to the environment: Nudging food waste decisions at restaurants

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Abstract

Generally, feelings of shame arising when individuals misbehave encourages them to behave well. However, individuals may feel ashamed also when they do well in contexts where misbehavior is the social norm. They may then choose to conform to the norm, adopting the common bad behavior. The result is a smaller number of people behaving well and a worse aggregate outcome. In these cases, changing the perception of what is stigmatized by peers may stimulate the proper behavior and improve the overall outcome. We focus on a specific example where shame discourages a pro-environmental behavior, preventing restaurants clients to take their leftovers home. In a field experiment, we find that changes in the perceived social norm reduces significantly individuals' feeling of shame and the amount of plate waste.

Keywords: food waste; doggy bag; social norm; default option; field experiment; shame.