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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking consumer convenience as a barrier to reusable packaging systems

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Reusable packaging systems have been recognised as a part of sustainability and circular economy transitions but they are widely considered to be inconvenient for the consumer. This article challenges the notion that reuse systems are necessarily inconvenient by drawing attention to reuse practices, differences between reusable packaging systems, and associated complexes of consumption practices. Theoretical insights from studies of convenience food and meal planning are used to inform our approach to convenience and convenient practices. In the UK, recent reusable packaging trials in mainstream retail have offered consumers the opportunity to participate in reusable packaging systems as part of their otherwise ordinary consumption. Based on qualitative research conducted with reusable packaging system users participating in these trial systems and others during this time, three practice complexes are identified and examined. These are bulk buying, organisational practices and weekly shopping. The analysis of these complexes provides insight into difficult aspects of reusable packaging systems, while separating discussion of these aspects from areas which would change with system transition. This locates the niche position of reusable packaging systems within a potential transition process and reiterates the importance of considering convenience in context.

Keywords practice theory • circular economy • reusable packaging • convenience

Key messages

- Convenience in reusable packaging systems should be viewed in the context of disposable packaging systems being the mainstream packaging system.
- It is possible to identify problems in reusable packaging systems that may persist despite changes in reusable packaging system scale.
- By thinking about convenience as a matter of displacing time and energy in everyday routines, it is possible to draw attention to where reuse practices make consumption convenient.

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Introduction

Reusable packaging (RP) systems for consumer goods (food and drink, and home and personal care) have been acknowledged as part of the transition to a sustainable circular economy (Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF), 2019; 2023), yet research on these and similar circular economy systems have until recently neglected the role of the consumer (Hobson et al, 2021; Greene et al, 2024). RP systems have complex logistics and are still maturing, facing significant barriers from the cultural and economic dominance of disposable packaging which needs to be challenged to effect a system-level transition (Geels, 2019: 6–7) and bridge the increasing 'circularity gap' in this area (Greene et al, 2024). The understanding of convenience among industry and policy makers is a part of the cultural-economic barrier to the further development of RP systems. New technological systems are often promoted to consumers on the basis of their convenience (Aagaard, 2021; Hirth et al, 2021) but the adoption of such 'convenient' products ensnare consumers in resource-intensive, tightly integrated practice complexes (Krog Juvik and Halkier, 2024). On this basis, rethinking convenience to account for the broader factors affected by system-level aspects of socio-technical transitions may be useful.

RP systems face perceptions that they require onerous work from users in comparison to the relative absence of work required by incumbent disposable packaging systems (see Tesco, 2022). Promoters of RP systems accept the need for convenience (EMF, 2019) but often without clarity. To participate in RP systems, the user must bring packaging back to the point of sale or put packaging out for collection, and maintain containers, among other things, which are forms of consumption work with equivalents for disposable containers (Wheeler and Glucksmann, 2015; Hobson et al, 2021). For RP systems, such consumption work extends beyond shopping practices and disposal practices, however, as households are required to decant, monitor stock levels and recirculate containers in the home as discussed by Beswick-Parsons et al (2025). However, while reuse practices have been documented separately from participation in RP systems, the connection between reuse practices and other everyday practices has not yet been addressed. Different relationships between specific RP system types and reuse practices should also be acknowledged (EMF, 2019: 13). Connections between practices are vital for understanding convenience, especially with respect to the role of plastic in everyday life (Åberg and Greene, 2024). Research on convenience food options (Jackson and Viehoff, 2016) has shown how they enable the displacement of time and energy for other purposes, but feminist literature has demonstrated how this process operates more widely (Pirani et al, 2022). In this article we apply these insights to our analysis of data from ethnographic research with RP system users, conducted as part of the Buddie-Pack project involving RP system users, to explore the convenience of RP systems. Insights from the analysis demonstrate how convenience is interdependent

with broader practice groupings and household social dynamics and indicate the need for further connection with approaches to socio-technical system transitions such as the Multi-Level Perspective (Geels, 2019).

Understanding reuse and convenience

Reusable packaging systems and their recent history in the United Kingdom

RP systems represent an efficient way to advance the circular economy and reduce plastic production by extending the usability of each item of packaging while retaining the useful qualities of plastic (Farrell et al, 2024). RP systems are not completely unfamiliar to businesses and the public. Between businesses in the UK, there are widely used systems for reusable secondary packaging[1] and there are historical examples of consumer products provided in reusable primary packaging.[2] However, available data suggests that RP systems are not meaningfully involved in the provision of fast-moving consumer goods (Oxford Reference, 2025) in the UK, as reusable primary packaging made up less than 1 per cent of the total packaging placed on the market in 2022 (WRAP, 2018). This is a similar, if not more marginal, position to other European countries that have some forms of primary packaging reuse systems (Beswick-Parsons et al, 2023; Sundqvist et al, 2024).

There are different forms of RP system which can be differentiated both by the ownership of the container, and the mode of return or refill. RP systems can be administered by the product provider, retailer or a third party (EMF, 2019). RP system types are summarised in Figure 1 for reference. For the sake of brevity, we have not described the different products covered by each system (for a list of indicative products, see EMF, 2019).

Each type relates to reuse practices in the home differently. These differences are important for understanding the different reuse trials ongoing in the UK between 2020 and 2025. Some of these were part of the Refill Coalition which was convened by GoUnpackaged (Conway et al, 2025a) and part-funded by the Smart Sustainable Plastic Packaging funding round administered by UK Research and Innovation (2025) to coordinate commercial RP system trials.[3] Others outside this coalition, such as Tesco (2022) (the largest supermarket retailer in the UK [Worldpanel, 2025]) and Abel & Cole (a sustainable and organic food delivery service) (2025) introduced reuse trials or RP systems separately. During the same period, numerous municipal

Figure 1: Reuse scheme types and definitions

Reuse type	Definition
Refill in store	Users refill their container away from home at a dedicated store, which provides bulk refill facilities.
Refill at home	Users refill containers at home, using lightweight-package refills.
Return from home	Packaging is picked up from home by brand or retailer for cleaning and refilling.
Return on the go	Users return packaging at a store or drop-off point for brand or retailer to clean and refill.

Source: Adapted from EMF (2019: 12–13) and On-Pack Recycling Label (2021).

entities in the UK supported return on the go RP systems (City to Sea, 2025). The existence of these varied trials allowed this project to examine the effects of RP system use on otherwise ordinary domestic provisioning practices and routines, and more detail on these is provided in the methodology section.

Approaching reusable packaging systems as part of everyday consumption practices

Shopping practices have long been of interest to various social science disciplines and it is well established that shopping practices are integrated with everyday practices (Miller, 1998; Jackson et al, 2006). However, RP systems occupy a niche position within retail systems currently (Sundqvist et al, 2024). As a result, it is therefore difficult to imagine what engagement with RP systems might look like if it is part of consumption practices performed by a broader, more diverse population.

Researchers studying RP systems have dealt with this issue differently. Early research into RP systems identified key design elements which need to be addressed to enable long-term consumer participation (Lofthouse et al, 2009; subsequently discussed by Diprose et al, 2024). Beitzen-Heineke et al (2017) note how RP systems incorporated into otherwise conventional retail sites have the potential to be more impactful and transformative than other niche applications. A more recent study from Miao et al (2023) uses refill-in-store dispensers installed in a lab setting to elicit consumer description of inconveniences associated with RP systems at various stages, including in the home, but they acknowledge the limited validity of the methods used and the lack of observational data. They also note the need for future studies to observe the changes that participation in RP systems bring about in the home. Rapp et al (2017), as part of an ethnographic study, also noted the need for pilot studies to show how RP systems integrate with routines. Fuentes et al (2019) have notably studied how refill-in-store retail requires the re-framing, re-skilling and re-equipping of shopping practices. Building on this practice theory informed work, Kemper et al (2024) identify 'bright spots' that could lead to the stabilisation of package-free shopping as a social practice. Neither of these authors explore complexes of domestic practices, however, or how these may be linked to convenience. However, Fuentes et al (2019) do acknowledge the altered practices of consumers as a form of work transfer, and we aim to extend this line of enquiry into the connections between the domestic and market practices.

Focusing on the work transferred to consumers echoes the consumption work approach, recognised as an essential element of future research on consumption in circular economies (Hobson et al, 2021). The approach aims to bring the 'invisible' range of domestic activity necessary for consumption into view, for example the work required to recycle (Wheeler and Glucksmann, 2016) and Fuentes et al (2019) have suggested that RP systems are likely to reorganise some of this recycling work, for instance. The consumption work approach also draws attention to the different kinds and amounts of consumption work performed by different household members and this is what makes it so useful. Gender relations and other inequalities within the household will work to support or undermine transitions to circularity (Beswick-Parsons et al, 2025: 15). There has been increasing recognition of the integration of consumption practices within the connected practices that make up everyday life, and within the institutional-material conditions that allow consumption to take place (Åberg and Greene, 2024; Greene et al, 2024). The scheduling of practices in daily

life is already an accommodation between family needs, school and care timetables, and work obligations, and these are spatially ordered and gendered in different ways (Mylan and Southerton, 2018). Hobson et al (2021: 6) argue that the willingness of consumers to forego the convenience of particular energy or material intensive arrangements to meet these conflicting demands in service of other normative goals is not well understood. We contend that in the case of RP systems convenience may be achieved in service of less energy or material intensive arrangements, but to progress this argument reuse-specific practices must be named.

By drawing on the consumption work perspective to examine reuse practices, Beswick-Parsons et al (2025) identify a set of practices performed in the home that are essential for engaging with RP systems but which are not limited to them. These are: decanting, stock management and recirculating (containers). Decanting involves removing products from packaging or transferring products to new containers. Stock management involves monitoring product quantities. Recirculating involves processes of cleaning and evaluating containers to ensure they are fit to be reused. These practices show how existing domestic practices can feed into existing circular economy transitions (Beswick-Parsons et al, 2025: 15–16). Some of these practices have been independently documented (Pickering, 2024) and they are a feature of our analysis as they highlight sets of connections between domestic practices and consumption practices which take place outside the home.

Practice groupings and convenient consumption

The work of Beswick-Parsons et al (2025) is informed by practice theory, which focuses on practices as social entities, composed of competencies, meanings and materials (Shove et al, 2012). Practice theory accounts for relations and connections between practices, but the nature of these connections must be specified. Practices can be connected through time due to sequencing and synchronicity; the relative significances and meanings of practices, as well as the practical, cognitive and material demands of practices, all play a role in how time is allocated and ordered (Southerton et al, 2012). Practice theory approaches everyday consumption as if it is made up of varied sets of connections between practices across time and space (Shove et al, 2012; Mylan and Southerton, 2018) and looking across these sets of connections offers a way to address convenience (Shove, 2003). Nicolini (2009) refers to this as 'zooming out' or attending to the wider arrangements that affect practices. Over time, terms for different levels of integration between practices have emerged, such as complex, bundle and nexus (often to deal with different aspects of convenience) (Shove et al, 2012; Hui et al, 2017). In this article, we focus on practice complexes, which describe coordinated, synchronised or sequential practices that display interdependence, such as cooking, food shopping and meal planning (Castelo et al, 2021: 5–7), and we aim to identify and analyse those that involve the reuse practices set out by Beswick-Parsons et al (2025).

Complexes are important for thinking about convenience, as research on the temporal ordering of eating practices has shown how mealtimes are synchronised or sequenced among related and unrelated practices to balance conflicting demands on household time and energy (Southerton et al, 2012). A number of authors (Jackson and Viehoff, 2016; Jackson, 2018; Jackson et al, 2018) have developed a process-based understanding of convenience (in relation to convenience foods) that accounts for the

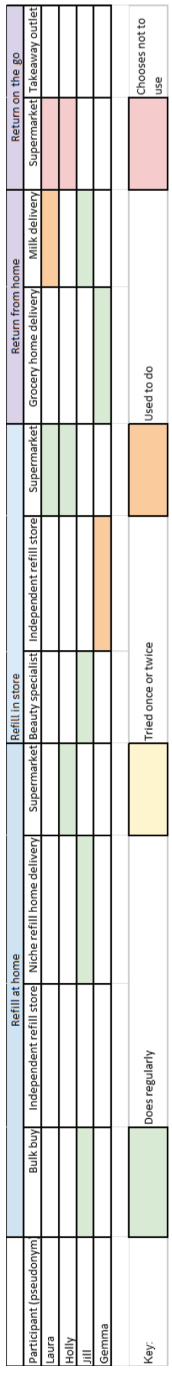
diversity of specific practices and arrangements that can be considered. This idea of conveniencisation can address the kinds and degrees of ease with which consumption is being performed, acknowledging the related practices like working, travelling and parenting that contribute to the conditions that make a particular convenience option contextually desirable (Jackson et al, 2018: 51). Krog Juvik and Halkier (2024) describe how conveniencisation leads to tightly synchronised and connected practice complexes which in turn drive more resource-intensive consumption and make sustainable practices more difficult to maintain. In the previous sections we argued that participation in RP systems will require a redistribution of consumption work that would be otherwise associated with disposable packaging, and this redistribution will affect and be affected by the organisation of practices in the household. However, feminist research on the organisation of household eating has described the process of prioritisation that happens in 'conveniencisation' pathways as a form of displacement which is central to the arrangement of eating practices on a day-to-day basis regardless of convenience options (DeVault, 1991; Blake et al, 2009; Agrawal et al, 2018). The resolution of conflicting demands on time and energy in the household can be understood as a fundamental part of the doing of domestic life rather than only linked to convenience options or other goals and the positive or negative connotations that come with convenience (Pirani et al, 2022). We aim to highlight such displacements within practice complexes that involve reuse practices, to understand how participation in RP systems may be convenient in context. This will equip further discussions of convenience in the context of RP systems as undergoing socio-technical transition.

Methods and approach to analysis

This article draws on qualitative research conducted with 15 UK households that regularly engage with RP systems (see Figure 2), as part of the Buddie-Pack project (GA number: 101059923). This project brings together academic and industrial partners from across Europe to prepare conditions for the large-scale deployment of reusable plastic packaging. A team at the University of Sheffield were responsible for a work package focused on behaviour and practices related to RP. The study aimed to answer the question: 'How do consumers interact with reusable packaging systems?' with a focus on existing consumption practices. Answering this involved qualitative ethnographic research and this article details research conducted with households only. An earlier stage involved participant observation of supermarket refill in store trials, and food and drink outlets running refill on the go trials. Households were recruited through a number of channels, including conversations during the earlier stage, and advertising via an online retailer.

The principal criteria for participation was engagement with any type of RP system. A screening questionnaire was used as an initial step in the research process, to ensure that participants were diverse in terms of household composition, gender, age and socio-economic status. Most of the research took place in and around various counties and cities in the Yorkshire region with exceptions, as this was where a number of the supermarket RP system trials happened to be taking place. It was also where a number of convenience food retail locations operating reuse schemes were operating (these do not feature in this article; see Diprose et al, 2024). Fortuitously this was within the reasonable travel range for the researcher.

Figure 2: Featured participant engagement with different forms of reuse



Participants took part in:

1. An accompanied shop. Participant engagement with RP systems and conventional shopping practices were observed and discussed together. Online shopping practices or unboxing of grocery deliveries were shared with the researcher where relevant.
2. An interview focusing on reuse and packaging, which often directly preceded or followed the accompanied shop. This and the accompanied shop followed the approach and techniques set out by Evans (2012) (including fridge and cupboard rummages).[4]
3. A week-long packaging diary conducted remotely, via WhatsApp (Clark et al, 2022). This focused on participant interactions with packaging and reuse systems. Participants were also able to send images as part of this method, often sending pictures of emptied packaging or things that frustrated them about single-use packaging.
4. A follow-up interview after the packaging diary was conducted. This involved returning to the different stages of the research process, particularly the packaging diary, and any reflections generated on packaging practices and engagement with RP systems.

Ethical approval was granted for this research by the University of Sheffield School of Geography and Planning Ethics Committee (ref: 052053). Data collection took place during 2023 and early 2024. Transcripts and notes from the research were then analysed thematically. Themes relating to convenience and reuse were identified and abductive analysis and conceptual development followed. The analysis draws on data from all participants, but the following section features five participants directly, as is shown in Figure 2, and focuses on two of them in detail. These were Laura (pseudonym) who used refill in store facilities located at a major supermarket participating in an RP system trial,[5] while Gemma (pseudonym) used refill from home and return from home products delivered by Abel & Cole, an online grocery retailer.

Analysis

In the following section each empirical example described involves a practice complex which is relevant to reuse or features reuse practices. Any displacement activity enabling convenience or conditions causing inconvenience are identified. Each participant featured was an active participant in an RP system at the time the research took place, but the examples may not primarily involve direct engagement with reuse systems. Practice complexes involving reuse practices are the focus. These complexes are used to illustrate how displacement achieves or denies convenience in specific situations, generating insights relevant to the functioning and trajectory of RP systems.

Bulk buying practice complexes

Bulk buying as a practice complex can easily become part of RP systems (Patreau et al, 2023; De Canio et al, 2024) as it clearly requires some form of decanting (Beswick-Parsons et al, 2025). Bulk buying involves purchasing larger quantities of products

at longer intervals and has been linked to packaging reuse practices in the home (Beswick-Parsons et al, 2025). Bulk detergents, hand soap, some dry food, personal care products, home care goods and specific packaged goods were all purchased in bulk by participants of this research, through different retailers including Ocado,[6] Costco,[7] Suma[8] and package-free retail stores (refill in store).

Gemma, for instance, was a committed customer of Abel & Cole, living with her husband and their son who is autistic. Her husband is in the armed forces and often away from home, and she shopped online with a supermarket prior to Abel & Cole, because she found it challenging to shop alone with her son. Abel & Cole are a grocery delivery service and Gemma started shopping with them during the COVID-19 pandemic because the supermarket deliveries had become unreliable, with substitutions of items that her son refused to eat, due to sensory issues. She suggested that food shortages at the time partly explained this, but at one point these shortages reduced her to tears and Abel & Cole reliably provided the required items. More recently, Gemma decided to bulk buy liquid detergent through the Abel & Cole return from home RP system, since she was buying equivalent products at similar prices. The first time they had to refill, they faced a problem:

> [Discussing a large refill bottle of detergent liquid] The only time it was an issue was when we needed to top up. When we first bought the washing liquid one, I just had a hysterectomy, completely, literally days before. … So I went to go and lift it and went, 'Yeah, I can't do that.' So, my husband had to do it. (Gemma)

Gemma described this situation as unusual, and stated that otherwise, the system worked well for them, as it did for the other similar products that they bought. In this return from home RP system, the user receives a large bottle of laundry liquid and decants it into a pump bottle (which is also provided). When the bulk container is empty, the user can order a new one and send the container back when the next delivery is made. Abel & Cole then refills the container ready for reuse. This bulk packaging reuse system displaces and rearranges consumer work in convenient ways for Gemma. Firstly, the fact that the container is returned through the delivery system prevents Gemma from having to visit a physical shop, which she valued for reasons which have already been outlined. Secondly, bulk buying detergent decreased the number of times Gemma had to buy it, and this also reduced the amount of packaging she had to recycle, which saved on storage space. She elaborated on her purchasing, stating that she ensured the other products they also bought in bulk did not run out at the same time as the cost for all of them to be purchased simultaneously would be too high. This complex of practices is workable and convenient for Gemma, but the bulk nature of this specific RP system requires certain resources and capacities. A level of competency is required for managing stock levels as a reuse practice. Physical resources are also required, as Gemma also discussed the need to find a place to store the bulk container, but also in terms of bodily capacities to decant. As explained, Gemma was unable to lift and handle the container when recovering from surgery. It is worth noting that this kind of physical work posed problems in similar situations for other participants, notably Julie, a retiree who also struggled to manage the stock of bulk goods in her home after a surgery. This exploration of the displacement involved in bulk reuse systems suggests that the convenience in return from home

RP systems may come with caveats related to competencies, material resources and physical abilities. These findings echo those of Åberg and Greene (2024: 14) on the potential convenience of online RP systems.

Organisational practice complexes

One of the major topics of discussion among participants was the practical importance and aesthetic value of objects, such as Kilner jars, containers with locking lids and label makers, which are often associated with RP systems and reuse practices. Such objects are involved in organisational practice complexes that structure consumption practices and displace work otherwise associated with disposable packaging. The role of aesthetics in domestic organisation should be addressed here, as participants desired the appearance of tidiness as much as they sought to implement functional organisational systems. For example, a number of participants used Kilner jars[9] to store dry goods even when their cupboard space was too limited to house them. Participants valued the quality of the seal that Kilner jars provide but also enjoyed their appearance and the ability they have to display stored items. Such items integrate functional storage into attractive visual displays. In some cases, this facilitated participation in RP systems, as it made checking stock levels easier and meant that there were available containers for participants to decant into.

Decanting was a key reuse practice for some consumers that was linked to surrounding practices and which was also linked to practices beyond RP systems. This link to practices beyond reuse, discussed by Beswick-Parsons et al (2025), is critical for understanding why particular groupings of consumption practices enable participation in RP systems. Laura, a part-time employed mother of three, consistently practised decanting to displace consumption work associated with disposable packaging away from particular 'hot spots' in her daily and weekly routine (Pirani et al, 2022). She was a consistent user of a refill-in-store section of a supermarket, shopping there as part of her weekly shop. This was one of the supermarkets running an RP system trial, where dispensers had been installed for several months. While shopping, she also used the 'Scan and Go' facility in the supermarket; this allows the user to enter their payment details before they shop and then scan each item as they add it to a trolley or basket, so that payment is taken on exit without the need for the shopper to go through a manual or automatic checkout. As she shopped with this technology, she packed each item into reusable shopping bags arranged in her trolley. Laura explained this to the interviewer during an accompanied shop.

Laura:	I can bag it all up in, do you know like my fridge stuff in one bag and [other] things in the other, so it's better than having it all piled up in here.
Interviewer:	So it's about being able to sort out your shopping as you go?
Laura:	I mean I do pile it up all the same, but then it's like then you've got to do that [the checkout], then you've got to put it all in your bags as well, so it's just easier.

Other participants also discussed using this same facility but did not combine it with pre-bagging the items in the trolley. This is clearly the intended benefit to convenience that 'Scan and Go' offers. Laura applies the same streamlining principle to her own

practices elsewhere, within the same cluster of practices. When she gets home after each weekly trip she decants most packaged items into dedicated containers in her fridge, as she is unpacking her shopping, and disposes of the single-use packaging. This also involves washing and cutting in the case of fruit. Laura explains during the portion of the interview that covers her unpacking her shopping that this practice essentially prevents her from having to do this washing, cutting and disposal work when she is feeding her children, as she can feed them straight from the containers when the time comes.

> When I do my food shop I'll do everything ready, like I'll top all those up so they're just ready for the week, and then you tip a few out and they're done. You don't have to cut them every day and wash them every day and whatever. (Laura)

Here, the practice of decanting concentrates the work associated with disposing of packaging and handling food to a specific time around the unpacking of the weekly shop. This practice satisfied a subjective need she identified for order and visual neatness, and it required particular materials (jars and sealing boxes), but it also required specific knowledge and reflection on previously stressful moments in the flow of her usual weekly routine. Laura also briefly discussed the lack of functional utility that disposable packaging has in the home, since from her subjective experience, it is only present from the shop to her home and does not add to freshness once opened. This is echoed by other studies detailing connections between public beliefs about the role of packaging in preserving food and unpackaging or decanting practices (Pickering, 2024).

Other participants undertook similar decanting practices (Holly, Gaia, Jill and Gemma), which displaced the need to interact with packaging away from the point at which the item is needed for cooking or eating. Some of these were part of practice complexes involving purchasing through RP systems, but other practices were motivated by a desire to avoid the staleness of food resulting from disposable packaging being left open or the mess from accidents caused by clumsy handling. Each participant in this study engaged with RP systems, but the example from Laura did not include products that are sold as part of RP systems currently. This develops upon a point made by Beswick-Parsons et al (2025) concerning how households may already be doing reuse practices necessary to engage with RP systems. The displacement documented here shows that some reuse practices may already work to make daily life more convenient in some organisational practice complexes, priming households for participation in reuse systems.

Weekly shopping as a practice complex

While the role of the weekly shopping trip has changed over the years, it is still a part of many routines (Greene, 2018). It is a complex of interdependent practices often involving car travel and shopping at major supermarkets. As this project took place during RP system trials at supermarkets, it was possible to describe RP practices as part of weekly shopping practice complexes. The previous section detailed a set of linked practices which could also be associated with weekly shopping, but the bulk buying complex documented in an earlier section differs as the complex is defined

by the effect it has on the frequency of purchasing events. Weekly shopping is a result of the scheduling and the coordination of other activities, and it is thus closely linked to these other practices. This practice complex concentrates shopping practices into a single time period, due to the presence and urgency of surrounding practices, and this results in particular challenges for RP system usage.

Participants who shopped weekly often knew what they would buy in advance or had strict shopping lists based on cost and knowledge of what they would use. For some participants, shopping trips were highly streamlined. Laura, as described, is a mother of three and made weekly shopping trips in specific slots in her weekly routine. She had tried to reduce the time taken by her shopping trip and was proud of getting it down to 20 minutes, all because of time pressure from the school run. This kind of tightly scheduled provisioning practice may have been enabled by predictability in other practices (Pickering, 2023) but it also results from the intense coordination of other practices. Laura mentioned that she had to balance commitments to visiting family, taking children to playgroups and other caring commitments when finding time to go shopping, all on a daily basis.

There is an intensity to the coordination between practices in this complex which means that engagement with RP systems is only possible on an opportunistic basis; Laura had not previously been able to seek out RP systems. Laura started using the branded liquid detergent[10] available in the refill-in-store section of the supermarket when it became available as part of a trial, along with her other usual purchases from the reuse section in the supermarket. At first, the refill station was semi-automated and accepted only branded bottles purchased with the first purchase. Once empty, the branded bottle could then be brought back for refilling from the same station. Laura complained that she had been left with this bottle she had paid for but could not use, because at some point previously, the refilling machine had been changed to a similarly branded return system that accepted different containers from the one she had originally purchased. Rather than being refilled in store, these containers were supposed to be dropped off by customers for washing and refilling by the manufacturer (return on the go). Laura felt cheated by this and went back to buying detergent in disposable packaging. However, it is worth noting that even when the refill-in-store dispensing machine was in place, it was not without problems.

> So I did my shop and I went back, but it was like nearly closing time and they were just like 'Oh no it's not working we can't do anything about it today'. And when I came before they were like, find another member of staff. … It's [the container is] empty so obviously I can't do any washing until I've got that, so it's not like – 'cause obviously when you're taking it back, you'd wait for it to be empty. I'm not going to take it back full, I can't refill it 'til it's empty, so then it would be like I'd go when it were empty, I can't do no more washing, I have three kids, I wash every day. (Laura)

As Laura explains, an unsuccessful refill trip with the empty washing container would have led to an inability to wash clothes, disrupting her daily washing patterns (if there was not a single-use disposable container alternative available). Her high intensity washing practices are closely synchronised with her constrained shopping practices. Laura was frustrated with the broken refilling machines, and yet more so when the refill system switched to a return system. The dependence of her washing

practices on the single shopping trip made it critical that the goods were available in a consistent refill format. Similarly, the fact that original refilling machines were configured to only refill empty containers and would not accept half-full containers made flexible refilling more difficult. Business practices like this that use branded packaging to ensure repeat purchases can be shown to create disruption in everyday routines if even one purchase is unsuccessful. Paid-for containers might help to enrol households in routine refill practices, but they also make product supply, maintenance of refill equipment and staff training even more critical for retailers, highlighting existing questions around the organisational commitment of retailers to RP system trials (Diprose et al, 2024). Situating refill-in-store options in supermarkets may appear to be convenient for consumers with inflexible routines but it also carries risks if they remain linked to brand loyalty practices, which is also recognised by Simoens et al (2022).

Discussion

Approaching convenience as a matter of displacing time and energy in everyday routines has significant benefits for how RP systems are understood. It can draw attention to how reuse practices may already be involved in making domestic practice complexes convenient, whether or not these complexes involve engagement with RP systems (Beswick-Parsons et al, 2025). Further work is necessary to identify other relevant complexes. This approach was derived by considering how insights from feminist researchers (Pirani et al, 2022) build on the conveniencisation concept developed by Jackson et al (2018). Looking across complexes of domestic practices in this way offers insight for policy interventions aiming to facilitate user engagement with RP provision, but it also leads to broader questions. If conveniencisation can be a pathway to more resource intensive consumption (Krog Juvik and Halkier, 2024), this article begins to ask if and how pathways should be constructed to redistribute consumption work in favour of less resource-intensive consumption, based on already existing reuse practices. An ethical question also emerges here around how unequal distributions of consumer work within households may underpin such reuse practices, and how certain forms of reuse rely on physical ability. Rather than just relying on the notion that packaging reuse must be convenient in general, sociologists and geographers of consumption can begin to answer the question of how and why different forms of RP system may be considered convenient in context and how they can be altered in ways to meet the challenges of everyday life for diverse household types.

Such insights about the convenience of RP systems must be understood in the context of the dominance of disposable packaging. RP systems currently have limited participation and market penetration. However, current limitations should not unduly influence evaluations of the future of RP systems and their potential convenience. The RP systems featured in this article were part of a series of trials in the UK which occurred from 2020 to 2025. A number of these RP systems have now been discontinued or have stopped operating (Conway et al, 2025a). A major part of the inconvenience of RP systems comes from the lack of availability of and access to retail locations using RP systems. Based on extensive modelling, the consultancy GoUnpackaged have argued (Conway et al, 2025b) that RP systems

become more economically viable and environmentally sustainable at larger scales, and similar assumptions seem logical for convenience. If RP systems and container return facilities were much more easily available to the consumer, engaging with those systems would be much more convenient. From a practice theory perspective it is easy to imagine how more pervasive RP systems provide greater opportunities for practice enrolment and maintenance.

The value of the approach taken to convenient practice complexes in this article is that it separates aspects of inconvenience linked to limitations in RP system scale from aspects of inconvenience which would persist despite changes to system scale. For example, the bulk buying complex of practices demonstrates the need for RP systems to account for the different and changing physical needs of users and the resources they have available for storing products at home; these elements are unlikely to change with increases in RP system scale. The organisational practice complex draws attention to the materials (for example, jars and Tupperware) and storage practices necessary for but not always linked to reuse. The weekly shopping practice complex highlights the difficult intersections between weekly routines and tightly sequenced practices surrounding the weekly shop that make specific types of branded products within RP systems unfeasible. This is an indirect and sector-specific response to the calls made by Åberg and Greene (2024) and Krog Juvik and Halkier (2024) for attention to how practices relate to one another through wider institutional and systemic arrangements. It leads to considering convenience in terms of contextual accessibility and appropriateness of specific system types rather than availability.

If the scale of provisioning systems heavily affects the meaning of convenience, then considering RP systems as instances of socio-technical transition might be worthwhile for consumption studies. The retail context of RP systems in the UK is currently shaped by a supermarket retail oligopoly, in which disposable packaging is the standard packaging form for the entire system. Along with consumer practices, the implementation of RP systems at significant scale would involve meaningful change to retailer infrastructures (Simoens et al, 2022; Conway et al, 2025a). In some cases, the infrastructures underpinning online delivery for RP systems overlap with existing systems but otherwise new operational infrastructure will be needed for a transition to RP. RP systems are still effectively at the niche phase within the multi-level perspective on socio-technical transitions (Geels, 2019). RP systems have not been considered in as much depth as other areas such as energy within transition studies (Simoens et al, 2022; Sundqvist et al, 2024) and this may need to change considering significant developments in packaging waste policy in the UK (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Environment Agency, 2025) and European Union (EUROPEN, 2025). To bring consumption research into conversation with policy and experts on specific consumption systems (not just RP systems) as suggested by Åberg and Greene (2024), a common understanding of possible socio-technical transition trajectories and policies appropriate to transition stages may be a useful next step.

Conclusion

RP systems for consumer use are still developing and maturing, and while this is the case, they face real and anticipated problems associated with convenience due to the incumbency of disposable packaging. By focusing on a process-based understanding

of convenience, grounded in relevant complexes of practices involved in RP systems, this article separates discussion of these barriers from more constructive discussion and description of the problematic features and elements of RP systems which are likely to persist despite changes in system scale. It also offers insights into opportunities to help users develop the necessary practices to engage with RP systems. Understanding convenience as a form of displacement within the routines and grouped practices of everyday life is essential to this, and it relies on the work of feminist researchers focused on domestic practices (Pirani et al, 2022). The approach taken to convenience here and the findings discussed should provide support for policy makers and RP system administrators. It also makes a case for convenient practice complexes more generally to be considered as contextual within socio-technical transition trajectories, given that infrastructural and logistical networks and competing industrial interests are also involved in structuring consumption practices.

Notes

[1] For example, plastic crates of varying kinds, used and returned by retailers. CO_2 canisters and beer kegs for the hospitality industry also qualify among numerous other examples.

[2] The quintessential example in the UK is the milk bottle, discussed at length by Vaughan et al (2007). This was once used widely by various local and national dairies across the UK, which would deliver to the doorstep. There are a number of recent reinventions of this service available to UK consumers.

[3] Much of the work of the Refill Coalition has been concerned with establishing standardised and interoperable dispensing and logistical systems, so that backwards logistics networks for cleaning, refilling and delivery can be shared between retailers for optimal efficiency.

[4] The approach taken by Evans (2012) is informed by anthropological studies of value and material culture adapted for researching inside homes. The fridge and cupboard rummages are prompted but participant-led and represent attempts to balance the 'insufficiency of interviews and the impossibility of ethnography proper' (Evans, 2012: 43)

[5] We have chosen not to name this retailer due to the commercial sensitivity of the findings.

[6] A UK online grocery retailer originally linked to Waitrose.

[7] An international wholesale retailer with limited membership.

[8] A cooperative wholefoods retailer in the UK.

[9] Kilner jars are a brand name for a glass jar with rubber gasket and wire sealing mechanism that has become popularly associated with any kind of similar sealing jar in the UK. Mason jars and Weck jars are equivalents in Europe and the United States.

[10] The brand has been anonymised in the same way as other major retailers involved in these trials to protect commercial interest.

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Data availability statement
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Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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