“You can’t win” on plastic

Single-use plastics are making headlines in the UK, recent clean up projects have revealed that 60% of the litter found in the River Thames is single-use plastic. To explore consumer attitude towards cutting back on plastics, Survation carried out two online group discussions with eight individuals from our own panel members across the country to find out more. Across the participants in our discussions, there appears to be an appetite for tackling climate change with small steps that are easy to incorporate into our participants’ day-to-day lives. However, participants remain confused about what is actually the best way to tackle climate change. There appears to be recurring themes across the focus groups such as the Blue Planet effect, responsibility, and “knee-jerk” effects. This is further demonstrated when talking about the issue of plastic in the Fast Fashion industry.

The Blue Planet Effect

All participants appeared aware of the issues surrounding the environment, such as plastic, throughout the conversation. However, when asked about what issues were important to them, the first answers were Brexit and the NHS. Only three participants highlighted environmental issues such as plastic and natural resources. One person went on to say “all massively important, but getting no attention” (Female, 57, Lancashire). Another added, “parliament debated the environment for one session last week, the first time in two years” (Male, 59, Derbyshire). When asked about the environment specifically, Blue Planet appeared to have played a role in engaging the sample in the issue of plastic and its harm to the environment. Some participants said there had been an increasing amount of attention paid to plastic since Blue Planet.

Generally, people support taking steps towards using less plastic, such as a deposit scheme for returning plastic bottles to shops, which multiple participants had seen enacted in other countries, and reducing plastic bag usage. One participant felt the UK is “so behind” (Female, 54, Lancashire). Three participants commented plastic’s harmful impact upon animals and fish - “I no longer eat mussels because they contain particles of plastic” (Female, 57, Devon). Almost everyone said they recycle - one participant felt because her rubbish collection had been reduced, if she didn’t recycle “you don’t manage weekly” (Female, 33, Wales). Other steps included avoiding single use plastic (carrying reusable bags, buying from the market, or doing more home-made cooking and baking) and specifically buying environmentally friendly products.

The core issue for the majority of our participants was lack of information about what the best steps were for them to act on climate change - “you can’t win” (Female, 54, Lancashire). There appears to be some barriers in the way of our participants who did act in more environmentally friendly ways - many of them commenting they act “where possible” (Female, 21, Berkshire) or only buy plastic “where necessary” (Male, 60, Yorkshire). For example, one participant noted her experiences working with people who have disabilities who struggle with plastic straw alternatives as they are “not practical for all people” (Female, 33, Wales). The majority of participants were

concerned about the lack of standardisation nationally when recycling products such as food packaging. One participant told us fruit and vegetables wrapped in plastic can be beneficial as it prolongs shelf life. Another went on to explain they were living in a single person household and they found “plastic packaging for a meal for one person is pretty much the same size as the amount of food you’d have for 4 people… buying in bulk for a single person means food will go out of date and be thrown out… and that's not any better for the environment” (Female, 33, Wales).

Who should take responsibility for the environment?

The majority of participants felt there was a role for everyone in tackling environmental issues - “governments should regulate, companies should find alternatives when possible or reduce demand for unsustainable items, and consumers should be aware of the choices they make when purchasing” (Female, 32, Derbyshire). The message from participants was that change is currently led by national and local governments - they noted positive steps such as the plastic bag charges, placing bans on harmful items (such as plastic straws) and encouraging attitude/culture changes. Those who were older in the group were more likely to believe environmental issues are local issues which are currently being acted on by the local council and local projects - “plastic pollution is more of a local issue” (Female, 57, Devon).

Very few participants expressed their concern for the environment as a global issue. One participant had seen a news story about “plastic waste in Indonesia, second biggest polluter of our seas after China” (Female, 33, Wales). There appears to be support for action around the world - one participant said “most plastics reach the ocean from Africa and Asia and I get despondent… what we do only seems to be a drop in the ocean” (Female, 57, Devon).

Further conversations highlighted an increasing role for businesses, manufacturers, and individuals. It was felt businesses “need to do their part to encourage and educate people” (Female, 21, Berkshire). Another example of this is “Walkers have finally started taking crisp packets back” (Female, 57, Lancashire) among others. Although the majority of participants felt more could be done within supermarkets, such as reducing plastic packaging that cannot be recycled - “until the major supermarkets stop packaging everything in plastic we have no chance” (male, 59, Derbyshire). Just this week the Bristol based independent coffee chain Boston Tea Party announced that it has lost 25% of its takeaway drink sales since it banned single use plastic coffee cups - the owner stated that he took a hit because it was the right thing to do for the planet and called upon larger businesses to do the same.

On the other hand, it was suggested that sole responsibility may lie with consumers and their choices. One participant noted the importance of using “consumer power” to show loss of demand (Male, 60, Yorkshire). Another suggested we should take plastic back to supermarkets in the spirit of “if you sell it, you take it back” (Female, 54, Lancashire) - the majority of participants supported this idea. Further, participants feel consumers may not have enough information to make the most environmentally friendly choices.

When asked about microplastics in clothing, one participant explained they found fleece which is "marketed as environmentally friendly as its recycled" (Male, 60, Yorkshire) despite shedding microfibres.

"Knee-jerk"

In October 2018, the UK Government set out a plan to ban the distribution and sale of some single-use plastics such as plastic straws, drinks stirrers and cotton buds to protect the environment. However, some participants felt too much responsibility was placed on consumers. One participant suggested such actions were of a "knee-jerk" nature rather than looking at the bigger picture (Female, 57, Lancashire); another participant felt that much of the blame surrounding environmental issues is being placed on consumers rather than producers. For example, it was highlighted that plastic bottles are often a focus of attention, although "ironically, plastic bottles are supposedly the most recyclable type of plastic out there" (Female, 33, Wales).

Case study: Fast Fashion

The majority of participants were not very familiar with the term 'fast fashion', but understood it related to "quickly discarded clothing items" (Female, 33, Wales) or clothes made "quickly and cheaply… to keep up with trends" (Female, 21, Berkshire) - they related this to clothing shops such as Primark. The participants were also aware of microplastics, but less aware about the extent of damage caused to the environment - "they need to teach this in schools" (Male, 60, Yorkshire). The majority of participants said comfort and price are their main priorities when buying clothes and they rarely consider their environmental impact. This majority of this group believed the issue was "a generational thing" (Female, 57, Lancashire) and highlighted the issue of fashion and competitiveness; their generation wasn't "after the latest fashions" (Female, 57, Devon).

Younger participants were more likely to feel responsibility for reducing harm was with businesses and manufacturers who should create a seamless solution for consumers, such as a device to "catch some of them" from the washing machine (Female, 33, Wales) - participants were not aware of something similar being available. However, others favoured individual action, such as "don't wash your clothes after every wear" (Male, 60, Yorkshire) or companies introducing a "rating system" enabling people to make informed choices about fashion (Male, 59, Derbyshire).

When asked if they would consider buying from an environmentally friendly clothing producer, many said they would but highlighted the increased cost of this - "four times the price from the ethical companies" (Female, 57, Lancashire); "my ethics are not quite that strong" (Female, 57, Devon). Younger participants were more likely to be sceptical of this concept and felt there was an element of consumer blindness. One participant said "I think I'd want a good amount of information about exactly how… a lot of companies are riding the environmentally friendly bandwagon these days for profit" (Female, 32, Derbyshire).

Survation held focus groups with 8 people online aged 18 and over in the UK.

Fieldwork was conducted on 12th and 21st March 2019.

Survation carried out the online focus groups using the Visions Live online platform.

Survation is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.