

Consumption Bottlenecks & Warrens of Wickedness: Insights from onflow household cultural research

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Introduction

How to best account for constraints on the consumer subject's agency remains an area of perpetual debate for interpretive consumer research (ICR). Whilst multi-level, actor-network, and non-representational explanatory frameworks have expanded in popularity (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Hill *et al.*, 2014; Thompson *et al.*, 2013), we are still some distance away from arriving at an integrated account of how the realm of choice processes imbricate with often pre-reflective structures (including geographies, exclusionary architecture, familial, social and biological factors) that manifest in idiosyncratic boundaries, deadlocks, and circumscriptions – or what we might collectively call “bottlenecks” – on consumer behaviour. Identifying bottleneck emergence and how bottlenecks condition and constrain consumption, we argue, is not only valuable for advancing our theoretical knowledge of how consumers' intentions are constricted, but is helpful for understanding how macro challenges, like roadblocks to sustainability, are perpetuated within the minutiae of everyday life. Although environmental sensitivity and awareness of the impacts of single-use plastics have rapidly grown amongst consumers in recent years, evidence of widescale consumption adjustments to curb the impacts of plastic pollution remain disappointing and whatever gains are made might ultimately be frustrated by global capitalism's growth mandate (Bradshaw & Zwick, 2016). In this paper, we venture into the broad ambits of daily and domestic plastic consumption to map out what restricts, discourages, and negates the opportunities for households to pursue more sustainable lifestyles. In doing so, we lay the foundations for a theory of consumption bottlenecks and develop a topography of bottleneck emergence.

Although the metaphorical term *bottleneck* has been deployed in everyday speech as a colloquialism for a drag force, congestant, or restriction on the potential for an actor to achieve some intended end-state, it lacks substantive conceptualisation. To provide conceptual scaffolding for consumption bottlenecks we import and integrate *constraints theory* (from leisure studies) (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford *et al.*, 1991) with Bourdieu's (2000) concept of *hysteresis* which denotes a subjectively felt “lag” or mismatch between habitus and changing field conditions. Bringing the concepts together, we explore hysteresis as structured around real or imagined – and multi-level – constraints that work to ossify the limits of what is achievable (or even conceivable) for households in terms of forging more sustainable consumption practices under growth-fuelled capitalism.

Moving from gaps to maps

When mapping out consumption bottlenecks, it would be remiss not to first revisit the suspected inconsistency between what people say and what they do — what is alternately referred to as the ethical “attitude–behavior”, “intention–behavior”, or “words–deeds” *gap*. The gap, as an internalised and individualised condition, is understood to be sometimes exaggerated by social desirability bias (Auger & Devinney, 2007). However, genuinely held ethical and pro-environmental purchase intentions might be prevented from translating to appropriate buying by a lack of prior planning, incomplete control over the buying experience, and aspects of the shopping environment. Commentators have also proposed the consideration of further constructs such as “prioritisation of ethical concerns” and “commitment and

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sacrifice” (Carrington *et al.*, 2014). Others have argued ethical consumption cannot be reduced to individuals’ sovereign capacity to achieve discrete ethical purchases and hinges more complexly upon: shared efforts and discourses such as those of the household (Belz & Peattie 2009); evolving, splintering socio-cultural interpretations or translations of what it means to be, for example, a “green” consumer (Autio *et al.*, 2009); and immutable structural elements such as the “entire supply chain of decisions and choices [that] have occurred before the consumer reaches the store to choose from a predetermined range of options that have been procured and controlled by powerful corporate actors” (Carrington *et al.*, 2016: 27).

Accordingly, critics have contested that the attitude-behaviour gap is epistemologically and axiologically hamstrung by its reliance on cognitive modelling principles that artificially afford primacy to the individual agent and perpetuate the assumption “that consumer behaviour is rational and stripped away from a broader social, historical and cultural context” (Caruana *et al.*, 2016: 215). Further, the unit of analysis in such theorisation has typically been the individual, rather than a spousal unit or household. Even the most rudimentary relational interplays of relevance to consumption – such as living as a *family* and shared ritualistic behaviour – are not adequately accounted for. By abstracting away any sense of “we” or collective habitus in favour of an emphasis on “individualized ethical flaws and internal moral shortcomings of consumers”, the gap not only sanctifies consumer sovereignty but serves an important ideological function in preserving the individualist, atomising conditions of consumer capitalist ideosystems that predicate and benefit from such thinking (Carrington *et al.*, 2016: 23). To redress these issues, we turn to constraints theory and hysteresis as concepts that can be weaved together to better account for the familial, social, and structural bottlenecks that impact upon sustainable consumer behaviour.

Marrying Constraints with Hysteresis

Although sustainability is a deeply structural issue that necessitates macro-scale commitments and intervention by retailers, brands, producers, and governments, it would be folly to simply trust in “capitalism's captains to save us from the environmentally devastating effects of capitalism” (Bradshaw & Zwick, 2016: 267). For example, as reflected in research on barriers to getting involved in recreational and commuter cycling, “simply putting in place safe infrastructure might not adequately support participation with confidence and skills presenting additional barriers” (Rowe *et al.*, 2016: 426). To contend with the complexity of factors that serve as a drag-force on how households engage with sustainability, it is possible to look to and adapt an integrated model of constraints that was originally introduced in leisure studies (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford *et al.*, 1991). The model categorises constraints on the ability to act according to intrapersonal (e.g. needs & preferences, skills, beliefs, dispositions), interpersonal (e.g. spousal, familial, micro-social, tribal influences or commitments), and structural (e.g. political economy, space, resources, family life-cycle stage, class) factors. At the heart of the basic three-layer model is the assumption that the relationships between factors are complex, contextually bound, and can be negotiated. To provide some conceptual depth for how such intersectional complexity is lived, experienced, and affectively handled when households are *forced* to confront them, we integrate Bourdieu’s concept of hysteresis.

Hysteresis, as defined by Bourdieu, describes the disruptive affects, consequences, and inertia that individuals or groups face when their habitus (system of dispositions that provide ways of thinking and being) and relatedly, their doxa (taken-for-granted, often acritically accepted assumptions) begin to feel *wrong* or that they can no longer adequately guide them within changing field structures. In a rapidly “greening” consumer culture where environmentalism, sustainability, “ocean literacy”, eco-moralism, legislative reforms including the EU & UK “plastic taxes”, and socio-normative pressures like “the Blue Planet effect”

legitimise plastic-free consumption and creeping commercialism around plastic alternatives, many households may find that their “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” are no longer fit for purpose (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). Bourdieu (2000: 161) suggests that often in cases of individuals or groups facing “difficulty in adjusting to the new established order”, their “dispositions become dysfunctional and the efforts they make to perpetuate them help to plunge them deeper into failure”. Hysteresis, thus, helps to conceptualise the disparity between the opportunities made available by field changes and consumer subjects whose established habitus renders them incapable of ascending to new and expected ways of being (Skandalis *et al.*, 2020). Hysteresis is useful for identifying bottlenecks as it can manifest in unpremeditated space(s) for reflexivity, in that those behaviours that normally “go without saying” become noticeable, and as such prone to introspection and discursive expression by consumers within the field (as they reflect on new expectations, responsibilities, and pressures). For example, Robinson & Arnould (2019: 3) discuss “hysteresis of the battery” experienced by tech consumers when they are away from their charging devices and become haunted by the “unpleasant unpredictability” of their battery-based technology, inspiring explicit reflection on their energy consumption, the out-of-home energy infrastructure, and energy access in general. Comparably, Robinson & Lundahl (2019) explore how the challenging transition to veganism, characterised by a kind of “voluntary hysteresis”, provides a reflexive opportunity for contemplating one’s distinction and social mobility as shaped and constrained by one’s consumption. It is through that reflexivity that hysteretic experiences may reveal the specific ways that intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints become directly or indirectly thought about when reacting to pressures to live more sustainably.

Method: Onflow household ethnography

The empirical data for the study is generated through household ethnographic accounts which form part of a larger ongoing interdisciplinary project funded by the UKRI (grant reference: NE/V010611/1). We are collecting data from 30 households across two counties in the UK centring attention on their mealtimes and associated (or *passengerial*, see Cronin *et al.*, 2022) usage and disposition of plastic food packaging in daily life. The ethnographies are designed to engender what Hill *et al.* (2014: 384-385) call “onflow accounts”, by “chronicling events as they unfold in manners that allow sampling procedures and research sites to remain fluid, always at stake, ready to respond to material objects and flows that demand closer attention”. Accordingly, our data collection involves multiple rounds of ethnographic interviewing, site visits, weekly catchups with heads of the households, diary-keeping, introspections, and records of fridge, cupboard, and bin contents. For the purposes of our 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 are invited to play an active role in the data collection process, often without the researchers’ physical presence (Sirola *et al.*, 2019). They are 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, the research team can gather fruitful insights into more private and personal settings where accessibility may be limited. For this working paper, we draw upon data collected from 14 households based in Lancashire which enabled us to develop our initial, emergent findings, as presented below.

Emergent Findings

Our data reveals that through shopping for foods, preparing meals, and disposing of waste across various changing fields (characterised by combinations of sustainability-aware social environments or inadequately resourced built environments or vice versa), conditions are

created for hysteretic moments where households' habitus and doxa are challenged and subsequently renegotiated, suspended, or maintained albeit problematically. In contrast to the attitude-behaviour gap research that tends to emphasise the simple break between purchase intentions and actual purchases, our accounts reflect a diverse range of tacit and explicit constraints around the home, throughout the market, and beyond individual purchases that reflect or incur actual and imagined negative consequences. Our initial findings highlight that household recycling of plastic food packaging is restrained and contextualised by a plurality of bottlenecks that are characterised by uncomfortableness, unpredictability, and hermeneutic reflection. We classify these bottlenecks according to a series of tensions that emerge through *materialities, dependencies & relationalities*, and *orthodoxies*, amongst others.

Because of paper-length restrictions, we provide just one case of *materialities* wherein a major catalyst for hysteretic affects was the absence of effective resources combined with conflicting material norms to achieve sustainable objectives. Evie (age 22), who lives with others in a university rent-share flat in a town centre, tells us that: *"We were told that it's our responsibility to split up our recycling, even though we're only given one bin. And obviously, you need multiple to do it properly."* Evie's understanding of the need to "recycle properly" from having previously lived with her parents, who made use of multiple recycling and waste disposal bins, conflicted with the facilities of her current living arrangement. In response, she tells us of her attempts to circumvent the limits of having only one communal bin at her flat, but that most efforts are frustrated by their impracticalities or unintended consequences. For a while Evie attempted to manage her own improvised recycling system out of her bedroom where she would sort, store, and decide how best to privately dispose of her waste plastics rather than consigning them all to the communal waste bin. However, she found that her commitment to this system was partly determined by whether the packaging might create a foul smell in her bedroom. Moreover, as a second-year medical student, expectations to reduce, reuse, and recycle plastics also conflicted with a number of doxic protocols Evie had picked up while training in clinical healthcare environments. Many of these protocols – particularly over the COVID-19 pandemic – necessitate the generalised destruction of single-use plastics, or as she suggests, *"we were told on the first day of hospital placement, he [instructor] said I want you to use as many gloves as possible and as many masks as possible and as many aprons as possible. And obviously that means just binning them all. And he said I want you to get through as many as possible just to keep-, for infection prevention. And I hated that"*.

Discussion: Warrens of Wickedness

Our sustained capture of the flows of consumers, materials and discourses raises considerations of how habitus intersects with and complicates the systemic urgency for more sustainable consumption practices. Our ongoing attempts to map out bottlenecks suggest that multiple levels of real and imagined constraints overlap in domestic environments and their surrounds as reflected by multiple and co-constituting types of hysteresis. We call these overlapping, interlinked constraints "warrens of wickedness" to denote their labyrinthine interconnectedness as well as potential for one consumption bottleneck to be a symptom of another. We invoke the term wicked here with respects to the concept of "wicked problems"². Conceptualising these warrens contributes to ICR in two critical respects. First, rather than perpetuate the moralisation of consumption choices through epistemological allegiance to a "gap" between individuals' intentions and deeds, we call for a "map" of the multi-level, multi-temporal, multi-actor bottlenecks that tacitly and explicitly, directly and indirectly shape, constrain, facilitate or obviate enacted behaviours. Second, our conceptualisation of bottlenecks provides deeper

² Though multiple and competing interpretations exist, "wicked problems" can be thought of, most broadly, as "that class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing" (Churchman, 1967, B-141).

clarification for how the *life course*, that is how people develop and change over time as shaped by their environments, material conditions, past and present commitments as well as expectations about future possibilities, remains a key determinant of how consumption is perceived, managed, and enacted (see Cronin & Malone, 2019).

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