

Consumers angry at retail industry for producing plastic waste, study finds

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British consumers are angry at the retail industry for producing plastic waste and frustrated with current reuse and recycling systems, according to research from the University of Sheffield.

The study, by academics in the University's School of English, has found that supermarkets and manufacturers use [language](#) that frames themselves as helping and supporting customers to make pro-environmental choices. However, findings from the research show that this isn't how consumers see the relationship.

The study is the first to look at how language can influence the public's thoughts and behavior towards plastics reuse and recycling.

The team collected linguistic data to see clearly how people talk about plastics in their everyday lives and how different language choices can affect behavior.

After analyzing over 4.5 million words used in advertising, packaging, local council guidance, consumer language on [social media](#) and running focus groups with members of the British public, the Sheffield researchers found that retailers, manufacturers and local councils often use language that doesn't land well with consumers.

The study revealed consumers feel frustrated, uncertain, disempowered and overwhelmed with the global problem of [plastic](#) waste. The language they use suggests consumers are trying—but struggling—to make sense of the plastic crisis and are appealing to industry and councils for action on plastics.

Findings show that consumers feel heavily reliant on companies and institutions to create a real change around plastics, packaging and their impact on the environment.

Examples of the language used by consumers are:

- I think supermarket shopping has caused the crisis.
- I think all high street fashion chains and supermarkets are equally

bad.

- I feel awful that I have been chucking this into the regular bin but also angry that there's no easier way to recycle it.
- Buying yet another plastic bag for life—the guilt is overwhelming.
- Why does it need plastic in there? Why can't you just have a small box? Why couldn't it be delivered like that?

Professor Joanna Gavins, Chair in English Language and Literature at the University of Sheffield, who led the research, said, "We found that while most people wanted to reduce their plastic usage, they felt powerless and unable to do so. Many supermarkets provide goods in single-use packaging that consumers didn't necessarily ask for in the first place. There was a strong sense of frustration from consumers who felt like they were being blamed for something they had little control over.

"Our research highlights an uncomfortable relationship between retailers and individuals due to language choices that aren't landing well with consumers. Many supermarkets use words such as 'helping,' 'supporting' and 'providing' in their communications, but these sentiments are not felt by the general public, causing a detachment between brands and consumers."

When analyzing the language used by retailers, the researchers suggest companies often use language similar to that of a parent. They present themselves as an enabler—helping consumers to reduce plastic waste only by virtue of shopping with them.

Examples of the language used by retailers are:

- The positive impact of this will be far reaching: by helping our customers eat more sustainable diets, restoring nature in food production and eliminating waste from the retail industry.

- We were the first UK retailer to remove multi-buys on food products from our shelves—helping customers avoid waste at home and enabling us to forecast demand better.
- We are now extending Plan A further by encouraging all of our customers and employees to live 'greener lifestyles.'
- The pop-up store in London was a store with a difference, giving customers the opportunity to shop for others.

Professor Gavins said, "Our research has found that [consumers](#) don't feel helped or enabled to tackle plastic waste and that they want supermarkets and manufacturers to take more responsibility for plastics pollution. We're recommending that businesses and other organizations reframe their language to emphasize the hard work that customers put into recycling and reuse. People need to be able to recognize the role they play in reducing plastic waste and feel that their efforts make a difference."

Based on the findings, the Sheffield researchers have developed [a guide](#) to circulate to every local council in the UK, as well as supermarkets and plastics manufacturers nationally and internationally. Titled "How to talk about Plastics," the document provides guidelines on how to use language to reduce plastic pollution without falling into the trap of greenwashing. The manual gives direction in constructing effective messages to influence behavior around plastic waste.

Professor Gavins added, "Scientific, technological and engineering solutions for plastic pollution can't tackle the problem alone. What really matters is behavior change and encouraging more people to take up systems of reusing, before recycling. But to encourage this change you have to understand the benefits of reusing plastic and this can be done through language.

"The interdisciplinary nature of this project has been fundamental to

evidencing society's attitudes and behaviors towards plastic. I'm fortunate to work in an institution where linguistics is valued as much as science and engineering and hope our work together will drive business and behavior change to reduce unnecessary [plastic waste](#)."

The Many Happy Returns project aims to enable reusable packaging systems and so reduce the need for [single-use plastic](#). It brings together a team of experts from varied disciplines at the University of Sheffield, including chemists, engineers, linguists and psychologists. Project partners include: Morrisons, Ocado, Co-op, M&S, Nestle, packaging manufacturer Berry Global, design agency Touch, and zero-waste store pioneers Unpackaged and OPRL (On Pack Recycling Label).

More information: Emma Franklin et al, "I don't think education is the answer": A corpus-assisted ecolinguistic analysis of plastics discourses in the UK, *Journal of World Languages* (2022). [DOI: 10.1515/jwl-2022-0017](#)

Provided by University of Sheffield

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