

Magazine

# Viewpoint: The waste mountain of coffee cups



27 July 2016

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Every day hundreds of thousands of Britons put their coffee cup into a recycling bin. They're wrong - those cups aren't recyclable, and the UK throws away 2.5bn of them a year. It must stop, writes Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall.

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One chilly morning last March - exactly the sort of morning when a warming cafe latte could seem appealing - I took to the streets of London in a double-decker bus adorned with 10,000 empty takeaway coffee cups.

It might have looked like a piece of dodgy conceptual art, but it was actually designed to illustrate the vast volume of takeout cups we throw away daily in the UK.

My bus didn't represent all of them, though - 10,000 is the number of cups the UK gets through in just two minutes.

The British - like the Americans and Italians - are a nation of caffeine addicts. Walk down any busy street and you'll see people clutching coffee-filled cardboard vessels.

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That adds up to a huge number of used cups - more than seven million a day, or 2.5 billion a year. The sorry truth is, next to none of them are recycled - and the even sorrier fact is that no-one's taking responsibility for that, least of all the big coffee retailers who have created this takeout trash mountain.

During my War on Waste battle, I've looked at all kinds of issues

related to food waste, such as the heinous "cosmetic standards" applied to supermarket fruit and veg that lead to mountains of perfectly good produce being dumped.

Find out more



**Hugh's War on Waste: The Battle Continues** is on BBC One at 21:00 BST on Thursday 28 July or [catch up later via iPlayer](#)

The coffee cup crisis is somehow even more glaring - a wanton waste going on right under our noses.

Most consumers wrongly assume that paper cups are a "green" choice.

It's an assumption coffee companies are happy not to challenge. They know differently, but they're keeping that to themselves. They're not going to tell conscientious consumers that putting a used coffee cup in a recycling bin is pointless. But it is.

The takeout cups that are the stock-in-trade of High Street coffee giants such as Starbucks, Caffe Nero and Costa are currently almost impossible to recycle.

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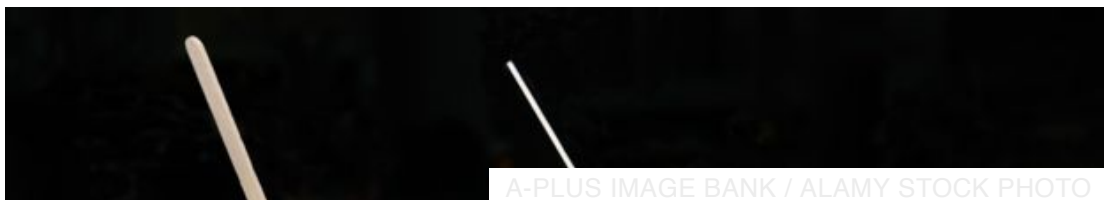
To make these cups waterproof, the card is fused with polyethylene, a material that cannot be separated out again in a standard recycling mill.

What's more, the cups are not even made from recycled material in the first place - the way they are designed means one thin seam of card inside the cup comes into contact with the hot drink, so they have to be made from virgin paper pulp.

And of course, they have very brief lives - just the time it takes to down a macchiato. The millions of coffee cups we use every day are, in effect, virgin materials with a single use, thrown almost immediately into the bin - a horrendous waste, with a hefty carbon footprint.

These poly-lined cups are, technically, capable of being recycled - a fact that enables coffee companies to describe them as "recyclable".

However, the reality is this is only possible in a highly specialised recycling facility - of which there are only two in the UK. One of these sites has never actually dealt with a single paper cup - the other has processed a very tiny number.



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In every meaningful sense, conventional paper coffee cups are not recyclable in Britain.

There is nothing, of course, on the average takeout cup to let you know this. Some cups even sport the little Mobius-loop symbol - the three arrows in a triangle - which communicates a pleasant whiff of eco-friendliness to the hard-pushed coffee consumer. But this symbol is not necessarily an indication that the object can be easily recycled.

If you go to the websites of the big coffee brands, you'd be forgiven for thinking they've got sustainability completely covered. But their claims are about as substantial as the froth on a poorly made cappuccino.

More from Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall



"Watching 20 tonnes of freshly dug parsnips consigned to the rubbish heap in a Norfolk farmyard - purely because they didn't look pretty enough - is still one of the most shocking things I've ever seen," wrote Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall.

### The rejected vegetables that aren't even wonky

On the Costa website, for example, under the misleading headline "great taste without the waste", the company has the sheer brass neck to describe its cups as "eco-friendly" - perhaps the least accurate use of the term I've ever heard.

By way of justification, Costa explains that the card for its cups comes from sustainable wood pulp, before claiming that said cups "are recyclable in a number of locations across the UK". The number of locations, as I've said, is two - max. And Costa sends less than 1% of its cups for this treatment.

Starbucks, meanwhile, is uselessly vague. "We're working on a solution to the challenges of paper cup waste," it says, before adding reassuringly that "paper cups make up a small proportion of the waste produced in our stores".



That's a statement that means little without hard figures - though it does suggest they are being ridiculously wasteful in other ways too.

These are just a couple of the companies keeping the UK awash

with discarded coffee cups - there are, of course, many more. All of them are silently passing the responsibility for recycling cups on to their customers without fessing up to the fact that it is an all but impossible task.

What's the alternative to eco-unfriendly cups? Reusable ones are an option and Starbucks does offer customers a small incentive to choose these. But that incentive should be substantially increased and adopted by all the major coffee chains - reusable cups are not currently making any kind of dent in the problem.

A change in coffee cup design is the second obvious answer. And the frustrating fact is that a recyclable paper coffee cup already exists. I visited inventor Martin Myerscough who demonstrated his version of the takeout cup which can be made from recycled paper and recycled after use in standard paper recycling facilities.



Starbucks have announced that they are interested in testing out these new cups - but why aren't other coffee retailers snapping at his heels for the blueprint?

When I challenged some of these retailers on camera, they earnestly expressed their commitment to "look into" the cup waste problem. That's not the same as doing something about it.

If we're to see genuine progress, not just kneejerk PR responses, these companies need to feel the heat from the only people who can actually hurt them - that's you, the coffee-drinking public.

Consumer pressure can make change happen very quickly. Following my War on Waste programmes last year, more than 300,000 people signed a letter to the UK's big retailers demanding they do something to reduce the waste they generate.



Since then, many supermarkets have begun stocking more of the "imperfect" vegetables they had previously rejected, and increasing the amount of surplus stock they donate to charities, rather than to landfill.

These are small steps, but encouraging and certainly cast-iron proof that the voices of customers ring in retailers' ears.

If enough people make a noise, these companies will have no choice but to step up and start dealing with their woeful waste issue.

- Starbucks says: "Reusable cups are a key part of our overall waste reduction strategy - and we have been offering a money off incentive to anyone who brings in a reusable cup for over a decade. We don't include recycling symbols on our paper cups. We are... undertaking a trial with our waste management supplier Veolia on cup segregation and collection. We are also exploring potential solutions with cup suppliers, including testing Frugalpac on our standards for safety and quality."



- Jason Cotta, managing director, Costa, says: "Costa's takeaway cups and lids are recyclable, as evident in our partnerships with Veolia and James Cropper, who recycle our cups. We do, however, agree that not enough takeaway cups are recovered and recycled and it is right that the industry as a whole is challenged to confront this issue. Until we are satisfied that more of our takeaway cups are being recycled we have removed the Möbius Loop symbol." The firm met FrugalPac early last year and ran similar tests to those announced by Starbucks last week but concluded that the cup on offer at the time would not work for them.

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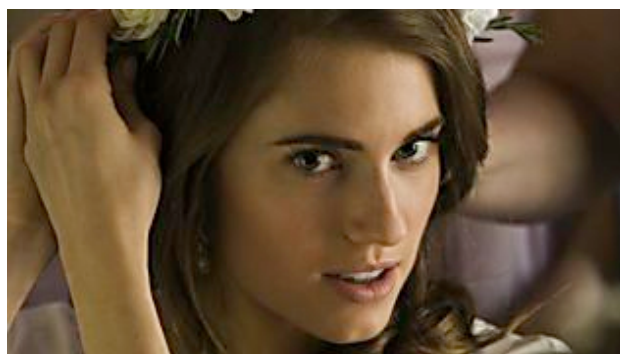
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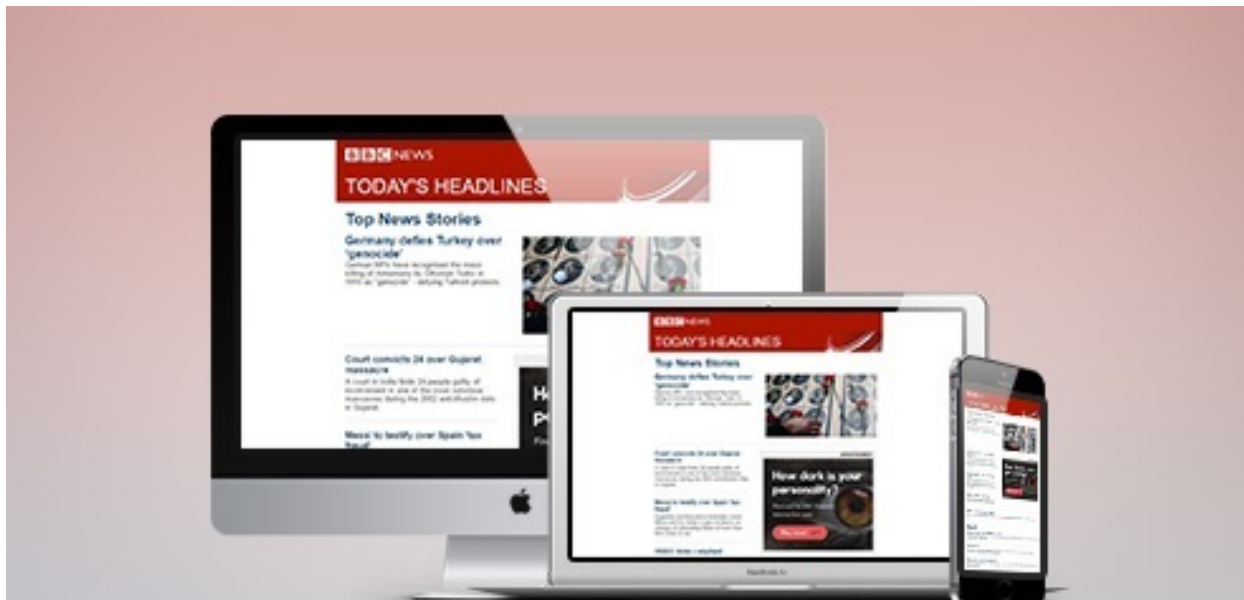
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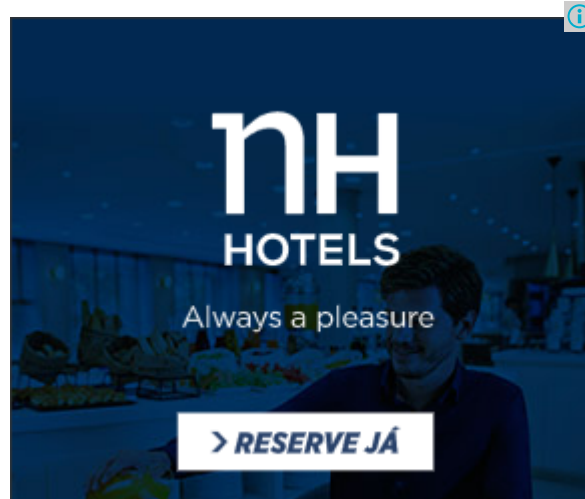


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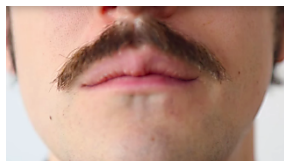
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