

Introduction

Garbology is the study of modern refuse and it shows a lens into understanding human behavior, consumption patterns and structures of contemporary society.¹

This field began in the early 1970s by William Rathje, who was an archeologist at the university of arizona and he founded *The Tucson Garbage Project*.² Rathje's idea was to reconstruct and look at Tucson's residents waste and to find patterns in waste consumption, this led to him uncovering the realities of modern life and in ways that people won't openly admit.³

Garbology used multiple disciplines such as archeology, anthropology, environmental science and sociology which helped challenge the idea that rubbish is just waste. Instead, Garbology treats the rubbish as evidence and clues about how people actually live, what people value and how their choices interlock through economic and ecological systems.

Through landfill excavation, waste audits and long term tracking of consumer habits, archaeologists have exposed a habit that people state what they consume versus what their rubbish actually reveals.

Garbology can also be useful for telling institutions on a local or national level on which parts of recycling and sustainability guidance is actually being done and how to educate people on recycling properly and how to properly dispose of certain waste products. In addition to this, garbology helps improve people's diets by exposing foods people throw away, this reveals people's habits and their over eating and over consumption and reliance on processed foods and snacks. By comparing people's reported diets to their waste we can spot nutritional gaps, showing this to local councils they can help educate people into a healthier diet depending on how much time people may have or how much money someone may have, leading to a healthier diet to the one they originally had leading to a better wellbeing in the long term.

Item types, recycling and destruction patterns



The way in which this packaging was disposed can show a lot about the household who this belonged too. The repetition of the way the

³ pagosconservation.org.uk/garbology-new-perspectives-on-waste/ [accessed

encyclopedia.com
a.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/garbage-p
er 23, 2025].

³ "Garbage Project." n.d. Encyclopedia.com
<<https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/garbage-project>> [accessed November 23, 2025].

⁴ Image, Kayla Bird, (2025).

diet coke bottle was crushed shows a repetitive manner, meaning it was possibly disposed by the same person every time, we can also tell possibly the way they might have crushed this item, by crushing under the arm.

The individuals of this household also rip up their rubbish showing the need for space in their recycling, this shows that they use a lot of recyclable items. This household also cleans their recyclable items before disposing showing a care for what's being thrown away also showing they have time to do so. This contrasts however to what items they have been disposing of, such as ready meals or quick easy meals to make, which doesn't correlate to them having time to neatly clean out⁵their waste.

The ready meals and quick meals do suggest more that the household in general don't have much time to cook, suggesting they have a very busy lifestyle, this could be due to the people in this household having long working hours or having to travel for. The beef stroganoff is a two person meal suggesting there may only be two people in this household. In the waste we can infer about the demographics of the household, such as no children as there were no child-centered items such as toys or more child friendly foods meaning it's likely that in this household its two adults with no children currently living there.



Also found in the recycling were 11 rizla packets one packet of filters and one Tobacco pouch, this is strange due to there only being one Tobacco pouch and one filter packet as 600 rizlas could become 600 cigarettes; there is 120 filters in a filter packet which does not equal 600 cigarettes. This could suggest either the individual has multiple Tobacco pouches at one time or that the rizlas came from bins from around the house.

In the recycling it was found that the individuals in the household did not recycle properly, this was seen with chocolate wrappers being found in the bins which did not belong and it was the same for multiple crisp packets as well, on the Ceredigion county council website it states that these two items were not allowed to be recycled. This could suggest that the individuals that live in the household are of an older generation and are not so up to date with the rules of recycling.⁶

"If rubbish isn't reduced, reused, or recycled, it is taken to landfills where it contributes to air pollution, water and soil contamination and ultimately climate change."⁷ This can lead to the food

⁵ Image, Kayla Bird, (2025).

⁶ "Clear Recycling Bag - Ceredigion County Council." n.d. Gov.uk
<<https://www.ceredigion.gov.uk/resident/bins-recycling/clear-recycling-bag/>> [accessed November 23, 2025].

⁷ "What Is Rubbish and How Does It Affect Our Environment?" n.d. Recycle-more.co.uk
<<https://www.recycle-more.co.uk/recycling-resources-for-kids/what-is-rubbish->> [accessed November 23, 2025].

we eat being polluted and ultimately affecting people's health. Climate change is a long term effect that cannot be reversed, climate change refers to the global climate and rising temperatures across the Earth alongside shifting weather patterns which causes severe weather phenomena such as hurricanes, floods and droughts.⁸

Shops and economic status

The waste that was left in the recycling bags are useful to gather information of where the individuals shop and to the earnings of the household. To gather the income of this household we can look into the shops that they buy from and what products the⁹ individuals buy from these shops.



In this household they are more likely to be of a higher income,¹⁰ this is due to the amount of branded products instead of store own, such as Hagen Daz, Fox's and Lurpak, these items are considered more luxury items than their store own counterparts. Another way of telling that this is a higher income household is the subscriptions they have, we found that there was a "The WI" subscription which is yearly a total of £127.5 this suggests that the household have a good disposable income to be able to afford this subscription, this subscription is also an inspiring woman magazine suggesting one of the members is female.

The products found in the recycling bags were primarily found from 2 shops, Co-op and Sainsburys. We can gather that the individuals in this household do their big shop in Sainsbury's and buy their snacks in Co-op, this was due to the items that were purchased from these shops. Snacks such as cookies were primarily from co-op and meals were primarily from sainsburys. Sansburys was ranked the third most expensive shop to go to even with a nectar card which this household does own, this suggests that this is a high income household.¹¹

⁸ Michael Shafer, D. 2023. "What Is Climate Change?," Warm Heart Worldwide, 15 January <https://www.warmheartworldwide.org/what-is-climate-change1.html/?utm_device=m&utm_term=&utm_campaign=&utm_adgroup=&device=c&utm_source=google&utm_medium=&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=22427936806&gbraid=oAAAAADhoQoJvQFywYsapqeICBRdqTSxek&gclid=CjwKCAiA_orJBhBNEiwABkdmjLe7DE8I9uo3zhpC-KFZt6XDRKemglhh6ozrsABv7C39NGG6057LSBoCWnMQAvD_BwE> [accessed November 23, 2025].

⁹ Image, Kayla Bird, (2025).

¹⁰ Image, Kayla Bird, (2025).

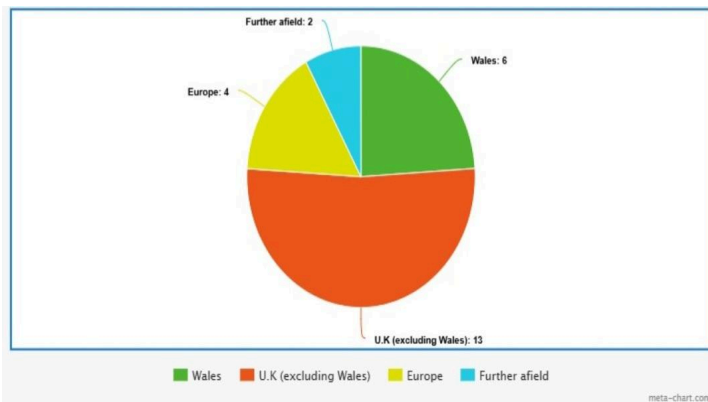
¹¹ Simmonds, Ellie, and Hannah Walsh. 2025. "Cheapest Supermarkets 2025," Which?, 5 March <<https://www.which.co.uk/reviews/supermarkets/article/supermarket-price-comparison-aPpYp9j1MFin>> [accessed November 23, 2025].

With what this household was purchasing we can infer they do have the disposable income to buy snacks, the amount of snacks that were bought suggests that they do not have to worry about how much it would set them back and do not have a set amount for the week and will just buy more when they have run out. The snacks also can suggest that a member or both members of the household could be doing work in their house as well, for example grading papers or admin work, this is due to needing energy and sugary snacks will help with this especially if the individual or individuals stay up late doing work, jobs that would require this kind of work are often high paying jobs adding to the suggestion of a high income household.

Many of these items are found within a stereotypical British household, there was no culturally specific foods that could suggest them from being from a different country, so we inferred that they were both from the UK. The one outlier and culturally specific item would be Welsh cakes showing that they both live in Wales as you don't often find them outside of Wales.

This collection of waste from the recycling bags represents a large majority of the demographics from the UK and represents UK consumption habits, such as their milk being Welsh and English, which is common throughout the UK as shops use dairy, agricultural and meat products across the Isles.

Material and origins



The rubbish bags found in the ¹²recycling bags shows a pattern of globalised trade as shown on this pie chart with a quarter of the products from being outside of the UK. European influences such as Alpro Yogurts being from Belgium, and Polish bacon this shows the influence of European products in shops across the UK and the globalisation of trade across the world.¹³ Polish bacon is an outlier as

the majority of bacon sold in shops in the UK tend to be from that local area for example Welsh back bacon or English back bacon, this could suggest a Polish influence in the area or just that the household prefers Polish Meat in general.¹⁴

Due to the amount of produce being sourced from the UK and Wales this suggests that although the UK is a heavily culturally diverse place a lot of everyday consumer goods still come from the

¹² Image, Will, (2025)

¹³ Ortiz-Ospina, Esteban, Diana Beltekian, and Max Roser. 2018. "Trade and Globalization," *Our World in Data* <<https://ourworldindata.org/trade-and-globalization>> [accessed November 23, 2025].

¹⁴ "Sainsbury's Online Grocery Shopping and Fresh Food Delivery." n.d. Sainsburys.co.uk <<https://www.sainsburys.co.uk/gol-ui/SearchResults/bacon>> [accessed November 23, 2025].

domestic area, this can infer that the consumers prefer locally produced products, and in this household the individuals could prefer this.

There were no products from other countries suggesting that neither individual in the household has been to another country recently.

Dates

The dates on the products had a range from early October to late November suggesting that the individuals in this household do not regularly put their recycling out, as the recycling truck comes every week to pick up the recycling and every three weeks for glass recycling¹⁵¹⁶. This shows that the individuals do not put it out regularly. This illustrates that the individuals of this household do not recycle properly as earlier stated the individuals put both crisp packets and chocolate wrappers in the recycling which do not belong.

Conclusion

In conclusion this rubbish from the recycling bags is not the most useful for representing the socio-economic patterns of the UK, but is useful for high income households as most do not have time to cook throughout the day to produce meals. The rubbish from the recycling is also useful with showing the patterns of produce from the UK, most agricultural, dairy and meat products are locally sourced from that region or distributed throughout the isles. This shows the reliance of the UK on their local farms and the importance of keeping local farmers in business. The study of garbology is useful for understanding people's consumption and how their day to day life is reflected in the products that they dispose of.

It would have been better if there was a larger sample size because the small amount of data calls into question the external validity of this study, as we are unable to generalise this to the wider population also leading to low population validity.

Rathje's study *The Tucson Garbage Project (1973)* looked at Tucson's residents waste and was used to reconstruct peoples day to day consumption which ultimately led to uncovering the habits that people won't admit to for example lying on what they consume in a week.

¹⁵ "Glass Recycling Box - Ceredigion County Council." n.d. Gov.uk <<https://www.ceredigion.gov.uk/resident/bins-recycling/glass-recycling-box/>> [accessed November 23, 2025].

¹⁶ "Ceredigion." n.d. Org.uk <https://myrecyclingwales.org.uk/local_authorities/ceredigion> [accessed November 23, 2025].

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<<https://www.which.co.uk/reviews/supermarkets/article/supermarket-price-comparison-aPpYp9j1MFin>> [accessed November 23, 2025].

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