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Waste prevention in practice: Confronting public discourses about reusing, reducing, and recycling with consumers' perceptions of wasting material possessions

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Abstract:

This research proposes a consumer perspective on waste prevention by examining how individuals cope with public discourses about reducing, reusing and recycling material possessions. We confront consumers' sayings and doings with three objectives put forward by public authorities about waste prevention: raising awareness, improving material efficacy, and promoting sustainable consumption. A qualitative-based methodology with 25 participants shows that waste is mostly equated with destroying and non-using objects, much less with buying as its primary trigger. Consumers also highlight the difficulty to fully optimize the use of their products as well as the lack of channels to recirculate unwanted, unused or broken things. Finally, they show that objects tend to stagnate in the home, a reality that is inadequately captured by public authorities through waste collection and recycling systems.

Keywords: waste prevention, material possessions, public policy discourses

Track: Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction

Waste prevention addresses the crucial issue of reducing the amount of waste generated at source and implies that measures are taken before a substance, material or product becomes waste. Waste prevention is thus intended to minimize end-of-life management that results in collecting, treating and recycling materials (European Commission, 2012). Broadly speaking, waste prevention encompasses various actions pertaining to the extraction, production, transport, distribution, purchase, use and re-use of products. Yet because the European Commission defines waste as “any substance or object which the holder discards or intends or is required to discard” (EU Waste Framework Directive, 2008, p.9), public policy discourses tend to target end-users by enticing them to both minimize their consumption and optimize the use and life span of objects (ADEME, 2016). Such emphasis put on the consumer is evidenced by Corvellec (2016) who shows that 90% of the 51 initiatives that have been singled out to participate in Swedish waste prevention competitions relate to consumption. However, how consumers tackle the expectations of exemplarity that are placed on them by public authorities remains poorly understood.

In this study, we examine whether household mundane practices align with waste prevention discourses and how consumers conceive of wasting objects. More precisely, we try to uncover how individuals cope with three objectives that animate waste prevention: greater awareness about the need to prevent waste, increased material efficiency of products that they possess, and broader commitments in sustainable consumption (Corvellec, 2016). In order to address our objectives, we explore how mundane objects that have been bought, received as gifts or inherited are dealt with over time. In particular, we focus on when and why objects are thrown away, resold or given, but also kept in cupboards, attics and garages because they are considered useless and disappointing or end up broken. We also explore if and how individuals refer to waste in such situations.

2. Conceptual background: From food waste to solid waste

The issue of household waste has been extensively examined in the context of food waste where it is associated with losses that occur during the retail or food consumption phases (Porpino, 2016; Quested and Johnson, 2009). Various drivers of food waste have also been identified as well as motivations to minimize its impacts (Graham-Rowe, Jessop, and Sparks, 2014; Quested, Marsh, Stunell, and Parry, 2013). However, behavioral, experimental and declarative approaches that are used in these studies fail to account for the complexity of the

material, normative and social elements that shape a range of practices involved in food waste such as planning, shopping routines, buying (and overbuying), storing, cooking, processing food at home and gardening (Ganglbauer, Fitzpatrick, and Comber, 2013). From a different angle, practice theory offers a clearer understanding of how food becomes wasted. It shows that social norms, education standards, material infrastructures, household organization, inconstancies, unexpected situations as well as public discourses on environmental responsibility and food safety may conflict with each other, thus creating food losses (Evans, 2012; Hebrok and Boks 2017; Watson and Meah 2012),

In contrast with food, objects are not affected by the problem of perishability deriving from a limited shelf life. Not do they seem to be subjected to the same moral condemnations that surround food waste (Bolton and Alba, 2012). As a result, how material possessions may be conceived as wasted remains poorly understood. If evoked, this may result from technical, psychological or planned obsolescence that refers to the voluntary or involuntary loss of competitiveness, usefulness and value of objects because better and cheaper alternatives are introduced into the marketplace or because people themselves develop new preferences, requirements and tastes (Cooper 2004; Gultinan 2009; Levinthal and Purohit 1989). Obsolescence contributes to waste to the extent that objects that might still be used, for example by reselling, bartering, giving, renting and lending them, results in replacing them prior to their end-of-life.

From the opposite perspective, Bolton and Alba (2012) examine “consumer aversion to unused utility” as a psychological mechanism that is likely to minimize waste. Through a series of experiments, they demonstrate that people, when given a choice, try to avoid waste arising from unused utility. However, both a declarative methodology and a non-naturalistic approach obscure the actual circumstances in which objects enter the home in practice. Hence, in order to examine how consumers conceive of wasting objects and cope with public authorities’ discourses, we adopt a qualitative and ethnographic method. Following previous approaches to food waste that draw on practice theory (Evans 2012; Ganglbauer et al. 2013; Watson and Meah 2012), we explore how objects are integrated in and disintegrated from mundane practices that prove out to be in tension with public discourses about waste prevention. We next detail our qualitative study that trace objects in the home and examine when, how and why people feel these are “wasted.”

3. Context and methods

This research takes place in France where the national environment and energy management agency (ADEME) implements waste reduction campaigns that fully resonate with similar initiatives in developing countries (Guerrero, Maas and Hogland, 2013; Corvellec, 2016). ADEME (2016) seeks to raise awareness among consumers by pointing that waste has increased dramatically in recent years and that a 10% decrease in household waste per capita should be achieved by 2020. At the same time, adopting a circular economy approach, it promotes various solutions that should avoid destroying objects such as reselling, donating and reusing them. However, because ADEME aligns with the EU's definition of waste that semantically equates unwanted objects with rubbish (European Commission - Waste Framework Directive, 2008), its communication undermines its virtuous enticements. The website that ADEME has created – *reduisonsnosdechets.fr*, meaning “let's reduce our waste” – suggests that things that people want to get rid of are junk instead of “objects” or “products” that may be reused. Hence, while prompting people to make objects recirculate, public discourses assimilate useless objects to waste and hence normalize their destruction through curbside and bulky waste collections (Shultz, Witkowski, and Kilbourne, 2008).

To gain a comprehensive approach of how people conceive of waste, twenty-eight object-focused interviews (Miller 2008) were conducted during a two-year qualitative study in different rooms and storage places of our 25 participants' houses. As a starting point, interviews began with grand tour questions about their favorite activities, e.g., clothing, books, childcare material, trinkets, dishes, CDs, DVDs, appliances, etc., and objects variously bought, received as gifts or inherited. We sought to understand what categories of objects and how many were frequently acquired and/or received, and where these were located. When duplicate or multiple purchases were found, we discussed the reasons for buying a new product and what the former had (was meant to) become. Places such as cupboards, garages, attics and basements were also explored to examine which objects are stored and why. Unless participants themselves introduced the topic of waste, there was no direct mention of it during the interviews. Of the 27 conversations that resulted, 18 were audio-recorded and 9 were conducted in video format. While the former aimed at gaining a general understanding of participants' consumption habits, purchasing practices, multiple possessions of objects, way of using products, reasons for stopping using them, and perceptions of waste in the house, the latter was more focused on particular practices and related spaces such as the kitchen as a place for cooking, the garage for DIY activities, the bathroom for dressing and making-up, or the living room for reading, listening to music, watching films, storing books, CDs, etc. We

re-interviewed 3 participants to gain a broader knowledge of their consumption practices over time and took special care of informants' feelings about their practices and what they were themselves spontaneously considering as wasteful. We also explored in depth when their awareness of waste had begun, if this had led to any behavioral change and, if so, which one.

Profiles were selected gradually by introducing variance in practices but also in age (17 to 82 years old, 38 on average), gender (10 men and 15 women), family situation (9 singles, 4 couples, 12 family), occupational status (4 students, 14 employees, 5 retired, 2 unemployed), geographical location (10 in the Paris region and 15 in various provinces), and socio-cultural origin (7 had their families outside France). Interviews and illustrations resulted in 411 single-spaced pages of transcripts and approximately 6 hours of video footage. They were then coded and analyzed through the theoretical grid of public policy discourses, i.e., awareness and representations of waste, practices that support or impede material efficiency and ways of conceiving sustainable consumption.

4. Waste prevention in practices

Our data first show that waste prevention is associated by our participants with avoiding destructing and non-using objects. However, except for unwanted products such as gifts and heirlooms that have been involuntarily received, acquiring them is less questioned as the primary trigger of waste. Second, participants allude to the difficulties optimizing the use and material efficiency of objects and they also elaborate on the lack of appropriate channels to recirculate objects. Third, while they show little engagement in reducing their levels of consumption as well as in lending or swapping their goods with others, they similarly often fail to repair products. As a result, our findings show that objects stagnate in the home, thus accounting for the hidden part of waste that is not collected nor reused or recycled.

4.1 Raising awareness of waste

Waste prevention initiatives first and foremost focus on “raising awareness that waste is a problem” (Corvellec, 2016, p.7). Our results show that participants are fully aware of wasting objects when these are destroyed. While they mostly refer to the end-of-life state of objects as a natural and valid reason to get rid of them, they however consider destroying them as the core cause of waste. In addition, participants refer to non-using objects as a second ground for waste. For example, Léa, a 26-year-old young mother, purchased a juice extractor that she

does not use any more. Because she was pregnant, Léa deemed necessary to eat healthy but she has now given up this practice, not only because she delivered her baby but also because she was “*a little disappointed with the quality of the product.*” However, she feels guilty for having bought an expensive kitchen appliance that she has used four or five months only, “*on a whim.*” Disappointment with a purchase is also another reason to stop using products as Gisèle (F, 82, retired nurse) also illustrates. Because of mobility problems, she had to turn to Internet to purchase clothes, the poor quality of which leads her to donate those clothes without even having worn them. Third, people also refer to waste when they receive objects that they do not choose and that do not please them. This situation is particularly challenging, socially speaking, when it pertains to gifts. Commercial gifts such as goody bags, paper bags, small tokens, frequently end up in the trash and they are subjected to limited deliberation when they do not match the recipient’s expectations or needs. Private “failed gifts” (Roster, 2006) also represent troublesome and ambiguous situations as destroying them would be felt as a profanity. Caroline (26, assistant professor) explains: “*I got rid of all the things that friends gave me for my house warming party. I told people: I do not need anything. I hate trinkets!! But some still brought something, a photo frame, eggcups...I managed to pass them on to family members.*” Caroline’s comment highlights that she is uncomfortable with both keeping things that she does not like in her house and sacrificing the use that others could make of these objects. Hence, waste prevention encompasses avoiding both destroying unwanted objects and making little use of them. Yet, the crucial point about awareness of waste relates to the reasons why objects enter the house, an issue that is examined below.

4.2 Promoting sustainable consumption

Sustainable consumption requires changing people’s consumption habits, for example by forsaking the acquisition of products in favor of borrowing them from acquaintances or through renting/lending platforms. Yet, renting objects may be difficult as it implies relinquish what is considered essential, even for a short period of time. As for Léa, Maxime provides a basic example of such situation: “*Imagine that you are at your friend’s home and you see his blender: “Oh, that’s cool! It would be nice if you could lend me your blender. I would be happy to make me a smoothie one of these days but I do not know when.” The risk is that the person answers: “Yeah, sure! But I too would like to make me a smoothie one day but I do not know when.” It might happen that we will want to make smoothies the same day!*” Because objects are not only material supports but also magical tools that (re)activate desire,

nurture the power to act and foster the ability to create (Sartre, 1943), the objective of making full use of products by lending or swapping them is practically unreachable for a number of items of everyday usage.

Informants may also be quite critical towards poor quality products that they buy involuntarily. Gisèle above says she is “disgusted” by the clothes that she buys through mail order catalogues and hence donates or even throws away. Likewise, participants refer to electronic objects that are not intended to last long because of so-called planned obsolescence. For instance, Gaël (M, 44, cleaning person) indicates that “*repair shops have difficulties to find replacing pieces because manufacturers do everything to encourage consumption, not sustainability.*” To avoid waste, some promotes more sustainability in participating, like Claire, in “*a Facebook group that gives objects to people. Many are interested in acquiring things, so objects can really be useful for others. They can be reused even if they are old and a bit damaged.*”

While most participants emphasize that objects must be really unusable and not repairable to be thrown away, few of them make a real diagnosis of product failures. When in doubt that the object is really out of order, most of our participants keep objects that are broken down, like Maxime (M, 25, self-employed) who acknowledges that: “*this blender, I got it from my mum’s friend but it never worked, and hence I put it there, saying that I had to throw it away... but it’s still there! I should have it repaired but I’m lazy, I think...*” As a result, objects stagnate in closets, cupboards and remote places of the home like attics and garages when people ignore what to do with unusable products or how to fix them. Some participants like Philippe (M, 63, CRM executive) also refrain from throwing technically obsolete products to the bin – such as audio and video cassettes – because “*these are not properly recycled in France at the moment.*” Similarly, he explains that while he likes to put metal items on the sidewalk on bulky items collection days “*because it makes poor people happy to retrieve recoverable materials,*” he avoids depositing whole electronic appliances “*that they will destroy and hammer, putting plastic parts anywhere.*” Consequently, he prefers to keep useless objects than to imagine these ending in landfills. In short, while public discourses promote sustainability through reuse or repair (Corvellec, 2016), this seems not fully achieved by many consumers. Participants are torn between their awareness of waste and appropriate solutions to properly recycle or to make objects recirculate.

4.3 Practical difficulties to optimize objects’ use

Corvellec (2016) shows that “increasing material efficiency” is one of the three main types of actions that are promoted by waste prevention initiatives. However, practical life situations raise various issues that render this objective inapplicable. As shown above, disappointment with products may lead to stop using them without knowing who could be interested in their reuse. This is all the more so when objects are costly because their poor performance prevents their holders from donating or reselling them as for Léa’s expensive juice extractor. Also, ordinary situations may result in wasting products that are bought too impulsively. Jean (M, 62, doctor) for example acknowledges that when he needs materials to fix or tinker something in the house, *“he wants the job to be done quickly so he runs to the store and buys. Whereas if he had taken five minutes and look in his toolbox, he would have realized that he had everything that he needed.”* Jean’s comment illustrates that acquiring products without a full awareness of what he already possesses results in a failure in the optimization of the use of previously purchased products.

Differently, not fully using products may also result from duplicate purchases. This happens when participants fear a product failure as for Elisabeth and Patricia who both have a strong interest in cooking and respectively hold two fridges and two kitchen scales, because they *“desperately need these materials in case of defects or breakdown.”* Elisabeth in particular has been affected by the loss all the food that was stored in her fridge that broke down few years ago. Likewise, Patricia, a 58-year old talented pastry cook, cannot imagine lacking a kitchen scale for her favorite practice. These cases provide evidence that matching production and use is not achieved, although public discourses promote such principle as an abstract motto (Corvellec, 2016).

4. Conclusions

Our research focuses on waste prevention through consumers’ mundane practices. Based on a qualitative methodology involving 25 consumers, we show that these account for waste prevention and avoid destroying and throwing things away. However, at the same time findings also highlight that they express difficulties in optimizing the use of objects, e.g., recirculating, swapping, lending or repairing what they possess. Furthermore, our research brings to light that they barely conceive of waste as primarily deriving from the acquisition of objects, which may be done impulsively, for a temporary purpose or result from failed gifts.

In addition, how participants relate to waste appears closely associated with objects’ trajectories in their daily activities (Appadurai, 1986; Epp and Price, 2010), e.g., dressing,

wearing make-up, watching movies, having a child, cooking, that all require and entail consumption at particular “moments” (Warde, 2005, p. 137). Waste prevention is thus strongly dependent on the way objects are integrated in and (dis)integrated from practices. Once objects are integrated in a practice, they may contribute to the waste phenomenon if they are not used or if they are cleared because they stop bringing utility and pleasure. Hence, waste occurs when objects are disintegrated from practices and/or spaces whatever public policy discourses may normatively urge consumers to do. In addition, the lack of naturalized infrastructures to make objects recirculate between people contradicts the so-called public objectives to foster sustainable consumption and circular economy. In other words, public policies encourage a “double waste disposal paradox” (Shultz, Witkowski, and Kilbourne, 2008) whereby infrastructures dedicated to garbage collection fail to address acquisition as the primary mechanisms of waste generation and waste reduction.

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