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# Zero Waste on Instagram Through the Lens of Precautionary Consumption

## **Keywords**

zero waste, precautionary consumption, environmentalism

**Zero Waste on Instagram Through the Lens of Precautionary  
Consumption**

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Michelle Murphy is a student of the University of California, Los Angeles majoring in Psychobiology with a minor in Society and Genetics. This paper was inspired by her own experience attempting to live a waste-free lifestyle after finding the zero waste movement on Instagram.

**Abstract:** The zero waste community (ZW) community on Instagram is a group of individuals who intend to lessen their environmental impact by utilizing precautionary consumption (PC) to avoid generating waste. Public figures in the ZW community advertise ZW as a simple and efficient method to take action against the ever growing plastic waste in our society. In this paper, I perform a virtual ethnographic analysis of posts shared on Instagram within the ZW community to illustrate the way in which ZW places responsibility at the individual level in order to reduce plastic waste. Next, I compare levels of industrial waste to municipal solid waste to highlight how ZW's fascination with food plastic packaging is an inadequate approach to their environmental goals. Next, I apply a lens of precautionary consumption (PC) to examine why women may identify with the ZW community, what kinds of women are most prominently represented, and what this representation says about ZW as a method for eliminating plastic waste from our environments. In this way, I ultimately conclude that the PC utilized by the ZW community is an ineffective method to eliminate plastic waste from our environment.

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## **Introduction**

In light of the ever-growing threat of plastic pollution, environmental movements such as the zero waste (ZW) movement have gained increased popularity. However, the zero waste community is not a particularly well-defined movement. In a literal sense, the zero waste concept is supposed to refer to a circular flow of materials, “the same materials are used again and again until the optimum level of consumption” so that no materials are wasted or underused (Song, Li, and Zeng 2015: 200). Nonetheless, when I discovered zero waste through the photo-sharing social media platform Instagram, zero waste was portrayed as a lifestyle change with the ultimate goal of eliminating waste from individuals lives in order to save the planet’s environment. It is often also referred to by other terms such as “low waste,” “low impact,” “non-toxic living,” and “intentional living.”

I was first exposed to the ZW community when a viral video of a woman fitting numerous years of trash that she produced into a single mason jar popped up on my Facebook feed. This woman was Lauren Singer, a public figure within the ZW community. I became more familiar with her through Instagram, where her username is @trashisfortossers. A couple of years later, I found myself inspired by the ease and beauty portrayed by members of the ZW community on Instagram, particularly individuals with large follower counts such as Singer, and set out to achieve a plastic free life style as well. Unfortunately, the experience was not as achievable as it was

portrayed, and I struggled daily to find options that were truly plastic free, leading to strong feelings of guilt. The challenges I faced forced me to evaluate the effectiveness of ZW as an environmental movement.

Public figures in the ZW community often advertise ZW as a simple and efficient option that empowers the individual to take action against the threat of plastic waste in our society. In this paper, I will perform a virtual ethnographic analysis of posts shared on Instagram within the ZW community to illustrate the way in which ZW puts responsibility on the individual to reduce plastic waste. I will then compare levels of industrial waste to municipal solid waste to highlight how ZW's fascination with food plastic packaging is an inadequate approach to their environmental goals. Municipal waste will be used in this paper to refer to waste produced by the standard, individual consumer. Next, I apply a lens of precautionary consumption (PC) to examine why women in particular identify with the ZW community, from what backgrounds women are most prominently represented, and what this representation says about ZW as a method for eliminating plastic waste from our environments. Traditionally, PC refers to the act of adopting lifestyle changes, such as adhering to particular diets or purchasing only products labelled as "certified organic" or "non-toxic" to protect one's body and health from toxic contaminants (MacKendrick 2015). I argue that the ZW community's adoption of PC to encourage reducing plastic consumption, particularly plastic food packaging, overlooks the larger threat of industrial solid wastes while appealing to and placing

unequal responsibility on women. In this way, PC is thus an ineffective method to eliminate plastic waste from our environment.

### **Zero Waste on Instagram**

In this section, I will be analyzing photos shared on Instagram along with their captions and comments to examine what messages the ZW community are representing and what implications these messages have in regard to consumer behavior patterns. For the purposes of this paper, I define the ZW community on Instagram as a group of individuals who intend to lessen their environmental impact by utilizing precautionary consumption to avoid generating waste. These accounts can be found by searching for hashtags such as “zero waste,” “sustainable living,” and “life without plastic.” Individuals who associate themselves with the ZW community tend to be concerned with waste for two main reasons: the current health of our planet and the potential health benefits of avoiding plastic products.

Though the ultimate focus is on reducing waste to protect the health of the environment, the bodily health is mentioned as well. This is illustrated by some of the alternate names for ZW, such as “low impact,” “non-toxic living,” and “intentional living,” which hint at the active choice to avoid negative impacts of plastic consumption with the use of terms like “intentional” and “non-toxic.” By using these terms, the movements essentially equate plastic consumption to toxicity and encourage purposeful behavior to avoid these toxins.

If one searches Instagram for the topic of zero waste, the most common photos that appear are pictures of food. This might include pictures of pantries filled with aesthetically organized jars of bulk foods or “hauls” of fresh produce laid out to show just how much food can be purchased without plastic. These kinds of pictures, as exemplified in Figure 1B, are what initially inspired me to live plastic free, and they are often the main mode of spreading ZW information



Figure 1. (A) Two captions from @trashisfortossers Instagram photos. (B) This photograph from Instagram shows a typical “haul.”

throughout the platform. The overall simplicity of the photo shown in Figure 1B along with the variety of foods represented not only attracts viewers with its aesthetics but also adds to the sense that ZW is an easy lifestyle change to implement.

Together with these aesthetic photos are captions with compelling messages that emphasize the simplicity of ZW and the power of the individual. Two examples of these captions by @trashisfortossers are exemplified in Figure 1A. In one of her



captions, Singer states that “living a zero-waste lifestyle involves little forethought,” implying that a ZW lifestyle is something that can be achieved with minimal effort. In the next caption, Singer presents statistics to illustrate just how much trash she has supposedly avoided by living ZW then uses this number to back up her claim that one person can “make a difference” on our environment. She further states that “we are powerful,” emphasizing that individual level PC can make a significant impact on reducing plastic waste levels. Singer is not alone in sharing these kinds of messages of personal responsibility throughout the ZW community as they are the most pervasive and common theme seen throughout the ZW Instagram platform. By highlighting individual responsibility for waste production, the ZW community sends a strong message that the individual has the power to “save the earth.”

Additionally, the message of personal responsibility that the ZW community and particularly public figures spread on Instagram, affects consumer behavior patterns. For example, @trashisfortossers has 278 thousand followers as of March 2019 with her most recent posts averaging about 8,000 likes. Though that may not seem like an influential number compared to celebrities that boast millions of followers, one study found that lesser known public figures can actually influence consumer behavior more effectively because Instagram users find them more relatable and more trustworthy (Djafarova and Rushworth 2016). From this study and from my firsthand experience, it can be inferred that information shared on Instagram does influence its users’ consumer behavior.

## **Zero Waste Offline**

Looking at the amount of solid waste produced by the United States annually, a huge percentage of that waste is due to industrial waste (MacBride 2012). Despite this, the ZW movement on Instagram places a huge emphasis on personal consumption choices. In this section, I discuss how ZW's emphasis on avoiding food plastic packaging at the individual level is an ineffective method to reducing harm to our environments due to the difference between industrial and municipal levels of waste, and their respective effects on the environment. Industrial waste refers to waste produced by large corporations such as industrial, mining, extractive, and agricultural operations. (MacBride 2012). In addition, I argue that the use of Instagram as the ZW community's main platform also contributes to the movement's ineffectiveness by simplifying and glamorizing ZW practices.

My attempt at living a plastic-free lifestyle was much harder than how it was implied in the messages spread on Instagram. As discussed previously, I was overwhelmed by the fact that evading plastic waste was virtually impossible. I struggled to understand why I could not achieve what others seemed to be implementing so simply into their lives. This experience of overwhelming guilt is openly talked about within the ZW community on Instagram. However, in general, the main message of encouragement offered to combat these feelings of failure is that small actions taken by large numbers of people can achieve large results. This mantra reflects ZW's overall view that the individual has the power (if not the responsibility) to

reduce plastic waste.

The ZW community's emphasis on plastic food packaging is a logical place to start when attempting to reduce the amount of plastic waste society is creating. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reported that the United States generated a total of 262.4 million tons of municipal solid waste in 2015 alone, with plastics making up about 13% of this total (Facts and Figures about Materials, Waste and Recycling 2018). In the U.S., the food and beverage industry is one of the largest consuming industries for plastic products (Gourmelon 2015). On top of this, packaging accounts for 42% of the demand for plastic in the U.S. (Gourmelon 2015). This data suggest that plastic food packaging is an ideal candidate to focus on when attempting to reduce plastic consumption and waste. Additionally, plastic food packaging waste is a very palpable target because people interact with plastic food packaging nearly every day and its harm is easily visualized. Videos of sea turtles with straws stuck up their noses or dead whales floating to shore with stomachs full of plastic bags circle all sorts of media platforms. These types of photos and videos appeal to the audience emotionally and further make plastic food waste a compelling target of environmental movements.

Despite the potential threat of food plastic packaging, avoiding using it may not be the most effective method to prevent harm to our environments. This is not to discredit the fact that plastic waste truly is a threat to our environment. However, if the goal of ZW is to protect our planet's environments, it seems obvious from the numbers that industrial solid waste poses a larger threat than

municipal solid waste. As previously mentioned, the US generated 262.4 million tons of municipal solid waste in 2015 (Facts and Figures about Materials, Waste and Recycling 2018), but the EPA also more quietly reported that manufacturing industries are generating approximately 7.6 billion tons of industrial solid waste per year (MacBride 2012), nearly 30 times more than the municipal waste produced in a year. This striking difference in the amount of waste produced by the average consumer in contrast to corporations helps illustrate why targeting consumer level choices may not be as impactful as attempting to reduce corporations solid waste production.

Others may argue that the impact made via individual PC should not be considered insignificant just because it is smaller than the potential impact of reducing corporations' waste. This is true, but I am arguing not that ZW's precautionary consumption is insignificant, but that it is ineffective. ZW's PC can be seen as a form of what MacBride (2012) calls "busy-ness." In her book, *Recycling Reconsidered*, MacBride (2012: 8) defines busy-ness as a "fulfilling sense of work and achievement that often brings positive side effects but fails to reach the central effect." ZW's emphasis on reducing food plastic packaging waste through modes of PC embodies busy-ness by failing to achieve their central goal of significant environmental impact. Posting photos on Instagram of one's plastic-free grocery trips and receiving likes for this effort may feel fulfilling and even seems to produce minimal benefits to the environment, but it fails to address the bigger, systematic threat that industrial waste poses.

The utilization of Instagram in particular adds to this busy-ness by glamorizing and simplifying the practice of ZW. Social media is marketed as a way to share our lives with our friends, with Instagram in particular focusing on pictures and short videos as a way to stay connected. Instagram is an exceptionally powerful platform because of its widespread reach. One study found that over half of the internet using young adults they surveyed are Instagram users, with approximately half of these users using the platform every day. (Lee, Lee, Moon, and Sung 2015) Most Instagram users carefully curate their posts in order to present their lives in a more favorable light, often omitting aspects that would not be taken as positively (Goldsmith 2018). These tendencies apply even to those who share their ZW lifestyles through their Instagram posts which creates unrealistic expectations of the ease of ZW, as previously discussed. The overall illusion that Instagram promotes thus further advances the ZW lifestyle as a form of busy-ness.

### **Precautionary Consumption, Gender, and Access**

The ZW community on Instagram is undoubtedly dominated by women. The most well-known public figures of the ZW community are regularly women with large followings, as seen with @trashisfortossers. Not only are the public figures within the community women, but the majority of their followers are women as well. Upon examining a post by @greenifyme, another public figure in the ZW community, I found that of the 288 likes on one of her food haul photos, only 19 of the likes were from accounts that appeared to be run by men, as determined by their profile photo, name, and profile

content. The remaining accounts were run by women or were accounts representing companies, blogs, or couples. Though this represents only a small portion of the ZW presence on Instagram, it illustrates that the ZW community is represented most significantly by women.

In this section, I examine why women may identify with the ZW community on Instagram through a lens of PC. I then discuss which groups of women specifically are most prominently represented in the ZW community and what this representation says about ZW as a method for eliminating plastic waste from our environment.

In the body of literature, women are usually considered to be the primary caretaker in the average American household (MacKendrick 2015). As the primary caretaker, women are often in charge of consumption choices, especially when it comes to food preparation. One study found that women spent twice as much time cooking and cleaning than their male partners (Beagan et al. 2008). Hence, PC is an inherently gendered practice as women are the one's making a majority of the consumption decisions (MacKendrick 2015). I suggest that this exposure to food preparation and its resulting waste is one reason why the ZW community is comprised of mainly women. On top of the fact that women have first-hand experience of how much waste they can produce through food, they also express involving themselves in food work out of concern for their family's health (Beagan et al. 2008). ZW's method of PC addresses this concern because ZW is often equated to being natural and being

“natural” is usually perceived with a positive connotation. This mindset was illustrated in a study where participants were asked about their views on organic and natural products, in which one participant expressed that “All-natural means it has less bad stuff” (Abrams et al. 2009: 369). Many people equate eliminating plastic food packaging to choosing only “natural” options because they are avoiding most processed foods. Thus, this idea of ZW as a healthy alternative could be another reason why women who are concerned for the health of their family members would be so drawn to ZW and its implementation of PC.

Among the women within the ZW community, the most followed women are of exceptional socioeconomic status (SES) with unique access to ZW resources. For example, @trashisfortossers is an entrepreneur with no children living in New York City who runs multiple successful small businesses. Her SES status, day to day schedule, and other demographic aspects of her life would not be congruent with a majority of the women living in rural, smaller cities.

Let us consider the fact that she lives in New York City, a fairly progressive city. New York county alone has 50 registered farmers markets compared to a state like Nevada, which produces the most landfill waste in America and has only 28 registered farmers markets throughout the entire state. (Land of Waste: American Landfills and Waste Production n.d.; Find a Farmers' Market, Farm Stand or Mobile Market 2019; Farmers Markets n.d.). Farmers markets are just one example of a resource that makes ZW living

achievable, and without these resources people attempting to live the ZW lifestyles they see on Instagram will face challenges to avoiding plastic food packaging waste.

The fact that PC is a gendered practice in addition to this overall unequal accessibility demonstrates the ineffectiveness of PC as a mode of eliminating plastic waste. The gendered nature of PC places unequal responsibility on women to be the driving force of plastic waste reduction. Furthermore, access to resources that make ZW living convenient and achievable, such as farmers markets, is necessary for someone to successfully lead a ZW lifestyle. Nonetheless, in a capitalist society like America, the options that consumers have are limited due to one's SES, geographic location, or even one's daily lifestyle (Scott, Haw, and Lee 2017).

Consequently, even when one attempts to utilize ZW's mode of PC, if their consumption choices are limited to food that only comes with plastic packaging, they will be unable to avoid it. ZW's encouragement of PC is thus an inadequate method to reducing plastic waste because it does not account for these factors.

## **Conclusion**

The PC of plastic food packaging that the ZW community promotes on Instagram is ineffective in achieving their ultimate goal of reducing the threat of plastic waste on our planet not only because it is a form of busy-ness but also it lacks of focus on industrial waste. The utilization of Instagram adds to this sense of busy-ness by glamorizing and simplifying the practice of ZW. PC may particularly



attract women to the ZW community due to its relevancy to food work and focus on health, but it remains an ineffective method to eliminate plastic waste due to its gendered nature and the unequal access to resources necessary for a ZW lifestyle.

The work that ZW is trying to achieve is admirable and one that many people sympathize. However, it will require more than individual level PC to attempt to fix the astronomical levels plastic waste we are seeing at the global scale. Considering its powerful, relevant message and recent appearances in mainstream media, adherents to ZW practices should consider relocating their efforts from messages of PC to messages of communal action against systems that make plastic so prevalent (Kurutz 2019). Analyzing the ZW community on Instagram is specifically important because of Instagram's influence in the modern world. Instagram has become one of the fastest growing social media sites and reported having 500 million daily users on the platform as of 2017 (Balakrishnan and Boorstin 2017). With this kind of following, encouraging communal action against plastic waste rather than individual responsibility could lead to more effective environmental benefits. One potential opportunity would be rallying the community to target local government, and eventually larger political figures, to put pressure on corporations and hold them responsible for their solid waste amounts.

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