

Anti-Consumption: A Literature Review

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### Abstract

The body of literature on consumer behavior, attitudes, preferences and motivation etc. is vast and expansive. In comparison, work on anti-consumption is at a nascent albeit growing stage. I undertake a review of the literature that has emerged in anti-consumption in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I explore the meaning and definitions of anti-consumption and resistance and then delve into the research on anti-consumption lifestyle, voluntary simplicity, brand avoidance and the motivations behind them. I conclude by looking at recent debates on re-conceptualizing and delineating anti-consumption theory from other similar research fields like sustainability, environmental and ethical concerns and other social marketing literature.

## Anti-consumption: A Literature Review

In the Journal of Social Marketing, Gerard Hastings (2012) asks:

*When a supermarket chain attains such dominance that it covers every corner of a country the size of the UK, threatens farmers' livelihoods with its procurement practices, undercuts local shops and bullies planners into submission, it becomes reasonable to ask: does every little bit really help? Once the 100 billionth burger has been flipped and yet another trouser button popped, it is sensible to wonder: are we still lovin' it? As the planet heats up in response to our ever increasing and utterly unsustainable levels of consumption, it is fair to question: are we really worth it? (P. 223)*

Consumption, as a concept, has enamored us for centuries and research on consumer behavior, attitudes, preferences and motivation is vast and expansive. In comparison, work on anti-consumption is at a nascent albeit growing stage. Recent conferences held by International Conference on Anti-Consumption Research (ICAR) ([www.icar.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.icar.auckland.ac.nz)) and special issues in journals like Journal of Business Research, Psychology and Marketing and European Journal of Marketing have helped in developing research on anti-consumption. In this paper, I undertake a review of the literature that has emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I start by exploring the meaning and definitions of anti-consumption and resistance. I then, delve into the research on anti-consumption lifestyle, voluntary simplicity, brand avoidance and the motivations behind them. I conclude by looking at recent debates on re-conceptualizing and delineating anti-consumption theory from other similar research fields.

The word anti-consumption literally means “against” or “opposed to” consumption. Researchers believe that anti-consumption research can help provide knowledge that is not sufficiently captured by conventional consumption studies (Lee, Fernandez and Hyman, 2009). Since resistance or avoidance of brands or products is not very easily visible or measureable, it is felt that there is greater need for research in this area. Yet, anti-consumption is not studied simply as an abstinence from consumption (Chatizidakis and Lee, 2012). There are different forms of anti-consumption: some people may choose to resist certain brands or products (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2006; Thompson and Arsel, 2004), while others may resist from the ideology of consumption as a whole. Anti-consumption lifestyles allow for individual self-expression (Black and Cherrier, 2010), a sense of authenticity (Zavestoski, 2002b), and a sense of individuality (Cherrier, 2009; Shaw and Moraes, 2009).

Resistance (both as an attitude as well as behavior) is strongly related to anti-consumption (Cherrier, 2009). Zavestoski (2002a, p. 121) calls anti-consumption “*a resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment of consumption.*” Price and Penaloza (1993) refer to it as a “*resistance against a culture of consumption and the marketing of mass produced meanings*”. For Fournier (1998), resistance lies on a continuum- ranging from avoidance/minimization behavior to active rebellion. But there is an important difference between resistance and anti-consumption. ‘Resistance’ deals with “*oppositional responses to a practice of dominance within the market place*” (Lee *et al*, 2011, p. 1681) and thus revolves around power and power asymmetry (Foucault, 1979, 1982). Anti-consumption, on the other hand, deals with phenomena that are against the processes of consumption (Lee *et al*, 2011). Galvagno (2011) discusses the conflicts and convergences between anti-consumption and consumer resistance and finds the latter to have a strong background in cultural studies. Portwood-Stacer (2012) believes that anti-consumption

is not simply about resistance (against a brand or overall consumption); rather it is an ideology or a lifestyle orientation. Chatzidakis and Lee (2012) also argue that anti-consumption should not be studied simply as the “reasons against” consumption.

Holt (2002) questions the modern branding paradigm and asks why most anti-branding movements are targeted at those companies who have successfully applied the marketing concept. He believes that post-modern consumer culture was born as an opposition to corporatization and people have been viewing consumption as an autonomous space where they can create their own identities, and thus brands that were overly coercive lost favor among the public. In the post-modern era, consumers create distinction by individualizing the market offerings and avoiding market influences. In fact, he predicts that we will soon be transitioning into the post post-modern stage, where “*brands will no longer be able to hide their commercial motivations*” (p. 87). He concludes by saying that what has been termed as “consumer resistance” is simply a market-sanctioned experimentation which helps the market to rejuvenate.

Before moving ahead, it may be helpful to classify the different forms of anti-consumer research, for ease of presentation. Iyer and Muncy (2009) undertake a behavioral classification of anti-consumption literature, based on the purpose and object of anti-consumption. This is depicted in figure 1 below.

		Purpose of Anti-Consumption	
		Societal Concerns	Personal Concerns
Object of Anti-Consumption	General (All Consumption)	Global Impact Consumers	Simplifiers
	Specific (Individual Brands or Products)	Market Activists	Anti-Loyal Consumers

Figure 1: Four types of anti-consumers (*Replicated from Iyer and Muncy, 2009*)

The vertical dimension differentiates between those who want to reduce overall consumption levels and those who want to reduce consumption of a particular brand or product. The horizontal dimension differentiates based on the purpose of anti-consumption- whether consumers are concerned about societal issues (like environment) or personal issues (improving quality of life etc.). It is important to note here that these categories are not mutually exclusive and most of the time people who reduce consumption fall under more than one of these categories. Although there are other similar classifications available (Cromie and Ewing, 2009), I use the above framework to present the available anti-consumption literature in a neat and ordered manner.

### **Global Impact Consumers**

These consumers “*are interested in reducing the general level of consumption for the benefit of society or the planet*” (Iyer and Muncy, 2009, p.1). They generally care about environmental issues and issues of sustainability (Black and Cherrier, 2010; Cherrier, Black and Lee, 2011). Dobscha (1998) writes that these consumers do not agree with the prevalent view that consumption indicates national prosperity (Borgmann, 2000). They are opposed to global capitalism and the overall ideology of consumerism. They organize movements to transform the social order (Buechler, 2000), fundamental ideologies and broader consumer culture itself (Gabriel and Lang 1995; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Rumbo 2002; Sklair 1995). Gabriel and Lang (1995) write that it has been only in the last 20 years that environmental and ethical consumer groups have started questioning the ‘shop till you drop’ syndrome. These calls are often ridiculed, but it is time to start taking them seriously. The earth’s resources are finite and it cannot take abuse and neglect any longer. Thus, they call for nothing short of a full-frontal attack on the core assumptions of consumerism.

Kozinets' (2002) ethnographic study on the Burning Man project reveals discourses of communality, alternate exchange practices, and positioning consumption as self-expressive art. Holt (2002) describes how people are able to resist the normative pressures of consumer culture through reflexive resistance (Murray and Ozanne, 1991); where they understand how marketing works and are able to reflexively defy it in their consumption practices. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) provide an account of how these activists not only view the large capitalists as their opponents, but have added consumers to their list of adversaries. Consumers are perceived as being "ignorant and foolish", selfish, wicked and slavish. On the other hand, consumers find these activists as being holier-than-thou and disdainfully elite. The activists use concepts of commitment, legitimacy and authenticity to oppose consumerism. Cherrier (2009) shows the importance of consumer identities in anti-consumption practices. She describes the hero identity, which relates to discourses against exploitative consumption and is concerned with social and environmental threats.

Rumbo (2002) undertakes a case analysis of *Adbusters*, the Canadian anti-advertising magazine. Its parent organization, The Media Foundation, describes itself as one of the most significant social movements of the next 20 years. The author writes that there is a struggle happening for the consumer's mind space- between consumerists and those opposed to it. There are many obstacles inherent in challenging the consumerist ideology. The magazine may aim to recover some customer mind-space away from marketing messages, but find it difficult in the face of the control that advertisers have over cultural spaces. Because they try and remain apolitical, some of their messages get co-opted by market forces, which then start selling these countercultural identities. In a capitalist marketplace, the symbols and practices of cultural opposition are co-opted by companies and transformed into commodities and fashion styles that

get assimilated into the mainstream marketplace (Clark, 2003). Thompson and Balli (2007) explore how members of an anti-consumption movement try to reclaim their co-opted symbols and practices. They discuss how corporate co-optation of the organic food movement has led to a new market system: community supported agriculture (CSA). They explore the alternate producer and consumer outlooks that are created in these new relationships. Heath and Potter (2004) though, give a different twist to co-optation studies. In their explanation of how countercultures become consumer culture, they contend that consumption of counter-cultural symbols is a kind of status competition. Under the pretence of being rebellious, consumers compete for social status and try and create distinction by consuming co-opted brands. These consumers in fact provide the necessary demand for these newly positioned goods.

One thing that cannot be ignored is that even anti-consumption idealists are not beyond the realm of consumption. Most researchers admit that however much consumers may choose not to consume, there is no escaping the consumer society (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2006; Portwood-Stacer, 2012; Rumbo, 2002; Shaw and Newholm, 2002). Price and Penaloza (1993) put it very aptly: “*the boundaries between consumption and resistance to consumption are porous*” (p. 123).

### **Simplifiers**

Voluntary simplicity is a system of beliefs that is “*put into practice by minimizing consumption of material goods, exercising self-reliance, developing one's intellect, and other nonmaterial facets of human existence*” (Zavestoski, 2002b, p. 149). An anti-consumption lifestyle is voluntarily adopted by individuals who want to avoid consumption, by either buying less and/or simply efficiently using resources (Lee, Fernandez and Hyman, 2009). These consumers are not frugal materialists (Lastovica, 2006), who reduce consumption for monetary



reasons; rather they believe in using fewer resources because they feel detached from materialistic goods. In fact, research indicates that a large population believes that over-consumption can create stress, fatigue and disillusionment (Zavestoski, 2002b). Even Jenkins (2006) concludes that people who reduce their consumption habits feel happier than they did before the change.

Zavestoski (2002a) writes that market researchers generally study the psychological factors motivating individuals to consume a particular product, but what is not clear is what makes them hold anti-consumption attitudes. These attitudes could be anything from rejecting media-generated ideals of beauty, consuming less, living a simple life or battling against advertising and marketing messages. In his later work (2002b), Zavestoski describes anti-consumption attitudes from the three social-psychological bases (Gecas, 1986,1991) i.e., esteem, efficacy and authenticity. His research shows that consumption can help individuals achieve esteem and self-efficacy but is unable to fulfill the self's demand for authenticity. Voluntary simplicity allows members to get feelings of authenticity in their lives. He adapts Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs to show that consumption helps meet the lower order needs (physiological and safety) and some part of the higher order needs (belongingness, esteem and efficacy) of individuals but it doesn't help achieve authenticity, which is why many recourse to non-material options like voluntary simplicity.

Some researchers find ethical or spiritual components in the anti-consumption beliefs of simplifiers (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002; Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Wilk, 2006). Shaw and Newholm (2002) find that those consumers who are concerned about the ethical issues of consumption also feel a need to consider their extent of consumption. They are surrounded by decisions of whether to selectively consume ethical alternatives or to reduce overall consumption

through voluntary simplicity. Thus, these ethical issues can be an important antecedent towards becoming voluntary simplifiers. Craig-Lees and Hill (2002) explicate the essence of simplicity lifestyle behavior in relation to non simplifiers. They do an extensive contrast and comparison between these two groups. They explore the thoughts, beliefs, values, and behavior of the simplifiers and see how they differ from the non-simplifiers. They find that simplifiers limit the volume and variety of goods purchased. They are more concerned with the utility of items, including objects like cars and household items, which could be perceived as status symbols. Simplifiers do not use brand names and fashion as status but instead use them as identifiers of value for money. The authors arrive at three motives for reducing consumption-environmentally, spiritually, or self-oriented. Portwood-Stacer (2012) though, has a different take on the motivations for anti-consumption. She believes that “*anti-consumption does much more than directly subvert its object of opposition (i.e. consumption)*” (p. 88). She provides a typology of motivations for anti-consumption (personal motivations, moral motivations, activist motivations, identificatory motivations and social motivations) and explicates how overlaps and conflicts between these motivations create this lifestyle. She looks at the habitual practices of anti-consumption in the daily lives of the respondents and emphasizes on the cultural and political significance for participants.

### **Market Activists**

We have so far looked at literature dealing with resistance to the overall principle of consumption, where consumers believe in simpler lives through less consumption or have environmental or moral concerns about consumerism. We now look at alternative consumption narratives, where consumers target certain brands, products or large businesses because of certain societal concerns. Holt (2002) writes, “*The most puzzling aspect of the antibranding*

*movement is that it takes aim at the most successful and lauded companies, those that have taken the marketing concept to heart and industriously applied it. Nike and Coke and McDonald's and Microsoft and Starbucks—the success stories lauded in marketing courses worldwide—are the same brands that are relentlessly attacked by this new movement.*”(p.70). It's not just the big corporations that are being resisted, but even common rituals like Valentine's Day (Close and Zinkhan, 2009) or attending the high school prom (Nuttall and Tinson, 2011). What is it about these brands/products/events that has got activists up-in-arms against them?

Thompson and Arsel (2004) develop and use the construct of a hegemonic brandscape to explicate the hegemonic influence of Starbucks on local coffee shops. Starbucks has previously been condemned by activists for its predatory business practices, for propagating homogeneity and even for over-roasting its coffee beans! The authors use this anti-Starbucks discourse to interpret how consumers consume their local coffee shops. Carty (2002) examines the ways in which the Internet and alternate forms of media have been employed to foster global resistance against brand hegemonic tendencies. She focuses on Nike Corporation to argue that although globalization has led to greater power and autonomy for large corporations, it has also seen a rise in resistance to the hegemonic tendencies of corporate culture. She examines how marginal groups use the Internet to challenge the corporate hegemonic domination in the fields of production (the anti-sweatshop movement) as well as consumption (Culture Jammers). Cromie and Ewing (2009) also describe rejection of brand hegemony as a motivation for anti-consumption behavior. They study the open source software community and study their rejection of the Microsoft brand. The authors capture the negative motivations that can lead to the rejection of brand hegemony. *“Consumers can feel disempowered, even trapped, by the lack of real freedom, whether in choice of product, support/service or mode of operation, or a variety of*

*other parameters such as incompatibility with other products, lack of information on product design and operation and so on*”(p. 3). They write that these feelings of powerlessness and frustration among the consumers, lead to the rejection of brand hegemony. Duke (2002) works on another form of hegemony. Her conceptualization of consumption is not simply purchase but also as the acceptance of ideals created by an industry. She studies how the African-American audience (a minority in the United States) critique and distance themselves from media created ideals of beauty. She shows that the marketing efforts employed by the beauty industry may not be as effective on African-American girls as much as they are on White girls. Her respondents felt that the portrayal of women in teen magazines was inauthentic and they rejected and critiqued these beauty ideals.

Sandikci and Ekici (2009) examine the role of ideologies in anti-consumption motivations. They discuss three types of political ideologies that can lead to rejection of certain brands. A) Predatory globalization (Falk, 1999), where a particular brand may be viewed as being capitalist and exploitative. A discourse of cultural imperialism (generally implying the United States of America) is laid upon products and services like Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Disney etc. B) Chauvinistic nationalism, which involves attitudes and beliefs about national superiority and *“stresses the idea that one's own nation is the only entity of self-determination and respect”* (Wittrock, 2004, p.13). Users may avoid certain brands if they feel that it tries to misuse nationalistic feelings in order to make money. C) Religious fundamentalism, which involves associating a brand with religious fundamentalism, and may also lead to rejection. Varman and Belk (2009) explore a different role that nationalism ideology plays in anti-consumption movements. They study a movement opposing Coca-Cola in the Indian village of Mehdiganj and find that the nationalist ideology of *swadeshi* is linked to experiences of colonialism, modernity

and globalization. Russell *et al* (2011) focus on similar ideological motivations, specifically animosity towards a particular country. Hoffman (2011) on the other hand, finds several idiosyncratic motives behind such boycotts. He writes that “*some consumers join boycotts because they feel solidarity with those affected by the actions of a company (resistance-boycotter), whereas others generally criticize the free-market economy and are generally prone to boycott any company (anti-consumption-boycotters). Companies (thus) need to ensure that both types of boycotters consider them socially responsible*” (p. 1702).

Many social marketing messages are also linked with anti-consumption discourses. Social messages about environment, global warming, sustainability, human rights etc. may often also include anti-consumption themes (e.g., messages against consumption of tobacco, alcohol or drug usage). Lee, Fernandez and Hyman (2009) clarify that “*anti-consumption research focuses on the reasons against consumption rather than pro-social movements*”. Yet, works like that of Cherrier and Gurrieri (2012) which highlight the social and cultural barriers to anti-consumption practices (in this case, rejecting alcohol consumption) may play an important role in extending anti-consumption literature.

### **Anti-Loyal consumers**

This group of consumers represents those people who avoid purchasing certain brands/products because of perceived inferiority or some negative experience associated with it (Lee, Motion and Conroy, 2009). The authors explore why certain people avoid certain brands. They come up with three categories of brand avoidance- experiential avoidance (from unmet expectations in previous experiences), identity avoidance (symbolic incongruence) and moral avoidance (ideological incompatibility). While it is well established that consumers derive

meaning from what they consume, there is now literature available that consumers create identities even through what they *don't consume* (Englis and Solomon, 1997; Hogg and Mitchell, 1996; Muniz and Hamer, 2001). In their work on the anti-Starbucks discourse, Thompson and Arsel (2004) found that inauthentic brand meanings motivated customers to avoid the Starbucks brand. Other authors have similarly found identity-related motives behind rejecting particular brands/products. In her elaboration of the project identity, Cherrier (2009) writes that there is an attempt to create one's own space and reposition oneself in society. Anti-loyal consumers are not against material consumption, but rather create new cultural codes, symbols and alternate market practices. Cromie and Ewing (2009) give the example of the gay community which boycotts the products of Coors because of their perceived lack of support to gay employees (identity and moral avoidance). Banister and Hogg (2004) explain self-esteem as an important motivation for rejection/avoidance of symbolic goods. Some researchers though, warn of reading too much into anti-consumption literature. In their study of users of toy sharing libraries, Ozanne and Ballantine (2010) found that users engaged in sharing for reasons like socialization and monetary benefits and not necessarily any anti-consumption attitudes. They provide sharing as a possible alternative market structure for anti-consumers. Thompson (2004) looks at the alternate medicine market and invokes the marketplace myths present in these markets. He elaborates on "*how cultural myths are leveraged to create distinctive marketplace mythologies that, in turn, serve diverse, and often competing, ideological interests*" (p.163). He specifically looks at three print ads on alternate medicine to delve into the theme.

## **Discussion**

There have been attempts by authors toward theory building in this field. Hogg *et al* (2009) draw on earlier frameworks and present an integrated conceptualization to explain how rejection

happens within symbolic consumption. In their model, they integrate consumption and anti-consumption and claim to offer a road map for further theory building. Iyer and Muncy (2009) attempt to develop scales that can differentiate between people who pursue anti-consumption for societal reasons and those who do so for personal reasons. As one can see, most researchers seem to be working on individual psychological reasons against consumption and have not yet moved beyond the lived experience of consumers (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011).

Chatzidakis and Lee (2012) make very strong arguments regarding the conceptualization of anti-consumption. They write that the “reasons against” consumption are not necessarily the binary opposite of “reasons for” consumption and that there are very important differences between negation and affirmation. They identify four areas (relating to ethical, environmental, resistance and symbolic concerns) which are often confused with anti-consumption because of use of reasons theory. The “reasons against” consumption should be studied not only from a micro-psychological level of individual choices but also a “*variety of meso, macro and supra-national levels through which various actors (e.g., businesses, governments, nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]) mobilize anti-consumption discourse*” (p. 4). Lee *et al* (2011) talk about delineating anti-consumption and consumer resistance and acknowledge the fact that while there may be certain overlaps, the two areas differ strongly.

There is a greater need for clear conceptualization in these similar looking fields. There is no doubt that in practice, many of these behaviours overlap, but now it is time to start working toward a grand theory of anti-consumption (Lee, Fernandez and Hyman, 2009) and for this to happen, researchers should start moving to a more macro level of theorization.

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