

From Waste to Worth: Reusable Packaging as a Site of Ideological Struggle of Meaning and Practice in Latvia and the US

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The media plays a pivotal role in shaping and promoting ecopiety — displaying environmental virtue, often expressed through personal lifestyle changes, consumer choices, or symbolic acts to show one's ecological awareness and commitment (Taylor, 2019). "Green media" frequently endorse this form of environmental virtue, while the audience looks up to experts in "green lifestyle" who use the media as a platform for spreading relevant and effective advice on sustainable consumption practices. Thus, some experts struggle to transition from an older mindset of a linear economy, focusing on one aspect of sustainable behavior, to adopting a more modern circular mindset that involves scrutinizing the role and impact of a specific activity in light of the entire product life cycle.

Our study investigates this problem by deconstructing the "expert talk" on green consumption, sustainability, and the circular economy. The study is informed by the following research questions: (1) What is the discourse on the use of reusable dishes; (2) What meanings are associated with green consumption, sustainability, and the circular economy that "experts" promote; and (3) In what ways do these meanings create ideological inclinations of capitalism, consumerism, sustainability, recycling, and a circular economy.

To answer our questions, we analyze media texts produced by a variety of media figures in Latvian and US contexts, including examples from television interviews, "influencer" statements repeated by mainstream media and in social media, and statements on event-specific and/or corporate websites. Our theoretical and methodological approach is informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013). We build our transdisciplinary approach on the notions of Circular Economy (Kirchherr et al. 2017, 2023) and Ecopiety (Taylor, 2019).

Our preliminary analysis reveals that, while seemingly instilling new ways of being a consumer and organizing large-scale public events, the Latvian "expert" talk articulates a sustainable and environmentally aware action by discursively linking fashionable green lifestyle choices with pseudo-circular consumer behavior and the marketing interests of event organizers and their business partners. The US is far behind the EU in considering and implementing the use of reusable dishes, cutlery, and cups. Thus, the pop discourse celebrates the novelty of these items, with anecdotes related to reusable cups at particular music venues requested by artists who wish to make "green statements," while industry messages mostly focus on economics rather than environmental interests. We approach this meaning-making as part of the problem, rather than the solution, since the "new" approach does not permit ideological moves beyond the linear economy.

Focusing on end users by appealing to the trends and lifestyles of environmentally aware people seems only partially efficient. While individual action needs to be mobilized, this approach primarily serves the interests of the linear economy and traditional consumerism, thus maintaining the existing system. The media needs more sophisticated stories, such as the ones we explored, e.g., focusing on entrepreneurial practices that illustrate the transition from a linear to a circular economy and involving diverse players beyond end users. As society is still in the early stages of its transition to a circular economy in most areas and industries,

there is currently a small group of researchers, experts, and practitioners with the necessary depth of knowledge and practical experience to implement economically feasible circular solutions. This could explain why the media gives more voice to the so-called green lifestyle influencers. Although their knowledge is not always comprehensive, they are often more proactive and visible in the social media environment.

The circular economy is an economic system that replaces the 'end-of-life' concept with reducing, reusing, recycling, and recovering materials in production, distribution, and consumption processes (Kirchherr et al., 2017, p. 229). It is seen as a “toolbox” on the path towards sustainable development. Studies emphasize that a broad alliance of stakeholders – consumers, producers, policymakers, and scholars – is needed to foster CE transition, which may complicate CE implementation. (Kirchherr, 2023). Our study contributes to this “toolbox” and alliance of stakeholders by adding the local understanding of mediated discourse on CE issues.

Keywords

circular economy, media discourse, Latvia, USA, reusable cups