1. Introduction

Consumers' attempts to live more sustainably can take place through the rejection of particular products, brands, or activities. The motivation driving these non-consumption practices is that the consumer is concerned about "the effects that a purchasing choice has, not only on themselves, but also on the external world" (Harrison et al., 2005, p. 2).

This study aims to understand how and why consumers choose not to consume products or brands, or perform damaging consumption activities, in order to live more sustainably. To this end, we utilise a conceptual framework based on anti-consumption and consumer resistance, and interview 16 women, who had made a conscious effort to change their consumption practices in order to live more sustainable lives. In addition to helping us understand practices of non-consumption, this research also reveals that viewing non-consumption practice through both consumer resistance and anti-consumption frameworks, simultaneously, can lead to subtle yet valuable insights. Therefore, this research offers anti-consumption and consumer resistance as two interrelated theoretical frameworks that are equally useful for understanding consumption activities that occur outside the ideology of consumerism.

2. Conceptual Framework:

2.1. Anti-consumption for Sustainable Development

Even though the term anti-consumption literally means 'against consumption', seminal work defines anti-consumption as "a resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment of consumption" in general (Zavestoski, 2002, p. 121). Thus, in conceptualising anti-consumption as a "resistance to consumption", this influential definition does not question consumption, consumer culture and the market. Therefore, anti-consumption is a phenomenon that may be practiced within these systems. For example, research into voluntary simplifiers shows anti-consumption as a lifestyle driven by a desire to live the good life. Typically, simplifiers refuse to purchase items that do not improve their level of happiness or correspond to their self-concept (Cherrier and Murray, 2007, Elgin, 1981). Here, consumers adopt anti-consumption practices not as a 'weapon' against a particular antagonist but rather in terms of individual fulfilment and desired self. As a practice, anti-consumption operates inside, rather than against, the system. Conceptually, it is driven by self-interested and socio-environmental motivations (Lee, Motion and Conroy, 2009).

2.2. Consumer Resistance for Sustainable Development

In contrast, scholars researching consumer resistance conceptualize the phenomenon as a "resistance against a culture of consumption and the marketing of mass-produced meanings" (Penaloza and Price, 1993, p. 123). Here, consumers are conscious agents fighting/struggling against a well-defined antagonist, which can be a brand, organization, marketing images, or consumer cultural in general. The underlying idea is that the antagonist represents a system of
domination and consumer resistance is "a reaction against" this system (Ritson and Dobscha, 1999). Using this perspective, it appears that consumer resistance is defined by an 'us versus them' framework.

Under consumer resistance, green consumers who reject particular products or activities do so to resist a particular antagonist that does not conform to their environmental ideology. Here, similar to consumers performing anti-consumption, both are understood to be conscious decision-makers, however, resistant consumers differ in their use of an overarching ideological framework (Richardson and Turley, 2006) when evaluating what to buy or reject. Such a framework is always large in scale, stemming from beyond the consumer's micro-social experiences.

Based on the notion of anti-consumption as a self-interested or environmentally motivated act located within the system of consumer culture, and on the notion of consumer resistance as an act against a system of domination, we explore whether non-consumption for sustainable development should be understood as an act of consumer resistance, an act of anti-consumption, or both.

3. The study

Sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted with women attempting to live more sustainable lifestyles. Participants were sourced from the database of a sustainable living workshop run by the Australian Conservation Foundation, or by a professional fieldwork agency with instructions to only recruit participants who had modified their consumption practices toward sustainable living within the last 3 years.

To capture a range of experiences, ten participants had less than three years incorporating sustainability in their lifestyle while six participants had more than three years experience. Participants were aged between 28 and 64 years, and household incomes above $60,000 AUD.

Following Thompson et al.’s (1989) seminal methodology, interviews were conducted in informants homes, lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours, revolved around avoided products or activities, and were audio taped then transcribed. A hermeneutical approach was then used to analyse the data (Thomson, 1997).

4. Findings

As participants express their sustainable consumption practices and discuss the importance of not consuming, we identify two major themes: Claiming resistance without stigma (a consumer resistance theme) and the environmental significance of mundane practices (an anti-consumption theme).

4.1. Claiming resistance without Stigma

In practicing non-consumption for sustainable development, informants sometimes position themselves against antagonists who are unaware of environmental issues and careless in their activities. Most narratives informing this theme offer a clear picture of “me” versus “them”. For example, Rachel (50) explains that she is different to her colleagues. The discourse surrounding her act of not driving to work seems to hold her at higher moral standard, above and beyond, her colleagues whom do not even “consider” practicing non-consumption of their cars. She delimits her sustainable practices by differentiating herself from others who do not incorporate sustainable consumption in their daily lives.

Apart from resisting "others", where the antagonist is a group of individuals and their consumption activities, none of the informants describe resistance against particular antagonists such as a specific corporation, brand, ideology or the capitalist market in general, as is typically described in the literature. Therefore, our informants' practice of non-consumption reflects their consciousness, care and sense of responsibility. Furthermore, they utilise a “me versus them” framework to claim a sustainable consumer identity that is in opposition to the careless/unaware masses who continue to live unsustainably.
4.2. The environmental significance of mundane practices

While some studies position non-consumption practices as life changing acts that transform consumers’ identities leading them to enlightenment (Kozinets, 2002), our informants carry out their non-consumption practices on a more mundane level.

Simple actions of non-consumption that were well-integrated in to the informants’ life narratives include; not using the microwave to defrost meat or not turning on the air conditioning (Lisa, 25) or turning off lights (all informants). As non-consumption is carried out regularly and includes trivial acts suffused into the informants everyday ordinary practices, such acts are more in line with resistance to consuming (anti-consumption) rather than resistance against consumption (consumer resistance).

This normalization of non-consumption activities is achieved as participants prioritize their personal circumstances over environmental issues. Specifically, the narratives show that informants’ concerns for environmental responsibility and sense of being a good person were never described as superior to every day personal motives. For example, Francis (43) practices car-pooling and limits the use of her washing machine to save fuel and power, but she also links these acts of sustainable living to her personal circumstances. While environmental issues might be important for Francis, she does not consider them to be any more important than other elements of her self-concept. Instead, environmental concern shares a space with other aspects of her self-concept such as being a mother, a wife, and a financially responsible woman. Thus, for Francis, the aforementioned acts of non-consumption were also driven by self-interested concerns. In her own words, it is important to act in a way which ‘helps the environment’ but she also values practices that are ‘economically better’.

All narratives showed that anti-consumption practices are shaped by the myriad of interrelated concerns encountered in everyday life and by the informants’ micro-level circumstances that are interconnected with their multiple everyday roles. As non-consumption for sustainable development is a response to environmental and self-interested concerns, it operates within the capitalist system that nurtures rational decision making and self-expression.

This second theme shows non-consumption for sustainable development being performed as a range of day to day acts. These sometimes mundane acts were described with references to modern rational values as well as post-modern values of self-expression.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study shows that non-consumption for sustainable development can be understood as an act of consumer resistance against the dominance of other consumers as well as an act of anti-consumption motivated by self-interested concerns and modern values. Using both these frameworks we see that sustainable non-consumption enables consumers to resist against an opponent whilst nurturing modern values of progress and efficiency where the opponent is a mainstream consumer who does not consume in a sustainable manner. In addition, we show that sustainable non-consumption is not only driven by universal and transcendental norms, but that self-concept and everyday circumstances are just as powerful in motivating the practice of non-consumption.

The theoretical implications of this study are important. It suggests that non-consumption for sustainable development is best understood when using both anti-consumption and consumer resistance. We see both representing forms of non-consumption: consumer resistance acts occur outside the market and some non-consumption is a resistance against the system of consumer culture. Anti-consumption takes place within the market and can be a resistance to the act of consumption that occurs within consumer culture. We argue that acts of consumer resistance stem from the outside-in and are reactive or defensive in nature. We use the metaphor of a person who finds themselves in a situation where they must fight against an adversary because they have been backed into a corner or because it is the ‘right’ thing to do ideologically. In such circumstances
there is no question of what must happen and resistance against the antagonist is the most important act. In contrast, acts of anti-consumption flow from the inside-out, they comprise a pro-active choice by the individual to practise non-consumption as a means of defining one’s self concept or fulfilling individual goals. Here, the individual seems to have more ability to strike a balance between ideology and the mundane aspects of their individuality. We find that informants used both anti-consumption and consumer resistance when enacting the desire to live a more sustainable lifestyle and practice non-consumption.

Overall, this research helps to clarify the similarities and differences between anti-consumption and consumer resistance by suggesting that individual acts cannot be categorised as the one or the other, i.e. brand avoidance can be an act of consumer resistance or an act of anti-consumption. It is the motivation for that act, the repetition of the act and the subsequent site of the action that differentiates them.

References: