

Changing social perceptions of single- use plastic consumption



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Introduction There is a growing demand for plastic in our society, and now there is a ‘throwaway’ culture around single-use plastic. Plastic can be seen everywhere; in vegetables and fruits that are wrapped in unnecessary plastic packaging, plastic straws, food packaging and shopping supermarkets, where Woolworths alone gives out 3.2 billion single-use plastic bags per year. The effects of plastic on our environment is detrimental. Plastics do not biodegrade; it is a significant source of landfill waste and is regularly eaten by numerous marine and land animals, leading to fatal consequences. How do we stop people from using single-use plastic? – You need to change their attitudes and opinions and expose them to the reality of the plastic usage.

Aims

To investigate societal attitudes towards the consumption of single-use plastics

To identify possible motivations for supporting/not supporting the use the single-use plastic 3. To evaluate the effectiveness of the different strategies used to reduce societies plastic footprint

Hypotheses

Overall, society is aware of the impacts of single-use plastic, but it is whether they have the motivation to support that determines their decisions to use/not use the plastics. Not using plastic isn’t an easy task, and now, society finds it difficult to adjust to change. Convenience is fundamental for society to change their attitudes.

Convenience, taxation, financial gain, media influences, education, concerns for the environment are all possible motivations that manipulate/influence your decision and opinions of single-use plastic.

Strategies and initiatives have been put in place to raise awareness and reduce the usage of single-use plastic. ABC's 'War on Waste', David Attenborough's 'Blue Planet II' and National Geographic's 'Planet or Plastic', are all media and marketing strategies which are available to give awareness and education to society and has worked effectively well. Both Woolworths and Coles are removing the grey single-use plastic bags from their supermarkets nation-wide in June, but will they remove plastic elsewhere; for example, in the produce section; and what will be the alternatives?

Research questions 1. What is the social perception towards the consumption of single-use plastics? Sub-questions:

Are they aware of the environmental impacts of single-use plastics? 2. Are they willing to reduce the consumption of single-use plastics?

What are the attitudes and behaviours among people concerning the use of single-use plastics? 3. What are people's attitude towards the forthcoming change of removing plastic bags from supermarkets (Woolworths and Coles)? 1. 4 Methodology: As the investigation involves the attitudes and perceptions of people, a plastic clean up rubbish analysis is not appropriate. Rather, a collection that acquires into the psychology behind people and their behaviours. This is why surveys are an acceptable source of investigation. A survey was sent out through different forms of social media to study what people think about single-use plastics. The sample was anonymous and randomly selected, as it was placed on different platforms and people

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completed the survey voluntary. The primary data was gathered during the month of June through SurveyMonkey and 293 responses were received. It was assessed in light of other research and analysis into attitudes towards single-use plastic.

1. 5 Spatial dimension Currently, there is a global crisis of plastic pollution – the issue of plastic exists everywhere on Earth, even plastics have been seen on the beaches of remote islands in the South Pacific, such as Henderson Island, which is more than 3, 000 miles from major population cities. (Planet or Plastic?, 2018). Earth is currently drowning in plastic. (Appendix 3). As indicated by the investigation done by Jambeck et al (Figure 3), the most noticeably bad plastic offenders were from quickly developing populations that need assets of keep pace with waste management infrastructure and were from middle-income countries. China was profoundly the worst, contributing almost 5 billion pounds of plastic waste into the sea in 2010. the focus of this study will be on the eastern part of Australia, more specifically in Sydney. However, studies on other parts of the world have been done and the survey results, whilst predominately from Sydney, included respondents from other parts of the world, including the UK, and America. It is important not just to target and focus on one, however, look past the geographical area, as all oceans are connected. Everyone has a role to play in reducing our single-use plastic waste. With reference to figure 3 and 4, many may argue that Australia has strong recycling habits and are overall generally stable with the use of plastics, further agreeing with the idea that Australia isn't even in the top 20 culprits, so we don't need to change anything; other countries need to. Think again. Everyone is to blame. Whilst Australia isn't on

the top 20 list, they are still big culprits of the plastic problem. Woolworths alone gives out an estimated 3.2 billion plastics bags a year.

In 2017, Australia exported more than 600,000 tonnes of waste to China. With a recent ban imposed in China on all imported solid waste, Australia does not currently have the capacity to handle the volume of waste. Australia is in a recycling crisis.

Investigation

The issue

Environmental impacts Plastics are made from non-renewable natural resources such as crude oil, gas and coal. Plastic has remained the most common category of rubbish picked up on Clean Up Australia day over the last 20 years. In 2017, it made up 38% of all rubbish found. Tiny pieces of plastic, commonly known as microbeads or microplastics, are less than a millimetre in diameter. They then flow out to sea because they are too small to be filtered during sewerage treatment. Their small size means they are regularly mistaken for food by a wide range of marine life. Smaller creatures like plankton can ingest it, making its way up the food chain and onto our plates. (Plastic Free Sea, Victoria) Plastic in the ocean is responsible for killing hundreds of thousands of marine life each year. Plastic is deadly in the ocean. Marine animals like turtles can choke on plastic bags mistaken for jellyfish, seabirds get entangled and larger animals like whales can starve because their stomachs are so full of plastic they've eaten. 95% of plastic packaging is discarded after a single use. Whilst they may be convenient, they're costly to our environment. Most plastics don't biodegrade, so unless

they're recycled or repurposed, they pose a significant threat to marine wildlife. A major issue that is a result of the excessive amount of plastic human's use is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (GPGP). The GPGP is a collection of plastic trash, located between California and Hawaii. The plastic has been propelled by waves and currents and can travel thousands of miles.

The impacts of this garbage patch are detrimental. The impacts are only beginning to be felt, and further research is likely to reveal further damage to marine life, oceanography, ocean processes, and currents; the natural function of the ocean.

Ecological Dimension The issue of plastics is solemnly humans fault. We created it. We depend on it. Now we're drowning in it. (Planet or Plastic?, National Geographic, 2018) Both developed and developing nations can be thought to be dominated by a " throwaway society" where the standard is to deliver short-lived items so more can continue to create. Natural resources are perseveringly misused with a specific end goal to fulfil the general public's interest for single-use products, where reusing and reusing practices stay out of sight. Figure 6, a photograph from Life magazine in 1955, celebrates the birth of " Throwaway Living". Single-use plastics have brought great convenience, however, there has been little thought about the repercussions, and if we were to continue to generate the same amount of plastic that we do today, by 2050 there will be more plastics in the oceans in fish. (According to UN secretary general António Guterres) Unlike the water cycle, which is a closed cycle and imbalanced in the water, the amount of plastics is unchecked and potentially limitless. If society continues producing more plastic with no recycling, more will end up in landfill. There is nowhere <https://assignbuster.com/changing-social-perceptions-of-single-use-plastic-consumption/>

for it to go; nothing eats it, so it ends up in our environment and in landfill. With plastics, there is no equilibrium, we keep growing the supply of plastics and nothing happens to it; the environment suffers from our deprived habits. We, as a society, are consuming so much plastic. Australia uses over 10 million plastic bags a day – plastic bags are causing huge problems in our oceans. 50, 000 cups are used every half hour. 1 Billion coffee cups are used in Australia each year – these are not recycled.

Potential impacts on humans Plastics are entering the human natural way of life. We ingest little bits of plastic at whatever point we eat fish. It is straightforward – plastics are entering the seas and marine life are consuming, and afterward we ingest the fish. Plastics don't simply 'vanish', rather they separate into minuscule pieces which can be effortlessly swallowed by marine life – as little as zooplankton to turtles to whales. Plastics contain synthetic substances and poisons which pollute the marine life, which either result in their death, diminishing the accessible nourishment supply for different creatures in the food chain, or contaminating the prey that eats the polluted organism; eventually coming full circle (with those life forms which we devour) in people. Not exclusively is the plastics entering the human food chain, nonetheless/nevertheless it is likewise influencing the economy. The UN expressed that the damaged caused by plastic on the environment and its marine ecosystems is \$13 billion USD. This figure incorporated the cost of the beach clean-ups and the budgetary misfortune brought about by fisheries. (The Ocean Clean-up)

The 'Resisters' The 'Resisters' are the people who are resistant to change and don't seem to care or be interested in changing their habits to
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something environmentally friendly. They have an “ it doesn’t affect me” attitude. What makes them not care about the environment? Why do they not care about plastics? How do we change their attitudes? After coming across a YouTube video in research, someone said in the comments that, “ In terms of the environment, I could care less about the future of the human species. Why would it matter to me? I’ll be long gone before any severe effects begin taking place.” Currently there is widespread apathy amongst humans. They are in a habit of the ‘ throwaway society’ where they are not thought into the effects after the consumption of single-use plastic. The fact is that there is no “ away” in “ throwaway”, many do not realise how that one straw you may have had at the pub will still be here with your children’s children. Convenience plays a major role in human’s resistance to change their habits.

2.3 Psychology

In order to stop people from using single-use plastic we need to change their behaviours and attitudes. Behavioural change is not easy and does not happen overnight, however it is a step, in order to reduce the plastic footprint. What makes people change their opinions and attitudes on plastic? The ban of single-use plastic bags in Coles and Woolworths seem sufficiently honourable, however, the environmental advantages may be completely acknowledged if the ban drives a lasting change in customers’ conduct. Woolworths and Coles face a tough challenge – they are taking something away from customers, which was previously complementary, and some customers may be resentful and resistant to change as a result. Repetitive consumer behaviour is a tough cycle to disrupt and changing society’s perceptions of plastic involves breaking the habit of consumption. Behavioural and economic nudges can be used to gently ‘ nudge’ people to change their behaviour and allow people to consider their

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actions, what would otherwise be an unconscious behaviour. Economic ‘nudges’ may be local café’s charging customers less if they bring their BYO re-usable coffee cup, and recycling schemes, where they are given money to recycle their plastic bottles. Research has found that simply providing information through awareness campaigns is unlikely to change behaviour. Once we’re aware of an issue, society needs help to move from intention to action. In England, a small financial disincentive strategy was put in place to reduce the number of plastic bags used. A 5p charge was put on plastic carrier bags and a positive result concluded. England plastic bag usage dropped by over 85% and overall 6 billion plastic bags were taken out of circulation. This proves that by just adding a small price to plastic bags, it can significantly reduce the number consumed, meaning less marine life is harmed. There are many re-usable alternatives available to use; metal straws, cloth produce bags, metal drink bottles, keep-cups; the challenge is getting people to use them.

Evaluating the effectiveness of different strategies/initiatives. 2. 4. 1 ABC’s ‘War on Waste’ War on Waste features the ABC’s unrivalled ability to start national discussions and drive network activity and social change that effects the everyday lives of Australians. The unmistakably ABC TV program engages individuals to find a way to decline their exploitation of plastic. Plastic waste is an all-inclusive issue, it impacts everything. “ War on Waste” successfully drove Australians to address their own waste habits and triggering supermarkets to make change. In 2017, War on Waste reached 4.3 million viewers across Australia and was the ABC’s most successful social media campaign. (ABC, 2017) In an episode in the first season, Craig

Reucassal, the host, targets Australian households, assessing their recycling habits. The program then went back to these households to see a significant improvement, displaying how publicity and awareness can support change of perceptions towards recycling. An Australian company, 'KeepCup' sells reusable coffee cups, and following the program, the website crashed, and sales rose 400% after highlighting issues around disposable coffee cups.

David Attenborough's 'Blue Planet II' David Attenborough's 'Blue Planet II' is an eye opener to society. It raised awareness about the devastating consequences of our oceans because of humans. It captivated audiences around the world, especially in the U. K., which it became the most-watched program of 2017. The popular response of the U. K. promoted a political stance, where parliament started to put environmental issues in the forefront, SBS calling it the "Attenborough effect", and even the Queen is getting involved and is banning plastic straws and bottles on royal estates, following Attenborough's program.

National Geographic 'Planet or Plastic?' In time for Plastic Free July, National Geographic released their June issue of the magazine and their initiative called 'Planet or Plastic?'. The issue included a powerful cover (Figure 1) which sparked an interest across social media, and "is getting high praise as one of its best ever". The illustration by Jorge Gamboa, demonstrates a heartbreaking image of reality society as a whole is facing in a clear, direct way. Its ingenious way of capturing the attention of viewers has sparked a reaction and reflection of behaviour and habits.

Banning the bag Woolworths (June 20th) and Coles (July 1st) have both removed single-use plastic bags from their stores nationwide. Woolworths Group chief executive Brad Banducci said: “ We currently give out more than 3. 2 billion lightweight plastic bags a year and hence can play a significant role in reducing overall plastic bag usage.” (Woolworths Sustainability) Simon McDowell, Coles chief customer officer, said the company had been working on the plan to phase out bags for some time as “ part of our ongoing program to improve environmental outcomes throughout our business.” The reaction of the major supermarkets banning the bag received a positive response from environmentalists, however, many still question that they could have done more, regarding the amount of un-necessary plastic covering the fruit and vegetables. Woolworths state, “ Removing single-use plastic bags at the checkout is an important first step.

But we’re not stopping there. We’re working to reduce the use of plastic in both our produce area and packaging in general.” Other shoppers accused Woolworths and Coles of hypocrisy due to a large amount of plastic packaging on the produce section, and the profiteering of customers by charging for reusable options when lightweight plastic bags were previously handed out for free. (Appendix 4) Queensland University of Technology retail expert Dr Gary Mortimer wrote a piece for The Conversation, which argues the ban is just a ‘ marketing ploy’ and won’t do much for the environment. Figure 11 = Tables comparing the price of free plastic bags to the 15c plastic bags and demonstrating the potential profit the supermarkets make. The Conversation – Dr Gary Mortimer “ With each bag costing almost 3c, retailers stand to save more than A\$170 million a year in direct costs. Selling these

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new bags at 15c each, effectively creates another revenue stream with nearly A\$71 million in gross profit. (6c x 1. 18 billion units).” Appendix 5 A survey was done by ABC News exploring the responses of people about the latest removal of plastic bags. The response had a clear result: people are happy with the change. 85. 2 per cent said it’s been great, with only 14. 4 per cent saying it has ‘sucked’ and only 3 people (out of 765) saying they weren’t bothered. (ABC, Michael Collet, “Plastic bags: How are Australians coping in this brave new world without them?”, 2018). This result is equivalent with the results of my survey, where majority were in-favour of the removal, however, many do not support the removal of the bag. The main reason for disagreement with the ban is that the plastic bags were repurposed as bin-liners and pet waste (convenience), so now they ‘have to’ buy plastic bags from the supermarket. Also, others say that they don’t plan their shopping, so can’t bring their shopping bags everywhere. The backlash of the ban was contradictory. Whilst many was in support, there were many who were not. There was a customer “bag rage” which pushed the chain (Woolworths) to reverse the policy and offer the reusable bags for free until 8 July. “They just want a little extra help from us to get through the transition” said Claire Peters, Woolworths managing director, in a statement. This further proves that humans find it difficult to adjust to change. Both Woolworths and Coles have moved in a positive direction with the new partnership with REDcycle, which provides distinct bins for customers to recycle plastic bags into products, through a program called REDcycle. The REDcycle bins will be rolled out to every Woolworths and Coles store by July. (Woolworths Group)