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Tracking Conservation: A Brief Report

With news of our current global climate crisis and the continued waste problem in the United States, there is a growth in the market of people who are searching for a means to lessen their contribution to our large generation of waste. So as to not misinform, it should be made clear that the waste produced by everyday consumers pales in comparison to waste produced by industrial corporations. According to a 2019 report by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), in 2015 in the United States, the total generation of municipal solid waste (MSW)—classified as nonliquid waste that comes from homes, institutions, and small businesses such as product packaging, clothing, bottles and cans, food, electronics and so on—was about 262 million tons (U.S. Dept. of Energy). However, Municipal waste accounts for a very small percentage of the waste in the United States compared to industrial waste, which is difficult to account for but is considered to be in the billions of tons. Industrial corporations by far are responsible for an enormous amount of waste our country produces and unfortunately sustainable consumption/consumerism on an individual scale can do little to lessen the dent. However, this does not mean that we should all dump are waste with little consideration.

There is most evidently still an increase in sustainability values in many consumers, meaning there is still a desire for technology that aids in everyday conservation. A few existing sustainable technologies include renewable energy, green gadgets, and electric automobiles, but these technologies are expensive, not accessible to many, or both (“Barriers to Renewable Energy Technology”).

Consider an individual who already actively employs sustainable practices (such as recycling, composting, reuse, etc.) in their everyday life, but would like a simple means to track exactly how much waste they are conserving conveniently and accessibly. Another individual—who perhaps is not already habitually incorporating sustainable practices—may want to begin being mindful of their waste on a regular basis. Simple technology that helps an individual log their daily conserved waste can promote and instill environmentally considerate behavior.

A mobile application would be the most efficient means of logging or tracking as this would allow portability and ease of access to the waste log. While there are existing applications for logging your day-to-day sustainable activities—Recycle Coach, Wastify, and RecycleNation—the current apps do not offer much in way of motivation or incentive for consumers who do not use sustainable practices regularly. Many other applications, however, use in-app incentive strategies to motivate users to continue use. This includes app customization, leveling systems, avatar customization, icons, and bonus features. An incentive/motivator could be effective in promoting existing habitually sustainable users to use this specific app and non-habitually sustainable users to transition to habitual behavior. This idea is best echoed in the following:

Often the key to spreading sustainable consumer behaviors is to first break bad habits and then encourage good ones… Companies can use design features to eliminate negative habits and substitute positive ones. The simplest and probably most effective approach is to make sustainable behavior the default option. (White, “The Elusive Green Consumer”)

Following this, the desired outcome would be an increase in the use of sustainable practices in the user of the application on an individual scale and the efficient logging of conserved waste. This solution would not lessen the severity of the large amounts of waste already produced but promote the ongoing trend of concern and consideration for the current state of our environment.

Works Cited

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