

A taste for waste: **Situating unsustainable consumption within practices & social structures**

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ABSTRACT:

This study focuses on recycling processes in the context of plastic food packaging and is part of a larger ongoing interdisciplinary project. Our analysis highlights the nuances underpinning with the misalignment of attitudes with individuals' behaviour. We indicate that unsustainable practices are nurtured and shaped by both the existing habitual dispositions of consumers and wider historical, economic and culturally instituted factors. We further suggest that these lead to a series of consumption bottlenecks which prevent the development of more sustainable forms of consumption.

KEYWORDS

sustainability; recycling; plastic packaging; plastic waste; sustainable consumption

INTRODUCTION

Plastics and plastic waste now represent one of the key challenges of the environmental crisis worldwide (Chalmin, 2019; Dris et al., 2020). Importantly, plastics are characterised by their 'passengerial status', that is their unobtrusive and inconspicuous presence in consumers' everyday lives or, rather, their role in 'accompanying' us on our consumption journeys as silent *passengers* rather than *key drivers* of them (Cronin et al., 2022). For example, plastic is not the focus of our attention when we sit down to a family picnic though it is hauntingly present somewhere in the experiential gestalt, often providing us with the packaging, containers, utensils, bottles, and coolers necessary for consumption to take place. Similarly, plastic is passengerially present during grocery shopping, mealtimes, and other familial and household-related activities but rarely the object of direct reflection. In this paper, we explore the passengeriality of plastic, its 'failure of absence', and its 'material stickiness' as linked to the reproduction of social boundaries, field expectations, and consumers' improvisation amongst systems of dispositions and structural constraints.

Multiple rounds of ethnographic interviewing, site visits, participant-produced diary entries and introspections, and participant-observation (shadowing and spending time with participants in-situ) reveal how consumers develop *a taste for waste* by remaining often unconsciously and sometimes

unwillingly fidelitous to entrenched regimes of unsustainable consumption practices. In contrast to attitude-behaviour gap research that emphasises the moral shortcomings of individual consumers or the simple break between their purchase intentions and actual purchases, our empirical findings reflect a much more diverse range of tacit and explicit constraints around the home, throughout the market, and beyond the individual that incur actual or imagined negative consequences. The question of how to reshape these dispositions – including the routines and habits within which these are embedded – lies at the forefront of the quest for sustainable consumption (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014). Many of our habitual household consumption practices are deeply entrenched in “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1990: 53) which are further located into a broader socio-historic and institutional context and entail taken-for-granted perceptions and well-established meaning systems in relation to plastic packaging consumption and recycling.

In the context of plastic food packaging, this paper focuses on recycling processes and our analysis sheds light into the nuances underpinning with the misalignment of attitudes with individuals’ behaviour and highlight that unsustainable practices are nurtured and shaped by both the existing habitual dispositions of consumers and wider historical, economic and culturally instituted factors. These, in turn, lead to a series of consumption bottlenecks, that is multiple real and imagined constraints which hinder the development of more sustainable forms of consumption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability marketing has been previously defined as ‘the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers in such a way that both natural and human capital are preserved or enhanced throughout’ (Martin and Schouten, 2014: 18). Sustainable consumption entails social and environmental sensibilities and responsibilities (Prothero et al., 2011). At the core of any discussions about ethical and/or sustainable consumption is the concept of the attitude behaviour gap, that is the fact that consumers are often reluctant to translate any desire to act in a sustainable manner into action (Carrington et al., 2016). As such, prior academic research on sustainable consumption foregrounds the primacy of the so-called “attitude-behaviour gap” (*cf.* Prothero et al., 2011) and individual consumers’ reluctance, inability, or lack of commitment to translate their desire to act in a sustainable manner into action (Carrington et al., 2016; Davies et al., 2020). More specifically, prior studies suggest that we need to understand why individuals engage in unsustainable behaviours whilst many of them realise that these behaviours are not sustainable (McDonagh and Prothero, 2014).

However, a growing number of critics have problematised the usefulness of this imagined gap, suggesting its assumptive framing of consumers as fully agentic and cognisant subjects who are hostage to their own choice-making is phenomenologically and axiologically hamstrung when seeking holistic and representative accounts of the multi-variegated influences on human behaviour that emerge from and through the intersection of social, material, political, and environmental conditions (Carrington et al., 2016; Caruana et al., 2016; Thomas, 2018). Unsustainable consumption is often the result of firmly established market ideologies that have become naturalized within specific market institutions and consumer practices (Holt, 2012). Sustainable consumption is rarely reducible to a dyadic (and moralistic) payoff between personal intentions and enacted choices in naturalistic environments. On the contrary, consumer behaviour is ensconced and influenced by a plurality of structural, affective, and non-representational factors which often sit beyond the reach of individuals’ own conscious awareness or appraisal (Arnould, 2022; Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Cronin and Fitchett, 2022; Hill et al., 2014).

The attitude-behaviour gap's default unit of analysis being 'the individual' rather than the 'relational', 'spousal', 'cultural' or 'household' unit presents significant limitations. Even the most rudimentary of social and material relations – such as living and consuming as a family in a house in a particular region – are not adequately explorable at the level of personal psychology or the assumption that individual shortcoming present a yardstick for evaluating behaviour.

In other words, it is important to develop a more thorough account of individuals' prospects to engage in and maintain sustainable behaviour, by investigating (un)sustainable consumption in a more holistic manner (Sesini et al., 2020). When consumer researchers have sought to identify solutions to the seeming entrenchment of consumers in unsustainable lifestyle practices, they have typically assumed that the source of the problem stems from ineffective messaging strategies and that consumers would be motivated to adopt more sustainable lifestyle routines if presented with better targeted cognitive and emotional cues (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014). This microlevel focus on consumer decision making processes problematically ignores "the bigger systemic picture" of interlinked political and market structures that shape consumers' lifestyle practices and preferences (also see Holt 2012). In this paper, our aim is to develop a more holistic understanding of the variety of ways in which consumer interactions with plastic packaging are located within a specific socio-historic context (Askegaard and Trolle-Linnett, 2011) and socio-cultural milieu (Prothero et al., 2011) and give rise to various types of consumption practices and associated symbolic meanings (Ferreira and Scaraboto, 2015).

In doing so, we draw upon practice theory and the conceptual toolbox of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), specifically *taste*, *habitus*, *doxa*, and *misrecognition*. For Bourdieu, taste – as a master concept – is the result of a system of internal dispositions, namely habitus, which enables individuals to perceive and appreciate the social world and shapes their subsequent consumption behaviour (Holt, 1998). Accordingly, doxa refers to the 'the socially dominated nature of the natural attitude or practical sense' (Myles, 2004: 93) of individuals which defines taken-for-granted perceptions and unreflexive practices within certain social fields (Bourdieu, 1977). Such perceptions and practices are grounded within what Bourdieu (2000) calls misrecognition, that is the result of internalised, embodied habitus which entails a series of presuppositions in relation to understanding things 'not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: xiii) in the social world. In the context of our study, Bourdieu's writings enable us to recalibrate epistemological thinking away from the consumer as 'individual choice-maker' and more towards 'emplaced household actor' whose (un)sustainable consumption is bound up in pre-reflective domestic routines, competences, and structures which are ultimately positioned within a broader socio-historic and institutional context.

METHODS

Using qualitative data from 27 UK household ethnographies undertaken as part of an interdisciplinary UKRI-funded project, we focus on socially embedded practices related to the usage, consumption, and dispossession of plastic packaging in the home and its intersection with wider social fields. Our empirical data is generated through household ethnographic accounts which form part of a larger ongoing interdisciplinary project. More specifically, this research is part of the 'Plastic Packaging in People's Lives'(PPiPL) project, funded by UKRI Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), grant reference (NE/V010611/1) We have previously collected data from 27 households across two University counties in the UK (15 households based in Lancashire and 12 households based in Oxfordshire) centring attention on their mealtimes, shopping practices, and associated (or passengerial,

see Cronin et al., 2022) usage and disposition of plastic food packaging in various aspects of daily life. All participant names were changed to ensure confidentiality and interviewees gave informed consent. Data collection involved various methods including multiple rounds of ethnographic in-depth interviewing, site visits (shadowing and spending time with participants in-situ), weekly catchups and informal conversations with heads of the households, diary-keeping (written/audio/video), introspections, and records of fridge, cupboard, and bin contents.

For the purposes of this study, we define “head of household” (HoH) as the adult household member who is primarily responsible for the food shopping and food preparation and undertakes all or most of the domestic duties needed to maintain the household. HoHs were invited to play an active role in the data collection process, often without the researchers’ physical presence (Sirola et al., 2019), and were asked to keep a diary about their experiences relating to plastic food packaging, including photographs, videos and reflections facilitated by mobile phones/smartphones. By adopting this approach, we were able to gather useful insights into more private and personal settings where accessibility may be limited. The entire block of data was analysed using an inductive approach which involved the identification of emergent themes through a back-and-forth movement between data and extant literature. This process involved moving iteratively between small parts of the data, initial understandings of the whole set of textual/visual data, and relevant literature.

FINDINGS

Our data highlight the misalignment of individuals’ attitudes with their actual behaviour in relation to food shopping, meal preparation, and waste disposal. Such a misalignment is positioned within the habitual dispositions of individuals (Bourdieu, 1984) in relation to their embodied tacit knowledge of packaging and assumptions for recycling processes, amongst others. It is further located within wider historical, economic and culturally instituted factors concerning recycling infrastructures, processes and regulations and packaging guidelines.

Our analysis reveals that recycling has largely become an unreflective process which is deeply entrenched into our participants’ habitual dispositions and everyday routines. For instance, one of our informants indicates that “*I don’t even think about it most of the time it’s just I either know that it can be recycled or that it can’t*” (Anthony, first interview, Lancashire). Similarly, another participant who recycles “out of habit” and was prompted further about the type of packaging that he considers to be recyclable, indicates that recycling is a perceptual process; “*I can’t honestly really answer it knowing that I’m doing the right thing other than its more solid*” (Nathan, first interview, Oxfordshire). These unreflexive habitual dispositions are primarily grounded within individuals’ instinctual and embodied competences of recycling often being the result of a tactile appreciation through the senses with a number of participants referring to the “*texture*” (Eliza, first interview, Lancashire) of packaging and “*feeling if it’s plastic*” (Katie, first interview, Lancashire). Accordingly, some of our informants would make a distinction between “*hard*”, “*sturdy*” or “*substantial*” plastic food packaging, which are considered to be recyclable and “*soft*”, “*flimsy*” or “*flyaway plastics*”, which are perceived to be non-recyclable.

Our participants further engage into a series of doxic forms of perception (Bourdieu, 1977) when making assumptions about what happens to their recycling once collected from the local council recycling services and where the boundaries of responsibility lie with regards to plastic packaging

recycling. For instance, one of our informants argues that *“I’m not too precious about whether I get it right or wrong, by that I mean is it the right kind of plastic to go into the recycling bin. If I think it can go in a recycling bin I put in a bin and let the council worry about that. I mean I do it with some care, I don’t want to say that I just chuck stuff in there willy nilly, but I don’t take each piece of plastic, look at the writing on it to try to determine whether or not it’s appropriate to recycle or put it into the waste, I’ll leave that for the council”* (Tom, first interview, Lancashire). Similarly, another participant makes assumptions about the sorting processes that take place, once domestic recycling has been collected at the kerbside; *“If it’s paper, cardboard, bottle or tin then I’m pretty confident that’s recyclable. If its plastics then I hedge my bets really and I suppose you always hear these stories that if you put something that can’t be recycled in the recycling bin it contaminates the whole consignment and it all ends up going to landfill. I don’t really believe that. I mean I’d love to know whether it’s true or not. But I also know that a lot of landfill gets filtered, you know, that it goes on conveyor belts and they actually pull out stuff that can be recycled from landfill waste, from the general waste bins. So I think well if they’re doing that with the general waste, surely, they’re doing that with the recyclable waste”* (Lisa, first interview).

What we note here is the existence of a series of misrecognition acts (Bourdieu, 2000) via a reliance on waste management and recycling infrastructures (i.e. to separate non-recyclable from recyclable materials) which seem to be perpetuated through participants’ previous experiences and engagements with local bin collectors, who operate at the broader institutional context of the interface between household recycling and waste management recycling services. Such socio-historically and institutionally conditioned acts of misrecognition lead to a series of consumption bottlenecks and are further exemplified in the context of plastic packaging guidelines. For our informants who have previously engaged with these guidelines, a series of inconsistencies were noted between the packaging information and either, 1) the recycling guidance provided via the local council, 2) a soft/flexible plastics collection point or 3) the packaging for the same product, leaving them to prioritise one source of information over another. For instance, one of our participants highlights that *“two of the other items that I bought were in similar packaging, a plastic tray with a plastic film lid. The difference in recycling instructions (shown below) is a bit confusing though. However, the packaging on the right has not been updated since 2020, so I will assume (perhaps wrongly) that the more recent instructions (2022) apply to both”* (Marina, diary entry, Oxfordshire). Hence, our analysis also highlights that household recycling of plastic food packaging is further contextualised by a plurality of consumption bottlenecks manifested through either real or imagined constraints (e.g. packaging guidelines) that are often characterised by uncomfortableness, unpredictability, and hermeneutic reflection. We further note that the existence of these bottlenecks prevents the pursuit of a more sustainable lifestyle.

CONCLUSION

This paper offers an alternative and interpretive approach to understanding barriers to sustainable consumption that is sensitised to structural and shared infrastructures of *meaning* and *being* that legitimise, habitualise, and perpetuate wasteful consumption-related lifestyles and everyday consumption practices (Holt, 2012; Thomas, 2018). Our analysis suggests that multiple levels of real and imagined constraints overlap in domestic environments and their surroundings and offers useful insights into the variety of ways through which individuals develop what we have theorised here as a

taste for waste in relation to unsustainable consumption practices. In other words, our analysis illustrates how individuals' behaviours develop and change over time as shaped by their environments, material conditions, past and current commitments as well as expectations about future possibilities. We suggest future studies adapt their inquiries from the ethical consumption gap to the marketing construction of the gap and its underlying socio-historic positioning (Carrington et al., 2016).

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