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### Journal Item

How to cite:

Bekin, Caroline; Carrigan, Marylyn and Szmigin, Isabelle (2007). Beyond recycling: 'commons-friendly' waste reduction at new consumption communities. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 6(5) pp. 271–286.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1002/cb.221>

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[Bekin, C., Carrigan, M. and Szmigin, I. (2007) "Beyond Recycling: 'Commons Friendly' Waste Reduction at New Consumption Communities," *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Special Issue on Ethical Consumption, forthcoming.

**Beyond Recycling:**

**'Commons Friendly' Waste Reduction at New Consumption Communities**

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## **Beyond Recycling:**

### **‘Commons Friendly’ Waste Reduction at New Consumption Communities**

#### Abstract

This paper broadens current knowledge on consumer waste and disposal behaviour by exploring the diverse and complementary waste-reduction strategies and behaviours adopted by environmentally-conscious consumer communities in the UK. Using a critical ethnography methodology and a multi-locale approach to designing the field, six distinct ethical voluntary simplifier communities were studied. Findings suggest their alternative lifestyles and waste management choices offer society much in terms of environmental soundness, while also presenting several personal trade-offs for community members that deserve critical consideration. Practical implications for marketers and policy-makers are addressed.

#### Keywords

Voluntary Simplicity; Ethical Consumption; Waste; Ethnography

## **Beyond Recycling:**

### **‘Commons Friendly’ Waste Reduction at New Consumption Communities**

#### Introduction

Growing amounts of waste are critical environmental threats; 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, coupled with lifestyles that also generate considerable waste (Singh and Lakhan, 1989). The issue compounds when we consider the barriers to local disposal in developed countries including consumer’s “not in my backyard” attitude, the inconsistency of local government disposal strategies, and strict waste disposal regulations leading to international hazardous waste trading (Krämer, 1993; Singh and Lakhan, 1989). Although historically the UK paid little attention to waste policies, several European directives are now challenging this (Ekins, 2004). New Government policies are having results with consumers recycling more (Hopkins, 2005), and some local councils such as the London Borough of Barnet instituting compulsory recycling for all residents (*Compulsory recycling*, at [http://www.barnet.gov.uk/environment\\_transport/recycling/comp\\_recycle.php3](http://www.barnet.gov.uk/environment_transport/recycling/comp_recycle.php3)).

While legislation may be required to get most consumers to change their behaviour, ethical consumers and ethical voluntary simplifiers in particular, have always held waste as a major environmental issue worthy of concern (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. Despite their efforts, and the importance of the meanings and determinants attached to them, most research on waste, particularly within the marketing literature, is devoted to recycling behaviour alone. This is lamentable given it is acknowledged that for our society to holistically tackle current waste issues, a range of environment-friendly waste management strategies, not merely recycling, need implementation by policy-makers and industry, and adoption by consumers (e.g. Cooper, 1994; Ettore, 1992; Marengi, 1992, Fairweather, 1992). Furthermore, most studies in the marketing literature are quantitative and US-based, focusing on attitudes and attitude-formation, and individual consumer behaviour (e.g. Pieters *et al.*, 1998; Roberts, 1996). While acknowledging their usefulness, a broader social and cultural examination of disposal and disposition would contribute to current debate, as would the exploration of collective consumption behaviour.

For these reasons our aim in this paper is to extend contemporary knowledge on this topic by exploring 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) were studied. Findings suggest their alternative lifestyles and waste management choices offer much in terms of

environmental soundness, but also present several personal trade-offs for community members that deserve critical consideration.

### Addressing the Literature on Waste

As mentioned, most marketing and consumer behaviour literature on waste has centred on recycling attitudes, behaviours and motivations. For example, in their quantitative, US-based study, Bagozzi and Dabholkar (1994) review the extensive literature on recycling behaviour, and investigate consumers' recycling motivations and how these translate into action. Using theory of reasoned action, means-end chain analysis and laddering techniques, the authors found fifteen salient goals relevant to consumers for recycling, their interrelations and hierarchical structure. These moved from concrete (i.e. 'avoid filling up landfills', 'reuse materials') to more abstract values (i.e. 'sustain life', 'provide for future generations'), and their effects on attitudes, subjective norms, and past behaviours were examined. They argue that the provision of specific goals and procedures for recycling to consumers would likely increase the practice of recycling.

In a study of American university students, Smith, Haugtvedt and Petty (1994) found that recycling behaviour is subject to affective influences, which in turn are moderated by attitudinal strength toward recycling (i.e. affect has greater impact on attitudes for individuals with attitudes toward recycling which are not well integrated). Adding to the literature on the 'other end' of recycling behaviour, Mobley *et al.*'s (1995) US experiment on consumers' evaluation process of recycled products

supports the influence of affect on evaluation processes. Their findings suggest that consumers' attitudes are positively influenced by the presence of recycled materials in products, independent of the type of product. They found that the positive effects of recycling are salient to established brands toward which consumers already hold positive attitudes, but that recycling does not affect evaluations for unknown brands, a finding that may be questionable due to experimental limitations. Finally, Biswas *et al.*'s (2000) research bridges these studies by reinforcing Smith, Haugtvedt and Petty's (1994) work, and indicating a significant correlation between recycling, shopping behaviour and waste recycling behaviour. Building upon past findings regarding what drives individual consumers to recycle and purchase recycled goods, we consider it important to explore actual recycling behaviours, i.e. whether consumers recycle or not, and whether communal consumption settings offer better opportunities for recycling behaviour.

### Understanding the 'Other' Consumer Waste-Reduction Strategies

While critical, recycling is not the only answer to the world's environmental issues, and other equally significant waste-reduction and disposition behaviours deserve attention. Beyond recycling, numerous disposal strategies are performed by the most committed ethical consumers, yet few studies examine them. Exceptions are studies by Shaw and Newholm (2002), Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin (2005), and Dobscha (1998) who found ethical simplifiers' waste-reduction strategies 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 products, reducing and avoiding consumption. The Ethical Consumerism Report (Co-operative Bank, 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 focused upon these and other consumption decisions made by voluntary simplifiers (Young *et. al*, 2004). Extended pre-purchase research on ethical criteria was typical, but not enjoyable, and ethical choices have a deep impact on consumers' 'timestyles' (Cotte, Ratneshwar and Mick, 2004), whereby convenience tends to be sacrificed.

Such behaviour is less common among US mainstream consumers. For instance, DeBell and Dardis's (1979) quantitative study on the factors influencing consumer purchase and disposal of white goods found that although technologically possible to increase products' durability and consequent lifespan, consumers discard such products due to either technological or fashion obsolescence with durability having moderate impact on duration of appliance usage. Rucker *et al.* (1992) address consumers' disposition practices of unwanted gifts, including giving items to other people, placing them in storage, returning gifts to retailers, and sometimes returning them to the givers. They also present a detailed account of the literature on second-hand markets and, although little is said about consumers' willingness to effectively use second-hand products, it is suggested that consumers initiate personal sales mainly to dispose of unwanted items around the house, as well as for the perceived potential for economic gain.

It would therefore be relevant to explore whether broader waste-reduction strategies are actually employed by ethical simplifier communities. Are they more integrated in their approach to waste-reduction? What strategies are employed and to what extent? Given the social and dynamic nature of consumption we would argue that viewing waste-reduction in community settings may provide new answers by addressing not only behaviours but also the social relations contextualising waste within communal spaces. This marks a shift from the sole examination of individuals' waste and disposition behaviour that has been the remit of past studies.

#### Possible Drivers of the Recycling Focus and the Consumer

Previous literature offers little explanation for the tendency of researchers to focus primarily on recycling behaviour despite the plethora of complementary waste reduction and disposal strategies. As recycling allows for (some) raw materials to be reused it might seem that recycling does not negatively affect the environment (Cooper, 1994). Yet as with all physical activities recycling consumes energy: waste needs to be sorted, collected, cleaned and processed (Cooper, 1994). Reduce, reuse and recycle is the key environmental message, but recycling consumes energy and may also release harmful substances (Mackness, 2005). Recycling is not always preferable to other strategies. It requires thorough product Life Cycle Analyses (LCA) for its benefits vis-à-vis shortcomings in product-specific contexts to be assessed (e.g. Blumenfeld, 1991; Cooper, 1994; Jay, 1992; Marengi, 1992; Siegle, 2004). Despite awareness of the shortcomings of primarily focusing on recycling, it still remains at the top of most 'green' discourses, evident in the literature and also reflected by UK

local governments' waste reduction policies. Meanwhile, consumers are being led to believe that recycling can solve most of our environmental problems (Ettorre, 1992).

Recycling does have an historical tradition and so represents a form of dealing with waste which is known and engaging to consumers. Old newspapers were used in the production of paper-based products long before the rise of ecological concerns, and "junkmen and scrap paper mongers have been around at least as long as the Industrial Revolution" (Ettorre, 1992, p.16). In today's Brazil, one can now find workers (by necessity) forming waste collection cooperatives and entrepreneurially pursuing the 'scrap economy'. Another popular argument is the fear of a recycling backlash, whereby consumers would become disillusioned if recycling were to be positioned and perceived only as a partial solution (Ettorre, 1992). We suggest that this reflects a patronising approach to consumers in the UK who have been told half-truths about the issues of recycling and were excluded from most environmental discussions (other than as policy research subjects).

More controversially, Cooper (1994) argues, from an economic/productionist perspective, that such a focus on recycling is removing attention from more fundamental issues: rather than attempting to increase society's capacity to absorb waste there should be a focus on reducing the economic throughput (the flow of materials and energy through the economy). He proposes a shift from 'linear' to 'circular economies' (Cooper, 1994, see p.2; Cooper, 2005). His argument is based on the premise that in developed industrial economies the prevailing economic model (linear economy) assumes an unlimited supply of energy and raw materials at the one end of the industrial system, while at the other it assumes an unlimited pollution and

waste absorption capacity by the environment. The goal is to increase economic activity as a proxy for wellbeing (Cooper, 1994). By contrast, a circular economy would be one in which the emphasis is on minimisation of economic throughput without sacrificing human wellbeing. As both the volume of raw materials and energy entering into the productive system and the amount retained determines throughput, both inputs and outputs are considered (Cooper, 1994). Efficiency is measured by the optimal use of resources rather than entirely on financial performance (Cooper, 1994) - hence the importance of the 'other' waste reduction strategies beyond recycling discussed above.

Although a move toward more 'circular' economies is desirable if sustainable development is to go beyond the level of rhetoric, Cooper's (1994; 2005) proposition assumes a completely rational consumer (as do classic / 'linear' economic models). A critique of such viewpoint seems relevant at this point, hence the following discussion on Dolan's (2002) work.

#### Toward a More Integrated Approach to Waste and the Consumer

Dolan (2002) examines what he views as the shortcomings of the idea of sustainable consumption (and arguably a rationalist approach to reduced waste) for it does not take into account the historical, cultural and social processes of consumption. (NB. Although an account of such processes embedding consumer culture is well beyond the scope of this paper, we acknowledge the contribution of the extensive body of literature on this field of knowledge. See, for example, contributions from

Baudrillard, 1998; Campbell, 1987; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; McCracken, 1988; Miller, 1998; Slater, 1997.) He suggests that as consumption is embedded in such diverse processes there must be multiple and fluid definitions of sustainable consumption. He sees 'sustainable consumption' as a rationalistic discourse amongst other 'competing' discourses, which tends to be based on a basic needs assumption and presuppose a "unidirectional causal relation between sustainable consumption and sustainable development" (p.170). He argues that such discourse neglects the "significance of consumption practices as embodying the relations between individuals", and sustains that "we can examine the assumptions underlying sustainable consumption by addressing the way other discourses, such as sociology and anthropology, understand and explain consumption as a social practice" (p.170). A look at simpler communities should prove useful in this respect, as we study their waste practices as the materialisation of their intra-group relationships.

For Dolan, once we acknowledge the social processes of consumption, we must then address this implicit relationship between sustainable consumption and sustainable development, and acknowledge that the mainstreaming of such practice would be more intricate than a fundamental change in individual values; that we should therefore question the possibilities of sustainable consumption all together; that by so doing we would be putting the consumer and consumption practices as the realms in which solutions to increasing production are formed, rather than as the main sources of the problem. Again, it becomes relevant to understand the consumption practices of such environmentally-aware consumer communities as it is through modified consumption that waste may be reduced and they may well be good-practice examples

to follow if some of their practices have any culturally-embedded appeal to mainstream consumers.

Dolan further highlights that such focus on consumption practices is not only a micro problem but also a macro problem, as individual acts of consumption are macro-processes at work: “consumer practices are cultural and social practices that have historically developed and are manifestations of both local and global linkages of social interdependencies” (2002, p.171); by social interdependencies Dolan means, after Elias, the power relations between, say, capital and labour, business and consumers. He acknowledges the inherent capitalist logic of increasing commodities and desires production and the importance of a production perspective, while arguing that such logic does not exist in a cultural void and that a pure production viewpoint assumes consumers as manipulated dupes and desire-slaves. Dolan argues that despite this predicament, we must not wait for a ‘displacement’ of this order for sustainable development to take place and that, taking a Foucauldian perspective, we should view power not as a possession of producers or consumers but as something that emerges through their relationships. He also criticises approaches focused on the individual or micro-level analysis in that they tend to investigate “the spaces within social actors (whether producers or consumers) in terms of their supposed inherent psychology or motivation”, while not fully engaging in the historical, cultural and social significance of consumption, as “modern consumption is rational within those cultural frameworks” (p.173). He suggests we should rather address “spaces in between actors in terms of their relations and interdependencies” (p.171), and that a thorough analysis of the possibility of sustainable consumption should comprise both production and consumption processes. However, although we agree with Dolan’s conception of a

thorough analysis of the possibility of sustainable consumption, this is not the focus of this paper. And despite our tendency toward “the spaces within social actors”, if we consider a dialogic relationship between these spaces and the “spaces in between actors”, through the study of such consumption communities we are going a step further, beyond the most basic individualist level. We believe there is scope for such studies, particularly as we see an increased interest in, coupled with the increased need for environment-friendlier consumption and disposal behaviours – or else there would be no space for a special issue on ethical consumption! Within this context the meaning of waste is explored below.

### The Meaning of Waste

Thøgersen (1993) suggests that waste generation is dependent on many factors such as what is available in the market, as well as external, demographical, cultural and psychological factors; essentially a function of the consumption style of the household (Uusitalo, 1986) imbued with emotionally laden meanings (Roster, 2001).

While Veblen is most noted for his criticism of 19<sup>th</sup> century conspicuous consumption, he also tackled the outcome of such consumption, notably conspicuous waste. More recently a key informant on the meaning of waste is Jean Baudrillard (1998). For Baudrillard, waste is equivocally seen as a morally incorrect form of irrational dysfunction, driving mankind to its own destruction at a time where affluence itself is not real. He draws attention to the fact that societies have historically wasted and consumed beyond their needs as a means to feeling as though

they are not merely existing but truly living. This in turn has its own social functions, i.e. to assert power and create distinctions and meanings. He argues that “within this perspective, a definition of consumption as consummation – i.e. as productive waste – begins to emerge, a perspective contrary to that of the ‘economic’ (...) and one in which, by contrast, the superfluous precedes the necessary, and expenditure takes precedence in terms of value over accumulation and appropriation (even if it does not precede them in time)” (Baudrillard, 1998, p.43-44). He argues further that affluence only has meaning and symbolic value in wastage (as if only by wasting could one feel abundance), such that waste drives our entire system, and any wish to eliminate it is unrealistic.

While we acknowledge the importance of Baudrillard’s contribution, it is difficult to adopt a completely semiotic viewpoint and argue that the symbolic value and image of waste are detached from that which is being wasted. Indeed, Dolan (2002) highlights the pitfalls of adopting an extreme social constructivist perspective: as the notion of environmental depletion is grounded on scientific knowledge, by using scientific discourse as a resort we are defying, at least partially, complete social constructionism. So he argues for a balanced approach: “what appears to be required is a critical interpretive approach that aims to demystify the obscuring processes of the reality makers or to trace the development of, for example, a materialistic ethos, which may have occurred unintentionally. In other words, there is a more significant reality beneath the superficial or present realities... Ecological issues, while obviously socially constructed, also need to uphold the axiomatic truism that the earth’s resources are depleting. The epistemological security of that argument logically relies on the ontological security of natural resources as, at least in some sense (even though



such resources are only knowable in the symbolic sense), beyond the merely symbolic... This implies an epistemologically interpretive and ontologically realist position (p.174). In this way environmental depletion can be viewed as a current tangible threat, and waste as something which must be tackled for the sake of future generations. Also, “the fact that the meaning of nature is open to interpretation should be considered an opportunity to construct alternative meanings – of nature as more than a mere material resource for the use of humanity” (Dolan, 2002, p.174). Consistently, Dolan he highlights that if a change is to occur consumers need to think as well as care about the ‘environmental depletion’ meaning – thus the need to connect this environmental meaning with other, alternate meanings. It would be interesting to see whether the communities studied in this paper present a differentiated relationship to nature to that found in the individualist mainstream consumer culture.

Pieter *et al.* (1998) suggest that pro-environmental behaviour requires what Shultz and Holbrook (1999, p.218) called ‘commons-friendly’ decisions, whereby members of a social group face choices in which “selfish, individualistic, or uncooperative decisions though seemingly more rational by virtue of short term benefits to separate players, produce undesirable long-term consequences for the group as a whole”. Given the waste challenges facing society we explore whether ethical consumer communities are able to solve, even if only partially, some of these issues by working together at ‘commons-friendly’ ecological strategies.

## This Study

Several gaps in the literature have been identified. First, few studies explore the wide range of waste-reduction strategies and behaviours adopted by ethical consumers and there is a lack of studies on such behaviours in a communal environment, which are particularly complementary to the sole focus on individual recycling behaviour. Secondly, there is a lack of qualitative studies in this area addressing UK consumers, coupled with a focus on attitudes and intentions rather than actual behaviour; it would be relevant to see whether such waste-reduction strategies and behaviours are embedded in a different kind of relationship with nature; whether they help the communities to achieve their environmental goals, to what extent communal forms of ethical consumption behaviour and voluntary simplicity compare to individual consumers' behaviour in relation to waste-reduction, and whether 'community' is able to adopt 'commons-friendly' decisions and ecological strategies. Finally, at a 'rational' level, there is a lack of guidance to consumers that would engage them holistically in achievable actions, and more broadly address their negative consumption/disposal habits. These are the gaps and behaviours this paper aims to explore through the study of UK-based New Consumption Communities (Szmigin and Carrigan, 2003).

Szmigin and Carrigan (2003) argue that production-involved consumers, seeking to voice their concerns and gain a better production-consumption balance (and to an extent seeking to exercise positive choice 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 steering groups, 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). Therefore, 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 prioritises positive and technological options over ‘simplified’ ones).

### Methodology

New Consumption Communities can be viewed, albeit at varying degrees, as ‘others’: positive alternatives to what can be viewed as mainstream consumerism; thus an appropriate method to explore them is ethnographic research (Peñaloza, 1994). As we are interested in actual behaviours, ethnography is also appropriate in that 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). Ethnography allows for a deep understanding and the development of new insights about the phenomena under investigation (Carson *et al.*, 2001). However, as argued by Sears (1992) after Apple (1983), ethnography alone does not concede serious importance to the struggles and resistances against current ideologies that are present in the everyday lives of some groups; critical ethnography does (Peñaloza, 1994; Dey, 2002; Thomas, 1993). Hence 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. Communities that presented religion as a primary focus were ruled out as were communities outside the UK. 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 other five were either not willing to be researched or did not reply. The visits began in February 2004, and ranged from one day to one week. Some communities were visited several times over an extended period, while others were visited only once. As visits progressed, the interconnectedness between communities became clearer, as members would reveal their links to other communities. Because of much reference to a particular community based in Scotland, it was decided that this community should be visited – the sixth community in this study. Such fieldwork design, in which the researcher plays a major role in constructing the field (Amit, 2000) has been conceptualised as multi-sited or multi-locale ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Amit, 2000). 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. Acting as a full-time volunteer meant experiencing community life to the fullest and performing a range of activities including vegetable gardening, composting and cooking for large groups. It also meant listening to conversations about positive and negative personal views of community life, and socialising at natural settings. 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, and requires 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.

## Findings

### *Taking Some Control over the Production Process*

All the communities to varying degrees do try and reduce their 'economic throughput' (Cooper, 1994) by regaining some control over the production of what they consume. Spiritual Community, Stone Hall, and Green-Tech are all very 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, and everyone at Green-Tech must contribute equally to gardening. Sunny Valley and Woodland are also dedicated to growing their own vegetables and fruits, 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, then take charge of that particular task:

*“Everyone gets involved in growing things, which prevents that alienation... We do the rotation of the land and every year each person is in charge of growing something. 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).*

These communities also keep livestock for milk, eggs, and meat, and process their own foods, which vary depending on their dedication to self-sufficiency: products include butter, cheese, cream, yogurts, jams, honey and tofu.

Such production ‘systems’ permit food mileage to be minimised, and have two implications for solid waste reduction and a ‘commons friendly’ approach. Firstly, although more work-intensive than shopping, 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 or 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 (how packaging is dealt with is discussed below). At Green Tech, however, food which is not produced in the community is bought and prepared individually, as each member-family has their own, private house and kitchen, while at Fallowfields, food gardening and other ‘green’ activities remain limited. The community is going through an ethos-searching period and as they try to survive other activities are prioritised over food production.

The communities' re-engagement with production, albeit at varying levels, contributes to solid waste reduction and food mileage minimisation, considered essential to those wishing to lead greener lifestyles.

### *Reduced Versus Responsible Consumption*

These 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, at Fallowfields Ecover cleaning products are diluted in water prior to use, as only 'small amounts' are perceived to be required for effective cleansing, and at Stone Hall windows are cleaned with vinegar and old newspapers. Also, water is considered precious in this community: 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.

Vegetarianism and reduced meat consumption are common practices among community members. Stone Hall's meals are completely vegetarian (although creative and experimental), and because most facilities are communal household appliances are shared among members. At Spiritual Community, communal meals served to visitors and members are also vegetarian and simple. Some permanent and aspiring members live in very basic accommodation (sometimes just a room or an old refurbished caravan) with few private possessions. But this varies across Spiritual and it is difficult to say whether this is the rule given the size of this particular community (some houses in the village are actually quite big and new, but there were no

opportunities to investigate). In addition, both of these communities require that permanent members work full-time in the community, which minimises the need for transport usage.

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... A bit of a reality check here: 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.

The findings thus suggest two alternative paths to environment-friendlier 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*

Apart from Green-Tech, simplicity prevails in the communities and product repair and DIY play a big part in making this possible. At Spiritual Community a ‘Maintenance’ department repairs communal buildings, caravans and utensils. At Woodland, the kitchen appliances are old (exceptions are the stove and oven, which were bought new), and items are only disposed of if repairing is no longer an option. The community’s building is also quite old, 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 is a common practice in these communities, one further complemented by their re-usage behaviours.

### *Stretching Product Re-usage to the Limit: Creativity at Work*

An interesting aspect of all communities is their willingness 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 and cans are used to store and germinate seeds, and old, holed hoses are used as irrigation systems in the corn fields. But the most 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. At Spiritual Community even old whisky barrels have been reused:

*“At first I didn’t really know what to do with [those 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 thought that people at the community would probably find a use for it. So Jeremy acquired it and some time later one of the barrels became a Jacuzzi (used to raise money from visitors) and the others became beautiful houses.

In different ways these communities reveal a remarkable ability to devise new uses for products that no longer fulfil their primary purposes and would otherwise become waste.

#### *Purchasing Second-Hand Products*

Purchase and sales of second-hand products are also very common in these communities. Some of them trade goods and skills through local LETS (Local Exchange Trading Systems) and bartering schemes (Spiritual Community has even created its own alternative bank), while others take part in local used-goods markets. ‘New’ clothes are regularly purchased from second-hand shops. In addition, 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 for him is an opportunity to socialise and get good value for money. For community members second-hand purchases play an important part in their overall waste-reduction and environmental strategies.

### *And Finally, Recycling!*

Commitment to recycling is high in all the researched communities. 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 any other way are then recycled, and usually collected by the local authorities' recycling collection services. Sunny Valley currently runs the compost scheme for the local village, for which it gets some extra annual cash. Sunny Valley also used to run the local recycling system but the local government has recently taken over this task.

Clearly there is a strong commitment to recycling and composting, but these behaviours are only accessed once other waste-reduction strategies are exhausted. Nonetheless, recycling and composting can be very engaging activities even beyond the community, as well demonstrated in Sunny Valley's case. Landfill waste is the last resort.

## Discussion

The communities addressed in this study adopt a holistic approach to waste reduction, as seen in Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin (2005), Shaw and Newholm (2002), and Dobscha (1998). They are, to varying degrees, implementing alternatives to the wasteful practices of mainstream consumption behaviour, which do take their toll on these consumers' 'timestyles' (Cotte, Ratneshwar and Mick, 2004) given the amount of extra work which these strategies entail. Through reconnection to production these communities are able to reduce solid waste and food mileage in ways essential to more sustainable levels of consumption, which highlight a 'commons friendly attitude', but which would be difficult to achieve at individual levels unless appropriate institutional structures were in place. The observations suggest two alternative paths to greener consumption, one of diverse levels of abdication (the most adopted; criticized by Dolan, 2002) 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 these strategies are certainly reflective of these communities' commitment to an environmentally-souder way of living and 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 – countering DeBell and Dardis's (1979) findings – 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 which would otherwise become waste. Such *bricolleur* behaviour has been previously addressed by Holt (2002), whereby some consumers resist the branding imperative by using products in ways unintended by their manufacturers and to make personal statements against the current marketing ideology of ever more choice and consumption (Szmigin and Carrigan, 2004). Although anti-marketing attitudes are not overtly supported communally, one can find them at individual levels (Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin, 2005). Second-hand purchasing behaviour is common among community members, and plays an important part in their waste-reduction and environmental strategies. As shown by Fernando's case, it not only caters 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 (Bagozzi and Dabholkar, 1994; Smith, Haugtvedt and Petty, 1994; Mobley *et al.*, 1995; and Biswas *et al.*, 2000). Such evidence illustrates the importance of enhancing knowledge on the complementary waste-reduction behaviours that go beyond recycling, as explored in this study.

As for the meaning attributed to waste, a process of detachment from the self and from the relationship with the object of possession (Roster, 2001) was seen during fieldwork although not explored in the findings section: a Woodland member retaliated against the community's decision to 'force' her to sell at least some of her three (!) old caravans. The approach of the communities counters Baudrillard's (1998)

argument in that waste is indeed perceived as dysfunctional, although more in some communities than in others. Power assertion is transformed, and the more sacrifices are made in the name of simplicity the more ‘distinction’ seems to be attained (subject to the value conferred to simplicity by the different communities). An example is the usage of cleaning products at Fallowfields, where members who use ‘recommended dosages’ are viewed as wasteful. In this way the absence of possessions (or reduction) becomes valuable, and having little signifies distinction. The exception is Green-Tech, where the aim is to accommodate the comforts of modern life and environmental goals. Nonetheless these communities seem to have come up with ‘commons-friendly’ ecological strategies (Shultz and Holbrook, 1999), even if at times they struggle to get along amongst themselves to prioritise their environmental goals.

### Study Limitations and Future Research

We believe that the importance of studying these communities’ waste-reduction behaviour lies not in their difficulty in instigating and achieving social change against the excessive consumption ideology entrenched in today’s capitalist systems – Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004) stated motivation for studying consumer resistance behaviours – but in their ability to experiment with and foster novel, more sustainable consumption and disposal behaviours, even if at times to the cost of their members’ immediate personal benefits. 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. More

‘technologically advanced’ communities like Green-Tech could be accessed and investigated in order for richer data to be collected on the ‘positive choices path’ toward more sustainable consumption practices, more easily (although costlier) assimilated by mainstream consumers. Understanding of other New Consumption Communities in Europe could bring cultural and experiential idiosyncrasies to the fore with comparative purposes at a time where European environmental legislation is gaining strength. Further studies on the motivations, values and attitudes specific to UK mainstream consumers would also provide new insights to the discussion on recycling behaviour. It would also 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 disposal practices. Conceptual explorations on how to incorporate, in an inclusive manner, the desired changes to mainstream consumer culture would also be beneficial, as it is something that has been attempted by policy-making bodies for some time, but with only limited success.

## Conclusion

This study has presented the waste-reduction strategies and behaviours adopted by New Consumption Communities in the UK. Findings suggest that their behaviours help to achieve their environmental goals in a ‘commons friendly’ way although not without some personal sacrifices, and not at equal degrees. It is suggested that individual consumers could not readily adopt all of these communal waste-reduction behaviours. In fact, certain strategies are only feasible if implemented collectively or

if the facilitating institutional structures become accessible. These communities do seem to attempt the ‘circular economy’ (Cooper, 1994), although trade-offs are regularly made.

The behaviours presented go beyond simplified communal settings. Councils around the UK could follow the example set by the London Borough of Barnet and make recycling a citizens’ duty, although the enforcement of such policy remains challenging (how is one to ensure that consumers are recycling?). Additionally, straight forward labelling could be implemented on product packaging in order to better inform consumers – as opposed to confuse them (Balch, 2005) – regarding the ‘recyclability’ and reusability of packaging. But more information does not necessarily mean that consumers are always rational and will readily act upon it (an example is the case of still-functioning electronic goods that are disposed of due to fashion obsolescence); as argued by Dolan (2002) what is needed is a sensitization of consumers to environmental meanings. Furthermore, a pre-emptive strategy in terms of take-back legislation for companies (Cooper, 1994) would be to start assigning responsibility for waste created by consumers as a function of the consumption of their products. Companies should make it easy, as does The Body Shop, for consumers to return used packaging to the retail points where goods are acquired. This way packaging would not actually have to be recycled but could be reused in their original form. Although this could potentially be viewed as an ‘extra cost’ for companies, it is arguable that they would be saving in terms of packaging production from raw materials. Furthermore, composting should be encouraged more openly, particularly in areas where houses (as opposed to flats) are the most common housing option.



Local governments could facilitate the construction of new low-budget housing and housing facilities that meet the required environmental goals. These could follow the high-tech building model as shown by Green-Tech community and other sustainable housing developments such as BedZed in South London (<http://www.bedzed.org.uk/>). At a more fundamental level, however, consumers should be encouraged to reengage even if minimally with production, particularly where food deserts and low availability of fresh produce are the norm (Bekin, Szmigin and Carrigan, 2005). This could represent a challenge in that only so much produce can be grown individually (either due to lack of space or substantial results), which in turn could discourage individuals to pursue this reconnection with production. Also, in the UK we lack the incentives and opportunities to repair (Siegle 2004), so consumers need to be encouraged to take a less disposable view of their possessions. This is already underway with initiatives such as Lifespan Labelling, which aims to give consumers extra information on the potential lifespan of a product, and its 'repairability'. This needs to 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 painless, convenient and realisable 'green' goals for the rest of society.

#### Note

The authors would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

## [1] Communities' Overview

### *Woodland Community*

Situated on seventy acres of green land, Woodland Community is a co-housing initiative formed thirty-years ago by families and individuals who spontaneously chose to live together in a large old building. There are fifty-eight members, including thirteen children who attend the local school. This is supplemented by large numbers of volunteers during the summer, who are also the conduit to disseminating their communal lifestyle. The building is split into living units with bedrooms and small living rooms; some are equipped with bathrooms. These units are privately owned spaces for which initial capital is required. New members are required to buy stock-loans according to the value (size) of the unit in which they are interested. However, most spaces are communal and include a large, main kitchen with dining room, a small kitchen, a library, social rooms, laundry room, community office, and bathrooms. Nominal utility bills are paid, and according to a temporary member it is possible to live for less than £200 per month (including food) at the community, considerably less than it would cost elsewhere. Consequently, this negates the need for full-time employment. The community remains true to its founding members' fundamental values of self-sufficiency, co-operative living and low environmental impact. While located near a village, the nearest train station is a considerable walking distance away. There is a large amount of car ownership here but with members car-sharing whenever possible.

### *Fallowfields Community*

Fallowfields Community was founded in 1950 as an educational trust, and today the community has eighteen members (of which nine are temporary). It has a flexible approach to housing; some members live in the main building while others stay in adjacent buildings, cottages and bungalows. They have a trust that owns the buildings and sublets them to members. Rent can be paid in various forms, including a combination of money and community work hours. The original aim of Fallowfields Community was to investigate how people could achieve a more peaceful way of life. One member (Paula) said it is hard to know which came first, the adult college or the community. At the time of its formation (according to their literature) the college aimed to provide further adult education to enable people to get more involved with issues that affected their lives. Today the community appears to be undergoing a period of change or 'ethos-searching', with environmental causes having gained importance in the community. Fallowfields also sees itself as a social experiment; they are interested in social change, the challenges of communal living, and group intra-relationships.

### *Sunny Valley Community*

Sunny Valley Community is a co-housing co-operative based on seven acres of rural land. The main building is simply decorated and equipped, and is inhabited by its eleven highly educated members – three of which are now teenagers – who were celebrating the community's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2004; this is viewed as a landmark, given the financial difficulties they experienced in Sunny Valley's early days.

Adjacent to the main building are small cottages, which are mortgaged or sold to outsiders by the community trust. Buyers do not necessarily become co-op members, although they must be 'approved' by those living at the main building. Members share the community's maintenance responsibilities at all levels, and together hire the facilities out as a course venue, which brings in some (limited) income. Because of the high affinity between community members and cottages' owners there is an eco-village feeling to Sunny Valley. Their ethos comprises a strong ecological focus and respect for diversity. The community also has good links with the local village and organises their local composting scheme.

### *Stone Hall Community*

Stone Hall Community is, as self-determined, a holistic education centre set on eleven acres of land, run by a resident co-operative group and administered by a trust. The main building contains guest rooms, the main dining room, a piano room and the healing room, and is surrounded by adjacent buildings which together form a square stone rectory. In those buildings are the kitchen (fully vegetarian) and the washing-up rooms, the laundry room, a "first aid" room with communal laundry supplies, a toilet, the community kitchen and dining-room, and the kindergarten. Surrounding the main buildings are fields containing livestock, gardens, a green house and a poly-tunnel, as well as a recycling shed. There is a detached housing block for members and a caravan for visitors and volunteers. In the new library building accommodation for members is also provided. All fourteen members, except the children, work full-time for the community, each with their designated roles. All members have specific skills which they put to use in the community, and most members are either well-educated

or manually skilled. Sustainability is a key driver for this community. This manifests itself in the community's own water spring, reed-bed sewage system, composting, wood burners, and recycling efforts. Materials are simple, functional, and demonstrate a strong sense of craft-based aesthetics.

### *Spiritual Community*

Spiritual Community perceives itself as a pioneering, holistic enterprise whose aim is spiritual (non-religious) education. The community is situated in a huge rural area and comprises the eco-village, several communal buildings used as workshops and housing facilities, 'ethical' shops, food and landscaped gardens, as well as a beautiful hall which is normally used for conferences, plays and performances. The site is very idyllic and, although certainly not ostentatious, very well maintained and decorated. Spiritual community has inspired many of the other communities in this study, and is well known for its diverse educational workshops and courses, which range from spiritual and personal development through to arts and ecology. It is said that about five hundred people are in some way involved with the community, either through permanent membership (currently around 180 members from many different countries), trainee membership, volunteering or experience visits. It has a non-profit, charity status, with a body of trustees and a complexly layered administrative structure that endeavours to be consensual as much as its size allows. Community work is split into several work departments whereby members assume particular responsibilities and work alongside visitors and volunteers. Much of Spiritual Community's devotion toward sustainability is reflected on its energy windmills, the organic sewage system and its eco-houses. It also has its own community currency.

### *Green-Tech Community*

Green-Tech Community is an ecologically sound, earth-sheltered housing complex formally launched in 1998. It was partly built by its own members, and financed with the aid of some government and private grants. During both construction and occupation they have conserved and regenerated the land's fauna and flora. Green-Tech comprises five terraced 'sister' houses located in front of a large fish pond and an extensive green area. The houses are privately owned by the five member families, and have been built with high insulation to require little heating energy. The community also produces almost 100% of its own aeolian energy, some of its own food following organic principles, and has its own sewage, water collection and filtering systems. They have created a cooperative in order to manage and maintain the facilities, and all members are committed to the community businesses, which include guided visitor tours, educational and specialist workshops, information packs sales, and consultancy services. The members see Green-Tech Community as a best practice example of, and a catalyst for, sustainable communal living.

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