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Empowerment, Waste and New Consumption Communities

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Empowerment, Waste and New Consumption Communities

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the diverse and complementary resistance and waste-reduction practices adopted by UK-based New Consumption Communities, and whether such behaviours empower them to achieve their environmental and social goals.

Design/methodology/approach – The methodology can be broadly classified as critical ethnography, which acknowledges the researcher's own subjectivity, how the informants are treated and represented, and the study's wider context (Peñaloza, 1994). A participant-observer role is employed and six distinct New Consumption Communities are explored.

Findings – It is suggested that through their resistance and empowerment, as well as a reconnection to production, the communities are able to implement alternatives to the wasteful practices of mainstream consumption behaviour, and achieve (partial) autonomy from the hegemonic forces of the market.

Originality/value – This paper's original perspective on waste is not limited to a small group of consumers, and thus should interest marketers and policy makers engaged in the advancement of sustainability and green marketing.

Keywords – Consumer Empowerment; Voluntary Simplicity; Waste; Ethnography

Paper type – Research paper

Empowerment, Waste and New Consumption Communities

Introduction

Recent marketing practice has increased its focus on relationship marketing, largely enabled by new information technologies. These practices, in turn, are considered empowering to consumers (*Crowned at Last*, 2005). However, while marketing has remained innovative, there endures much rhetoric and little reflexivity about what has been done (Szmigin, 2003; Knights *et al.*, 1994). Although marketers may listen more to consumers, efforts have mainly been directed at controlling them, with scant involvement by consumers in the production process (Szmigin, 2003; Williams, 2002), at a time in which, paradoxically, consumers are increasingly sophisticated and principled (Titus and Bradford, 1996). Coincidentally consumers and resistance groups have been empowered by the same information technologies as marketing, able to exchange increased levels of information about brands and their producers (Reed, 1999). This has led to greater scrutiny of marketing practices that are seen as detrimental to society, including issues directly connected to environmental degradation such as increasing amounts of waste.

Waste is a major environmental threat; crammed landfills contaminate the soil and streams, and pollute the air. In the UK household solid waste may represent only 8% of all solid waste generated, but it is part of a much larger problem (Jones, 2004): for every ton of waste generated by

consumers, five tonnes have been generated by manufacturers, another twenty during raw materials extraction (Meadows, Meadows and Randers, 1992 *in* Cooper, 1994). Most waste is derived from developed industrial processes, which in turn create 'disposable lifestyles' that also generate considerable waste (Singh and Lakhan, 1989). While there is some intention by consumers to address waste and sustainability, there remain barriers to their commitment to action, including apathy and ignorance (Ross, 2005; Heap, 2005). A lack of effective, inclusive, convenient council recycling initiatives undermines efforts, exacerbated by unnecessary and un-recyclable packaging, premature product obsolescence, costly repairs, faddish fashion consumption cycles, and ineffectual commitment by marketers and government to sustainable development. This leaves many consumers feeling helpless to significantly improve their own waste reduction behaviour. Yet for some 'resistant' consumers, particularly ethical consumers and ethical voluntary simplifiers, concern about waste has always been fundamental (see Etzioni, 1998; Doherty and Etzioni, 2003; Elgin and Mitchell, 1977 for definitions of voluntary simplicity; Shaw and Newholm, 2002 for ethical simplicity). Historically they have employed a range of waste-reduction and disposal strategies that go beyond recycling and include reducing, reusing, repairing and composting (Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin, 2005a; 2005b; Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Dobscha, 1998). Yet the literature to date eschews addressing waste and disposal behaviour as potentially empowering to these consumers.

Our aim in this paper is to widen current knowledge on waste reduction strategies and their empowerment potential. First we review the relevant literature on consumer empowerment, resistance and waste, as well as the diverse and complementary waste-reduction strategies and behaviours adopted by environmentally-conscious consumer communities in the UK. Using a participant-observation methodology, six distinct New Consumption Communities (Szmigin and Carrigan, 2003) are explored. Findings suggest that by resisting some marketplace interactions and regaining some control over the production of what they consume, they are able to make waste management choices that offer much in terms of empowerment and environmental soundness.

The Consumer Empowerment Paradox

The dominant discourse that certain marketing practices (e.g. one-to-one marketing, customisation) have empowered consumers is widely employed by the business literature (for recent examples see *Crowned at last*, 2005; *Consumer power*, 2005). 'Sophisticated' consumers are said to proactively use their rights and knowledge of the mechanisms of the market, especially in cyberspace, to shift the power balance in the producer-consumer relationship. But have they?

Humphries (1996a) argues that the literature on empowerment within the social sciences is paradoxical and inconclusive with no consensus on its meaning. This debate continues in the business literature. On one hand, consumers are portrayed as sovereign through the product choices they

can make, empowered by their ability to access Internet and media information (Jarvis, 1998; Smith, 1995). On the other hand, some authors take a critical stance towards consumer empowerment. For instance, Rosenthal *et al.* (2001) highlight the diverse and fragmented ways in which consumers are discursively represented in different strands of business literature through an elaborate typology (including the sovereign consumer, the 'consumer of sexuality' and the 'spy consumer'). Hodgson (2001, p.120) points to the importance of such categorisations as 'active constructions', for in his view they end up shaping, rather than reflecting, reality; he emphasises the role of "marketing practices in the creation of 'the customer' as an object whose freedom (and duty) to choose and to consume allows it to be governed". Drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality, Hodgson sees consumption as both empowering and manipulative, a practice of liberty that allows for subjection and control. Consumer education (and knowledge), he argues, rather than being empowering and liberating, reflects the neo-liberal viewpoint that "in order to act freely, the subject must first be shaped, guided and moulded into one capable of responsibly exercising that freedom through systems of domination" (Dean, 1999, p.165, in Hodgson, 2001, p.118).

Fitchett and McDonagh (2001) argue that marketing should be viewed as a hegemonic practice even in the context of e-commerce: as consumers become more empowered by the Internet so do marketers, who can gather information on consumers more effectively, and without their permission. Marketing and relationship marketing may claim that the consumer is king, but in reality organisational and marketing strategies

remain determined by managers and such discourse only contributes to neutralise the differences in power (Fitchett and McDonagh, 2001). Similarly, Humphries (1996b) argues that an empowerment discourse obscures the sustained (although changing forms of) structural exploitation, and functions as an inhibitor of challenges to this exploitation; a culture of empowerment, she argues, is bound to the interests of the powerful which in turn reinforces the hegemonic group. The discourse on consumer empowerment allows consumers to believe they are empowered when, in reality, they are only reproducing and perpetuating the current power structures and ideologies afforded by marketing hegemony. Acknowledging that consumers are more empowered is accepting that they are further down the power ladder in the marketplace, and because marketing's and managers' ultimate goal is to fulfil their organisational objectives and profit, it is unlikely that they want consumers to be truly empowered (Anderson, 1996).

Although such focus on the manipulative powers of marketing has been said to overstate its effectiveness (Hodgson, 2001), and despite the continued debate on the real extent of consumer power, consumers should not be seen as completely powerless beings (Hodgson, 2001). We must recognise their ability and willingness to resist and even, in some cases, eschew market exchanges. Holt (2002, p.70) suggests that this will be the "only battle worth fighting and winning, the one that sets us free", by "organising resistance against the power trust that owns and manages the brand".

Consumer Resistance as Empowering

Despite the argument above, consumer resistance is often portrayed as empowering. Dobscha (1998; Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001), following de Certeau (1984), acknowledges the marketplace as a “structure of domination” (Dobscha, 1998, p.91). In her study (Dobscha 1998), consumers chose to define themselves in opposition to the dominant consumer culture, finding empowerment in the creation of their ‘new selves’, by devising resistance strategies to avoid what to them were oppressive market interactions. They took control over the production and disposal of some goods by not turning to the marketplace to find answers to problems, but by finding their own journey to solutions. For example, they rejected products the dominant culture deemed essential, and devised their own standards of ‘recommended’ usage amounts. From this they gained an empowering sense of accomplishment and autonomy over their lives, as they dictated their own consumption terms and norms for living, resisting those of the marketplace. The desire for human-scale structures and institutions, and the ability to gain more control over one’s own life were identified by Elgin and Mitchell (1977) as two of the five key values (the other three being material simplicity, awareness of the interconnectedness between humans and the natural environment, and a desire to develop inward, personal growth) underpinning voluntary simplicity (Leonard-Barton, 1981). Holt (2002) also discusses how individuals/groups fight back against marketing’s coercive cultural authority by investing commodities with more particularised meanings and

using them in their own idiosyncratic ways. In this manner, consumers outflank marketers, re-ascribing commodities with oppositional meanings through their consumption and re-usage practices. Holt examines the reflexive and creative resistance, where consumers filter out marketing's influence and, although complete emancipation from the market is not achieved (nor necessarily desired), it is empowering.

Achieving emotional and instrumental independence from the marketplace is an important aspect of autonomy, and consequently, empowerment. *Emotional* autonomy stems from the freedom for the need for approval, and means being able to define oneself rather than being defined by others (McBride, 1990). *Instrumental* autonomy refers to the ability to cope and take action to meet one's often conflicting needs and duties. If consumers are able to resist obeisance to the cultural authority of markets, they are emancipated and empowered (Holt, 2002).

The empowerment potential of resistance is also highlighted by the literature on alternative communities of consumption. Giesler and Pohlmann (2003), for example, bring attention to the alternative and empowering practices performed by such communities (e.g. non-monetary exchanges) and the conflict experienced by consumers with regards to community and market-led interactions. The authors theorise on the hegemonic powers of the market and the need of some consumer groups for de-commoditisation and emancipation. They criticize previous studies' concepts of consumer emancipation as unable "to prove its ability and usefulness to critically inform our understanding of the politically

charged, escapist and distancing construction of communal consumption" (Giesler and Pohlmann, 2003, p.96). They argue that their "vision of consumer emancipation then goes beyond the 'symptoms of distance' on the social surface, to be theorized (...) as the dynamic processes that 'build' the emancipative space of choice as an aim and a consequence of social communication about ideologies, meanings, and values" (Giesler and Pohlmann, 2003, p.96). Kozinets (2002) also explores the tensions between the 'careless market' and consumers' need for more profound social interactions. He is partially critical of the postmodern perspective (Firat and Dholakia, 1998; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Murray and Ozanne, 1991) that consumers can and should emancipate from what is seen as constrained mainstream market consumption culture through community, arguing that such emancipatory ideals seem rather individualistic and hard to reconcile with the community concept. His criticism could be viewed as emanating from the dualism that he and others adopt to analyse the market and community concepts; a more dialogical relationship between the two would enable an enhanced understanding of the empowering potential of resistance efforts.

Indeed, we can argue whether complete emancipation from the market would really empower the consumer. Carabine (1996) suggests that empowerment does not require resistance, challenge or the establishment of a counter discourse to existing power relations. This argument suggests that empowerment may be achieved through embracing existing power structures and conversely that resistance does not guarantee empowerment. Kozinets (2002) argues for more research examining the

limits of consumer emancipation, thus in this paper we seek to understand whether, how and to what level New Consumption Communities are able to empower themselves through, in this instance, the adoption of their own waste management strategies. Does communal life offer greater power of resistance for individuals and can communities counteract the market hegemony by enabling and empowering consumers to work together against the interests of the dominant producers?

Waste as Consumer Resistance and Empowerment Tactics

The resistance behaviours discussed above include a range of waste and disposal tactics, which can be said to go against the consumerist imperative of the market. The most prominent in the marketing and consumer behaviour literature is recycling. Research has mainly centred on quantitative studies of recycling attitudes, behaviours and motivations of American consumers (e.g. Biswas *et al.*, 2000; Pieters *et al.*, 1998; Roberts, 1996; Mobley *et al.*, 1995; Bagozzi and Dabholkar, 1994; Smith, Haugtvedt and Petty, 1994). While critical, recycling is not the only answer to the world's environmental issues; nor is it the only waste and disposal behaviour employed by environmentally conscious consumers. Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin (2005a; 2005b), Shaw and Newholm (2002), and Dobscha (1998) have explored ethical simplifiers' holistic approach to waste-reduction. Tactics included the adoption of simplified lifestyles and a range of individual consumption and post-consumption behaviours such as composting, recycling, extending products' lifecycles by repairing, re-using and creating unintended usages for products, purchasing second-

hand, reducing and avoiding consumption. The Ethical Consumerism Report (2003) cites an annual 15% growth in UK consumer buying for re-use (i.e. charity shops, second-hand clothes) in 2003, worth £1,433 million. A recent UK study focusing upon these and other consumption decisions made by voluntary simplifiers (Young *et. al*, 2004) demonstrated the complexity and challenges involved.

Dolan (2002, p.170) criticises the inadequacy of some contemporary accounts of ethical and sustainable consumption in terms of their “static, individualistic, and rationalistic tendencies”. He stresses the need for accounts of consumption within the “historical flow and flux of social and cultural processes. Such processes encompass their own shifting power relations and struggles, which enable alternative visions of society to emerge” (p.170). Dolan’s view is that the sustainable consumption discourse tends to centre on the notion of the rational individual, and his/her needs and wants and neglects the significance of consumption practices as embodying individuals’ relations with one another. He suggests that “ultimately people have to feel culturally aligned and connected with the meanings of nature”, arguing for an alternative means of self-realization by “seeking to reenergize alternative cultural forms that are not merely individualistic” (p.179) but are also empowering. To address this omission, this paper will explore whether broader waste-reduction strategies are actually employed by communal, ethical voluntary simplifiers. We examine whether simplifier communities experience a cultural alignment and connection with nature that supports more committed waste management behaviour, and whether this results in

empowerment. Given the social and dynamic nature of consumption we would argue, as Dolan (2002, p.171) has, that viewing waste-reduction in a community setting may provide answers by addressing the “space in between actors” in terms of their relations and interdependencies, rather than simply examining the space within social actors (consumers or producers) that has been the remit of past studies.

This Study

Given the gaps in the literature identified above, this paper aims to explore the resistance and waste-reduction tactics adopted by New Consumption Communities in the UK, and whether such behaviours empower them to achieve their environmental goals. Szmigin and Carrigan (2003) argue that production-involved consumers, seeking to voice their concerns and gain a better production-consumption balance (and perhaps also to defy marketing’s hegemony in the marketplace), can develop a sense of community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). The New Consumption Communities concept is a fluid construct, ranging from those communities with limited direct involvement in the production process, i.e. Fairtrade Towns, to those highly committed to various interrelated societal issues, i.e. intentional sustainable communities, in which it is possible to find many ‘ethical simplifiers’ (Shaw and Newholm, 2002). The communities discussed below can be considered to be at the highly-committed end of the New Consumption Communities spectrum, and are mainly adopters of voluntarily simplified lifestyles (although one

community prioritises positive and technological options over 'simplified' ones).

Methodology

This study can be broadly classified as critical ethnographic research. It comprises the contextualised observation of what participants do rather than what they say they do (Robson, 1993), and considers their ability to fully and accurately report on their own behaviour (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). A participant-observer role was adopted, and the researcher was concerned with her own subjectivity, how the informants are treated and represented, and with situating the study in a wider context (Peñaloza, 1994).

Three communities' directories acted as sampling frames. Thirty-four communities were identified as having an environmental focus; such focus has been deemed an important motivation for ethical consumption behaviour and voluntary simplicity. Ten communities were randomly selected and contacted via e-mail, which emphasized the volunteering visit request for research purposes. Five agreed to be researched; the others were either not willing or did not reply. The multiple visits began in February 2004, and ranged from one day to one week in length. A sixth community was later included following much reference to it as an exemplar community. Table I lists and briefly describes the communities visited. The variation, timing and duration of the visits were a result of acknowledging the sensitivities of the different communities, and their

willingness to provide access. A number of informal, short interviews were carried out; newsletters, flyers, business brochures were collected, and the communities' websites continuously analysed and checked for updates. As has been documented (Punch, 1986; Mitchell, 1993; Arnould, 1998; Jackson, 1983; Bulmer, 1982) participant-observation is not a straightforward research method, requiring a high level of ethical sensitivity about the relationships being built, and the information being communicated. Thus, the real names of the researched communities and their informants have been replaced by pseudonyms to guarantee their anonymity and preserve the rapport built to date with community members.

Take in Table I

Findings

Resisting the Market through Control of the Production Process

All the communities have achieved a sense of autonomy (Leonard-Barton, 1981; Elgin and Mitchell, 1977) by regaining some control over the production of what they consume:

"We prefer to do things ourselves, without being tied to outsiders or institutions" (Rose, Woodland).

Spiritual Community, Stone Hall, and Green-Tech are all committed to self-sufficiency, illustrated by their substantial production of vegetables

and fruits for self-consumption. At Spiritual and Stone Hall communities this is accomplished through the designation of gardening roles to members, while everyone at Green-Tech contributes equally to gardening. Sunny Valley and Woodland are also dedicated to growing their own produce, despite their lesser commitment to self-sufficiency. In these communities individuals choose which vegetable(s) or fruit(s) they want to grow in a particular year, and then take charge of that particular task:

“Everyone gets involved in growing things, which prevents alienation... If they like what they are growing they may stick to it or may choose to do something different the following year...” (Susan, Sunny Valley Community).

Such reconnection to production implies reduced dependency on the food market, coupled with increased administrative complexity. However, community members acknowledge they are still part of society:

“Once my father turned to me and said ‘you know, Nicky, out there in the real world...’ and I said, ‘dad, we are also part of society’! I told him about all the book-keeping and accounting we have to do, and that once we join the co-op we all become directors. Then he started to understand that we do our own things but we are also part of the wider society” (Nicky, Sunny Valley).

Operating on the 'edge' of the marketplace, where interaction is inevitable, but minimal, reflects the findings of Dobscha (1998) and Craig-Lees and Hill (2002). The marketplace is less dominant, avoided wherever possible, thus allowing these respondents to choose/resist products based on criteria they deem important.

Control over Production as Waste Minimisation

Such production 'systems' permit food mileage to be minimised, and have two implications for solid waste reduction. Firstly, in-house edible gardens allow for packaging-free food consumption. Secondly, in this way food wastage is reduced, and when bulk harvesting is required the produce is stored in crates and then placed in fridges and freezers. Food and other goods produced outside the communities (dependant on the aspired level of self-sufficiency) are still brought in, often procured from local wholesalers, but through bulk-buying the packaging remains minimal compared to individual consumption models. At Green-Tech, food which is not produced in the community is bought and prepared individually, as each member-family has their own, private house and kitchen. At Fallowfields, food gardening and other 'green' activities remain limited, partly due to their current 'ethos-searching' period. Their survival requires that at present other activities are prioritised over food production, thus not all the communities are fully engaged in waste reducing production mechanisms.

The communities' re-engagement with production, albeit at varying levels, does contribute to solid waste reduction and food mileage minimisation, considered essential to those wishing to lead greener lifestyles. Many of their practices allow them to take control of their foods' journey, avoiding the worst waste excesses of the marketplace.

Reduced Versus Responsible Consumption

The communities' re-engagement in the production of certain goods engenders more control over and interest in what and how things are consumed. It also allows for an appreciation of the resources involved in producing goods thus impacting the 'amount' consumed. For example, similar to Dobscha's (1998) respondents, at Fallowfields Ecover cleaning products are used creatively, diluted in water prior to use as only 'small amounts' are perceived to be required for effective cleansing. At Stone Hall windows are cleaned with vinegar. In collective consumer defiance, they resist the marketplace standards for instructions and usage. Also, water is considered precious at Stone Hall: because it comes from their own wells and water shortage is a possibility when rain levels are low, water wastage through unnecessary toilet flushing and long showers is discouraged. Observation of these constraints did not reveal communities suffering but rather that frugality is empowering; their resistance to consumption norms that others follow liberates them from marketplace conformity.

However, consuming more ethically does not mean radically reducing or eschewing consumption for all communities. At Green-Tech, a relatively new community, built with green design and materials, the alternative technology is the prime waste reducer. Although they try and reduce food mileage and the consumption of excessively packaged goods, 'green' as a product attribute seems to come after taste, quality and possibly convenience, which goes counter to most discourses on sustainable consumption:

"It's about making good use of our resources rather than being deprived... I like French wine, my kids like bananas"
(Nicholas, Green-Tech Community).

Such attitudes can also be seen in the consumption of household goods. Green-Tech houses are fully equipped with fridges, freezers, large-screen TVs and stereo-systems, and electric community cars have been acquired through a community-private sector partnership. This as a model may be more palatable to certain consumers in the mainstream market who balk at the perceived 'deprivational' aspects of sustainable living.

The findings thus suggest two alternative paths to sustainable consumption, one of abdications (the most adopted) and another of positive choices, both indicating very different views and possibilities of what would be the optimal strategy.

Repairing Their Way Through: Stretching Product Re-usage to the Limit

Apart from Green-Tech, simplicity prevails in the communities and product repair and DIY are central to making this possible. At Spiritual Community a 'Maintenance' department repairs communal buildings, caravans and utensils. At Woodland, the kitchen appliances are generally old and items are only disposed of if totally beyond repair. The community's building is also aged, so maintenance is recurrent:

"There is always a lot of maintenance work to be done and we actually need to prioritise the load" (Paul, Woodland Community).

Repairing and re-usage is a common practice in these communities. Holt (2002) argues that liberation comes from these micro-emancipatory practices. By defying the existing codes of consumption (i.e. discard the old, buy new), the communities are able to disentangle the marketer's artifice from the use and value of the products. Every community is willing to creatively reuse all types of materials. At Fallowfields and Stone Hall this is expressed at its most basic level, through re-usage of containers for storage of food and cleaning products, and through the multi-functional furniture. At Woodland, glass jars are refilled with home-made jams or compotes, containers are reused to store food, tins are used to store and germinate seeds, and old, damaged hoses are used as irrigation systems in the fields. But particularly creative in this respect are Green-Tech and Spiritual communities. Green-Tech has turned the carcass of an old van used during the construction period into a shelter/garage for the

gardening tractor, and has also turned huge, cylindrical juice containers into water tanks for each house. Spiritual Community go even further:

"At first I didn't really know what to do with [those whisky barrels] so they were lying around for a while. But then it occurred to me that they were big enough to live in..."
(Jeremy, Spiritual Community).

The whisky barrels were going to be sent to a landfill but the owner of the local distillery recognised that people at the community would probably find a use for them. Jeremy acquired them and eventually one of the barrels became a Jacuzzi (used to raise money from visitors) and the others were adapted to make living accommodation.

In different ways these communities reveal a remarkable expertise in re-inventing products that no longer fulfil their primary purposes and would otherwise become waste. As Dobscha (1998) argued, the consumer creativity with 'new products from old' avoids the market place for many things, and reinforces the refusal to be defined by it.

Purchasing Second-Hand Products

Purchase and sale of second-hand products are common in these communities. This disruption of the smooth operation of the system empowers the consumer, by denying the marketplace free access to their daily lives (Dobscha, 1998). Some of them trade goods and skills through

local LETS (Local Exchange Trading Systems) and bartering schemes (Spiritual Community has created its own alternative bank), while others take part in local used-goods markets. Clothes are regularly purchased from second-hand shops and Stone Hall has its own shop where it sells second-hand clothes donated to the community. Woodland's Fernando regularly attends the local second-hand furniture market, which also offers an opportunity to socialise. For community members, second-hand purchases play an important part in their overall waste-reduction and environmental strategies, and members gain a sense of accomplishment that is empowering by staying true to their self-definitions of being non-consumers in the traditional sense.

Recycling and Composting

Commitment to recycling is high in all the researched communities, and 'outsiders' who do not recycle are criticized:

"...You see them using all these jars and pre-prepared things, throwing away all that glass and not doing any composting... They just think it is too much trouble. It's terrible..." (Hanna, Sunny Valley).

If food remains cannot be eaten or reprocessed and organic waste cannot be used to feed livestock, composting is the first option. All kitchens have compost bins, and gardens have compost piles. Compost produce is then re-used either as plant food or as soil conditioner in the gardens. Used

packs, jars and containers that cannot be reutilised are recycled, usually through the local authorities' recycling collection services. Sunny Valley runs a compost scheme for the local village, for which it receives funding. They also run a local recycling system which has recently been taken over by local government. Sunny Valley is a good example of a community engaging with local residents in a way that has had an empowering effect on local waste strategies.

Clearly there is a strong commitment to recycling and composting, but interestingly even this is only pursued once other waste-reduction strategies are exhausted. Landfill waste is the next resort.

Discussion

The communities addressed in this study adopt a holistic approach to waste reduction, as seen in Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin (2005b), Shaw and Newholm (2002), and Dobscha (1998). They are, to varying degrees, implementing alternatives to the wasteful practices of mainstream consumption behaviour. Through their reconnection to production they achieve both instrumental and emotional autonomy (McBride, 1990), as they free themselves (even if partially) from the hegemonic forces of the market (Fitchett and McDonagh, 2001; Hodgson, 2001). Anti-marketing attitudes are not overtly supported communally, although they can be found at individual levels. Their reconnection to production also reduces solid waste and food mileage in ways essential to more sustainable levels of consumption, but which would be difficult to achieve at individual levels

unless appropriate institutional structures were in place. The observations suggest two alternative paths to sustainable consumption, one of diverse levels of abdication and another of positive choices. This may be due to the historical backgrounds and the dominant green ideologies present at the time when these communities were founded. Nevertheless there is no reason for such strategies to stand in binary opposition: both can be viewed as complementary behaviours in the fight against ever-increasing levels of consumer waste.

Repairing is a common and important practice in these communities, but requires members with specialist knowledge to perform such tasks. Again, this would be difficult to pursue at an individual level, especially given the high prices of repair work and the lack of availability of replacement parts (Siegle, 2004). New Consumption Communities' ability and willingness to repair is further complemented by their re-usage behaviours and their extraordinary aptitude to devise new uses for products that would otherwise become waste. Their 'mastery' in resisting through the reinvention of uses for products (Holt, 2002), and in managing waste responsibly, delivers empowerment and self-fulfilment. Second-hand purchasing behaviour is usual among community members, and plays an important part in their waste-reduction and environmental strategies. It caters not only for waste-reduction but also for the desire to reconnect supplier and buyer. Only once other waste-reduction strategies are exhausted do the communities resort to recycling and composting, counter to the strong focus on recycling behaviour in the literature (Biswas *et al.*, 2000; Mobley *et al.*, 1995; Bagozzi and Dabholkar, 1994;

Smith, Haugtvedt and Petty, 1994). Such evidence illustrates the importance of enhancing knowledge on the complementary waste-reduction behaviours that go beyond recycling, as explored in this study.

There is some nascent evidence of this filtering through the wider UK community. The Nightingale Estate in Hackney, East London, has set up a food waste reduction scheme, by supplying individual households with their own internal food composting bins. These are collected weekly, emptied into a central community composter, and the recycled compost is returned to the community as garden fertiliser. Not only have individuals been empowered to reduce and be more selective in their food purchases, other persuasive benefits include a reduced urban rat population and the creation of 20 local jobs. With 70% of residents participating, this is one step towards reducing the considerable annual UK food wastage figure; 38% of all food bought by UK consumers is thrown away, amounting annually to £20 billion worth of wasted food (Heap, 2005). As in the NCCs, this community has been empowered to assert their common agency against the interests of the dominant producers (Kozinets, 2002).

We believe that the importance of studying these communities' waste-reduction behaviour lies in their ability to experiment with and foster novel, more sustainable and empowering consumption and disposal behaviours. This exploratory study would benefit from additional empirical studies, both of qualitative and quantitative nature, which would bridge mainstream consumers and the practices of New Consumption Communities. It would be relevant to study UK mainstream consumers'

attitudes toward the diverse range of waste-reduction practices presented in this paper, in order to identify 'natural' opportunities for behavioural change toward more sustainable and truly empowering disposal and consumption practices.

Conclusion

This study has presented the resistance and waste-reduction tactics adopted by New Consumption Communities in the UK. Findings suggest that their behaviours help them to achieve their environmental goals in an empowering way, although not without some personal and sometimes unequal sacrifices. Broader waste reduction strategies are evidenced in the communities than might generally exist among mainstream individuals. Their structure also enables a more integrated approach to their waste goals, and their involvement in the production-consumption process creates greater commitment to waste management. These people are clearly empowered by their actions, and the behaviours presented go beyond simplified communal settings. Councils could encourage composting initiatives such as the Hackney example by simple actions such as regular, reliable paper and food waste collections, or the supply of free composting bins and materials to individuals in urban communities. Firms need to improve labelling on product packaging to inform rather than confuse (Balch, 2005), especially with regards to the 'recyclability' and reusability of packaging (see initiatives such as Lifespan Labelling and the Waste and Resources Action programme, WRAP, at www.wrap.org.uk). Furthermore, companies could start assigning

responsibility for waste created by consumers as a function of the consumption of their products. Companies should support consumers, as does The Body Shop, to return used packaging to the retail points where goods are acquired. Slavish consumer and retailer adherence to 'sell by' dates and 'best before' stickers exacerbates food waste, as do the strict standards set by supermarkets for fruit and vegetable producers, resulting in rejects being discarded in their millions (Milmo, 2005). One response has been the charity Fare Share's re-use of discarded supermarket food to feed the homeless and vulnerable, while Prêt à Manger gives away its unwanted food to the needy.

At a more fundamental level, however, if consumers are to be truly empowered they should be encouraged to reengage even if minimally with production, particularly where food deserts and low availability of fresh produce are the norm (Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin, 2005a; 2005b), even at the expense of the consumerist goals of the market. The Futurefarms co-operative (www.futurefarms.org.uk) in Hampshire, and the Salop Drive Market Garden in Sandwell (*Harvest in the City*, 2005), are successful examples of mainstream rural and urban communities empowered by working together to grow their own produce. In the UK we lack the incentives and opportunities to repair, and the creative vision to re-use (Siegle, 2004). Perhaps the Turner Prize nominee Tomoko Takahashi's works of art, created from rubbish discarded in skips, is a too radical exemplar (Hensher, 2005), but consumers need to be encouraged to take a less disposable view of their possessions. This can be further supported by provision of affordable, skilled craftspeople to assist consumers with

their product repairs. All of the above are lessons from simpler communities that offer empowering, convenient and realisable 'green' goals for the wider society.

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Community	Profile
Woodland	Co-housing initiative; formed 30 years ago, now has 58 members. Volunteers supplement the community. Spaces are communal with shared kitchen, laundry, social rooms etc. Values include self-sufficiency, co-operative living and low environmental impact. Transport mainly by car due to lack of local public transport.
Fallowfields	Founded 1950 as an educational trust, now has 18 members. Some shared, some independent housing. Values based in living 'a peaceful life', currently the community is undergoing an ethos-searching period, with environmental causes gaining prominence.
Sunny Valley	Co-housing co-operative in shared house on rural land. 11 members celebrated the community's 10 th anniversary in 2004. Group of cottages nearby are sold/mortgaged by trust, and members share maintenance responsibilities. Their ethos is a strong ecological focus and respect for diversity. Good links with local village and organises their composting scheme.
Stone Hall	Self-determined, holistic education centre, run by a resident co-operative group and administered by a trust. Main building has guest rooms, as well as large number of living areas such as communal laundry, community kitchen. Rear livestock, grow produce, and committed to recycling. All members work for the community in designated roles. Sustainability is the key driver for the community; have own water spring, reed-bed sewage, composting, wood burners etc.
Spiritual	Pioneering, holistic enterprise whose aim is spiritual (non-religious) education. Rural based eco-village, several communal buildings for workshops and housing, ethical shops and hall used for conferences, performances etc. Inspirational example to other communities, it runs diverse educational workshops. Around 500 permanent or volunteer members and visitors. Non-profit charity, with body of trustees, devoted to sustainability with energy windmills, organic sewage system, eco-housing. Has own community currency.
Green-Tech	Ecologically sound, earth-sheltered housing complex launched in 1998. Partly built by members, part government financed and with private grants. Five member families in energy efficient housing; produces almost 100% of its own Aeolian energy, grows some organic food, and has own sewage, water collection and filtering systems. Members are committed to community business, including guided tours, educational and specialist workshops. Considers itself as a best practice and catalyst for sustainable communal living.

Table I: Community Profiles

