

Recycling Pringle Tubes and views on ‘rubbish’

Research

To understand the recycling process of pringle tubes, a look on their website shows that ‘In the UK, Pringles cans are not currently recyclable’ (Pringles 2019). Reading a little further the website goes on to say that they have partnered with another company to allow consumers to recycle their cans (Pringles 2019). This new recycling initiative on Pringles’ part is likely based partly on an article published on the BBC in 2017 saying that ‘Pringles: Number One recycling villain’ (Harrabin 2017). Pringles are likely doing this from a cynical point of view, in that it would improve brand image but they make the task of recycling very difficult by incorporating many different elements into the packaging.

Plastic Lid

- Made from polypropylene
- This is recyclable through some schemes
- Currently only 3% is recycled

Foil lined cardboard with metal base

- Foil lined cartons can be recycled but the metal base makes it virutally impossible

Metal peel-back lid

- If removed, it can be recycled with other metals
- Only found this information with digging

A wider discussion

Waste is a very prominent topic in recent years, with a global push to reduce waste production and a drive to recycle as much as possible. As far as ideas surrounding rubbish go, there are a few that can be discussed. One prominent waste related theory is that of Michael Thompson’s Rubbish Theory. Thompson (1979:18) outlines there are three kinds of materials: Transient, Durable and Rubbish which has a specific amount of social value attributed to it, with rubbish obviously having the least amount of value. Transient objects are things that have value to begin with, but quickly decline (eating a tube of Pringles). Durable objects are things that have a very long lifespan and slowly decrease in value (a gold ring or a house). The finally category is rubbish which has fallen from either the durable or transient category after losing all of its value as an item. However items can emerge from the rubbish category to become durable, such as when an old style or thing has a revival and then its value will increase again (vinyl and record players coming back in fashion). The diagram illustrates the relationships between the three types of material.

However, Thompson’s idea of rubbish having no intrinsic value is contradicted by people who collect or hoard. Hoarding is defined as “Where someone acquires an excessive amount of items and stores them in a chaotic manner, usually resulting in an unmanageable amount of clutter. The items can be of little or no monetary value” (NHS 2018). This definition runs in direct contradiction to Rubbish Theory as anything with no value is waste and would be disposed of, be it demolition, binning it or repurposing it through recycling. Yet some people will fill their entire houses with ‘rubbish’ for no reason other than they like it or don’t want to get rid of it. A possible argument for why people may hoard or collect is Bennett’s Thing Power. In her 2004 article *The Force of Things* Bennett outlines her theory of Thing Power, an ambiguous force that it emitted by all things. Bennett (2004) highlights how looking at an amalgamation of waste clogging a drain exerted ‘thing-power’ and drew her attention to it. She goes on to say, in reference to Actor-Network Theory proposed by Latour that “Agency appears to him to be as a continuum” in which everything has a degree of thing-power which is can exert over the world. Bennett’s ideas can be used to explain hoarding in that the items that the person hoards is influencing them through thing power to keep a hold of them or to collect items when the person is a hobbyist collector. A collector may be drawn to purchasing their collected item through this thing power; despite it possibly having little or no monetary value, such as old coins that are no longer in circulation, but hold value for the collector. Another person may keep every newspaper they have ever bought, and these papers will lose their value quickly yet the person still holds on to them and enjoys collecting them, which contradicts what Thompson says people would do when something has no value.

Rubbish still has value in quite a few instances. One prime example is the Zabaleen of Cairo. In a 2015 article Alan Kadduri explains how the Zabaleen “created an entire existence around other people’s trash” (Kadduri 2015). When examined with Thompson’s idea that rubbish has lost all value, then by definition the Zabaleen are wasting their time with an endeavour like this, yet there is a thriving waste disposal community that is essential to Cairo not drowning in its own waste production. Yet this Zabaleen community is a prosperous one, working to recycle 85% of Cairo’s waste and earning on average \$312 or £253 a month, exclusively from refuse collection and processing (Kadduri 2015). Unfortunately “the Zabaleen have been prosecuted by authorities for decades. They are seen as a major source of the city’s waste problem” as Jamie Furniss is quoted as saying (Khazaleh 2015). This could be seen as the people in government not appreciating the work of a marginalised community or a deeper idea that what’s the point of recycling things when they have no value, in line with Thompson’s idea of rubbish. As a community, they provide an excellent example of what can be done to reduce waste in many scenarios; granted it may not be applicable to every situation but their recycling machine can be modified to suit other contexts.

Waste as a whole needs to be reconstructed on a global level as something that can have value when repurposed. Resourcefulness in ‘developing’ countries shows that rubbish, which is by definition without value and unwanted, can be picked, sold and reused as something new or serving its old purpose again after a bit of work. The ‘developed’ world should take note of the other world’s waste processing techniques and how much more environmentally friendly they are and apply them to the wasteful consumerism of their world.

References:

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