

Plastic Packaging

Luci Attala l.attala@uwtsd.ac.uk

Introduction

Discussions concerning the socio-environmental harms and the inadequacies of effectively recycling plastics are now well rehearsed. These issues are counterbalanced by plastic's enormous versatility and low production costs. To enable plastic to remain a useful material its inability to degrade needs to be addressed.

Current practice almost forces consumers to purchase non-recyclable containers if they want to benefit from the contents. Governments should support moves away from recycling towards biodegradable with regards plastic containers.

The following is a summary of the perspectives of approximately 80 young people studying Anthropology at undergraduate level with regards plastic consumption and consumer choice. The information results from 3 years of informal qualitative data collection. This document first describes the courses and then culminates with the students' suggestions for the future that arose from their research. It also demonstrates the apprehensions young people have towards plastic bottles, cups and other non-biodegradable containers.

Context

As Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at UWTSd, I designed and deliver 2 courses that explore environmental and behavioural issues circulating plastic waste. Over the last 3 years a number of students have sat the 2 courses (*Interactions with the Environment* and *Materialities in Anthropology*) with interesting results.

Brief overview of courses

- *Interactions with the Environment* is a first year class that is specifically structured to encourage students to look at the notion of 'waste' - from prehistory to present day - from which they realise **the fundamental problem with waste is not that it exists but that it now fails to degrade effectively**. We also consider consumer behaviour, plastic, water, and plastic in water (amongst other things). Running alongside the various practical exercises and lectures of the course, the students are obliged to bring their non-biodegradable waste each week to class where we make our own landfill site. As the weeks flow the pile grows to proportions that typically shock and embarrass the students. We sort the waste into recyclable and non-recyclable, and consider the life stories of the bits of (predominantly) plastic bottles and cups in the pile - during which students attempt to account for their waste, and their part in creating the problem (often sometimes with intense shame about their consumer patterns). With a view to help students reconsider their consumption patterns, together we make an attempt at re- or up- cycling by creating a thought provoking sculpture of bits of the rubbish in the

final class. To date we have made the goddess Gaia out of Coca-cola bottles, Plastiki – a boat out of plastic bottles (that we then sailed), and a representation of one of the ocean Gyres.

- *Materialities in Anthropology* is a second year class and deepens the knowledge of the above by asking students to explore the intellectual disconnection implicit between the way the environment and people (between nature and culture) are conceived in industrialised nations. During the research process students are enabled to produce bio-plastics in the Lab, became aware of the material and cultural complexities of plastics: recognised the ideological and cultural ideas embedded into, for example, the meaning of packaging; the significance and problems of the notion of 'convenience' (which plastic cups, bottles and takeaway culture embody), the part economics play in shaping the materials used, and the mounting environmental concerns as plastic packaging in its many forms (even as microscopic particles) fill the world.

Outcomes

From these courses it is clear most young people are *very concerned* with the environmental consequences of plastics and are angry that larger businesses and multi-national companies are allowed to 'get away with' their behaviour without penalty. Any government that made real strides to limit the criminal activities of these companies would have the support of the group I call 'the young thoughtfuls' (i.e.: uni students). Young people want to feel proud of their country. This can be done by making bold moves to protect the environment over business.

Suggestions from the student body

A fundamental *shift in production (NOT consumer) behaviour* should be the pivot and direction of any campaign.

The young are angry at big business; they maintain that the producers need to be made accountable for their actions in continuing to bring these polluting and destructive items to the public.

The following are some ways to make this happen for plastic packaging:

- As recycling is often costly and ineffective, companies should be encouraged to seek degradable materials over recyclable ones.
- Companies that use non-degradable packaging (e.g. cups and bottles) should be penalised and have their products labelled (like tobacco does with alarming imagery) so that the consumer can see the environmental damage created of the substances they are using.
- Put environmental ratings on products, similar to hygiene ratings that cafes etc., get.
 - Supermarkets, cafes and restaurants should be responsible and accountable for the recycling of all of the packaging they have on

their shelves. This could go into their rating (as above). They should not get any financial benefit from this process. (It is believed that doing this will force the hand of producers. Supermarkets and chain outlets are currently very much in control of consumer choices with their profits taking precedence over other values. Students believe that if these producers are responsible for the life cycle of the packaging that they are currently selling on to the consumer, it will work to discourage bad environmental practice.)

- Similarly, all kinds of plastic generated from online shopping should be regularly picked up by the supermarkets and should not be the responsibility of the consumer or local council. If companies insist on selling products that use this damaging material they should be liable for the consequences.
- No more disingenuous 'green-wash' promotions on products to disguise companies' polluting methods. Spurious reforestation initiatives and other such ineffective schemes are clearly designed to encourage purchase through guilt appeasement rather than protect the environment from plastic.
- Litter of plastics, and the pollution and damage it creates should be the responsibility of the manufacturers – after all, they made it, they should clean it - so as to discourage them from using/making it.
- Shoppers should be able to leave the packaging of the items they have bought in store after purchase (or use) for the shop to sort. Leaving the packaging in the supermarket would reduce the amount of community waste, rubbish collection and recycling costs of the local councils. If the cost of recycling falls to the supermarket/outlet/ producer then they will seek alternative containers that can biodegrade and go into landfill.
- As there are multiple examples of plant based plastics available nowadays manufacturers should be encouraged to use these substances. Companies that do should be recognised, supported and valued.
- Bottled water is a problematic. The government should educate people about the real value of bottled water to show that it has no health benefits at all. Furthermore, if people want to buy bottled water it should only be in glass so as to make it an unattractive proposition.

Key overarching point:

Significantly shift the onus away from the consumer and towards the producer (or seller) to ensure manufacturers are incentivised to use environmentally sustainable biodegradable materials in the creation their products.

Final note: I have seen one effect of the DRS working in Germany. It is specifically helpful to those living on the breadline (e.g.: homeless) who pick up and collect the discarded bottles to obtain some cash – but as such it is rather distasteful and draws the division between the haves and have-nots rather sharply.