

The Deinstitutionalization of Plastic Bag Consumption: A Consensus between Consumer Rights and Moral Obligations”

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In 1999, the Australian Retailers Association developed a National Packaging Covenant, calling for a drastic reduction in the use of plastic bags. In response, the Coles Myer supermarket started offering reusable environmentally friendly green bags at the cost of AU\$1, while still providing disposable plastic bags to its consumers. The efforts by Coles Myer, the largest Australian supermarket, to deinstitutionalize the use of plastic bags provide an analytical context in which the principles of ethical regulations and the possibility for individual choice are combined. This context allows study of how public authorities and individual identities foster non-consumption practices.

Analysing consumers' narrative on their green (reusable) shopping bag consumption gives an insight on how the meaning of existing practices changes, and on how established practices are abandoned. The deinstitutionalization of plastic bags in supermarkets combines both consumers as subjects of moral obligations (the conservative view) and consumers as actors of their life (the liberal view). On the one hand, refusing plastic bag consumption reflects politically constructed social norms and obligations toward others, and on the other hand, such practice echoes consumers' identity and individual experiences. The dialectical interplay between social norms and self-identity evolves through time and context across five main components: practice, micro-situational encounters, meaning, identity and community. All five elements are intertwined around the use of a symbolic possession at the level of the local and the mundane.