

Excessive... but not wasteful? Youth cultures of everyday waste (avoidance)

Abstract

This article contributes to ongoing debates around the cultural production of waste by arguing for a clearer distinction between concepts of ‘waste’ and ‘excess’, and by suggesting the benefits of this distinction for tackling the perceived consumer-cultural waste ‘problem’. Drawing on recent qualitative research with UK adolescents I consider how a range of (youth/consumer) cultural drivers, social norms and moral imperatives shape young people’s everyday material consumption practices in ways that reflect (and produce) varied ways of (de/re-)valuing no-longer-wanted possessions. By exploring the cultural projects within which the young participants and their material possessions were engaged, and by identifying their aims in employing specific keeping and ridding practices, noteworthy differences between ‘waste’ and ‘excess’ materialise. I suggest that the drivers of the ‘excesses’ identified – characterised here in terms of ‘outgrowings’ and ‘hedging’ – highlight a set of distinctly cultural challenges to be met if the slippage of materials from ‘excess’ into ‘waste’ is to be averted. I contend that acknowledging these challenges, and these conceptual distinctions, may prove beneficial in attempts to address some of the societal challenges (e.g. material novelty as a driver of social status) related to the production of waste.

Keywords: Youth; Consumption; Waste; Excess; Divestment; Sustainability

1. Introduction

“[We] are excessive sometimes but not, not wasteful, just excessive. There’s a kind of difference there.” (Graham)

Growing scholarly interest in the production, circulation, management and meaning of ‘waste’ has demonstrated both its empirical and theoretical richness, and the scale of the social, economic and environmental challenges to which it is central. Whilst often framed through specific global issues such as socio-economic inequalities, resource consumption and environmental damage, waste is equally interesting – and its relevance to these issues is

emphasised – when explored through the cultural work of categorising material remnants. Intersecting with the concept of waste is the notion of ‘excess’. Fewer studies have critically engaged with this term, or its material manifestations, perhaps because of the all-too-easy practical and theoretical slippage between ‘waste’ and ‘excess’, the latter tending to be located within the former. Here I argue that acknowledging the difference between waste and excess, as well as the nature of their intersection, is important. I suggest that the specific cultural and practical work that constitutes each category highlights distinct relations between human subjects and material objects. I contend that acknowledging the cultural drivers of excess may contribute to addressing challenges related to the production of waste, specifically in terms of interrogating complex geographies of responsibility (1).

The arguments presented are drawn from a recent empirical project which explored the divestment practices that characterise young people’s (2) material consumption. The project was a direct response to a problematic assumption about young people’s contribution to the waste ‘problem’, articulated in the introduction to an online sustainable consumption toolkit (3). In arguing that youth, “deserve special attention in efforts to change wasteful consumption patterns into ones that are more attuned to sustainable development” (4), the toolkit implied that there is something particularly or uniquely wasteful about young people’s consumption, or that youth should be engaged in waste reduction in a specific way. Yet on what basis was it being assumed that young people’s consumption *is* wasteful? And is there something specific about the waste created by youth that requires a bespoke response? In the qualitative inquiry designed to explore these questions, I did not go looking for evidence of waste-making, waste-avoidance, or excesses of any kind. Rather, by exploring the parallel biographies of the participants and their material possessions, a distinction between these categories emerged through the ways they categorised, placed and moved their things through phases of use, dormancy and abandonment. This suggests a preoccupation with ‘waste’ may fundamentally misunderstand young people’s relationships with their (no-longer-wanted) possessions.

Recent literature concerned with young people, consumption and sustainability has been polarised. Youth in the global north have been simultaneously framed as hedonistic pleasure-seekers and environmentally-aware ‘citizen-consumers’ (5), as complicit in the global waste ‘problem’ as any other (older) consumer. Yet little work explores their consumption beyond acquisition, including the mundane practices of sorting-out and getting-rid, where waste is most likely to emerge. To an extent, young people’s consumption has been considered in the wider context of family or household consumption, primarily with reference to the impact of shifting

relational identities on the fulfilment of shared domestic aims, including everyday divestment (6). However, attempts to understand shared practices within families or households, though valuable, should not obscure the fact that family/household members are also individuals tasked with navigating (consumer-)cultural demands placed upon them on the basis of factors including age, gender, and socio-economic background. The research discussed here – whilst acknowledging the situatedness of participants' lives within families, households and other social structures – foregrounded young people's agency in relation to the meanings they attributed to their possessions and those objects' movements through phases of consumption. By exploring the socio-cultural projects within which the participants and their possessions were engaged, not only did noteworthy differences between 'waste' and 'excess' materialise, so too did indications as to distinctly cultural drivers of 'excess'.

Concepts of 'waste' and 'excess' have rubbed along together in close proximity within much recent scholarship concerned with production and consumption – very little of which, it should be noted, has placed young people at its centre. Whilst it is recognised that waste and excess are not the same, the nature of their relationship differs depending on the theoretical or empirical enquiry of which they form part. The now fulsome scholarship on everyday household divestment, for example, has explored the trajectories of unwanted and un(der)used material things cast out from homes, and how those trajectories construct the meanings of the objects passing through them as value-able 'not-waste' (7). A range of terms have been used to mark this distinction, including 'surplus' (8), 'overflow' (9) and 'excess' (10). Yet despite acknowledgement of the considerable labour involved in averting everyday waste through divestment practices, including handing down, giving to charity, selling, and repurposing (11), there remains a problematic conceptual slippage between 'waste', 'excess', and related terms. The implication of this slippage is that excess (the term I employ here, based on the quotation used at the start of this article) is positioned as more proximate to waste than it may be in practice – that excess always and inevitably becomes waste. This assumed trajectory – based on assumptions about the nature of the material(s) that comprise a body of excess – denies (or at the very least underplays) the possibility that excess may in fact find long-lasting future cycles of reuse. Further, conceptualising too close an intersection between waste and excess obscures the cultural, as well as physiological, drivers of those material accumulations that comprise excess (such as changing trends or growing bodies), as it is these specific drivers of 'no-longer-wanted-ness' or 'no-longer-usable-ness' that tend to determine the future course of material things. In other words, prioritising asking 'what do we do about waste?' gets in the

way of asking ‘how do we prevent excess?’ or even ‘what is the purpose of excess?’ – somewhat different questions, both of which may in fact negate the first.

I begin with a brief methodological overview in order to contextualise the data that informs these arguments. I then begin to articulate the nature of the ‘excesses’ that characterised my participants’ consumption by connecting my empirical material with recent literature concerned with the material culture of divestment, obsolescence and waste. Specific analytical attention focuses on the ways in which different forms of ‘outgrowing’ make possessions redundant or undesirable, and how the practice of ‘hedging’, as a youth-cultural coping mechanism, has the capacity to both avoid and entrench everyday waste-making. I conclude by reflecting on how material excess emerges at the intersection of socially inflected waste avoidance practices and cultural imperatives oriented around youthful concerns with keeping up and joining in.

2. Methodology

Over eighteen months, thirty-two young people aged sixteen to nineteen participated in the project. Eight of the participants were male and 24 were female. Of those who disclosed their ethnic background, nineteen identified as White British or Irish, three as Black British, three as Asian British and one as ‘Other’. All attended school or sixth-form college in Cambridge, England, and lived within a 40-mile radius of the city. Participants were recruited through their schools: one a co-educational state comprehensive; one a leading co-educational independent school; and one a small independent sixth form college. Making approaches through schools inevitably meant accessing a particular ‘type’ of young person – arguably ‘middle class’ – with potential implications for the socio-economic diversity of the sample (12). However, I concur with Sweeting et al.’s view that ideas about class, or even socioeconomic grouping as a more specific social designator, are not necessarily a reliable indicator of the nature or extent of young people’s consumption, or the attitudes which underpin their actions (13). This is not to say that class or socio-economic circumstances do not matter in this context; rather that, since the notion of ‘middle class’ encapsulates a broadening range of socioeconomic circumstances and cultural practices, those occupying this grouping should be viewed as able to offer a wide-ranging set of experiences and opinions. Students participated in the project voluntarily, having self-selected in response to a short elevator pitch given in a school or college assembly.

Much recent research into motivations for and processes of divestment has used qualitative techniques, particularly ethnography (14), often incorporating interviews (15) and sometimes visual techniques including video or photography (16). These approaches have allowed scrutiny of mundane practices of sorting, storing, and ridding, revealed the (il)logics of divestment, and permitted reflection from participants on their relationships with their possessions. For this study, taking an ethnographic approach was impractical since the majority of the participants were minors (under the age of 18) and all were still living in the family home. Even if parental gatekeepers had been negotiated successfully, complex ethical issues surround the power relations of an adult researcher entering the private space of a teenage participant's bedroom. Instead, in-depth semi-structured interviews were combined with auto-photography. As previous studies concerned with domestic life, everyday consumption, and the management of 'waste' (or excess) have shown, sophisticated repertoires of action can be revealed within (discussion of) seemingly banal processes, in ways that cast light on the multifaceted aims of everyday practices (17). This is as true for the actions of young consumers as it is for adults, particularly since the two often cohabit in family households in ways that perpetuate the 'doing' of everyday consumption in familially-shared ways (18).

Participants were each interviewed twice, three months apart, with interviews ranging in length from 45 to 90 minutes. Between interviews, participants were invited to photographically document a range of their possessions *in situ* in their homes, as well as the ways in which they organise, store and divest them. This provided a window into each participant's material world, and an opportunity for the participant to reflect on their possession and practices. A discussion of each participant's photos, which were produced in hard copy to aid conversation, formed the basis of interview two.

Below I draw on these interviews to discuss my participants' understandings of, and orientations to, waste (avoidance) by introducing the notions of 'outgrowings' and 'hedging' as examples of excesses that materialised in the course of their everyday consumption. I begin with some brief contextualisation of material cultures of youth in relation to dominant conceptualisations of waste and waste-making.

3. Waste-avoiders or excess-accumulators? Ambivalences in the material culture of youth

Contemporary consumption practices, increasingly shaped by high rates of technical and stylistic obsolescence of consumer goods (19), exhort rapid throughput of material ‘stuff’. The divestment work created by consumer cultural norms around ‘keeping up’ with trends and responding (however begrudgingly) to product obsolescence is perhaps felt most acutely by those for whom conformance with consumer cultural norms is socially important. Youth, for whom peer group status is often heavily dependent not only on possession of particular material things, but conspicuous display of them (today documented publicly on social media) (20), may be especially susceptible to such pressures. Indeed, the importance of ridding for maintaining one’s sense of self, whilst identified as central to youthful self- and peer identity negotiations (21), has been found to be equally fundamental to divestment decisions across other demographics (22). Unwanted possessions can feel threatening, perhaps especially for young people, whose sense of self can be fragile while different identities are ‘tried on’ during adolescence (23). Thus, anything considered an improper fit (physically or emotionally) with an emergent self-identity is divested, creating separation from embarrassing, traumatic, or irrelevant personal histories. Linked to these processes of identity negotiation are significant life transitions which reshape identity and thus relationships with one’s material surroundings. Much work here has focused on the transfer of possessions from older to younger generations with the aim of materialising shared histories (24), although some have focused more practically on the youngest family members physically growing up (25). Waerdahl (26), for instance, notes the importance of moving schools as a key transitional point for young people, marking an opportunity to reject old clothes (identities) – and demand new ones.

Whilst the notion of youth as a transitional phase has been subject to critique on the basis of its potentially narrow understanding of embodied experiences of being young (27), it remains useful as a means of making sense of key aspects of young people’s material worlds. There is no escaping the fact that, as we get older, our bodies (as well as our interests and tastes) change – thus the notion of young adulthood as a time of transition is, in this respect, little different from earlier or later life stages. We are all always becoming. Nevertheless, and as noted above, the centrality of materialised peer relations to young adulthood, a time of important identity work, has significant implications for the throughput of material ‘stuff’ – and, in turn, for waste to potentially result. I consider this issue first through the lens of ‘outgrowing’ and suggest that this process is characterised by excess, a form of everyday matter qualitatively different from waste.

Outgrowing(s) (or how to ‘keep up’)

“I just, like, with the jumper I’m not going to be wearing it next year, I doubt. [R: How do you know that you’re not going to wear it?] Probably go out of fashion. Or it might not fit me...” (Elsbeth)

Elsbeth articulates two key drivers of the marginalisation, and ultimately the ridding, of everyday possessions amongst youth: changing trends and/or tastes, and physical growth. I conceptualise these together as ‘outgrowings’, identifying how physiological and cultural processes that characterise youth produce material accumulations which might be seen as excessive, rather than wasteful.

Material possessions which are physically or emotionally outgrown are commonly managed through normative practices of passing on or handing down, often to close family members or friends as a means of expressing love and care (28). This was common practice in all my participants’ homes, indicating the extent to which the socio-cultural value of gifting played a part in their everyday waste avoidance practices. There was, however, also a straight-forwardly practical dimension to handing down – given my participants’ age (16-19), physically outgrowing clothes, shoes and other apparel was unavoidable and thus a constant driver of material throughput. As Rosa noted, “Clothes, the age I am, I mean, now I’m not so bad but, I mean, you grow out of clothes quite quickly.” Cherry noted that the fact that she had kept a particular jacket for five years was “because I can still fit into it”. The unanimous acknowledgement across the group that, with an outgrown garment, “... it might as well be used by someone if it is just too small” (Daniel) illustrates the widespread cultural acceptance of passing-on to manage forms of consumption demanded by physical changes. Given the well-rehearsed analyses of passing along based on physical outgrowing (29), more interesting to consider here is the application of the notion of outgrowing to relationships with possessions unconstrained by the physiological dimensions of growing up.

Discussing with Bella how she made decisions about which possessions to part with, she explained that she sought to pass on things “that have been too long in my life.” Asked to clarify, she explained, “I think it depends on how I grow, like, how my maturity... deepens as I grow with age, I think...” Her comment highlights an under-researched aspect of young people’s consumption – that of the temporalities of youth (material) cultures as embodied in the course of growing up as they intersect with everyday consumption. Shifting consumption priorities as self- and peer-group identities evolve over relatively short periods of time are potentially profound contributors to excess in the form of youth-culturally-produced

outgrowings, as young adults seek possessions with a better (physical and/or emotional) fit (30), as well as separation from the material remnants of their younger selves. Aidan, for example, talked about parting with some DVDs, noting (laughing), “I wouldn’t want people to see them”, implying a fear of judgement from peers and a sense that these past purchases no longer ‘fit’ not just his present sense of self, but his friends’ sense of who he is. Ella similarly illustrated how an older, critical self, inevitably situated in a cultural environment oriented towards current trends, views possessions associated with a younger self with disdain. Her facial expression signalled genuine discomfort as she recalled getting rid of “... the kind of, like, gross neon tops that you buy when you're in, like, year eight.”

Most participants were aware of how the pace of changing trends – and the consequent spectre of obsolescence (31) – produced material accumulations for which they were, by their own recognition, responsible. They alluded to implicit acknowledgement – if not critique – of the role of a perpetually shifting consumer culture in rendering possessions ‘meaningless’, as those objects’ roles in youth cultural practices were superseded by something faster, slimmer, or shinier. Indeed, though they struggled to articulate exactly what they meant when they referred to retaining possessions that still had ‘meaning’, talking around the objects uncovered the role of personal and shared histories, and thus the persistence of shared cultural reference points, in maintaining the value of material things. If that object still helped to materialise a valued connection to someone or something, the object itself was still valued. Here a materially-mediated social connectivity constructs a practice set apart from the imperatives of consumer culture, where keeping things is acceptable when they are imbued with meaning through personal biographical significance. These possessions were able to transcend both physiological processes of *growing up* and consumer/youth cultural imperatives to *keep up*. Outside of this core of ‘meaningful’ possessions was an excess of usable and useful things; things with less potent personal histories attached.

How, then, do ‘outgrowings’ constitute a form of excess? Excess is produced at the intersection of bodily growth, emotional growth, and/or culturally-driven processes of stylistic obsolescence with norm-infrastructure assemblages that enable the moving along of those ‘outgrowings’ (such as family/friend networks receptive to objects handed down). Possessions become personally irrelevant but are still seen as value-able, and as such await an opportunity for moving along. Though the drivers of outgrowing vary in terms of their capacity to be resisted or challenged, the fact that personal change outpaces material change (i.e. material wear) means there is material value still to be ‘used up’. Outgrowings could thus be framed as

a benign form of excess – always intended for moving on, never for the waste stream. Framing these items as ‘in-waiting’ keeps them ‘alive’ as the kind of ‘vibrant matter’ that it is increasingly recognised can be kept usefully moving around spaces of re-consumption (32). Yet, as Daniel pointed out, rapidly outgrowing his clothes masked the need for any concern about their potential durability: “I don’t really know [how long an item of clothing lasts] usually it’s just that it gets too small.” Lettie’s claim that, “... fashion doesn’t last long so you don’t need your... items to” both reveals her awareness of stylistic obsolescence and highlights the fact that she is young enough not to have witnessed the cyclical nature of fashion. Thus outgrowings, whilst demonstrably manageable via gifting (or donating or selling), may also in some instances constitute a legitimization mechanism for consumption decisions that avoid consideration of durability, style cycles and thus the potential for long(er)-term use. As such, the potency of cultural norms around waste-avoiding divestment (such as handing down) may in fact obscure more problematic orientations to material outgrowings’ potential longevity, specifically a lack of concern with material and/or stylistic durability.

I move now to introduce the notion of ‘hedging’ to describe the practice of ambivalent keeping of un(der)used possessions based on anxieties about the future. Here I articulate how attempts to mediate youth cultural demands for particular forms of consumption produce usable excesses which, in some contexts, and somewhat counter-intuitively, may be more aligned with the emergence of waste than waste avoidance.

Hedging (or how to ‘join in’)

In addition to items outgrown, a second group of possessions were ‘hedged’. These objects had often been superseded by a newer version (e.g. a mobile phone or pair of trainers), but the older version was retained as a ‘back-up’. Participants could thus be said to have had an ‘excess’ of some possessions simply by virtue of having more than one. These excess things tended to be scattered around the home, rather than kept close (e.g. in a regularly used bag, or bedroom) like newer, more frequently used items.

The lingering of material stuff on the side-lines of everyday life – whether through active processes of storage or passive processes of just leaving things lying around – has yet to attract the same level of critical attention as has been paid to the mobilities of divestment (i.e. gifting, selling, donating). This may be a function of the emotional sensitivities associated with the role of un/conscious keeping and storing as a useful biographical editor (cf. discussions of the household bin in a similar role; 33). By moving possessions to the margins of everyday

encounter, material ‘irrelevances’ or ‘embarrassments’ from the past can be hidden without the risk of judgement that can arise from gifting or selling. At the same time, keeping such objects close can help appease a different kind of anxiety precipitated by suddenly having to ‘go without’ if a newer item fails. The frequency with which my participants brought such marginal objects into use illustrated recognition of their ongoing utility, as well as participants’ willingness to compromise a degree of social acceptability (and object functionality) in order to maintain participation in important youth cultural practices, such as instant messaging through mobile phones. The fact that functionally and/or stylistically questionable items were retained, and kept easily accessible, indicates already-recognised residual value – what might be framed as everyday domestic ‘vibrant matter’ (34).

Hedged items tended to be those most fundamental to everyday youth culture, and so those which my participants may have found it most (socially) difficult to be without. Elspeth demonstrated this when, having been asked why she kept her old mp3 player following acquisition of a newer one, she said:

“I think it just is... sort of to do with not wanting to get rid of something that still works. And then also having it as back up, if worse comes to worst... and you need it, even though it’s not as trendy and cool, and you don’t really want to use it, but at least it’s something.”

Similar comments were also often made with reference to mobile phones. These hedged gadgets formed an important socio-cultural safety net, allowing participants to maintain contact with friends or listen to music, even if their newer device was misplaced or damaged.

Hedging applied to garments and other apparel, too. In a similar way, the retention of clothing was justified through a fear of missing out. Rosa said:

“... even if I think I don’t wear ‘em I’m normally like, well, I *might* wear them, stupid as it sounds. I never actually do, but it’s just in ca-, the thought of, oh, well, I might need it.”

Although Rosa considered it unlikely she would revert to her hedged clothes, she frequently returned to old pairs of Ugg-style boots when other shoes wore out. It emerged that this style of footwear was central to both her personal identity and her sense of wider peer group affiliation: “It’s just something to wear that everyone else wears.” Other participants actively

embraced the potential of hedging to help them find new enjoyment in old things. Ella explained:

“I kind of group bags with clothing, like, I like having, I think I’ve got five, like, fairly new ones then in a couple of years I’ll kind of like change it over again. Umm... but, most things [...] if I don’t particularly have a use for it then, then I normally hide it away somewhere so that in a few years I find it and I’m like “ooh!” [laughs]”

Aidan described a similar approach to his DVDs:

“...there are some DVDs that I haven’t watched or I, y’know... or I don’t really want to watch, y’know? I’ll say, sort of, like, alright, I’ll get rid of that and then I think, aw, I might want to watch that one day. I won’t like... I won’t, like... get rid of it completely, I’ll just tuck it away. And then one day I might be, like, finding it and I’ll think, oh, I might watch this, y’know?”

This intentional hiding and rediscovering has been conceptualised by Parsons as ‘the find’ (35) – a process through which novelty is produced not through acquisition of the new but re-acquaintance with the old. This recalls Jackson et al.’s analysis of selective remembering and forgetting as a means of mediating embodied emplacement within multi-scalar geographies of (production and consumption-related) responsibility (36). Indeed, the challenges and opportunities of everyday keeping (e.g. material lingering and loitering through active or passive retention) in relation to the avoidance or production of waste hint at some important practical and analytical intersections between proximity and (in)visibility vis-à-vis the ‘appropriate’ location of un(der)used objects. Maycroft (37), for instance, has highlighted how much household ‘clutter’ inhabits liminal time-spaces where their practical, if not literal, invisibility conspires to make them obsolete. Items which slip into these liminal or ‘backstage’ areas of the home (such as lofts, garages, sheds, bottom drawers or the tops of wardrobes) are often those seen as those with least potential for further use – or as creating the greatest cause for embarrassment (38). These spaces – alongside the more conspicuous and omnipresent black rubbish bin – help to ‘black box’ the no-longer-relevant remnants of lives that have moved on (39), legitimising the forgetting both of the objects themselves and their future biographies as waste.

For Ella and Aidan, the relative frequency with which they chose to re-encounter their bags and DVDs mitigated both the risk of forgetting about these objects and the associated risk that, in the course of forgetting, marginalised objects become functionally and/or stylistically

obsolete (40). Their openness to further use of their possessions was also enabled by a cultural context in which doing so was socially acceptable and physically possible – traits fundamental to the (re)emergence of everyday ‘vibrant matter’ (41). Edensor and De Silvey suggest that there is an important role for material excess in making meaning associated with the (re)construction of histories and identities (42). Their concern may be with the remnants of the built environment, but the notion that items not needed now might be useful in future identity work can be applied to everyday consumer items – and evidently was by Ella, Aidan and others within the group. Contemporary trends for second hand (particularly vintage) clothing and resurgent interest in vinyl amongst music fans testify to this potential. Indeed, Edensor’s argument that excess, “contains rich potential for reinterpretation and reuse because it is underdetermined” emphasises that trait which Gregson et al. frame as surplus, i.e. the potential for (re)appropriation as part of future meaning-making (43). That this (re)appropriation implies a shift in time and/or space further emphasises the importance of both temporal and spatial location (as determinants of cultural location) for successful reuse of excess, and the need for more critical attention to be paid to the role of temporalities in mediating the relationship between excess and waste.

In contrast to ‘outgrowings’, which largely remained inactive and immobile until an appropriate divestment opportunity occurred, hedged items were used intermittently (and sometimes reluctantly) for as long as they were functionally usable or socially permissible. Specific types of shoes – Rosa’s boots, for instance – were either called back into service when newer versions failed, or were relegated to ‘backstage’ settings, such as John’s retention of some ten-year-old trainers which both he and his father used as ‘gardening shoes’. Only when such items were completely unwearable due to material disintegration were they consigned to the waste stream. The hedging of electronic items was more frequently characterised by intention than action. Although all participants who spoke about keeping ‘old’ gadgets stated they were retained with the intention of ‘back-up’ use (and some were indeed used), their retention was also partially characterised by a lack of knowledge as to how best to divest them, resulting in the accumulation of sometimes multiple (infrequently or never used) gadgets. These accumulations were, if not justified, then explained with reference to the belief that ‘everyone’ has a cupboard drawer full of defunct electronics. The cultural imaginary surrounding these objects has simultaneously emerged from and defined a practice of accumulation justified both by lack of knowledge or access (in relation to reuse channels) and a socio-cultural demand for constant connectivity. Whilst the materials comprising Rosa and

John's shoes are worn to the point of disintegration, the materials in participants' phones and mp3 players are denied the chance to be 'worn out'. This, then, is a form of excess which teeters on the edge of waste, since the barriers to moving gadgets along keep static and hidden (and thus out of use) materials increasingly demanded for the (re)production of new consumer goods (44). Further, and most significant in relation to technologies, the longer such items remain hidden in cupboard drawers, the more vulnerable they become to the consumer cultural temporalities that produce functional obsolescence.

The imperative to always be able to 'join in' that underpins hedging echoes the call to 'keep up' which drives consumer/youth-culturally-driven outgrowing. It raises the question of whether contemporary youth cultures *demand* excess possessions – the newest versions which demonstrate one's ability to participate in the latest trends, as well as older 'back-ups' which, while not trendy, allow the most important youth cultural practices (messaging, calling, listening to music) to be maintained. There is also an ethical dimension around the rights of youth to fully embody and explore this complex phase of the life course as they navigate it – using the material tools that global consumer culture provides to do so. This suggests that, despite their attentiveness to the potential for waste, their sensitivity to moral economies around perpetuating value and expressing (materialising) care for others, there is almost a cultural requirement for some level of excess possessions in the 'doing' of twenty-first century youth.

In the concluding section of this paper, I summarise the different forms of excess identified here, highlighting which forms resist, and which are vulnerable to, the 'slide into waste' implied by the hitherto blurred conceptual edges between these terms. I reflect on how consideration of the intersections of 'waste' with 'excess' offers some useful signposts as to where efforts to challenge problematic cultures of waste-excess might be orientated.

5. Conclusions

The slipperiness of excess as both an analytical object and practical category has made it too easy to associate with the 'bads' of consumer society and associated moral economies around hyper-acquisitiveness (45), thus positioning objects within its boundaries as unnecessarily close to waste. It has also been used to imply responsibility for excess lies with the consumer, rather than as a means of interrogating wider spatialities of responsibility. Indeed, excess has been framed as characteristic of the economic and cultural norms of late modern society – embodied by the consumer – and, as a result, as fundamental to the most pressing global

environmental problems, with 'waste' as the transitional framing device (46). Yet, as noted by Sarah A. Moore (47), material excess is the product of a cultural-economic system perpetuated by consumers' acquiescence to the conveniences it offers. At the same time that system produces expectations of socio-material order (from the home to the municipality, and beyond) which the nature of everyday excess makes it increasingly difficult to fulfil (48). Thus, as framed by Moore, the notion of excess highlights the range of multi-scalar cultural structures that produce it, as well as the potential for those structures to be challenged by individual acts of resistance. Though 'excess-as-resistance' might be framed as a facet of the 'waste-as-resistance' debates Moore summarises (49), to collapse the former into the latter, I argue, compounds the lack of nuance required to distinguish excess as a material form characterised by distinct cultural processes.

The framing of 'hedging' and 'outgrowing' as mechanisms through which young people manage their everyday possessions has emphasised the nebulousness of 'excess' in practice, and the ambivalence amongst my participants in terms of their responses to its varying forms. Their excesses could be argued to be problematic when objects remain 'dormant' long term but their component materials are in high demand (such as mobile phones), or when they are produced through consumer cultural 'push' pressures subsumed within sub-cultural norms, e.g. pressures to 'keep up' and 'join in' by possessing the 'latest' device/garment. The latter scenario may risk the kinds of excess which my participants deemed wasteful – where items are acquired or retained but not used. However, there is equally evidence of more benign excesses in the form of: i) items outgrown and simply awaiting an opportune moment for divestment; ii) hedged items used intermittently as a means of fulfilling youth cultural demands without risking damage to more highly-valued newer items; and iii) the self-directed 'keep and store' novelty production practice of 'the find'. These different forms of excess suggest that neither material accumulations of possessions, nor their moving-along through processes of divestment, is inherently problematic from the point of view of consumer waste production. Rather, what are problematic are those forces which contrive to keep accumulations static rather than mobile, as well as those which intensively produce those accumulations in the first place through rapid cycles of obsolescence and novelty. For my participants, their material excesses simultaneously stabilised and destabilised their socio-cultural world, by enabling social participation but also demanding effort and producing anxiety. This implies a socio-material tension to be navigated if they aspire both to cultural conveniences and expressions of socio-environmental care.

What does this mean, then, in terms of the geographies of responsibility that characterise those forces, as well as the mechanisms that might challenge them? There is, inevitably, a limit to the agency – and thus the responsibility – of the individual actor within complex global production-consumption networks; “[w]e do, however, all share a responsibility for the collective outcome of our everyday acts as consumers” (50). Since these ‘everyday acts’ of consumption are – as demonstrated here – profoundly cultural in imperative and outcome, I suggest here how further investigation into micro-level actions might illuminate how structural forces produce local excesses (and potentially global wastes). First, to understand how to prevent excess becoming waste, there is urgent need to interrogate storage as a (set of) practice(s), teasing out how storage (and/or other forms of keeping) is, or might be, practised in ways that enable re-enlivening of static objects versus storage that prefigures waste. Secondly, to understand how to reduce accumulations of excess in the first place, it will be important to explore how socio-cultural needs associated with self- and relational identities might be met in less materially intensive ways. In suggesting these ways forward I do not seek to claim that all wastes can or should be framed as excess in order to make them less ‘troublesome’; rather, that identifying and interrogating some types of excess might help us identify and understand their genesis (such that their production might be averted) more effectively than if we only seek to manage them once they have become waste.

To close, I refer back to the sustainability toolkit whose opening statement prompted this research, and paraphrase one of my participants, Graham, quoted in my introduction. The young people whose material worlds informed this study were, to my mind, not wasteful. They had well-developed, and keenly socially-inflected (more so than environmentally-inflected) waste avoidance moralities, which they practised to the extent that their everyday environments enabled. There was, however, something distinct about the *excess* produced at the intersection of growing up and youth culture(s), and, on this basis, there may well be a rationale for engaging this group differently from others in matters of excess (not waste) reduction.

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