

Crippling Environmental Justice: Disabled Opposition to Plastic Bans

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Natalie Dahlquist

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

Advisor

Bryn E. Seabrook, Department of Engineering and Society

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Introduction

Most people have seen the viral video of a turtle with a plastic straw stuck in its nose, blood streaming out as a team of marine biologists had to slowly remove the straw from the turtle's nasal cavity. The video had a profound impact on many people, causing them to rethink their plastic consumption and leading to single-use plastic bans (Rosenbaum, 2018). Plastic straws are viewed as an unnecessary convenience that can be easily removed or replaced in daily life.

However, many disabled people rely on plastic straws as a medical aid. There are not always eco-friendly alternatives available since plastic straws are the only universally accessible straw type (Schultz, 2019). This project looks at how disability advocates in the United States are pushing back against single-use plastic bans, applying the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) and Technoableism frameworks.

Methods

This project is investigating how disability advocates in the United States are pushing back against single-use plastic bans. It utilizes a combination of documentary research and discourse analysis. Data sources include journal articles, press releases, blog posts, and social media posts. Individuals are often unapologetic about their thoughts and opinions on social media, allowing for a clear image of public opinion on the straw ban issue. Key words used to find sources include 'straw ban,' 'plastic straws,' and 'ableism.' Hashtags such as #SuckItAbleism, #StopSucking, #StrawsSuck, #SkipTheStraw, and #StrawBan are used to find posts on X, Reddit, and Tumblr. This paper begins with background information on disability theory and the environmental impact of straws and then explains the STS frameworks being

applied. The SCOT analysis begins with an overview of the social groups involved and their stances, then explores what disability advocates are saying and how their arguments fit into the larger single-use plastic ban conversations.

Definition of Disability Theory

There are many different approaches to how to view and understand disability. The most prevalent conceptual model has varied throughout history and in different social groups. While there are many models, including the charity, religious, and economic models, the medical and social models of disability are currently the most prominent. In the medical model, disability is viewed as a failing of the body and/or mind. There is an emphasis on treatment and ‘fixing’ or ‘curing’ the individual. It “conflates individuals with disabilities with the sick role and discusses disability in a deficit model orientation” (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). The social model, by contrast, views disability as being caused by a society that does not properly accommodate impairments. Political action and social change is required, “constructing solutions should not be directed at the individual but rather at society” (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). The two models disagree as to the problem that must be solved to improve disabled people’s lives.

Feeding aids, such as plastic straws, are extremely important for many disabled people. “3% of those over 65 living at home have difficulties and 2-4% of those over 85 cannot feed independently” (Connolly & Wilson, 1990). Some common causes of feeding difficulties in adults are impaired body posture, limb loss, impaired arm use, swallowing difficulties, and cognitive impairment. Guidelines for providing feeding aids recommend that they are simple and look as regular as possible. Some patients will avoid using feeding aids if they are ugly or draw attention to their disability (Connolly & Wilson, 1990).

History and Impact of Plastic Straws

The earliest straws were used by the Sumerians in Mesopotamia to drink beer from large vats. Until the late 1800s, people were using straws made of naturally hollow materials, when Marvin Stone invented the first paper straw (*History of Straws*, 2022). His straws became a “cheap, durable, and unobjectionable substitute for the natural straws commonly used for the administration of medicines, beverages, &c” (Rude, 2018). After World War II, the rise of single-use plastic and the crosshairs of lids on fast-food drinks led to the popularity and ubiquity of plastic straws (Babis, 2019).

Researchers have investigated the social and environmental impacts of plastic bans. They question the efficacy of a plastic ban since it “only leads to a small reduction of global plastic marine pollution and thus provides only a partial solution to the problem it intends to solve” (Herberz et al., 2020). Guo et al. (2023) did a life cycle assessment of the sustainability of straws and found that alternatives do not outperform plastic straws. When comparing paper and plastic straws, paper straws performed worse in almost every metric. Plastic straws are stronger, their performance did not decrease in hot liquids, and “none of the paper straws evaluated had considerable stability after 30 min in liquids, losing 80% to 90% of their strength within 30 min of exposure to liquid” (Gutierrez et al., 2019).

Social Construction of Technology and Technoableism

Social construction of technology (SCOT) is an STS framework originally developed by Bijker and Pinch. This framework investigates how society influences the development of technology and “seeks to understand the ways that devices are viewed and shaped by the networks which sustain them” (Westrum, 1989). There are four components to the framework: interpretive flexibility, relevant social groups, closure and stabilization, and wider context.

Interpretive flexibility is the idea that the development of a technology is not linear and that it can be understood in many different ways by the relevant social groups. Closure and stabilization is achieved when the involved social groups consider the problem solved (Bijker & Pinch, 1987). The wider context “is the wider sociocultural and political milieu in which artifact development takes place” (Klein & Kleinman, 2002). I will apply this framework to analyze how different social groups view the single-use plastic bans, focusing on the conversations within the disability community.

One common critique of the SCOT framework is that it fails to consider what other forces could be shaping the development of a technology other than social groups. By focusing on social groups, it ignores “the constraints exerted by social structures, like class, gender, race, economic forces and political processes” (Basu, 2023). Additionally, social groups may be missed and left out of the analysis, frequently due to the bias of those conducting the analysis. In order to combat these shortcomings, SCOT is not the only framework being applied. By combining the SCOT and technoableism frameworks, this analysis is able to highlight how ableism affects the development of single-use plastic bans.



Technoableism is a term coined by Shew “to describe a rhetoric of disability that at once talks about empowering disabled people through technologies while at the same time reinforcing ableist tropes about what body-minds are good to have and who counts as worthy” (Shew, 2020). When designing new technologies intended for disabled people, many able-bodied engineers try to imagine what they would want in a similar scenario instead of talking to disabled people and asking what they want or need. This framework is fairly new, so there is not much scholarship on it yet. While most applications of technoableism focus on the development of new technologies, this analysis will apply it in the context of removing access to a technology, single-use plastics.

Results and Discussion

Disability advocates are using social media to raise awareness of the impact single-use plastic bans have on disabled people. They are using campaigns such as #SuckItAbleism to highlight why disabled people need plastic straws and how difficult it has become to access them. While environmental campaigns have shifted much of the public sentiment to see plastic straw bans as positive, there are still many people who are against them. Many consumers against plastic straw bans dislike paper straws and find other plastic straw alternatives inconvenient. Some companies have taken it upon themselves to stop offering plastic straws without formal bans. Disability advocates want disabled people to have a seat at the table when policies that will impact their lives are being discussed and legislation put forward. They are not anti-environmentalist, but they believe that straws should not be targeted as much as they have been.

Relevant Social Groups

Environmental nonprofits champion single-use plastic bans. They concentrate both on grassroots movements to grow public support and on getting anti-single-use plastic legislation passed. These organizations “are building momentum around a worldwide movement, so plastic straws become a relic of the past” through social change and local regulations (Plastic Pollution Coalition, n.d.). Online, these activists have created social media campaigns such as #StopSucking, #StrawsSuck, and #SkipTheStraw to try to convince consumers to stop using straws. There is extensive marine life imagery in these posts, with a particular emphasis on turtles. A common idea in these posts is encouraging people to avoid plastic straws to save the turtles. One X user shared a story of their waiter asking ““Now, do we want straws OR do we want to save the turtles?”” (Trish [@trishalive], 2018). Additionally, as part of these campaigns,

people are talking about their experiences skipping straws and sharing information about plastic straw alternatives. Most posts have a positive tone, encouraging people to make changes in their daily habits, but there were also negative posts that shame people who use plastic straws and businesses that offer them. For example, one post scolds straw users, saying “#stopSucking Be an adult and drink your beverage” (Debbie   USUA [@Debgriffin58], 2019).

While there is plenty of support for plastic straw bans online, not everyone is a fan. Many people view the issue as being a binary decision of plastic vs paper straws, and they dislike paper straws. As one X user complained, “ban paper straws man ion want my straw gettin soggy halfway into my smoothie” (jimmy hndrxx [@jeamesbpt], 2025). Consumers have also begun getting worried about the possible health effects of paper straws, specifically if paper straws could cause cancer. While there are other alternatives like metal or glass straws, people dislike the inconvenience of having to bring and clean the straws themselves. Additionally, some consumers are frustrated by the plastic straw bans and view them as a waste of effort. They point out that sometimes the plastic straw alternatives have just as much plastic, such as when paper straws are wrapped in plastic. They also believe that there are bigger issues that should be focused on instead. One X user lamented that “after hundred of school shootings, America has banned straws” (Sarah Larchmont [@SarahLarchmont], 2023).

Participants on all sides of this debate include companies and trade groups that are primarily motivated by profit and other material interests. One such group includes restaurants who stopped offering plastic straws. They have portrayed themselves as environmentally focused to gain positive PR. In a press-release, Starbucks quoted the director of Ocean Conservancy’s Trash Free Seas program saying that their “decision to phase out single-use plastic straws is a shining example of the important role that companies can play in stemming the tide of ocean

plastic” (Starbucks, 2018). The Plastics Industry Association (PLASTICS) is against plastic bans, since it would hurt their material interests, and recommend recycling instead. According to the PLASTICS CEO, “Our industry will continue to grow as part of the circular economy, finding innovative ways to make plastic better and more sustainable” (Plastics Industry Association, 2024). The plastics industry established multiple astroturf groups. The Alliance to End Plastic Waste was formed in part by a group of petrochemical companies and plastics manufacturers, though many of the alliance members are still building new plastic plants (Root, 2019). The Alliance to End Plastic Waste states that they “develop, de-risk and demonstrate solutions to address the plastic waste challenge” in order to create a circular plastic economy (Alliance to End Plastic Waste, n.d.).

Disability Advocacy in Single-Use Plastic Ban Discussions

Plastic straws are a medical necessity for many disabled people. There are many reasons people may be unable to drink from a glass: limited mobility or hand strength can prevent them from lifting a glass to their mouth, tremors may cause them to spill when attempting to drink, swallowing issues may impact their ability to drink from a glass, and more. As one X user pointed out, “What did all you disabled people do before straws were invented? I believe it was a Doctor who responded: They aspirated liquids into their lungs and died of pneumonia” (Unapologetic Raven [@ChronicallyRavn], 2018). Plastic straws are the only universally accessible straw type (fig 1). Plastic alternatives are not positionable or are an allergy risk. Additionally, many alternatives are more expensive, making it even more difficult for disabled people to get the access they need.



How plastic straw alternatives harm people with disabilities




Straw Type	Allergy risk	Choking hazard	Injury risk	Not flexible	Not safe with hot liquid	Dissolves while you use it	Hard to sanitize	More expensive
Metal	X		X	X	X		X	X
Paper	X	X		X	X	X		
Glass			X	X			X	X
Silicone	X			X			X	X
Acrylic	X		X	X	X		X	X
Pasta/Rice	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Bamboo	X		X	X				X
Biodegradable	X	X			X	X		
Single-Use Plastic								

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Figure 1. Accessibility of plastic straw alternatives (Schultz, 2019)

Disability advocates are doing significant work on social media; they want to shift the narrative around plastic straws. The general conversation does not include disabled people and how they need plastic straws, so disabled people get shamed for using them. Disabled people have taken to social media to share their experiences of being denied straws and being forced to explain or justify why they need plastic straws in the first place. X user moe shared their experience of being shamed for trying to get access to a straw. When moe asked their waitress for a straw, they were told straws were only given to the elderly. Even after explaining their medical issues and why they needed a straw, it took over 5 minutes and involving the manager before moe was finally able to get a straw (moe [@EhlersDanlosgrl], 2019). Other users have also shared stories of struggling to drink without a straw and getting injured when using plastic alternatives like metal straws (Annie Segarra [@annieelaine], 2018; Maysoon [@maysoonzayid], 2019).

Disability advocates argue that plastic straw bans should not be as restrictive, and that disabled people should be involved when creating such bans. Valley (n.d.) argues that “disabled people who rely on straws must be included in the conversation, listened to and respected.” Disability advocates want bans to allow plastic straws for disabled people, and they want companies to follow these exceptions and actually provide the straws. According to one X user, the idea solution would be to “focus on awareness campaigns to reduce use of some items while banning others. The answer is CONSULT DISABLED PEOPLE, ALWAYS” (Jess Walton [@JessHealyWalton], 2021).

This issue is an example of technoableism; abled people have centered themselves in this conversation and do not understand why disabled people need straws (and specifically plastic straws). Abled people view straws as unnecessary, so they think giving them up should be easy. They are banning plastic straws without understanding the impact and how these bans put the burden of accessibility on disabled people. As one Tumblr user points out, they do not understand that “A world without technology is a world where a lot of disabled people don’t get to survive” (nightmaretour, 2023). And even when abled people attempt to think of disabled people, they do not spend the time to understand all the complexities and offer surface level solutions. One frustrated X user complained about this issue, saying “STOP RECOMMENDING USELESS ALTERNATIVES TO DISABLED PEOPLE. YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT WE NEED. WE DO. Stop trying to be ‘helpful,’ and fucking LISTEN” (Lily Calder    [@paperstainedink], 2018).

Disabled people are not anti-environmentalism, but they believe straws shouldn’t be the main target of environmentalists. Many advocates highlight the fact that plastic straws don’t actually contribute that much to plastic pollution, and targeting/banning other plastic items

would have a larger environmental impact. They are frustrated by how much time and effort is put into plastic straw bans, since it has a minimal environmental impact and actively makes life harder for disabled people. “If your environmentalism works at the expense of people’s welfare, it’s not sustainable. Disabled people rely on plastic straws and denying access to them will do more harm than good” (rip-thesystem, 2018). Disabled advocates have pointed out that many environmentalists lack intersectionality, and some have started becoming ecofascists.

Environmental activists chose to focus on plastic straws because they thought it would be an easy target. They admit that plastic straws do not majorly contribute to plastic pollution, making up just 0.2% of the United States’ annual plastic waste (Ives, 2020). They chose to focus on plastic straws, considered to be an optional single-use item, to act as a “gateway plastic” and start a conversation (Ives, 2020). However, these activists did not consider the fact that straws are a necessity to some disabled people and are not easily avoidable or replaceable.

Limitations and Future Research

During the writing of the paper, there have been major shifts in the conversation surrounding plastic straw bans. The Trump administration has taken an anti-paper straw stance, and an executive order has directed the federal government to stop purchasing and providing paper straws. Since these changes are new and still ongoing, they were not included in the scope of this research paper. This paper focused primarily on public opinion and responses to single-use plastic bans; future research should investigate the creation of these policies and how they could be improved. Additionally, this research focused on plastic straws, but future research should consider other items affected by single-use plastic bans.



Another area for future research would be to look into how ecofascism is involved in the discussions surrounding plastic straw bans. Ecofascism is present in online environmental spaces

and can be hostile to people who require single-use plastic items. One Tumblr user talked about ecofascists “who told me and countless other disabled folks to our faces that if our disabilities meant we couldn’t give up plastic straws for safety reasons we were a burden on the planet and should consider suicide the moral option” (thebibliosphere, 2023). These ecofascist views influence discussions and the general public’s perception of straw bans and should be investigated more thoroughly.




Conclusion

Disability advocates are leveraging social media to highlight the effects of single-use plastic bans on disabled individuals. They believe disabled people should be involved in discussions about the bans, and while they support environmental efforts, they argue that straws shouldn't be the primary focus of these initiatives. Banning plastic straws put the burden of accessibility back on disabled people, making it harder for them to engage in public life. When medical aids are taken away, disabled people are harmed, even if the public does not notice it. The conversations around the plastic straw bans highlights how disabled people are often forgotten and left to fend for themselves. Disabled people are frequently the only people advocating for their rights, and they need more allies to help support them.

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