

Consumer Food Waste in All-Inclusive Hotels: A Conceptual Framework and Exploratory Pilot Study*

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Abstract

Food waste in the hospitality sector represents a growing sustainability challenge, particularly in all-inclusive hotel settings where unlimited access to food and buffet-based service systems may encourage overconsumption. While previous studies have examined either operational or behavioural determinants of food waste, limited attention has been given to their integration. This paper proposes a conceptual framework that explains consumer food waste behaviour by combining structural factors, such as participation in all-inclusive tourism and buffet exposure, with key psychological drivers, including value-for-money orientation, variety-seeking behaviour, awareness, and perceived social norms. The model also incorporates behavioural interventions, specifically portion control strategies, as mechanisms for reducing waste without compromising customer satisfaction. To complement the conceptual framework, a pilot study based on a survey of 63 respondents was conducted to explore selected psychological components of the model. The results provide exploratory insights, indicating moderate levels of self-reported food waste behaviour and weak, non-significant relationships between psychological variables and behavioural outcomes. The findings highlight the complexity of food waste behaviour and support the need for a comprehensive empirical validation of the proposed model using larger samples and experimental designs.

Keywords: Food waste; all-inclusive tourism; consumer behaviour; buffet systems; behavioural interventions.

Introduction

Food waste has become a significant challenge for the hospitality sector, particularly in contexts where service design encourages high levels of consumption. All-inclusive hotels represent a specific environment characterized by unrestricted food access, extensive buffet systems, and the absence of marginal consumption costs. These conditions may unintentionally promote excessive portioning and food waste.

While previous studies have examined food waste either from an operational or behavioural perspective, fewer approaches integrate both dimensions within a single framework. In all-inclusive settings, food waste results from the interaction between structural factors (e.g., buffet exposure) and individual behavioural drivers, such as value-for-money orientation, variety-seeking, and social influences.

This study addresses this gap by proposing a conceptual model that links contextual and psychological determinants of consumer food waste behaviour. Additionally, it incorporates behavioural interventions, such as portion control, as mechanisms to reduce waste without compromising customer satisfaction. The paper also outlines a research design combining a survey and a scenario-based experiment to enable empirical validation of the proposed model.

Literature Background

Global Scale and Impact of Food Waste

Food waste (FW) is defined as *the food and the associated inedible parts removed from the human food supply chain* (UNEP, 2024). This phenomenon represents a significant social, economic, and environmental challenge that has gained global recognition in the last decade. According to the UNEP (2024) Food Waste Index Report, global FW is estimated at 1.05 billion tonnes per year, with approximately 28% originating from food services, including hotels, restaurants, and canteens. The environmental repercussions are severe, as FW is responsible for 8–10% of global greenhouse gas emissions and leads to the depletion of land, water, and biodiversity resources. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2019) emphasizes that reducing FW is critical for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Target 12.3, which aims to halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels by 2030.

The All-Inclusive Model in the Hospitality Sector

The hospitality industry is a major contributor to this problem, generating disproportionately large amounts of waste compared to other sectors (Filimonau & De Coteau, 2019). Within this sector, the all-inclusive resort model presents a unique challenge to sustainability (Okumus et al., 2020; Temizel et al., 2024). The "serve endless, eat endless" foodservice concept inherent to luxury all-inclusive resorts is conceptualized as a primary barrier to sustainable resource management (Gannon et al., 2022). In some regions, the standard has evolved into "luxury ultra all-inclusive" offers, providing 24-hour food availability which encourages a "carefree" holiday mindset (Klein, 2024). Temizel et al. (2024) identify the open buffet system as the primary driver of food waste (FW) in all-inclusive hotels because it allows guests to take unlimited portions that they frequently fail to consume. Furthermore, the low room rates of some all-inclusive packages may force managers to purchase lower-quality raw materials, resulting in products that fall below guest expectations and are subsequently wasted (Abu Elnasr et al., 2021).

Consumer Behavior and Psychological Drivers

Research indicates that a substantial amount of waste in food services stems from consumer behavior and "plate waste" (Appel et al., 2025; Juvan et al., 2018; Temizel et al., 2024). At hotel breakfast buffets, tourists often "bite off more than they can chew" (Juvan et al., 2018). Juvan et al. (2018) found that higher levels of plate waste are significantly associated with the presence of children in the guest mix and specific nationalities.

A critical theoretical contribution to this field is the concept of "pay riders," introduced by Appel et al. (2025), which describes the guest's belief that they must maximize the benefit of their payment by loading more food than necessary. This behavior aligns with the "loss aversion" theory of Tversky and Kahneman (1991), suggesting that people prefer avoiding the loss of money (for an already paid meal) more than achieving an equivalent gain, thus leading to over-selection (Appel et al., 2025). Furthermore, Üngüren et al. (2023) demonstrate that dispositional greed and impulsivity are significant positive predictors of plate waste, as the impressive atmosphere of a buffet triggers irrational responses in guests.

Theoretical Frameworks for FW Analysis

To understand the complexity of food waste (FW), researchers utilize the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Theory of Social Practice (TSP) (Appel et al., 2025; Tahir, 2023). The TPB posits that intentions, attitudes, and perceived behavioral control drive waste behavior (Appel et al., 2025; Tahir, 2023). However, in high-stimulation dining environments like buffets, the consistency between intention and behavior is often weakened by the sensory abundance of the setting (Asif et al., 2024). Stancu et al. (2016) argue that while intentions are important, it is the routines, such as those related to food selection and the reuse of leftovers, that have the most direct impact on actual waste levels. Papargyropoulou et al. (2016) propose a conceptual framework that links biophysical flows of food provisioning with the socio-cultural practices of consumption, highlighting that FW is a result of interaction between hotel operations and guest expectations.

Mitigation Strategies and the Business Case

Interventions based on choice architecture and nudging have proven highly effective in reducing food waste (FW) in hotels (Dolnicar, 2020; Kallbekken & Sælen, 2013). Kallbekken and Sælen (2013) demonstrated in a field experiment that reducing plate size by just 3 cm reduced plate waste by approximately 20%. Similarly, providing social cues, such as signs encouraging guests to visit the buffet multiple times rather than taking a large portion at once, achieved a 21% reduction in waste (Kallbekken & Sælen, 2013). Dolnicar (2020) suggests designing services that increase holiday pleasure, such as using games for children, to entice tourists to behave more environmentally friendly without sacrificing overall satisfaction.

From an economic perspective, reducing FW is a "no-regrets" measure (Kallbekken & Sælen, 2013), with a strong financial "business case" (WRAP, 2018). An analysis of 42 hotels across 15 countries found an average benefit-cost ratio of 7:1 over three years, with over 70% of sites recouping their investment in the first year (Appel et al., 2025). Key operational strategies for success include regular waste measurement (using "smart" scales) and staff engagement (WRAP 2018), as well as "waste mapping" to identify hotspots in the kitchen and service areas (Pirani & Arafat, 2014). National initiatives, such as the UAE's ne'ma program, have successfully scaled these behavioral solutions to achieve an 8% national reduction in plated food waste across 220 hospitality sites (Cappellini et al., 2024).

Conceptual Framework and Research Model

This study proposes a conceptual framework aimed at explaining consumer food waste behaviour in all-inclusive hospitality settings by integrating structural characteristics of service systems with individual-level behavioural determinants. The model responds to a gap in existing research, which has often examined operational and behavioural drivers of food waste separately, with limited attention to their interaction.

Integrating Structural and Behavioural Perspectives

Food waste in all-inclusive hotels emerges in a context characterized by unrestricted access to food, high product variety, and the absence of marginal consumption costs. These conditions create an environment that can encourage overconsumption and inefficient portioning. However, the extent to which food is wasted ultimately depends on individual decisions made within this context.

Accordingly, the proposed framework assumes that food waste behaviour results from the interaction between structural exposure and behavioural predispositions. Structural factors define the consumption environment and shape available choices, while psychological factors influence how individuals respond to these conditions.

Two key structural components are considered:

- participation in all-inclusive tourism, reflecting exposure to a specific service model,
- buffet exposure, understood as the intensity and frequency of interaction with self-service food systems.

Buffet exposure is conceptualized not merely as a contextual variable but as a behavioural mechanism through which the all-inclusive system influences consumption patterns. Frequent exposure to buffet settings increases the likelihood of multiple portioning decisions, experimentation with food, and potential over-serving.

Psychological Determinants of Food Waste Behaviour

Within this structural context, individual behaviour is shaped by a set of psychological drivers that influence food selection, portioning, and consumption decisions.

The model includes four key behavioural constructs:

- Value-for-money orientation, defined as the tendency to maximise perceived benefits from prepaid services. In all-inclusive settings, this may lead individuals to take larger portions to "justify" their expenditure.
- Variety-seeking behaviour, reflecting the desire to try multiple food options. Buffet systems, by offering extensive choice, may reinforce exploratory consumption patterns, potentially increasing the risk of over-serving.

- Awareness of food waste issues, which captures individuals' cognitive understanding of the environmental and social consequences of food waste. Higher awareness is expected to encourage more responsible consumption.
- Perceived social norms, referring to the influence of observed behaviour and perceived expectations of others. In buffet contexts, individuals may adjust their behaviour in response to the actions of other guests.

These constructs represent complementary dimensions of consumer decision-making, capturing economic reasoning, hedonic motivation, cognitive awareness, and social influence.

Behavioural Interventions and Service Design

In addition to structural and psychological determinants, the framework incorporates behavioural interventions as mechanisms that can influence consumption outcomes without restricting customer freedom.

In particular, the model considers portion control strategies, such as smaller plates or behavioural prompts encouraging multiple visits to the buffet. These interventions are grounded in the principles of choice architecture and are designed to subtly guide behaviour toward more sustainable outcomes.

Within the framework, behavioural interventions are treated as external factors that can directly influence food waste behaviour, as well as indirectly affect customer satisfaction. Importantly, the model assumes that well-designed interventions can reduce waste without negatively impacting the perceived quality of the service experience, which is critical in hospitality settings.

Research Model and Hypotheses

The relationships between the identified constructs are formalized in the research model presented in Figure 1.

The model assumes that both structural exposure and psychological determinants contribute to food waste behaviour, while behavioural interventions act as influencing mechanisms at the level of observed behaviour and service evaluation.

Based on this conceptualization, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- **H1:** Participation in all-inclusive tourism is positively associated with food waste behaviour.
- **H2:** Buffet exposure is positively associated with food waste behaviour.
- **H3:** Value-for-money orientation is positively associated with food waste behaviour.
- **H4:** Variety-seeking behaviour is positively associated with food waste behaviour.
- **H5:** Awareness of food waste issues is negatively associated with food waste behaviour.
- **H6:** Perceived social norms are positively associated with food waste behaviour.
- **H7:** Portion control interventions reduce food waste behaviour.
- **H8:** Portion control interventions do not negatively affect customer satisfaction.

Food waste behaviour is operationalized as self-reported plate waste tendencies, including the frequency of taking excessive portions and leaving uneaten food. Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual model and hypothesized relationships.

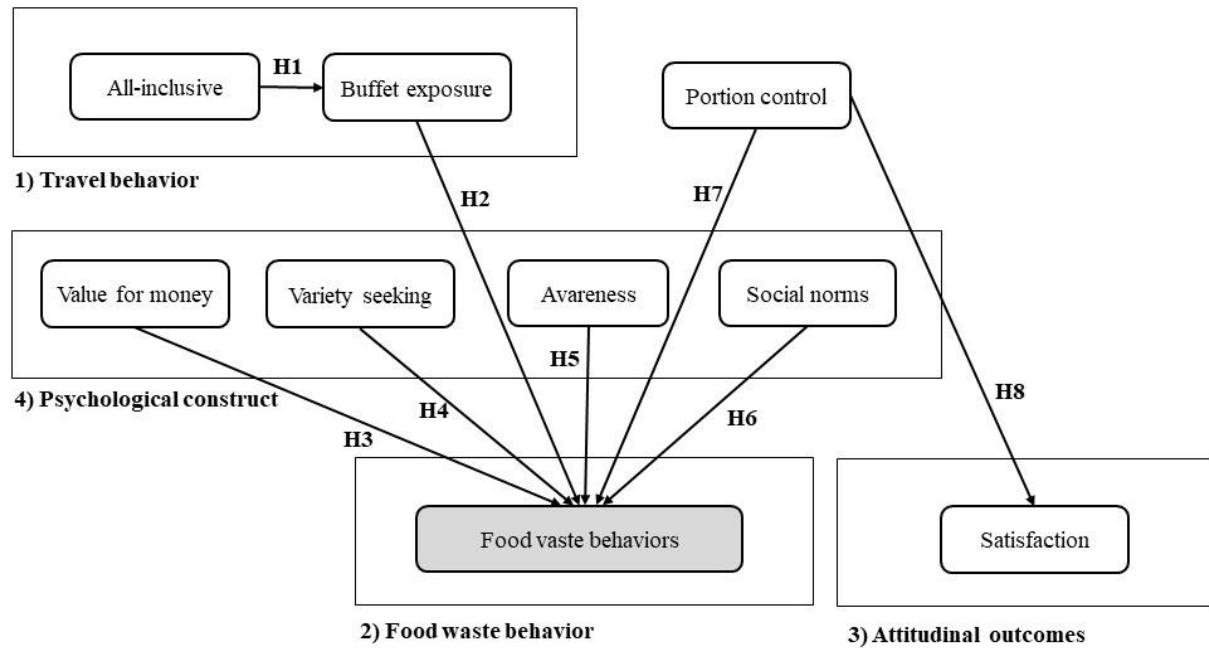


Figure 1. Structural model with hypothesized relationships and survey construct groupings

Planned Empirical Validation

Given the multidimensional nature of the proposed framework, its empirical validation requires a comprehensive research design. To this end, the study adopts a quantitative approach combining a cross-sectional survey with a scenario-based experimental component.

The survey is designed to capture structural exposure, behavioural tendencies, and psychological constructs using multi-item measurement scales. The experimental component allows for the assessment of causal effects of portion control interventions on intended behaviour and satisfaction.

Due to the complexity of the model, its empirical verification is planned in stages. The present study includes a pilot analysis focusing on selected psychological constructs, which serves as a preliminary step toward full model testing and refinement of the research design.

Pilot Study: Design and Exploratory Insights

To complement the proposed conceptual framework, a pilot study was conducted as a preliminary empirical step aimed at exploring selected behavioural components of food waste in all-inclusive hospitality contexts. The pilot does not constitute a full test of the research model but provides initial insights that support further model development and methodological refinement. The experimental component is not included in the pilot analysis

Pilot Study Design

The pilot study adopts a quantitative survey-based approach, focusing on selected psychological determinants of food waste behaviour.

The questionnaire was designed to capture several dimensions relevant to consumer behaviour in hospitality settings, including:

- general travel behaviour and experience with all-inclusive tourism,
- self-reported food waste behaviour,

- attitudes and responsibility perceptions related to food waste,
- and key psychological constructs, such as value-for-money orientation, variety-seeking behaviour, awareness of food waste, and perceived social norms.

All constructs were measured using multi-item Likert-type scales, adapted from prior research where possible. Food waste behaviour was operationalized through items capturing over-serving tendencies and the frequency of leaving uneaten food.

Data were collected between April and May 2026 using an online questionnaire distributed via convenience sampling. The survey was shared through digital channels, including social networks and academic networks.

A total of 63 valid responses were obtained and included in the analysis. Given the pilot nature of the study, the sample is not representative and does not allow for generalization. However, it provides a useful basis for identifying preliminary behavioural patterns and assessing the feasibility of the measurement approach.

Measures and Analytical Approach

The empirical analysis focuses on selected psychological variables included in the pilot study, rather than on the full set of constructs specified in the conceptual model.

Food waste behaviour was operationalized as a composite index based on three items measuring over-serving and plate waste tendencies. The internal structure of this measure reflects the behavioural dimension of waste generation at the consumer level.

The data were analysed using:

- descriptive statistics, to assess the overall distribution of responses,
- and Pearson correlation analysis, to explore relationships between food waste behaviour and selected psychological determinants.

Statistical significance was assessed at the conventional level of $\alpha = 0.05$. Given the exploratory purpose and limited sample size, the analysis is intended to identify directional patterns rather than to provide confirmatory evidence.

Importantly, the pilot analysis does not include structural variables (e.g., buffet exposure in an operationalized form) or experimental manipulations, which are part of the full research design presented in Section 3.

Results of the Pilot Study

The pilot study was conducted on a sample of 63 respondents. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients for the analysed variables.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Food waste behaviour	3.27	0.86	1					
2. Value for money	3.24	1.28	0.13	1				
3. Variety seeking	3.76	1.09	-0.12	0.21	1			
4. Awareness	3.02	1.20	0.08	-0.18	-0.10	1		
5. Social norms	3.13	1.27	0.13	0.19	0.22	-0.05	1	
6. System encourages waste	3.52	1.21	-0.15	0.28	0.30	-0.09	0.25	1

Note: N = 63. Pearson correlations are reported.

Overall, the results indicate moderate levels of food waste behaviour, with the composite index (based on over-serving and plate waste items) reaching a mean value of $M = 3.27$ ($SD = 0.86$). This suggests that behaviours associated with food waste are relatively common among respondents, even in self-reported measures.

Among the analysed psychological constructs, variety-seeking behaviour exhibited the highest mean value ($M = 3.76$), indicating a strong tendency to experiment with multiple food options in buffet settings. Respondents also showed moderate levels of perceived value-for-money orientation ($M = 3.24$) and social norms ($M = 3.13$), while awareness of food waste issues remained at a relatively average level ($M = 3.02$).

Correlation analysis was conducted to explore relationships between food waste behaviour and the selected psychological determinants included in the pilot study. Importantly, none of the observed correlations reached statistical significance at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level, which is consistent with the exploratory nature of the pilot study and its limited sample size.

Nevertheless, several directional patterns consistent with theoretical expectations can be observed. Food waste behaviour shows weak positive associations with value-for-money orientation ($r = 0.13$) and social norms ($r = 0.13$), suggesting that economic rationalization and social influence may play a role in shaping consumption behaviour in buffet environments. At the same time, variety-seeking behaviour does not exhibit the expected positive relationship ($r = -0.12$), indicating that the link between exploratory consumption and food waste may be more complex than assumed.

Contrary to theoretical expectations, awareness of food waste issues is not negatively associated with food waste behaviour ($r = 0.08$). This finding may reflect the presence of an attitude-behaviour gap, where declared pro-environmental awareness does not translate into actual behavioural outcomes.

Additionally, respondents' perception that the all-inclusive system encourages food waste shows a weak negative relationship with reported behaviour ($r = -0.15$). This may suggest that individuals who recognize systemic drivers of food waste could exhibit greater behavioural restraint, although this relationship requires further investigation.

Given the pilot character of the study, these results should be interpreted as exploratory rather than confirmatory. Importantly, the pilot analysis focuses on a subset of psychological constructs and does not test the full conceptual model, particularly the structural variables (e.g., participation in all-inclusive tourism, buffet exposure) or the experimental manipulation of portion control interventions.

Exploratory Insights from the Pilot Study

The pilot study provides exploratory insights into consumer food waste behaviour in the context of all-inclusive hospitality services. While not intended to test the full conceptual model, the results offer an initial empirical perspective on selected psychological constructs.

First, the findings indicate that food waste-related behaviours are relatively common among respondents. Moderate levels of self-reported over-serving and uneaten food suggest that consumption patterns associated with waste may occur even outside actual buffet settings, pointing to the relevance of behavioural tendencies.

Second, the observed relationships between psychological variables and food waste behaviour appear to be weak and inconsistent. Although some constructs, such as value-for-money orientation and social norms, show positive directional associations, the effects are small and not statistically significant. This suggests that individual motivations alone may not be sufficient to explain food waste behaviour, especially in complex service environments.

Third, the results highlight a noticeable gap between declared awareness and behavioural outcomes. Respondents who report awareness of food waste issues do not exhibit lower levels of waste behaviour, indicating that cognitive factors may have limited explanatory power when not supported by situational or contextual conditions.

Fourth, the lack of a positive relationship between variety-seeking and food waste behaviour suggests that exploratory consumption does not necessarily lead to higher waste levels. This may indicate that individuals are capable of balancing variety with portion control, or that the relationship depends on additional moderating factors not captured in the pilot study.

An important observation concerns the perception that all-inclusive systems encourage food waste. While respondents generally agree with this statement, the relationship with actual behaviour is not positive. This may suggest that greater awareness of system-level conditions could influence individual behaviour in a more reflective manner, although this interpretation requires further investigation.

Overall, the pilot results point to the multidimensional nature of food waste behaviour, where individual attitudes, perceptions, and motivations interact in a complex and non-linear way. At the same time, the findings underscore the importance of incorporating structural and situational variables, as proposed in the conceptual framework, in order to better explain consumption outcomes.

It is important to emphasize that these findings are preliminary and exploratory, due to the limited sample size and the pilot character of the study. Moreover, the analysis focuses only on selected psychological variables and does not include key structural constructs or experimental manipulations outlined in the full research design.

Limitations of the Pilot Study

The pilot study is subject to several limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the analysis relies on self-reported measures, which may be affected by social desirability bias and may not fully reflect actual behaviour in real consumption settings.

Second, the small sample size ($N = 63$) limits the statistical power of the analysis and reduces the likelihood of detecting significant relationships between variables. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and indicative rather than conclusive.

Third, the pilot study focuses exclusively on selected psychological determinants, without incorporating key structural variables or the experimental component included in the full research design. This limits the ability to capture the complexity of interactions proposed in the conceptual framework.

For these reasons, the results should be treated as preliminary insights, serving primarily to inform future research. Further studies should involve larger and more diverse samples, as well as more robust analytical approaches, including experimental and field-based designs.

Conclusion

This study addresses the issue of food waste in all-inclusive hospitality by proposing a conceptual framework that integrates structural characteristics of service systems with individual behavioural determinants. By combining these perspectives, the paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of consumer-driven food waste in buffet-based environments.

The pilot study provides initial exploratory insights into selected psychological factors associated with food waste behaviour. The results indicate that food waste-related behaviours are relatively common, while the relationships between individual determinants and behavioural outcomes appear weak and inconsistent. In particular, the findings suggest that awareness alone may not be sufficient to reduce food waste, highlighting the potential importance of contextual and situational influences.

Importantly, the pilot analysis does not constitute a full empirical test of the proposed conceptual model, as it focuses only on a subset of psychological variables. Structural factors, such as participation in all-inclusive tourism and buffet exposure, as well as behavioural interventions, were not included in the empirical verification at this stage.

Despite these limitations, the study offers several contributions. From a conceptual perspective, it emphasizes the need to analyse food waste as a result of the interaction between system design and consumer behaviour, rather than as an outcome driven solely by individual attitudes. From an empirical perspective, the pilot findings support the need for a more comprehensive research design, incorporating both structural variables and experimental approaches.

Future research should therefore aim to:

- empirically test the full conceptual model using larger and more diverse samples,
- examine the role of structural determinants, particularly buffet exposure as a potential mediating mechanism,
- and evaluate the effectiveness of behavioural interventions, such as portion control strategies, using experimental or field-based methods.

Overall, the study highlights that reducing food waste in all-inclusive hospitality requires a combined approach, where behavioural insights are aligned with service design solutions, ensuring both sustainability and customer satisfaction.

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