

Using one of the given assemblages,
what social patterns might be inferred
from an examination of old rubbish? - Gwenllian Anthony 1404702

What social patterns can be inferred from a given assemblage? That is what this report will be trying to deduce. The assemblage in question is a bag of recycled waste from an unknown source, but known to be from the Ceredigion area.

There are many different ways of rearranging the assemblage due to the diversity of waste products found, but the focus of this report will be the use by and production dates, the colour of packaging, potential marketing strategies and treatment of the products.

Firstly, the assemblage was rearranged into recyclables and non-recyclables. Most of the items stated whether it was suitable for home recycling, store recycling or not recyclable at all, with the exception of some small plastic items such as bottle tops and plastic clips. It was evident once the items were sorted that the household who disposed of this waste had made a conscious effort to recycle. Most of the plastic food packaging were thoroughly cleaned before placing it in the recycling, although there were a couple of cereal packets that had been missed and one or two items which had food waste residue. There were no obviously non-recyclable materials in the bag, such as food waste, ceramics or glass, but there were a few clear plastic fruit and vegetable packets that do clearly state its inability to be recycled. The same was found for items with mixed packaging such as refrigerated food containers, which contained recyclable and non-recyclable plastic. The disposal of these items could be due to busy lifestyle, a lack of knowledge on the recyclability of some plastics but also the household's habitual behaviour. Christina Knussen and Fred Yule aim to explain these habitual acts in their work on the habitual behaviour in the disposal of household waste. They state that habits are typically construed as learned goal-directed acts that in turn become automatic responses in specific situations. The automaticity of these actions implies that they are being performed without full conscious reasoning (Knussen, C. Et al. 2008). Except for a packet of garden compost, all of the non-recyclables were food related. Taking what Knussen and Yule said into consideration, the presence of non-recyclable materials could infer an unconscious, habitual act during preparing and cooking meals, especially as waste bins are usually kept in meal preparation areas. It's important to note that according to the theory of planned behaviour, behaviour is predicted by intentions to act in a certain way and intentions are predicted by attitude, the subjective norm and behavioural control. The subjective norm reflects the importance of said behaviour among peers and the extent to which the individual is motivated to comply (Knussen, C. Et al. 2008). Therefore, it is a possibility that the individuals that created this assemblage not only make an effort to recycle out of their own will, but because of pressures from friends, family and the wider society. When it comes to the items that haven't been thoroughly washed, it possibly could indicate a busy lifestyle. This may cause the household to be careless with the treatment of waste since they have clearly made a conscious effort to wash the food containers out, but haven't taken the time to thoroughly clean them as the rules state.



Non-recyclable plastics found in assemblage - Photo by Gwenllian Anthony

Secondly, the assemblage was rearranged into colour groups. Although the majority of items were clear and white plastic, it quickly became apparent that a large portion were in the red, pink and purple colour groups. Compared to the cooler colour groups, such as green and blue, there was an obvious tendency to be attracted to these warmer colours by the household, whether it was the main or secondary colour of the packaging. This included a Bisto gravy pot, a Bonne Maman yoghurt pot, Cook frozen meals, cereal boxes, Diet Coke and Sainsbury's Taste the Difference artisan seeded bread flour, all of which are branded or high-end supermarket products. Aslam (2006) suggests that the colour red is seen as a more masculine colour in the United Kingdom, while the New Design Group, a branding and web design company, states that the use of red is often used in advertising to "create feelings of excitement, passion and urgency" and is commonly used to "convey a sense of luxury and exclusivity". Moreover, HunterLab state on their website that the colour red is an appetite stimulator, which may explain the tendency to purchase food within that colour group. The use of purple also often connotes luxury, authenticity, quality and stately due to its historical past as a colour reserved for royalty (Labrecque, L. I. Et al. 2011). These are interesting statements as all of the items in these colour groups have either been branded or high end supermarket products. For example, the Sainsbury's 'Taste the Difference' flour packet not only used red for the item's description, but has used purple for their high-end range branding. It is inferred that this household not only has a tendency to buy brands and high-end products, but that they are susceptible to the marketing strategies of said brands. Evidence from the assemblage suggests they are more inclined to buy more expensive products, whether that is consciously or unconsciously. This could infer the household have more disposable income than the average family circle, which would suggest a middle class social status, especially considering the lack of own brand supermarket items.



Red/Pink/Purple Colour Group - Photo by Gwenllian Anthony

When looking at the items' production and use by dates, a pattern of buying and consumption becomes apparent. The products were all in date at the time the assemblage was sorted, which was the 28th of October. All fresh items had between a few days and a couple of weeks, and the dry and frozen food items had months to go until the use by date. For example, the Bonne Maman yoghurt's use by date was the 18th of November, the Alpro yoghurt's was 30th of October and a Chicken Tikka frozen meal was dated May 2025. Therefore it is clear that the products were being eaten relatively soon after their purchase. There is no evidence to suggest that the household have been consuming food that they have been storing for a while or eating food that is about to reach its use by date. This may infer a regular shopping habit, buying little and often, instead of purchasing a lot but shopping less often. With regards to purchasing habits, when looking at the production dates on the bottles of Diet Coke found in the assemblage, it shows that all eight bottles' use by date falls on the same date, the 31st of March, 2025. This implies that all eight bottles were bought at the same time and therefore at the same shop also. Although this could suggest the household buying items in bulk, the variety of shops found in the assemblage would suggest otherwise. It seems more likely that the household are purchasing food items regularly, which could suggest a busier lifestyle, where they tend to buy food on their daily commutes.

Unfortunately, it's not possible to be sure about their shopping habits without other assemblages from different weeks to compare.

When looking at the treatment of the items in the assemblage, there is evidence of some habitual tendencies. The most obvious habitual pattern is the treatment of the Diet Coke bottles before they are placed into the waste. All of the bottles have been emptied, but not rinsed, crushed under the individual's arm and their tops screwed back on. The interesting pattern that appears is that they have all been crushed in the same way, by what looks like an arm, but some have been crushed with the left arm and the rest the right. It's possible to see this by looking at the diagonal dents across all the bottles. It is not clear whether they have been compressed by different people who have a tendency to use different arms, or by the same person who often swaps arms due to the other being occupied. This habitual act ties in with what Knussen and Yule spoke of in their work. It seems whoever created this assemblage performs habitual patterns towards their waste and most probably stems from a semi automatic response when performing regular and frequent sequences, such as throwing away waste. It's possible to see similar habits when looking at the cardboard items in the assemblage. A large portion of the cardboard products have been ripped at the opening, such as the cereal boxes and frozen meal packaging. Although the tears themselves are slightly different on each package, it does infer a sense of urgency or impatience when it comes to opening the products. The same impatience could transfer to their attitude towards recycling in general. Especially with regards to the lack of care when it comes to depositing non-recyclable products, the cleaning of all plastic products and flattening cardboard items. This impatience could very well be the reason that the mixed material products haven't been properly sorted and plastic containers have not been thoroughly cleaned.



Diet Coke bottles with dents - Photo by Gwenllian Anthony



Treatment of Cardboard food packaging - Photo by Gwenllian Anthony

To conclude, as seen with this assemblage, there is a strong tendency to buy products that fall into a warm colour category such as red, pink and purple. This is possibly due to the marketing strategies of brands and high-end supermarkets, who often use these colours to exude feelings of excitement, strength, authenticity, quality and to stimulate hunger. When looking at recycling habits, it's clear that the household has taken some care when it comes to washing plastic food containers and not depositing obviously non-recyclable items such as food waste. Although, there is a lack of attention for non-recyclable plastics, as there are a few items that are mixed and non-recyclable, but also there are plastic containers that have not been cleaned thoroughly. This may be down to lack of knowledge, habitual performance while cooking or a busy lifestyle that causes carelessness with the treatment of waste. With regards to buying and consumption patterns, it is possible to use the dates stated on the products to deduce possible habits. It's clear from the dated items that the household buy and consume their food products within a relatively short span of time. There were no out of date products and all items were consumed much earlier than the use by date stated. All of the Diet Coke bottles were also dated the same, inferring a quick turnaround of items in the household, and possibly a habit of purchasing food little and often instead of bigger, less regular shopping. There is also evidence of habitual treatment of items such as the crushing of the Diet Coke bottles and the ripping of cardboard boxes. The former infers a behavioural pattern with regards to recycling habits and the latter a sense of urgency or impatience when using items. As is seen in this report, the examination of people's waste can be a great way to learn about the lives of people, especially when it comes to social behaviours and habitual tendencies.

References

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