

Bag for Good? A CDA of News Media and Popular Discourse on Lightweight Plastic Bags Ban in Australia

Abstract: In order to reduce unnecessary plastic usage, most Australian states have banned lightweight plastic bags. In the non-regulated jurisdictions, the two supermarkets Coles and Woolworths self-imposed a ban, encountering customers' rebellion against the end of the free bag era. The chains initially seemed to surrender to a slower transition to reusable bags, causing further protests by environmentalists. The present paper investigates the recontextualisation of the environmental and legal issue of the single-use plastic bags ban in news media and user-generated discourse. The study analyses a collection of articles published by two of the major Australian online news outlets, *News.com.au* and *Sydney Morning Herald*, in 2017 and 2018 and the comments they generated. A corpus-assisted CDA aims at identifying the way actors and facts are framed in news discourse and user comments, also examining the linguistic means used by readers to express their position about the newspaper's views and to support environmentalist or consumerist positions.

Keywords: *news discourse, user-generated web discourse, environmental conflict, single-use plastics, Australian bag ban, corpus-assisted CDA*

1. Introduction

1.1 Research background

1.1.1 The plastic bag ban in Australia

Plastic has transformed our lives, offering societal benefits and enabling technological and medical advances. Cheap, adaptable, strong and durable, it has been appreciated for its seemingly infinite applications. Nevertheless, its usage and disposal have generated significant environmental impacts. Over a third of the current plastic production is used to manufacture items of packaging, which are then rapidly discarded. Of the plastic produced over the last 70 years, about 79 per cent has been thrown away, either into landfill sites or into the general environment, just nine per cent is recycled, while the

rest is incinerated.¹ The invention of plastic has been considered as a marker for a new era. The current geological epoch has thus been dubbed ‘Anthropocene’ for the high impact of human activity on our planet. All parts of the earth bear today the signs of pollution from plastic items, including water containers, bags, polystyrene lumps or cigarette filters.²

Plastic persists in nature and causes problems to marine wildlife resulting from ingestion, entanglement, and leaching of chemicals. A serious concern is caused by the abundance of small plastic fragments or microplastics from primary sources or from the mechanical and chemical deterioration of larger items. Fish and birds often ingest plastic debris, so that toxic substances may enter the food chain.³ In particular, although plastic shopping bags seem to be convenient carriers, they have proven to represent a major source of environmental pollution. Their disposal and recycling is extremely problematic, most of them ending up in landfills. Due to their lightness, bags tend to be carried by sea currents and accumulate in ocean gyres. Marine animals (such as albatrosses, sea turtles, and whales) suffer from the risk of entanglement and suffocation, they can easily mistake bags for food and even feed them to their offspring. The accumulation of plastic bags has also shown to block local drainage systems, mostly in developing countries.⁴

After the issue of plastic pollution was brought to public attention, many countries embraced the battle against plastic. All over the world, measures have been adopted to discourage the use of single-use plastics (e.g., cotton buds, cutlery, plates) and particularly of plastic bags, including taxes, levies, and regulatory bans. Up to 2018, globally, more than 40 countries have banned plastic bags, with the first actions taken in Bangladesh in 2002. In South Africa, the government implemented regulations to prohibit light-weight bags and mandate a minimum thickness, so that more durable plastic bags are produced and reused. Several European states have imposed a tax on plastic shopping bags, with very positive impacts on the reduction of their usage.⁵ Recently, the European Union approved a directive aiming at reducing the per capita consumption of lightweight plastics carrier bags and imposing a levy on bags provided in shops.⁶

¹ Ian Johnston, “How Plastic Is Damaging Planet Earth”, *The Independent* (28 September 2017).

² Robin McKie, “Plastic Now Pollutes Every Corner of Earth”, *The Guardian* (24 January 2016).

³ Richard C. Thompson et al., “Plastics, the Environment, and Human Health: Current Consensus and Future Trends”, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, Series B, Biological Sciences*, 364.1526 (July 2009), 2153-2166.

⁴ Douglas Lober, “Environmental Impact: Effects, Dangers of Plastic Bags”, *ReuseThisBag.com* (26 October 2017), <https://www.reusethisbag.com/articles/plastic-shopping-bags-environmental-impact/>, last accessed 30 November 2018.

⁵ ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), “No Bag, Thanks!”, *ABC* (27 March 2003), <http://www.abc.net.au/science/features/bags/default.htm>, last accessed 30 November 2018.

⁶ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, “Directive (EU) 2015/720 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2015 Amending Directive 94/62/EC as Regards Reducing the Consumption of Lightweight Plastic Carrier Bags”, *Official Journal of the European Union*, 115 (6 May 2015), 11-15.

In Australia, the possibility to introduce a plastic bag tax in shops had been debated for some decades. At the time of writing, most of its state governments have banned or pledged to ban lightweight plastic bags. South Australia was the first to impose a ban, in May 2009.⁷ The directive applies to bags with handles with a thickness of 35 microns or less. The Northern Territory introduced a similar ban in September 2011.⁸ Shortly after, in November 2011, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) passed its ban.⁹ Tasmania applied a similar regulatory ban in November 2013.¹⁰ Bans on lightweight plastic bags were introduced in Queensland and Western Australia from 1 July 2018.¹¹ In October 2017, the Victorian Government announced its plan to join the lightweight plastic bag ban at the end of 2019 and undertook public consultation on the design of the measure. New South Wales is instead the only primary jurisdiction in Australia that has not yet found an agreement to phase out single-use lightweight plastic bags.

1.1.2 Supermarkets' new policies and corporate communications about single-use plastic bags

On the same date the new legislation came into effect in Western Australia and Queensland, in July 2018, the two Australian major grocery retailers, Coles and Woolworths, also decided to phase out lightweight single-use shopping bags, including biodegradable, degradable and compostable bags, in their supermarkets throughout Australia, whether or not a plastic bag ban was in place. In Victoria and New South Wales, therefore, the supermarkets themselves enforced a self-imposed ban, anticipating the governments and in response to public pressure to reduce waste and to prevent harm to wildlife. The new state regulations on plastic bags had met some oppositions by customers when they were first enacted across Australia. The grocery retailers had forewarned customers about the change with notices in their stores. Nevertheless, the enforcement of the new policy provoked a general uproar against the end of the free bag era.¹² Outraged, citizens refused to pay 15 cents for the reusable plastic bags. To respond to its consumers' needs, Coles decided to surrender to a slower transition to reusable bags by continuing to provide free plastic bags in its stores. It initially agreed to give bags away for free only until 1 August 2018. Then, fearful of losing its customers, it backed down again and decided it would

⁷ Government of South Australia, *Plastic Shopping Bag (Waste Avoidance) Act 2008* (Adelaide: Government of South Australia, 2018).

⁸ Northern Territory Government, *Environment Protection (Beverage Containers and Plastic Bags) Act 2011*, (Darwin: Northern Territory Government, 2011).

⁹ ACT (Australian Capital Territory) Government Environment and Sustainable Development, *Review of the Plastic Shopping Bags Ban* (Canberra: Australian Capital Territory, 2014).

¹⁰ Tasmanian Government, *Plastic Shopping Bags Ban Act 2013* (Hobart: Tasmanian Government, 2013).

¹¹ Government of Queensland, *Waste Reduction and Recycling Act 2011* (Brisbane: Government of Queensland, 2011); Government of Western Australia, *Environment Protection Act* (Perth, Government of Western Australia, 2011).

¹² Kate Lyons, "Jacinda Ardern Says New Zealand Will Ban Plastic Bags", *The Guardian* (10 August 2018).

give bags away indefinitely. Unimpressed by this attitude, environmental movements threatened to boycott Coles. Its back-flip was indeed viewed as worsening the plastic pollution problem since heavier reusable bags degrade more slowly than thin single-use bags. If lightweight plastic bags are supplied free, they are thus likely to proliferate in litter and landfill. Woolworths, on its side, after a short transition period and despite the protests, seemed to be firmer in the application of its plan of action and continued to charge 15 cents for its thicker bags. One of the main competitors of Coles and Woolworths, the German discounter Aldi, has instead never given away plastic bags to shoppers and supported a complete ban on single-use plastic bags.¹³

Australians were not the only citizens to initially oppose plastic bag regulations. For instance, in Italy, since January 2018, the use of plastic bags for fruit, vegetables and baked goods was banned, in favour of eco-friendly biodegradable and compostable alternatives.¹⁴ The new bags could not be given out for free, but charged from 1 to 3 euro cents per bag. Since the law went into effect, it was met with a flood of protests with grocery retailers throughout Italy, as well as on social media. Some called this customer reaction hypocritical, such as the historian Marco Gervasoni, who wrote:

Everyone is always quick to say that they are environmentally friendly and mock Trump for global warming, but where you ask them for a minuscule and a little-more-than-symbolic concrete contribution, they become indignant.¹⁵

On their corporate websites, Coles and Woolworths, published a series of press releases about the ban issue, namely three were produced by Woolworths and seven by Coles¹⁶. While all reports on the topic issued by Woolworths are antecedent to the enactment of the ban, five over seven of Coles' releases were instead written after June 1, 2018. However, in such communications, the company never mentions any critical episodes which have taken place at the supermarkets. The scenario represented in the news releases by the two companies is far from the reality narrated by journalists and customers. No mention is made of the incidents occurred at checkouts, not even when the statements were released in the same dates in which such facts were reported in the news. From the close reading of the documents, it seems that the two companies deliberately chose to manage the conflict by ignoring

¹³ Dom Knight, "Australia: The Country That Went to War Over Plastic Bags", *The Guardian*, (3 August 2018).

¹⁴ Repubblica Italiana, "Conversione in legge, con modificazioni, del decreto-legge 20 giugno 2017, n. 91, recante disposizioni urgenti per la crescita economica nel mezzogiorno", *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, Serie Generale, 188, 17G00139 (12 August 2017).

¹⁵ Elisabetta Povoledo, "Biodegradable Bags Cause Outrage in Italy. (It's Not Really About Bags.)", *New York Times* (8 January 2018).

¹⁶ Woolworths Group Limited, "News", (2018), <https://www.woolworthsgroup.com.au/page/media/?tab=184415>, last accessed 30 November 2018; Coles Supermarkets Australia Pty Ltd, "News", (2018), <https://www.coles.com.au/about-coles/news>, last accessed 30 November 2018.

potential or actual problems. Both discourses present the phasing out of plastic bags as the right thing to do for a greener Australia, praising the chain's commitment to environmental causes, only acknowledging the time needed, on the part of the customers, for a 'transition' towards the new habits. The discourse strategies adopted in the official communications rely on showing endorsement by government and customers and praising shoppers for their commitment to contributing to an improvement of the environmental outcomes. Consumers are mostly referred to as "our customers", suggesting inclusiveness in an inner group underlining the care on the part of the companies, counterbalanced by the customers' loyalty. The importance of fidelity is confirmed by the stress laid in Coles' press releases to the campaign awarding a *Flybuy* (loyalty scheme) bonus to customers who were reusing own bags, as another way of distracting the attention from violent reactions on the part of many consumers. Intensifiers, comparatives, and adverbs enhance positive actions and aims in the releases by both supermarkets. Thus, apart from anticipations of a "greener future", as would easily be expected, the two chains report on ever "more" customers bringing their own reusable bags, though encountering "huge" problems, but all shifting towards "more" sustainable attitudes. Nouns, adjectives, and verbs used in the press releases all contribute to the description of the phasing out as a responsible action that everybody would wish for and aspire to. On some occasions, Woolworth's tone sounds even epical, specifically in two releases that, taken together, seem to allude to the words Neil Armstrong pronounced when landing on the moon: "this is a big change for our customers and store teams" and "small, but important steps in our commitment to make positive change happen".¹⁷

1.2 Research questions and objectives

The present study focuses on the controversial issue of the single-use plastic bag ban in the Australian States and on its portrayal in online news discourse. The research investigates the recontextualisation of the environmental and legal case and the representation of the conflicts it originated in the articles published by two of the leading Australian online news providers. Considering the relevance of online news platforms for opinion formation and aggregation, the paper also analyses user-generated comments to online news articles on the issue.

The analysis aims at identifying the way actors and facts are framed in news discourse and readers' comments, also comparing the discourses arising in the two news media outlets. It also examines how the original articles influence the different positions and opinions reflected in users' comments and investigates the linguistic means used by readers to express their stance about the newspaper's views. The study also explores the different discourses emerging in the public debate in the digital arena,

¹⁷ Woolworths Group Limited, "News".

which may support environmentalist or consumerist positions and reveal different concepts of Australian citizenship.

2. News Media and User-generated Discourse: Literature Review

News media play a central role in offering access to information and influencing public opinion.¹⁸ News selection and coverage of issues are at the heart of the agenda-setting process, as news media affect the relative importance of a topic, having an impact on both public perceptions and policy development aimed at addressing the featured issues.¹⁹ This tendency is particularly noticeable for environmental problems, which are subject to periodical shifts of public attention.²⁰ News is not to be naively viewed as a reflection of reality, but as a frame through which the social world is constructed. Facts are reported from a specific angle, and linguistic and representative choices convey ideological positions.²¹ News media not only address an ideal reader, but also regularly form an audience which will share the views presented.²² Newspapers often seem to reduce more complex issues to specific updates or scoops, both in order to attract reader interest and because news articles need to be written in a short space and under tight deadlines.²³ The ownership of news media also influences the political positions expressed in the articles. This situation is plainly evident today, as the number of information suppliers is becoming more and more restricted. Media organisations and management groups tend to acquire various news outlets, thus concentrating the power in the hands of a few sources.²⁴ For instance, the Australian-born American media mogul Rupert Murdoch, CEO of *Fox News* channel, is accused of biased reporting in favour of the Republican Party in the US. In Australia, Murdoch is the owner of News Corp Australia one of the largest media companies in the nation. The company's sites include *News.com.au*, which publishes news circulating across several national newspapers of the group, including *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Herald Sun*, *The Courier-Mail*, *The Advertiser*, *The Mercury*, and *Northern Territory News*. Another big newsgroup in the country, connected to more left-leaning positions, is Nine Publishing (formerly Fairfax Media Limited), whose newspaper holdings

¹⁸ Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (New York: Arnold, 1995).

¹⁹ See Wayne Wanta et al., "Agenda Setting and International News: Media Influence on Public Perceptions of Foreign Nations", *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 81.2 (Summer 2004), 364-377.

²⁰ See Anders Hansen and Robert Cox, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Environment and Communication* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015).

²¹ Roger Fowler, *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991), 2-10.

²² *Ibid.*, 232.

²³ Ruth Wodak, *The Discourse of Politics in Action: Politics as Usual* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 18.

²⁴ Maria Grazia Busà, *Introducing the Language of the News: A Student's Guide* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 13-14.

include *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *The Australian Financial Review*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Sun-Herald*.

The evolution of the Internet has significantly affected media discourse. In the past, the recipients of mass media messages had little capacity to intervene in the communicative process and contribute to its content and development. Readers could write letters to the editor of a newspaper, yet the discursive identities between the producer and the receiver always remained separated and asymmetrical.²⁵ The participatory character of the web 2.0, and mostly of social media, has instead allowed readers to communicate with dominant media texts, thus transforming the public from mere consumers into prosumers.²⁶ The Internet has eroded the classical hierarchy of traditional mass media and direct citizen participation in political debate has promoted the exchange of information and contributed to shape the readership's positions.²⁷ The technical features of the Internet have favoured the meeting of people in the 'virtual world',²⁸ viewed as a public sphere where citizens can gather to discuss relevant issues and articulate their interests.²⁹ The web interactivity has allowed users to become involved in political processes through a series of public participation tools, such as online discussion fora, blogs, Facebook groups, comments on news stories. Such media can be used regardless of the physical location, promote political discussion and encourage argumentation and debate.³⁰

The introduction of web 2.0 technologies in online news websites has allowed readers to add their voice to journalistic discourse in the form of comments, creating a new space for public discursive processing of news issues.³¹ The one-way flow of information from the newspaper to its audience has today given way to interactive news websites. Consumers have acquired the active and more powerful role of text producers, as they can now publicly express their comments to online news.³² The commenting tool enables readers to discuss the article contents and express personal views, generally

²⁵ John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

²⁶ Michael S. Boyd, "Participation and Recontextualisation in New Media", in Bertie Kaal et al., eds., *From Text to Political Positions: Text Analysis Across Disciplines* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2014), 245-268; Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Bantam, 1984).

²⁷ Susan C. Herring, "Discourse in Web 2.0: Familiar, Reconfigured and Emergent", in Deborah Tannen and Anne Marie Trester, eds., *Discourse 2.0: Language and New Media* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown U.P., 2013), 1-25.

²⁸ Scott Wright and John Street, "Democracy, Deliberation and Design: The Case of Online Discussion Forums", *New Media and Society*, 9.5 (2007), 849-869, 72.

²⁹ See Jiirgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

³⁰ Kim Strandberg and Janne Berg, "Online Newspapers' Readers' Comments – Democratic Conversation Platforms or Virtual Soapboxes?", *Comunicação e Sociedade*, 23 (2013), 132-152: 134.

³¹ Patrick Weber, "Discussions in the Comments Section: Factors Influencing Participation and Interactivity in Online Newspapers' Readers Comments", *New Media and Society*, 16 (2014), 941-957.

³² See Herring, "Discourse in Web 2.0".

by posting their remarks in a field placed beneath the text of the article.³³ Online readers' comments are published via an online form with minimal censorship and represent a more immediate, direct and inclusive form of communication if compared to traditional forms of audience interaction, such as letters to the editor, which were vetted in the newsroom and devoted limited space in print newspapers. Online news readers' comments have had a high impact on news practice, by occupying a space once reserved to journalists alone. The possibility to publish comments from anonymous or non-verified profiles allows for the free flow of thoughts and the unconstrained expressions of views on sensitive topics.

Together with other forms of online participation, user-generated comments to news media reports have allowed to gain unprecedented insight into the people's thoughts and reactions.³⁴ By including perspectives and opinions which may not be considered in newspapers' discourse, such micro-fora enrich public debate on issues of collective interest.³⁵ In the last few years, several studies have revealed that the most commented news stories are generally about public affairs and politics.³⁶ Studies have also shown that commenters tend to focus on the subject of the story, on the social actors mentioned or on the broader topic presented the article.³⁷

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data collection and corpus

The study analyses a collection of articles published by two of the major Australian online news outlets, namely *News.com.au* and *The Sidney Morning Herald* and the comments they generated. More specifically, the corpus comprises 110 articles, 55 by *News.com.au* (henceforth *News*) and 55 by *The Sidney Morning Herald* (henceforth *SMH*) retrieved through the Google search function, with the search terms “plastic” and “bag” in the time span between 1st January 2017 and 31st December 2018. The results of the enquiry were then filtered, selecting only the articles which responded to the topic of the single-use plastic bag ban. The final corpus of *News* articles is made up of 41,272 tokens (running

³³ Strandberg and Berg, “Online Newspapers’ Readers’ Comments”, 134.

³⁴ Jaime Locke, *Amplifying a Public’s Voice: Online News Readers’ Comments Impact on Journalism and its Role as the New Public Space* (Austin: The University of Texas, 2011).

³⁵ Edith Manosevitch and Dana Walker, “Reader Comments to Online Opinion Journalism: A Space of Public Deliberation”, Paper presented at The 10th International Symposium on Online Journalism, Austin, TX (17-18 April 2009), 6.

³⁶ Pablo J. Boczkowski PJ and Eugenia Mitchelstein, “How Users Take Advantage of Different Forms of Interactivity on Online News Sites: Clicking, E-Mailing and Commenting”, *Human Communication Research*, 38.1 (2012), 1-22.

³⁷ See Strandberg and Berg, “Online Newspapers’ Readers’ Comments”; Zara Pinto-Coelho et al., “News Discourse and Readers’ Comments: Expanding The Range of Citizenship Positions?”, *Journalism*, 15 (May 2017), 1-19.

words) and 4,297 types (distinct words; type/token ratio 10.62), while the news articles by *SMH* comprise 33,426 tokens and 4,267 types (type/token ratio 13.07). Of the articles on *News*, 14 contained comments, amounting to 19,751 tokens and 2,813 types (type/token ratio 14.61), while 27 articles on *SMH* included comments, comprising 231,883 tokens and 10,921 types (type/token ratio 4.92).

3.2 Methods of analysis

Media discourse has been widely investigated from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, mainly focusing on linguistic and representative choices in order to reveal embedded ideologies which may support or challenge the dominant social and political order.³⁸ The approach combining Corpus Linguistics with Discourse Analysis has also proved productive for the study of media discourse. Through the statistical overview of linguistic data, the use of Corpus Linguistics tools assists the researchers, by enabling them to pinpoint topics and trends that may not be immediately evident and guiding a closer analysis.³⁹ Studies on media discourse have considered news as a communicative event comprising a social context, participants, and the acts of production and reception.⁴⁰ CDA has traditionally viewed text and discourse as created by a dominant text producer for seemingly powerless readers.⁴¹ News producers and receivers were conceived as linked by a one-directional relationship. News corporations, in particular, were viewed as holding an advantageous position, as they could select and give importance to specific issues, thus influencing public discourse and political action.⁴²

The present study aims at identifying the way actors and facts are framed in online news discourse. Furthermore, like many media platforms, the selected media outlets include the interactive feature of commenting. User comments are conceived as crucial to understanding both how texts are received and recontextualised by readers and how users react to news topics and texts. The investigation examined therefore also user comments written in response to the articles, primarily considering the high relevance of the issue of the plastic bag ban in the common citizens' life. The corpus-based critical discourse analysis combined quantitative and qualitative examination of news articles and reader

³⁸ See, among the others, Fairclough, *Media Discourse*.

³⁹ The present study makes use of WordSmith Tool 6.0 software. See Michael Scott, *WordSmith Tool 6.0* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Paul Baker et al., *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2013).

⁴⁰ Teun A. van Dijk, *News Analysis: Case Studies of International and National News in the Press* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1988), 1-2.

⁴¹ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: A Critical Study of Language*, Second Edition (Harlow: Longman, 2010); Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis", in van Dijk, ed., *Discourse as Social Interaction* (London: Sage, 1997), 258-284.

⁴² John E. Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 12.

comments. The investigation of comments focused on the linguistic means used by readers to express their positions on the views and facts in the news and to support environmentalist or consumerist perspectives.⁴³

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Australian newspapers' discourse on plastic bag ban

From a CDA perspective, each media text is viewed as both a representation, since it constructs social reality and mediates the world, and as a way of constructing the social identities of the actors involved.⁴⁴ In a first approach to the semantics of news texts, the main topics and controversies across the articles were identified. The events narrated in the articles analysed satisfy several of the criteria of 'newsworthiness' or 'news values' which drive journalistic practice.⁴⁵ More specifically, the articles seem to give prominence to the values of: novelty, actuality and relevance of news; proximity or impact over the national and the local interest; projection and consequences of the facts in relation to the future evolution of the situation; conflict, by presenting both confrontations and a difference in points of view about the issue and attempting to appease contrasts among parts.⁴⁶

The generation of keyword lists helped identify which words occur statistically more often in each of the sub-corpora⁴⁷. Table 1 shows some of the most significant keywords retrieved through WordSmith Tools 6.0 obtained by contrasting articles by *News* and *SMH*.

⁴³ See also Michael S. Boyd, "Critical Discourse Analysis and the Editorial 2.0: News Reception and User-generated Comments in Discourses about (Im)migration", *Altre modernità/ Otras modernidades/ Autres modernités/ Other Modernities*, 10 (2018), 1-22.

⁴⁴ Fairclough et al., "Critical Discourse Analysis and Citizenship", in Heiko Hausendorf and Alfons Bora, eds., *Analysing Citizenship Talk: Social Positioning in Political and Legal Decision-Making Processes* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006), 98-123.

⁴⁵ Fowler, *Language in the News*, 13.

⁴⁶ See also Miguel Túñez and Melitón Guevara, "Framing by Proximity as Criteria for Newsworthiness", *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 64 (2009), 1030-1044.

⁴⁷ Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis* (London: Continuum, 2006).

<i>News.com.au</i>			<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>		
Keyword	Freq.	%	Keyword	Freq.	%
bag	389	0.94	government	93	0.28
shoppers	126	0.31	checkouts	28	0.08
check-outs	36	0.09	waste	94	0.28
customers	303	0.73	phase-out	13	0.04
customer	64	0.16	minister	27	0.08
remember	12	0.03	political	8	0.02
reusable	177	0.43	litter	29	0.09
green	38	0.09	forgot	7	0.02

Table 1. Keywords of *News.com.au* vs *The Sydney Morning Herald* news article subcorpora

The concordances for some of the keywords seemed to confirm the author’s first impressions as a reader. In particular, keywords revealed in the former news outlet a clear tendency to represent negative issues and consequences for Coles’ and Woolworth’ customers, while *SMH* looked more prone to calm down conflict and dispute among its readers/commenters.

A special emphasis was placed in both subcorpora and especially in *News* on the object of bags. Newspapers attempted to construct a new way of carrying the shopping and delivering it, also considering the cost and fees connected. The most common immediate right collocates of “bag” in *News* were “ban/s” (157, 0.38%) and “rage” (12, 0.03%) while in *SMH* “ban/s” (57, 0.17%) and “offer” (10, 0.03%) were the most frequent. The economic impact of the ban seems indeed to be dramatically unfavourable to the Australian people. Several terms refer to the people affected, mostly represented in economic terms, as shown in Table 2:

Corpus	<i>News.com.au</i>		<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	
	Word	Freq.	%	Freq.
customers	303	0.73	161	0.48
shoppers	126	0.31	42	0.13
people	86	0.21	43	0.13
Australians	19	0.05	19	0.06
consumers	18	0.04	22	0.07

Table 2. Most frequent terms referring to the subjects affected by the bag ban in *News.com.au* vs *The Sydney Morning Herald* news article subcorpora

Altogether, these terms account for 1.34% of the words in *News* articles and 0.87% in *SMH*’s. Choosing the individual as the focus of news updates may be seen as a form of empowerment of the buyer over institutions. People are described as “angry”, “frustrated”, “irate”, “struggling”, “disgruntled” and “upset” and are generally at the centre of the events being reported or comments being expressed. The customers’ rebellion against the new rules is constantly represented, above all by *News*, as in the extreme example here narrated:

A frustrated shopper loading a shopping trolley full of groceries into his vehicle outside a Woolworths in western Sydney in a desperate attempt to navigate the new plastic bag ban which is polarising consumers.⁴⁸

The economic consequences experienced by the two supermarkets have a pivotal role in their subsequent behaviour, thus confirming the determinant influence of their customers. Primarily *SMH* reports distinctly emphasize the influence that shoppers have on the retailers, though not denying the customers' inconvenience due to the bag ban. For instance, in the example from the opinion article below, “cave in” is a clear example of the power exercised by the customers, who remained the key factor capable of determining every phase of the ban process. Customers had such a power as to soften Coles' implementation of the ban, while at the beginning the retailer had attempted to pursue a firmer line of action:

Coles and Woolworths initially ditched providing free single-use shopping bags in tandem. Customers of both revolted but only Coles caved in and allowed customers until the end of this month before it charges for bags.⁴⁹

Some of the journalists overtly sided with the official decisions responsibly taken by governments and supermarkets:

Customers are being led to believe that their role as consumer makes their behaviour, no matter how abusive, permissible. The rise of the five-star rating across service industries has also given consumers a feeling of power.⁵⁰

It is also worth noting the usage of the verbs “forget” (13, 0.03% in *News* and 13,0.04%, in *SMH*) “remember” (17, 0.04%, in *News*, 5,0.01%, in *SMH*) in the articles, which draws attention to the burden of “remembering” placed on customers. The verb “forget” implies failing to remember, inadvertently neglect to do, bring or mention something, while “remember” refers to doing something that one has undertaken to do or that is necessary or advisable.⁵¹ Constructions with such verbs tend to represent distressed buyers who oppose the new rules, as these force users to cope with the duty of carrying a personal reusable shopping bag or pay, each time, for a new one. Supermarkets seemed to

⁴⁸ Sam McBeath, “Frustrated Shopper Loads Full Trolley of Shopping into the Boot of His Car After Plastic Bag Ban” *News.com.au* (4 July 2018).

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Knight, “Coles Plays Dirty but Smart in Plastic Bag War”, *The Sidney Morning Herald* (20 August 2018).

⁵⁰ Roqayah Chamseddine, “The Plastic Bag Outrage Is Only the Beginning”, *The Sidney Morning Herald* (23 August 2018).

⁵¹ “Forget” and “Remember”, *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2018).

show understanding towards buyers' forgetfulness and tried to support them in the first phases of the ban. Again, although showing sympathy towards customers, newspapers opposed the customers' reluctance to accept the legislative provisions, both because the rest of the country had already successfully implemented them and because of the environmental impact of plastic bag usage.

If people can go to Coles now and not worry about remembering their bag, we could end up in a far worse situation (because) thicker bags take longer to break down. By doing this Coles is creating a far worse environmental problem.⁵²

News chooses to emphasise the dangerous effects that Coles' behaviour can have on the environment, whereas, *SMH* appeals to the Australian sense of citizenship, openly criticising those who are not keen on responsible changes:

For those who somehow forget to bring their own bag, the cost of buying a 15c bag is minuscule. If Australians are too selfish and stuck in their ways to work out a solution to plastic bags, it would have boded ill for other more complicated problems which similarly require the public to make changes in their habits to achieve a public good like a clean environment or public health or safe streets.⁵³

It appears worthwhile to focus on the definition of the crucial place where the conflict emerges, informally dubbed as “bagging area*” (14 instances, 0.03%, in *News*, 0 in *SMH*), or more neutrally as “checkout*” (33, 0.08%, in *News*, 60, 0.22% in *SMH*), the latter preferred by *SMH*. Interestingly, the word “bag” has multiple meanings in Australian English, lending therefore itself to multiple interpretations. In the Australian slang, “bag” is indeed also used as a verb with the meaning of “to criticise or denigrate someone or something”⁵⁴, as in the example from *News.com*: “Woolworths: Don't be bagging us”. The linguistic choice is in line with the campaign slogan “Don't Bag Retail Staff – No One Deserves a Serve”, mentioned both by *News* and *SMH*. The programme was launched by the SDA (Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association), a union representing retail workers, to stop verbal and, sometimes, even physical abusive behaviour towards shop assistants who could no longer give free plastic bags to customers. Being “bagging” a more informal term and given its connotation in

⁵² Benedict Brook, “If Coles Was Going to Blink So Quickly On the Plastic Bag Ban, Why Bother with It in The First Place?”, *News.com.au* (1 August 2018).

⁵³ The Sydney Morning Herald (Editorial), “Seeing Reason On Plastic Bags, One Checkout at a Time”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (4 August 2018).

⁵⁴ Tom Dalzell and Terry Victor, eds., “Bag”, *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 27; see also “Bag”, *Cambridge English Dictionary Online* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2018).

the Australian jargon, it is more present in articles which voice the customers' protests, although still in an attempt to mitigate conflicts.

When customers' feelings are mentioned, very little revolves around a public interest for the environmental outcomes of the measure, but rather the main focus is on rage and incapacity/unwillingness to assume new habits. Analysing the frequencies of terms connected to the environment, very few are related to the positive environmental impacts of the ban. Such terms include "environment*" (140, 0.34% in *News*, 155, 0.46%, in *SMH*), "waste" (49, 0.12%, in *News* and 97, 0.29% in *SMH*), "landfill" (37, 0.09% in *News* and 21, 0.06%, in *SMH*), "litter*" (19, 0.05%, in *News* and 35, 0.1%, in *SMH*), "pollut*" (9, 0.02%, in *News* and 19, 0.06%, in *SMH*). Praises on the results of the measure are generally presented in *News*, by reporting statements by either Woolworths or Coles chief executives or by governmental authorities, such as Victoria's Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, Lily D'Ambrosio. In some instances, when terms related to the environment are found in *News*, they seem to be even used to voice criticism towards the ban. This position is presented directly or indirectly, reporting experts' opinions or customers' comments on social media, which tend to be negative, even welcoming a delay of the ban. Litter seems to be represented as a problem that will never be solved as there will always be 'something bigger' behind. Nevertheless, both newspapers do tend to balance negative positions with common-sense comments, to avoid exacerbating conflicts.

But have we resolved the problem? Not really. We're still polluting the environment with plastic it would have actually have been better for the environment if we'd never gone through this whole sorry process in the first place. In an effort to banish the litter of lightweight, single-use carrier bags, our streets are now going to be littered with heavyweight carrier bags instead. Some progress.⁵⁵

Lexicon referring to the legislation banning single-use plastic bags does not reveal to be central to the debate. Such terms include "minister" (8, 0.02% in *News*, 36, 0.11% in *SMH*), "politic*" (2 in *News*, 13, 0.04% in *SMH*), "law" (4 in *News*, 13, 0.04%, in *SMH*), "legis*" (16, 0.04%, in *News*, 32, 0.1% in *SMH*), "illegal" (1 in *News*, 1 in *SMH*), "legal*" (5, 0.01%, in *News*), "enforce*" (5, 0.01%, in *News*, 7, 0.02% in *SMH*), "come/came into force", (9 in *News*, 8, 0.02%, in *SMH*), "enact*" (6 in *News*, 6, 0.02% in *SMH*). Reference to the whole legal process that has led to the ban is largely disregarded, principally in *News*. On the other hand, *SMH* confirms to be more supportive of the ban also by endorsing governmental action. For instance, the articles report some ministers' declarations or refer to statements in favour of the ban, highlighting its positive outcomes. Some articles by *SMH*

⁵⁵ Benedict Brook, "Plastic Bag Ban: Many Alternatives Have Huge Environmental Footprints", *News.com.au* (21 June 2018).

expressly refer to the legal aspect of the ban process, with explicit reference and popularisation of the texts of the ban. Before the ban came into force in Queensland, *SMH* clarified:

The ban targets all lightweight, single-use plastic bags, including those of the biodegradable variety, but stops short of prohibiting the heavier bags used at department stores.⁵⁶

On this specific occasion, also *News* published answers to a series of FAQs in the article “What you need to know as plastic bag ban starts to take effect?”⁵⁷ *SMH* overtly criticised The New South Wales government for its inactivity on the issue, ironically suggesting politicians the legal language to be used to ban plastic bags explicitly:

Prohibit, forbid, proscribe, outlaw, make illegal, impose a moratorium or injunction. Perhaps this handy list of synonyms might help the NSW government, which has become the only legislature in Australia not to have introduced, or drafted, laws to ban the single use of plastic bags.⁵⁸

It is crucial to remind the terms of the ban, which, at the time of writing, was not yet into force in two Australian jurisdictions and was self-imposed by the companies Coles and Woolworths. It also has to be considered that these supermarkets operate all over Australia and, thus, also in territories where the ban was already active. The press reported how most CEOs, though admitting the technical and economic challenges of shopping, welcomed the ban as a contribution to environmental pollution:

Harris Farm Markets CEO Angus Harris said now that most states and major retailers had banned plastic bags, it was time for the federal government to follow up with legislation.⁵⁹

The environmental policy was hardly ever criticised; it was cited, hinted at, explained, often specifying that single-use plastic bags had been phased out after consultation with business groups and community. While companies, as previously shown, were never critical about the law, citizens did not have homogeneous opinions, as will be further revealed by user comments to news articles.

⁵⁶ Jorge Branco, “Queensland’s Plastic Bag Ban Is Official, Along with Recycling Refund”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (6 September 2017).

⁵⁷ Sophie Chirgwin, “What You Need to Know as Plastic Bag Ban Starts to Take Effect”, *News.com.au* (18 June 2018).

⁵⁸ The Sydney Morning Herald (Editorial), “Bin The Bag: Time for Shameful Lack of Action by Berejiklian to End”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (1 July 2018).

⁵⁹ Frank Chung, “Ditch ‘Problematic’ Single-Use Items but Don’t ‘Demonise’ Plastic, Sustainability Experts Say”, *News.com.au* (6 June 2018).

4.2 Readers' comments

As previously mentioned (see Paragraph 3), not all of the articles in the corpus enabled or provoked commentaries by the readers' audience. Although the two subcorpora consisting of the original news articles and readers' comments may not be strictly comparable, a corpus analysis was conducted in order to determine lexical similarities and differences between primary and secondary texts.

As it would have been expected, the two subcorpora share a significant number of lexical items. For instance, the most frequent terms in both subcorpora are “bags” (2,157, in the articles, with a normalised frequency of 1.91% and 3,891 in the comments, 1.83%) and “plastic” (1,673, 1.48% against 2,680, 1.26%). Keywords were determined to identify the most relevant linguistic patterns and lexical items in the two subcorpora. Especially in the readers' comment, first and second person pronouns rank high.⁶⁰ Table 3 shows the frequencies of the most frequent personal references in the subcorpora of Readers' comments and *News* articles:

Word	Corpus		News articles	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
I	2,551	1.20	751	0.66
you	1,999	0.94	612	0.54
my	736	0.35	212	0.19
your	801	0.38	238	0.21

Table 3. Frequencies of personal references in Readers' comments and News articles subcorpora

The use of the first person singular indicates personal participation, alignment or non-alignment with ideas or facts conveyed in the news or in previous comments, or expression of personal opinions (e.g. “I agree”, “I think”, “I don't think”). It is also used to establish credentials to give proof of environmental-friendly personal habits or to narrate personal experiences with the ban. Predominantly, the usage of the subject “I” together with the commissive “will” seems to be highly relevant, as it expresses the users' actions and reactions either in favour or against the ban, as in:

shameless money grab ... I will be taking my own bags and holding up the que as I pack them...⁶¹

Customers may thus react against the supermarkets either for applying the ban and charging for carrier bags or, for opposite reasons, because retailers have initially given up to pressures and delayed

⁶⁰ See also Boyd, “Critical Discourse Analysis and the Editorial 2.0”.

⁶¹ Comment to Daniela Spanjaard and Francine Garlin, “How ‘Nudge Theory’ Can Help Shops Avoid a Backlash Over Plastic Bag Bans”, *News.com.au* (23 July 2017). Being instances of user-generated language, readers' comments may present spelling or grammar mistakes, which have been reported in this paper without modifications.

the implementation. Nevertheless, in both cases, users seem to vent their economic power as buyers, by promising not to shop in those premises.

Second person references are also frequent in comments, used both in the impersonal sense and in interpersonal communication, to address governments, supermarkets, journalists or other commentators. In particular, exploiting the possibility to respond to comments, users sometimes engage in verbal crossfire with their peers.

See for example:

Good on you Coles, I will be shopping with the supermarket which supplies plastic bags for free, all you anti bag people can get stuffed

Answer: This is disgusting. How can people be so blatantly lazy and selfish. It is not hard to take a bag to the supermarket and use it. No one is asking you to make the bag yourself. If you are unable to perform such a simple task, you probably need to reconsider you entire life, and attitude. The lack of concern and or respect for the environment is really quite shocking. Dissappointed does not even come close to describing how I feel about this.⁶²

From a reading of the comments, it was possible to identify a general uniformity in the positions held. For the present study, it appeared therefore useful to consider comments to both news outlets as a whole corpus. The tone of the comments is very diversified, ranging from users who fuel the controversy and those who wish to stop the fight, also accusing supermarkets of their backflip. Comments by readers who are in favour of the ban but try to mitigate disputes are usually longer, more articulated in their argumentation, and tend to refer to the respect of legislations or the government's initiative. More specifically, the empirical findings led the author to hypothesize the possibility do distinguish user comments in the four categories of the 'greens', the 'close-fisted', the 'conspirophiles' and the 'disbelievers'.

The 'greens' recognise that the more plastic goes into landfill, the less our planet has to survive and sustain us and our children. They support therefore measures aimed at protecting the environment, such as:

Plastic = Cancer to the humans and planet Earth. - - - So, problems that need answers. Better to work on this and save the humans, save the planet then what ever it is you are doing. New World – Please. G is for Good. Cheers.⁶³

⁶² Comments to Gavin Fernando, "Coles Has Backflipped on its Bag Ban, Offering Customers Free Reusable Plastic Bags Indefinitely", *News.com.au* (2 August 2018).

⁶³ Comment to Shireen Khalil and AAP, "Australia-Wide Bag Ban Leads to 1.5 Billion Fewer Plastic Bags in the Environment", *News.com.au* (3 December 2018).

The ‘close-fisted’ customers declare they have switched from one grocery store to another because they do have environmental preoccupations and would rather save 15 cents than accept Woolworths’s position:

Does this mean I can pack them straight into the trolley as I do at Aldi? I do not want to pay for a convenience that was previously provided because I was (and still am) a money paying customer. This was an Andrews government law, people, but taken up as a money earner by the major supermarkets with alacrity.⁶⁴

The ‘conspiraphiles’ are people who think that the ban represents an occasion for supermarkets to make a profit, rather than a general move to a more sustainable future for our planet – also ignoring that the provision had been supported beforehand by the Australian people in public consultation – as in the following example:

Woolworths will actually make money out of it. If the genuinely wanted it to work smoothly they’d carry the cost of doing it.⁶⁵

The ‘disbelievers’ do not trust scientific research, therefore they disdainfully deny the evidence of the damages on the environment:

The result is not a positive one. The so-called green bags must be used 100 times to be equivalent to 100 light plastic bags. But they take longer to decay, and cannot end their life as bin liners. So most people will buy bin liners. End result, we are worse off than before.⁶⁶

Comments also refer to legal provisions, above all when the reader is in favour of a phasing out of plastic bags and try to mitigate the dispute:

It is the function of a government to legislate things like a plastic bag bans and because they did nothing, the poor supermarkets are now coping it and being blamed for trying t do something about it.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Comment to Frank Chung, “Woolworths, Coles and Harris Farm Markets Ditch Plastic Bags”, *News.com.au* (14 July 2017).

⁶⁵ Comment to Melissa Cunningham, “‘Bringing Reusable Bags Has Been a Challenge’: Woolworths Backflip on Plastic Bags”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (29 June 2018).

⁶⁶ Comment to Ian Whitworth, “Banning Plastic Bags Is Right So Deal with It” *The Sydney Morning Herald* (3 July 2018).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Long term, the ban will become legislated anyway, the result being Coles will be the only store to face the backlash then, unless Woolies is foolish enough to follow.⁶⁸

5. Conclusions

In response to the recent revelations about the damages caused by plastics on our environment, Australian jurisdictions are gradually embracing the fight against plastic, and chiefly against plastic bags. The present study focused on the discourse about the single-use plastic bag ban emerging in Australian online news and on how such texts influenced and collected public opinion on the issue in the digital arena.

News articles mostly refer to the feelings of frustration and deception experienced by part of the Australia population and to the negative consequences of a possible continuation of plastic bags usage. They also took into account the legal context and contributed to the popularisation of the new measures. Articles by the news outlet News.com.au seemed to be more focused on hard news and more event-oriented, expressing customer dissatisfaction and narrating the immediate and economic impact of the ban on buyers. Articles by *SMH* revealed to be closer to the official governmental perspective, with more frequent references to ministers' statements, legislation, and scientific data. Online articles by *News* employ a more dynamic language which, on some occasions, became so strong as to look to a superficial reading even in contrast with the ban, while articles by *SMH* tended instead to use a less sensationalist and milder tone. Without overtly siding with one of the opposing 'parts', both newspapers kept the attention high on the issue of the plastic bag ban, and also attempted at managing the conflict and transmitting some civic sense to the readers.

User-generated comments reflect a change in discursive and social practices from reception to interaction, allowing online news readers to gather in a shared virtual space to voice their opinions on topics generated by the accompanying news story. In readers' comments, news stories, actors, ideologies are recontextualised and shared in online newspapers and social media, reshaping newsmaking practices and reinforcing beliefs among readers. Although conscious that their reactions and opinions may also not have any deliberative function, citizens still felt the urge to express their own position on the issue. In computer-mediated communication, the user's professional or other status indicators are not visible. Yet, all citizens may claim an implied authority, as, after all, we are all customers and all may be affected by a change in buying and selling practices.

User comments to the articles under analysis seemed to respond to the general themes treated in and to the titles of the related articles. They showed different reactions to the measures and in particular to

⁶⁸ Comment to Fernando, "Coles Has Backflipped on Its Bag Ban".

the ban that Woolworths and Coles self-imposed in pursuit of a corporate social responsibility strategy. The supermarkets' autonomous action on plastic bags was applauded by environmentalists, but also met with abuse and claims of profiteering. When the retailers initially back-flipped to respond to the needs of their irate customers, the problem seemed to be even amplified. Consumers' reaction may be interpreted as caused by a perceived breach of the supermarkets' 'psychological contract' with customers, a set of unwritten rules or expectations between the parts. Shoppers realised they were the only ones making an effort towards a greener living, as supermarkets were saving money by no longer giving away bags for free, while customers incurred a cost in order to receive a bag. Meanwhile, supermarkets were not attempting to reduce the use of plastic in the store. The Australian people engaged therefore in revenge and retaliation, which took different forms, ranging from online complaints to acts of sabotage like stealing shopping baskets.⁶⁹ The online comments largely reflect the situation, emphasising the feelings of betrayal and frustration experienced by many Australian customers.



Figure 1. Landcare Australia, Woolworth's Reusable Bag, <https://landcareaustralia.org.au/woolworthsgrants>, Landcare Australia © 2019

⁶⁹ See also Gary Mortimer and Rebekah Russell-Bennett, "Why Plastic Bag Bans Triggered Such a Huge Reaction", *The Conversation* (15 July 2018).