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LUMINOUS INSIGHTS

Commentary

Reclaiming the Tap, Curbing Single-Use Bottled Water: An Agenda for Research and Policy

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ABSTRACT

The dramatic global growth of bottled water over the past five decades, particularly in nations with nearly universal access to high-quality, low-cost public tap water, has generated a host of harmful environmental impacts, including a substantial contribution to the crisis of single-use plastic pollution, as well as negative social and economic impacts due to its far higher cost and unequal patterns of distrust in tap water. More recently, bottled water's rapid spread has produced a major backlash, which is increasingly linked to the broader reaction against single-use plastics overall. A surge of activity by local governments, civil society, and private businesses—employing a combination of policy change, regulation, education, promotion, and social marketing—has emerged with the aim of curtailing bottled water sales and consumption, expanding access to free drinking water in public spaces, and restoring trust in and consumption of tap water. This commentary reviews several key bodies of scholarship and outlines the scale, causes, and consequences of bottled water's dramatic spread and of growing public distrust in tap water. It examines a range of responses, including campaigns to increase tap water consumption, restrict sales and consumption of single-use bottled water by governments, institutions, and individuals, and expand access to public tap water, profiling several examples of such initiatives. These efforts have spread worldwide and achieved substantial reach and momentum. The discussion takes stock of these developments and suggests potential implications and research directions for scholars of sustainability, consumer behavior, and other fields.

KEYWORDS

Tap Water, Bottled Water, Refilling, Policy, Single-Use Plastics, Social Movements

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1. Introduction

The dramatic global growth of bottled water over the past five decades, and in particular the beverage industry's success in normalizing its widespread consumption across nations with nearly universal access to high-quality, low-cost public tap water, surely counts as one of the more

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remarkable feats of marketing ever achieved.[1] Bottled water is now by far the world's most consumed packaged beverage. However, its ubiquity has produced a host of harmful environmental impacts, including dramatically higher energy, climate, and water footprints compared to public tap water, and a substantial contribution to the global crisis of single-use plastic pollution, as well as negative social and economic impacts due to its far higher cost and unequal patterns of distrust in tap water supplies.

Yet more recently bottled water's rapid spread has generated a major backlash, which is increasingly linked to the broader reaction against single-use plastics overall. A surge of activity by local governments, civil society, and also private businesses—employing a combination of policy change, regulation, education, promotion, and social marketing—has emerged with the aim of curtailing bottled water sales and consumption, expanding access to free drinking water in public spaces, and restoring trust in and consumption of tap water.

The following section reviews several key bodies of scholarship, beginning with literature on sustainable consumption and debates over the potential for sustainable capitalism. It then outlines the scale, causes, and consequences of bottled water's dramatic spread and of growing public distrust in tap water. In the third section I examine a range of responses to these dynamics, including campaigns to increase tap water consumption; efforts to restrict sales and consumption of single-use bottled water by governments, institutions, and individuals; and initiatives to expand access to public tap water—which collectively constitute what I term movements to "reclaim the tap." These efforts have spread worldwide and achieved substantial reach and momentum. I profile several examples of such local, national, and even international initiatives. The discussion section takes stock of these developments and suggests potential implications and research directions for scholars of sustainability, consumer behavior, and related fields.

[1]This paper mainly addresses bottled water's role in settings where public tap water is largely reliable and safe, and coverage nearly universal. The context in many parts of the global South, as well as some communities within wealthy nations, is distinct. In those settings, widespread dependence on costly packaged water for drinking is a more complex problem, where the inability of some governments to build or maintain reliably safe public water supply systems (often despite the political will to do so) can be a result of colonial legacies, the extraction of wealth through debt and unequal trade, fiscal austerity imposed by creditors, or other structural causes. Yet such dependence represents a barrier to realizing the human right to water.

2. Context and Key Literature

The role and relative importance of state, market, and civil society actors in influencing social, political, and environmental change, and the interactions among them, is a focus of debate for scholars in many disciplines. For example, White and coauthors address the potential of these three realms in their outline of a research trajectory for the future of sustainability marketing (White et al., 2025, pp. 4–5). They consider the relationship between "system-driven" efforts utilizing law and regulation (e.g., extended producer responsibility laws, recycling mandates, product bans);"consumer-driven" initiatives or campaigns by advocacy groups and social movements; and "business-driven" initiatives, principally voluntary efforts such as sustainability reporting and green supply-chain management.

The potential for business to meaningfully advance genuine sustainability is a highly contested topic, including within the subfield of environmental sociology. The model of a virtuous synergy between state, capital, and civil society, resulting in a greener economy, echoes the approach of ecological modernization theory (EM), which asserts that an "environmental state" can emerge from the interplay between business, governmental, and nongovernmental actors (Fisher & Freudenburg, 2001; Mol et al., 2014). EM has been heavily criticized by political-economy scholars, who view it as a naively optimistic model that does not correspond to the reality of governmental policy and industrial practice, which tends toward a "treadmill of production" with continually expanding environmental impacts (e.g., Gould et al., 2004). They also contend that it cannot account for current global trends including widespread environmental deregulation, growing corporate power, or catastrophic climate change.

One sticking point in the debate between these starkly opposing views is the potential for more sustainable corporate practices to evolve or emerge organically or voluntarily, as opposed to being compelled through strict regulation (by governmental bodies necessarily free from regulatory capture) and/or by pressure from social movements. Nonetheless, it is valuable to examine specific sustainability initiatives that do in practice incorporate all three sectors. The initiatives to reclaim the tap that are the focus of this article encompass each of these realms to greater or lesser degree, in most cases with a central role for public policy and regulation.

2.1. Causes, Consequences, and Impacts of Bottled Water's Global Growth

Since the late 1970s, bottled water has transformed from a luxury niche product into the world's most consumed packaged beverage, with annual sales in 2025 of over $360 billion worldwide and $50 billion in the United States. U.S. consumers drink an average of 178 liters (47 gallons) per capita of bottled water annually, and one in five now shun the tap entirely for drinking water (Jaffee, 2024; Rosinger, 2022). Yet bottled water also generates major negative environmental externalities, including an energy footprint up to 2,000 times higher than public tap water (Gleick & Cooley, 2009) an overall environmental footprint up to 3,500 times greater (Villanueva et al., 2021), substantial water use in manufacturing, and a significant contribution to the global plastic pollution crisis. Roughly 700 billion single-use plastic beverage bottles per year are consumed and disposed of worldwide, of which packaged water constitutes the largest share (Laville & Taylor, 2017). Beverage bottles are the number one ocean garbage item collected in coastal surveys (Ocean Conservancy, 2026), representing up to half of all marine plastic waste (Five Gyres, 2017).

In most parts of the wealthy nations of the global North, bottled water is on average no safer than public tap water, and sometimes less so (Gleick, 2010). It contains much higher levels of microplastic and nanoplastic fragments than tap water (Sajedi et al., 2025), and common PET plastic bottles can leach harmful estrogenic chemicals under some conditions (Sax, 2010). Ironically, almost two-thirds of bottled water sold in the United States, and a lesser portion worldwide, is sourced from already-treated municipal water supplies (Jaffee, 2023). Yet the resources available to public water utilities to educate consumers about high tap water quality and safety pale in comparison to bottled water firms' marketing budgets, creating an uneven playing field in shaping attitudes toward drinking water. This disparity suggests the great need for effective strategies to address public perceptions of tap water safety and sustainability.

While the growth of bottled water consumption is often portrayed as a simple story of manufactured need, its spread in places with abundant safe tap water involves a more complex interaction between social and political trends, opportunistic marketing, and branding that has shifted social norms and perceptions of drinking water (Hawkins, 2017). While advertising associating this product with youth, health, and fitness plays a key role, the most important factor driving consumers to bottled water is fear of public tap water (Jaffee, 2023). These fears are augmented by a strain of bottled water marketing that explicitly or subtly casts doubt on tap water safety.

This is compounded by genuine pressures on public water systems. In the U.S., a 50-year disinvestment trend has nearly eliminated federal support for drinking water infrastructure, pushing the fiscal burden onto state and local governments and leading to aging pipes, delayed maintenance, and soaring water bills. High–profile crises of unsafe or toxic tap water in communities such as Flint, Michigan; Jackson, Mississippi; and Walkerton, Ontario further increase public distrust about tap water safety beyond the affected areas, and represent a windfall for the bottled water industry. Nonetheless, over 90% of water systems in the U.S. consistently meet all health-related federal safety standards (Allaire et al., 2018). These dynamics pose a major challenge for drinking water utilities, local governments, and public health and environmental advocates, who must thread the needle between acknowledging real threats to drinking water safety without unduly stoking fear, while working to remedy the root causes of distrust in tap water.

Yet that rising distrust is not evenly distributed. In the U.S., low-income and non-white adults, who are disproportionately exposed to tap water safety problems (Bae & Lynch, 2023; Switzer & Teodoro, 2018), express the greatest distrust in tap water, avoid the tap at higher rates, and spend the most to consume bottled water (Pierce & Gonzalez, 2017; Rosinger et al., 2022; Teodoro et al., 2022). However, bottled water costs hundreds to thousands of times more than the equivalent volume of tap water, and dependence on it exacerbates economic and racial inequality (Jaffee, 2024; Javidi & Pierce, 2018). Tap water avoidance is also associated with higher consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and other public health concerns (Gorelick et al., 2011; Rosinger et al., 2018).

Thus, the dramatic global growth of single-use packaged water, combined with falling consumption of and trust in public tap water—a substance with a vastly lower environmental and economic impact—represents a major linked problem of sustainability, public health, and social justice.

3. Responses to Single-Use Bottled Water, Tap Water Distrust and Lack of Access

3.1. Initiatives to Reduce or Restrict Single-Use Plastics

Especially since China's momentous 2018 decision to ban imports of waste plastics, local governments, particularly in the global North—who are largely responsible for providing waste and recycling services—have been forced to contend

with huge backups of unrecyclable plastics. This has amplified public concern about the proliferation of plastic in the environment and generated a worldwide burst of policy change, including bans and restrictions on various types of single-use plastics at the local, state/provincial, national, and even supranational levels. The most commonly banned or restricted items to date are plastic bags, cutlery, straws, sachets, and polystyrene containers, among other products.

Borg et al. (2022) survey literature on such interventions to reduce single-use plastics, dividing them into two categories: policy and regulation, including product bans or phase-outs, recycled content mandates, and extended producer responsibility (EPR) laws; and initiatives to create voluntary behavior change, among them consumer information and education campaigns by both NGOs and governments. Yet with few exceptions, the major wave of national and local policy action around single-use plastics has stopped short of restricting or even significantly regulating ubiquitous plastic beverage bottles—of which bottled water constitutes the biggest share. However, that has recently begun to change, as I describe below.

3.2. Initiatives to Promote Increased Tap Water Consumption

A second body of literature, largely in public health, nutrition, and environmental and health psychology, examines case studies of specific efforts to increase tap water consumption in a range of institutional or public settings. These include initiatives in public schools (Altman et al., 2020; Kenney et al., 2020), neighborhood recreation centers (Lawman et al., 2020; Rosenthal et al., 2023), and restaurants (Dorigoni & Bonini, 2023). Some case studies are explicitly analyzed as examples of social marketing programs to increase trust in and use of tap water, such as the campaign by the municipal water utility Águas do Porto in Portugal (Dias & Balonas, 2017).

The bulk of this work frames these efforts as interventions aimed at influencing individual attitudes or water consumption behaviors, often within a specific population, as opposed to comprising part of a larger social movement to influence legislation or public policy. One partial exception is scholarship examining European national-scale initiatives to promote tap water consumption under the EU's Drinking Water Directive, which mandates that governments must provide access to free drinking water in public spaces (Tosun et al., 2020). Warner and coauthors divide such efforts into three tiers: policies, behavioral interventions focused on the individual level, and "setting-based interventions…to change local food [and water] environments" (Warner et al., 2023, p. 962). This schema, which emphasizes the role of macro-, meso-, and micro-level changes, is useful in analyzing the wider range of initiatives that I discuss next.

3.3. Initiatives to Restrict Bottled Water and Expand Public Access to Tap Water

Since the turn of the century, and particularly in the past decade, programs and movements to "reclaim the tap" have emerged around the world. These initiatives consist of a constellation of efforts that span the governmental, nonprofit, and private sectors. Hundreds of city and local governments, and thousands of universities, schools, and nonprofit institutions, have banned bottled water purchases for government or organizational use and in many cases also prohibited its sale on public property or on their premises. A small but growing number of local governments have gone further, outlawing all commercial sales of single-use bottled water by private businesses. These policies are frequently accompanied by expanding access to clean free tap water by installing new filtered drinking fountains and refilling stations in public spaces, distributing refillable bottles, and promoting tap water quality and consumption.

Efforts to reclaim the tap also include private businesses serving free tap water even to non-customers, with logos or window stickers to identify them, and smartphone apps allowing users to find their nearest refill sites easily (the Refill Return app, for example, claims to list over 330,000 water refill points worldwide). Public interest in tap water refilling is growing rapidly, with more than 60 percent of U.S. residents and 85 percent of Canadians regularly using refillable bottles, stoking demand for additional places to fill them.

The centerpiece of these efforts is typically public policy. Nonprofit advocates and environmental campaigners often find local governments to be fertile ground for policy change, and they frequently collaborate with sympathetic public officials. The communities enacting these policies range from large cities including Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Munich, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Toronto, Vancouver, Montréal, and South Delhi, India, to small towns and rural hamlets.

Local governments—which in much of the world are responsible for both drinking water provision and solid waste management—have several motivations to enact these policies. Their appeal can be fiscal (eliminating spending on bottled water in public facilities, and cutting recycling

and disposal costs for plastic bottle waste), environmental (reducing plastic and microplastic pollution), or political (defending their public water utilities, and using public procurement policy to make a statement along with other communities). For some cities the motivations also include issues of public health and social justice (reducing tap water avoidance and dependence on costly bottled water, especially among structurally disadvantaged communities).

However, if there is virtually nowhere to find safe, convenient tap water in public places—as is the case in many places where drinking fountains have been removed, shut off, or allowed to deteriorate—banning or restricting sales of single-use bottled water can be problematic. For that reason, policies curtailing or banning bottled water typically must be preceded or accompanied by investments to expand access to tap water in public, commonly by installing attractive new drinking fountains (many with added bottle refilling fixtures) or stand-alone refill stations.

For example, in Los Angeles, California, since 2019 multiple city agencies (led by the water and power utility LADWP, along with the parks and streets departments, L.A. Unified School District, and other entities) have engaged in a major push to install hundreds of new filtered refilling stations (nearly 400 to date, with most located in disadvantaged communities), and refurbish existing fountains. This complements the city's ban on municipal purchases of single-use bottled water and its sale on city property. The city of San Francisco's Drink Tap program, led by the Public Utility Commission,is a similar cross-cutting initiative, complementing its 2014 bottled water ban. Both cities' international airports (SFO and LAX) also ban sales of single-use plastic bottled water.

Accompanying these infrastructure investments are often campaigns to increase trust in and consumption of public tap water—frequently through cooperation between public water utilities and local governments. In some cases, still more ambitious cross-sectoral efforts have developed, with governmental, nonprofit, and private partners collaborating on educational and promotional campaigns that include unified branding, signage, and messaging.

For example, Paris, France's public water utility Eau de Paris has installed hundreds of new fountains and water refill stations and launched a promotional campaign titled "Here, I Choose Paris Water," with an online map of refill sites, including over 1,000 participating businesses. In California's Lake Tahoe area, an environmental NGO (Keep Tahoe Blue), the regional water utility association, and the city of South Lake Tahoe—which since 2024 has prohibited commercial businesses from selling single-use bottled water—collaborate in a campaign to curtail plastic bottle waste, promote the area's high-quality tap water, and expand refilling points. Two nearby towns, Truckee and Mammoth Lakes, passed similar ordinances soon afterward.

Some of these efforts are being linked internationally. The Blue Communities project, which originated in Canada, now includes over 80 cities in 10 countries that have adopted parallel policies including banning government purchases of single-use bottled water and its sale on public property, along with dozens of universities, schools, nonprofits, water utilities, and other entities. Table 1 offers a typology of the policies and actions taken by governmental, civil society, and business actors, along with examples of each.

3.4. Assessing the Scale and Impact of Initiatives to Reclaim the Tap

Taken together, how significant are these developments? The population affected by these initiatives and policies is substantial and growing. As of late 2026, the 115 Canadian cities that have enacted policies banning bottled water purchases by local government (and in many, also its sale on public property) are home to approximately 14 million people—one-third of the national population. In the U.S., the 24 cities with similar policies cover a population of over 18 million. Adding the two U.S. state governments, two Canadian provinces, and several county governments in both nations that have banned bottled water purchases increases those totals considerably. On a further level of ambition, the 34 towns and cities (all but two in the U.S., with a high concentration in Massachusetts) that have implemented full bans on commercial sales of single-use plastic water bottles as of this writing are home to 379,000 people—a figure that has nearly doubled since 2021 (Jaffee, 2023).

While the great majority of initiatives to restrict packaged water and promote tap water consumption so far are concentrated in North America, Europe, and Australasia, more recently governmental bans on single-use plastic bottled water have been adopted across the global South, including in Bali, Indonesia, and the Indian states of Assam, Maharashtra, and Kerala.

Depending on the criteria used and the status of policy implementation, upwards of 300 million people worldwide now reside in municipalities and regions where governments have banned single-use plastic bottled water in some form. And the pace is picking up: more than half of all the jurisdictions with these policies have passed or strengthened them since 2019. Beyond these figures are many more cities that

Table 1 | Policies and Actions to Restrict Single-Use Bottled Water (BW) and Increase Tap Water Access and Consumption

Entity	Policy/Action	Examples	Comments
Municipal and regional gov'ts; water utilities	Ban or phase out bottled water (BW) purchases by government bodies	139 municipalities and 4 states/provinces in U.S. and Canada; many local, regional, state gov'ts worldwide	Ends purchasing of single-use BW for public offices, meetings, vending machines, etc.
	Ban BW sales on public property (vendors in parks, plazas, cafeterias, etc); require public events to serve tap water	Many of the same local and regional gov'ts as above	Public events connect to public water supply via portable refill stations
	Ban all commercial sales of single-use bottled water	34 municipalities in U.S., Canada, Australia	Some also ban free BW distribution; volume thresholds vary
	Require restaurants to provide free tap water on demand	Spain, France, Portugal, Romania, New Zealand; (also UK and Australia, if alcohol served); some local governments	
	Change building codes to require more fountains and refill stations in new or renovated public (and semi-public) buildings	Many municipal, state/provincial governments	E.g., gov't buildings, libraries, schools, public housing, private apartments, businesses
	Airports ban single-use plastic bottled water sales	SFO (San Francisco); LAX (Los Angeles)	Accompanied by new refill stations
	Install new/refurbished fountains and/or refill stations in public spaces (parks, plazas, schools, etc.)	San Francisco (Drink Tap Pgm.); Los Angeles (Hydration Station Incentive Pgm.); Paris; London, New York, etc.	Test water quality and communicate results; Unified signage/branding to identify source, increase trust
	Distribute or sell (logo/branded) metal refillable water bottles	Many city gov'ts, water utilities (e.g., Choose Tap, Australia)	Also nonprofits, universities, public schools
Supra-national and national governments	EU countries are required to make free drinking water available in public buildings, provide access to fountains or refill stations in other public spaces.	European Union Drinking Water Directive	By 2029, EU nations must report regularly on actions taken to improve promotion of and access to drinking water.
Universities and schools	Ban single-use BW sales on university campuses, in schools	Many universities in N. America, Europe, Australia, etc. (e.g., entire UC, CSU systems in California); primary/secondary schools, school districts	University or school buildings, incl. cafeterias, dining residence halls, vending machines, etc.
	Install new filtered fountains and/or refilling stations	" " (e.g., Detroit, Michigan public schools)	Test water and publish/ communicate results
	Campaigns to communicate quality of tap water, promote refilling	" "	Can include signage, taste tests, advertising, logo refillable bottles
Nonprofit organizations	(Similar actions/policies to universities and schools)		
Private businesses	Install filtered water refilling stations on premises	Many small businesses; hotels; grocery, retail, restaurant chains	
	Promote free water refills without purchase; identify via window stickers, smartphone apps	(see Multiple Actors, below)	Local, regional, or national initiatives

Table 1 | Policies and Actions to Restrict Single-Use Bottled Water (BW) and Increase Tap Water Access and Consumption (Continued)

Entity	Policy/Action	Examples	Comments
Private businesses (cont.)	End sales of single-use plastic BW	Retailers incl. New Leaf Markets, New Seasons, PCC Community Markets, Natural Grocery Co.	
Multiple actors (gov't, utilities, nonprofit, private)	Smartphone apps and online maps to locate free water refilling sites in cities, regions, nations, or worldwide	Refill Return (global); Blue W (Canada); Refill NZ; Freewa (Croatia); many local governments	Many initiatives also use window stickers to identify participating refill sites, institutions, businesses
	Promotion/education campaigns re tap water quality to increase trust, consumption	Here, I Choose Paris Water (Paris); Choose Tap (Australia); Drink Tahoe Tap (Lake Tahoe area, California)	Frequently involves public water utilities/providers, local gov'ts; some include nonprofits, businesses
International coordination	Link governments, educational institutions, nonprofits adopting similar policies to reclaim the tap	Blue Communities project: over 80 municipalities in 10 countries, plus many universities, schools, water utilities, nonprofits, faith organizations	Municipalities pass a package of policies, including to ban or phase out the sale of bottled water in municipal facilities and at municipal events.

have not so far restricted bottled water but are actively installing new refilling points and/or promoting tap water. Yet despite their significant scope and geographic coverage, to date there is little published research addressing such initiatives that pair the expansion and revalorization of public tap water with efforts to restrict bottled water.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that in some communities in the global North and elsewhere in the world where tap water is not reliably safe or potable, restoring trust in tap water is not merely a matter of effective education, promotion, counter-marketing, or combating misperceptions. In such settings, repairing the underlying safety and infrastructural problems (including unsafe "premise plumbing" inside some homes and institutional buildings) is an essential precursor to restoring trust in public water supplies (Javidi & Pierce, 2018, p. 6109).

The cumulative impact of these linked trends—growing public opposition to single-use plastics including bottled water, increasing use of refillable bottles and demand for additional tap water refilling sites, the development of phone apps and maps to locate refill points easily, and rapidly increasing actions by governments, water utilities, nonprofits, and businesses to restrict bottled water and expand access to tap water in public—is now beginning to become apparent.

After more than 45 years of nonstop growth (except for two years during the financial crisis), since 2019 the per-capita volume of bottled water consumption in nearly all nations of the global North—and much of the South as well—has leveled off, and in most is now declining. Worldwide, the total volume of bottled water consumption is projected to remain flat in the coming years (despite population growth), a development that would have been unimaginable even a decade ago. This represents a major sea change. Beverage industry representatives have identified the public backlash against single-use plastics and movements to promote water refilling as the leading cause of this transformation (O'Mahony, 2020). One market report observed that "The shift away from bottled water to refillable water bottles is an existential threat to bottled water brands" (Mintel, 2020, p. 30). These changing dynamics have influenced industry strategy, including the 2021 decision by Nestlé, formerly the leading packaged water firm, to sell off its North American bottled water business (Ewing, 2020).

4. Discussion and Future Research

How can movements to "reclaim the tap" in their various forms be conceptualized, and what are the implications for policy and for research on sustainability and consumption? A look at the geographic and temporal spread of the policies and initiatives described above (especially when viewed on a map) indicates a case of policy contagion—the diffusion of parallel policies and laws across similar local governments and institutions. Social movements and environmental campaigners have frequently found local governments to be the most accessible and democratic venue for enacting in-

novative policies that may be blocked at higher levels of government due to entrenched bureaucracy or the power of vested interests.

This approach can also be understood as a type of boycott (aimed at a product rather than a firm), but with local and subnational governments joining individual consumers as the actors refusing to purchase the product. In contrast to other forms of consumer activism and green consumption—typically a "buy-cott" advocating the consumption of more sustainable or ethical products or brands—this represents an anti-consumption strategy (Inês & Moreira, 2025), which rejects a market product deemed unnecessary and replaces it with a public good provided on a nonprofit basis.

Efforts to reclaim the tap, across the public and private sectors and in civil society, also constitute a form of decommodification (Jaffee, 2023). Their effect is to at least partially return drinking water from a relatively costly for-profit commodity with a very high ecological footprint back to its previous status as a free or nearly free public good with a far lower environmental impact.

In sum, these initiatives involve a wide range of both new and traditional modes of accessing public drinking water: city- and nonprofit-funded water fountains and refill stations, private businesses serving free tap water to both customers and noncustomers, and technology enabling people to find these various water access points while out and about. This amounts to the construction of a unique hybrid: a physical/virtual and public/private/civil society infrastructure of free tap water access.

4.1. Implications and Directions for Future Research

The above observations suggest several potential fruitful avenues for research on these topics. To begin with, it would be valuable to better understand how consumer-citizens' rejection of single-use bottled water fits within the schema of anti-consumption and non-consumption (Cherrier et al., 2011; Inês & Moreira, 2025). Aside from the purchasing of refillable bottles (a form of reuse), these efforts do not constitute green or ethical consumption, but rather a rejection of the consumption of drinking water as a private market good entirely.

Second, researchers can contribute to understanding the key factors shaping drinking water consumption norms, beliefs, and practices, and the most effective ways to influence them. Social norms are of particular interest, as they operate and are shaped at the meso-level of society, particularly through communities, social movements, and institutions. White and coauthors identify five key psychological factors leading consumers to adopt more sustainable behaviors and practices; among these are social influences, which include both social norms and social identities (White et al., 2019). Other scholarship in environmental psychology and behavioral science similarly supports the importance of leveraging social norms to influence pro-environmental practices (e.g., Constantino et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021).

While a fairly robust body of literature exists on the causes of distrust in tap water and bottled water consumption, far less is known about the opposite phenomenon: the increasing rejection of single-use bottled water (particularly among some segments in the global North) and the return to consuming tap water and carrying refillable bottles. Better understanding how social norms and identities operate in this context would be valuable. For example, are such consumers' choices primarily a reaction to the environmental crisis of single-use plastics, an affirmation of environmental identity at the individual or group level, a rejection of the commodification of drinking water, a combination of the above, or other factors entirely? Understanding the types of messages that work best to denormalize bottled water consumption and revalorize drinking from the tap in different regional/national contexts and socioeconomic groups is important.

Third, there is a need to assess the effectiveness of social marketing strategies for tap water (refilling) education and promotion campaigns, which form a key plank of many efforts to reclaim the tap. Gauging the impact of a range of approaches in shifting drinking water consumption perceptions, norms, and practices would greatly benefit local governments, water utilities, and nonprofits, who often must design and implement such efforts on modest budgets. Identifying which foci are most persuasive for particular demographic groups, and in which settings, will be vital: for example, messages focused on the lower environmental and climate footprint of tap versus bottled water, health and safety concerns regarding bottled water (e.g., microplastics, leaching), tap water's far lower economic cost, or other issues. Schools and universities are of special note here: as semi-contained institutions they represent an important site for the formation of norms and attitudes, and are particularly well suited to educational and promotional efforts such as widely distributing refillable bottles and disseminating messages about tap water quality. Another important issue is to understand how consumers do or could use technologies to find and access water refilling sites (such as phone apps, maps, or other tools), how those can be made

more informative and accessible, and how they could better be integrated with local governments' or water utilities' existing data and maps of refilling sites.

A penultimate question is to analyze the current and potential roles of various social actors in efforts to reclaim the tap and restrict single-use plastic bottles. How and where do (or can) nonprofits, activists and advocates, local governments, public water utilities, and businesses collaborate on such efforts in ways that leverage the relative strengths and freedoms of each, and where do their interests diverge? In particular, the role of social movements vis-a-vis other actors is an important issue. White and coauthors write that "while interest in social movements within marketing has been increasing, more research is needed to explore the psychological and social drivers that affect consumer responsiveness to advocacy efforts, which can give deeper insights into designing more effective campaigns" (White et al., 2025, p. 6).

Such collaboration is especially important for local governments and public water utilities in order to counter anti-tap water messaging or advertising from industry. Given that their meager budgets often put them at a disadvantage and some may be restricted in what they are able to say publicly, how can they best use those funds and their comparative strengths? For example, local governments and water utilities have the ability to message or advertise at low or no cost on public property (including on water refilling infrastructure itself), on public transit, on social media, via inserts in water bills, and other approaches. At the same time, some kinds of messages may be more effectively delivered by NGOs, activists, public health or environmental advocates, and other actors. Pierce and Gonzalez write that in view of the influence and power of the bottled water industry, "improving perception [of tap water] may require that proponents of tap water employ more adversarial, fact-based tactics in debunking the myths about alternative sources of water supply. Given its potentially confrontational nature, this is likely to be a role which nonprofits rather than public agencies are best suited to play" (Pierce & Gonzalez, 2017, p. 9).

5. Conclusion

The velocity of bottled water's spread in only a few decades, and the present ubiquity of single-use packaged water in societies with ample access to abundant safe public tap water, points to the powerful role of marketing in shaping social norms and attitudes. Nonetheless, that dramatic shift also indicates the potential for an equally rapid countermovement.

Given the vastly higher environmental impact of bottled water in comparison with public tap water, for many critics this product epitomizes the notion of unsustainability. Those environmental harms have been the primary impetus for the growing opposition to single-use bottled water and the emergence of movements to restrict its presence and restore trust in the shared public good of tap water; in many places that has now been supplemented by concerns about packaged water's impact on public health and social justice.

As this article illustrates, these policies and initiatives are spreading rapidly—particularly in communities with consistently high drinking water quality—and studying them can yield important lessons to inform and strengthen similar efforts in other cities, regions, and nations, as well as valuable insights for scholars of sustainability, consumption, and related fields. Where actual problems with tap water quality and safety persist, however, a critical first step in addressing the root causes of persistent distrust is to remedy the underlying infrastructure and underfunding issues.

All of the elements in the initiatives profiled above—public education and promotion about tap water quality, expanding access to free tap water in public spaces, and shifting drinking water norms, perceptions, and practices—are arguably essential for curtailing the major sustainability impacts of single-use bottled water. They are also central to realizing the potential to achieve affordable and equitable access to safe drinking water for all: the core of the Human Right to Water, formally declared by the United Nations in 2010.

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Daniel Jaffee: The author was responsible for conceptualization, writing the original draft, and reviewing and editing the manuscript.

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