

# **Banning Plastic Shopping Bags: Raising Environmental Consciousness on National Level**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is centered around social learning theory principles and intends to demonstrate the use of these principles through a proposed ban of single-use plastic shopping bags. The ban would be an effort to raise environmental awareness in U.S. society. This paper explores the current literature across several connected topics: the harm that plastic shopping bags cause to our environment; the way in which a ban of these bags could improve environmental awareness, and as a by-product, raise efforts; and the best alternative to these single-use bags: jute bags. Furthermore, this paper explores how these efforts could become realized through the use of governmental incentives designated for corporations who implement these changes. Lastly, this paper explores possible positive long-term effects of this implementation and potential problems within these proposals.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Learning Theory, Plastic Shopping Bags, Environmental Awareness, Jute Bags, Governmental Incentives

## **Introduction**

Since the development of Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, many improvements in society have been made possible through the use of these principles. According to Chegg.com, social learning theory is the concept that humans learn through observation and imitation of others with which they surround themselves. The process of social learning can be broken down into a few simple steps: attentively watching the observational being, creating a memory of the actions exhibited, imitating the observed actions, and replicating the behaviors in the same way as the observed being (Chegg Study n.d.). Considering the current global climate and harmful impacts of plastic pollution, it seems of use and even of utter importance to implement these theories in an effort to raise U.S. society's environmental awareness. Since the United States of America is one of the world's most industrialized and developed nations, it is reasonable to believe that the United States has one of the biggest environmental impacts in the world. Banning plastic shopping bags and replacing these one-time use bags with jute bags in major cities around the country could help influence and raise concern and awareness for our environmental impact on a national level. Humans are highly adaptive beings and most behaviors and concerns are acquired through socially learned observation.

## **Environmental Harm Resulting from Plastic Bag Usage**

In an article written by The Washington Post on plastics and the harm produced by them to our environment, The Washington Pos wrote: "If we keep producing (and failing to properly dispose of) plastics at predicted rates, plastics in the ocean will outweigh fish pound for pound in 2050" (Kaplan 2016). Actually, 80 percent of trash that collects on land, beaches, and in/on the ocean is plastic (Wabnitz & Nichols 2015). As is readily apparent from the information obtained, reducing use of plastics is vital to the global climate and marine ecosystems. Furthermore, this plastic pollution damage not only impacts upon marine ecosystems, but also has major potential to harm our lands and land-based ecosystems.

Some countries have outpaced the United States in the implementation of a ban or reduction of plastic shopping bags, though not all of these countries have switched to jute bags. For example, the province of Queensland, Australia, has implemented this change and, by doing so, has been able to effect a one-third reduction of plastic bag waste in landfills (ACT Government n.d). More importantly, after visiting relatives in Australia who reside in the country, it is readily apparent that this society is more environmentally conscious overall than America. Some of these differences are due to difference in resources each country has access to and certain historic cultural differences, yet these are not the only factors. Although an assumption, it is worth at least considering that the

ban of single-use plastic shopping bags has had an additional impact on environmental awareness in the country.

After much research, jute bags seem to be the best alternative to the single-use plastic shopping bag dilemma. Jute bags consume carbon dioxide and also happen to be biodegradable (Medium.com/Greenhandle 2018) Now that it is evident that carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas that has played a vital role in the reduction of our ozone layer, which in turn has created major climate change and sea-level rise, this is one of the most exciting aspects of the jute fiber. Jute is an abundant fiber that is the second most commercially grown fiber in the world next to cotton, yet it needs much less water than cotton and is not dependent on pesticides for healthy growth. In fact, in one article ABC News states “one hectare of jute grown absorbs 15 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>” (Kilvert 2018). Considering that many governmental agencies around the world are looking for ways to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, major commercial production of jute could produce some of the results these agencies are intending.

### **Applications of Social Learning Theory**

As stated previously, social learning theory posits that humans learn most of the behaviors and thoughts they commonly exhibit via observational learning. As this has been tested and proven time and time again, it is reasonable to assume that banning plastic shopping bags would increase environmental consciousness in addition to limiting plastic shopping bag use. As the reduction or elimination of plastic shopping bags in the U.S. would take place, the natural result would be that people in this society would think more often about the environmental impact that is a result of their own actions. In general, the more a person is aware of a detrimental behavior, the greater the chance there is for that person to be inclined to change that behavior. In short, the result should and would be a raise in environmental consciousness.

Since Albert Bandura first developed social learning theory there have been multiple examples of this theory being tested and repeatedly proven. In Albert Bandura's book, *Social Learning Theory of Identificatory Processes*, Bandura (1969) states “it is evident from informal observation that the complex repertoires of behavior displayed by members of society are to a large extent acquired with little or no direct tuition through observation of response patterns exemplified by various social agents.” In addition, Bandura states that “the provisions of social models are also an indispensable means of transmitting and modifying behavior in situations where errors are likely to produce costly and fatal consequences.” Though this book was written later, as a means to test this theory, Bandura designed the famous Bobo Doll experiment in 1961. In this study Bandura gathers a group of boys and girls and divides these children into three groups. These three groups of children are shown a video in which a child is playing with and attacking a Bobo doll. The difference between the three groups is that in one video, after the child attacks the Bobo doll, the child is positively reinforced. In another, the child is negatively reinforced, and in the third, the child is neither positively or negatively reinforced (Bandura 1965). The results ended up providing support for Bandura's theory; the children that replicated this behavior the most were the children that watched the video in which the child was positively reinforced for attacking the Bobo doll. This experiment in turn, led to the initial developments of social learning theory in 1963.

Thus far, in reference to social learning theory, this paper has detailed instances in which people have displayed negative behaviors learned through observation, yet it is also possible for these principles to be applied to effect positive societal change. A remarkable example has been demonstrated through psychologist's implementation of “time-outs” for child-rearing in American society. In a paper devised by researchers and graduate students at West Virginia University, it is stated that what “time-out” really stands for is “time-out from positive reinforcement” (Questch et al. 2015). Of course, this means that in order for “time-outs” to work, the child must be reared in an overall positively reinforced environment. It is not the child being punished as much as the child being removed from the favorable positive environment that makes this practice so effective. (What is most pertinent about this topic concerning this paper is that a by-product of this practice has been an extreme reduction in child maltreatment in American society (Questch et al. 2015). As such,

many social learning theory principles are found applicable here since much of this practice has been spread throughout the society through observational learning. This reinforces the conclusion that social learning theory has the ability to create widespread positive societal impact.

### **Potential Problems of Proposal**

While many of the points made during this research have significant substance, there is question of how these changes could actually be implemented in the United States. If banning single use plastic bags were ever to have an impact across the country, the change would have to be implemented throughout multiple cities in each major region of the United States simultaneously. In addition, in order to effect such change, there would need to be a long-standing organization in charge of this implementation that also has major political influence in these cities. After much research, the most fitting non-profit organization points to the Sierra Club. The Sierra Club is found in most major cities in the United States including cities such as New York City, Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Seattle, and Los Angeles, which would cover most major regions in the country. The Sierra Club's mission statement reads as follows: "To explore, enjoy, and protect the planet. To practice and promote the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources; to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment; and to use all lawful means to carry out those objectives" (Sierra Club n.d.).

In order for Sierra Club to be able to persuade cities and corporations within these cities to implement these changes, incentives would need to be created for both parties. While searching corporate incentives already being used in the United States, Colorado was found to have a state-wide incentive for investing in machines designed to recycle plastic materials called the "Plastic Recycling Investment Tax Credit." This tax credit is a 20% tax break on the first \$10,000 spent on plastic recycling investments (White 2018). If used as a model to build a new tax credit that Sierra Club could persuade each of these cities to create, the implementation of these proposals could be realized. Of course, this would only be an example to have the new tax credit based off.

The proposed tax credit that has been formulated through this research would be a 20% tax break of the first \$100,000 of net expenditures on jute bags for the first five years. This seems to be an appropriate incentive to help persuade corporations to actually implement this switch. Although the cities that do this would lose money from this venture in the short-term, in the long-term this should be immensely beneficial to these cities, as well as making each city more attractive for businesses and residents to want to move to these cities. This, in turn, would increase revenue flowing to government coffers, resulting in the overall benefit to the cities. From this point, a trickle-down effect would likely be realized to the areas surrounding each of these cities, thus leading to the spread of the same practices throughout the country.

Of course, problems could exist in implementing these proposals. In order to effectively link these bans or reductions to a raise in environmental awareness, public service announcements explaining the benefits of these changes would be of vital importance. If public service announcements were not implemented concurrent with the efforts, it may not be successful. Additionally, figuring out the production costs of jute bags and determining if these bags would be single-use or reusable is necessary information that needs to be researched. Even if the jute bags were reusable another great point is if these bags would be cheap enough to be given away to customers for free, much like the already in use plastic shopping bags. Another problem is the fact that not always is it easy to persuade corporations and city legislators. Figuring out which city council members are pro-environment, current budget circumstances, and persuading a non-profit like Sierra Club could be potential obstacles.

### **Conclusion**

After reviewing these proposals, additional research needs to be done. Social learning theory principles appear to be applicable in raising environmental awareness in the United States and a good way to raise this awareness could be created by banning single-use plastic shopping bags. Jute is likely the best alternative as it is easy to grow, less harmful to the environment in which it is grown in, and absorbs carbon dioxide while growing. In order to implement these changes, a well-established non-profit, such

as Sierra Club, would need to be willing to tackle these proposals across multiple cities. Incentives would need to be provided for corporations and governments within these cities to prompt willing participation. Furthermore, it would be most effective if more research was done on which city council members, congressmen, and senators in a region are pro-environment as well as what non-profits have connection with whom. A ban of single-use plastic shopping bags across multiple cities could increase to a national level and as a result raise concern for positive environmental impact as a byproduct; humans are very adaptable creatures and most of our behaviors and concerns are socially learned.

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