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# Hidden Mountain

## The Social Avoidance of Waste

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This article considers the neglected area of disposition, the nature of our relationship with waste. Marketing tactics are complicit in a throwaway culture, so how can we better theorize our relationship to waste? The authors submit that to maintain control, we are encouraged to keep waste in its place—out of sight and out of mind. This is achieved through systemic smoothing mechanisms such as our socialization against waste, the role of trash cans, and the work of garbage collectors. By exposing the detritus of consumption, the “waste mountain,” a macromarketing analysis helps us confront the systemic avoidance of waste. As such, this constitutes an initial contribution to marketing as social engagement and also to future policy development. We connect the rendering invisible or hidden aspect of waste to what Bauman has termed the *economics of deception* prevalent within consumer society.

**Keywords:** *disposition; waste; rubbish; systemic mechanisms; consumption*

### Acquisition, Consumption and Disposition

**Consume:** **1.** To take in as food; eat or drink up. **2a.** To expend; use up. **b.** To purchase (goods or services) for direct use or ownership. **3.** To waste; squander. **4.** To destroy totally.<sup>1</sup>

Despite Jacoby's (1978) call for consideration of the full cycle of consumption, research in marketing has largely ignored disposition processes. Exceptions include examinations of the antecedents of disposal decisions (e.g., Arnould, Price, and Zinkhan. 2002; DeBell and Dardis 1979; Hanson 1981; Jacoby, Berning, and Dietvorst 1977), including the effect of perceived value on such decisions (Hibbert and Horne 2002), attitudes toward recycling (e.g., Alwitt and Berger 1993; McCarty and Shrum 1993; Thøgersen and Grunert-Beckmann 1997), the implications of reverse marketing channels (Fuller and Allen 1996; Zikmund and Stanton 1971), and consumer responses to disposable containers (Marquardt, McGann, and Makens 1974). Although consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) has engendered a more insightful treatment of the full cycle of consumption, including disposition (see Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Sherry 1990), the general lionization

of consumption by interpretive researchers may have marginalized disposition even further. Consumption is, after all, currently conceptualized as a sacred process to be celebrated, a cornerstone in the construction of identity (McKay 1997). Disposition, on the other hand, is far more secular and mundane.

Limited though the study of disposition is, the disposal of waste is marginalized even further. However, the waste produced by consumption is not only relevant, providing as it does a tangible record of that consumption (De Graff, Wann, and Naylor 2001), it is also vitally important to understanding the complete consumer experience. The treadmill of consumption produces not only a constant flow of waste but also endless decisions about the value of consumption objects and what to purchase or discard (Dyer and Maronick 1988; Granzen and Olson 1991; Schwepker and Cornwell 1991; Singhapakdi and LaTour 1991). These decisions are often based on socially and culturally constructed criteria, leaving the value of our

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possessions eternally in flux. Moreover, these criteria are easily manipulated by macro political phenomena, which script our behavior. This article addresses some of these concerns. It explores our relationship with waste and examines the important interface between societal infrastructures and consumer attitudes.

In our examination of waste, we remain mindful of the significance of consumption practices to the relations between individuals (Dolan 2002). Dolan argues that the Gramscian logic of hegemony is a good way to acknowledge the many interconnected ideological systems that coexist within any particular social system. This article helps readers reflect on such assertions by focusing on waste. Put simply, capitalism maintains control not just through violence and political and economic coercion but also through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the middle classes become the commonsense values of all.

It can be argued that Gramsci's theory suggests that subordinated groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group not because they are physically or mentally induced to do so, nor because they are ideologically indoctrinated, but because they have reason of their own. (Strinati 1995, 166)

A consensus culture developed in which people in the working class identified their own good with the good of the middle classes, and thus, rather than revolt, they helped to maintain the status quo. Such analysis is helpful if we consider how the present dominant social paradigm (cf. Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997) implicitly suggests that our systemic waste collection processes are efficient at dealing with the residues of the system. Indeed, this is so axiomatic that it is commonsense and rarely, if ever, questioned. At an individual level, because trash is quickly removed to trash cans and collected from our places of residence (literally taken away from us) on a regular basis, this essentially relieves us from any further responsibility. This is what is referred to here as the *social avoidance of waste*.

In this article, the authors open up such avoidance to question. In doing so, they revisit one of Jacoby, Berning, and Dietvorst's (1977) assertions, "As the amount of available storage space increases, the probability that an item will be kept will increase, and the probability that it will be thrown away will decrease" (p. 27) and juxtapose this against the now widely perceived reality of "Marketing and the Tragedy of the Commons," where Shultz and Holbrook (1999) help us to realize that storage space is not unending (and the Commons is rapidly disappearing)! Therefore, as a clear social consequence of marketing, how we dispose of waste needs to be reconsidered at the systemic level and in terms of how this impacts policy and the household. Shultz

and Holbrook (1999) also ask us to reconsider a positive role for technology in communicating Commons-friendly behavior. Waste needs to be recognized and confronted in policy discussion in the context of our ecological footprints, the limited use of resources, and the discussion around forms of waste disposal or energy (e.g., Wackernagel 2007; Pimentel 2007). All of these issues clearly locate waste as an important issue within the macromarketing domain. If we are able to locate discussion of waste not as one of Nason's (1989) "unforeseen effects" considered only in hindsight but rather as an "internality" caused by imperfect information, it may be that technology could help, given its ability to enable access to pertinent information. This challenge provides us with the opportunity to refocus on "marketing systems performance" (Fisk 2006, 215). In this regard, how we deal with the waste question in our theory also contributes to much needed sustainable supply chain analysis (Fisk 2006).

### The Slumbering, Festering Beast

We are a nation of slobs. Unimaginative, lazy, selfish, filthy in our habits and damn the consequences. If we had the choice, we wouldn't keep ourselves as pets. Skunks would be easier to live with. (Girling 2002, 18)

The environmental lexicon bulges with references to "waste mountains," "litter escalation," "throwaway cultures," and "landfill capacity exhaustion," which are characteristic of Western consumer society. Waste is painted as a slumbering, festering beast, soon to wake and ravage the earth. Such analogies can be supported by readily available statistics. In North America, the Media Foundation's Adbusters organization (<http://www.adbusters.org/home/>) regularly ridicules the "pig-like" waste generated there as well as on the other continents. In the European Union, each individual generates approximately 450 kg. (approximately 1,000 lbs.) of waste per year (Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [DEFRA] 2007). Moreover, in the United Kingdom, citizens throw away nearly 30 million tons of garbage every year, and this figure continues to rise. Standard critiques focus on the shortage of landfill facilities, which currently house 62 percent of the United Kingdom's waste (House of Commons Select Committee 2007). Meanwhile, apocalyptic press articles speak of a garbage crisis and question where tomorrow's rubbish will be kept (Grogan 1997; Girling 2002).

Notwithstanding these statistics, our disposal habits go relatively unchecked. While there have been numerous studies of waste commissioned by waste management authorities, these rarely find their way into public or academic domains. The studies that emerge within marketing

are predominantly managerial and tend to use aggregated data, observing generic trends and waste generation patterns (e.g., Thøgersen 1993). While superficially useful, these studies are limited in facilitating an appreciation of the nuances underlying waste creation.

Waste has been addressed to some degree in other disciplines. For example, the pop-sociologist Vance Packard (1960) provided a wonderfully accessible exposition of the issue in his second book, *The Waste Makers*. With his finger firmly pointed at U.S. industry and marketers in particular, Packard uncovers many of the ways (e.g., planned product obsolescence) in which, in a saturated market, consumers are encouraged to consume ever-increasing quantities of goods at an ever-increasing pace. Jean Baudrillard (1970) questions the assertion that waste is dysfunctional, insisting instead that wasteful consumption allows us to feel alive. He argues that only with greater understanding of waste will its true function within society be uncovered. Thompson (1979) offers one of the few works to consider the dynamic nature of waste and the fluctuating value of the things we own. Martin O'Brien (1999) extends this work, raising issues on which a sociology of garbage might be constructed. However, O'Brien (1999) argues that even within sociology, waste has not received the attention it deserves. He suggests it is treated "as if it were literally immaterial, as if it existed in a world apart from the one we inhabit in our daily, routine lives" (p. 262). This has been more recently redressed with George Ritzer's extension of Weber's notions of rationalization into a discussion of the "globalization of nothing" (see Beilharz et al. 2004).

Within economics, Smith (1972) considers the cost to the consumer of recycling versus disposal, while Fullerton and Kinnaman (1996) measure the impact of related charges on the volume of waste produced. Schor (1998) offers an engaging analysis of the material overload caused by wasteful consumption. She challenges us to consider how much we really require and examines trends toward downshifting and voluntary simplicity.

Recent responses to apparent consumption excesses and efforts to challenge consumption are now attracting the attention of consumer researchers (e.g., Kozinets and Handelman 2004; McDonald et al. 2006; Fraj and Martinez 2006). While considering distribution and public policy, Dholakia and Dholakia (1978) highlighted that socialist countries had concerns over the Western model of retailing due to its high cost and social waste.

However, it is arguably within anthropology where one is offered perhaps the greatest depth of research on waste. Rathje has researched extensively in the area and is probably best known for the development of the Garbage Project. With more than three decades of study in the field, he applies modern-day archaeological techniques to the examination of contemporary waste and

recycling habits in what has become known as "garbology." *Rubbish: The Archaeology of Garbage* is perhaps his most famous contribution (see also Rathje 1984; 1991; Rathje and Murphy 1992; Wilk and Rathje 1982). Rathje contends that garbage provides the key to understanding what consumers actually do rather than what they say they do. Wallendorf and Reilly (1983) have also used consumers' household garbage to examine cultural differences in consumption habits.

To recap, using Jacoby's (1978) work as a guide, research into disposition is important because consumer disposal decisions can have a significant impact on both individuals and the environment. Research in this area would also help to complete analysis of the cycle of consumption, providing a more complete picture of the consumer. Moreover, many marketing tactics encourage the "throwaway spirit," and we, as marketing academics, have a moral obligation to improve our understanding of waste in particular. The research reported here represents an initial step in this process, as it seeks to elucidate the nature of our relationship with waste. The initial premise was that consumers are socialized into avoiding waste. Specifically, the authors were concerned that decades of Keep Britain Tidy campaigns (Environmental Campaigns [ENCAMS] 2001) and Keep America Beautiful crusades (Heywood 2002), years of early-morning or late-night garbage collection, and the everyday functioning of trash cans may have rendered waste invisible. That is, the tendency for individuals to experience waste in a fleeting, almost ethereal manner translates into a societal failure to truly experience and therefore acknowledge waste. This presents a particular empirical problem for macromarketers who wish to engage with how the issue of waste is rendered invisible and, following Fisk (2006), to consider what impact this might have on marketing systems. Bauman (2008) comments as follows:

In addition to being an economics of excess and waste, consumerism is for this reason also an economics of deception. As with the excess and waste, deception does not signal its malfunctioning. On the contrary—it is a symptom of its good health and of its being on the right track; a distinctive mark of the sole regime under which the society of consumers may be assured of survival. . . . The society of consumers derives its animus and momentum from the disaffection it itself expertly produces. It provides the prime case of a process which Thomas Mathiesen has recently described under the name of "silent silencing" (of potential system-born dissent and protest) through the stratagem of "absorption"—meaning that "the attitudes and actions which in origin are transcendent (that is, threatening the system with explosion or implosion-Z.B.) are integrated in the prevailing order in such a way that dominant interests

continue to be served. This way, they are made unthreatening to the prevailing order.” I would add that they are concerted into a major resource of the reproduction of that order. (P. 153)

This provides an incentive for macromarketers to investigate the causes and consequences of the hidden mountain.

## Methodology

Our direct experience with the waste we produce tends to be limited. Thus, it is often difficult for us to explore our thoughts and feelings about that waste. To consider how to engage consumer informants on their experiences of the issue at hand, the authors first had to confront and detail their own personal experiences. Thus, one of the researchers undertook subjective personal introspection (SPI) as a way of engaging with the difficulties of articulating personal thoughts about waste. SPI further allowed the authors to consider what kinds of issues emerge when they allow themselves to reflect on rubbish. SPI has been employed successfully by researchers interrogating their own mental processes (see Holbrook 1986, 1987, 1988; Gould 1995; Shankar 2000) and is quite common as a prelude to further data gathering (Brown and Reid 1997). Indeed, the SPI employed here contributed substantially to the subsequent study design.

The second phase of data collection involved interviews with five consumers.<sup>2</sup> These informants were interviewed in their homes in an effort to contextualize the physical reality of waste in their everyday lives. For example, information regarding the number and placement of waste baskets throughout the homes (see Chappells and Shove 1999) became important to interview discussions. More fundamentally, it was interesting to consider how the informants' views on waste changed throughout the interview as they began to actively experience their own rubbish. The informants were all young and well educated. They provided an important role in the study by corroborating suggestions that societal systems exist that substantially inhibit consumers' abilities to experience the impact of their consumption in terms of waste (Douglas 1966). The consumer data are not used in this study in any attempt to generalize to the United Kingdom or other populations. Rather, they are mobilized to highlight the nature of the problem and to offer deeper and more compelling insights than have hitherto been possible. Brief details of the consumer informants are given below.

James, twenty-four, currently works as a product assistant for a major multinational, sharing rented accommodation with a friend. Sarah, twenty-four, presently lives

alone in her own house and works as a personnel officer. Iain, twenty-five, is a vegetarian and also lives alone in an apartment. He currently works as a software engineer. Gemma, twenty-four, continues to live at her family home and works as a producer for a U.K. radio station. Finally, Jonathon, twenty-seven, has recently purchased a new house, is a vegetarian, and works for the U.K.'s Environment Agency.

Because consumers do not easily experience waste, the authors felt it important to gain access to individuals who actually do experience waste in a real sense. Therefore, they conducted further interviews with individuals employed within the waste management industry.<sup>3</sup> These expert informants provided important access to everyday experiences of waste. In undertaking this phase of the data collection, a more phenomenological approach to inquiry (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989, 1990) was considered most appropriate. As such, the authors privileged informants' lived experiences and attempted to gain access to their world. This could not be considered pure phenomenology, however, because of the parallel use of syncretic introspection. As such, the insights gained from both personal and guided introspection allowed for exploration, in an iterative way, into areas not initially driven by informants. Therefore, the approach taken is more akin to Mick and Buhl's (1992) phenomenological-type interviews. Furthermore, the interviews also incorporated a degree of participant observation, as researchers and informants waded across landfill sites and through recycling centers during the course of interviews. This facilitated the use of grand tour questions (Fetterman 1989) and enabled the authors to “learn where things are, what things are called, and what is important—at least to the person giving the tour” (Bailey 1996, 73). For these interviews, snowball sampling was employed, where meeting one informant presented opportunities to meet others. Again, all discussions were audio-recorded and fully transcribed to ensure all data were captured and to avoid interrupting the flow through note taking.

Mick, forty-five, is the waste manager of Brighshaw Borough Council, responsible for all local waste collection duties. Tony, forty-nine, is a regional manager for a waste disposal contractor, with thirty years' experience in the waste industry. Visiting a “rudimentary” public recycling center, the authors met Bryan, forty-eight, self-employed manager for the last twenty-five years. The authors also visited Redfield Road Recycling Center, a more organized and, hence, more typical example of recycling facilities within the United Kingdom. This was run and owned by John, fifty-two.

Both sets of interviews ran simultaneously and developed in an iterative process (Jones 1991). Analysis followed a hermeneutical style, where researchers immersed

themselves in the data and embarked on an iterative and interactive back-and-forth process, relating part of the text to the whole (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990). The number of informants in both sets of interviews is intentionally restricted to ensure depth concerning life-worlds (see Fournier 1998). These interviews typically lasted between one and one-half and two hours.

## Waste: An Inevitable Consequence

A number of themes emerged from informant discussions. First and foremost, it becomes obvious that waste is regarded as an inevitable consequence of the society in which we live. This is important and demonstrates how the production of wealth (within consumer culture) is systematically seen to be accompanied by social risks and hazards (Beck 1992). Thus, as consumption has escalated, so too has the production of waste, signifying a relationship between the two (Thøgersen 1993), with the prevailing trend legitimized by capitalism's insatiable appetite for profitable growth.

I think it's like all forms of pollution really; it's not going to get any better, so we've got to learn to live with it. . . . You have got to have certain waste; it is just a matter of minimizing that waste. (Jonathon, twenty-seven, Environment Agency officer)

The inevitable production of waste is highlighted particularly by those informants who work within the waste management industry. For example, both Mick and Bryan felt that the amount of waste produced by society was increasing and that this was to be expected given the way in which we choose to live:

Waste is on the up all the time. I've noticed; I've been here twenty-odd years, and I can tell the volume of waste that is coming in has gone up year after year after year. We live in a very wasteful society. (Bryan, forty-eight, Burnstump Recycling Center)

As long as we remain prosperous, people will still keep producing more and more waste. It's the consumer age. (Mick, forty-five, Waste Manager, Brigshaw Borough Council)

The "consumer age" is predicated on the idea that we no longer consume to live but live to consume. The most salient feature of the long-term application of marketing technologies is the ideology of consumption that constitutes the dominant social paradigm (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997). "Market discourses teach individuals not just about individual products but also about how to live and

participate in the consumer society—thus ensuring its survival" (Kelly-Holmes 1998, 341). As a result, we learn quite early in our development as consumers that waste is an inevitable by-product of modern life.

Trying to persuade people to actually generate less refuse is not that simple because the amount [they] generate is driven by their lifestyle and by modern living; that is almost an inevitability of the development of society. . . . We are fighting a losing battle in trying to get people to change their attitudes towards waste. (Tony, forty-nine, regional manager, Nottinghamshire Waste Disposal)

[Waste] is the snail trail of human existence, the mess we leave behind us as we supposedly move forward. As our lives progress, we leave a trail of sludge and slime and poo that we've got no use for, but all the time, it's showing us where we've come from and what we are about. (James, twenty-four, product assistant)

James's intriguing metaphor highlights an ambivalence toward waste that resonates throughout much of the literature. First, referring to waste as the "mess" we leave behind, he then suggests that it shows us "where we have come from and what we are about," connoting a more socially revealing aspect to our refuse. We may shed light on these issues by referring to the works of Norbert Elias and Mary Douglas. In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias (1939/1994) describes the means by which social standards and codes have developed over time. According to Scheff (2002), this civilizing process encompasses, among other things, Weber's notion of rationalization, the increasing regulation and surveillance of the individual such that individual lives become more calculable and controllable. For Elias, there has been a movement through which the locus of control has shifted from the external domain to the internal one, making it even more powerful and restraining. Such a stance is also similar to the implications of Foucault's (1979) disciplinary gaze, within which the perception of constant surveillance causes individuals to internalize normative conventions. Douglas's (1966) examination of the intricacies of dirt is consistent with Elias's work: "Dirt is essentially disorder. . . . We are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea" (p. 2). Her assessment is evocative because it implies a set of ordered relations. Public manifestations of waste contravene these relations and disobey systemic rules. Waste must therefore be put in its proper place if the system is to be maintained, since it is "likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" (Douglas 1966, 36). In an effort to keep it in its proper place, we are socialized as children against public displays of waste (such as littering),

we are encouraged to maintain order (through governmental and commercial campaigns such as Keep Britain Tidy, Keep America Beautiful, and Don't Trash California), and we are provided with mechanisms that isolate and remove waste quietly and efficiently (trash cans and garbage collectors), often late at night or in the early hours of the morning. Such organized waste disposal mechanisms are increasingly necessary given the disaggregation between consumption and disposition in modern society (Nicosia and Mayer 1976).

### **Socialization Against Public Manifestations of Waste**

Young consumers are quickly socialized to believe that the public visibility of waste should be avoided. Gemma was involved in a school group called Litter Busters, while Jonathon received more direct parental intervention:

The only thing I did once that I felt really bad about was throw a banana skin on the ground outside work, because I didn't want to carry it around in my pocket. So I just chucked that down the side of the pavement, and each day, I walked past and kept looking at it [feeling] . . . that's really bad. (Gemma, twenty-four, radio producer)

My mum and dad used to train me, ingrain into me "pick that up" and give me a slap on the back of my head. It was ingrained from a young age that it is not the done thing. (Jonathon, twenty-seven, Environment Agency officer)

The need for order and the general abhorrence of public waste are also evidenced by other informants:

I get angry when I see people dropping litter. Sometimes, I feel that I would love to pick it up and just go and chuck it back at them. (Iain, twenty-five, software engineer)

It annoys me. I quite often get litter in my garden, which really irritates me because it doesn't take a lot to put a [candy] wrapper in your pocket or to take something to a [trash can]. It makes the place look so horrible. (Sarah, twenty-four, personnel officer)

You've got a pretty place that is spoiled through people's disregard, disrespect . . . for one's environment. Considering you are in a developed country with high population density, we've got to work a little bit harder to keep things tidy, rather than just thinking, well, it gives someone a job, doesn't it! (Jonathon, twenty-seven, Environment Agency officer)

In addition to parental instruction, such normalized reactions to publicly visible waste are reinforced through repetitive exposure to environmental campaigns, such as Keep Britain Tidy, which has been running since 1955. However, it has to be noted that slogans, such as Keep Britain Tidy, already presuppose a tidy Britain. Furthermore, these campaigns shift the onus of responsibility for managing waste firmly onto the shoulders of individuals and largely ignore industrial pollution (O'Barr 2006). Meanwhile, the U.K. government has divested itself of almost all responsibility, as it has transferred the accountability for such campaigns to a private organization, ENCAMS (Hobson 2004). Similarly, in Ireland, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government was responsible for an advertising campaign titled Race Against Waste. As a result of the campaign, there was nearly a 50 percent increase in the number of people who believed that individuals have primary responsibility for the environment and an increase in recycling from 8 percent to 21 percent (Institute of Advertising Practitioners in Ireland 2004). The then Minister for the Environment also highlighted the campaign's successes in a 2004 speech: "The message in the campaign has made everybody think, it's making people talk, it's making people take responsibility" (Institute of Advertising Practitioners in Ireland 2004). The overall purpose of this campaign then was to challenge the perception that waste was the responsibility of the government, local councils, or businesses and to promote personal responsibility.

There is currently much concern about landfill in the United Kingdom because of the 1999 European Union directive requiring a reduction in the amount of biodegradable waste going into landfill from the 18.1 million tons in 2003-2004 to 13.7 million tons in 2010, 9.2 million in 2013, and 6.3 million in 2020 (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts 2007). While progress has been made toward this target, it is largely attributed to the enthusiasm and commitment of the public. Future strategies to achieve further reductions include the development of new infrastructure capable of processing up to 15 million tons of waste each year as well as further efforts to curb individual waste production through the introduction of a *bin tax*. Although the idea of a pay-as-you-throw charge operates in other countries (including Ireland), it is controversial in the United Kingdom. It is anticipated that the bin tax will hit poorer and larger families hardest and that there may be a concomitant increase in fly-tipping (people dumping their garbage in unofficial locations) as well as a possible increase in back garden bonfires. The development in infrastructure is also behind schedule, as there are widespread protests

about proposed locations (see BBC 2007). That is, while people may recognize the value of a potentially hazardous facility (such as landfill sites, incineration plants, etc.), they do not want these facilities situated in their locality. The “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) and “locally unwanted land use” (LULU) phenomena (Schively 2007) are important in resisting such infrastructural developments (Lober 1995).

In the United States, the Keep America Beautiful campaign was initially funded by large corporations in whose interest it was for citizens to manage the detritus of consumption rather than to curb consumption itself (Nees et al. 2003). More pointedly, the 1965 Highway Beautification Act was specifically designed to remove junkyards from the view of federal and state roads, thereby rendering them invisible (Nees et al. 2003).

These and similar campaigns espouse the idea that waste contained in a trash can ceases to be a problem. Thus, campaigns such as Keep America Beautiful are an exercise in cosmetology (Schnaiberg 1980) and fail to address the question, when we throw things away, where is away? (Thiele 2000). In other words, these campaigns have little to do with environmental concern but are related to the desire to keep waste in its place. Indeed, research by the organizers of Keep Britain Tidy found that both parental control and pride in an area, rather than environmental concern, were the key drivers perpetuating the social intolerance of littering (ENCAMS 2001).

I think it just looks ugly. Whereas, a tidy place, you remember it. You know if you see a particular town when you go on holiday that is really well kept and well looked after, then you remember it. (Gemma, twenty-four, radio producer)

Thus, the desire for a waste-free environment simply represents the exercise of social control and the avoidance of shame. Such control, in turn, facilitates guilt-free consumption, for we are never faced with the unseemly product of our actions. By comparison, Singapore has harsh penalties for the (ab)use of chewing gum and Irish Business Against Litter (IBAL) names and shames in its annual Anti-Litter League. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that consumers will engage in procedural tactics to enhance their sense of control such as removing evidence of waste from the streets themselves:

We were driving along, and we saw another car drop a carrier bag of rubbish by the roadside, and it was quite close to a relation's house, and we felt really annoyed about it because they'd just left it there. So we went and picked it up and took it to a twenty-four-hour [disposal area]. (Gemma, twenty-four, radio producer)

You can't drop a crisp packet when there is no litter to be seen. [In Florida], the streets [are] spotless, and you are the outcast if you drop litter. (James, twenty-four, product assistant)

## The trash can

The trash can is a ubiquitous part of everyday life within Western consumer society. In every home, on every street, practically anywhere people congregate, a trash can is likely to be placed close by.

We have them in every room actually, apart from the entrance hall. We don't have one in there 'cause we just don't use it enough. And the [one] that's nearest to it isn't that far away. Whereas, for a while we didn't have [one] in the front room, and we had to keep going to the kitchen to put stuff in the [trash], and then we got a bit lazy, so we bought one for the front room really, and now its always full. (Gemma, twenty-four, radio producer)

The prevalence of trash cans within our homes, our workplaces, and our streets is not purely accidental. Rather, the trash can plays a fundamental role in the social construction of waste (Chappells and Shove 1999) and in the simulation of self-control. It is an intrinsic part of the system that serves to protect consumers from the evidence of their consumption by hiding waste.

. . . big black hole you throw things down, and they just disappear. (Sarah, twenty-four, personnel officer)

As soon as it gets in that [trash can] . . . that is not mine anymore. That is someone else's, I suppose, the [garbage] collection people, and that's it. (Iain, twenty-five, software engineer)

These descriptions share common themes; specifically finality and transcendence. That our garbage bags are only visible fleetingly as they pass from trash can to garbage truck means that they are hidden for the rest of the time. Thus, it appears that trash cans operate as a transcendent gateway between the visible and invisible aspects of consumption; the front- and backstage (Goffman 1971). Consequently, the trash can may be conceptualized as a “smoothing mechanism” that keeps the messy by-products of consumption hidden (backstage), making it easier for consumers to engage in guilt-free consumption in the front-stage theaters of consumption.

The trash can is, therefore, much more than just a passive receptacle for our waste. Rather, it actively constructs the nature of waste and dictates household waste practices (Chappells and Shove 1999). It both shapes and is shaped

by contemporary meanings of waste. For example, trash can design influences patterns of use by communicating a number of scripts, inscribed in its shape, size, and form. The introduction of the “wheelie bin,” now used in approximately 40 percent of U.K. homes, has dramatically changed “both the quality and quantity of waste, with a 50% increase in waste collected in affluent areas” (Chappells and Shove 1999, 269).

The bins are 240 liters [54.5 U.S. gallons], which is roughly one and one-half times the old [trash can] size. So you’ve given [people] the temptation there to generate more waste, because its there. They’ll fill it, where before they may have thought twice. Now this is a problem all councils’ experience; people fill the bins, can’t abide them being half full, just can’t live with it. (Mick, forty-five, waste manager, Brigshaw Borough Council)

The capacity of wheelie bins to guzzle waste has led to calls for their replacement (Chappells and Shove 1999). They further conceal our rubbish, making it even easier for us to forget and ignore the amount of waste we produce. Thus, within Western consumer society, the trash can becomes iconic, absolving those who use them from the rubbish they have created.

### The garbage collector

Garbage collectors and waste collection can also be regarded as smoothing mechanisms, ensuring the speedy dispatch of waste from the vicinity of our homes. These systemic mechanisms are very efficient and prevent us from dwelling too long on what we discard. The early-morning collection time is designed specifically to have minimum impact on daily life:

They are in my environment for such a short period of time, once a week, that I invariably miss them. If you are having a [sleep] in; you hear them coming; that is about it. (James, twenty-four, product assistant)

I hear them but don’t have any contact with them. (Gemma, twenty-four, radio producer)

The rare contact, and fleeting audible rumblings of the garbage truck, as it moves slowly through the street, is all that reminds us of the toil of garbage collectors. Indeed, informants’ limited contemplation of the role of garbage collectors belies the important job they do. Without their efforts, systems of production and consumption would collapse, and society would suffocate in junk and waste (O’Brien 1999). Our consumer informants appeared ambivalent to the role of garbage collectors within society:

They are doing an important job; they get a hard time. People suggest they wouldn’t want to be a [garbage collector], dealing with all that rubbish all day long, but it is an important service. Someone has got to do it. (James, twenty-four, product assistant)

I think it’s quite depressing actually. I think it’s a very vital role. It’s got a huge function, and we need to be told how valued it is. But actually, to physically do that each day of my life, it’s very menial, isn’t it? Though if they didn’t do what they did, what would you do with all the rubbish? So, it’s a huge responsibility. . . . But I think it must be quite depressing. (Gemma, twenty-four, radio producer)

They are doing a job just like anyone else. Probably should be respected more than other people because they are doing the stuff you don’t want to do. They are taking away the crap you can’t be bothered with. They fulfill quite an important role in society. I wouldn’t like to do it. (Sarah, twenty-four, personnel officer)

The contradictions within these responses are clear. Informants acknowledge the important role that garbage collectors play within society and, on reflection, suggest that this importance should afford them greater respect. However, they imply that such jobs are not for them, as they struggle to free themselves from the culturally constructed perception that such work is “depressing,” “menial,” and concerned with “the crap you can’t be bothered with.”

### Consumer Experiences

Waste is not something that many of us confront in our daily lives. This is the inevitable outcome of the collective desire to maintain self-control and to keep waste in its proper place. Apart from the five minutes dedicated to taking the trash can out for collection each week, there is little else we need to think about. Moreover, while conducting interviews with our consumer informants, we noticed that many found it difficult to articulate their feelings toward waste, thus underlining its hidden nature.

I know where it goes, but I forget about it. To be honest, I don’t really think about it. I don’t think, oh my God, I’m destroying the planet because I’ve bought three yogurts I haven’t eaten. I suppose it’s the same as eating meat. You just don’t think about it. If I thought about the little lambs skipping down the little hillside, then taken off by Farmer Giles to be hit on the head and slaughtered, I wouldn’t eat meat. But you just forget about it and focus on the bit that involves you. (Sarah, twenty-four, personnel officer)

I don’t think about the volume of waste I produce. (James, twenty-four, product assistant)

The ability of informants to forget about their waste and to disregard the consequences is perhaps symptomatic of the way society operates. Alternatively, it may be the result of decades of successful socialization against waste. At best, this is mass senility, but at worst, it constitutes a manifestation of cultural doping and deserves greater scrutiny by the macromarketing academy. Moreover, there also seems to be a trend toward blaming others for environmental problems. Alexander (1993) found that 59 percent of Americans believed they were personally doing a good job for the environment but felt that the same was true for only 12 percent of their contemporaries.

I am quite a clean and tidy person, so I would probably make an effort to go and sort it out myself. The world in general would look quite crappy though, because there would be people who just aren't bothered by things like that and would quite happily leave their rubbish on the street for someone else to clear up. (Sarah, twenty-four, personnel officer)

This type of attitude is problematic because it absolves the individual of personal responsibility, shifting blame onto a nebulous group of mythical "people who just aren't bothered." Interestingly, the informants acknowledged that if they were confronted with the amount of waste they had individually produced, they would inevitably be shocked, illustrating the power of this pervasive blindness:

If someone came back to me after a year and said, "This is all your [garbage] that you have thrown away," all piled up, you would stop and think . . . well, maybe I could have taken all those letters, all that junk mail out and sent it off for recycling, or the bottles or the tins. So I suppose the shock tactics would work. (Iain, twenty-five, software engineer)

Probably the amount of waste that can be recycled would shock me, and that would probably embarrass me as well. (Sarah, twenty-four, personnel officer)

These reflections are likely to be merely temporary, as the bustle of daily life leaves little room for prolonged contemplation of one's contribution to waste. Moreover, dwelling on such issues is likely to be uncomfortable and therefore avoided (Thompson 1979):

I think it would make me uncomfortable if I thought about it every time I was doing it because I would be thinking, God, I'm ruining the planet. (Sarah, twenty-four, personnel officer)

Waste management professionals further suggest that even when people attempt to recycle their waste, they limit their engagement with it and its associated trappings.

They think, because they've brought it to a recycling center, that's where it all finishes. (Bryan, forty-eight, Burnstump Recycling Center)

Everybody pulls in and wants to chuck everything in one [receptacle], without rummaging through it and everything, taking the cardboard out and wood out. We [the employees] have to [do it]; otherwise, the yard's not doing its proper job. (John, fifty-two, Redfield Road Recycling Center)

These comments concur with the research of Lyons, Uzzell, and Storey (2002), who found that only 56 percent of consumers who visited recycling centers used the different areas designated for different types of waste. This is perhaps why the rudimentary setup at Burnstump Recycling Center, which does not enforce segregation as rigorously as many others, takes approximately 25,000 tons a year, whereas the average is around 10,000 tons:

The paradox is that people like coming here because it's so easy to use, because they can just drop it on the floor and drive off again. So it's back to this; people like to pay lip service to environmental issues, but when it comes to the crunch, they want the convenience. (Tony, forty-nine, regional manager, Nottinghamshire Waste Disposal)

It emerges, therefore, that even when we consider ourselves to be environmentally conscious, we are uncomfortable when confronted with our waste. Much of the recycling behavior reported by consumers may be little more than an exercise in impression management (Goffman 1971; Rathje 1984, 1991; Rathje and Murphy 1992; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983). Indeed, Lyons, Uzzell, and Storey (2002) recorded that over two-thirds of their informants claimed they recycled whenever possible, a spurious figure, given that the current level of recycling in the United Kingdom is around 10 percent.

I get concerned that we don't look at the bigger picture; we focus on our little bit, but we don't look at the bigger picture in terms of the environmental impacts and what we are doing and whether we are really doing the right thing. (Tony, forty-nine, Regional Manager—Nottinghamshire Waste Disposal)

Often it seems that we feel the "effects are too distant to motivate change [and that] . . . small lifestyle changes by an individual would have 'zero effect' on what was a global problem" (Lyons, Uzzell, and Storey 2002, 9-10). However, as Smith (1972) rightly points out, while an individual's waste contributes only marginally to general discomfort, in aggregate, it may produce "severe disruption to the environment" (p. 601).

## Discussion

Waste is regarded as an inevitable consequence of consumption. While all of our informants considered this an undesirable situation, importantly, they also displayed a tacit acceptance that this must be. This partial hypocrisy remains relatively unchallenged because prevailing social conventions absolve us of our profligacy, and consumption continues to grow unchecked. Thus, the initial challenge is to ascertain how waste is understood and accepted in particular way(s) and to uncover the axioms that underpin this dominant view. In this article, the authors detail how the production of waste is regarded as an inevitable consequence of consumption and, thus, how the “problem” of waste is framed as a “waste management” issue. By exploring the mechanisms that cumulatively result in the systemic social avoidance of waste, the authors offer insights that will inevitably be more helpful in informing policies that engender social change rather than continuing to vilify waste per se.

The bottled water market provides a useful characterization of the problem at hand. Over the last decade, bottled water has become ubiquitous in the West, with more than 2,900 brands of bottled water produced in over 115 countries (Mineralwaters.org 2008). In 2004, global consumption of bottled water reached 154 billion liters (41 billion U.S. gallons), up nearly 60 percent on 1999 (Blumenfeld and Leal 2007). The phenomenal growth of bottled water has been buttressed by concerns over the quality of tap water, the perceived purity of spring water, and by the status attached to drinking a bottled product (Connell 2006). As May (1996) outlines, “Consumption [of bottled water] . . . typifies the emergence of a new, urbane consumer niche, where people use consumer goods to signify who they are and, in so doing, are constituted as a new ‘cultural class’” (p. 60). Even in areas where tap water is safe to drink, demand for bottled water is increasing. As such, the production and consumption of bottled water create unnecessary garbage and consume vast quantities of energy (Arnold and Larsen 2006). In the United States, Mayor Anderson of Salt Lake City accused the product of embodying wasteful and reckless consumerism.

The environmental problems associated with bottled water are numerous. It tends to be packaged in single-serving plastic bottles. The most commonly used plastic for water bottles is polyethylene terephthalate (PET), which is derived from crude oil. “Just manufacturing the 29 billion plastic bottles used for water in the United States each year requires the equivalent of more than 17 million barrels of crude oil” (Larsen 2007, 2). According to Mary Owen (2007), 86 percent of used water bottles in the United States end up as garbage. If they are simply

dumped into landfill, they can take up to one thousand years to biodegrade. If they are incinerated, they produce toxic by-products such as chlorine gas and ash containing heavy metals (Arnold and Larsen 2006). Thus, recycling is the only real option. However, only about 23 percent of bottled water containers are recycled in the United States because water bottles have not traditionally been included in local redemption plans (Owen 2007). Moreover, of the limited plastic water bottles presented for recycling in the United States in 2004, almost 40 percent were exported, sometimes to countries as far away as China (Arnold and Larsen 2006), further adding to the environmental footprint. Even when recycled, it is hard to turn scrap PET into new bottles. More virgin material is always necessary (Mooallem 2007, 8).

Two thousand seven was a bad year for the bottled water industry. Despite predictions of continued increases in worldwide consumption, there have been strong criticisms of the industry. In June, the U.S. Conference of Mayors representing 1,100 American cities discussed the irony of purchasing bottled water for employees and for functions, while simultaneously touting municipal water supplies. Indeed, with \$43 billion a year going to provide clean drinking water in cities across America, the United States’ municipal water systems are arguably among the finest in the world. During 2007, a number of U.S. cities banned the purchase of bottled water. These included San Francisco, San Jose, Boston, New York, and Salt Lake City. A number of prominent European city councils have also followed suit, including Rome, Florence and Paris. In the United Kingdom, DEFRA has also ceased to offer bottled water at official functions (Larsen 2007). In November, the city council of Chicago placed a landmark tax of five cents on every bottle of water sold in the city to discourage consumption.

The industry has attempted to respond to these various criticisms by running a series of advertisements in *The New York Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle* containing the message from the International Bottled Water Association that water is good whether it comes from a faucet or a bottle (McGinn 2007). Some water companies have even redesigned their bottles to use 15 grams of plastic rather than the normal 19 grams, a reduction of 20 percent. Nonetheless, Corporate Accountability International continues to urge us to “Think Outside the Bottle.”

Current attempts to update the 1980s bottle bill include an increase in the deposit involved (currently only a nickel in most states) and the inclusion of water bottles alongside soft drink bottles and beer bottles (Cox 2007). Thus, an economic incentive is being initiated that encourages recycling rather than littering. However, if we consider the innovative “Plas-Tax” introduced by the Irish government

in 2002, we begin to understand the true possibilities afforded by economic incentives.

The Plas-Tax was designed to rein in rampant consumption of 1.2 billion plastic shopping bags in Ireland each year. Motivation was provided by the country's escalating litter problem, the scale of resource use, and by respect for the environment. Moreover, recycling was not considered a viable option, as Ireland lacks the necessary infrastructure. Because consumer apathy was seen as high, the levy was set intentionally high at €0.15 to effect the appropriate change in consumer behavior. An education campaign was run prior to the introduction of the tax to encourage compliance and to give Irish consumers a reason to engage.

The Plas-Tax has been hailed as an outstanding success. In the twelve months after its introduction, Ireland witnessed a 90 percent drop in consumption. Moreover, close to €10 million was raised from the tax in the first year and placed in a green fund to benefit the environment ([www.reusablebags.com](http://www.reusablebags.com)). Consumers purchase "bags for life," which they reuse for each shopping trip. Retailers have also gained, as they are saving close to €50 million a year by not having to provide single-use plastic bags.

The interesting contribution of the Plas-Tax centers on its ability to curb consumption itself rather than to manage the residue of consumption. Unlike other programs that attempt to decouple the link between economic growth and waste growth, the Plas-Tax acknowledges the link and recognizes that the environmental impact of consumption can only be arrested by tackling consumption itself. While progress toward waste reduction can certainly be made by reducing unnecessary waste through increased producer responsibility and consumer activism, it is questionable whether the inherent profligacy of a consumer society can be reduced to a truly sustainable level without a comparable reduction in consumption. Indeed, waste management itself is an expanding industry, where the primary motivation is economic growth. An increasingly prosperous and sophisticated waste management industry may only serve to further limit the engagement of consumers by convincing them they are doing all that is required. Thus, the authors join other commentators in questioning whether the problems of a capitalist and consumer society can be reduced using the same logic that created them (Ritson and Dobscha 1999; Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997; Peñaloza and Price 1993). Strategies such as DEFRA's "Reduce, Re-use, Recycle" are essential but only partial solutions to the growing waste mountain, since they tackle the symptoms not the cause. Operating within a capitalist system, the consideration of environmental problems in economic terms may be the quickest way to precipitate the required action.

However, it remains to be seen whether the managed reduction in consumption is even possible within a system that has an "insatiable appetite for profitable growth" (Willmott 1999, 217).

## Conclusion

The emergence of centralized disposal systems reflects an effort on our behalf to control our environment. The desire for control emerges as a result of the rationalization brought about by civilizing processes (Elias 1939/1994). Public manifestations of waste evidence a lack of control and contravene the standards established as a result of these civilizing processes. Managing waste, therefore, involves a number of processes designed specifically to keep it out of sight and in its place. This provides support for Beck's (1992) assertion that the management of the inevitable social risks caused by wealth creation becomes as functional as wealth creation. We need to consider how this impacts on marketing systems (Fisk 2006; Layton and Grossbart 2006). Implicit in this is the need to understand how waste is currently understood because this determines policy.

The authors have examined several ways in which waste is prevented from becoming visible and kept in its proper place. We are encouraged to maintain the established order through our socialization against public manifestations of waste. This is perpetuated through parental guidance and promotional campaigns such as Keep America Beautiful. Such activity attempts to foster unquestioned norms by ensuring waste is in the proper place (the trash can) rather than foster proactive environmental concern. Garbage collectors and the waste disposal system also mask the visibility of waste. Consequently, these mechanisms help to reinforce social norms by ensuring our waste remains predominantly hidden, preventing extended contemplation. Out of sight and out of mind (De Graff, Wann, and Naylor 2001) is the order of the day.

As academics and members of society, we question our current attitudes toward waste. Concerted action is likely to be difficult, however, given that "one of the political characteristics of waste is precisely this silencing process: the removal or dispersion of shared meanings and experiences of waste" (O'Brien, 1999, 263). Additionally, the systemic logic that seeks to minimize public displays of waste is something of which we are only vaguely aware (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997). Ironically, citizens also trust the present system to solve the adverse consequences of that system.

The influence of these systemic mechanisms only becomes truly apparent when they fail or do not work as they are supposed to work. During the "winter of

discontent" (1978-1979), the General Strike caused torrents of rubbish to fill U.K. streets, sparking a massive public backlash against the system and heralding the birth of an entirely different ideology—Thatcherism. Clearly notions of hyperconsumption are socially constructed (Dolan 2002), but the data support the assertion that we become decidedly uncomfortable when faced with our waste and, thus, begin to question our consumption levels. As such, consumer society is happiest when consumption is isolated from its waste consequences. Conversely, consumer society is challenged when confronted with the detritus of consumption or when waste solutions introduce social contention, as may occur around the location of waste incinerators, for example.

Throughout this article, the authors have examined the role of several social conventions, norms, and mechanisms that facilitate our desire to keep waste out of sight. They have also speculated that this has made waste tolerable, which is why they introduced notions of questioning the common sense of systems in the introduction, since they create the precarious situation in which we now find ourselves in relation to the Commons. As the waste mountain grows steadily each year, the authors' aim here is to mobilize further research into this largely neglected area. To engage constructively in this debate through macromarketing ideals (Shultz 2007), we need to better theorize consumption and to acknowledge waste and its role in consumer society. We must, therefore, place the finite Commons at the center of the analysis in the knowledge that once the Commons are no more, our own existence as a human race becomes precarious (Shultz and Holbrook 1999). The authors' contribution attempts to provide some small pieces in the waste puzzle. However, as we make macromarketing like the agora (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Mittelstaedt 2006), there are numerous other areas that require examination before the entire picture takes shape. Following Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Mittelstaedt (2006) the effects of commercial and industrial waste also require investigation. Additionally, longitudinal ethnographic inquiry into waste would be beneficial. The authors make no claim to definitive knowledge, merely offering one interpretation of our relationship with waste. Accordingly, the authors invite others to reexamine their findings and consider the role other implicit systemic mechanisms play in consumer perceptions of waste.

Challenging the implicit logic of the system within which we live is extremely difficult, but it is crucial if we are to be more than mere slaves to that system. This above all else makes waste a vital area for research. Essentially, as Alexander (1993) points out, "To live is to pollute. We all consume. We all generate waste" (p. 175).

Thus, to theorize waste as simply a waste management issue or indeed a marketing or consumer research issue is problematic in itself. Rather, it is a societal problem and one that is culturally embedded. This requires a more robust theoretical frame than has been offered to date. As Jones and Spicer (2006) have posited with reference to the entrepreneur and excess,

if it is possible to change the distribution of excess, then this would involve not simply returning ourselves to a circle of production, but opening up a different political economy of the distribution of excess. (P. 202)

The authors would therefore argue that under the dominant social paradigm, waste, its social cultural significance, and the potential for reconceptualizing our relationship to it are undertheorized. In considering meaningful social change, it might be useful to consider new ways of visualizing waste (Schroeder 2005). The broadcaster Channel 4 (2006) in a documentary titled *Britain's Waste* claimed, "The U.K. produces more than 434 million tones of waste every year. This would fill the Albert Hall in less than 2 hours. And babies' nappies [diapers] make up about 2% of the average household rubbish. This is equivalent to the weight of nearly 70,000 double-decker buses every year. If lined up front to end, the buses would stretch from London, England, to Edinburgh, Scotland." In 2003, Seattle city employees used the equivalent of a mountain of paper 10,000 feet high, higher than the state's highest peak, Mount Rainier (Taevs 2005).

It is both necessary and appropriate for the marketing academy to engage with these issues and for practicing marketers to actively develop and promote waste policies. Only then can marketers confidently claim that marketing has a social conscience and that it can demonstrate this as a form of constructive engagement. As Shultz, Rahtz, and Sprece (2004) argue, it is in the very nature of macromarketing to engage broad challenges. In the case of waste, the authors contend it is hidden from the macromarketing agora, but perhaps as Fisk (2006) and Peterson (2006) both allude to, our future is in our past. To deal with the hidden mountain, the authors submit that transdisciplinary studies—associated so much with Charles C. Slater—are needed to help us to unveil the whole picture and, as a result, out the systemic economics of deception.

## Notes

1. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. "Consume."

2. These interviews were conducted in person by Edd de Coverly between January and May 2002 in Leeds and Nottingham, United Kingdom.

3. *Ibid.*

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