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RESPONSIBLE WASTE DISPOSAL: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF BRITISH AND BRAZILIAN CONSUMERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how British and Brazilian consumers dispose of their unwanted or no longer used goods. Post-consumption environmental impact has become a global issue, and the need for consumers to reduce, reuse and recycle is paramount. A study of seven participants with recycling experience was undertaken. Divergent concerns in relation to waste, and distinct symbolic roles for disposition reflected the economically distinct contexts of the participants. Insights from this study can inform future consumer and policy research, and provide a more holistic view of the consumer behavior cycle.

INTRODUCTION

Post-consumption environmental impact has become a global issue and, in the UK, Defra (2007) has stated the need to prevent, reduce as well as recycle, reuse and recover energy from waste. While some UK local authorities, such as Lichfield District Council, have managed to achieve household waste recycling rates of 46% (Hickman 2006), and despite UK recycling figures going from 11.2% in 2000/01 to 22.7% by April 2005, there remain barriers to consumers' commitment to action, including inappropriate incentives and structures, apathy and ignorance (Heap 2005). However, for every ton of waste produced by UK consumers, about six tons are generated by commercial business (Hickman 2006), so assigning consumers sole responsibility for waste would be myopic. Indeed, consumption practices should be viewed as the realms in which solutions may be achieved, rather than as sources of environmental issues (Dolan 2002). Therefore, this exploratory research seeks to address this gap in the literature by viewing consumers and their meaningful practices as solutions to environmental issues. Thus, the first aim of this research is to explore how a few UK consumers dispose of their unwanted goods.

Defra (2007) highlights the need to break the linkage between waste and economic growth. However, such a severance may serve to elide the intrinsic links between economic development, affluence and waste, and the manner in which consumers dispose of unwanted goods. We contend that consumers from countries with distinct levels of economic development will dispose of goods in different ways. Therefore, the second aim of this small-scale study is to compare the varied paths to disposal adopted by middle-class British and Brazilian consumers, and to examine any differences between consumers' disposal attitudes and practices in both countries. Insights from this interpretive qualitative study can inform future consumer and policy research, and present paths for improved solutions to disposal practices in the UK and Brazil.

HIGHLIGHTING A FEW SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BRAZIL AND THE UK

With 186 million people (IBGE 2007a) Brazil is marked by widespread unemployment, social inequality and increasing environmental degradation. Current indicators suggest illiteracy rates of about 9.3% among women and 9.9% among men above 10 years of age (IBGE 2006), as well as decreasing unemployment rates of over 10% in 2005 (IBGE 2007b). While only 3% of the economically active population earned 10 or more minimum monthly wages in 2006, about 60.5% earned between 0.1 and 2 minimum monthly wages in that same year (IBGE 2007b). Thus, purchasing power is low for the majority of the Brazilian population and informal employment is to the fore. Current media and specialist discourses on waste acknowledge its risks, but portray it as a source of economic opportunity. This view is also embraced by those with few opportunities for social mobility, and is reflected in the role played by waste cooperatives in keeping the streets clean. In the state of Sao Paulo, affluent consumers (middle, upper middle and upper classes) tend to rely on the domestic services of housekeepers, and general household consumption and disposal practices are mediated by such employees.

Compared to Brazilian society, most of the 60 million UK consumers experience relatively affluent lifestyles, although nationwide certain marginalized populations experience high levels of deprivation and economic constraint (Williams and Paddock 2003). Around 16% (5.2 million) adults remain functionally illiterate (NLT 2008), while two-thirds of the population experience below national average income (Brewer et al. 2006). Yet, consumption throughput is relatively high compared to Brazil, such that commerce and household waste in the UK amounts to over 434 million tons annually (Milmo 2005). This and other signs of environmental degradation have led UK government, media and pressure groups to campaign for more sustainable consumption and responsible waste disposal practices. The UK has also presented some interesting

community-led initiatives based on the use of waste, such as the Brighton & Hove Community Wood Recycling Project which collects waste wood daily from sites, and prevents landfill disposals (Williams 2006). Such initiatives, however, emanate from the perceived need to combat environmental issues rather than from economic need. Indeed, UK media discourses on waste address it as burdensome, which in turn is accompanied by inconsistent government recycling initiatives and ineffectual commitment by marketers to green development strategies. Research also suggests that perceived effort is a relevant attitudinal component in the responsible disposal decision making process (Dahab, Gentry, and Su 1995), so, given that the employment of domestic help is not as common in the UK as it is in Brazil, UK consumers are in charge of their own disposal. The UK and Brazil, therefore, provide useful backdrops against which to explore consumers' waste disposal attitudes and behavior, and the literature addressing disposal (throwing things away) is discussed next.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON DISPOSAL BEHAVIOR

In the past two decades, a number of studies have sought to examine disposal as an integral part of the consumption experience. Yet, there remains much to be explored in terms of how consumers dispose of goods in the ways that they do. Additional studies have examined recycling attitudes and motivations as well as 'reduce' and 'reuse' behaviors. Bagozzi and Dabholkar (1994), for example, investigate consumers' recycling motivations using the theory of reasoned action, means-end chain analysis and laddering techniques, and find fifteen salient goals relevant to consumers. These moved from concrete (i.e. 'avoid filling up landfills', 'reuse materials') to more abstract values (i.e. 'sustain life', 'provide for future generations'), and overall findings suggest that the provision of specific goals and procedures for recycling to consumers would likely increase the practice of recycling. Smith, Haugtvedt and Petty (1994), on the other hand, suggest that recycling behavior is subject to affective influences, which in turn are moderated by attitudinal strength toward recycling, and Mobley et al. (1995) support the influence of affect on evaluation processes of recycled products, and suggest that consumers' attitudes are positively influenced by the inclusion of recycled materials in products, independent of type.

However, from an environmentalist perspective, recycling should be adopted alongside other waste-reduction and disposal practices (Cooper 2005), and studies on ethical consumption (Shaw and Newholm 2002) have revealed a range of responsible waste-reduction practices adopted by consumers. These include composting, recycling, extending products' lifespans by repairing, re-using and creating unintended usages for products, purchasing second-hand products, reducing and avoiding consumption. Therefore, we explore whether this broad range of disposal practices are employed by our study's participants, and how such practices may differ among Brazilian and British consumers. We draw on Harrell and McConocha's (1992) framework – keep, throw away, sell, pass along, donate with and without tax deduction – and adapt it to fit our research context alongside the additional practices identified in the literature (see Figure 1).

METHODOLOGY

We have adopted an interpretive methodology, which systematically explores consumer subjectivity, the process of meaning construction, individual and shared systems of meaning, and ways of representing these phenomena through qualitative research (Marsden and Littler 2000). In order to restrain the research to a particular set of social circumstances (Thompson 1996) despite the distinctiveness of each chosen market, the purposive sampling criteria included middle-class, working mothers in their thirties and forties, with recycling experience. A discussion guide was developed in English and translated into Portuguese; topics were based on the key disposal issues identified in the reviewed literature and the framework presented in Figure 1. In the UK, three semi-structured interviews of approximately 1 hour were conducted face-to-face, whereas four Brazilian respondents were interviewed through computerized telephone calls. The interpretation followed the hermeneutic process involving reading and systemizing the interview transcripts, where patterns of meaning, similarities and distinctions among answers were sought, and where interpretation was developed through each reading (Thompson 1996).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Distinct Levels of Economic Development and Attitudes toward Waste and Disposal

Both UK and Brazilian respondents made the connection between how we dispose of goods and natural environment degradation. Crammed landfills, litter and excess packaging were highlighted by UK participants, whereas Brazilian respondents were more concerned with pollution. Lack of landfill capacity was also stressed by Márcia, a São Paulo resident, who supported the local authority's decision to institute a tax on the amount of household waste disposed. Cecília, too, linked disposal, climate change and health issues: "I fear that in a very near future we are not going to have water, food... We are spoiling everything. Mothers come to the surgery complaining that their sons don't stop coughing, that they have bronchitis. I

tell them that it's our fault. Here asthma is a big issue. It is the disease which makes most people unfit to work, and pollution has a great deal to do with it (Cecília)." UK participants harbor occasional guilt arising from throwing away something which could potentially be reused or recycled. They also portray the pursuit of responsible disposal practices as something of a burden, which, as seen in the literature, impacts the decision to dispose of goods responsibly (Dahab, Gentry, and Su 1995). Suzanne laughingly recounted her conflicts with bottle waste: "I don't want to blame culture, but I think the council should meet you halfway. I think people would be willing to do a lot more recycling if it was more convenient to do so. (Suzanne)." There was also a feel good factor reflected from their social stewardship: "I do feel good about it. It's not so much feeling actively good about it, but feeling that there's an element of social responsibility, and people should be doing this, because if nobody did, then it's just obscene the amount we waste and throw away (Sarah)." Therefore, extended disposal cycles (Harrell and McConocha 1992) are seen as responsible and necessary by UK participants, despite the inconvenience.

However, the overall impact of waste and disposal on UK participants' lives was less obvious than their impact on Brazilian participants' experiences. Arguably, much of the Brazilian condition of lack of education (including about disposal), social inequality, and poverty is intrinsic to Brazilian participants' discourses on waste and disposal. Poverty is close to home, yet part of a parallel social world. Scrap mongers, who collect the recyclable waste from households and public spaces, are cited by Márcia as "part of the urban landscape." Brazilians greatly disapprove of (and possibly feel guilt and denial regarding) waste and irresponsible disposal practices, for, in their view, how can there be waste under such social conditions? "I just think that any waste is absurd! Most of what is wasted can usually be used in one way or another... And how can there be waste if some people have nothing? (Márcia)" In these participants' experiences, extended disposal is a duty, but the 'burden' is usually incurred by someone else (the housekeeper or scrap monger). This is a key difference between Brazilian and UK participants' attitudes toward responsible disposal, which emanates from distinct socio-economic realities.

Cecília and Fátima reported feelings of altruism and citizenship when engaged in responsible disposal practices, and Raquel described feeling "less guilty" when separating waste and recycling. Stern et al. (1993, in Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002) found that the egoistic orientation is the foremost orientation in altruistic behaviors, followed by social and only then environmental concerns. Fátima reported buying purses made of braided supermarket plastic bags out of sympathy for community project's members. Yet these purses were not used because they were perceived as unfashionable, and so again became items selected for disposal. Therefore, and in contrast to UK participants, Brazilian respondents experienced waste and extended disposal cycles as signifiers of distinction (Bourdieu 1984); a distinction which sets them apart from a disconcerting social reality. Despite the issues, UK and Brazilian participants strive to adopt an array of disposal practices.

Distinct and Varied Paths to Disposal

British and Brazilian participants exhibit a distinct range of disposal practices. Food composting is recognized in the UK, but only Sarah undertakes it. Brazilian interviewees, however, are unaware of food composting. All participants separate their general packaging and paper waste, and Fátima compared her annual disposal of magazines and receipts to a cleansing ritual, by which she prepares herself for the start of a new year. This resonates with some of the literature on the symbolic role of disposition practices in relation to rites of passage (McAlexander 1991). In the UK, geographical location impacts upon how much recycling is done due to the variable Council services, or the distance to the recycling point. Sarah (rural town dweller) and Suzanne (city dweller) explain as follows: "We have a collection that comes fortnightly that will take paper, glass, cans and tins, aluminum, plastic. And also I live about two or three miles from a municipal tip that has got more and more organized where you can also take cardboard, garden waste, wood, metal, stuff that's got to be disposed of (Sarah)." "We get a paper collection, so that's great. You can save as much paper as you want, and leave it out for collection. Mind you, that annoyed me a bit because there was paper everywhere, and the recycling only comes every two weeks (Suzanne)."

In Brazil, some of these practices are dependent on the type of living accommodation; collection services and civic amenities are seldom offered by local governments. The Brazilian participants who live in high-rise buildings (Raquel and Fátima) argued that each floor has its separate bins for recyclable materials, collected by the building's maintenance team and passed to waste cooperatives that re-process the recyclable waste. But families living in houses face greater barriers to recycle. Brazilian scrap mongers seldom pass by, and waste cooperatives are not always local. Cecília separates recyclables, but ends up leaving the separated waste to be collected by the litter truck due to alleged lack of time. Both UK and Brazilian house-residing respondents emphasized the accumulation of waste (and thus clutter) due to their recycling efforts, while Suzanne lamented the inability of her UK neighbors to organize themselves and collectively engage in responsible disposal practices: "It needs somebody to initiate it and do it and get on with things; it's the responsibility of it. It's like, at the back of us we've got a shared driveway to all the gardens and we need to put some gates up to stop intruders, but nobody will actually go round all the houses and collect the money and organize the actual gates to be put up. Somebody needs to be responsible for

it (Suzanne).” Biswas et al.’s (2000) US research indicates a significant correlation between purchasing recycled and recycling practice. In Brazil, only Raquel bought notebooks made out of recycled paper, whereas UK participants were all enthusiastic purchasers of recycled and/or second-hand goods.

Both UK and Brazilian participants tried to donate unwanted clothing. All UK respondents either pass unwanted items of clothes to friends or family, charity shops, or recycle bins. Liz described her surprise at learning that regardless of the condition, clothing and shoes could be reused, and this had encouraged her to donate further: “A friend told me that charity shops will take more or less anything, they’ll sort it out and then they will send stuff where it’s needed. I’ve done the lot, you know things like school shoes that are a bit battered, but again if you’ve got nothing then you might appreciate them, so my attitude has changed towards that (Liz).” UK respondents repair shoes and clothes: “Oh I’m pretty good at repairing things. I patch clothes and things like that (Sarah).” This contradicts recent UK research suggesting most UK consumers are unwilling to buy second hand goods, or repair products (Cooper 2005). Brazilian respondents also reported passing clothing and shoes to mainly family and friends, repairing most items, and donating directly to social institutions.

The disposal of electronics and white goods differs somewhat in both countries. UK respondents would repair washing machines if worthwhile economically vis-à-vis a new purchase; cheaper electronics or unwanted white goods go directly to the recycling point or for council collection under a reasonably effective call and collect service. Brazilian consumers would also normally repair and make secondary use of them around the house, donate them to family members, or send them to second homes. Items beyond repair are donated to scrap cooperatives or to the poor, who in turn profit from selling the electronics’ and white goods’ parts. DeBell and Dardis’s (1979) study on the factors influencing consumer purchase and disposal of white goods found that although technologically possible to increase products’ durability and consequent lifespan, consumers discard such products due to either technological or fashion obsolescence. However, both our Brazilian and UK participants clearly demonstrate making-it-last behaviors towards their electronics and white goods, and the importance of extending their product life cycle beyond the expected norm: “Hoover, we’ve had it for years, it still works. Gosh...we’ve got one TV, we’re quite unusual among our friends. It’s a really old one and me personally, I’m not into, kind of you know I’ve got friends who want the latest this, that and the other, and to me you can get one that works just the same, it’s the same telly isn’t it? (Liz).” Sarah described her approach to replacing worn out goods, a view that was reflected by all the UK participants: “I quite often tend to look at things and think do we need it? And that’s usually far less based on an economic principle than I just hate having too much stuff (Sarah).” These findings provide a contrast to Cooper’s (2005) study on UK consumer attitudes to product obsolescence. All our participants value their goods, eschewing pointless and overpriced upgrading. They contemplate buying products with extended lifespans, such as energy efficient washing machines, and suggest the value of their goods is derived from longevity and functionality.

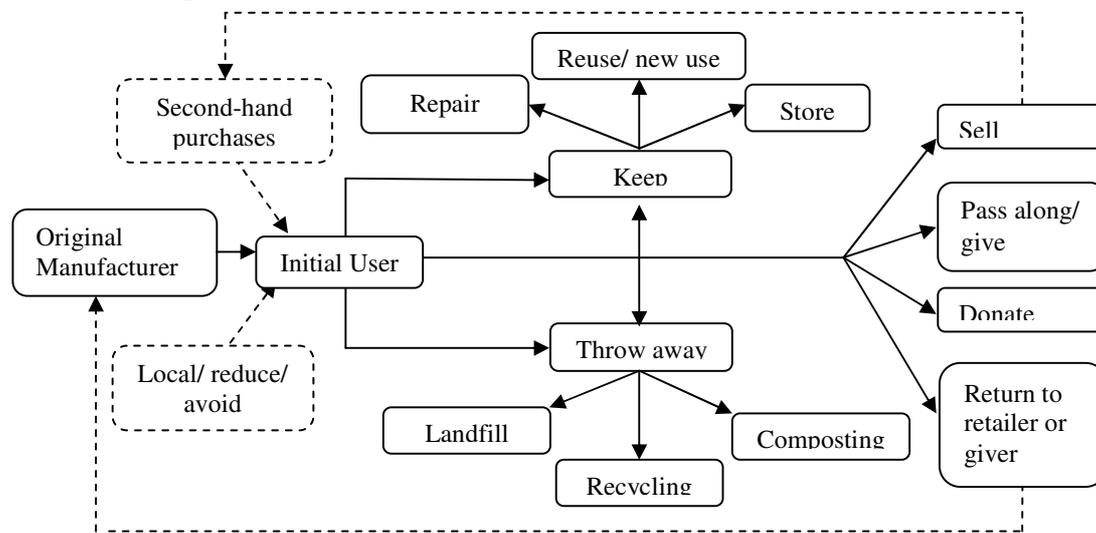
Where feasible, UK participants buy local, which in turn is seen to reduce environmental impact: “Yes we use local farm shops for meat when we can actually get around to getting there. It probably only accounts for 20-25% of our meat but I try and use that. And even when I’m in the supermarket... Waitrose have an organic and locally grown section, and I will pick up the locally grown stuff (Sarah).” UK participants would like to buy more local produce, but found barriers to this particularly in the city, from either lack of choice and availability, or because of high prices. These participants’ participation in alternative consumption spaces (i.e. charity shops, eBay) reflects an agency-orientated cultural reading ascribed to affluent populations that “views the engagement in such spaces as about the search for fun, sociality, distinction, discernment” and so forth (Williams and Paddock 2003, 137). However, Brazilian participants had little knowledge of, or interest in second-hand items, and took the traditional view (Williams and Paddock 2003, 137) that alternative consumption spaces such as second-hand stores were “marginal spaces used out of economic necessity by disadvantaged populations.” This reinforces the social role of distinction associated with disposal in the case of Brazilian participants. Buying local was an inevitable, rather than deliberate strategy for Brazilian participants, as most food staples are produced locally in Brazil. However, even where their food shopping practices are mainly dominated by supermarket trips, all participants source their fresh produce from a range of local outlets, which reduces food mileage and negative environmental impact. While this choice is socio-culturally influenced by Brazilian tradition, it is also supported by availability; such choice is diminished for UK participants.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored British and Brazilian consumers’ distinct disposal attitudes and practices. Although non-representative and drawing on a small sample of participants, this study clearly indicates the need to question Defra’s (2007) intention to break the link between economic development, waste and disposal. UK and Brazilian participants presented divergent concerns in relation to waste, and articulated distinct symbolic roles for disposal, which emanate from their economically-distinct contexts. Although extended disposal cycles are seen by British participants as burdensome, but

necessary and responsible, Brazilians see them as a duty, with the ‘burdening’ aspects of such practices being passed on to third parties. Both UK and Brazilian participants make the connection between irresponsible disposal and natural environment degradation, and all participants repair and value the longevity of electronics and white goods. Despite the lack of appropriate government-led collection services, Brazilian participants’ disposal practices seem more intricate, hierarchical and geared towards charity and non-wastefulness than those adopted by UK participants. Conversely, UK participants avidly reuse and purchase recycled and second-hand products, practices which are not adopted by the Brazilian participants. Although Brazilian participants’ narratives embrace the waste-as-opportunity viewpoint communicated by the local media, such discourses seem to reproduce the social inequalities idiosyncratic of the country. Exploratory findings from the present study have both specific and general relevance to further studies in the UK, Brazil and other countries. Future research could interview and survey a broader range of participants in these and other countries, including consumers with varied demographic, geographic and socio-economic backgrounds, as the findings and literature suggest these factors impinge upon consumers’ disposal attitudes and practices. Finally, policy-driven interventions would have to be accompanied by context-specific participatory processes and experiential education (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002), as well as coherent legislation aimed at facilitating not only recycling but also additional, more energy-efficient disposal practices (Defra 2007).

Figure 1: The extended disposal cycle



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