

The Material Life of the Reusable Water Bottle

INTRODUCTION¹

The reusable water bottle is an object that many people interact with on a daily basis, especially on environmentally conscious college campuses such as the University of Vermont. In order to fully understand the reusable water bottle as a facet of the material culture of humans, one must identify the biography of both its physical form and its function in social scenarios². Materiality is an aspect of culture that places significance on how objects are made and how they are valued within groups. Humans instill importance within objects, and thus they are a reflection of trends of human thought and interaction. Studying an object that can be considered somewhat mundane, like a reusable water bottle, can reveal particularities of culture that would not be accessible otherwise. In order to grasp the significance of the reusable water bottle, I conducted field research and interviews³ to supplement the background research I did on the history and physical construction of water bottles. Pairing the knowledge of the water bottle in social action with the knowledge of the water bottle's physical qualities not only displays the specificities of form's relationship with function, but elements of culture as well⁴. On campus, I found that great value is placed on owning, customizing, and utilizing the reusable water bottle. Its use is widespread, and users vary.

¹ In this section, I provide an introduction to materiality and the reusable water bottle.

² I begin to breakdown the dichotomy of materiality, which is both the object's physical form and the significance humans instill in the object. This is an overarching theme of the paper.

³ These are my methods, and the "bread & butter" of anthropology.

⁴ This exemplifies ethnography: how observations can be observed and interpreted to have cultural meaning.

I assert that college students, specifically those at the University of Vermont, utilize reusable water bottles on a daily basis for the sake of convenience, and for the mental security that they will have access to water⁵. Due to the high rates of invested customization, I believe that as a tool, the water bottle is the threshold where practicality and personalization meet. In order to study this, I conducted field observations and interviews of individuals who own and utilize reusable water bottles in varied settings, including the classroom and public dining areas⁶.

MATERIALITY & THE HISTORY OF THE WATER BOTTLE⁷

Materiality, known as “thingness” (Dawdy 761)⁸ or the anthropology of things, is a concept that dominates the modern field of anthropology. Anthropologists study the relationship between human beings and the material objects humans craft in order to fully understand how and why value is assigned to certain items. Objects must be both “produced materially as things” (Kopytoff 64)⁹ and then “culturally marked” (Kopytoff 64) within a social setting to acquire value. Objects are an integral part of the human existence, and thus they reflect what we deem important. Material culture is a form of anthropology that everyone interacts with on a daily basis, through the filling of a “personal or social niche” (Kopytoff 65)¹⁰.

Reusable water bottles are a relatively new concept¹¹. Prior to its advent, people utilized different objects, mostly natural resources like clay pottery, animal pelts, and baskets to transport

⁵ This is the driving argument for my ethnographic report, and answers the question “what overarching cultural significances were found during research?”

⁶ A breakdown of my methods of collecting research, stating the people observed and the settings in which they were observed.

⁷ This section places the water bottle within a historical and theoretical context.

⁸ Note the AAA in-text citation: Chicago style is common, but AAA is often requested.

⁹ Citations re: materiality pull prior research/theory in the field into my exploration.

¹⁰ Materiality is one of Kopytoff’s major academic arguments – I am crediting him and weaving his theory into my background information.

¹¹ After giving context to materiality, I dive into the history of carrying potable water from first records to the modern bottle.

water (Reddish and Lewis). Native Americans artifacts like the woven baskets of the Cherokee and Ojibwe tribes show the basic craftsmanship of the first objects created to transport water (Reddish and Lewis). Although these methods are dated with the development of newer technology, it was in recent years that humans were using glass jars and milk cartons to carry potable water. These objects—both old and new-revolutionized water consumption in that they allowed for water sources to be mobilized.

The first stage of materiality in relation to the reusable water bottle is seen in its industrial production. It wasn't until the end of the 20th century when reusable water bottles took hold of the water transportation and consumption scene. A notable contributor to the rise of the reusable bottle is the Nalgene Company, a producer of a variety of plastic bottles. However, as BPA became a big concern with the increase of plastic bottle use, they were met with resistance. The plastic bottles that were being used contained a chemical that was harmful to public health, and so there was public movement to eliminate BPA from objects sold for the purpose of water consumption. With a huge push, the FDA created regulations in order to better the safety of these objects sold and used frequently today¹².

At the University of Vermont, there is a certain culture rooted in eco-activism that proliferates the presence of reusable water bottles¹³. In 2012, the Student Government Association passed legislation that led to the banning of plastic water bottles sold in markets on campus. This is viewed as “jarring”¹⁴, as stated by a female non-student visitor to the campus, by those who are not students or staff accustomed to a campus culture of eco-activism. For example, athletes who come to the University of Vermont to compete, as well as their fans, are put into a

¹² I place the reusable bottle within a historical context, positive and negative.

¹³ I connect broader environmental concerns to those represented in my field of research (UVM).

¹⁴ A piece of data collected by a non-student visitor to show a difference in campus culture.

position where they cannot purchase portable unflavored water, as the vendors do not carry water bottles. Unlike these people, students on campus have adapted and realized that they must carry reusable water bottles on their person in order to remain hydrated throughout the day. There are a handful of alternatives that students who do not use reusable water bottles have mentioned during interviews, and they include purchasing plastic water bottles off campus in bulk, only drinking from fountains around campus (thus sacrificing the portability of water), and solely consuming other non-water beverages. The element of convenience is displayed in the campus-wide preference to carry a bottle for the sake of water consumption.

OBSERVED INTERACTIONS: TRENDS OF WATER CONSUMPTION¹⁵

In order to fully understand how students interact with water bottles, I observed water bottle usage in varied places around campus. During my observations, I noted several different methods in which students utilize reusable water bottles. Although the actual amount of bottle usage varied from person to person, it was clear that there were patterns of use. I compiled these usage types into two categories: meal usage and casual drinking¹⁶.

Many individuals used their bottles for drinking while having a meal. During this time they drank from their water bottles on a semi-frequent basis in accompaniment of their snack. During one class, I observed three people drinking while eating snacks before class started. The pairing of food consumption with water bottle usage was also seen when observing the “Fishbowl” dining area on the University of Vermont campus. Although there are three major vendors present in this location, a majority of the individuals drank from water bottles they kept in their backpacks. This trend could be related to student finances, as many drinks in the

¹⁵ Placing my research in the field into the discussion/history of water bottle usage.

¹⁶ Dividing bottle usage into two categories is an organizational and thematic decision for my argument.

Marketplace or at New World Tortilla are costly as opposed to the free water one can tote from home or acquire at water fountains on campus. The emphasis placed on convenience is witnessed in these situations because the alternate option for students looking to drink water would be to get up and find a water fountain at every point they wanted a drink. By carrying a water bottle, they have access to hydration when they need it and can refill their bottle on their own schedule, planning ahead for times where they will need it, like class¹⁷.

The second usage is the use for casual drinking, as in sipping on water intermittently throughout the day to maintain hydration. During classroom observations, it was noted that many students that carried reusable water bottles used them to have access to water during the class period. Two college students I interviewed fell into this category; a twenty year old female sophomore¹⁸ said she uses her water bottle all day long, even when she is at home, because she “simply like[s] the taste of water.” The other student, a twenty-two year old female senior, described how she was health conscious and liked to use the water bottle to get the daily amount of water needed for good health. In her words, “Drinking water is very important. I have been trying to be more healthy by consciously watching how much water I drink. A water bottle is particularly useful because I don’t have to get up during class to get water. I have it right next to me which is reminds me to drink more.”¹⁹

Although I only observed two distinct types of bottle usage, there were some individuals that did not use their water bottles during class, or “non-usage”. Many people kept their water

¹⁷ In this paragraph I describe what I saw, and propose reasons that potentially explain what transpired.

¹⁸ Identify the subject and place them within the community observed. It is not necessary, and at times discouraged, to use names.

¹⁹ These quotes are examples of primary resources and data, essential to ethnography.

bottles in their bags, a less accessible option. This, however, does not necessarily mean that those individuals did not use their water bottles during the day.

The amount of water in each bottle varied from person to person; however, most people had less than half of their bottle filled. It was interesting to see that the bottles were not filled to the brim, or even close to it. This could have something to do with the ease of accessibility of water and centralized locations of water fountains. Every building on campus has at least one fountain that allows students to fill up their water bottle, not counting the numerous bathrooms that give people access to water. With this accessibility, it is almost unnecessary to carry a bottle. However, carrying a water bottle isn't a necessity for everyone; for some it is merely a convenience.

PORTABILITY OF POTABLE WATER²⁰

This prompted me to consider why in a country like the United States, where potable water is provided at no charge and at great convenience to the public, a trend of carrying reusable water bottles has taken hold. Water security is not a problem in this modern society with safe and clean water infrastructure, however, the inherent need to carry a water bottle on our person at all times indicates a social trend towards ensuring that water is always accessible. This could be rooted in past negative experiences, such as times of water shortage or dehydration. Carrying a water bottle is the body's way of guaranteeing good health, and may serve as a precautionary health measure.

There is also a history of soft drink corporations commodifying water and selling it for profit. It is sold alongside sodas, juices, alcoholic beverages, and other drinks as a portable

²⁰ A broader discussion on why the water bottle as a tool is so commonly used. This is another sign of ethnographic work, as I am asking a broader "why?" question based on my observations.

refreshment option. Exposing the public to this normalizes the concept of carrying around liquids for the purpose of consumption.

CUSTOMIZATION AND PERSONALIZATION²¹

Humans intensified the relationship shared with reusable water bottles by moving past valuing them solely for their practical use - storing water for hydration - in order to customize them for means of self-expression. This is the second stage of materiality, where cultural value is assigned to an object. Purchasing a reusable water bottle is the first step in customizing the bottle, as they now come in various shades, materials, and sizes. From here, many people apply stickers to the exterior walls. The very structure of the bottle encourages this; the ample empty space on the bottle's walls invite the consumer to coat the bottle in stickers. Accessories, such as sip guards and bottle belts, can also be purchased in an array of patterns, colors, and styles. These accessories serve a practical purpose, but often are aesthetically pleasing in order to please the consumer. As numerous as these options are, based on my research, the most essential form of self-expression found in the reusable water bottle culture, notably on the University of Vermont campus, is the selection and application of stickers²².

On a college campus where a majority of students have a reusable water bottle, these stickers serve as ways to distinguish one bottle from the next. The presence of stickers on the water bottles is not just for practical means; many individuals seem to take great pride in crafting the ideal aesthetic for their bottle. A twenty-one year old male junior²³ discussed this with us when he was asked about the sticker he had on his Nalgene water bottle. It was a multicolored "Arctic Monkeys" sticker, and it dominated the exterior of his water bottle. He put the sticker on

²¹ The second argument I listed in my overarching focus.

²² Grounding my argument within the field I researched (UVM).

²³ Here I utilized a particularly fruitful interview to gain quotes and a personal story on bottle usage and customization for data.

his bottle because he “always ha[s] it on [him], so [he] gets to look at [the sticker] a lot.” When I interviewed him, he had owned the water bottle for two years, but only put the sticker on three months after purchasing it when he attended a concert. This act indicates that the sticker serves as a reminder of a positive event, or a nostalgic symbol. During this conversation the individual was receptive and positive. His tone was warm and he was smiling. The individual seemed excited that he was approached and asked about the sticker, which indicates that decorating of water bottles also functions as a way for strangers to bond over common interests. The stickers are employed as conversation starters, and the reusable water bottle serves as a vessel for this to occur²⁴.

Although many people make the effort (manual and financial) to personalize their reusable water bottles, many bottles end up in the back of college classrooms unclaimed by their owners²⁵. The circumstances under which they are not reclaimed for long periods of time are worth thinking about. The student may find it easier to purchase another water bottle than to search for the bottle. However, if an individual is spending two to three class periods a week in the same room, it would not be difficult to simply pick the bottle up the next time. This could mean that the owner is using an instance where they forgot the water bottle to truncate the relationship with their reusable bottle, perhaps in order to purchase a newer model. Many people spend money on stickers for their bottles, which makes their water bottle a monetary investment. One would think that this would motivate students to reclaim their bottle when it sits forgotten in the back of the classroom, however, a visit to any classroom on campus would indicate

²⁴ It is not necessary to describe the demeanor of the interviewee unless it would be considered relevant to your data. Here, the interviewee’s warm demeanor helped me show that his stickers served as a conversation starter.

²⁵ A proposition of a counterargument can instigate broader thought on the topic: why do students customize their bottles and then discard them (sometimes on purpose, sometimes by accident)?

otherwise. It would be worth doing a follow-up study of what people who misplace their reusable water bottle do next; do they purchase another reusable water bottle or temporarily shift to plastic water bottles or solely using the water fountains on campus?²⁶

CONSTRUCTION OF A SOCIAL IMAGE THROUGH OBJECT USE²⁷

Using a reusable water bottle creates an image for the user whether they intended to or not. For many, using a reusable water bottle is a physical display that they are environmentally conscious. They are opting to forgo disposable plastic water bottles in order to use a more sustainable vessel of water carrying. Due to the fact that the original intent for reusable water bottle was for outdoor use like extended backpacking trips, the idea of users being ‘outdoorsy’ still remains today. Nalgene water bottles in particular are known for their durability, which is great for camping or outdoor activities. Throughout my research, I noted that many people on campus tended to own a Nalgene water bottle. Many people on campus are active in the outdoors, but Nalgene bottles have come to be popular enough that the user doesn’t need to be a backpacker or hiker to purchase and use one. Nalgene bottles are now a mainstream item that is used more for status assertion and assimilation to popular culture. This association of the outdoors with the use of water bottles shows that the structure and history of the object still carries over to social percepts today, furthering the form and function relationship between humans and objects.

Carrying a reusable water bottle also gives off the image that you are health conscious. Individuals who participate in this performative act are living a healthier lifestyle by drinking water. They are opting to drink a calorie-free beverage over the drink options provided by on-

²⁶ Proposing future research that can be done within the field based on your work is good to include.

²⁷ A summary of how physical image is constructed socially through the use of the water bottle as a tool and as a platform for personal expression. This wraps my points together.

campus vendors. Also, there is an innate association between reusable water bottles and a sporty, athletic lifestyle. Carrying a water bottle does not necessarily mean that you exercise or do sports, however, the social ties between the two makes the individual more likely to assume the user values fitness. One eighteen-year-old male freshman proposed that it is because “you are committed to hydrating yourself, likely because you are exerting yourself physically or are doing things all day.”²⁸

CONCLUSION²⁹

It would be simple to look at a water bottle and understand it as an invention solely for liquid transportation. However, digging deeper reveals the biography of an object that begins as a material in a different form with a completely different purpose. Humans shape this material to create what they need from it; in this case, it is a reusable water bottle created from plastic, glass, or tin. Creating a biography of the reusable water bottle is essential to conceptualizing the role this object plays in society. From here, the water bottle can then be analyzed not only by its physical qualities but the sentimental qualities instilled by humans. From the observations and interviews I conducted on campus, I was able to further grasp how college students value the reusable water bottle. As humans are all different, so are their opinions. However, there seemed to be a consensus that the utilization of the reusable water bottle use is a daily occurrence for most people, especially in classrooms where immediate access to hydration is not typical. This is function-driven use is tied to the customization-driven aspect of reusable water bottles, where one is able to apply elements of their personality to their water bottle through the use of sticker and water bottle accessories. Not only are these monetary investments, but personal investments as well. They help craft an image-perhaps of health or eco-awareness, for the user.

²⁸ Quotes from interviews are essential data for ethnography

²⁹ A summation of my findings, placed again within the context of materiality

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³⁰ This is cited in AAA style. Citations should be done however requested by professors.