Transcript of ‘Better Plastics Behaviour’

Season 2, Episode 15, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: [speaking over music] Today we'll learn about how plastic has shaped us as a society and why we continue to use it despite our awareness of its harm. Plus, an answer to a question from last week's episode. Did the Egyptians use plastic to wrap mummies? Let's get into our episode. Professors, James Cronin and Alex Skandalis, marketing experts from Lancaster University.

[Theme music]

Paul: [as music fades] Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability and Business here at Lancaster University Management School. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: More plastics today, Jan.

Jan: Well, we're, we're well on the series and where are we gonna go today?

Paul: I think it's about time we talked about me and you.

Jan: In terms of being wasted space?

Paul: You said it. [Jan laughs] Uh, in terms of us being consumers and, uh, consumer attitudes towards plastics, maybe. I think that's about where we are, we've looked at the overarching Plastic Packaging in People's Lives projects, the PPiPL project.

That's what we’ll refer to it from now on 'cause it's a lot easier. And we've looked at supply chains. Let's have a look at consumption practices and the people who are getting the plastics at the end of the process almost.

Jan: And that's really great 'cause most of our listeners, um, preparing food, maybe while you're listening this, to this, or emptying the recycling or realizing just how much packaging there is in their lives.

So this is a really good topic to be working on. Who's gonna tell us about this?

Paul: Yes. I do remember from the last episode where we discovered that Linda Hendry has a domestic engineer at home who looks after all of her

plastic disposal. But yes, we don't have a domestic engineer in today. Instead, we've got two marketing experts.

We're joined by Professors James Cronin and Alex Skandalis from Lancaster University Management School. Hi James. Hi Alex.

James: Hello there.

Alex: Hello.

James: Great to be here.

Paul: First of all, can you tell us a little bit about yourselves, your expertise, and your backgrounds? James, start with you please.

James: Um, yeah. Great. Well, well, thanks. Thanks very much, uh, for, for the invitation to the, the podcast. Uh, yeah.

I'm a Professor in Consumer Culture Studies and I'm a director of the Centre for Consumption Insights. So, my big interest in, in broad terms is how humans engage and interact with the material world. I'm quite interested in the fantasies that we, we create, the stories that we tell ourselves to help us to maybe, perhaps justify certain behaviour, to help add symbolism to certain behaviour, the meanings and the stories we create around, uh, our consumptions.

So, uh, that, that, that's what I've been interested in and I've been working away on for quite some time.

Paul: And how about you, Alex?

Alex: Hello tha…thanks so much for the invitation as well. I'm, uh, I'm a Professor in Marketing and Consumer Culture. I'm also the Head of the Marketing department. I have a very similar, uh, research, similar research interest to James.

Essentially, uh, my kind of work revolves around consumer behaviour and consumer culture, particularly focusing on sustainability, uh, the cultural and creative industries and digital cultures as well.

My work predominantly employs interpretive and, uh, qualitative research methods such as ethnographic techniques and in-depth interviewing. So essentially trying to get, uh, a, a much more in depth understanding of of, of people's behaviours. Around market and consumption phenomena.

Um, so in the PPiPL Project, uh, what we've been trying to do was to, uh, look at the investigation of consumption behaviour in relation to plastic, uh, packaging together with, with James as part of the Consumption Insights work package.

Paul: So, let's figure it out then. How does plastic fit into the idea of a consumer society? So can you tell us a bit more about the history of plastics when it comes to the consumer society that we're now living in?

James: Um, yeah, no.

Great. So, I mean, one of the first things is we gotta take apart the word 'plastic'. So just, just at an etymological level, just to kind of go a little backwards and see where the history comes from. Alex, you probably know better than me being, being Greek, but it's, it's, it derives from, uh, the Greek word 'plasticos', which means to be mouldable, uh, to be moulded or shaped. And so that word has been used for a very, very long time in relation to materials that can be either moulded in use or during manufacture.

And some speculation suggests it goes back thousands of years. That effectively ancient Egyptians used natural resins to provide the lacquer on their sarcophagi. Also Mesoamericans. So, the Aztecs, uh, were considered to have fashioned rubber balls, uh, and figurines out of the latex that was naturally found from some trees.

And then of course, we go into the Middle Ages and we think of, um, you know, during the Dark Ages, we, uh, we have individuals that were using animal bone, animal horn, tortoise shell, amber, rubber and shellac. So these are all natural plastics. They're found in nature and just when they're heated, they can be mouldable and turned into things.

So certain words like lantern, you know, like the, where you put your little candle into the, the pot and you can shine your way around. You could never use glass because the heat of the flame would, would shatter the glass. So people used horn from animals and that's where the term comes from, 'lant-horn'.

So these type of panels were made from flattened and heated animal horn. So that's the first thing, that plastic actually is a lot older than we think it is. It's got hundreds if not thousands of years of relationship to naturally formed plastics. Uh…

Paul: Well, James, I'm just gonna say you've answered a question from our last episode [Jan laughs] where I jokingly asked Linda Hendry whether or not the, why, or why didn't, or did the Egyptians use plastics to wrap up mummies, and what do you know? I, I had no idea that we were gonna get an answer to that question…

Jan: That's, that's why…

Paul: So, there you are…

Jan: …that's why there was lots of punching of the air and celebration.

James: I was wondering, yeah. [Laughter from the group] It's, it's, it's, yeah. I was feeling good about myse…

Paul: …a lot of passion about the ancient Egyptians in the studio. You were picking up on that, you were right.

Yeah. Yeah. Well there, who knew? We were, we've got an answer to that question. I can cross it off the list of things that I need to find out.

James: Just thought I had, uh, some Egyptologist uh, hobbyists, you know, in the room. But, uh, but, but yeah, I mean, effectively there's that, plastic is a lot older than we'd think, but we, we tend to associate it with the stuff we see in supermarkets, you know, plastic bottles or Co Coca-Cola served in, or the plastic windows of our sandwiches.

But these are synthetic plastics or petrol based polymers. It's, it's a lot older than that would be the, would be the history.

Alex: Yeah, I, I think it's important also to kind of mention that plastics have, since the eighties and more recent years actually, sur, sur surpassed as the most widely u used material of today's society, still.

And you know, today, if we think of most of the iconic products that, that, that we have in contemporary consumer culture, whether it is smartphones, whether it is toys, whether, uh, we're talking about flat screen TVs or, or Blu-ray discs, essentially, uh, they feature plastic or packaged in plastic or, uh, were brought to market using, using plastic, uh, as well.

And particularly in, uh, you know, uh, in the UK. Um, I would say in the US as well, plastics, uh, has become, is, is part of popular culture as well, uh, has become synonymous with, uh, uh, with, uh, uh, a throwaway lifestyle,

celebrated for its convenience, for, uh, for its disposability and so on and so forth.

And we can see it featuring in films and music. Um. And, and, and other domains of popular culture as well.

Jan: And, and you've said the word culture a few times, so you talked about consumer culture, so maybe for our listeners you could unpack that a bit more, about what kind of things people look at in that field, because that will help us understand then how we think about consumer culture and plastics.

James: Um, I suppose, yeah, in terms of consumer culture, we're, it will be in the, in, in the name in terms of this cultural aspect, we're, we're not just looking at objects or services or even experiences in, in a strictly material sense. Not just in terms of their function or their uses and what they do or solve, but what they kinda mean, perhaps symbolically, uh, sometimes ideologically.

And how we perhaps use the things around us to, to create stories, to create stories about ourselves, our identities, our social affiliations. So the big interest we kind of have as maybe consumer culture theorists in plastic is it's this, as Alex said, it's its dominant, uh, material of our contemporary society and how that's integrated into the storytelling efforts of individuals, how it's used, not just in a strictly functional sense, but how does it enable us to live our lives?

How does plastic fit seamlessly into the lifestyles we create for ourselves? And how do we kind of justify our reliance on plastic, even if we know it mightn't be strictly great for the environment or, you know, even our health. I kind of wanna just point back to kind of a, a historic point where in the 1900s, so in the Victorian age, back in the, uh, the, the 19th century, uh, or sorry, go back maybe the, the 1800s when plastics, semi, se, semisynthetic plastics were first being marketised.

So when we started moving away from, I suppose your standard naturally formed plastics, and we started moving into new and more innovated semisynthetic plastics. There was a big call upon sustainability, it was one of the stories that was actually told that, hey, this stuff will really save nature. 'cause we won't be going around slaughtering so many animals for bone and for horn.

And there's a famous quote from, uh, the chairman of the Royal Society of Arts in 1865 where he says, and I quote “we were exhausting supplies of India rubber and gutta percha, the demand for which was unlimited, but supply, not so much so.” And he proceeded to talk forward about, you know, the idea of synthesising through chemical intervention, something that would save nature itself.

That, you know, we wouldn't need to slaughter whales for their oil so much or their blubber. And again, in terms of the horn and bone of, of, of cattle. So one of the greatest ironies is how the story has changed, that we still use plastic quite a bit today, but we're, we're quite aware of the problems with it and we kind of tell ourselves fantasies or justifications.

We find ways to maybe disavow it, to disavow the negatives of it, which is in stark contrast to where it all kind of began in the 19th century, which was very much about, you know, this is good for the environment.

Paul: Do you think we'd have the same type of consumer culture that we have today if we didn't have these synthetic plastics?

Alex: Yeah. I, I, personally, I don't think so because I think plastics, you know, they are characterised by what we've, uh, uh, termed in one of our papers by the ‘passengerial’ status. So essentially they're just there, they have an inconspicuous presence in our everyday lives and they, they, they support us on our consumption journeys, uh, in most cases as, as, as silent passengers, if you like, rather than being key drivers.

Well, if you think about, uh, a family picnic, plastic is there, not necessarily, uh, at the forefront, but it's part of the packaging, part of, uh, containers, uh, bottles, coolers, which are necessary for, for consumption, uh, to take place if you like.

And similarly, you know, we can find plastic when we go for grocery shopping, uh, uh, mealtimes, uh, any other household related activities. Plastic is still there, but again, not necessarily the object of direct, uh, reflection. So it is an imp… it has been an important aspect of our, uh, of our consumer culture, I would say.

James: Yeah, like I suppose one of the most interesting things about it is how plastic has gone from something exceptionally visible and celebrated that when semisynthetic plastics, different forms of, uh, celluloid were, were

cultivated in in late 19th century, it was almost celebrated as a new luxury item, in some cases.

It was used to make small personal objects like combs, buttons for clothing, uh, chess men for, for playing chess, collars and cuffs and luxury items. And then we move into the early 20th century, and you have the introduction of Bakelite, which was used again in kind of electronics, radios, uh, the components of cars, um, things that are semi-moderate luxury to, to full on luxury. So it was very visible and very celebrated.

But now with single use plastics, we don't really see them. They're, they're, they're everywhere. They're cons... they're, they're, I suppose, invisible in their conspicuousness, and so we basically in, in, in part of our, our research, we developed the concept of 'passengeriality', which is kind of a two pound name really for the idea that plastic is no longer kind of a driver of things so much. It's not like it was once the celebrated object where, wow, I'm gonna buy this cellulite comb because it's this newfangled amazing material that rivals ivory or something. These days we just buy our, you know, bottle of coke or we buy our sandwich from the shop, and we buy it for the sandwich, for the Coke. That's the driver of our consumption.

But the passenger that's riding alongside it is the packaging. And so we see it kind of fading to the background as kind of more of a covert presence. Again, I think an interesting metaphor with that is, is the movement of plastic being very much away from, so if you picture a driver of the bus, someone that's in control, and they're determining our journey towards something that's like a silent passenger that's sitting amongst us.

We have our own justifications, we have our own reasons. I want to eat this food, or I want to have this kind of experience, or I want to wear these kind of shoes. And we have wants and needs, and plastic isn't part of that, but it tends to be there. It comes along for the journey with us.

Jan: It is really fascinating and, and sort of resonates with, um, some of my sort of older, older relatives who, who used to, you know, were really excited about having a plastic box, whereas now we sort of have too many of them.

So, with all of that history and that background and then some of those framings about the cultural aspects, but also this carrying along, being a passenger on the journey, how do those ideas link through to the PPiPL project?

Alex: The everyday choices and behaviours of consumers are, are seen as playing a key role in overcoming challenges related to plastic packaging and related to plastic waste.

So that's one of the main ways in which this, this consumer culture, uh, perspective and understanding, uh, of, of, of issues surrounding plastics become important. Uh, and based on the work that we've done and the, and the Plastic Packaging in People's Lives project, our findings reflect a range of barriers around, uh, the home, uh, and within the marketplace as well, which, which prevents household efforts to, to be more sustainable and to pursue more sustainable lifestyles and engage in more meaningful recycling, uh, practices.

So, as part of this project our aim was to essentially generate a, a more in depth understanding of, of both the personal and the social context to consumer attitudes and, uh, and their behaviours with, with, with plastic packaging materials at the household level. Um, and we have, uh conducted research with, uh, with 27 households across two counties in the UK, focusing essentially on, on getting a much better understanding of their mealtimes, of their shopping practices, of uh, how they use and dispose, uh, plastic food packaging in different aspects of their routines and of their everyday, uh, lives/

Our more like holistic approach was, was to generate those in-depth insights into the circumstances, into the activities, into the practices and constraints that, uh, at the end of the day surround, uh, food related behaviours at household level and have an impact on, on plastic packaging, consumption and recycling.

Jan: And what I really picked up on, and your statement there is that you looked at households, 'cause oftentimes we think about consumers, we, we sort of go down to all of these individuals, but of course we, you know, if we are fortunate enough to have someone we like to live with, uh, which is not always the case, that we, we live in households together.

So is a household different from a collection of individuals in, in the framing of your work and, and what you found as well?

James: Um, I, I, I suppose, yeah. That, that is, that is a great point in terms of it that even, it goes back even to the title of the project where we were saying plastic and plastic packaging in people's lives.

We, we, we didn't necessarily wanna say plastic packaging in consumer's lives because I suppose as a subjectivity, as an identity position, a lot of us don't necessarily identify as consumers or we tend to view consumer in a very econometric, usage, disposition, very functionalistic view. Whereas something like the household kind of gets at the messiness of, of human relations, that we occupy many different roles, not just within the home.

You know, as, as a brother, sister, or, you know, father or wife or husband and this kind of thing. But also too alternative forms of households too. There, there, there can be, um, you know, co, cohabitation, it can just be a single occupier household, but we occupy multiple roles within it that we wouldn't, strictly in layperson speak, consider to be consumption, even though we might argue to say, okay, there is a series of activities here which are perhaps linked to, um, the use, the disposition, the engagement with materials and products and perhaps could be classified as consumption.

But we were interested in seeing how an individual perhaps, you know, is a worker and in terms of the workplace and how they might engage with consumption there, particularly plastic packaging when they come back home, does that change, does that, uh, differ depending on the hat they're wearing at home?

So, for example, just, just to pick a point, I suppose from our project, was we, one of the individuals we were speaking with was, uh, you know, a medical student, um, studying medicine to, to become a doctor and, uh, quite, quite mindful of plastic packaging and wastage and the problems around it, and was very vigilant and reflexive of her own consumption in the home and, you know, it was quite diligent. Everything would be sorted in the correct bins. And, you know, recycling was at the foreground of, uh, of, of, of her considerations.

But she would often find in the workplace this was completely at odds with what she would practice at home, because I suppose within the medical institution, contamination, issues of infection, these, these are great concerns. And so there is an encultured mandates towards, you know, binning plastics. Uh, and so it was kind of found, I'm, I'm doing this activity at work, I'm going through industrial amounts of plastic here. How can I justify just sorting the right cans and the right bins and the right bottles at home?

And that that's what we were interested in. We weren't just interested in the blanket consumer identity. We were interested in the many roles humans

occupy, depending on work, domes…domesticity, sociality, uh, and just even in nature also.

Jan: And what I love about that story is that I've seen the same kind of story come to the fore for the NHS when it did its first carbon footprint.

And so it identified wherever the carbon impact was and some of that carbon impact they were trying to reduce. So, like, you know, heating and lighting and, and you know, being efficient in how, um, you know, vehicles moved around. Although not the ambulances, they, they just go there and back and so they've like had carbon sensibilities about those kind of…carbon, but the carbon tied up in an A and E emergency event, carbon's not part of that story, what's part of that story is human welfare and health.

And so I suppose in that respect, you know, not all carbon is equal, but I think what I took from your story is that not all plastic is equal as well. So as it's doing this passenger journey, it is, it is a different kind of passenger in different contexts as well. So I think that's really nice to realise that this is not the only place where a…where something, a piece of materiality, whether it be plastic or carbon emissions, has very different meaning depending on what it's doing.

James: Absolutely, you know, that, that passenger can, can, can take on roles in and of itself.

So again, within, I suppose, uh, a medical context, in terms of medical, intervention, you know, your, your objective is to save a life or to prevent illness in some form or to, you know, assist in pain and plastic still comes alongside as a passenger. Albeit one that is much respected and much needed, and I, and that was one of the, the struggles we found amongst that kind of identity of how we reconcile the home at the workplace.

Another very, very brief one, um, is actually I suppose, within, um, rescue work or fire service. One of our informants was someone that worked, um, the fire brigade and effectively, again, quite reflexive at home, but then through, I suppose the master narrative, the ultimate command of saving life and, uh, you know, protecting property and the rest of it, a lot of plastic is actually used in that, uh, in terms of the bagging of contaminated clothing, the sealing up of, again, potential contaminants and plastic, I suppose, necessary work-driven activities where plastic still rides along as a passenger, it's not the driver, no one's doing it just for the sake of doing it. Has very, very keen reasons.

But it exists again, with a passenger to perhaps sits a little closer to us that perhaps might be a bit more intimidating if we're thinking of this kind of journey because we're, we're very, very conscious of how present they are.

Alex: I think that reveals as well, uh, another role that plastics have in, in that particular context, in the workplace context, which has to do more with their protective as a, as a protect, being a protective mechanism or having a protective, uh, role if you like. Also kind of shows that kind of overlap between the household level and the workplace context and how, uh, practices that individuals engage with at workplace context can also have an effect on the household, uh, behaviours when it comes to plastic packaging and how they use plastic, how they recycle as well.

Paul: I dare say that a Large proportion of our listeners aren't necessarily gonna be familiar with the working in the emergency ward, working as a fireman, but they'll all be familiar with being in the workplace where there are certain types of recycling practices.

So on a more so basic level, you're gonna have workplaces where there's different routines for recycling. You'll have bins for different things in a workplace than you have at home.

Was that a big factor that came into play as well, that people were maybe so used to doing and recycling things in a certain way at home only to arrive at work and find, no, that's not how we recycle things here. We have a bin for this type of thing, but not for that type of thing, whereas at home you have a bin for that type of thing, but not this type of thing.

James: Uh, that, that, that's a great point. And I mean, there were different, I suppose, feelings and effects that kinda emerged from people sense of nihilism or sense of cynical pragmatism to emerge because you're saying, I'm doing this amount at work, or vice versa. I'm doing this amount at home and I go into my workplace and it's not set up, but nonetheless, I need to use it.

Like, for example, I suppose when it comes to, um, like night drivers, like the nighttime economies ,say taxi drivers at night or individuals in, in hauling, uh, in terms of carriage, of delivery of goods, individuals…oftentimes they're, you know, they've got a schedule to make. The system really isn't set up for recycling when you're out there on the road.

But before we even kind of get to that, I suppose even something like the food, the food system itself, to actually find nourishment, to be sustained isn't great. So individuals that work on a night shift in factory conditions, et cetera, usually are fairly reliant on vending machines. Cafeteria's closed down during the night shift, oftentimes, similarly in, in the hospital. Again, for practical reasons for preservation, et cetera, things are sealed in single use plastic. And so that, that was an issue. And particularly again for those individuals that are out on the road, again, very reliant to maybe petrol station stops, dashboard dining, you know, so just getting, getting stuff and consuming in the car.

Even with that, there isn't anywhere really to, to, to recycle the, the objects. It's the, it's the closest bin or the closest refuse, wherever you can kind of get rid of this stuff. So we often found that, that in these kind of bottlenecks of life, uh, where consumption occurs, but it's not as clear as the home, but it certainly does interact with what you're doing and thinking about later in the home did, did affect people, that they see...people seem to have these multiple selves, you know, multiple, kind of, um, expressions of themself. And they would, they would have to reconcile them.

Alex: And I think that that actually shows that, uh, in reality when we're thinking about plastic packaging consumption and, and, and, and plastic packaging waste as well, things are a bit messy and especially at household level what we've seen, uh, was that there are complex constraints that individuals may not have necessarily control, over or even be aware of.

So when we're thinking about, uh, about those kind of issues, a more holistic approach is needed, which takes into account, uh, the overarching social and cultural context and the material and institutional conditions that actually have an impact on, on people's relationships with, with plastic packaging, uh, uh, in their, in their everyday lives.

Paul: What do you mean when you say material and institutional conditions?

Alex: It means getting an understanding that the choices, the actions, and the capabilities of the average British consumer, they're not necessarily only, uh, based on their own attitudes it's not something that can change, consumers not necessarily choose to do one thing over another, only based on, uh, on their own, kind of like everyday behaviours.

It's about getting an understanding of, of, of, of the wider environment, uh, um, local councils, for example, the guidance that they get from, from local

counc… councils in terms of what can be recycled also, uh, what they think that they can recycle and what can be recycled and cannot be recycled, we found that there are a number of, uh, socio-domestic concerns as well, uh, which again, have a material effect on what they choose to recycle and how to recycle it.

So, so it's a bit more complex than just an individual choices and individual behaviours.

Paul: Is this where something like 'wishcycling' comes into it? 'Cause I know that the PPiPL project has highlighted something like wishcycling where you hope something can be recycled, so you put it in the recycle and keep your fingers crossed for the best.

James: Yeah. Yeah. That, that is what I mean with, with something like plastics, it, it's become a major source of, of media discussion, and it's, it's a popular cultural issue at the moment, you know, and we, we see various documentaries and, uh, and uh, you know, say news network, uh, specials all the time on it.

So plastic has become something that we know it's passengerial and rides along with us, but we're also very, very conscious of that, that the passenger's visible and it becomes, in some cases, it becomes kind of an easy way out.

It becomes an easy way to do our duty. It's something we can kind of fetishise that, right, I'm a good recycler, I'm a good citizen, I'm doing my bit for the environment 'cause I'm putting the right things in the right bins and now I don't need to worry about anything else.

And at one stage you have that kind of problem where, where plastic does become kind of this free-floating signifier for sustainability, that that because it is so on everyone's spoken lips, that becomes a very easy thing to, uh, again, fetishise and perhaps reconcile in the household.

Now, sometimes where that runs up against issues is depending on council collections, et cetera, where there may be, uh, firm guidance on what should be included, what should not be included, that can challenge that sense of fetishism. An individual may hold onto it and saying, right, well, I, if I, if I really need to think about this too much, that's gonna make being a good recycler, a really difficult, uh, and strenuous activity. So look, I, I think the best thing for it

is just to put this stuff in the bin and, and hope for the best. I mean, it's, it's better than throwing it in the other bin, right?

But the difficulty with that is that can contaminate whole loads, that there can be various material consequences to that, that, you know, um, and, and, and that, that, that tends to be the problem. That's, you know, plastic…We emphasise perhaps the simplicity of it, of just going into this bin or that bin, but that almost becomes licensed then perhaps to say, right, well I can kind of disregard environment in other parts of my life because I've done my duty in the home.

But also too, yes, in terms of wishcycling, it can sometimes be the catalyst for, um, yeah, wishful behaviour, which mightn't be, actually be, be beneficial in the long term.

Paul: So, in your research you use the phrase 'turning off the plastics tap'. First of all, I want to know what that means. Uh, and then so, how it could be done,

James: I suppose, and as you might, you might have thoughts on this too, I suppose in terms of the plastics tap, that it, it, we're not looking for kind of, um, I suppose a blanket monolithic intervention of let's stop plastic, that that certainly isn't what we're looking for because we recognise the implicit need for plastic in so many industrial, medical, aeronautical, and just even the basic convenience of everyday life within all these sectors, plastic is a necessary component, it's when things start drifting into single use plastics.

It's when they fully have moved away from any driving of a particular consequence to just being that kind of passenger, that inconspicuous thing that's going along, that we don't very much think about what our, you know, what our sandwich is packaged in. We don't necessarily think too much about, uh, what our clothes are packaged in, or we don't think too much about how this item will arrive when I order online.

It's, it's just part of transit and it's just part of carriage. And that's, that's been increasing, you know, not, I suppose incrementally it's been increasing dramatically for a number of years, it is as if someone has spun that pivot of the tap, they've turned it and it's now in a freewheeling sense that that more and more, uh, plastic is being dumped out.

So our suggestion in that sense isn't a kind of radical monolithic, we need to stop the tap, it's quite simply to slow it down. That with the recognition, it is a

very important industrial and also consumer material. But this continuous and perhaps sometimes unnecessary reliance on the inconspicuous nature of plastic just accompanying us, we, we probably need to curtail that a bit.

Alex: Yeah. I think essentially understanding how we can turn off the plastics tap, uh, as James, uh, uh mentioned requires uh, to essentially develop an understanding that we need to pay significant attention, uh, to the ways that we produce, design, consumer, and dispose of, of plastics, uh, and to uh, uh, uh, explore and investigate the everyday choices and behaviours of of, of consumers.

Because these are really important if we want to move towards more sustainable solutions. And that's essentially what we've tried to do throughout the Plastic Packaging in People's Lives, uh, project, and going back to that holistic approach that I've mentioned, uh, earlier.

Because if we, any wide scale transition towards, uh, more sustainable solutions is an issue that needs to start from getting a much better understanding of the everyday choices of consumers and how that, uh, how these are shaped essentially by, uh, uh, by the wider context in which in which they operate.

Jan: What I really like about how you've described that is it's not a blame game or a simple gimmick and, and you're not pushing all the action onto individuals and the whole sort of attitude-behaviour gap…I mean it exists, but what you've articulated is a much more complex set of relationships between those two elements than what we sometimes hear. So I really appreciated that.

And in that context, I know you use a phrase, 'socio-domestic concerns'. You guys are the best guys for phrases I have to say. [Laughing] So I think, um…

Paul: Do you think they've just made them all up [group laughter] is there a possibility these phrases didn't exist before this project started [group laughter continues] and they've not done actual any research [group laughter continues] or, so let's just see if we can fit these words into a report and if anyone picks up on it.

Jan: [Laughing] Yeah well maybe yea, maybe nay, we will have to wait and see, 'cause I'm gonna ask you now to unpack that and I think that you have been talking about what I would think of as socio-domestic concerns, but actually opening that up for our listeners will be a really great thing to hear now.

Alex: Socio-domestic concerns, they refer to the way that each individual has subjective and in certain cases, um, unconscious concerns, uh, for their home.

So this could, for example, include, uh, household norms for maintaining comfort or for, uh, cleanliness within their, uh, houses. And in our research, we've found that although households are aware in many cases of local council guidance to, for instance, rinse any soiled plastic food packaging before placing it in recycling bins, their willingness to do so is constrained by these socio-domestic concerns.

So in other words, the way that, uh, households evaluate whether plastic food packaging is, is recyclable or not, uh, while to a certain extent is shaped by local councils and what is being communicated to them, it is ultimately influenced by, by the perceived risk of these socio-domestic, uh, concerns.

So to give you another example, we found out that with raw meat related packaging, this could disqualify items from being rinsed and sorted into the correct bins and this situation often, often ended up in many plastic containers being left unwashed and discarded amongst kitchen waste in regular bins, for example.

James: Yeah, no, it's, it's worth bearing that in mind that this, this kind of sticky issue of, of socio-domestic, that, that, that is a very good example with it. That, uh, if we think of you going to a supermarket and you buy your, your, your, your punnet of, uh, of minced meat. Usually once you've removed the meat and you look underneath, there's this really soggy, gross looking piece of robbery plastic at the bottom, which is known as a ‘purge pack’.

It's basically to, um, suppose abserb, absorb what the food industry calls purge, which is basically kind of the myoglobin, the kinda bloody looking fluids…that is very unappetising, which runs off your product. And if you didn't have this purge pack, it would look quite unappetising, it wouldn't look very sale worthy in the supermarket.

And yeah, just, just basically with that, that that alone sometimes can be a bit of a distracting source, 'cause in the home, domesticity, as you know, various anthropologists have studied over the years, the great British anthropologist, Mary Douglas spoke of, you know, purity, purity and danger. And she spoke of things being out of sorts or out of place, being almost a definition of dirt or filth.

And so one of our domestic roles is, you know, to be a good housekeeper, you know, that we, we take, we take care of our surroundings, and, you know, it's, it's important for hygiene and for family care and all of this. And sometimes that cannot, perhaps outrank our, our duty as sustainable citizens.

And particularly too, you're taking care of kids. You're, you know, you're in a rush. You're just back from work and you have this really gross looking purge pack that's absorbed all this myoglobin, all this kind of bloody looking juice. Um, that alone could just be a very, very quick, not even, not even very thoughtful, not even a reflexive decision, just almost a habitual or a heuristic decision to make, to just chuck it in the bin.

So that's kinda what we mean by socio-domestic, that it's, it's got social roles that are there, which are implicit to the household. And a lot of times they're unsaid, they're more kinda felt like I'm a mother or I'm a father and I'm doing all this duty, I'm doing all these, you know, activities and this work.

But it's, it's, it's the kind of consequences of that, the how, how do you impact your, your interactions with materials?

Jan: So, Mary Douglas would undoubtedly disapprove of my household. [Group laughs] Erm, because…

Paul: How many ways?

Jan: So many ways. So a, a friend of mine, um, they built a house and, and, and it was very stylish and I was admiring the stylishness and, and, uh, my friend was saying. Well, when you open the front door, it has to say the things that you want to people to hear and say as they come into your house.

And his front door was, was incredibly stylish. And he said, well, what have you got at your front door? And I said, the recycling. So, so maybe in a socio uh, domestic kind of way, I'm, I'm living those ideals.

He was horrified by the way that you open the door and the first thing you see is my, my piles of recycling before you come into the house.

Paul: Yeah, I think the first thing you see generally when you open the door to our house, have a car seat for one of our children because someone's waiting to swap it between cars, or lots of stuff from the police museum because stuff gets brought home by my partner and left, left at home for a few days in the little doorway. So that's, yeah, we're not a very, um…

Jan: [jokingly] Well sort yourself out, Paul, that's all I can say, because we clearly…

Paul: [still joking] Hang on, hang on…

Jan: …clearly…

Paul: …[inaudible]… criticising you, not me.

Jan: I, I clearly think that, yeah, I now understand that a lot better and realise that I missed the memo on some of that.

James: Well, it, it's very interesting the places you kind of mentioned, uh, like, you know, say just the footwell when we come into the house, there might be kind of a, a little area there or underneath the sink, or it could be a broom closet.

All these little areas we were actually quite interested in [Jan laughs] which I know perhaps says a bit more about us than, than it did [inaudible], we were quite interested in kind of seeing, um, what we kind of consider these liminal spaces, I suppose.

Quite a technical term, but if we think of limbo kind of in between, almost like a purgatory stage, we think of rubbish in terms of, right, immediately after I've unpacked my mince meat, or I've unpacked like carrots or potatoes or something, and we immediately think of maybe just a bin that's right there, you know, or we think of the bin that's outside.

But oftentimes what happens when the bin is full, uh, or, you know, it looks quite unsightly or recycling bins. And so we found that these kind of little areas like, you know, I suppose the vestibule when you first come into a house, or again, you know, kind of an adjoining pantry room of the kitchen, were kind of brewing with these socio-domestic activities.

Probably the most boring parts of the house were actually the most dramatic in terms of, um, decision making when it came to, uh, recycling.

Paul: I know for instance, that my mother-in-law was appalled at one point by, we used to have a pile of recycling quite near the sink where you'd, you'd wash the plastic after you'd finished using it.

You'd put it there in a pile and you'd actually take it out. She was appalled at that fact that you could actually see this stuff there. It's what on earth that doing there, you shouldn't be able to see this.

Jan: But what that also speaks to, I think, is this idea of shared expertise. Um, within the household that actually have brought together in a non-conflictual sense. So after you've eaten your dinner, not when you're hangry, um, might actually improve collective behaviour in and around plastics. Did you see those kind of things happening in the spaces where you have been doing your research?

Alex: Um, yeah, I think with, with shared expert, expertise, I think that's important and having that, that kind of knowledge of what and how can be recycled following guidance provided by local councils.

And if, if you have that, that shared expertise amongst different members of the household, then it's probably helps to avoid experiential approaches to recycling as well. And what I mean by that is that we found out that in many cases, individuals would prioritise their own judgments in terms of, uh, uh, what types of plastic food packaging should be recycled, uh, in an experiential, uh, point of view.

So, for example, they would use their touch and feel as a, as, as, as a guide, as a toolkit for evaluating materials for disposal. In many cases, that happened when…just one person in the household was responsible for, for this, for this, for the process of recycling. And that shared expertise was not essentially there.

And shared expertise can also help to reduce wish, wishcycling practices that we've referred to, uh, before, uh, before as well. Because again, going back to that, to to, to that idea of, of wishcycling as well, and experiential approaches to recycling, when you don't have that, that shared expertise essentially, you're left with, uh, uh, consumers and, and individuals who might be well intentioned, but at the end of the day, they might end up depositing incorrect items in recycling bins and just hoping for the best, essentially.

Jan: And I suppose it's how you deliver it as well. I might be now revealing too much about my household, but if I'm told, uh, Jan, you ought to do something, I get, I get, my back gets up.

Whereas I think a household coming together, and I think this is what I might do after these, these podcasts, is to sort of take the top off the bin and say, what's in here that we didn't realise we could do something better with than having in the bin? So it's, it's a bit, it's messy, it's a bit, maybe a bit dirty, maybe it feels a bit unhygienic, but waste audits must, you know, if you can

collectively do it as a household and someone can look up online about what is possible and, and maybe also look in the recycling and saying, what, what errors have we made here?

So, I think that's a, a pretty neat activity that anyone can do. And I might go home and have a go.

Paul: But as long as no one tells you to do it. Yeah. If, if you're telling yourself to do it, it's fine. But if someone tells you to do it, that's why the problem.

Jan: There's maybe my personal weakness, but I'm sure it's a shared personal weakness [laughing].

Paul: So let, let's wrap up then. Let's think about what you've seen while you've been doing the PPiPL project that you think works well when it comes to consumer behaviour, household behaviour around plastics. What, what have you seen that's actually made you think, yeah, actually that's good, that's inspired me.

Alex: Um, I think there are many things that work well in the context of, uh, households and in fact, we found out that consumers are mindful of the, of the consumption behaviour and they are extremely worried about plastic packaging waste and plastic pollution. And our sample was quite, uh, diverse, I would say. Uh, and in fact, households are generally interested in doing their duty to reduce their dependence on plastic packaging, to recycle more, to live more sustainable as well.

However, I think what we also found what was, which was concerning, was a common lack of understanding with what to do with plastic packaging. And this is one of the key challenges, uh, when it comes to building a stronger recycling system, especially in the UK. Um, and I think that although consumers do often behave contrary to the attitudes that they hold, it's really important to view their behaviour at this more wider level that we have been discussing rather than us, um, this more purely individualized understanding of, of the consumer and their behaviour.

And as our findings illustrate, uh, households do not sit, uh, isolated in the middle of nowhere. They are indeed shaped by workplace behaviours, they are shaped by a wider, uh, environment in which they operate, by institutional conditions, by sociohistoric and cultural contexts and so on and so forth.

So I just think it's really important to take that into account moving forward.

James: Absolutely. I think it was that level of sophistication. We were particularly, uh, impressed with seeing that, you know, there is a lot of discussion in the media about something like the 'Blue Planet' effect that, you know, it, it galvanises people, but it also perhaps dramaticises certain forms of intervention. People get very excited about it.

We found within our, you know, with the great British public who we've, we've engaged with that, there is a great sense of nuance, uh, a level of complexity with it. The people do recognize the broader, more mediatised phenomena. But, but as Alex said, just in terms of say local neighbourhoods, just even within the home, within the workplace, it was very heartening to see that kind of that, that understanding and that level of empathy about the complexity of, of, of, of the system.

And I suppose, which is the interesting thing, 'cause we, we spoke a little today about the passengerial reality of plastic, that it's specifically single use plastics to kind of accompany us on our journeys. And I suppose the only way to challenge that kind of subjectivity or that status of plastic is by kind of making it visible, uh, in such a way that you know, it, it may not be the driver, it may not be the the one that's in charge of where we're going, but it certainly will affect where we're going.

But we were impressed with that kind of visibility the plastic has, has developed, and like I say, not just in kind of a very dramatic sense, but also just in reflection to one's own practices at a community level and the socio-domestic level too.

Paul: Thank you very much for joining us, James and Alex. That's been really good. It's been great to get through another discussion about PPiPL.

Jan: I loved it. Thank you, guys.

James: Thank you very much.

Alex: Thank you.

James: Thanks a lot.

[Theme music]

Jan: I know you're a history buff. So we had Pliny the Elder when we were talking about soils. Is he further back in time than the ancient Egyptians…

Paul: No…

Jan: …or closer in time?

Paul: Ancient Egyptians go from about 4,000 BC, so…

Jan: …well, they are …

Paul: …you know, you are, you are talking a long time away. It's, it's, what are these silly things that, you know, the construction of the, um, pyramids, the Egyptian pyramids, it was so far away that the end of the Egyptian empire is closer us than it is to the construction of the Egyptian pyramids.

Jan: Oh, wow.

Paul: Or something like that. It's just so, so long ago. Yes. And then the Aztecs, you know, I think the Aztecs, you know, the height of their empire was probably after Pliny the Elder, in case you were wondering.

Jan: Because. Because I thought it was really cool that we had talked about that and then it popped up. But also the idea of regrettable substitutes, I think was writ large, and that historical laying out of what we used before we use plastic.

Paul: Yes. Yeah. When they're talking about the sustainability credentials of plastics when it first came around is, oh, we're not gonna have to kill as many animals. We won't have to rape and pillage nature as much as we have been in order to produce these materials.

And then you end up in a situation a hundred and so many years later where actually plastics are causing lots of other types of problems. Yeah, and I dare say there's not that many species of animals that have survived because we stopped using them for plastics because, you know, extinction rates haven't exactly slowed down in the last a hundred and so many years.

Jan: Yeah, no, I thought that was a really interesting background. But then I really enjoyed understanding the households, but also how they relate linked households to work. And it brings to mind a piece of research I saw once that if you've got like good energy saving practices at, at work, people will be more likely to bring their pro-environmental behaviours from home into work.

So that home and work interaction, whether it be energy saving or recycling, is a really powerful way of linking behaviours.

Paul: Hmm. And the idea of being a good recycler and knowing how to recycle properly, if you will, rather than just guessing and, you know, doing bits of

recycling here and there, but rather actually taking recycling practices all across the board and teaching others as well.

And that less, you know, passing on lessons that you have when it comes to what you know about recycling, how it operates in your area, and making sure that neighbours, friends, et cetera, can copy those, and indeed people within your own household.

Because as we say, you're not talking about everyone as an individual consumer. We're talking about people within households and a group there and how they behave.

Jan: And these, um, both James and Alex had had some fantastic phrases that were a bit hard to begin with.

Paul: They've all made them up. [Jan laughs] I'm telling you, honestly, if we were to look back in history, none of these phrases have ever existed before.

Jan: [still laughing] Well, they've got a grand invention of phrases, but I really liked how they unpacked it for us. And you could really see the, the nuance and the subtlety of what they were talking about, which was really super.

Paul: And they were talking about how in the eighties, plastics became the main material. And it's everyone's…plastics was used for anything. Back in the day, if you got a glass bottle of something, it was seen as, oh, I'd prefer the plastic bottle if I could. Now it's having the glass bottle, say if you were going to buy six small glass bottles of Coke, it's far better than buying six plastic bottles. Oh, you've bought the glass ones. Oh, you really are spoiling us. And it's not just about the, the taste or anything, it's about the whole attitude towards the materials that are there.

Glass 150 years ago was used everywhere, and then glass phased out a bit. And phased out, and then it's starting to come back a little bit more and you know, so many different packaging materials and the attitudes towards them.

We can see the phrase that Linda used in the previous episode about plastic not being the enemy is true. Plastic isn't the, the whole problem. It's just how consumer society treats different materials at different times.

Jan: So they left us with the bin. Where are we going to go next?

Paul: What, do you think we're gonna climb into a bin? [Jan laughs] No, there's only so much research I'm willing to do for this podcast. We're gonna stick with

consumers, but we're going to look at how retailers deal with consumer attitudes and how they speak to consumers, learn from them, how they look at their packaging, and how it shapes how consumers behave. So we're gonna speak to Booth Supermarkets.

We're gonna speak to Jane Routh and Katie Gwynne, and we'll find out from them how Booths have worked as part of the Plastic Packaging in People's Lives project.

[Theme music]

Jan: That'll be brilliant.

Paul: Well, until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]