

No More Plastic Bags: Overcoming Consumer Resistance to Sustainability Regulation

Alison M. Joubert, Claudia Gonzalez-Arcos, Daiane Scaraboto, Jorgen Sandberg,
and Rodrigo Guesalaga

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THE AUTHORS

Alison M. Joubert

Assistant Professor, The University of
Queensland, Brisbane, Australia
a.joubert@business.uq.edu.au

Claudia Gonzalez-Arcos

Assistant Professor, The University of
Queensland, Brisbane, Australia
cgonzalez@business.uq.edu.au

Daiane Scaraboto

Associate Professor, The University of
Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
dscaraboto@unimelb.edu.au

Jorgen Sandberg

Professor, The University of Queensland,
Brisbane, Australia, and University
of Warwick, England
j.sandberg@business.uq.edu.au

Rodrigo Guesalaga

Professor, Universidad Finis Terrae, Santiago,
Chile
rguesalaga@uft.cl

Using regulation to encourage sustainable behavior

✗ Reports about environmental problems such as polluted oceans, toxic rivers, and extinction of species pop up everywhere. As the challenges of the environmental crisis accelerate, governments are searching for solutions to reduce the negative impact of economic activity that threatens communities, regions, and society as a whole. Regulation is a common response to restrict harmful consumer and corporate behavior. A very popular object of regulation is the plastic bag – almost an icon of marine and terrestrial pollution. By 2018, nearly 130 countries had implemented some form of ban on using disposable plastic bags. Despite their popularity, bans on plastic bags are often met with strong pushback by consumers, retailers, and other members of society. Why do consumers push back against such a seemingly reasonable regulation? And what can be done to reduce such resistance and win consumers over to play along in measures for protecting the environment? Our research on Chile's nationwide ban of plastic bags in 2019 (see Box 1) enabled us to answer these questions and develop some guidelines for the successful implementation of sustainability interventions.

The challenge of changing social practices ✗ Shopping is usually a mundane and routinized activity for people. Shoppers can easily reproduce the existing routines without much effort. In our case, consumers took the availability of plastic bags and their ways of utilizing them for granted and counted on them. Eliminating this element through the plastic bag ban changed the familiar course and caused some resistance and discouragement and delayed the required change of the shopping practice. In this endeavor, three simultaneous change processes take place (Figure 1).

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BOX 1

Chile's nationwide ban of disposable plastic bags



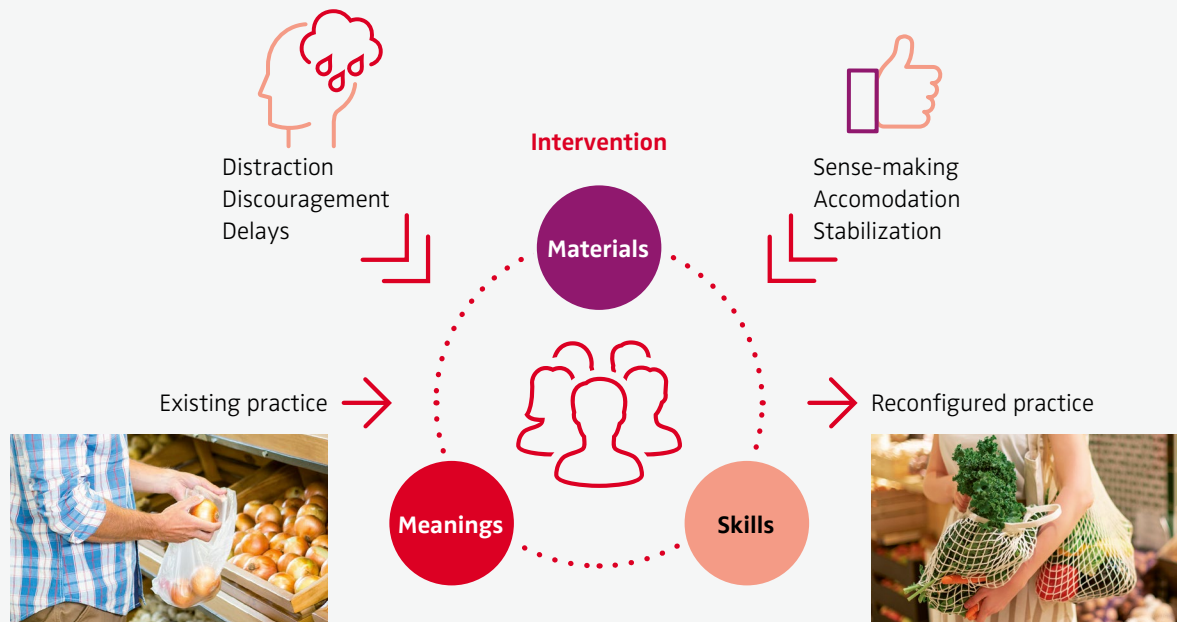
Chile was the first South American country to ban the use of plastic bags nationwide. Despite wide citizen support for the ban – a nationwide survey in 2017/18 indicated that 95% of people were in favor – the measure was still met with resistance when it was rolled out. Consumers started complaining and venting on social media and others went as far as assaulting supermarket workers or stealing bags. Why? To find out, we conducted interviews and observations with consumers and checkout assistants, and collected documents, news articles, and social media posts related to the Chilean ban, starting in 2013 until four months after the implementation of the ban in the entire country in June 2019. We analyzed these data focusing specifically on why consumers resist interventions of this kind.



We discovered that consumers refused to accept or support a sustainability intervention because the individual behaviors being targeted – in this case using disposable plastic bags for shopping – are embedded in social practices with their own meanings to consumers. These practices determine people's way of life and, to a large extent, who they are. From this perspective, a behavior such as using a plastic bag to carry groceries is simply a performance of the socially shared, habituated practice of shopping. Therefore, even a minor intervention can cause anger and frustration because, for consumers, there is more at stake than just the loss of a plastic bag. People needed to change their habits and reconfigure their lives around this lost material.

Social practices like shopping can be broken down into three elements: materials – such as the carts and bags; skills – like lifting or loading groceries; and meaning – what people attribute to the practice e.g., convenience, pleasure. The ban essentially eliminated one element – the material – and changed how shoppers viewed the other two – skills and meanings, and even affected related, indirect activities – like packaging and garbage disposal (see center of Figure 1). Consumers needed to accommodate new materials, such as reusable bags of different sizes and weights, and stabilize their new shopping practices. Consumers also found that they were bearing the brunt of the sustainability measure. Some experienced exasperation or shame when they forgot to bring their own bags to the store – causing resistance and slowing down adoption and support for the regulation.

FIGURE 1 > The transformation process of an established practice into a new and changed practice



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Changed practices need to be performed often and efficiently to become a routine.

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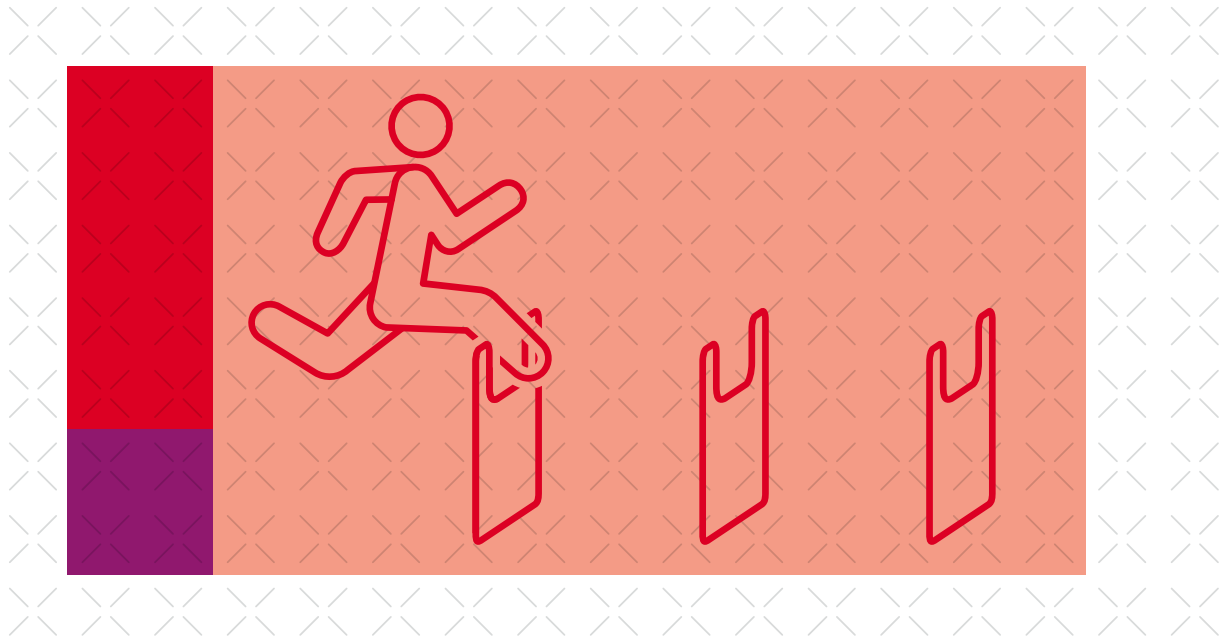
- > **Sensemaking** ✕ Consumers need to understand what the loss of an element means for the shopping routine and develop new meanings for the changing practice. The plastic bag's meaning of being convenient and always available had to be reinterpreted as something harmful to the environment.
- > **Accommodating** ✕ In addition, new skills need to be developed for using and handling alternatives to the plastic bags. Some consumers started to consider alternative materials like hard plastic boxes, others developed the skill of thinking of bringing their own bag. The newly required skills affected the whole shopping process: quickly placing products on the checkout belt, sorting products for a swift checkout, distributing loaded plastic bags in both hands to carry them easily into their cars,

unloading purchases at home and to find space to store reusable bags or boxes.

- > **Stabilizing** ✕ Changed practices need to be performed often and efficiently to become a routine. Consumers embody the changed practice with a degree of difficulty and speed: engaging in them disrupted routines, lifestyles, and even consumers' perceptions of themselves.

Hurdles on the way – understanding potential negative reactions

✕ While some customers find new sense more easily ("this is great for the planet") and change their habits without much effort, others get distracted, discouraged, and delay acceptance and the reconfiguration of the practice. Three major challenges made the practice change more difficult for consumers and lead to resistance.



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 resistance at the outset.*
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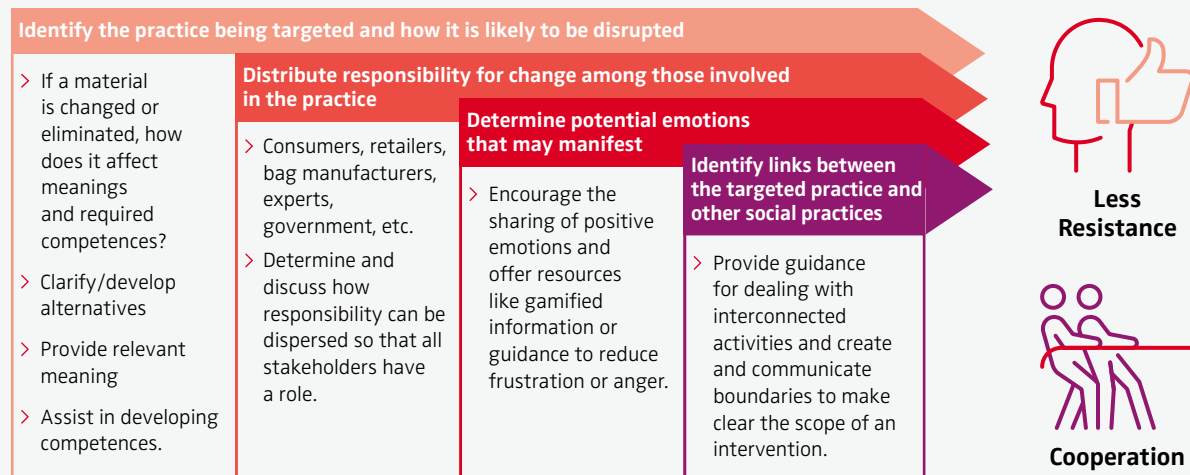
- > **Battles about who is responsible** ✕ Instead of diverting effort to new shopping routines, consumers started pondering on who should be responsible for desired outcomes. Some considered it unfair that they should carry the burden of increasing sustainability and questioned the motives of the supermarkets and manufacturers, assuming mere cost-cutting attempts. They hesitated to change their routines without seeing effort from other actors.
- > **Unsettling emotions brought about by the changing practice** ✕ Some shoppers felt no longer completely attuned or “at home” with their previously familiar practices. This led to anxiety and fear. People who forgot to bring their own bags also felt ashamed and guilty and became angry because they were put into this situation.

- > **(Un)linking related practices** ✕ Consumers forge new connections or have to break existing ones between shopping and other practices. For example, the ban disrupted the disposal of domestic garbage as free plastic bags were no longer available. On the other hand, consumers forge new links by questioning why other forms of plastic packaging like for fruits and vegetables was not affected or while (much worse) deforestation or coal mines were not sanctioned.

Once these reasons for consumer resistance are known, they provide greater clarity around why consumers will push back against sustainability interventions. Based on our insights we suggest the following steps to reduce resistance against regulatory measures and make them more effective.

How to design and adjust sustainability interventions

- ✕ Our findings show policy makers and other agents involved in sustainability interventions that changing social practices – not individual behaviors – should be their primary goal. Figure 2 shows how they should proceed to encourage the adoption of sustainability measures. If, like in our case, plastic bags are banned, consumers will expect retailers to provide alternative materials for carrying the purchased goods. At the point of sale, advice for accommodating the change can reduce anger and frustration with the new situation and help consumers feel a sense of pride and satisfaction. If the bags are also used for garbage disposal, alternative solutions should be pointed out. Also, it should be made clear which concrete (though limited) contribution the individual measure can achieve.

FIGURE 2 > Planning and designing practice-based sustainability interventions

Designing interventions that account for the aforementioned hurdles may reduce consumer resistance at the outset. Nevertheless, policymakers must continue monitoring the reconfiguration processes to be able to react in time and make the necessary adjustments to new sources and types of resistance that could emerge. These adjustments should focus on the three key processes in the establishment of new routines.

> **Refocus sense-making** ✕ If consumers are experiencing tension and lacking focus, intervention efforts should reduce these distractions. For example, to ensure benefits for consumers, retailers might introduce limited-time discounts on eco-friendly garbage bags for shoppers who comply with the new regulation by bringing reusable bags. If this incentive is not financially viable, retailers could consider other ways to encourage adoption, like offering bonuses for early compliance.

> **Encourage accommodation** ✕ If consumers are avoiding risks and restricting their experimentation during the change process, intervention efforts should focus on the challenges that trigger the discouragement. If consumers are struggling to develop competences due to unsettling emotionality, for example, additional educational programs might be helpful. At the point of sale, instruction

banners might acknowledge initial forgetfulness and offer sustainable alternatives for shoppers who left their reusable bags at home.

> **Accelerate stabilization** ✕ If consumers are grappling with discomfort and don't seem to be able to settle with a new version of the social practice, the focus should be on removing barriers. Traditionally, testimonials and success stories are recommended to foster consumer compliance and willingness to change behavior.

Facilitating more sustainable consumer behavior through regulation is often more complex than expected. One way to reduce consumer resistance to sustainability interventions significantly is shifting the focus from changing individual behavior to changing the required social practices. ✕



FURTHER READING

Gonzalez-Arcos, C.; Joubert, A. M.; Scaraboto, D.; Guesalaga, R.; & Sandberg, J. (2021): "How do I carry all this now? Understanding consumer resistance to sustainability interventions," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 85(3), 44–61.
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