

“How Do I Carry All This Now?” Understanding Consumer Resistance to Sustainability Interventions

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Abstract

Given the increasingly grave environmental crisis, governments and organizations frequently initiate sustainability interventions to encourage sustainable behavior in individual consumers. However, prevalent behavioral approaches to sustainability interventions often have the unintended consequence of generating consumer resistance, undermining their effectiveness. With a practice-theoretical perspective, the authors investigate what generates consumer resistance and how it can be reduced, using consumer responses to a nationwide ban on plastic bags in Chile in 2019. The findings show that consumer resistance to sustainability interventions emerges not primarily because consumers are unwilling to change their individual behavior—as the existing literature commonly assumes—but because the individual behaviors being targeted are embedded in dynamic social practices. When sustainability interventions aim to change individual behaviors rather than social practices, they place excessive responsibility on consumers, unsettle their practice-related emotionality, and destabilize the multiple practices that interconnect to shape consumers' lives, ultimately leading to resistance. The authors propose a theory of consumer resistance in social practice change that explains consumer resistance to sustainability interventions and ways of reducing it. They also offer recommendations for policy makers and social marketers in designing and managing sustainability initiatives that trigger less consumer resistance and thereby foster sustainable consumer behavior.

Keywords

consumer resistance, practice theory, social change, sustainable consumer behavior, sustainability intervention

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The battle is not just being fought over the fate of a familiar modern convenience but over, for one side, our last vestiges of freedom and, for the other, the future of planet Earth. And fluttering above this battlefield like the tattered banner of a besieged army, amid a haze of misinformation, counterarguments, and money, money, money, you'll find a single, flimsy, humble plastic bag.

—Sternbergh (2015)

One of the most important questions today for governments, marketers, and policy makers is how to foster sustainable consumer behavior. However, efforts to encourage sustainable consumer behavior with interventions such as water restrictions (Phipps and Ozanne 2017) and fees for using disposable coffee cups (Poortinga and Whitaker 2018) often meet various forms of consumer resistance (Gleim and Lawson 2014; Scheurenbrand et al. 2018). Understanding why consumer resistance emerges is critical because such resistance undermines the effectiveness of sustainability interventions (Little, Lee, and

Nair 2019) and has significant implications for companies, consumers, and policy makers.

Although highly diverse and varied in scope, prevalent approaches to sustainability interventions often center on changing individual consumer behaviors (Kemper and Ballantine 2019). Early on, these approaches focused on the diffusion and adoption of planned social changes to convince individual consumers to alter their behavior (e.g., Kotler and Zaltman 1971). More recently, research in marketing and behavioral science that

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investigates behavioral, attitudinal, psychological, and social barriers to or drivers of behavioral change has informed policy to encourage individual consumers to act more sustainably (Karmarkar and Bollinger 2015; Olsen, Slotegraaf, and Chandukala 2014; White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019; White and Simpson 2013). However, as White, Habib, and Hardisty (2019, p. 34) note, sustainability interventions need to be embraced by large groups of people, as they differ “from traditional consumer behaviors in which the outcome is realized if the individual engages in the action alone.” In this sense, individual resistance to behavioral change might arise due to habit (Verplanken and Roy 2016), but sustainability interventions also provoke resistance when consumers reject “what is perceived as a power, a pressure, an influence, or any attempt to act upon one’s conduct” (Roux and Izberk-Bilgin 2018, p. 295).

Our purpose is to investigate consumer resistance in a sustainability context, defined as “the refusal to accept or support a sustainability intervention.” We ask: What gives rise to consumer resistance to sustainability interventions, and how can consumer resistance be reduced? We approach these questions from a practice-theoretical perspective (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012), which proposes that consumer behavior is not primarily determined by the individual but by the social practices through which they conduct their daily lives (e.g., eating, cooking, shopping). By conceiving of individual consumer behaviors as embedded in dynamic social practices, we can better understand how and why sustainability interventions are likely to face consumer resistance and ultimately fail.

We conducted a comprehensive, real-time study of Chile’s 2019 nationwide ban on plastic bags. The ban was met with a high level of consumer resistance, evidenced by public manifestations of consumer resentment and extensive media coverage of consumers’ refusal to accept the intervention. It constitutes a compelling case for investigating our research questions. Our findings show that consumer resistance to sustainability interventions emerges because the individual behaviors being targeted are not separate from, but rather embedded in, social practices. When interventions aim for individual behavioral change rather than social practice change, three major challenges emerge: (1) battles about who is responsible for making practices more sustainable, (2) unsettling emotionality brought about by the changing practice, and (3) the (un)linking of other practices involved in the change. These challenges generate consumer resistance that interferes with social practice change, which significantly undermines the effectiveness of the sustainability intervention.

We develop a theory of consumer resistance in social practice change that explains how the aforementioned challenges give rise to consumer resistance to sustainability interventions and how this resistance can be reduced. Drawing on our theory, we prescribe recommendations for policy makers and social marketers regarding how to design practice-based sustainability interventions to reduce resistance from the outset, as well as how to monitor and adjust these interventions to manage consumer resistance that may emerge later.

Behavioral Approaches to Sustainability Interventions

Marketing literature pertaining to sustainable consumer behavior has coalesced in its focus on how individual consumers should change their behaviors to be more sustainable (Kemper and Ballantine 2019). Early social marketing studies provided the foundations for this approach by conceptualizing sustainability as a “planned social change process” (e.g., Kotler and Zaltman 1971). More recently, the behavioral literature has profiled the behaviors of green consumers, informing the design of marketing interventions to encourage the adoption of relevant actions (Olsen, Slotegraaf, and Chandukala 2014), such as choosing sustainably sourced products, conserving resources, and seeking more sustainable product disposal modes (White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019).

Research concludes that consumers will engage in more sustainable behaviors in response to specific messages (Olsen, Slotegraaf, and Chandukala 2014; Winterich, Nenkov, and Gonzales 2019), normative appeals (White and Simpson 2013), and priming (Karmarkar and Bollinger 2015). White, Habib, and Hardisty’s (2019) SHIFT framework identified five psychological factors—social influence, habit formation, individual self-accounts, feelings and cognition, and tangibility—that can be leveraged in sustainability interventions. However, researchers also note the potential for obstacles, such as conflicts between sustainable behaviors and private goals (Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012), as well as skepticism, lack of support, or perceptions of unfairness (Bolderdijk et al. 2017).

Although they increase our understanding of sustainable consumer behavior, these approaches have tended to be based on an “individualistic understanding of both action and change” (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012, p. 142) that neglects the complex systems in which environmental issues are embedded (Little, Lee, and Nair 2019). Furthermore, many sustainability interventions make individual consumers responsible for societal issues such as climate change and poverty (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Evans 2011; Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Luchs, Phipps, and Hill 2015; Shove 2010). This approach, known as “responsibilization,” is based on neoliberal ideology and involves government partnership with corporations to “encourage all citizens to become active and responsible consumer subjects...obliged to help solve pressing social issues through their everyday consumption choices” (Veresiu and Giesler 2018, p. 255). Responsibilization assumes that individual consumers want to act responsibly and make moral choices to support an intervention’s intended goals (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). However, consumers often resist such responsibilization (Eckhardt and Dobscha 2019), particularly when they experience physical, psychological, and/or philosophical discomfort. Therefore, effective sustainability interventions may require a shift away from responsibilizing individual consumers and toward shaping the social elements and systems of daily life, as implied by a practice-theoretical perspective (Spurling et al. 2013).

A Practice–Theoretical Perspective on the Dynamics of Social Practice Change

Although several different theoretical approaches exist within the practice perspective (e.g., Sandberg and Tsoukas 2015; Schatzki, Cetina, and Von Savigny 2001; Thomas and Epp 2019), they all recognize that people, animals, materials, equipment, activities, norms, rules, values, and understandings are not independent but interacting units that constitute social practices and their performance (Reckwitz 2002). Social practices comprise “temporally evolving, open-ended sets of doings and sayings linked by practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structure, and general understanding” (Schatzki 2002, p. 87). Continuous engagement in social practices, such as eating, cooking, shopping, driving, and reading, largely determines people’s way of life and who they are (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2015). From this perspective, “behaviors are largely individuals’ performances of social practices” (Spurling et al. 2013, p. 4). To apply such a perspective to sustainable consumer behavior, we build on Shove, Pantzar, and Watson’s (2012) theory of the dynamics of social practice, which features five key premises.

First, social practices and their performance involve three broad groups of interacting elements: materials (e.g., equipment, tools, ingredients, bodies), competences (e.g., specific know-how, skills, shared practical understandings), and meanings (e.g., identities, symbols, norms, aspirations, ideas). Social practices depend on the interactions of these defining elements and thus cannot “be reduced to any one of these single elements” (Reckwitz 2002, p. 250). Only when the elements are linked together, consistently and over time, do social practices come into existence and endure. Therefore, social practices are not fixed. Instead, these practices are dynamic, as they are produced and reproduced through their performance over time (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). As an illustration, the social practice of communicating with mobile phones comprises materials (e.g., phones, bodies, touchable screen), competences (e.g., typing, dialing, taking turns to speak, knowing proper times to call), and meanings (e.g., social closeness, convenience) that are linked every time someone makes a call.

Second, social practices are continuously carried out by multiple actors. Consumers, retailers, and other market actors are social practice “carriers” (Reckwitz 2002). As carriers, these actors produce, reproduce, and transform social practices by continuously linking elements in their performances of them (Blue et al. 2014, p. 38). The practice’s goals, meanings, and materials direct carriers to perform the doings and sayings of a given practice in specific ways (Schatzki 2002). For example, mobile phone users reproduce the practice of mobile communication, and the practice influences how users communicate with friends, family, and colleagues (e.g., via texting).

Third, social practices also evolve and change through the making and breaking of links among their defining elements (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). Links are made and broken as a result of the introduction of new elements or the removal of

existing ones. Such alterations require carriers to reconfigure the elements—that is, to develop and establish new links between them—for the practice to stabilize and endure. It is through this process of reconfiguring the links between modified elements across carriers that social practices evolve over time. For example, the introduction of mobile phones (new material element) changed the social practice of communicating. Mobile phones altered not only the material elements of the communication practice but also all its interacting elements, such as consumers’ competences for handling mobile phones and the shared understanding of how and when communication should be performed.

Fourth, rather than existing in isolation, social practices are linked to other practices, forming nexuses of interacting practices (Hui, Schatzki, and Shove 2016) that together make up social life (Reckwitz 2002). Changes to some elements of a particular social practice therefore may require a reconfiguration of both its interacting elements and other, linked social practices. In the mobile phone example, the introduction of the new material element changed purchasing, repairing, emailing, and family practices (e.g., family video calls), each of which demanded new tools, skills, and know-how to perform.

Fifth, social practices have an inherent emotional dimension (Schatzki 2019), “tied to the embodied and tacit aspects of everyday living” (Molander and Hartmann 2018, p. 372). This dimension provides practice carriers with a template for the acceptable beliefs, states, and feelings that they should express as part of the practice. Returning to our prior example, replacing landline phones with mobile devices altered the emotionality associated with different communication practices. Many users now regard voice calls negatively, as anxiety-inducing or intrusive, but text messages evoke more positive emotions related to efficiency or self-control.

These five tenets of practice theory highlight how practices can guide social life and consumption (Warde 2005) and form the basis of our inquiry into consumer resistance to sustainability interventions in several key ways. First, this perspective considers the complexity associated with changing a ubiquitous social practice like shopping, which is linked to and intertwined with many other practices. Second, in this perspective, social practices constantly change and evolve, but their histories never disappear entirely (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). Carriers might draw on these histories and either adapt or fail to reconfigure practices when elements in a practice are misaligned (Phipps and Ozanne 2017; Thomas and Epp 2019). Third, this perspective allows us to consider resistance as an activity that interferes with the social practice change that is required by interventions. While individual in nature, such resistance can aggregate to cause even greater levels of disruption to the reconfiguration of the targeted practice (Welch and Yates 2018). Finally, although Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012) highlight that practices can change, the specific processes by which carriers reconfigure links and thereby change social practices remain unclear. Our findings extend this perspective to address this gap.

Methods

Research Context: Disrupted Shopping Practice in Chile

Plastic bags are a common target of sustainability interventions (Jakovcevic et al. 2014). Although they have become a symbol of an ecological crisis (Hawkins 2009), plastic bags reached this status due to their mundane and widespread use (Sternbergh 2015). As an essential material element of the shopping practice, the bags also shape other practices, such as carrying, transporting, advertising, disposing of, and selling products (Hagberg 2016).

By July 2018, 127 countries had adopted restrictions on plastic bags, with laws that targeted their manufacture, retail distribution, use, and trade (United Nations 2018). Chile was the first South American country to ban the use of plastic bags nationally. Chilean policy makers argued the ban was simpler than other interventions that would require participation by stakeholders other than consumers (e.g., waste generators, producers' recycling efforts).ⁱ Thus, they began regulating the use of plastic bags in coastal areas in 2013 while initiating discussions of a nationwide ban. The law, approved in August 2018, applied throughout the country without exceptions (Cristi et al. 2020). It required retailers to stop offering plastic bags to customers (MMA 2018), which was done in two stages. During the first six-month adaptation period, retailers could provide two plastic bags per customer, and then the total ban was initiated in February 2019.

It may be tempting to assume that the implementation of the second-stage total ban signaled the success of the intervention, but our findings indicate this was not the case. As in many countries,ⁱⁱ the ban prompted resistance in Chile (Coleman 2018), and some consumers struggled to accept, adjust to, and support it. Some even questioned its purpose, refusing to comply and challenging supporters (Masquelier 2017). A later bill aimed to partially reverse the ban, ostensibly to restore consumer "dignity," by forcing retailers to provide at least one plastic bag per customer (CNN 2019).

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected archival, social media, interview, and ethnographic data related to the Chilean ban, starting in 2013 and lasting until four months after the implementation of the ban (i.e., June 2019). Web Appendix B summarizes these sources. To begin analysis, we undertook a descriptive exploration of the entire data set. The Spanish-speaking members of the author team identified prominent themes in the verbatim data (e.g., emotional reactions, relevant actors, meanings), which were discussed with the entire author team. Through this analysis, we gained an initial understanding of the shopping

practice from consumers' and other carriers' perspectives, and we narrowed the focus to consumer resistance. Next, we developed etic codes, in accordance with analytical procedures commonly adopted in practice-based research (e.g., Epp, Schau, and Price 2014; Phipps and Ozanne 2017; Thomas and Epp 2019). This coding stage focused on the processes of reconfiguring the shopping practice to build understandings of how consumers respond to sustainability interventions.

Similar to the procedures adopted by Bradford and Boyd (2020), we supplemented the initial practice-theoretical codes with emic terms (e.g., "proud," "angry," "hard," "unfair," "commercial interests") to reflect how consumers responded to changes in the shopping practice. Each Spanish-speaking author coded different types of data and discussed the coding to triangulate the findings among researchers and data sources (Atkinson and Delamont 2005). It became apparent during this round of analysis that consumers had expressed concerns about responsibility and manifested emotional responses to the sustainability intervention. This prominence of responsabilization and emotionality led us to focus on capturing these aspects. We then aggregated the emergent codes to develop meaningful themes that explain what gives rise to consumer resistance to sustainability interventions. In this iterative process, we moved between prior literature and our data, examining how existing concepts might explain or be challenged by the data (Spiggle 1994). In the final stage of analysis, we examined selected excerpts (i.e., those simultaneously coded as particular reconfiguration processes and challenges) to identify how resistance interferes with practice change. This process continued until a set of theoretical concepts emerged that explained the phenomenon, allowing us to develop a theory of consumer resistance in social practice change. Throughout the process, we considered other types of consumer responses to the sustainability intervention (e.g., support, acceptance) and the roles of other actors (e.g., retailers) in reconfiguring the shopping practice. However, to keep the focus on consumer resistance to sustainability interventions, we did not integrate those aspects into our theory except when directly relevant (e.g., if consumers demanded retailers take responsibility). We provide evidence from the various sources to illustrate our coding in Web Appendix C. Our data references are provided in Web Appendix D.

Findings

We have suggested that consumer resistance to sustainability interventions arises because consumers are required to alter the social practice implicated by the intervention. Our findings, detailed in the next two sections, offer insights into that process. First, social practice change occurs through three recursive reconfiguration processes: sensemaking, accommodating, and stabilizing. Second, consumers encounter three challenges in reconfiguring the practice: responsabilization battles, unsettling emotionality, and the (un)linking of other practices. Each of these challenges disrupts the change process by creating different forms of consumer resistance that interfere with the reconfiguration processes—distracting sensemaking,

ⁱ The history of the legislation is available in Web Appendix A.

ⁱⁱ For example, a New York State ban on plastic bags similarly faced strong resistance from angry consumers and unhappy retailers (Sheehan, Sullivan, and Fitz-Gibbon 2020).

discouraging accommodation, and delaying stabilization—which undermine the effectiveness of the intervention.

Our findings are summarized in Table 1 and further elaborated in the following sections. We begin by describing the three practice reconfiguration processes and follow this by documenting the three challenges to their effective unfolding, including how these challenges distract, discourage, and delay the social change process. We finish by offering a formal statement of this emergent theory that describes these insights in a more generalizable form.

Three Social Practice Reconfiguration Processes

Our interviews and ethnographic incursions provide multiple similar descriptions of the shopping practice, which emphasize its mundane, routinized, and stable nature prior to the ban. Consumers easily reproduced the existing shopping practice without much effort, as described by one interviewee: “I normally check what’s in the kitchen, a quick look to see what we need . . . and as I know the store layout by heart, I walk the aisles the same way, I go early when there’s no one, I take one of my sons, I put things inside the cart . . . and only in plastic bags. The house was filled with plastic bags.”¹ Consumers took the availability of plastic bags for granted and counted on them to support other practices, such as waste disposal: “Before [the ban] I didn’t bring anything to carry my purchases. In fact, if I needed five bags in a purchase, I grabbed five more for the garbage.”² When the ban challenged this shopping practice, we observed consumers seeking to change the practice through three reconfiguration processes. We present them separately for theorization but note that real-world reconfiguration processes are ongoing and recursive.

Sensemaking. Carriers initially attempted to make sense of the changes to their shopping practice as required by the intervention. The plastic bag ban implied the loss of a material element of the shopping practice and many other practices. Many consumers started to consider substitute materials, as well as new competences they would need to continue performing their shopping practice, such as asking “how do I carry all this now?” (see Figure 1a). Consumers sought to understand and develop new meanings for the shopping practice as well. That is, the governmental campaign assigned negative meanings to plastic bags, portraying them as damaging to natural landscapes and animal life (see Figure 1b). This conflicted with the more conventional meanings in Chilean society, which regarded plastic bags as convenient, affordable, and widely used (Cristi et al. 2020). The campaign did not extend the negative meanings to other, related materials though, so consumers had to find a way to resolve the contradiction that “in the meantime, everything continues to be wrapped in plastic . . . food . . . toilet paper . . . shampoo . . . etc. etc. etc.”³

Online and in supermarkets, consumers discussed the scope, purpose, and point of the ban to make sense of it. As noted by the checkout assistants, who pack bags for customers at the register, in the weeks following the implementation of the ban,

“half [of the shoppers] think ‘this is great for the planet’ and half [of them] say ‘this is a great business for the supermarket’ that now sells bags rather than giving them away”⁴ (see also Figure 1c). These informants highlighted the difference between “the typical people who say ‘this change is useless’”⁵ and others saying “this is a really good policy.”⁶

Accommodating the change. We found that, after some initial sensemaking of the ban, carriers started to accommodate changes to the shopping practice, discuss the intervention and its impact, and develop new competences for using the new materials and meanings involved in performing the shopping practice without plastic bags. Retailers’ and governmental communications focused on a single new competence: “Bring your own bag.”¹⁰ However, we found evidence that consumers had additional competences associated with using disposable plastic bags while shopping, such as quickly placing products on the checkout belt, sorting products for a swift checkout, knowing how much to tip checkout assistants, and distributing loaded plastic bags in both hands to carry them easily into their cars (see Figure 2a). These competences were challenged when bags were limited (to two per customer) and eventually banned. Consumers also had to develop new skills for unloading purchases at home (e.g., using hard plastic boxes) and to design home storage options for their reusable bags (e.g., dedicated kitchen drawer; see Figures 2b and 2c). A local magazine offered tips for developing new competences, such as “when making your shopping list, get in the habit of always writing down ‘reusable bags’ as the first thing.”¹¹

Cashiers also had to develop new competences for packing groceries into different types of materials (e.g., reusable bags, boxes, carts) and learn how to time their service provision accordingly, as some packing processes might take more time. Consumer interactions with these actors were also altered (e.g., when and how to provide the cashiers with the materials; if and how to pack the materials into a trolley), and thus new relational competences from consumers were required.

Furthermore, the law did not propose substitute material elements, and we found that consumers began experimenting with different substitutes for plastic bags (see Figure 3a). Media and social media actors also offered ideas: “#ByePlasticBags: The law that seeks to reduce the use of bags has already started . . . What do you think of this measure? What idea do you propose to replace the bags?”¹⁵ During the partial ban period, social marketing campaigns invited consumers to bring their own bags to stores but did not suggest the type of bag they should use. Retailers also proposed diverse alternative materials (see Figure 3b). Some supermarkets offered recyclable bags for sale, but because they contained 15% plastic, these were quickly denounced by Greenpeace as misleading.¹⁶ Other supermarkets offered cardboard boxes, fabric bags, reusable plastic bags, and paper bags, though some provided no alternatives. In searching for substitute materials and to develop competences, consumers accommodated the reconfigured shopping practice as carriers by attempting to become skillful shoppers once again: “I know I must carry a [reusable]

Table 1. Understanding Consumer Resistance to Sustainability Interventions.

Reconfiguration processes Reconfiguration challenges	Sensemaking Consumers seek to understand and develop new meanings for the (reconfiguring) shopping practice.	Accommodating Consumers develop new competences for using and handling the new materials (and meanings) involved in performing the shopping practice without disposable plastic bags.	Stabilizing Consumers embody (at times with resignation) the changed practice, with more or less difficulty or speed.
	Consumer resistance		
Responsibilization battles Carriers clash over who is responsible for reconfiguring the shopping practice.	Sensemaking is distracted as consumers divert sensemaking efforts towards responsabilization instead of reconfiguring the shopping practice.	Accommodation is discouraged as consumers question the motives and responsibility of each actor who introduces a new material involved in performing the practice.	Stabilization is delayed as consumers hesitate to commit to the reconfiguring practice without seeing commitment from other actors with whom they wish to share responsibility.
Unsettling emotionality Carriers no longer feel completely attuned or “at home” with the shopping practice, which was previously familiar to them. This leads to anxiety and fear.	Sensemaking is distracted as consumers find it difficult to understand their unsettling emotions.	Accommodation is discouraged as consumers limit their use of new materials as well as their attempts to develop new competences to avoid experiencing unsettling emotions.	Stabilization is delayed as consumers may not want to stabilize the reconfiguring practice until they feel emotionally settled in it.
(Un)linking other practices Carriers forge new or break existing connections between the shopping practice and other practices.	Sensemaking is distracted as consumer efforts are extended to other practices by making and breaking links between them.	Accommodation is discouraged as consumers direct their attention to the linked and unlinked practices, reducing their ability to accommodate elements within the reconfiguring practice.	Stabilization is delayed as consumers try to embody changes to (un)linked practices in addition to embodying changes to the reconfiguring practice.

bag in my backpack no matter what, because if I eventually want to buy something I need to know where to carry it.”¹⁷

Stabilizing the practice. As our analysis indicates, at some point, carriers started to embody (at times with resignation) changes to the shopping practice, with more or less difficulty or speed. The practice stabilized as it once again became familiar and routinized. At the time we concluded data collection, some consumers settled on a set of interconnected elements that would allow them to perform the reconfigured shopping practice skillfully, describing how they might “keep reusable bags in the car. When I get home and unload them, they go back to the car immediately”²¹ or noting “I haven’t seen anyone else doing this . . . here we use garbage bags, those black ones that I purchase once a week. I purchase these bags, put my groceries in them, and when I take them out, I use the bags for the garbage.”²² By regularly performing such behaviors, consumers supported the stabilization of the reconfigured practice. From a practice-theoretical perspective, we would expect that, as more consumers enter this stabilizing phase, their performances may converge into a new social version of the practice, which other consumers then start reproducing.

However, some consumers did not engage in stabilization immediately. We found evidence of consumers purchasing reusable bags on multiple shopping trips and accumulating them at home or “stealing” the disposable bags the supermarket provides for fruit and vegetables and repurposing them to carry purchases home (see Figure 3c). Such consumers continued trying to make sense of the intervention and develop sustainable shopping practices, but they also still experienced contradictions and misalignments in their performance, which impeded the stabilization of the shopping practice.

Challenges and Consumer Resistance to Practice Reconfiguration

The ban on plastic bags forced carriers to reconfigure the shopping practice, and we found that this generated three challenges: responsabilization battles, unsettling emotionality, and the (un)linking of other practices. These challenges made practice change more difficult for consumers, leading to resistance. We describe each challenge and how it distracted, discouraged, and delayed the change process, leading to a recursive state of reconfiguration instead of stabilization.

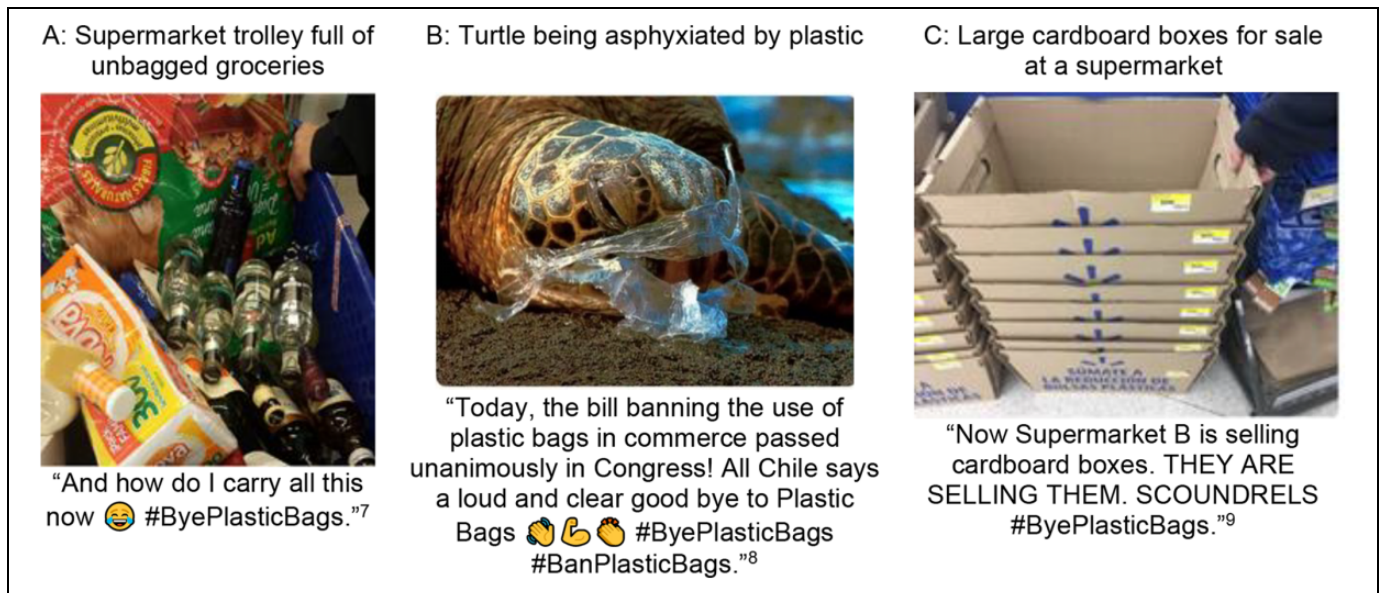


Figure 1. Illustrative social media posts.

Responsibilization battles. Responsibilization battles emerged when carriers clashed over who was responsible for reconfiguring the shopping practice. In these battles, consumers who refused responsibilization challenged those who did not (“Are you an idiot or do you actually believe they removed the bags for the planet? To cut costs for companies, nothing else #ByePlasticBags”²³) and vice versa (“I hope all those who are AGAINST the plastic bag ban choke on one! #ByePlasticBags”²⁴). Retailers and government agencies were also pressed to take some responsibility (“Now retailers and supermarkets must give away eco bags. Not everything is revenue and profit. Do your share!!! #ByePlasticBags”²⁵). These responsibilization battles unfolded in social media, the press, and retail spaces.

The battles evidenced consumers’ discomfort due to responsibilization (Eckhardt and Dobscha 2019). We found that consumers experienced (1) physical discomfort from carrying fewer, larger, heavier bags (“I have to lift the bags and they are super heavy... because they are so large, I tend to load them too much and the truth is, I start feeling it in my back”²⁶); (2) psychological discomfort due to social scrutiny of their performance of the shopping practice (“When I ask them, ‘did you bring a bag?’ they get upset, they resent it a bit”²⁷); (3) financial discomfort caused by incurring the cost of replacing the plastic bags they previously got for free (“Always f—ing up the poorest and most vulnerable in our country, now paper bags are sold for \$1000, \$2000 and \$3000 [Chilean] pesos”²⁸); and (4) moral discomfort when they identified hypocrisy in corporations or government actors that profited from the change (“Supermarket B prospers and the consumer does not benefit at all. Customers now have to buy your bags and advertise your brand for free”²⁹).

To resolve their discomfort and navigate the challenge of responsibilization battles, consumers resisted the plastic bag

ban in various ways. Some consumers attempted to spread the responsibility (“@SupermarketA, @StoreA @DepartmentStore @StoreB and many more should give us bags and not sell them”³⁰) or diffuse responsibilization claims (“No one forces you to buy a reusable bag from supermarkets, there are many people who have their small business selling bags, or you can make your own bag, carry a backpack, even carry your purchases in your hands when you don’t have much stuff”³¹). Other consumers engaged in boycotts and retaliatory actions against both supermarkets and the government: “I also enjoy going to [Supermarket A] with a [Supermarket B] bag and going to [Supermarket B] with a [Supermarket A] bag, because I feel like supermarkets are benefiting from this law so this is my way of protesting against this. If I am forced to buy the bag, then I get to choose which one to use where.”³²

These responsibilization-provoked sources of resistance interfered with practice reconfiguration (see Table 1). They distracted consumers’ sensemaking away from the shopping practice and toward other actors’ intentions and behaviors, as exemplified in debates about government mandates involving supermarkets: “I don’t understand why people are celebrating so much the stupidity and loss of freedom of #ByePlasticBags... Why weren’t the supermarkets mandated to change the [disposable plastic] bags for biodegradable and compostable ones?”³³

Such resistance also discouraged accommodation when consumers witnessed nonsupportive actions by other carriers whose motives they questioned. For example, consumers who tried to replace the banned bags with reusable bags or cardboard boxes often believed that supermarkets should support them: “Customers must be informed correctly. I bought a full trolley and when I got to the cashier I got the news that I cannot get bags, they did not have bags available to buy and the cashier tells me that the local manager said that giving cardboard boxes



Figure 2. Illustrative social media posts and photographs.

was inappropriate. They must provide solutions to the customers, put signs up warning them of the change.”³⁴ Finally, consumers delayed in committing to reconfiguring the shopping practice because they did not perceive sufficient commitment from other carriers with whom they wished to share responsibilities: “In part, the regulation of plastic bags is justified due to the contamination derived from them, but I believe that the ban does not solve the problem and unnecessarily burdens the customer with something that the shops should be responsible for.”³⁵

Unsettling emotionality. The ban also disrupted the affective structure of the shopping practice: Consumers as carriers no longer felt completely attuned or “at home” with their previously familiar practice. During reconfiguration processes, the shopping practice gets infused with an unsettling mix of negative and positive emotionality. Some consumers experienced anxiety and fear: “good heavens, what are we going to do?”³⁶ and others grappled with the notion that “though I like nature and all this, the first week when I went to the supermarket and there were no bags, it was... ‘good God, the bags are over!’ and I even got a bit angry like ‘why are there no bags?’”³⁷ For other carriers who still lack competence and therefore fail to perform the practice skillfully, reconfiguring the practice creates frustration and shame: “#ByePlasticBags I can’t get used to this shit! 🙄🙄.”³⁸ As consumers reflected on their performance of the shopping practice, additional emotions emerged. Erratic or flawed performance (e.g., “people forget to bring bags or bring fewer than they need”³⁹) prevented the changing practice from becoming “second nature” and added guilt and anger to its emotionality. The dynamic links between the modified elements (materials, competences, meanings) of the shopping practice (and other practices) further unsettled its

emotionality (see Figure 4a). Consumers may have felt conflicted about performing well in one practice but not others:

I have mixed feelings... too bad this will go on record... up to the very last minute [prior to the ban] I still asked for plastic bags. Now I imagine the little fish that’s eating the plastic and I am committed, but my alternative is still to purchase a plastic bag for the garbage.⁴⁰

However, the reconfiguration processes also offered numerous possibilities for performing the practice in ways that could be more effective or beneficial to carriers. Therefore, consumers could adopt more sustainable materials, become more competent, or derive more meaning from the practice. Such possibilities charged the shopping practice with positive emotions, such as hope, excitement, and pride (“You have to be calm and take it with humor, and that is all!!! We look cute carrying Cloth Bags!!! Hahaha #lookinglikegrandma 🥰!”⁴¹)

As the reconfiguration processes continued and consumers started shopping without disposable plastic bags, other emotions surfaced and became part of the unsettling emotionality. Pride characterized carriers who felt accomplished or creative in performing the practice (see Figure 4b) because they identified new substitute materials: “When you are offered a plastic bag at the farmers’ market, but you open your backpack and say ‘just in here please’ #GoodbyeByePlasticBags” [accompanied by an image of Arnold Schwarzenegger looking at the horizon surrounded by animals and nature].⁴² This sense of pride was also reinforced by social marketing campaigns, such as one proclaiming “Chile is the 1st country in Latin America to say #ByePlasticBags in commerce!”⁴³ Reconfiguration processes also prompted nostalgia: “When I was little and we shopped, they would wrap things in newspaper, there wasn’t a plastic bag for sugar, it was paper.”⁴⁴



Figure 3. Illustrative social media posts.

This mix of emotions we identified emerged during reconfiguration processes and, as suggested in prior research, became characteristic of the practice, providing consumers with a new (albeit changing) template for the beliefs and emotions they *should* express as part of that practice. We found that each shopping performance added to the emotionality of the practice, making it more volatile, complex, and tense.

In response to the challenge of unsettling emotionality, we found that consumers resisted the sustainability intervention by complaining that “to carry products in their hands is degrading”⁴⁸ or claiming a “loss of dignity,”⁴⁹ as well as engaging in more extreme acts such as “kicking checkout points, screaming at the cashiers, causing scandals, so the supermarket security guards have to be called.”⁵⁰ The resistance generated by the challenge of unsettling emotionality interfered with the ongoing practice configuration (see Table 1). It distracted sensemaking by diminishing consumers’ cognitive capacity or ability to notice and make sense of important cues: “There is a feeling of disgust for having the responsibility of bringing our own bags. This increases our costs, and I don’t see the benefits.”⁵¹ Resistance also discouraged the accommodation of the reconfiguring practice, as consumers hesitated to handle new materials or develop new competences when they struggled with their emotions: “I am already getting used to having to carry the bag, but if I sometimes forget the bag, I have to buy a bag again. If I don’t buy it and if there are a few things, I have to carry them in my hands and that’s embarrassing . . . walking around with things in sight.”⁵² Moreover, as consumers resisted in response to the challenge of unsettling emotionality, they tended to avoid repeating performances that prompted anxiety or fear, and this delayed practice stabilization: “Our family’s initial reaction was very positive, as we understood the purpose. However, as soon as this ban started revealing the difficulties of this buying process, our view started changing and we

now feel upset and uncomfortable, and seriously question the initiative . . . Isn’t there an easier way?”⁵³

(Un)linking of other practices. The challenge of (un)linking other practices emerged because as the materials, competences, and meanings of the shopping practice underwent reconfiguration, they also forged new or broke existing connections between the shopping practice and other practices. For example, the ban disrupted domestic disposal of garbage because free disposable plastic bags, which represent a key material for both practices, were no longer available: “I used the supermarket bags to dispose of trash, now I need to buy trash bags because I still need to throw the trash out . . . Does anybody do this differently?”⁵⁴

As the meaning of plastic bags evolved, we found that connotations of contamination and waste also extended to other retailing practices, such as product packaging (“wrapping eggplants in plastic film”⁵⁵; see Figure 4c), selling reusable bags wrapped in plastic, “requiring that [consumers] use plastic bags to weigh fruit and bread,”⁵⁶ and waste management efforts (“They could work on responsible waste management now, the producing companies MUST take care of the waste that remains when consuming their products. #wasteisadesignproblem @[sustainability ONG] knows about that.”⁵⁷) Once they face disruption to such links, consumers manifest resistance:

A gentleman once told me: “This is absurd! 2% of the country’s pollution is plastic bags in the water. The rest is pure plastic that they continue selling. So what is the point? You get it? . . . Do you see how ridiculous this is? They are attacking 2% instead of attacking 30% through prohibiting other plastics, reducing that, or increasing these other things. This is more of a populist measure than anything else.” I got to hear plenty of opinions from people [laughs].⁵⁸

Moreover, consumers identified misalignments between the governmental discourse about the ban and the government’s



Figure 4. Illustrative social media posts.

actions in other industries: “Everything is fine with the plastic bags . . . What about the coal mine in Patagonia?”⁵⁹ or “#Bye-PlasticBags but [president] shrinks national parks for private exploitation, persists with + hydroelectric plants, mining, destruction of native forests with pine and eucalyptus plantations, there is no recycling, what we consume comes in plastic and is disposable, retail uses electricity for lights all day.”⁶⁰ Upon acknowledging the complexity of interrelated practices, consumers resisted the intervention, perceiving it as “absurd.”

Consumer resistance in response to the challenge of (un)linking other practices also interfered with practice reconfiguration (see Table 1). It distracted sensemaking by requiring consumers to make sense of not just the focal shopping practice but also the broader nexuses with other practices and their elements (i.e., materials, competences, and meanings): “I don’t understand how they can talk about #ByePlasticBags while still allowing tires. It must be because the bags contaminate ‘in your face’ while tire wear is invisible because their microparticles disappear in the air we breathe. #terriblelegislation.”⁶¹ Similarly, such resistance discouraged consumers from accommodating elements within the shopping practice, as they would need to accommodate elements in linked and unlinked practices at the same time: “I went to the supermarket, good thing they eliminated plastic bags, I bought this [paper bag], but everything I am carrying inside it is in plastic packaging. What has changed from this? #ByePlasticBags #GoodBusiness.”⁶² Finally, consumers’ resistance delayed the stabilization of the reconfiguring practice because they were forced to embody changes to (un)linked practices in addition to embodying changes to the reconfiguring practice: “Today they didn’t give

me plastic bags at the supermarket, 10 fewer bags on the planet, but what I can’t wrap my head around is that I had to purchase 10 of those black garbage bags for the bathroom and kitchen waste bins (I had never, ever purchased bags for this before). Something is not right!!! @EnvironmentMinistryChile #ByePlasticBags.”⁶⁴

Towards a Theory of Consumer Resistance in Social Practice Change

In this section, we build on our findings to propose a theory of consumer resistance in social practice change. We now present this theory, illustrated in Figure 5, in broad terms to demonstrate its generalizability.

Practice theories, such as ours, conceive of individual behaviors as embedded in social practices. As such, we start from where consumers continuously and skillfully perform an existing practice by repeatedly linking its elements in a similar manner (see Figure 5, Existing Practice). However, when interventions (imposed or otherwise) occur that modify the basic elements of a practice, consumers must reconfigure the links across the modified elements to enable the social practice to develop and endure.

Consumers do this through three recursive reconfiguration processes (see Figure 5, Reconfiguration Processes): sensemaking, accommodating, and stabilizing. Consumers work to make sense of the modified elements to understand what the change means for the social practice in question and their continued performance of it (“what do we do now?”). They must also accommodate the modified elements while performing the

changing social practice (“how do we do it now?”). Finally, consumers need to stabilize the changed practice by embodying the newly developed links between the modified elements in their performances (“this is how we will keep doing it from now on”). During reconfiguration, the links between the practice elements are provisional (dotted lines in Figure 5, Reconfiguration Processes), as consumers are not yet consistently engaging with the same elements in performing the changing practice.

Three major challenges emerge in social practice change: responsabilization battles, unsettling emotionality, and the (un)linking of other practices. These challenges generate consumer resistance that disrupts practice reconfiguration. Considering the nature of these reconfiguration processes, we identify how the dispersed consumer resistance interferes with each of them in a particular way. Sensemaking, which requires focused attention, emotional stability, and a manageable cognitive load (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2015), is distracted by consumer resistance. Accommodating, which involves experimentation, trial and error, and risk-taking to incorporate new materials into the changing practice, is discouraged by consumer resistance. Finally, stabilizing, which requires that consumers comfortably and consistently perform a new version of the practice (Phipps and Ozanne 2017; Thomas and Epp 2019), is delayed by consumer resistance. It is worth noting that, as reconfiguration processes are recursive, the ways in which consumer resistance disrupts them may overlap.

In this way, consumer resistance keeps the practice in a recursive state of reconfiguration, interfering with the desired change. Finally, when the reconfiguring practice becomes stable, the practice in question is reconfigured (see Figure 5, Reconfigured Practice): Consumers skillfully perform it again by continuously linking its modified elements in a similar manner. Taken together, our theory explains what gives rise to consumer resistance to interventions and how this resistance can be reduced by including consideration of social practice change.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

Our theory of consumer resistance in social practice change has two main research implications. First, we advance marketing literature on sustainable consumer behavior by shifting the focus from individual consumer behavior to social practice change. Second, we advance theories of social practice change in marketing and social sciences by examining the role of consumer resistance and emphasizing the previously overlooked roles of responsabilization and emotionality.

Shifting from individual perspectives on sustainable consumer behavior to social practice change. Consumers often resist behavioral-focused interventions, particularly when they are made responsible for social issues (e.g., Eckhardt and Dobscha 2019), thereby undermining the effectiveness of the intervention. Our theory offers an explanation for this important problem. Extending prior research (e.g., Blue et al. 2014;

Scheurenbrand et al. 2018), we show how sustainability interventions disrupt social practices and explain that consumer resistance emerges because the individual behaviors being targeted are embedded in disrupted social practices. Specifically, we explain that, when interventions aim to change individual behaviors rather than social practices, they place excessive responsibility on consumers, unsettle their practice-related emotionality, and destabilize the multiple practices that interconnect to shape consumers’ lives, ultimately leading to resistance. This theory offers a conceptual framework for better examining, understanding, and explaining consumer resistance to sustainability interventions and how this resistance can be reduced.

Connecting consumer resistance, responsabilization, and emotionality to theories of social practice change. Our proposed theory also contributes to theories of social practice change in marketing and social sciences more generally. Whereas Shove, Pantzar, and Watson’s (2012) highly influential theory shows convincingly that social practices change when links among their elements (i.e., materials, competences, meanings) are made or broken, their theory does not fully articulate what processes and challenges are actually involved in social practice change and what gives rise to consumer resistance in social practice change. Our theory advances existing social practice theories in three important ways. First, it shows that social practice change takes place through three recursive reconfiguration processes by which carriers reconnect the links among modified elements for a practice to endure. Second, it identifies three major challenges arising in reconfiguration processes. Third, it shows how these challenges generate consumer resistance, which disrupts the reconfiguration processes required by sustainability interventions and undermines its effectiveness.

In addition to articulating the practice reconfiguration processes, our theory extends current understandings of social practice change by shedding light on two subjects: responsabilization and emotionality. First, we explain why consumers resist responsabilization and provide evidence of how they do so, in the context of a social practice change. Our analysis shows that consumers resist responsabilization not only when they find it difficult to reconfigure their habituated social practices but also when they feel they are the primary carriers being tasked with the change. Thus, our findings extend Eckhardt and Dobscha’s (2019) work by identifying other forms of discomfort that consumers experience in response to such allocations of responsibility. Moreover, by introducing “responsibilization battles,” we identify the consequences of discomfort that go beyond the individual. The notion of responsabilization battles in social practice change is important because these battles are likely to become more frequent as consumers increasingly find themselves tasked with complex practice reconfigurations. Furthermore, when these battles occur publicly, such as through social media, they may amplify consumer resistance and outrage about sustainability interventions, potentially working through social contagion (Plé and Demangeot 2020) to disrupt other social practices.

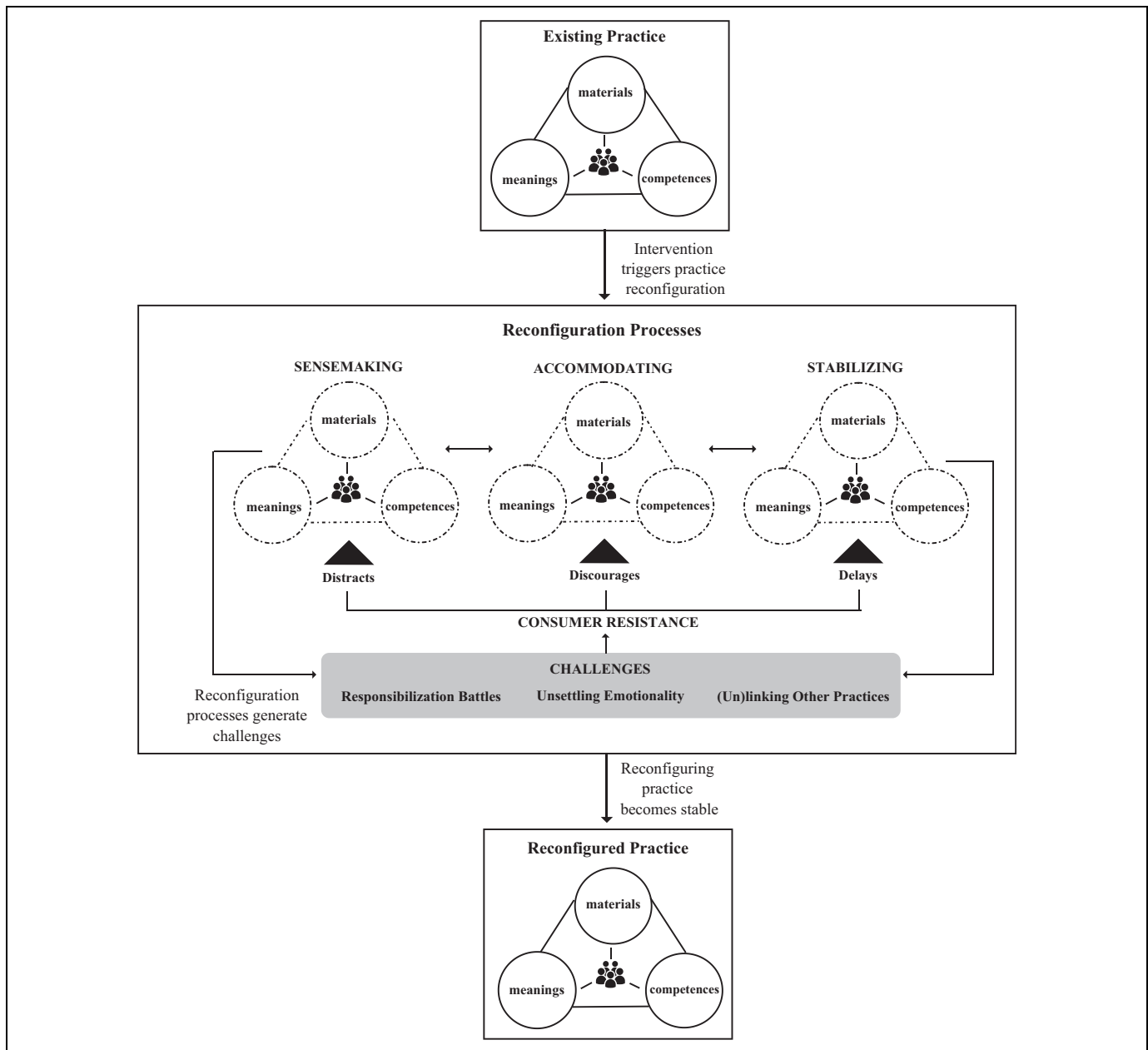


Figure 5. Consumer resistance in social practice change as required by interventions.

Second, we emphasize the role of emotionality in social practice change. We show that during reconfiguration, multiple, often conflicting emotions get linked to practices as consumers perform them. This notion adds to a practice-theoretical understanding of practice reconfiguration. We challenge the assumption that consumers simply accept responsibility assigned to them by government interventions. We find that consumer resistance is a disruptive force that pushes against consumers’ desire to acclimatize to a new normal (Phipps and Ozanne 2017), and it can infuse reconfiguring practices with demoralizing emotions. Although emotionality is often a “blind spot” in social practice theory (Molander and Hartmann 2018), examining its role offers a way to connect

cultural and material explanations of social phenomena (Reckwitz 2012). By identifying the unsettling emotionality of social practice change, we help clarify the conflicts that often surround sustainability interventions (Sternbergh 2015). These go beyond individual reactions to routine disruptions or behavioral change and add insights about the role of collective emotions in sustainable consumer behavior (White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019).

Managerial Implications

If individual consumer behavior is determined by social practices beyond individual motivations or attitudes, then putting a

sustainability intervention into effect is just a first step. Reconfiguring the practice should be the primary goal, which can lead to the broader aim of fostering sustainable consumer behavior. Our emergent theory offers a framework for designing and managing practice-based sustainability interventions, which makes it possible to explore methods to reduce consumer resistance that go beyond individual behavioral approaches. Our recommendations focus on two key aspects: how to (1) design practice-based sustainability interventions to reduce resistance at the outset and (2) monitor and adjust these interventions to manage consumer resistance that may emerge later. Using the plastic bag bans as an example, we offer a first set of recommendations for considerations that should be addressed prior to implementing the intervention, then a second set involving ways to monitor and adjust ongoing processes during practice reconfiguration. We outline the sets of recommendations in Figures 6 and 7.

Planning and designing practice-based interventions. First, when designing sustainability interventions, policy makers should identify the potential practice elements (i.e., materials, competences, and meanings) that will be disrupted and require reconfiguration. They can then introduce substitute elements that reflect the sustainability goal of the intervention, demonstrate how the new elements work, and provide advice regarding their use and assessment. For example, to replace disposable plastic bags, policy makers could present alternative forms of reusable bags, describing both their usage and their (positive) impact on the environment. Likewise, policy makers should identify the competences that consumers need to perform the changed practice, such as packing different types and sizes of reusable bags, choosing the right bags, or deciding where to store them. We advise policy makers to obtain consumers' perceptions of and reactions to the new practice before announcing the intervention. They can then include those insights in their planning and communication. Rather than relying exclusively on opinion polls, which often show strong support for interventions (see <http://chaobolsasplasticas.cl/en/>), deeper consumer insights should be gained through focus groups and ethnographic work (see Cayla and Arnould 2013) to capture consumer experiences of the reconfiguration processes.

Second, policy makers should consider all practice carriers—beyond just consumers—and distribute responsibilities among them. For example, consumers may perform the shopping practice, but retailers and bag manufacturers set material arrangements for shopping, the government determines the rules for the commercial activity, and social marketers promote the meaning of sustainable consumption. Rather than banning bags, which eliminates retailers' responsibility for this aspect of the shopping practice, policy makers might assign retailers the task of developing sustainable alternatives. Similarly, to prevent retailers' opportunistic attempts to profit from the intervention (e.g., by selling reusable bags for profit), which threaten to irritate consumers because they perceive these tactics as hypocritical, policy makers might

establish legal price limits for reusable bags or prohibit retailers from charging for a bag that features their brand logo.

Third, ethnographic studies might help policy makers determine and evaluate the potential emotional implications of an intervention. For retailers, the point of sale is generally where consumers experience performances laden with emotions. Planning to reduce those visible manifestations of unsettling emotionality may reduce their effects on consumer resistance. Social marketing campaigns and efforts at the point of sale (e.g., signals that indicate the shared responsibilities of multiple carriers, advice for accommodating the change) might reduce extreme negative manifestations, such as assaults on cashiers, abandoned shopping carts, or theft of plastic bags from the produce section. Consumers might also feel a sense of pride or other positive emotions if they can accomplish the shopping practice without plastic bags, so these positive emotions should be leveraged to reduce resistance, such as through the gamification (Müller-Stewens et al. 2017).

Fourth, policy makers and social marketing institutions should identify which practices share materials, competences, or meanings with the targeted practice (e.g., waste practices, goods packaging, transportation), so they can anticipate other possible sources of resistance and act accordingly. Materials should be considered broadly, for example, a sustainability intervention targeting plastic bags should address links to other practices that also involve plastic—as a general substance, not necessarily just in the shape of disposable bags. Due to their broad goals, such as “promoting sustainable consumption,” the scope of sustainability interventions tends to appear virtually endless. Consequently, consumers might link any intervention to other practices that they consider unsustainable (e.g., waste, mining). By establishing and communicating clear intervention boundaries, policy makers can establish a precise sequence of future interventions that can support the broader goal of sustainable consumer behavior.

Monitoring and adjusting practice-based interventions. Designing interventions that account for the aforementioned considerations may reduce consumer resistance at the outset, but policy makers must continue monitoring the reconfiguration processes to identify any emerging resistance, then make necessary adjustments to manage this resistance. These adjustments should focus specifically on how potential consumer resistance disrupts reconfiguration processes (i.e., distracting sensemaking, discouraging accommodation, or delaying stabilization) and should aim to refocus sensemaking, encourage accommodation, and accelerate stabilization.

First, consumer resistance may distract sensemaking during the reconfiguration process. To identify this resistance, note when consumers experience tensions and lack of focus while attempting to make sense of the intervention and its required changes. When consumer resistance manifests in this way, intervention efforts should remove or reduce these distractions. For example, communications could remind carriers of the intervention's scope, the distribution of responsibility, and specific benefits to them. By clearly communicating

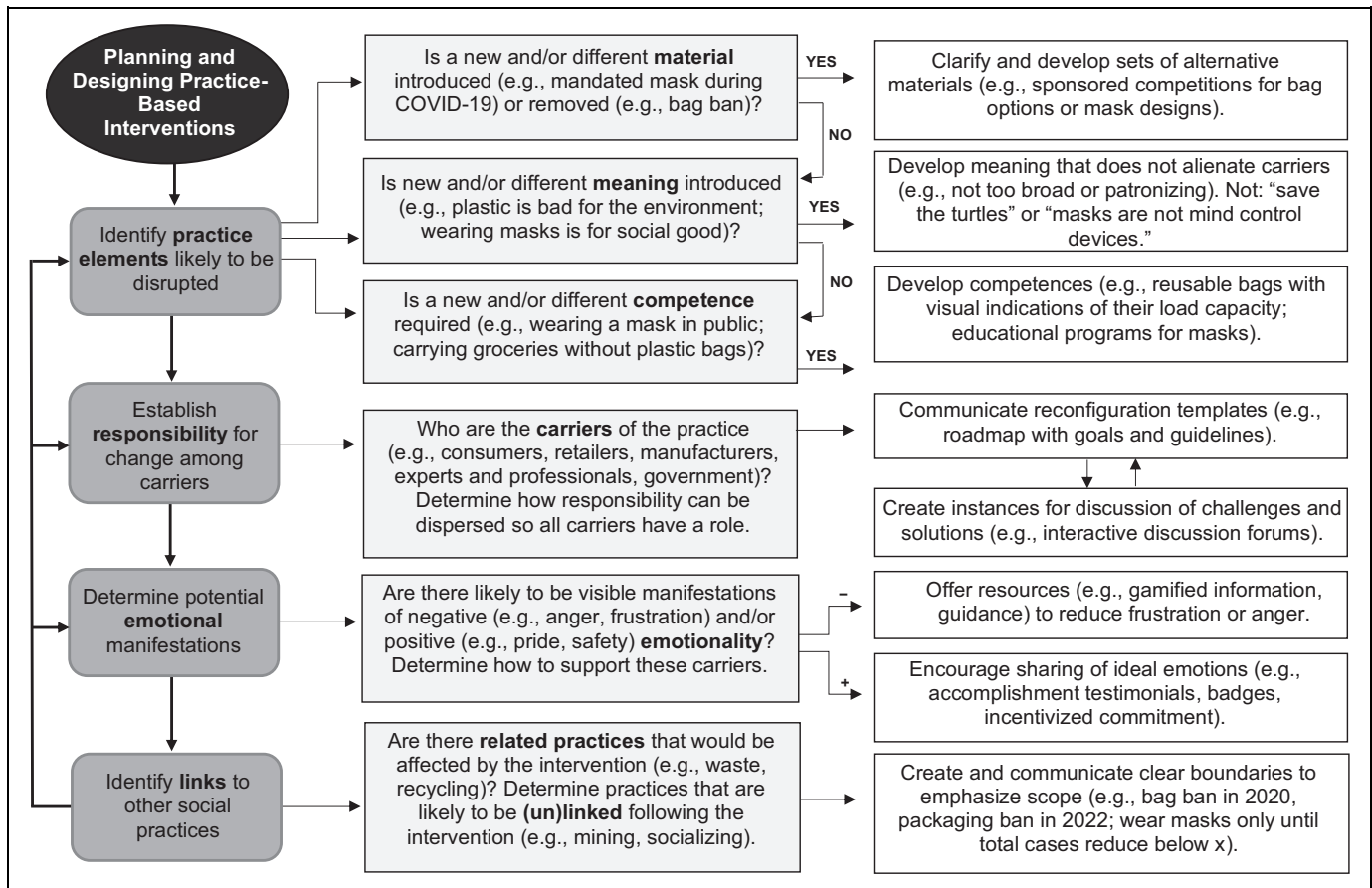


Figure 6. Decision flowchart: planning and designing practice-based interventions.

and reaffirming the boundaries around the intervention and its benefits, policy makers can reduce distraction and refocus sense-making (e.g., establishing a roadmap for associated interventions). For example, to ensure benefits for consumers—often the most visible and numerous carriers of a practice—retailers might introduce limited-time discounts on eco-friendly garbage bags for shoppers who comply with the intervention by bringing reusable bags. If this incentive is not financially viable, retailers could consider other ways to encourage adoption (e.g., badges for early compliance). Policy makers might also build financial considerations (e.g., grants, funding) into the policy, then allow retailers to distribute the government-sponsored incentives to consumers.

Second, consumer resistance may discourage accommodation. To identify this resistance, observe consumers avoiding risks and restricting their experimentation with new materials, competences, and/or meanings. When consumer resistance manifests in this way, intervention efforts should focus on the challenges that trigger the discouragement. If consumers are struggling to develop competences due to unsettling emotionality, for example, additional educational programs might be helpful. At the point of sale, instruction banners might acknowledge initial forgetfulness, then offer sustainable alternatives for those shoppers who left their reusable bags at home. Policy makers should observe what alternatives become visible

when consumers attempt to reconfigure the shopping practice, and they should use these insights to determine solutions that can be quickly and easily adopted. Alternatives that arise through reconfiguration efforts may be better suited to the market setting, even if they differ from the options predicted in the planning phase. Therefore, it is important to monitor and leverage consumer accommodation efforts.

Third, consumer resistance may delay stabilization. To identify this resistance, notice consumers grappling with how to comfortably embody the changes. To deal with these delays, intervention efforts should focus on removing barriers. Traditionally, testimonials and success stories have been recommended to foster consumer compliance to behavioral change (White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019). However, we find that consumers tend to be unwilling to stabilize a reconfiguring practice until they observe commitment from other actors. Thus, we propose that effective campaigns and forums should focus on other actors that consumers believe have not been adequately responsabilized. Other efforts to help consumers overcome the discomfort associated with stabilizing practices should refer to both the reconfiguring practice and any practices that have been newly (un)linked. Finally, in line with our recommendation that broader sustainability goals should be emphasized throughout the process, policy makers must ensure that any promises are met. Carriers will be more likely to

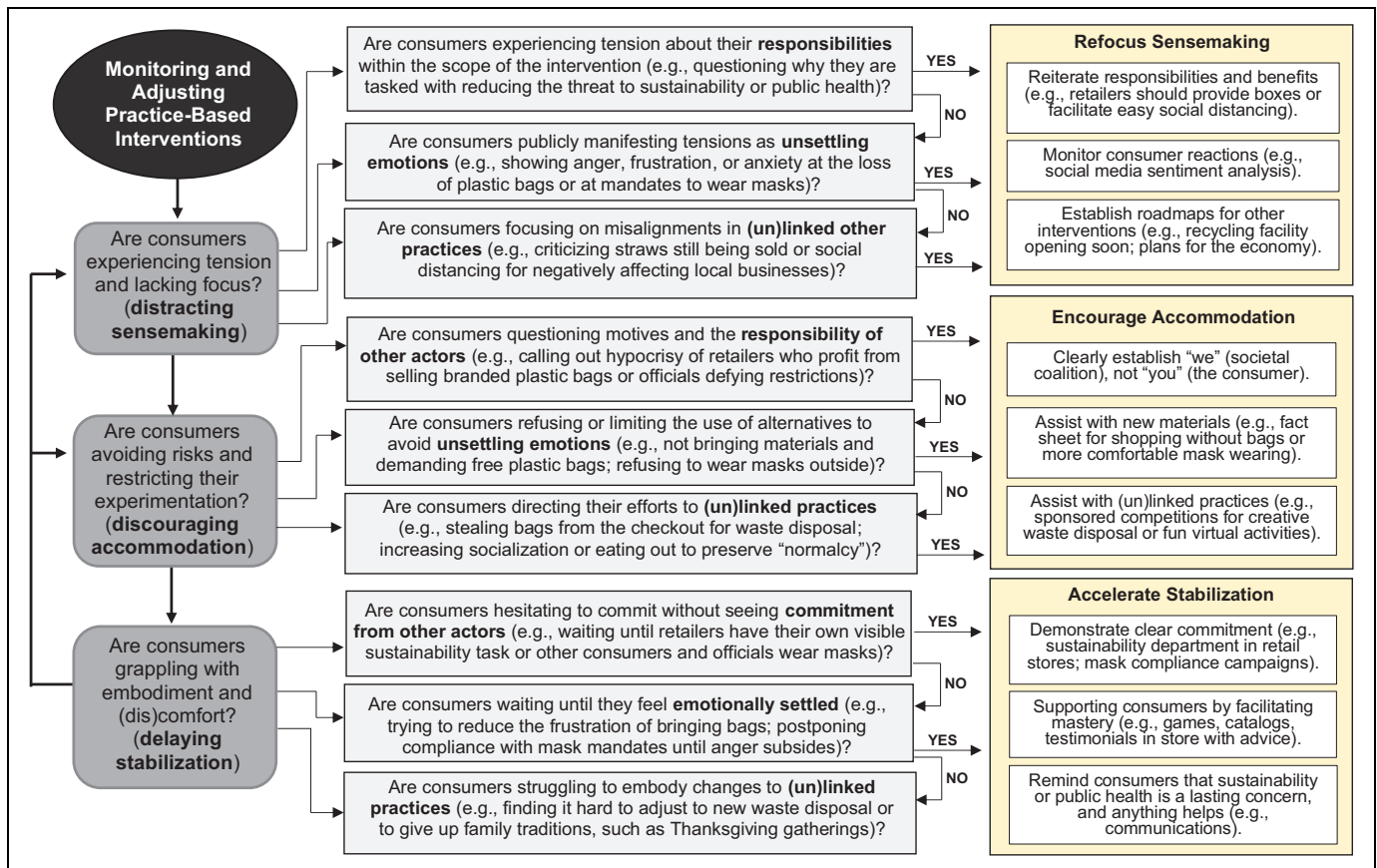


Figure 7. Decision flowchart: monitoring and adjusting practice-based interventions.

stabilize reconfiguring practices if they know that their efforts are not moot when it comes to fostering more sustainable consumer behavior overall.

At the time an intervention is put in place, and thereafter, communications with carriers should be ongoing, describing the intervention's scope, importance, and responsibility assignments. When responsabilization, unsettling emotionality, and the (un)linking of other practices generate consumer resistance during the reconfiguration process, policy makers should prioritize identifying disruptions to ensure targeted responses to resistance. In this way, the process of designing and implementing interventions will remain appropriately dynamic and iterative, rather than static and linear.

Limitations and Further Research

Future research can address limitations in this study. First, we examine a ban on plastic bags. Despite its spread and importance, this empirical setting may differ from other contexts within the broader sustainability domain, such as those outlined in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2020). Nevertheless, our emergent theory is relevant to intervention contexts that (1) result in significant changes to established practices; (2) are public, such that the intervention affects many consumers who might resist it; and (3) relate to

changes that demand the involvement of multiple actors to reconfigure the practice. Additional research might apply this theory and investigate interventions that target other goals (e.g., interventions aimed at reducing smoking, drinking, obesity). Second, the intervention we study entails the elimination of a material (plastic bags), but reconfigurations of social practices could also vary in response to interventions that encourage new competences (e.g., recycling) or alterations to meaning (e.g., recycled drinking water). Continued research should address consumer resistance to interventions that target such practice elements and determine if consumer resistance and reconfiguration processes vary. Third, our comprehensive study mirrors the implementation of the plastic bag ban in real time. However, we did not assess the long-term outcomes of this sustainability intervention. We hope continued research will analyze consumer responses over time to gain additional insights into monitoring/adjusting strategies. Fourth, the sustainability intervention we study was a mandated governmental policy. Other organizations also propose sustainability interventions (e.g., Meat-Free Mondays), and the reconfiguration of social practices in response to marketing-led interventions (e.g., packaging-free product strategies) might differ in this context. We suggest adapting our theory to such research topics to develop insights into the roles of consumers and companies in the successful implementation of such interventions. Finally,

the proposed theory provides a novel and comprehensive explanation for why consumers engage in resistance, and as such, it proposes several additional methods for reducing consumer resistance to interventions. However, facilitating more sustainable consumer behavior through interventions is a complex, multilayered effort that is likely to require contributions from multiple perspectives to be resolved satisfactorily. Continued research should consider how the proposed theory of consumer resistance in social practice change can be combined with other perspectives, such as the SHIFT framework (White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019), to clarify how consumer resistance to sustainability interventions can be reduced and, ultimately, to foster more sustainable consumer behavior.

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