

What Triggers and Barriers to Practicing Consumption Ideals Must Be Addressed By Sustainable Consumption Solutions?

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ABSTRACT

Despite a wealth of knowledge on the psycho-social and ideological functions of personal consumption, we have yet to successfully address unsustainable consumption practices in developed urban spaces. This study develops a contemporary understanding of how people from Sydney engage in their personal consumption practices. Using both focus groups and personal consumption journals, I identified the common consumption considerations of all participants regardless of whether their goal was to minimise or maximise their resource consumption. This data was collected into eight categories of psycho-social and ideological issues that are argued to consistently contribute to the renegotiation of consumption ideals into practices. These results show that personal consumption is a fluid act that occurs anew with each decision. As such, these eight categories offer points of entry to affect sustainable consumption practices.

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List of Abbreviations

AAP	Australian Associated Press
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CSIRO	Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation
DSP	Dominant Social Paradigm
GFC	Global Financial Crisis
IISD	International Institute for Sustainable Development
UNEP	United Nations Environmental Program
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UN	United Nations
WTO	World Trade Organisation

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview.

The success of any policy or campaign solutions to unsustainable personal consumption practices depends upon fulfilling the needs and wants currently filled by those consumption practices. Despite recognising the environmental burden of our contemporary personal consumption practices, we are yet to affect any successful solution that will allow personal consumption practices to be sustained indefinitely within the finite resource limits of the earth. For a solution to be successful would require that it encourages less resource consumption than can be regenerated by the earth's systems.

1.2 Background.

More than half of the world's population now live in cities (UNFPA, 2008) – these vortex spaces (McManus, 2005), where we draw in resources to sustain ourselves as individuals and societies. This process of urban resource consumption has dislocated us from the resource origins, and the processes that permit our practices. Our efficient infrastructures of production and disposal hide the environmental and resource consequences of our consumption.

These consumption practices are shaped by the ideology of the Dominant Social Paradigm. When considered with the psycho-social functions of consumption, we have identified the two major roles of consumption in our lives and in our societies.

However, our resource consumption is unsustainable. The rates at which we are consuming natural resources and polluting the earth systems is beyond the capacity of the earth to

restock and refresh. We are passing environmental costs sideways to developing nations and forwards to future generations.

Despite previous attempts, we have failed to address those personal consumption practices that contribute to the sustainability problem / our unsustainable lifestyles / the present sustainability issue.

1.3 Research in brief.

My research will contribute to knowledge of consumption practices in urban spaces, from an Australian perspective. This thesis situates the personal consumption practices of a group of participants from Sydney, Australia within the sustainable consumption, and functions of consumption literature. This research concentrates on the psycho-social and ideological considerations that influence personal consumption practices, to demonstrate how alternative behaviours can replace current practices.

1.4 Research aim.

The primary aim of this research is to determine how we manage the psycho-social and ideological considerations that affect our personal consumption practices.

1.5 Research structure.

The background and contexts of this research are provided throughout Chapter 2. First, the idea of consumption is explained, before being placed into a context of unsustainable practices, and psycho-social and ideological functions. Chapter 2 concludes by presenting an overview of existing approaches to sustainable solutions, and suggests what is missing from current theories.

The research methodology is described in Chapter 3, and results are provided in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 analyses the results and demonstrates their practical applications. The thesis is brought to a conclusion in Chapter 6 with a reflection on the research process and suggestions for future research opportunities.

1.6 Significance of this research.

Research into consumption practices and their roles in our lives and our environmental impact is not new. Despite understanding how consumption functions across a range of personal, social and global levels, we have failed to affect behavioural changes that will permit both the environment and our consumption practices to be sustained. My research analyses contemporary consumption practices to identify areas neglected by previous sustainable solutions. It therefore contributes to filling the knowledge gap of what must be considered in devising sustainable consumption solutions.

2 About consumption

2.1 What is consumption?

Consumption, in its basic form, is the process of acquisition or use of goods or services. However, this definition fails to acknowledge the implications of our modern consumption practices. Given the complex nature of the products and services that are now consumed, our consumption practices are caught up with complex systems involving the sourcing, processing, distribution of resources into materials of manufacture and by-products, the processing of these materials into goods and by-products, the marketing, distribution, consumption, and waste management of those goods, related services, and the by-products of those processes, all of which are enabled by complex logistical infrastructures.

2.2 Why personal consumption is important.

Personal consumption practices are important because they contribute to the unsustainable loss of natural resources, upon which life on earth depends (Jackson, 2005). They also threaten the habitat of other species, and are considered a factor in anthropogenic climate change which is affecting the earth's systems capacity to function.

The word 'sustainable' can be defined as "capable of being maintained or kept in existence" (Dictionary.com, 2009a). That this should be the goal of our consumption practices, regardless of what is being consumed, seems self-evident. The only way that the earth's systems can sustain life is if those living off its resources, live within its capacity to regenerate those resources.

Recognising the complexity of the consumption processes has important implications to discussions around addressing unsustainable practices. Firstly, with each additional stage in the consumption process, the consumer is further distanced from the resource origins and implications of their consumption choices. Secondly, the size of this process highlights the challenges of making effective changes. Thirdly, it shows that, despite the limited direct engagement of citizens in these many processes, they ultimately depend upon the individual's choices to consume.

There are two dominant schools of thought that explain the important roles of personal consumption. These place consumption into contexts of ideology and psycho-social function. This chapter will present these two schools of thought, and outline how their arguments account for personal consumption practices.

2.3 The Ideologies of consumption.

2.3.1 The Dominant Social Paradigm.

Arguably, the primary reason for our current personal consumption practices being unsustainable is that they lie at the core of the ideology that dominates our social paradigm in developed countries (Kilbourne et al., 1997). Consumption's role in this DSP can hardly be overstated because it extends far beyond the use of goods and services that are the superficial interface. Instead, it forms the basis of how we interact with each other and the earth systems that support life, how we establish our identity, and how we ensure the stability of the economic system, the arrangement of which we now depend upon for access to essential goods and services. In recent decades, consumption has grown in stature to the point where it now drives the global economic model, dictates political alliances and trade

agreements, and justifies the subservience of almost every other social value. However, these consumption patterns that are central to the DSP are increasingly being recognised as problematic because they are a major driver to environmental change (Princen, 1999).

The fundamental flaw of this paradigm is that it is based on a principle of infinite growth from a finite system (Slater, 2008). This is at odds with the notion of sustainability which recognises the limits to growth, as outlined by the Club of Rome's seminal work (Meadows, 1972). In order to create a new paradigm that recognises the boundaries of the earth's systems, we must understand how our individual consumption practices both shape and are shaped by the existing paradigm. By engaging with consumption as we currently do, we perpetuate the paradigm, which in turn strengthens its influence over our practices. My research investigates how we can break that cycle, by reflecting on what factors are considered in our consumption practices, and how we understand our role in the consumption processes.

Two of the distinct areas that are clearly dominated by the DSP model of consumption practices are the idea of sustainability, and by extension, the concept of development. The implications of our unsustainable consumption practices are that the DSP must change willingly or the change will be forced upon us due to resource shortages. In recent decades, there has been increasing attention paid to addressing issues of unsustainability (Cohen, 2001), and yet to date, we have failed to alter practices enough to ensure a balance where both our consumption patterns and life on earth can be maintained.

Part of the challenge in formally moving towards sustainable consumption is the difficulty in agreeing on a definition. Ambiguity and confusion around meanings of these vital concepts

potentially dilute them to the point of negating their value. (See Box 1.1 from (Jackson, 2006:5))

Box 1.1 *Defining sustainable consumption*

The use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the lifecycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations. (Ofstad, 1994)

The special focus of sustainable consumption is on the economic activity of choosing, using, and disposing of goods and services and how this can be changed to bring social and environmental benefit. (IIED, 1998)

Sustainable consumption means we have to use resources to meet our basic needs and not use resources in excess of what we need. (Participant definition, Kabelvåg, IIED, 1998)

Sustainable consumption is not about consuming less, it is about consuming differently, consuming efficiently, and having an improved quality of life. (UNEP, 1999)

Sustainable consumption is consumption that supports the ability of current and future generations to meet their material and other needs, without causing irreversible damage to the environment or loss of function in natural systems. (OCSC, 2000)

Sustainable consumption is an umbrella term that brings together a number of key issues, such as meeting needs, enhancing quality of life, improving efficiency, minimizing waste, taking a lifecycle perspective and taking into account the equity dimension; integrating these component parts in the central question of how to provide the same or better services to meet the basic requirements of life and the aspiration for improvement, for both current and future generations, while continually reducing environmental damage and the risk to human health. (UNEP, 2001)

Sustainable consumption and production is continuous economic and social progress that respects the limits of the Earth's ecosystems, and meets the needs and aspirations of everyone for a better quality of life, now and for future generations to come. (DTI, 2003a)

Sustainable consumption is a balancing act. It is about consuming in such a way as to protect the environment, use natural resources wisely and promote quality of life now, while not spoiling the lives of future consumers. (NCC, 2003)

Sources: DTI (2003a); IIED (1998); NCC (2003); OCSC (2000); Ofstad (1994); UNEP (1999); UNEP (2001).

This discussion of unsustainable practices, habitat and species loss, and anthropogenic climate change embeds consumption into the context of the environment. Yet, there is a significant body of work that criticises ‘the neglect of consumption from the environmental equation’ (Durning, 1992:58, Ropke in Huback, 2004:31, Kilbourne et al., 1997:5). This dearth of local research prompted Kersty Hobson to write a paper entitled, “Consumption, Environmental Sustainability and Human Geography in Australia: A Missing Research Agenda?” (Hobson, 2003). This call to academics to investigate ‘how the contextual use of natural resources is perceived and practiced, and how consumption helps to shape contemporary social relations’ in Australia (148) has largely prompted the research in this paper.

As will become evident in this chapter, there are several forces that work to keep the environment and consumption practices as separate and distinct, thus permitting guilt-free consumption (Peattie, 1999, Porritt, 1984, Ottman, 1993). However, I believe that the real issue is not that the environment is neglected from the equation, but that consumption is so dominant in our paradigm that the environmental solutions are expected to work within the model of a society based on consumption (UNEP, 2009).

This dominant paradigm directs the agenda of our local, national and international goals of sustainable development and sustainable living (Redclift, 1996b). These have been established in documents such as *Agenda 21*, which argues that reducing the impacts of all social actors’ consumption practices is vital in making sustainable development a realistic

goal (UNCED, 1992). Chapter 4 of *Agenda 21* promotes the need for 'sustainable consumption' to achieve this goal, a concept defined as:

The use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, whilst minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations (IISD, 1999).

In spite of this message of awareness and consideration of future generations, it is clear that "increasing consumption is the primary goal of national economic policies" (Durning, 1992:21).

The role of consumption in development agendas is important for two reasons. Firstly, the development agendas are directed by the wealthy, developed nations (WTO, 2009a). This global leadership guides the developing nations towards the DSP, where their societies, their economies, and their political structures are based on consumption and free-market capitalism. This consumption-centred model may potentially affect the way that these communities engage with each other, with the land, and with global infrastructures, thus undermining their capacity to provide for themselves and increasing global resource burden (Chirico, 2003).

Secondly, this leadership of the development agenda by the wealthy, developed nations allows their concepts of "needs and aspirations" to be transferred to the developing nations (Brundtland, 1987). In embracing this model, these development agendas are inviting billions more people to adopt unsustainable consumption practices, which further reduces the capacity of the earth to process and regenerate resources. These concerns highlight the

urgency of addressing unsustainable personal consumption practices, particularly for their role within the DSP.

These two points on consumption's role in the development agenda are implied in the claim that "arguments to reduce consumption appear to undermine legitimate efforts by poorer countries to improve their quality of life" (Jackson). Growing economies such as China and India also argue that their role in the production stages of the consumption process is vital for offering their nations the development opportunities that have previously built the world's dominant economies (Babiker, 1999).

Increasingly, the world is recognising that consumption is connected to the "financial and ecological crises" (WTO, 2009b). Yet, the wealthy nations have failed to show any evidence of successfully integrating the "Green Economy" into the global development agenda (WTO, 2009a, WTO, 2009b). On the contrary, our ongoing practices are not only limiting the resources available for current developing nations and future generations, but also passing forward additional costs such as toxic waste and global warming (Pearce, 2003, Redclift, 1996a).

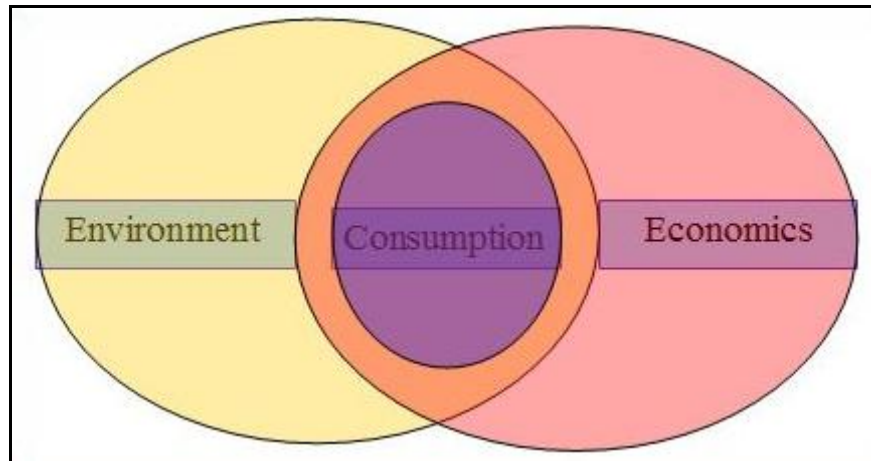
In light of the recent GFC, and increased global attention to climate change, the current agenda of many governments across the developed world is to find ways to trade and consume our way to combined economic and environmental health (WTO, 2009b). Locally, the Australian Government has focussed their policies on new production technologies, such as clean coal and hybrid vehicles, as potential solutions seeking to sustain both the economy and the environment (CSIRO, 2008, King, 2008). This maintains the current ideology of economically driven societies but seeks to replace non-sustainable products and practices

with more environmentally sustainable products and practices. This suggests that our approach to consumption and our rates of consumption are sustainable, and it is what we are consuming that needs review. This new market-based approach also relies on trusting the market to prioritise the environment as well as profits. Ironically, in recent weeks, suggestions that we must change our relationship with consumption have come from leading market thinkers, not economists or politicians. This has been in recognition of our unsustainable consumption practices, and in response to market changes as a result of the GFC (TED, 2009a, TED, 2009b).

The political shift towards green consumption reflects both increasing public concern for the issues, and the need for governments to be seen to consider both sides of the argument. However, most politicians in power realise how deeply embedded the paradigm is, and therefore the political difficulty in making the radical changes that are required to bring about sustainable lifestyles. The perception is that their constituents want a solution based on building and buying more efficient products (Seyfang, 2006, Siegford et al., 2008). However, Jevons Paradox argues that this solution is flawed; greater efficiency in production leads to cheaper products, which leads to greater resource consumption and therefore greater environmental burden (Rees, Monbiot in Schmidt, 2009).

In recognising the connection between consumption and the DSP, we also identify the overlapping relationships between consumption-economics-environment (Fig. 1), which demonstrates that consumption lies at the centre of where economics and the environment affect each other. This demands that any solutions to unsustainable practices must address the issue on all three levels.

Fig. 1



Acknowledging the connection between consumption's role in the DSP and environmental destruction is vital not only to understand why consumption is important, but to place any potential change to consumption practices into a context of what must be changed.

Kilbourne argues that in moving towards sustainable consumption, we must consider "the technological, political and economic benefits and costs of consumption, thus challenging the paradigm itself" (Kilbourne et al., 1997:4). This identifies the depth and breadth of the system that supports current consumption practices, and the size of the challenge in making change.

2.3.2 The psycho-social roles of consumption.

While the research in this paper targets individual consumption practices, it is important to know what is already understood about our consumption motives, and what role consumption plays in the lives of those living in developed nations. This section will introduce some of these major theoretical approaches from previous consumption research, and in doing so, will begin to establish a context for the new data that emerges from this study.

Consumption motives have long been the focus of academic attention. Since the 1950s, the advertising and marketing industries have researched and theorised our consumption motives in order to maximise their tools of exploitation (Usurnier, 2004). This has been led by the work of Ernest Dichter, whose list of consumption motives includes “power, masculinity-virility, security, eroticism, moral purity-cleanliness, social acceptance, individuality, status, femininity, reward, mastery over environment, disalienation and magic/mystery” (Solomon, 1992:7). Dichter gathered what he considered to be the significant motivators of human behaviour that were suitable for manipulation by the market for reward financial rewards. This approach came to inform the way that the market considered the consumer and has arguably served to embed both consumption and our approach to consumption into the free market model (Usurnier, 2004).

Shove’s academic analysis of our consumption motives had similar results to Dichter, but instead identified a “list of mechanisms that support consumption”. This outlined “social comparison, identity, mental stimulation, matching other possessions, and specialisation” as the psycho-social functions that support consumption (Shove, 1997:4-8). Other research has found similar results. Jackson argues that consumption “satisfies our needs for food, housing, transport, recreation, leisure, and is also implicated in the processes of identity formation, social distinction and identification, meaning creation and hedonic ‘dreaming’” (Jackson, 2005:5).

These theories of Shove, Jackson, and Dichter are typical of a body of research that has been conducted on consumption motives since the mid 20th Century. Common among them are the ideas that consumption serves a range of personal, social, and physical functions. The personal functions include consumption’s capacity to communicate identity and to

contribute to identity formation (Jackson in Huback, 2004:10). In practice, this occurs through the meaning that is embodied in what we consume (Jackson, 2005:72). These meanings are often assigned through culture and marketing, and this role of consumption contributes to how we identify ourselves. As an extension of this, consumption demonstrates not only who we are but who we aspire to be, and who we want to portray to the world. It communicates information on our values and priorities. The market uses this principle to maximise engagement in the DSP, by targeting our aspiration and insecurity. By highlighting these personal motivators, individuals are drawn in to participating in the processes of consumption. This form of consumption has been further facilitated by globalisation's capacity to deliver a wider range of goods for cheaper costs, increasing the range of goods that we can aspire to. This greater diversity of products offers greater diversity of identity that we are able to construct, and greater opportunity to distinguish ourselves from others.

This capacity to distinguish oneself also acts as a social function of consumption. In this context, consumption serves to both unite and divide (Alvesson, 1994, Mead, 1934). Through our consumption choices, we are united with those who share similar consumption practices or interests. Likewise, this separates us from those who consume differently from us. These social functions of consumption communicate our status and our social aspirations. These also apply at all levels across society, from within a family, to workplace, school, community, or church, to areas within a town, city, or country or culture. In this way, we recognise how consumption serves multiple psycho-social functions in everyday life, identity formation, social engagement, and society building (Giddens, 1991, Shove, 2003:93, 161, Bauman, 1998, Jackson in Huback, 2004:21, Rosenblatt, 1999).

At a primal level, consumption is recognised by the Darwinian evolutionary theorists as serving functions of sexual selection (Miller, 2009, Saad, 2007). Here, individual consumption practices are argued to display the female plumage and demonstrate the male's capacity to provide for his female. In the case of both genders, consumption practices are intended to communicate our reality and our aspirations.

This role of consumption as a social and sexual connector is supported by the argument that consumption helps us "create a social universe, and to find in it a credible plac'" (Douglas, 1976:207). For some theorists, this concept extends to consumption acting as a personal and cultural tool used to ward off anomie (Jackson in Huback, 2004:8-26). In this theory, the strengthening of community through common consumption experiences serves to preserve social stability and offer individual and collective purpose (Dictionary.com, 2009b). However, it could be argued that the opposite is also true; that consumption's role in distinguishing identity can serve to distance individuals from their community, and to undermine collective purpose. This point highlights the dichotomy of consumption; that social connection with some can bring social disconnection from others, that community development can also bring personal dislocation, and that economic development can also bring increased poverty (UN, 2005).

It is clear that our consumption practices contribute to the fulfilment of a range of our needs, including food, shelter, social bonding, sexual partnerships, and community health. However, Jackson also refers to consumption as fulfilling our 'needs' of "transport, recreation, and leisure", This raises the question of how individuals and societies distinguish between 'needs' and 'wants'. Are these the same needs that the Brundtland Commission outlines in its definition of 'sustainable development'? Considering the resource

consequences of our consumption practices, should we really be seeking to ‘meet the transport, recreation, and leisure needs and aspirations of our generation’? When ‘wants’ and ‘needs’ become interchangeable, limits to our consumption seem to disappear behind the justification of ‘needs’.

The question of language is crucial because the ambiguity over these words allows governments, world bodies, and individuals to justify their current economic, development and consumption practices. It also allows business to expand how societies understand these concepts by pushing at their boundaries. This is evident in the way that transportation ‘needs’ have grown to include power steering, air conditioning, electric windows and mirrors; and are now starting to include GPS, and in-car DVD players. The question of ‘needs’ and ‘wants’ is important because these concepts are central to our consumption priorities. Furthermore, this research shall demonstrate that discussion around these ideas is vital to determining ways to affect change in consumption practices.

2.3.3 Who is responsible?

This question lies at the core of affecting change in consumption practices. It is evident from previous research on the topic that the consumption processes are perceived to be engagements between citizens, the government, and the market. Indeed, the range of documents available on the responsabilization of consumption include those addressing the subject from the citizenship perspective (Clarke et al., 2007), the governance perspective (Barnett et al., 2008), and the market (Kilbourne et al., 1997). Overall these arguments acknowledge the roles of all three actors, but generally tend to consider the problem from a singular perspective of how one actor is affected by or affects the other two actors. This approach fails to recognise the complexity and responsive nature of these interactions. This

dynamic engagement is central to how my research analyses individual consumption practices. However, it is the role of the individual citizen that is the focus of this piece of research.

2.4 What is missing from the current theories?

Using these psycho-social and ideological contexts of consumption, previous research has accounted for the present patterns of individual consumption, and identified the link between individual consumption practices and unsustainable resource consumption. The extent to which this link between personal consumption practices and their consequences is understood by members of the public is unclear. Considering the visible consequences of our practices such as habitat loss, species loss, food shortages, pollution, and climate change, it seems obvious that our current practices cannot be sustained. Yet globally, the DSP continues to drive our consumption practices.

If we do understand this connection between our practices and resource loss, then why are our practices not changing? What does it take to change our practices? This problem has traditionally been considered in terms of the value-action gap, where our environmental values are not translated into our consumption actions. This has been the focus of considerable academic attention in recent decades, and yet, we have failed to affect adequate behavioural change.

The range of approaches has been thoroughly addressed in previous works, most comprehensively in “Motivating Sustainable Consumption” (Jackson, 2005). In this document, Professor Tim Jackson draws together existing theories including “Persuasion Theory”, “The Elaboration Likelihood Model”, “Social Learning Theory”, “Control,

Helplessness and Participatory Problem Solving”, “Breaking ‘Bad’ Habits”, and “Community-based Social Marketing”. His critique presents the solution in terms of what must be addressed to motivate behavioural change. However, it fails to suggest how to replace consumption in the range of psycho-social functions that it currently fulfils. It also fails to adequately address the multitude of levels on which the DSP functions to support our consumption practices.

Furthermore, I suggest that the failure of these previous approaches is generally caused by two issues. These theories suffer from being both too narrow and too complex. Generally, they focus on a narrow selection of the roles that consumption plays in our lives and in our societies. This is demonstrated by the example of the “Social Learning Theory” which narrows its focus to the use of social relations and information in affecting behavioural change. However, this narrow focus tends to become overly detailed, to the point where the research fails to grasp the overview of our engagement in the consumption process. Using the same example, this theory concentrates on developing a complex understanding of specific interactions between social relations and information, at the cost of acknowledging the other consumption considerations which will be discussed later in this paper.

My paper also introduces the idea that some previous approaches have been unsuccessful because the arguments have been placed in opposition to each other, with either “social influence at the heart of those consumption deliberations” (Jackson in Huback, 2004:17) or the consumer as passive victim to the system (Koritz and Koritz, 2001). However, my research will take a fresh perspective; combining both the psycho-social and ideological contexts to revisit the gap between consumption ideals and practices. This seeks to then identify the valid points of entry to affect changes in individual consumption practices.

This reflection on past research helps us to recognise that our consumption motives are quite complex and therefore requires that any solution to our unsustainable practices must consider a range of factors. They also introduce the idea that our consumption practices are responsive to a range of external and internal considerations. In the coming chapters, I will explain the methods chosen to conduct my research, introduce the new concept of 'renegotiation' into our understanding of consumption, and identify the combined psycho-social and systemic points of entry into changing our practices. This approach will combine original data with a body of previous work to address how our management of the psycho-social and ideological considerations of consumption can facilitate sustainable consumption solutions.

3 Methodology

3.1 Overview.

In this chapter, we explore why Sydney is a suitable venue for consumption research, how the research participants were recruited, and the demographic data on the participants. This process will outline the challenges of recruitment, and establish the similarities and differences in the research participants. We will also introduce several concepts including 'ideals and practices' which were developed out of the traditional 'value-action gap' concept, and the idea of 'agency' in consumption. Following this, we will explore the formal stages of the research, which combined a series of focus groups with personal consumption journals. This approach was designed to gather data from each independent method, as well as assess the impact of combining the two methods.

These methodologies were chosen for two important reasons. Firstly, they both have the capacity to be largely participant-led in their subject matter and in how the topic is considered. Secondly, neither of these methods is neutral. Each has the potential to affect the results. Consistent with the concept of renegotiation that emerged in this research, the long-term consequences of the discussion and reflection were not relevant. Instead, both of these methodologies have potential to reveal whether participation in the process led to the research discussions and reflection being considered in the range of triggers and barriers affecting ideals and practices.

3.2 Why Sydney Is Important.

In order to develop strategies that promote sustainable consumption, it is essential to study those geographical regions whose citizens have "high incomes, high resource consumption

and high waste patterns” (Hobson, 2003:149). In an Australian context, the study of individual consumption practices is pivotal because, like many developed nations and as part of an increasing global trend (UNFPA, 2008), the vast majority of Australians live in urban settings, and individual consumption is a significant contributor to overall resource consumption (Hobson, 2003:150). While this study will consider how local culture and history contribute to meanings that individuals attach to consumption and the environment, it is anticipated that the global homogeneity of the DSP will justify the transfer of some of the research methods and results across to other developed cities.

As a result of this research, policy and market solutions to unsustainable consumption will be able to specifically target those triggers and barriers that affect individual practices in developed urban spaces such as Sydney. Furthermore, this research will consolidate the prevailing psycho-social and ideological discourses on contemporary consumption issues into a comprehensive narrative on individual consumption practices in developed cities.

3.3 Recruitment.

Participants were initially sourced using a University of Sydney Department of Ethics-approved poster (Appendix 1) which was distributed around the University, to local cafes in Newtown and Petersham, the Watershed Sustainability Resource Centre in Newtown, Alfalfa House Food Co-op in Enmore, Reverse Garbage and The Bower in Marrickville, and a yoga school in Petersham. The recruitment poster focussed on ‘consumption practices’ with no mention of the environment, resources or conservation. This approach and the range of venues where the poster was distributed were intended to attract a diverse range of respondents including those who consume a lot and those who are more frugal with their consumption practices.

Recruitment via the posters was slow and yielded minimal response, and of those responses, only four people were able to commit to the project. It was evident that a more pro-active approach was needed for the focus groups to succeed. I engaged the services of facebook.com to enlist volunteers via poster advertising and direct emails. Eventually, 28 people committed to participating, with the numbers finally settling at 17 due to incompatible schedules and drop-outs. This process highlighted several valuable lessons:

1. Posters have limited success at enlisting volunteers into programs without some form of compensation to the respondents.
2. Those people who are interested enough in consumption to volunteer for consumption research are likely to already be quite attentive to their consumption practices.
3. The multitude of commitments present in individuals' lives in modern urban cities makes commitment to regular meetings difficult, and more so, when the participants have little, if anything, to gain from the experience.

3.4 Participants.

The seventeen participants ranged in age from 21 to 70 years, with two being over 50 years, and 11 being below 27 years. Of the 17 participants, four were still living at home with their parents, and therefore, on occasions, subject to the consumption choices of others.

However, this potential limitation also created opportunities to discuss the consumption implications of the interplay between non-selected social group (i.e. family), family values and domestic environment as triggers and barriers to practicing consumption ideals. The home-based participants offered some insight into the variety of individual responses to reasonably consistent domestic triggers and barriers.

More than half of the participants were full time university students, several with part-time jobs in a range of sectors including Retail Trade, Sports, Education, Administration, and Social Assistance. Of the participants who are employed full time, three work in the Arts, two work in Health Care, one works in Administration, and one works as in Education. This information was compared with data from the Australian Government, which identifies the three main employment industries as Retail Trade, Health Care and Social Assistance, Manufacturing and Construction (ABS, 2009). Using this comparison, we recognise that the participants do not represent an average cross-section of Australian workers. Therefore the data does not necessarily reflect average opinions. The research methodology sought to address this issue by inviting occasional reflection on how work environments and culture affect consumption practices.

All but two of the participants lived, studied or worked within 1 kilometre of the research venue of the Darlington Campus of the University of Sydney. Both of these two people owned cars which facilitated their participation in the meetings. This reflects the challenge of recruiting people for this type of research project which demands regular commitment over a period of 4 weeks.

All participants were of Anglo-European origins, and all but two were born in Australia or New Zealand. Of those two, one French-born participant has lived in several countries and has been living in Sydney for four years, while the other was German-Swiss born and was in Australia for a six-month study trip. The issue of cultural background was discussed for its influence in consumption ideals and practices.

As per the recruitment process, the final participants were selected without any criteria of environmental interest or commitment. As such, they represent a diverse range of

consumption interests, with no consistent environmental agendas. These differences in consumption interests were often targeted in focus group discussions to challenge dominant ideologies and maximise the focus group methodology's capacity to prompt reflection.

Each group consisted of between four and seven respondents, and only the third group was consistently populated for the three meetings. Each group always consisted of some people with previous connections and some people without connections to other participants.

Those connections included a couple in a relationship, some best friends, people who had studied together at university, and a tutor and one of their former students.

3.5 Concepts.

3.5.1 Ideals.

'Ideals' were chosen as a starting point in preference to 'values' for several reasons. As identified in earlier chapters, the already considerable research on the 'value-action' gap has failed to successfully address unsustainable consumption behaviours. Secondly, reflection on the previous psycho-social and ideological research reveals that values seem to be one consideration within our ideals.

Values are a set of guiding principles for what one deems to be correct, whereas ideals relate directly to preferred outcomes and goals. In terms of consumption, it is the difference between values of saving money and looking after the environment, and the ideal of being able to access a functional public transport network, to action those values. Therefore, research into ideals was thought to more accurately inform what is affecting our consumption practices.

3.5.2 Practices.

'Practices' represent the actual consumption choices and actions that we perform. They are an outcome of filtering our ideals through the subjective and dynamic triggers and barriers presented in this paper. As such, our decisions to consume are justified by a complex process of subjective renegotiation.

3.5.3 Agency.

Given the focus of this research on determining ways that individuals can make their consumption practices sustainable, I introduced the idea of 'agency' into focus group discussions. During the final meetings, we discussed how the participants viewed their capacities to affect the extended consumption processes. This data was intended for comparison with data collected from the previous focus group discussions and journals, with the goal of establishing whether the perception of agency is matched by consumer activism.

3.6 Pre Focus Groups.

Following the recruitment drive, the volunteers were emailed the Participant Information Statement, answering likely questions they may have on the research. Participants were then contacted via email and asked to list their 'Top 3 Consumption Interests'. These interests were to provide the topics for targeted discussions within the groups, and the subject of the journals. Consistent with the recruitment poster, this request made no mention of environmental focus or priorities. This important distinction directed the research focus onto investigating the triggers and barriers to practicing the respondents' subjective consumption ideals. This approach acknowledged that the environment is not a consideration in the consumption practices of all people. However, the research sought to

identify any patterns or consistencies in the triggers and barriers to the practicing of subjective consumption ideals, demonstrating if those triggers and barriers of those seeking to maximise their consumption matched those seeking to minimise theirs. If the results in this area were positive, this would identify common triggers and barriers that could be targeted to affect behaviours in both consumers regardless of consumption goals.

While the original goal was to allocate focus groups based on similar journal subjects, recruitment experiences demonstrated that the biggest hindrance to participation was scheduling. As a result, focus group membership was allocated according to the availabilities of the participants. However, each group of participants consistently shared overlapping areas of interest.

3.7 Focus Groups.

The format and layout of the focus group meetings were based on the work of Krueger and Casey (Krueger and Casey, 2000) and Larsen et al (Larsen, 2004). The focus groups were held in a meeting room in the Madsen Building at the University of Sydney. The room was easy to find on the ground floor and the building was located near to public transport and car parking facilities. The room was a generic meeting room, with a white board at each end, and two central tables large enough to seat more than a dozen people. All of us shared a single table.

I employed deliberate body language in my facilitation of the groups, often sitting with one arm on a nearby chair, serving to invite (with open arms), and also to suggest a focal point and a sense of control of the space (appearing larger). I would also turn towards whoever was speaking, showing attention and bringing the group's attention to them. This reflects

the work of Krueger and Casey who discuss body language as integral to focus group methodology (Krueger and Casey, 2000:9,111,113).

Prior to each session, the basic points of focus for the meeting, the participants' first names, and a thank you sign were written on the white board. This allowed participants to refer back to the board at any stage to keep themselves on task, offered a common visual point of reference for any questions, facilitated interpersonal connection through the reminder of informal names, and there constantly reminded everybody that their participation in the program was appreciated.

Each session began with a chat over a cup of tea and biscuits. This served to informalise the space and facilitate a level of rapport with each other (Krueger and Casey, 2000:180). The final session included some home-made biscuits, which allowed additional data to be collected on some of the consumption practices that had been discussed during the course of the research (see Results).

Having experienced firsthand the common social reservation verging on reluctance to participate in formal meetings, I conducted the meetings as informally as possible, while still maintaining stringent ethical standards and academic research discipline (Krueger and Casey, 2000:40). The establishment of this informality served to build rapports and to diminish isolation between participants; thus, encouraging contributions and interactions.

The formal part of each focus group began with a welcome, and an explanation of the meeting goals. For the first meeting of each group, permission was sought to record the discussions on an audio recorder. In the second and third meetings, the previous meetings were briefly summarised to place the coming session into context within the research.

The first and second focus group sessions began with writing down ideals and practices on a shared piece of paper. This too served to connect the group, as well as ensuring that each person contributed ideas to the discussions. In acknowledging the methodological strengths of “participatory diagramming techniques” (Kesby et al in Cloke, 2004: Chapter 9), participants were invited to ‘write, doodle, or draw’ on these pieces of paper. Consistent with the overall goal of the focus groups, this was intended to create opportunity for greater engagement between participants, and the group development of ideas. However, only occasional and independent drawings were added to supplement the written contributions. Once everyone’s contributions were established on paper, this written information formed the basis of the discussions. I raised selected points from the written contributions and then invited the authors to expand on their ideas, before opening up each point to group discussion. The written points were filtered using subjective and approximated criteria of interest and relevance to the weekly goal. This served to maintain momentum in the interactions, and direct the discussions. Often, these discussions led the group to develop their original written points, eventually identifying common triggers and barriers to their consumption ideals and practices.

The diversity contained within the relationships and the demographics of participants offered similarly diverse interactions and contributions (Larsen, 2004). The researcher responded to this variety of participants by tailoring his techniques according to the groups. Some groups were less formal in their engagement with each other. Some interactions and perspectives verged on conflict that required managing. On these occasions, I would endeavour to support a participant-led resolution, but occasionally intervened if I felt the

focus was moving away from the session goal, or that the tension was becoming unproductive.

In reflecting on the work of Krueger and Casey on focus groups, it was observed that a broad and contrasting range of perspectives were openly offered by participants (Krueger and Casey, 2000:71). Furthermore, I paid close attention to ensure that my opinions were either excluded from the discussion, or if they arose, that it was explicit that they were of no greater value to the discussion than those expressed by the participants. Most importantly, it was regularly emphasised that there were no wrong answers, and whatever the opinions of the respondents, all were of value to the research. Each of the focus groups ran between 70-90 minutes, and several people expressed that they could have continued delving into these topics for much longer.

3.7.1 Focus Group Meeting 1.

Goal: To determine what is important in our consumption ideals and why these things are important.

Questions:

1. What factors affect your consumption ideals?
2. Why are these considerations important?
3. Have your ideals changed at all over time, and if so, what has facilitated those changes?

This was the first of our focus group meetings, where the participants met each other, and started their discussions around what they considered important regarding consumption.

After some brief hesitation, the first group engaged enthusiastically. They challenged each other and responded to the opinions and experiences voiced by members of the group. This interplay led to reflection on a broad range of stimuli that were identified as acting as triggers and barriers to the development of consumption ideals.

The second group was noticeably more reserved in their engagement with each other. At times, some members of this group seemed to be more focussed on interaction with the facilitator than with each other. It was noted that while not directly engaged in speaking or being spoken to, some people would be restless and distracted. These participants were noted to be less likely to respond to comments of others, or to develop ideas that were raised, unless the facilitator invited them to do so individually. Other participants engaged enthusiastically with each other, responding to ideas raised and developing concepts around consumption ideals. In this meeting, the focus group format of participant-led research was more challenging to facilitate than in the first group. The contrast in behaviours between the first and second meetings identified the need for flexible and responsive facilitation of discussions.

The third group was a small and consistent group who engaged well from their initial introductions. This group openly responded to each other with respect and enthusiasm. My facilitation was largely to ensure that the discussions remained relevant to the subject material, and to occasionally challenge the participants by reflecting back to them some of what they had identified. This group had a more mature median age (48 years), which may have contributed to the interactions exhibited by the participants. However, this level of engagement was consistent across participants of all ages.

As focus group facilitator, my key task evolved to be challenging individuals and the group on some of the comments, and inviting further reflection on points that were relevant to the research. This role was consistent among the all of the focus groups, though some relied more heavily on my interventions. Throughout the meetings of the first week, the largest research challenge was in directing discussions towards consideration of consumption ideals more than consumption practices. This was likely due to the more common reflection on practices of consumption rather than the ideals that direct those practices. This was managed by allowing participants to lead much of the discussion, with the role of facilitator to encourage reflection on the ideals behind the practices, and the triggers and barriers behind those ideals.

At the completion of the first focus group meetings, the journals were handed out. In the following days, I emailed all of the participants to convey the success of the first meetings and to remind them to complete their daily journals.

3.7.2 Focus Group Meeting 2.

Goals: To determine what our consumption practices are and why do we do them. Also to determine how large we perceive the consumption process to be?

Questions:

1. Alongside ideals, what factors shape your consumption practices?
2. Why do these considerations impact on your practices?
3. Think of one item of consumption, and write down all of the stages of and resources affected by the consumption of that item.

Following completion of the 14 day consumption journals, participants regrouped for the second of the focus group meetings. These groups were generally similar to the groups from the first meeting, but two of the three groups had slightly different participant composition. This included the loss of two participants due to scheduling incompatibilities, and the arrival of one participant who was unavailable for the first group meetings, so his responses to the initial questions were gathered during an interview recorded at a local café.

Compared with the first meeting, there were some different levels of engagement in these groups but it is unclear and largely unimportant as to whether this was due to the change of group composition. These changes included some more discussion and interaction between some of the participants; however, some participants continued to be reserved and distracted. Apart from some minimal differences in interactions, the overall dynamics of the groups and the role of the facilitator remained consistent with the first focus group meetings.

For these meetings, attention had moved onto consumption practices. This was a noticeably more accessible subject for discussion, and there was a general awareness that some of this ground had been covered in the first meeting. However, this created a space for deeper examination of why our consumption practices are as they are. Before concluding the second focus group meetings, we spent approximately 10 minutes beginning to contemplate the stages of and the resources affected by our consumption practices. This was intended to initiate consideration of whom and what we are affecting through these consumption practices, in preparation for the final focus group meetings.

3.7.3 Focus Group Meeting 3.

Goal: What are the triggers and barriers that affect whether we practice our consumption ideals? Consider your role in the consumption process.

Questions:

1. Agency – How much can you affect the processes surrounding consumption by your consumption practices? What determines your impact?
2. Where, in the spectrum between slave to external forces and autonomous citizen choice, do you place your agency to determine consumption practices?
3. List what you identify as the triggers and barriers to practising your consumption ideals?
4. In what ways did the journal affect your consumption practices?
5. What affects whether you do or do not take the environment into consideration during your consumption practices?

A week after the second focus group meeting, we convened for the third and final meeting. Again, the participant composition was slightly different for both the first and second groups. In addition to some reshuffling due to schedule incompatibilities, one participant was unable to attend the final meeting due to work commitments. The dynamics and interactions between the participants were consistent with previous meetings.

This final meeting was structured to build on prior meetings and address two main goals. The first aim was to consolidate previous discussions and review the participants' thoughts

on what were the triggers and barriers determining whether their consumption ideals are practiced.

The second goal involved stepping back from discussions of triggers and barriers. Using any clarity and judgement that had been born out of the research process, participants reflected on whether we, as wealthy, educated adults living in a developed urban location, are able to affect the consumption processes, and if so, what determines the extent of our influence.

3.8 Journals.

The 16 page recycled paper journals were handed out at the end of the first focus group meeting (Appendix 3). These journals were intended to build on the initial focus group discussions about consumption ideals and to lead into the following focus group meetings on consumption practices. The expected commitment required to document the relevant data into the journals was no more than 10 minutes per day.

Journals were selected as an appropriate methodology because they allow frequent qualitative and/or quantitative data to be collected on a range of ideals and practices at times that are flexible and convenient to the participant. For the purpose of this research, participants were not instructed whether to gather qualitative or quantitative information. This freedom was intended to encourage collection of quantitative data on resource consumption, along with the qualitative data on the thought processes that contribute to the decisions around consumption practices. It was hoped that any changes in behaviours over the duration of the 14 day journal, that were thought to be resulting from increased reflection due to participation in the research process would be noted and further reflected upon.

One asset of the participant-led research methodologies is that they offer opportunities to collect data beyond what is raised in the discussion or the journal. In the case of our journals, participants were invited to select their own topic for data collection, revealing information on what subject matter is of interest to them. This process also gathers information on what topics are considered suitable for research into consumption.

During the period of journal writing, participants were contacted twice via email. After a few days, an initial email complemented their contributions to the first focus group meetings, and encouraged their journaling. In the days leading up to the second group meeting, I again emailed them to encourage their journaling, and to remind them about the upcoming focus group meetings.

3.9 Combining methodologies.

The format of placing the individual journals after the initial focus group meeting and directly before the second focus group meeting maximised the opportunity for reflection on ideals and practices. The first meeting grounded the participants in the concepts and specific areas of interest to the research. This meeting also established some rapport, thereby facilitating greater interaction and maximising the development of group ideas. This initial meeting was also intended to generate some momentum of consumption consideration which would be sustained into the journaling process.

The 14 day individual reflection of the journals raised points for discussion in the second focus group meeting. This meeting capitalised on the freshness of the journaling experience, revealing whether the reflections and experiences resonated between participants.

The third focus group meeting gathered a week after the journals were completed. This week away from the research offered some perspective to emerge on the journaling process, and also revealed whether the concentrated attention of the journaling had left any residue of consideration on consumption ideals and practices.

3.10 The Role of Reflection.

Both the focus groups and the journals offered participants opportunities to reflect upon their consumption ideals and practices. The focus groups provide a shared and interactive reflection, held at intervals of two weeks and then one week. The journals involved private daily reflection which was subject to levels of personal interest in the material, and the availability of time for independent consideration. These methods are consistent with the theories and observations of Gerald Midgley who has critically reviewed the research value of both group and individual reflection (Midgley, 2001).

4 Results

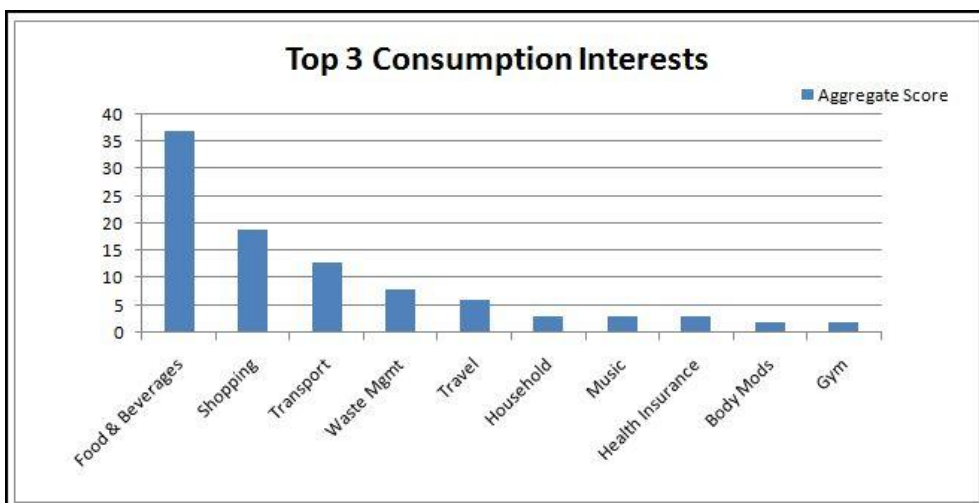
4.1 Introduction.

This section presents the data collected from participants during the focus groups and the consumption journals. The data outlines the consumption interests and priorities, and introduces the stimuli that are recognised to act as triggers and barriers to our consumption practices. Finally, it reveals how participants perceive the extended consumption processes and their role in those processes.

4.2 Pre Focus Groups.

Following the recruitment drive, respondents were invited to submit a list of their Top 3 Consumption Interests. This list was assembled by allocating points to each response; 3 for top interest, 2 for second top interest and 1 for third top interest (Fig. 2). These responses were to form the basis of the focus group allocations, and therefore, the basis of our discussions. While this was unsuccessful, the lists did demonstrate the areas of consumption where this group of people had the most interest.

Fig. 2



4.3 Ideals.

The initial focus group meetings served to introduce the concepts of the research. The concept of 'consumption ideals' proved somewhat difficult to grasp, and as a result, the conversation topics tended more towards 'consumption priorities'. Using this as a starting point, questions targeted the reasons behind these priorities. While discussions naturally addressed actual practices as well as ideals, the focus groups were successful in identifying the consumption ideals of the participants.

These are condensed into 5 main points, which are presented with some quotes from participants:

Participants are distinguished by an initial and number.

- Connecting to environment through our consumption
 - I saw what our car culture does to the environment when they put the motorway through my local forest. (M1)
 - I try to research what I am buying so that I understand the environmental impacts – this is important to me. (K1)
 - I try to minimise the impact of my consumption. (R2)
 - Our ideal is good quality, fresh, humanely treated animals. (V2)
- Community engagement through / requiring consumption
 - I love having my daily coffee. The staff know me, and chances are that at least a few people I know will stop and hang out. (B1)
 - Society has different classes, and they demand different consumption. (V1)
- Consuming out of boredom

- I get bored, so I go have a coffee – that kills time till there’s something else to do. (S1)
- There’s nothing else to do at lunchtime in the city except shop. (V2)
- Efficient spending
 - Driving cars is a waste of money – the more we drive them, the more we spend to maintain them, and the more other stuff they use. (B2)
 - I’m a student with limited funds, so I need to do my research before I buy something. (A1)
 - I literally cannot walk past a shoe sale without going in and trying something on. (C2)
 - The only thing that I always buy new is shoes; otherwise, I always try the second hand shops first. (R2)
- A personal treat
 - Going to the shops, having a coffee and reading a book is *my* time. (V1)
 - Buying something nice helps me see beauty in myself. (R1)
 - I knew I didn’t need it, but I thought “what the heck, I deserve it!” (V1)
 - After a crappy day, I can justify going to a nice restaurant. (B3)
 - “Do I need it?” comes after “Do I want it?” – because I always want it. (B3)

4.4 Triggers and Barriers.

Following the discussions of consumption ideals and practices, the focus groups and journals revealed that the consumption process involves the filtering of ideals through a range of triggers and barriers which results in the consumption practice. These triggers and barriers are a range of short- and long-term, psycho-social and ideological considerations that serve

to reinforce or undermine our consumption ideals. In doing so, they either stimulate or inhibit our consumption ideals. This distinction initially seemed to be self-evident. However, as this research progressed, it became increasingly clear that the categorisation of these stimuli as triggers or barriers is socially framed and personally subjective. Furthermore, these categories often overlap, which appears to demonstrate that the same point can not only work as a trigger or barrier, but also be considered across multiple categories within a single consumption decision. Consequently, the results are presented as a single list, with participant examples of how these considerations can be subjectively interpreted to facilitate or inhibit consumption.

1. Social

a. Facilitates consumption

- i. Coffee or shopping is what my friends do when we get together. (V3)
- ii. Going to a restaurant is how I have special time with my friends. (B3)
- iii. If I wear the same thing twice, I know that someone will make a bitchy comment. (J1)

b. Inhibits consumption

- i. My friends are freegans. I feel guilty if I buy something to take to their place. (S1)
- ii. None of my friends are 'shoppers' so it's not something that we do. (R2)
- iii. I won't change my behaviours until I see other people doing it. (M2)

2. Identity

a. Facilitates consumption

- i. Now that I am earning money, I am free to spend it how I want. (V3)
- ii. If you live where I live, then you are expected to dress in a certain way.
(C2)
- iii. I'm a movie buff; I'm a chocoholic. (R1)

b. Inhibits consumption

- i. My family has never cared about brand names, so neither do I. (C1)
- ii. I feel better about myself if I don't go shopping for things that I don't need. (K1)

3. Information

a. Facilitates consumption

- i. I buy stuff if I hear experts or people I know recommend it. (B1)
- ii. I make sure I research whatever I want before I buy it. (A1)

b. Inhibits consumption

- i. Talking to people at Uni has made me care about Fair Trade coffee, which otherwise, I wouldn't have done. (C2)
- ii. I'm on the Sydney Uni Fair Trade Coffee Facebook group and the Watershed Facebook group. (M3)

4. Connection

a. Facilitates consumption

- i. Buying from a local market makes me feel connected to the seasons and my community. (V2)
- ii. Everything we buy now is so complex that I can't always find out where it came from, so sometimes I just give up and buy it. (B3)

b. Inhibits consumption

- i. Buying organic connects me with the earth, which makes me less likely to buy junk food. (S1)
- ii. Seeing and smelling how our cars pollute the atmosphere makes me not want to get one. (M1)

5. Financial

a. Facilitates consumption

- i. Easy credit is wrong; but I just tell myself I need it. (V1')
- ii. The government gave everybody \$900 so they would go spend it. (C1)

b. Inhibits consumption

- i. I've always had a weekly budget that I can spend, but that's it. (V1)
- ii. I saw on the news that when petrol prices were up, more people took public transport to work. (M2)

6. Infrastructure

a. Facilitates consumption

- i. I don't need a car because I chose to live in a place with good public transport. (M1)
- ii. My work gives me discounts on clothes, and has a rule that we can only wear what is in season and in stock. (C2)

b. Inhibits consumption

- i. With the 'no smoking' laws, it's almost impossible now to smoke anywhere. (B3)
- ii. I live in Newtown where everything I need is local, so I pretty much don't have to drive anywhere except to gigs. (B1)

7. Stimulation

a. Facilitates consumption

- i. We need variety in our lives – to avoid getting bored. (C3)
- ii. The one thing that I know is bad but I don't want to give up is travel. (M2)

b. Inhibits consumption

- i. I'd rather spend time talking with friends than shopping with them. (M2)

- ii. I'd much rather grow the vegies myself; playing in the dirt and watching them grow, than go to a cloned supermarket and buy the same as everybody else. (B2)

8. Habit

a. Facilitates consumption

- i. Every day, I go to the shops, read my book, and have a coffee. (V1)
- ii. My daily ritual on the way to work is a coffee, a ciggy, and a chat with the café guy. (V2)

b. Inhibits consumption

- i. Now, I'm in the habit of thinking about everything that I buy. (A1)
- ii. If I go to the beach, then I make sandwiches to take with me. (C3)

4.5 How big is the consumption process?

At the end of the second focus group meetings, participants spent a little time individually writing down all aspects involved in the consumption of a single item. This question sought to discover the extent of consideration of the processes surrounding consumption, and to take this into discussions on individual agency within these processes. This information is important for identifying the extent to which individuals feel connected to, and therefore their potential to engage in the multiple stages of the consumption processes.

This activity offered opportunity for individual reflection on some specific topics that the groups had discussed only rarely. These included fresh fruit, travel, take-away Thai food,

music, processed foodstuffs, alcohol, and cotton fabric. For the majority of participants, initial consideration of this question prompted few connections, but this list was quickly expanded through the focus group discussions to often include human and material inputs for manufacture, production, transportation, promotion, and waste disposal.

Because the purpose of this question is to support consideration of the question on 'agency', the analysis has been integrated into the chapter on Agency.

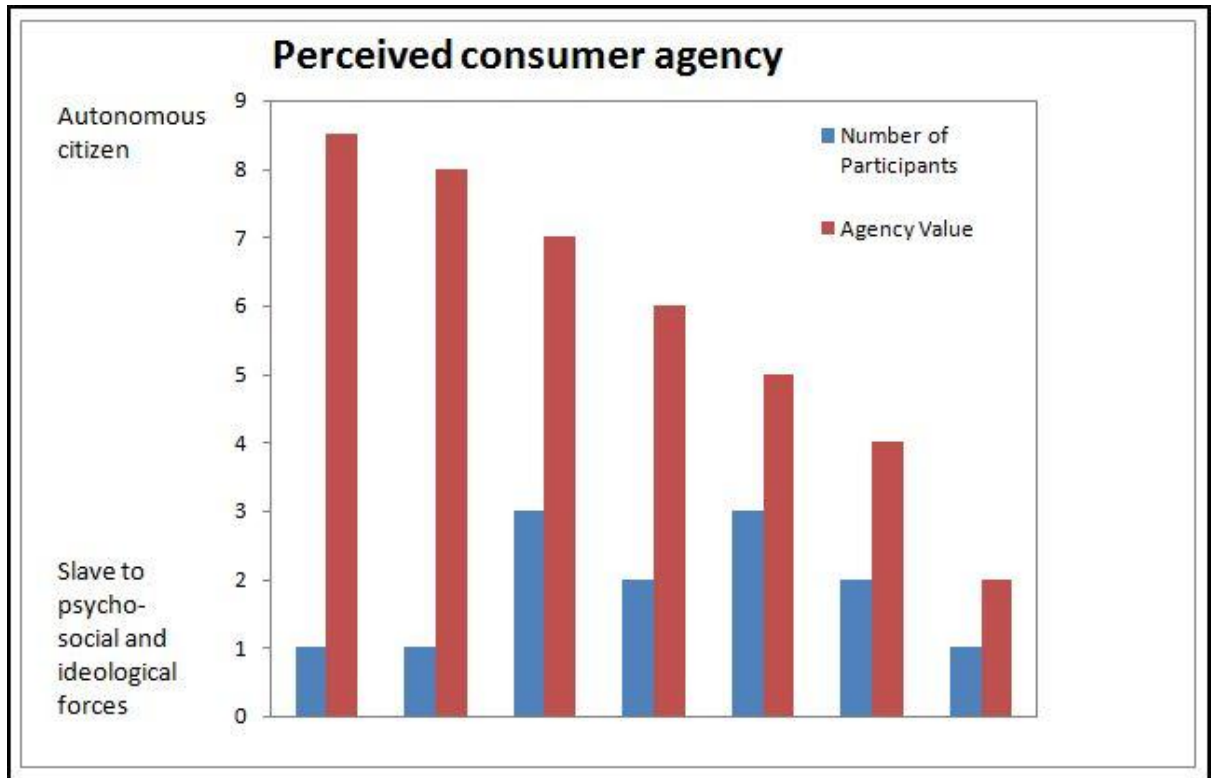
A selection of these responses is contained in Appendix 2.

4.6 Agency.

During the final focus group meetings, we discussed how people perceived their capacity to affect the consumption processes (Fig. 3). The question asked them to place themselves on a spectrum between slave to psycho-social and ideological forces, and autonomous citizen. These were selected as the two extremes of consumer participation.

This data was considered important for two reasons. Firstly, in seeking to change people's consumption practices, it is important to know how they perceive their role in the processes. Secondly, this research paper gives the opportunity to analyse whether their feeling of agency correlates with their actions, by comparing it with our other data from the focus groups and journals. Due to time restrictions, this area was not discussed in depth. However, the results are intended to promote further research that builds on the concepts in this paper.

Fig. 3



4.7 How has participation in the research affected your consumption practices?

In the final stages of the focus group meetings, we reflected on how participation in these discussions on consumption affected those practices. It was unanimously agreed that discussion of consumption resulted in increased awareness of engagement in the processes. However, participants reported that increased awareness does not necessarily convert into action.

What was particularly interesting in this part of the research was the fact that these results did not always match with comments during the focus groups. Below, I present some responses to this question, with other selected comments from the same participant italicised in brackets.

- Didn't really. Not driving is a continuous choice. Reflected on the fact that owning a car is a social default position, and it's built into our social norms. I pondered my choice and now remain firm in my principles. *(These discussions made me notice more things that we do at work that is wasteful, that normally I wouldn't notice.)*
(M1)
- Did not affect consumption practices but helped to work through the feelings that motivate them, reinforcing my views. *(Every time I want a coffee now, I think about where I am buying it, and where it comes from, and then sometimes I'll have something else, like a Soy Dandelion drink instead.)*(B1)
- More aware of consumption and the thought processes that were previously hidden.
(C2)
- Doing this made me re-think *why* I was buying things. I would constantly reflect on why I bought something (big items). For everyday shopping, it made me question why things were purchased; and it kept this in the front of my mind. (B3)
- I became aware that I was actually more focussed on environment and consequences than I thought. It also highlighted my dependency on a car; and emphasised how much where you live affects consumption practices (particularly car). (J1)
- Journal was very effective raising awareness on practices, triggers, and reasons. It strengthened my resolve to change habits. It gave me back a sense of power. It identified a lot of hidden reasons for what I do. (R1)

- No change in behaviour. I did notice that the days when I was too tired to do the journal were the days that I slipped into wasteful or more excessive consumption practices – less conscious and in control. Journal made me more focussed on time management which generally fostered better practices. (R2)
- Sometimes felt guilty about buying things. (K1)
- Not affected by participating. I'm a conscious consumer by practice and habit. (C1)
- I became aware of previous presumptions I made about products. I made an effort to become more informed as a result of increased awareness. (V2)
- I became aware of the distance between my ideals and practices. It highlighted some areas that I could be making better choices. Reflection made me aware how much my practices had changed over past 10-15 years. (B3)
- I stopped and thought about reasons for consuming goods. (V1)
- Awareness that I don't consume as much as I thought he did. (S1)
- No change in practices. Frugal practices based in upbringing, but I am more liberal with my consumption because I have money or am sometimes lazy. (M3)

5 Analysis

5.1 Introduction.

This chapter shall analyse the various stages of this research by developing the results into a narrative on the consumption process. Using the list of triggers and barriers, this narrative will introduce the new concept of 'renegotiation' and use it to demonstrate how our consumption practices are fluid and subject to change. Following this, the triggers and barriers will be analysed for their application in affecting change in our consumption practices. These two sections form the central argument of this paper; that regardless of one's consumption goals, each act of consumption, including the choice to not consume, is the result of renegotiating our ideals through a range of triggers and barriers. This idea will then be used to analyse the results on 'consumer agency'.

Unless otherwise credited, all of the examples used in this analysis emerged from the original discussions in the focus groups and consumption journals.

5.2 Renegotiation.

Perhaps the strongest implication to emerge from participant contributions is the idea that consumption ideals and practices are managed by a process of constant renegotiation. Even for seemingly habitual or addictive consumption such as smoking or coffee, participants identified that each act of consumption still involves the prioritisation of several parameters including availability of resources, ability to replace lost resources in the future, availability of financial resources, and availability of suitable venue for consumption.

This concept of renegotiation differs from negotiation in that it identifies that the process happens anew each time the acts of consumption have potential to occur. In addition, it involves responses to a range of dynamic psycho-social and ideological, past and present considerations. As part of this renegotiation process, these considerations are prioritised and the overall situation is evaluated before a decision is made.

This complex process demonstrates that our engagement with consumption ideals and practices is fluid and subject to change. This highlights the importance of identifying those triggers and barriers that are considerations in these processes of renegotiation. Awareness of this process offers opportunity to inspire change in individuals, while our study of triggers and barriers directs us to the specific stimuli which participants have shown to affect their decisions.

While introducing it as a new concept, participants recognised that advertising is based on this same idea of renegotiation. The goal of advertising is to encourage us to renegotiate our consumption decision according to information that the advertised product is better than the competitor's product that we have been using, or it is better than our current situation of not having this product in our lives. Without renegotiation, advertising is meaningless.

The implication that consumption is a process of renegotiation is supported by existing research on brain plasticity and personality development. Current scientific research believes that our brains continue to develop based on the inputs they receive (Doidge, 2007). This constant cognitive evolution demonstrates how our dynamic decisions are subjective responses to our individual experiences.

This idea is supported by the post structuralist, social constructionist view of our personalities. This school of thought believes that personalities are a social construction devised to explain behaviour (Burr, 1998:14-31); but like our brains, our personalities are not fixed, and therefore do not prescribe our consumption ideals and practices.

This relevance of this concept is further reflected in Seidman's work on the recognised consumption trigger of social engagement. Like our brains, which process the triggers and barriers to determine a consumption outcome, our social groups are not fixed, 'but rather are constitutive of subjectivity'(Barnett et al., 2008:636) . This highlights the extent of fluidity within those factors that contribute to our consumption considerations.

While this information on the processes of review and negotiation that shape our consumption practices is not new, my research has identified that renegotiation is central to how we make our consumption decisions. It is this process of renegotiation that incorporates both the psycho-social and ideological functions of consumption into our practices. Understanding renegotiation is crucial to finding solutions to our unsustainable consumption practices that work with the identified triggers and barriers.

5.3 Triggers and Barriers.

As discussed in the results section of this paper, participants identified eight categories of stimuli that are consistently used to filter our consumption ideals into practices, regardless of whether our goals are to consume more or consume less. These eight categories include both psycho-social and ideological stimuli, and all are consistent with some previous research on consumption practices (Jackson, 2005, Usurnier, 2004, Shove, 1997).

This section analyses the triggers and barriers, and demonstrates some of the ways that they work together to motivate and inhibit our consumption. While these categories are distinct, many of the examples show how these considerations function across several categories, compounding the influence that they may have over our practices. Given the evidence that our consumption practices are subject to constant renegotiation, we can target those categories that form the basis of our renegotiations to affect behavioural change.

The distinctions between triggers and barriers are constructed and artificial. This analysis shall show that some of these external and internal stimuli act quite consistently to elicit particular behaviours from individuals. However, the majority of stimuli are interpreted through our personal, social and cultural filters in constant acts of renegotiation into our consumption practices. As such, these practices which emerge from these stimuli are subject to change in response to these dynamic filters. While many of these stimuli appear to be almost invisible, such as family values, or social expectation, it is evident from the focus group discussions that they do contribute to the renegotiation of our acts of consumption.

5.3.1 Social.

Consistent with previous research into consumption, one of the strongest triggers and barriers to ideals and practices are the social implications that we associate with it. From the first focus group meetings, participants identified the reward of social engagement as a consideration of consumption ideals and practices. The most common manifestations of this among participants was through café meetings (for males and females), social shopping (most commonly, for females), and eating in restaurants (to demonstrate that a relationship is valued). The environments for these practices have come to dominate our suburban and

urban landscapes, demonstrating how infrastructure also facilitates and inhibits our practices.

There's not really anywhere else to hang out. Even though we don't plan it, we usually end up at Westfields or some other shops. (V2)

Since the development of a DSP based around free-market economics, there has been a gradual shift towards shopping centres as the community meeting places for our communities (Gill, 1999). As a culture, these 'cathedrals' have placed consumption as central to our social engagements. However, the majority of respondents identified the social engagement and not the consumed goods or services as the reward that they are seeking.

The social reward often extends beyond the obvious engagement of the direct participants. Regular consumption rituals, such as shopping or visiting a café, serve to embed people into their community and establish relationships that offer intrinsic rewards.

I always have coffee at the same café every day. They know me. (B1)

Additionally, it was recognised by some participants that the rewards are increased by regular engagement with local providers such as farmer's markets, and food co-ops. Participants cited other non-consumptive activities including community gardens, and living in a community with shared values around practices such as sport, the arts, veganism, low car use, and recycling, as offering significant social rewards. The deeper the social participation, the more that this social reward was perceived to contribute to an individual's 'quality of life'. It was also noted that, while not as fulfilling as direct engagement, there are social rewards in on-line communities that are established around common consumption ideals and practices (see Information).

Participants recognised how some social participation involves pressure to consume, such as clothes shopping, or social engagements such as sports. A large part of these pressures are based in social norms that have emerged, not out of necessity, but out of class conventions or cultural shifts.

All of the girls that I play soccer with are from the upper North Shore. So, if I want to play with them, I am expected to go to the same gym, do the same diet, and buy the same stuff. (C1)

One of the strongest ways that we connect with other people is through dialogue. Through this, we share information, opinions, and values, which are often absorbed into the ideals and practices of those around us. In the same way, participants recognised that their behaviours could be affected by the behaviours of those around them. This was particularly noted for items of frequent consumption such as food and drinks. One participant explained that he would not respond to 'information' until there had been a shift in the zeitgeist, at which stage he would use this information to justify his new ideals, and alter his consumption practices. In this example, we can identify how these social considerations also connect with identity, habit, available information, and an infrastructure that supports the change in practices.

5.3.2 Identity.

As discussed earlier in this paper, identity formation is a key motivator of our consumption ideals and practices. This section will explore how our relationship with the self contributes to how we respond to perceived triggers and barriers.

Participants demonstrated that our identity formation is just as connected with what we do not consume as it is with what we consume. This idea was highlighted by the heightened sense of self achieved by stepping outside of the common consumption ideals and practices that are largely projected onto us through the DSP. For some, this self-awareness emerged through reflection on the distinctions between 'wants' and 'needs', and the perspective that the DSP blurs the differences between them.

One characteristic that emerged as a significant contributor to identity formation through consumption ideals and practices is that of empowerment. This is true for the previous example of not consuming, where individuals are empowered through the feelings of integrity and independence that come with these choices. However, this empowerment path divides into two sets of very different ideals and practices. For some, independence is asserted through being free to consume whatever they choose. This can be in response to perceived restrictions such as finances, and family or social values. Independent consumption is also seen as something of a rite of passage within this DSP; where the capacity to consume alcohol, motor vehicles, clothing, etc, are active assertions that a person has reached adulthood. In contrast, the perceived restrictions of the DSP can provoke assertions of independence through avoiding consumption of mainstream products. These people are empowered by the freedom to make their own choices. This practice was recognised as 'The Empowerment Cycle'; referring to the idea that independent actions build personal feelings of empowerment, which then support further independent actions (Quinn and Spreitzer, 1997:9). Furthermore, the previously mentioned 'social' aspect of affecting the consumption ideals and practices of others was also acknowledged by participants to contribute to this 'empowerment cycle'.

Consistent with previous research, participants noted how goods such as alcohol, clothing, and motor vehicles carry embodied meaning which affects consumption ideals and practices. Not only can these products represent the transition to adulthood; but, they also convey messages of identity, freedom, wealth, status, and social aspirations (Solomon, 1992: Chapter 1). Brand-name clothing and 'luxury' products such as cosmetics and chocolate also carry meaning that is argued to sometimes surpass the function of the product (TED, 2009b). Much of this embodied meaning was identified as originating in marketing campaigns and popular culture. Manipulation of embodied meaning was seen to prey upon personal insecurities, so that consumption acts are used to affirm our identities not just to others, but to ourselves. The marketing campaigns hand feed us excuses that we can use on ourselves such as "...because I'm worth it"; and labels that carry embodied consumption obligations, such as "movie-buff", "chocoholic" (R1), and "addicted to coffee" (C2). This identity trigger has recently been embraced by environmental campaigns such as the green re-usable shopping bags. They are seen to affirm environmental consciousness and show that the user is putting their ideals into practice.

The self-affirmation role of consumption was frequently recognised, particularly in the journals. When considering the reasons behind acts of consumption, a common response was the sense of extrinsic reward or a treat. This idea was so consistent, that rarely in either journals or focus groups were rewards considered in terms of anything apart from consumption. Treats were consumed when things went well and when things went badly, when friends were around and when friends were not around. The rewards chosen depended upon the consumption ideals of the individual. They commonly included

chocolate, organic snacks, new or second hand clothes or music. The self-reward concept was consistently demonstrated to be a consideration in consumption ideals and practices.

Consumption considerations that acknowledged responsibilities to the self, the local and global communities and the planet were recognised as generating intrinsic rewards. In this context, participants recognised how personal, communal and 'earth citizen' identities are affirmed through altruistic consumption considerations.

Cultural and community identities were also demonstrated to be considerations in our consumption practices. This was demonstrated in all of the non-Australian born participants mentioning the influence of their culture at some stage during the focus groups.

Likewise, community identity is affirmed through collective consumption decisions. This was evident in the recent decision of the residents of Bundanoon, in New South Wales, to make their town 'bottled water free'.

While consumption is recognised as a tool used to both unite and to distinguish individuals and social groups, this identity trigger also contributes to the ideals and practices of buying local goods and services. For several focus group participants, avoiding national and transnational supermarket chains and department stores was an opportunity to distinguish themselves from the mainstream. This ideal seemed easiest to implement in the consumption of fresh produce, where supermarkets are seen to offer "cloned shelves of identical fruit and vegies" (V1). Buying local and seasonal produce from a local supplier is seen as exotic and interesting compared with the common supermarkets. Other ways that participants use consumption choices to assert their identity is through the prioritising of particular values, such as ethical products, food miles, or organic produce. These

consumption ideals and practices were recognised as being motivated by the same identity assertions as consuming brand name products.

Since the late 20th Century, our identities have also been shaped by the internet and other information technologies. Our consumption of this media has changed both the way that we engage with each other, and the way that we identify ourselves. This will also undoubtedly lead to changes in how identity motivates our consumption, and the arenas in which our identity is asserted.

5.3.3 Information.

Over recent decades the way we share, and receive information has largely been shaped by technological advances. These changes have led to changes in our consumption practices not only through access to different goods and services, but through an increased sense of empowerment over consumption choices. As an extension of this, changes to information technology have altered the way we perceive knowledge and its role in our lives. This relationship with knowledge is not restricted to that which is distributed via the internet. My research identified a range of ways that 'information' acts as a trigger and barrier to the development and practicing of consumption ideals.

We are living in a time of unparalleled access to information. Technology and innovation have brought almost global access to fast and wireless internet, which facilitate distribution of information almost as soon as that information exists. Furthermore, these technologies have largely socialised the distribution of information. Through interfaces such as blogging, Facebook and Twitter, we are able to share our thoughts or opinions, and those of other people. This has led to a change in how we gather information (Qualman, 2009). Now, an

ability to access information generally implies an ability to contribute to that information.

These technological changes have led to advancements in global logistics that serve to facilitate the distribution of information as well as the distribution of goods promoted through these information channels (see Infrastructure).

Research participants identified several areas in which the internet acts as an important source of information. It is perceived as removing physical borders to the distribution of information. Beyond some notable exceptions to this trend, such as China, North Korea and Cuba, most countries have largely endorsed this borderless network of information exchange (RSF, 2006). Wireless internet, as the current pinnacle of this technology, facilitates almost immediate access to alternative media, alternative products, a wide range of experts, and information on products, quality, dissenters, manufacturers and their practices, and labelling codes and practices. All of this permits increased comparison of information and the creation of connections around consumption ideals and practices.

The social networking sites were also recognised by participants as serving multiple purposes within people's consumption ideals and practices. Besides the sharing of information on the origins of and processes surrounding consumption of goods and services, they create a sense of community around a shared purpose. Furthermore, they endorse consumption ideals that otherwise may seem quite isolating. In doing this, the social networking sites act as triggers and barriers through both information and through identity formation. This knowledge exchange and activism of online communities was interpreted by many to demonstrate the value of individual consumer action.

Freedom to consume has long been recognised as symbolic of political freedoms (Cohen, 2004). With increased socialisation of information, individuals are able to engage in the

consumption process as the free market has always claimed (Rothbard, 2008). This empowerment to affect change through informed consumption choices implies that the system has less power over citizens than previously considered, and therefore “we might need to ascribe to ‘political rationalities’ a more modest influence in shaping the pathways of social change” (Barnett et al., 2008:628).

Beyond the information accessed via the internet, the idea of ‘experts’ was recognised as a consideration in consumption ideals and practices. Expert information is acknowledged to be gathered from a variety of formal media sources as well as word-of-mouth. It is then used to advise consumption practices and to shed light on the consequences of these practices.

Other sources that contribute information which may affect consumption ideals and practices were identified to a range of media sources. Commercial media were noted as encouraging consumption through their commercial agenda. The perceived credibility of the ‘current affairs’ television programs was divided among the focus group participants.

For some participants, a dominant source of information was non-commercial media outlets, such as the government-financed radio and television stations. They are perceived to give voice to respected scientists, political and social commentators working outside or on the fringes of the DSP. The integrity and credibility of these broadcasters are seen to contribute to public awareness on subjects and to promote broader discussion. They are perceived as free from commercial agenda, and therefore somewhat disengaged from the consumption-focused DSP.

Where possible, the subject matter of the media broadcasts and discussions was recognised as being integrated into the consumption renegotiations of their audience. It was also seen

as generating further enquiry, as well as formal public and informal social discussions around the topic. As noted in the earlier section of this chapter on 'social' triggers and barriers, these discussions are recognised by participants to contribute to their consumption ideals and practices.

A key source of information affecting consumption ideals and practices has been the emergence of particular labelling systems such as 'organic', 'fair trade', and 'fat-free', as well as the 'energy star rating system' on white goods and appliances. These were recognised to be effective when they are simple, concise and consistent. Once these standards are applied across a market, the consumer is able and more motivated to consider them in their consumption ideals and practices.

Changes to education over recent decades have also resulted in changes to consumption ideals and practices. All of the research participants under the age of 30 years noted that they had been schooled in the consequences of their waste management at their primary and high schools. School policy and culture have informed their practices, particularly around recycling. This 'information' trigger and barrier is also supported by the infrastructure within the schools (see Infrastructure). However, this education was not reflected in the data collected in the focus groups. Without any apparent sense of conflict, the 'knowledge' that led to their recycling practices seemed to carry less weight than the 'knowledge' that their individual consumption is a right to be exercised frequently because resources are perceived to be plentiful, if not limitless. This demonstrates how the renegotiation process involves the subjective prioritisation of the available information.

In the tertiary environment, studies in humanities, social sciences, politics, and economics, were suggested to offer opportunities of reflection upon our relationship with consumption.

These tertiary institutions also encourage discussion, questioning of norms, and activism; offering further opportunity for consideration of these triggers and barriers.

Beyond their promotion of discussions and activism, these academic venues support research that is distilled into the broader community. Through this research, our societies have become increasingly aware of the consequences of our resource consumption. We have learnt about the sustainability issues that we face. This research connects us to the information that encourages engaged and informed consumption.

5.3.4 Connection.

Several triggers and barriers were identified that share the common thread of 'connection'. We have already discussed social connections as a stimulus; noting how sharing with or affecting the ideals and practices of others reinforces our choices. However, this idea of 'connection' extends further into our consumption ideals and practices. Participants argued that 'considered consumption' engages us with the system, participating in the processes that enable successful commerce in 'ethical', 'Fair Trade' and 'free-range' products. The practice of supporting local business embeds us deeper into our communities, and strengthens them economically.

The disconnection from resource origins and environmental consequences that is present in so many of our current consumption choices was identified as a significant barrier to practicing any sustainable consumption ideals. This lack of connection is argued to be a consequence of the complexity of many of the goods that we consume (See Infrastructure). Due to advancements in global logistics, complex manufacturing processes use resources and labour from multiple countries, and with each stage, the consumer is further

disconnected from the resource origins. Despite the advances in information technology, the complex processes of sourcing, manufacturing and distribution hinder the capacity of the consumer to make informed decisions about consumption ideals such as resource origins, ethical production, and manufacturing and distribution by-products. Furthermore, participants suggested that company ethics are often difficult to ascertain, as massive transnational corporations absorb smaller companies into their businesses. This makes it easy to disguise business practices, and makes company connections difficult to map.

Some focus group participants argued that keeping consumers at a distance from the consequences of our actions is a deliberate policy intended to disempower us from participating in the manufacturing and waste disposal aspects of the production process. Certainly, participants observed feeling most connected with and therefore most able to engage in the processes around products of simple origins. This was reinforced by the evidence that common points of consumer activism involve products such as eggs, coffee, fur clothing, and fresh produce. They all share the common trait of being of single or simple origin. For most participants, t-shirts and jeans were flagged as being basic products whose production now involves complex global logistics which prohibits general consumer participation. These production logistics include material origins (including direct and indirect environmental impact such as petroleum origins, mining, forestry, water use and pesticides), carbon miles of materials, dyeing by-products, and labour standards in developing countries, all which conspire to make the processes too challenging to comprehend. Consistently, participants expressed greater disconnection from goods of complex origins such as technology products and motor vehicles. Some participants

recognised their struggle in negotiating their way through these complex connection challenges, and the benefits of trying and achieving anything.

Another key aspect of connection that affects consumption ideals and practices is our capacity to connect consumption choices with the environment. This acts on several levels. Firstly, it was recognised that buying local produce connects us with the earth through the seasons. Buying organic products connects us with the health of the planet and the pollution consequences of our choices.

More broadly, it was recognised that we are more likely to respond to choices whose consequences we can connect to personal experience. Local examples of this are litter, air and water pollution, fires, water scarcity, and toxic soils. By the same token, we pay less attention to remotely sourced goods and services where these opportunities for experiential connection to the resources and supplier communities do not exist. Participants argued that this disconnection goes some way to explaining the difficulty of activating behavioural changes in response to global warming. Information technology can help connect us through dissemination of information and the visible evidence of the consequences of modern consumption practices.

A more abstract issue of connection as a trigger and barrier to consumption is creating connections with what we already have. Participants raised this idea in relation to consuming clothing that matches their existing wardrobes, or technology products or furniture that are compatible with existing goods in use. These connections can serve to reduce consumption through creative use of existing resources (e.g. mixing compatible clothing). Connection was recognised as a common trigger or barrier to consumption acts and is consistently exploited as a marketing tool through brand recognition.

Some participants recognised that “everything is connected to us and to the environment”, and therefore, “if we are to be honest with ourselves, we must acknowledge these connections and act upon them” (M1). This choice is supported by the availability of information, but challenged by those parts of the infrastructure and the DSP which work to inhibit consumer activism.

5.3.5 Financial.

Financial considerations were noted to inspire and restrict consumption among the research participants. Superficially, our ability to practice ideals is affected by fluctuations in our disposable wealth. As one participants said, “When money is tight, values go out the window” (R1). Likewise, money that is perceived to be disposable (including easy credit) commonly acts as a trigger to consuming. Beyond this ‘money = consumption’ concept that reflects the role of consumption in the DSP, financial considerations were also noted to work with other triggers and barriers including ‘social’, ‘identity’, and ‘infrastructure’ to affect consumption ideals and practices.

The focus groups discussed how the GFC was providing the backdrop to some quite drastic changes to consumption practices. Personal consumption rates and patterns have changed, and people have begun saving rather than spending (Rudd, 2009). In response to these changes, many businesses have changed how they engage with the market, with the customer, and with communities. More importantly, it is claimed that the GFC represents an “opportunity for the consumer to take control and guide us to a new trajectory” (TED, 2009a). These points highlight how consumption practices are subject to constant renegotiation, and how these consumption practices do have potential to affect business practices.

Whether money is available or not, participants recognised being motivated by a sense of 'value' and 'bargain'. This was noted not only as responses to 'Sale' signs in shop windows, but also as response to the bargains found in second hand shops. Second hand shopping has the potential extra rewards of saving money, finding some 'treasure' and buying something unusual, also serving our 'identity' and 'social' triggers.

Reducing consumption as a consequence of saving money was recognised to compound environmental benefits by consuming fewer resources, producing less waste, and increasing community engagement through activities such as walking or car-pooling. Financial considerations were also noted to alter how and what we consume. One suggestion was to bring back "bottle deposit legislation" (M1) which offers a financial reward for the return of bottles for recycling. Since the focus groups, this idea has been tabled by the National Environmental Protection Council (NEPC, 2009). Other participants stated that they consume less meat in response to both environmental and financial considerations (S1). Vegetables are more environmentally sustainable, cheaper, and can be grown at home or in community gardens, therefore offering the social rewards of connecting people with their community and with the earth (B2).

One of the significant barriers to practicing environmental consumption ideals was identified as the fact that 'real' costs of consumption are hidden from the consumer (J1). This may be somewhat addressed for some goods and services by the government-proposed carbon tax, but as long as the fossil fuel industries are subsidised (AAP, 2008), and domestic waste management services are paid for in our council rates, it is difficult to grasp the real financial and environmental costs of consumption. This is also true for the health and subsequent

financial costs of consuming alcohol, tobacco, fast foods, and industry-generated air pollution (V2).

There are several dominant ways that our financial considerations engage with our consumption practices and the DSP. If financial resources do not match our wants, we sometimes feel that we are lacking (V3). In response, we perceive that we must compromise our consumption ideals, and therefore do without. In turn, this often leads to compensatory consumption, further reducing financial resources, and creating a cycle of disempowerment and dissatisfaction (V3). When our financial resources and wants are matched, we feel more empowered to engage in our consumption ideals and less inclined to enter a cycle of compensatory consumption (R1).

While money is an important consideration in consumption choices, many participants expressed that, whenever possible, they are willing to pay more for higher quality and goods that conform to their personal values. It was also common for people to do without what they considered less important so that they could consume their ideal goods or services (V1).

5.3.6 Infrastructure.

As part of the renegotiation stages of the consumption process, infrastructure was demonstrated to be a consistent consideration in consumption outcomes. In the context of the journals and focus group discussions, the idea of 'infrastructure' came to refer to any system of structure or authority in which we, as citizens, actively or passively participate and which serves to restrict or facilitate behaviours. In practice, the concept of infrastructure covers a range of factors from the ubiquitous DSP, and legal infrastructure through to local, cultural, community or workplace infrastructures. It was clear from focus group reflections,

that the DSP is recognised as directing the infrastructure that maximises our personal consumption of goods and services, and minimises the sharing of resources (J1).

Connected to the economic and political infrastructures is the legal infrastructure that legislates around alcohol and cigarette consumption, and advertising practices. In a similar way, schools and workplaces can legislate around uniforms, removing the 'identity' trigger that leads to competitive consumption. While the conservative political and business sectors plays on our fear of disempowerment by publicly discouraging government involvement in the market (Daley, 2009), research participants recognised how we tolerate political and legal infrastructure for the sake of communal benefit. From governmental economic policy to public fascination with celebrity, from corporate sponsorship of our sporting teams to advertising revenue-driven media, we are surrounded by infrastructures which are largely intended to facilitate our consumption.

Infrastructure can affect ideals and practices both through its presence and its absence. This was often raised in focus group discussions as a key consideration on the development of ideals and the consumption practices around public transport. It was also noted to be relevant to the practicing of ideals such as ethical investment, the purchasing of goods such as free-range eggs, fair-trade coffee, and the cultural shift in Australian supermarkets to green re-usable shopping bags.

Several participants from the inner suburbs recognised how efficient community infrastructure such as community hubs, where the most common goods and services are locally accessible, has the potential to embed people into their community. This supports the development of community markets, consumption of local produce, and reduces the need

for consumption of transport services. Ease of access to this local produce can mean more regular shopping for fresher produce and less wasted excess (M2).

Some focus group participants recognised how culture becomes embedded into infrastructure and vice-versa. This is most evident in the ways that our social spaces have changed to be centred on consumption. We are now embedded in a community infrastructure where venues of social engagement are designed primarily to encourage consumption (B1). This infrastructural support of consumption was also identified in retail clothing workplaces (C2). In city office environments, personal consumption is a common response to perceived personal restrictions from workplace infrastructure (V1). The only available time where individuals are able to assert their autonomy is their lunch hour, at which time they are surrounded by retail shops where they respond to other triggers and barriers such as stimulation, identity formation and social engagements associated with consumption.

Our consumption considerations include the infrastructures that facilitate or inhibit our practices. Infrastructure can also hide the by-products of consumption practices, such as efficient waste management services rendering the production of our waste almost invisible (M1). What is important to recognise is that infrastructure can use multiple stimuli to affect an outcome. For example, the case of public transport shows how we consider a range of factors including proximity to home and destination, scheduling, costs, road infrastructure designed to encourage individual car use, government support of car culture through industry subsidies, market infrastructural support through availability of petrol stations and parking, and popular culture's support of car consumption (M2).

Despite the infrastructural benefits to consumption that developments in logistic and technology have provided, this has created a barrier where infrastructures have become too complex for consumers to comprehend. Furthermore, it introduces a new challenge to the ethical consumer. Complex production chains distance the consumer from the resource origins (See Connections) and create dilemmas by having multiple points of entry for ethical behaviours. Participants recognised the challenge of having to prioritise between issues such as carbon miles, ethical production, and packaging. This is often seen as a no-win situation. This complexity has been shown to disempower consumers from participating in the process, and again offers some reasons why simple origin products inspire consumer activism.

A different demonstration of how infrastructure can affect practice was the recent example of a workplace replacing individual desk bins with a central less convenient bin (M2). This resulted in employees being forced to reflect upon their office waste practices, and led to a reduction in the quantity of waste produced (McKenzie, 2009:35). This example demonstrates how creative infrastructural decisions can connect with other noted triggers and barriers to affect behavioural change. These employees are being stimulated by the change in routines and as a result, are being forced to reflect upon their habitual practices.

The focus groups discussed how, on a global scale, infrastructure is affecting our consumption ideals and practices through technology and logistics. The internet (see Information) has socialised our capacity to share opinions and information on goods and services. This has been supported by logistical infrastructures that grant access to these goods and services to and from anywhere in the world. As a result, our consumption ideals have grown to include almost anything that exists anywhere. However, this infrastructural

change has also facilitated access to knowledge about sustainable consumption, as well as goods and services that are sustainable. The focus groups recognised how global logistical developments now provide the infrastructure to support ethical and sustainable consumption for those that practice this consumption ideal. One of many businesses that have used these developments to benefit others is the Oxfam 'Gifts Unwrapped' program, which urges people to replace unnecessary gift giving in developed nations with a card acknowledging that their support has assisted a community in a developing country (M1).

5.3.7 Stimulation.

Participants recognised 'stimulation' as a basic human drive affecting consumption. This idea has been seized by marketers who provoke our consumption by promising stimulation. Biologically, we are programmed to respond to variation and difference as a way of identifying risk and opportunity. Participants recognised these responses were also generated by many consumption experiences; from shopping, to travelling abroad, or driving a fast car. They serve to "dispel boredom" (C1), "interrupt our conforming" (V2), and "drag us out of the mundanity of our lives" (C1). However, this stimulation is biologically designed to be fleeting, and eventually needs to be replaced by something else; and so, the consumption cycle continues.

There are different ways that consumption serves to stimulate us. Besides that already mentioned, participants expressed how we can be stimulated by the search for information on a product and the *potential* consumption of that product. Consuming second hand goods also stimulates us through the mystery of the hunt, the surprising rewards of a successful rummage, and excitement of saving money and not consuming new resources (R2, M1). The

sensory stimulation of perfumes and toiletries can also be found in the search for fresh produce, with its opportunities to smell, feel, taste and see (B1).

We can also become over-stimulated by the availability of too many options. This was recognised by some participants as inhibiting our capacity to make considered consumption choices by overwhelming us. This same issue of too many options has conditioned us the availability of extrinsic rewards, and arguably made us less inclined to generate our own stimulation.

5.3.8 Habit.

Distinct from the concept of 'addiction', 'habit' is one of the more obvious stimuli affecting consumption. Most of our common consumption practices were noted to become habitual behaviours over time. Examples suggested include domestic utility consumption (M3), transport consumption (B1), food and clothing shopping practices (V2), and waste management practices (J1). We are also affected by habits around what we eat, by 'associated consumption' such as having a choc-top at the movies (R1), and by brand loyalty (A1).

Despite a lack of journal evidence to support this, the focus group discussions revealed that the first triggers to changing habits were education (information) and (socially-induced) reflection on behaviours. During the course of the research, these were demonstrated to affect one family's waste management practices; as they made a decision to use newspaper in their garbage bins instead of plastic bags (J1). Another participant noted that during 15 years of living in shared households, these triggers would almost consistently affect people's utility consumption and waste management practices (R1).

Habitual behaviour does not necessarily lead to unmanaged consumption. It was identified that 'not consuming' and consuming differently, such as ethical, organic, second hand, or local, can also become a habit (R2, M1, V3, B1). As an extension of this concept, it appears that reflection on consumption ideals and practices can embed itself as a habit (R2). This demonstrates how redirecting people's habits can potentially affect their consumption ideals and practices.

5.4 Agency.

My research into feelings of consumer agency shows that there appears to be only occasional correlation between the answer to this question and the actions of the participants as expressed in the focus groups and journals. Several of those who expressed agency in the consumption processes demonstrated little or none of this agency in their consumption practices; while several of those who expressed a lack of agency actively engaged with the consumption processes. This point is important because it highlights the conceptual disconnection between individuals' own perceptions of empowerment and their willingness to participate.

Overall, most participants demonstrated that they are, at least in some way, actively engaged in some of the multiple stages of the consumption process. Some respondents see their consumption ideals and practices as part of the traditional supply and demand dynamics, with the potential to affect manufacturing, transportation, packaging and waste management decisions. Others suggested that even if their choices are of the extreme minority and go unnoticed by the relevant actors, strong personal ethics serve to guide their choices and translate particular ideals into consumption priorities.

5.5 Summary of Analysis.

Through this analysis, it has become evident that these eight categories explain a wealth of ways that we process the influences on our consumption choices. I have highlighted how these influences overlap, and shown that the categories are more complex than they initially appear, as each of them includes both psycho-social and ideological factors.

Within these overlapping triggers and barriers, it was recognised that some stimuli were more likely to have common environmental outcomes. For example, convenience (infrastructure) and finances were the most likely to act as barriers to practicing environmental ideals, while personal values (identity) were the strongest trigger to practicing environmental ideals. This is not to say that the opposite did not occur; just that these outcomes were more common.

This analysis has addressed the shortcomings of previous theories in two ways. Firstly, it demonstrated how consumption practices are affected by a range of overlapping psycho-social and ideological functions. Secondly, it argues that these triggers and barriers can be used to develop sustainable consumption solutions.

Overall, this analysis has shown how the processes of renegotiation cover a range of considerations addressed by the eight categories of triggers and barriers. These results are consistent across all respondents whether seeking to maximise or minimise their consumption. In the coming chapter, I will discuss ways in which this combination of psycho-social and ideological triggers and barriers can work together to support sustainable consumption solutions. I will then summarise my research and the research process that

were undertaken for this thesis. Finally, I will suggest how some potential areas for future research.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Discussion.

This paper has argued that previous considerations of unsustainable consumption practices have failed to find effective solutions. I argue that this has largely been due to their failure to consider how the psycho-social and ideological functions of consumption work together to influence our personal consumption ideals and practices. Instead, they have privileged 'information' and 'infrastructure' as the key to making change. As an alternative to previous approaches, I have suggested that sustainable consumption solutions must draw on as many of the eight triggers and barriers to our practices as possible. The potential of these triggers and barriers was argued by participants to be compounded when they worked together. In order to clarify the value of these stimuli, I have constructed an example of how these triggers and barriers can work together to affect change.

Using the eight triggers and barriers in a hypothetical campaign to minimise domestic water use:

- Social – strengthening community through local campaigns and activities, such as 'Winter Dry Days' where we skip a shower if possible; encourage the use of public pools rather than private pools; show how the actions of many make a difference;
- Identity – use celebrities to endorse campaign; promote concept as empowered; market idea as cool and desirable; associate participation in the campaign as being different and interesting; connect with sense of local or cultural identity;

- Information – spread the word and promote discussion using popular media and social networking sites; inform people of the impact of their decisions to participate; associate the campaign with other successful campaigns such as Earth Hour; use experts; show ways that we can easily conserve water;
- Connection – connect the campaign to the community, the planet, the social, environmental and economic consequences of participating & not participating; connect to the social and environmental benefits of the campaign; connect the idea to other desirable things that don't need much water, such as planting native plants;
- Financial – demonstrate the low cost of entry to participation; show how less resource use saves money directly and indirectly; encourage saving as something beneficial to them, their family, and their future; raise water costs;
- Infrastructure – make participation in the campaign accessible, by having local points of entry; reduce availability of water by rationing; subsidise or demonstrate support of domestic water tanks; offer some kind of reward for water conservation;
- Stimulation – the use of celebrities; the engagement with our communities; make the idea new and desirable; make water waste boring and undesirable; 'shower with a friend' campaign; slowly re-package the image of water as something that is a luxury and not something to be exploited or wasted
- Habit – support habit changes by ensuring that visible triggers and barriers such as identity, social, connection, infrastructure and information, are very present and constant;

This hypothetical example demonstrates concretely how these eight triggers and barriers can overlap and work together to support behavioural changes towards reduced water consumption. It also shows how these triggers and barriers continue to feed into each other, to compound the campaign benefits. This is in contrast to the traditional approach of 'information + infrastructure = behavioural change'.

6.2 Summary.

This research topic emerged from the awareness that personal consumption practices in developed nations are using natural resources at rates that are beyond the capacity of the earth to restock them. Previous consideration of consumption has identified that it fulfils a range of psycho-social and ideological functions. However, the majority of this previous literature has generally suggested that one of these sets of functions works within the other. My research has demonstrated how both of these functions interact to work as triggers and barriers to our consumption ideals and practices.

Existing theoretical approaches to solutions have suffered from being too narrow, failing to recognise how these triggers and barriers work together to influence our consumption choices, or from being overly complex by neglecting to understand the overview of the roles that these psycho-social and ideological triggers and barriers play.

Furthermore, these existing approaches have failed to recognise the psycho-social and ideological holes that any changes to consumption practices will leave. My analysis has argued that effective sustainable consumption solutions will need to address these spaces by using the eight triggers and barriers to practicing consumption ideals. This paper has used participant data to demonstrate that a range of existing practices also fulfil the psycho-social

functions that consumption is recognised to do, and that numerous ideological functions of consumption can support changes to consumption practices.

We recognised how we engage these psycho-social and ideological influences in the process of renegotiating our consumption ideals into practices. This renegotiation process is critical to explaining how each act of consumption is subject to change. Importantly, the theory on renegotiation recognises that to facilitate changes in our consumption practices, any policy and campaign approaches must engage with as many of the identified triggers and barriers as possible.

In conclusion, I conducted new research using the combined methodologies of focus groups and journals to confirm the previously identified considerations and functions of our consumption ideals and practices. I then separated them into the eight categories which were demonstrated to consistently contribute to the renegotiation of our consumption choices ideals and practices, regardless of goals. This result implies that these triggers and barriers to our consumption practices must be addressed by sustainable consumption solutions.

6.3 Reflection on the research process and methods.

This research combined two distinct methodologies of focus groups and journals. This approach allowed the collection of participant-led collectively negotiated data from the focus groups, as well as the independent personal data generated by the journals.

The recruitment process for research participants raised important points about approaching research based on focus groups and journals. It highlighted the challenges of not compensating participants, of sourcing a range of participants with diverse consumption

interests, and of conveniently scheduling focus group meetings. Following successful recruitment of sufficient numbers for the research, these participants then influenced the direction of the research by opening the research question up to include consumption goals of both increased and decreased consumption. This change benefited the research by directing the research focus onto common triggers and barriers to practicing consumption ideals, an area that had not been addressed by previous studies.

The process of focus groups and journals were successful in generating new data on consumption ideals and practices. The focus groups offered opportunity for participant-led discussions and the development of group ideas, while the journals revealed a range of detailed quantitative and qualitative data on specific aspects of personal ideals and practices. The sequencing of the focus groups and the journals worked well to ground participants in the concepts of the research and then to encourage both immediate and more distant reflection on how individuals engage in their consumption practices. Overall, the research process validated the findings of previous work on the topic, and generated new knowledge that seeks to contribute to future research and solutions to unsustainable personal consumption practices.

6.4 Future Research Opportunities.

Due to the unsustainable nature of our current personal consumption practices, it is essential that we continue to explore the many roles of consumption in our psycho-social development and in the Dominant Social Paradigm. Possible future research opportunities include:

1. Using this paper as a basis for larger research both in Australian and other developed nations on what triggers and barriers to practicing consumption ideals must be addressed by sustainable consumption solutions.
2. Broadening our understanding of the other ideological influences over consumption rates – including a comparison of how different religious ideologies approach contemporary resource consumption.
3. The investigation of how the changing identity formation facilitated by sites such as Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter, is or has potential to affect the role of consumption in identity development.

These, or similar research goals will contribute to sustainable consumption solutions.

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8 Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Recruitment Poster



The University of Sydney

Volunteers wanted

Whatever your thoughts are on
"CONSUMPTION"
– if you love it or hate it –
I want to hear from you!



I WANT...STUFF

The School of Geosciences at the University of Sydney is seeking to recruit participants for a study on "Triggers and Barriers to Practicing Consumption Ideals". Participation will involve keeping a consumption journal and attending three focus groups based on their selected area of concern. Volunteers must be aged 18-95 and fluent in English written and oral communication.

Email David at dobe7421@usyd.edu.au or leave your name and details here, and I'll be in touch.
Chief Investigator: Dr Kurt Iveson k.iveson@geosci.usyd.edu.au

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet



The University of Sydney

Head Office

Discipline of Human Geography

School of Geosciences

Chief Investigator / Supervisor: Dr Kurt Iveson Room 466

(Senior Lecturer in Urban Geography)

F-09 Madsen

University of Sydney NSW 2006

AUSTRALIA

Telephone: +61 2 9351 3627

Facsimile: +61 2 9351 3644

Email: **k.iveson@usyd.edu.au**

Web: www.usyd.edu.au/

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

Research Project

Title: Triggers and Barriers to Practicing Green Consumption Ideals

(1) What is the study about?

This study looks at the gap between individual's consumption ideals and practices. It seeks to identify what factors influence when, where and why this gap exists.

(2) Who is carrying out the study?

The study is being conducted by David Oberthur and will form the basis for the degree of Honours in Geography at The University of Sydney under the supervision of Dr Kurt Iveson.

(3) What does the study involve?

The study involves the journaling of 14 days of specific consumption practices (based around everyday activities such as driving a car, shopping, showering, etc, after which time the journals shall be handed in to David Oberthur for data analysis.

In addition to the journal, participants will be required to attend 3 x focus group meetings. These meetings will be held in a meeting room at either Fisher Library or SciTech Library, depending upon availability. These focus groups will be audio recorded for later transcription of the participants' dialogue. While names shall be used to address individuals in the meetings, the data recorded shall not include names or identification of any sort.

(4) How much time will the study take?

The journaling will require approximately 10-15 minutes per day for 14 days, and each focus group shall meet 3 times for approximately 1-1.5 hours each time. Times will be arranged to suit the majority of available participants.

(5) Can I withdraw from the study?

Being in this study is completely voluntary - you are not under any obligation to consent and - if you do consent - you can withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with the University of Sydney.

Submitting a completed journal questionnaire is an indication of your consent to participate in the study. You can withdraw any time prior to submitting your completed journal questionnaire. Once you have submitted your journal questionnaire anonymously, your responses cannot be withdrawn.

You may leave the focus group at any time if you do not wish to continue. Once you have participated in the focus groups, your anonymous responses cannot be withdrawn.

(6) Will anyone else know the results?

All aspects of the study, including results, will be strictly confidential and only the researchers will have access to information on participants. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

(7) Will the study benefit me?

The study will offer no direct benefits to participants.

(8) Can I tell other people about the study?

You are free to discuss this study with others. However, your participation in the focus groups in an indication that you agree to keep the identity of fellow participants anonymous.

(9) What if I require further information?

When you have read this information, David Oberthur will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact David Oberthur at dobe7421@usyd.edu.au .

(10) What if I have a complaint or concerns?

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact the Manager, Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on (02) 8627 8175 (Telephone); (02) 8627 8180 (Facsimile) or gbriody@usyd.edu.au (Email).

Appendix 3: Consumption Journal Cover Sheet

Consumption Journal Cover Sheet

What is your area of focus?

The basic idea is that you record any interaction with your topic...

Please record how much attention is given to this area each day. The Golden Rule is:

Please write down ANYTHING that you think could be of the remotest interest to my research.

Appendix 4: Selection of responses to Focus Group meeting 3 question -

"How big is the consumption process?"

