

# Practice Theory: How The Consumer's Limited Agency Hampers Climate Action

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In October 2018, the International Panel on Climate Change released a report stating that there are twelve years left to prevent the global temperature rising by 1.5°C which would lead to climate catastrophe (IPCC, 2018). The report highlighted that while climate change is a natural phenomenon, it has been accelerated through anthropogenic means. A wave of environmental action across the world, including demonstrations and civil disobedience from Extinction Rebellion and student strikes with Fridays for Future which demanded that governments take on structural and systematic changes to combat climate change. While governments have often been remiss to enforce environmental regulations which directly affect consumers, due to evidence that suggests that current patterns of consumption are unsustainable, calls for individuals to take action to reduce their environmental footprint have also been made (Akenji, 2014). Although economically-liberal governments have often argued that consumer choice is the best force for directing sustainability in consumption, government regulation has successfully created swift acts of sustainable consumerism through incentives to make 'green' choices and regulations to prevent or discourage unsustainable actions (*Ibid*). With such a pressing deadline of twelve years, while the need to change habitualised behaviours is clear, to lay the responsibility for this change with the consumer is inefficient as their agency and potential for impact are limited through the practice of consumption. Instead, when viewed through the framework of Practice Theory (PT), it is apparent that in order to rapidly alter non-social practices of consumption, namely common consumption in a supermarket, change must be applied upon the practice and not upon the carrier of the practice in order to prove effective.

### Practice Theory for Consumption

Practice theory has been used across the humanities and social sciences and was introduced by Shove (2005) and Warde (2005) into the fields of consumption and green consumerism (Halkeir *et al.*, 2011; Perera *et al.*, 2015). A practice, which is defined by the popularly cited Andreas Reckwitz (2002: p. 249 in Warde, 2005), is a "routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements interconnected to each other.". With the aforementioned elements consisting of bodily and mental activities (in Halkier *et al.*, 2011: p. 4). It is, again to lend from the work of Reckwitz (2002: p. 250), therefore the routinization of the movement of bodies, handling of objects, treatment of subjects, describing of things, and understanding of the world. Thus, it is through the examination of these elements that practice theory offers an insight into the nature and process of consumption (Warde, 2005). Moreover, practice theory advances the examination of consumer behaviour as consumption is a requirement of and involved in almost every practice. As Warde (2005: p. 137) points out, it is *wants* which emanate from practice and in turn drive consumption. Therefore, to understand how consumers make their choices, it is imperative to examine them empirically as practices with a focus on the means of consuming, as it is the engagement in a practice that explains the consumption over the qualities of the individual or the item itself.

Furthermore, as a theory that draws from constructivist schools of thought, PT seeks to avoid descriptions of practices that presuppose a shared understanding that create an unlikely degree of commonality as this would require that understandings, procedures, and engagements are uniform across all carriers of the practice. Therefore, in the instance of consumption, while a practice may appear uniform across all carriers, it is necessary to recognise that these practices are internally differentiated and are not performed identically. Were this the case, it would carry

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the implication that practices cannot change as there can be no variation in performance from carriers. Instead, practices continuously change and this change that occurs within a practice is driven by affect (Rösch, 2020). This affect is triggered by the carrier's reflection upon the practice however this creates a difficulty in the observation of practices themselves as it is reflection that affects change. As a result, this essay will utilise observations from previous academic empirical analyses of sustainable consumption practices, which while not perfect, serve to avoid the replication of reflective influence through primary sources.

## Pressure for Consumer Action

As human consumption in both developed and developing countries outstrips relative growth of GDP and populations, on a surface level it is clear why the push for climate action may fall upon the individual consumer (Akenji, 2014). As defined by Akenji (p. 13), acts of sustainable or green consumerism concern "the production, promotion, and preferential consumption of goods and services on the basis" that they claim to be environmentally sustainable, contrary to regular consumption which pays no special regard to the environmental impact of merchandise. Goods to be avoided by a green consumer are largely those which consume large amounts of energy, use excessive or non-recyclable packaging, or involve materials or ingredients which cause environmental damage in their production, use, and/or disposal (Beatson *et al.*, 2020). A green consumer will still engage in the practice of consumption, but their choice will be dominated by the environmental impact of the good. This has been described by the European Commission (2007), among other organisations, as a driver for innovation and solution to the unsustainability of current consumption due to the need for organisations to curb the environmental impact of their products in order to meet the demands made by sustainability-conscious potential customers. However, while the demand of consumers is a key driver for innovation, this approach has been criticised in its utility as a solution to reducing emissions and pollution within the required timeframe, as relying upon a consumer-driven approach still encourages over-consumption as individuals consume beyond their environmental means, exceeding any gains made by the increased efficiency.

## Agency and Efficacy of Climate; Conscious Consumers

Before discussing further, it must be indicated that the practice of household consumption is, in the modern-day, far removed from the practice of production (Akenji, 2014). A consumer is the carrier of consumption and this practice revolves around their supermarket or shop of choice, where products are not produced but are placed ready for consumption by the individual. To take sustainable action, a consumer must select a product that has the greatest environmental benefit (or least negative impact) from the range of goods which the retailer has provided for them. While there are a variety of factors which influence the choice itself which will be discussed throughout this essay, it is this removal from the process which makes a turn in practice most difficult, as it means that the practice is identical for purchasing both a sustainable and a non-sustainable product; select from the shelf and purchase. Some have argued that it is this removal from and the resulting extreme similarity of the process which prevents consumers from feeling a sense of responsibility for the goods which they purchase, and as a result, individual-level behavioural change is harder to motivate (Beatson *et al.*, 2020). To take a Practice Theory perspective, this can be distilled as a lack of opportunity and trigger for reflection upon the consequences of the practice, thereby preventing the opportunity for a turn in practice. Instead, the responsibility for the consequences of the end product is shouldered back and forth between governments, producers, vendors, consumers, and disposal services. A lack of accountability is a key barrier in the motivation for change and therefore as the overarching authority, it has been convincingly argued that it is governments who must apportion responsibility in order to create impactful change across the system (Cherry *et al.*, 2015).

In addition, knowledge is a key aspect to consider in PT, but in the instance of consumption, many consumers are not confident in the accuracy of the information presented to them by corporations regarding the sustainability of products (Beatson *et al.*, 2020). The act of greenwashing, whereby corporations intentionally mislead consumers about the environmental impact of their product, claiming to be more green than they really are, has become increasingly important in consumer discourse (Saito, 2018). As the popularity of and range of sustainable products has grown, branding to promote items as having such qualities has also increased (Perera *et al.*, 2018). While this branding should promote a change in behaviour towards green products, Perera *et al.* (2018) have highlighted that

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consumers have been reticent to fully embrace green marketing due to scepticism, and as a result, engage in a mix of green and non-green processes. In order for consumers to have more agency in their decision-making process, it is necessary for stricter regulation of claims of sustainability and their corresponding eco-labels which act as a shorthand assurance of sustainability for consumers. This is a call that has come from many consumers, yet it is governments and other regulatory bodies who must enact more stringent checks to ensure that consumers have accurate information at the point of purchase and are able to confidently make sustainable choices.

Further to this, as a highly routinized and necessary behaviour, changes to non-social consumption practices, including grocery shopping, would require an increase in the cognitive load of the practice on the consumer (Warde, 2005). With the volume of individual goods and therefore individual choices which must be made, for a consumer to confidently ensure that their every purchase is truly sustainable is a large time investment and a mental burden (Beatson *et al.*, 2020). This is further exacerbated by the existing lack of immediately recognisable visual cues such as eco-labels and branding and lack of trust in the integrity of such cues, which serves to make it more difficult for consumers to make a responsible choice. Such a challenge and the resulting mental load (in what is an otherwise 'light' practice when disregarding concerns of sustainability) often leads the individual to see the task as insurmountable and so it is abandoned (Autio *et al.*, 2009). Overwhelming the individual consumer through placing the responsibility to undertake this load at the penalty of environmental ruin hinders effective action as carriers disengage and avoid reflection, in turn preventing the opportunity for change. It has been found, however, that while the single intervention of fact-based education is not effective, visual cues such as eco-labels combined with economic incentives have been successful in fostering pro-environmental consumption (Nilsson *et al.*, 2011). Once again, this is a change that is not driven by the carriers of the practice but must be applied to the practice in order to trigger reflection. This may originate from the producers of a product, the retailer, and/or policymakers, however as it must be done to the practice, not by the carrier of the practice, it is therefore unproductive to rely upon individual-level behaviour change to be effective without an outside influence.

## Excess Baggage; Wales' Carrier Bag Ban

A prime example of how a turn in the practice of non-social consumption through the application of a change to the practice can be found in the implementation of the Single Use Carrier Bags (SUCB) Charge in Wales. Prior to the introduction of the charge, SUCBs had become a core object in non-social consumption and is therefore a prime example of practice (Poortinga *et al.*, 2016). The high routinization of the consumption of SUCBs, especially those made from plastic, had been embedded to an "unconscious" degree (Poortinga *et al.*, 2013: 241). In order to reduce the avoidable negative environmental impact which the production, use, and disposal of SUCBs has on the environment, two turns in practice were required. The first, wherein the intervention gives the individual direct cause to reflect upon their use of SUCBs and the consequences, and the second, whereby the reflection has the greater impact of adding the action of bringing a reusable bag with them before engaging in consumption behaviour.

In order to achieve this, in 2011 the Welsh Government introduced a £0.05 levy for each single-use carrier bag which disrupted the routine of saying 'yes' to a SUCB and instead forced the consumer to reflect upon the practice. It is upon this reflection, alongside the economic incentive not to take a carrier bag, which creates the turn as 'taking' a bag changes to 'purchasing' a bag. While the financial penalty for taking a SUCB is almost negligible, it is enough to have successfully changed the practice in Wales as SUCB use fell by 71% in the first three years of the policy (Winning Moves and Icaro Consulting, 2019). An increased number of consumers in Wales have reported bringing a reusable carrier bag while visiting the supermarket, and the number of people who 'always' bring their own bag to the supermarket increased by over 20% (Poortinga *et al.*, 2013:245). The SUCB Charge in Wales – which was introduced by the government, enforced by retailers, and engaged with by consumers – has not only successfully disrupted the routine of taking a single-use bag, leading to a reduction in production and therefore the associated negative environmental impacts; It has replaced this routinized consumption, with the active decision of non-consumption which has then developed into a routinized action exemplifying the great impact governmental intervention in consumer practices can have.

## Conclusion

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As this essay has discussed and exemplified through the use of practice theory, consumers have limited agency in the practice of consumption with regards to environmental choices. As they are removed from the practice of production and procurement wherein the environmental impact of a product's lifecycle is determined, consumers as individuals bear a much greater burden when made responsible for enacting effective change. Actions can be taken at a consumer level, however, in order to drive a turn in practice and create a swift change, the carrier must be given a cause to reflect. This cause to reflect is best triggered by a force upon the practice, rather than upon the consumer. Therefore, a multi-level approach is most effective in the fight against pollution and climate change. This limited agency can be overcome through government-led, and to a lesser extent producer, and retailer, interruptions in practice which cause reflection and would lead to a turn within the practice. This has been exemplified by the use of the SUCB charge in Wales, whereby government intervention which was implemented by retailers and influenced consumers has seen a dramatic reduction in environmental impact created through a turn in routinized behaviour.

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