CUSTODIAN BEHAVIOR:
A MATERIAL EXPRESSION OF ANTI-CONSUMERISM

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Abstract:

Custodian behavior is an everyday practice that certain consumers consciously perform in order to rescue and safeguard material objects from being thrown away or wasted. An analysis of nine in-depth interviews with self-identified custodian consumers shows custodian behavior to be a form of anti-consumerism that resists the wastefulness of consumer culture. This study broadens the area examined by anti-consumerism research by considering wider forms of cultural practices and expression. Although they do not consciously attack global consumer culture, custodian consumer practices illustrate the diverse ways of countering the expansion of a throwaway culture, and are a testament to consumer reflexivity.

Introduction

Most approaches to anti-consumption seem to endorse notions that condemn material goods. For example, a well-known anti-consumption movement named Voluntary Simplicity promotes a detachment from processes involving commodification, markets, and material accumulation to the benefit of “non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning” (Etzioni 1998, 620). Part of the movement’s ideology points to issues of unnecessary possessions and clutter that stop individuals from living inwardly rich lives (Elgin 1981). Voluntary Simplicity takes commodities, or, the material, to represent a superficial and alienated form of existence, lacking both authenticity and depth (Elgin 1981; Etzioni 1998; Huneke 2005). The non-material, they seem to suggest, matters because it transcends manipulative and dominative social forces. Similarly, writings on downshifting emphasize that “quality of life rather than quantity of stuff” should become a priority in the consumer policy agenda (Schor 1998, 459). For Juliet Schor, resisting the material is necessary to nurture “values stressing family, religion, community, social commitment, equity and personal meaning” (p. 460). As “excessive concern for material goals is a sign of dissatisfaction with life” (Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 271), individuals need to revive the culture of constraint and/or to relearn the enjoyment of non-material things (Cross 2000). Discussing anti-consumerism in terms of resisting the material positions the subject against an alienating material world made of commodities and controlled by marketing and advertisers (Kozinets and Handelman 2004). This demarcation between the subject and the material draws from the Cartesian subject–object dualism, which assumes a separateness and autonomy between the subjects and the material. The material is public and external while subjects are private, conscious, and internal (Schrage 1997). In this view, the subject is set apart from its environment and the material world of possessions is mere background.

In contrast to this anti-material view of the subject, this study on custodian behavior adopts a subtler view in showing that consumers can use the material as a form of protest against the consumerist ideology. Two streams of research have influenced this contrasting view. First, previous research on material culture has highlighted that the human condition is inseparable from the things that surround us (Marcel 1935). There are no “individuals” in the abstract of the material. Our products, brands, and consumption experiences are necessary for our self-concept and identity construction (Belk 1988; Cherrier and Murray 2007). Indeed, the overall material world helps in creating us as subjects and we, in turn, are compelled to give an account of our values, meanings, and experiences using the material (Borgerson 2005; Miller 1987). The movement of day-to-day product use and signification and/or the re-contextualization of the objects by the subject offers a space for social and cultural production. That is, consumer protests are to be found within the marketplace matrix (Giesler and Pohlmann 2003; Giesler and Venkatesh 2005; Kozinets 2002; Peñaloza and Price 1993). Hence, based on this line of thought, the present study looks at the possibility of counteracting consumer culture by using commodities. Although there has been a call to use such a position in a previous study (Grayson and Martinec 2004), this topic has not yet been closely examined.

The second stream of research that influenced this study relates to research on consumerism and accounts of anti-consumerism as a countervailing ideology. The term consumerism points to the incessant expansion of “new, modish, faddish or fashionable, always improved and improving” material goods (Slater 1997, 10). By promoting the consumption of disposable products, short-lived fashions, and ephemeral sensations, consumerism nurtures an ideology of newness and creates a space wherein the old, the past, and the worn-out have no place (Fiske 1989; Hill and Cromartie 2004; Twitchell 2000). For Twitchell, “consumerism is wasteful” (Twitchell 2000, 289). Exposed to a constant

marketing push for the new and the different, modern consumers are inclined to develop efficient methods of dispossessing the old, including throwing things away, garage sales, second hand markets, or professional de-cluttering organizations (Belk et al. 2007; Lucas 2002; Roster 2001; Shankar et al. 2006). The expansion of dispossession practices supports the claim that “we live in a disposable society” (Belk 1995, 66). Baudrillard goes further—he highlights the fact that the practices of dispossession and waste are the main criteria for the progression of consumer culture (Baudrillard 1998). Indeed, it is estimated that in 2001, each American produced 4.4 pounds of waste per day compared to 2.7 pounds in 1960 (Iyer and Kashyap 2007). The significance of wasting practices has lead researchers in diverse disciplines to equate consumer culture to a “throwaway culture” (Urry 2000; Young 1991). Indeed, for liberal economists, wasting behavior is not only natural but necessary for the success of businesses (Bozeman 2002) and for the sociologists, our current consumer culture calls for waste rather than acquisition as a means for self-expression (Rosenblatt 1999). This field of inquiry leads to the question of whether consumers who consciously resist throwing things away in their everyday life are creating a form of protest against the consumerist ideology of newness.

The purpose of this study is to analyze whether the meanings that consumers use to interpret their custodian behavior account for a countervailing discourse to the consumerist ideology of newness. For this research, I interpret custodian behavior as an everyday practice that resists the wastefulness of consumer culture. In the face of increasing dispossession practices and the expansion of a “throwaway culture,” few consumers consciously resist throwing things away in their everyday lives. Rather than accepting and incorporating the social tendency to throw away, they opt for taking, keeping, and restoring the old and worn-out objects, even when discarded on the street. Their practice goes beyond the idea of recycling or collecting particular objects in its accumulation of all types of objects without a

clear motivation or purpose (Frost and Gross 1993; Frost et al. 1998; Maier 2004). These consumers call their behavior “hoarding” (i.e. “I hoard things”) and positions its consumption lifestyle under the notion of “custodian” (i.e. “I am a custodian of things,” “I am a custodian of material objects”).

Understanding custodian behavior within the framework of anti-consumerism has important implications. First, analyzing custodian behavior through the lens of anti-consumerism leads us to re-examine the conventional wisdom that anti-consumerism implicitly negates attachment to material possessions (Elgin 1981; Schor 1998). In addition, this study broadens the area examined by anti-consumerism research by considering wider forms of cultural practices and expressions. Some consumers do not have the opportunity to express anti-consumerism values by refusing to purchase certain brands or use particular products. They may not have the time, money, or awareness to decline fashion and trends in quest of authenticity (Zavestoski 2002), to boycott global corporations for political ideologies (Kozinets and Handelman 2004), or to adopt a simpler lifestyle for self-actualization (Cherrier and Murray 2007; Schor 1998). Furthermore, some consumers may not have the willingness to participate in explicit anti-consumerism manifestations such as rave weekends (Thornton 1995; Wilson 2002), Burning Man weeks (Kozinets 2002), or boycotting events (Sen, Gurhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001). Whereas the abovementioned protests make certain demands on consumers’ time and money, acting as a custodian of material goods by contrast is neither financially nor time-wise costly, and may allow consumers to express subtle forms of anti-consumerism values. In this context, there emerges a micro or local version of anti-consumerism that questions the viability and sustainability of consumer culture. Although they do not consciously attack global consumer culture, custodian consumer practices illustrate the multiplicity of sites of anti-consumerism, and are a testament to consumer reflexivity.

The Study

In this study, the informants are identified as *non-clinical hoarders*. Non-clinical hoarders accumulate a large number of barely usable objects and have difficulties in disposing of their items without clear conscious motivation or control (Frost, Steketee, and Williams 2002; Greenberg, Witztum, and Levy 1990; Sookman et al. 2005). For this study, non-clinical hoarders are differentiated from clinical hoarders, from collectors, and from non-hoarders, and the differences between these categories are explored next. First, non-clinical hoarders diverge from clinical hoarders in that their behavior does not cause them any significant distress nor does it impair their functioning in society (Frost and Hartl 1996). Also, non-clinical hoarding does not express an obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD) and can be found among a variety of individuals who are socially active and continue to be successful in their lives (Greenberg, Witztum, and Levy 1990). In contrast, clinical hoarders are diagnosed with OCPD, and their behavior can endanger the health and safety of the individual and the community. Second, non-clinical hoarders differ from collectors in that collectors undertake an active process of search by attending auctions and art galleries or going to antique stores; they publicly display their collected items; and their behavior is generally evaluated by others positively (Belk 1995; Bianchi 1997). In opposition, non-clinical hoarders lack a definite purpose for accumulation, they do not undergo excessive planning, they accumulate objects privately or even secretly (Frost, Steketee, and Williams 2000), and their behavior is perceived by others as irrational or abnormal. Finally, the difference between those who hoard and those who do not is that hoarders express an excessive attachment to their material possessions and are concerned with protecting their items from “unauthorized touching” and from being wasted or destroyed (Frost and Gross 1993; Frost et al. 1995). Hoarders opt to accumulate and store old and torn items rather than throwing them away (Coles et al. 2003).

Selection of the informants is concentrated on individuals who publicly name their behavior using the verb “hoarding” (i.e. “I hoard things”) and position their consumption lifestyle under the notion of “custodian” (i.e. “I am a custodian of things,” “I am a custodian of material objects”). The selection started with personal acquaintances and word of mouth communications. The snowballing technique finalized the recruitment. In order to be selected, it was imperative that each informant identified himself or herself as a hoarder. A personal contact and a review of the participant’s activities and social networks helped certify that each informant was a non-clinical hoarder.

The interviews were performed in the participants’ private space. They lasted between two and six hours and were fully recorded. Each interview consisted of open-ended questions around the motivations to accumulate, to keep, and to not dispose of material objects. The notion of being a custodian of material objects was not mentioned by the researcher. However, as the informants had themselves mentioned that they were custodians of material objects, extended time was dedicated to deepening the meanings informants affiliated with the notion. In this context, the participant was the creator and interpreter of the meanings attached to hoarding and to being a custodian of material objects in consumer culture. This paper merely interprets the meanings that non-clinical hoarders attached to these notions.

In order to uncover the meanings of being a custodian of material objects, a hermeneutical analysis was performed (Pollio, Henley, and Thompson 1997; Thompson 1993, 1997). A thorough examination of each interview was conducted through repeated readings of the interview texts, transcribed verbatim, making comparisons among informants. An understanding was formed and challenged through an ongoing process between the researcher’s interpretation and the informant’s meanings. The analyses of phenomenological existential interviews with nine non-clinical hoarders who classify themselves as “hoarders”

and “custodians of material objects” uncovers three unconventional aspects of anti-consumerism: acting as a custodian of material objects, blurring the division between the material and the social, and creating differences between past objects and modern objects.

Findings

Acting as a Custodian of Material Objects

The analysis of nine interviews with non-clinical hoarders shows that these are individuals who are reflective about living in a throwaway culture. All informants expressed concern towards the increasing rate of dispossession practices and the overwhelming distribution of “piece of plastic” (Lisa), “new stuff” (John), and “this crap that you find made in China” (Thomas). For example, Lisa compares our society to a gigantic box through which objects go in and out incessantly: “We live very much in a throwaway society where it’s very much easy come, easy go” (Lisa). For Jeff and Thomas, individuals are being trained to mechanically give away their possessions: “We live [in] a crazy, whacky society where they actually encourage us to throw things away” (Jeff); “We’re just in a habit of throwing everything away” (Thomas). George, Fiona, and John intensify the concept of living in a throwaway society when they say that “there is an aspect of conspicuous consumption” (George), “carelessness” (Fiona), and “wasteful indulgence” (John) in the way we live.

Informants refer to the number of things disposed of in consumer society as unnecessary and wasteful. Robert speaks of a new world that “should stop producing anything at all for 10 years, start reusing what we’ve made.” Jeff emphasizes this idea commenting that society has “lost the ethic of keeping things.” Together, informants felt that our current consumer culture is producing too much, which leads to “unnecessary waste” (Fiona), “a throwaway society” (Lisa), and a “wasting culture” (Jeff).

Although the informants are all displeased about the unnecessary waste in consumer culture, they do not take action against any corporations for their production practices nor do they organize political manifestations against wasteful practices. Rather, they opt for constructing and maintaining every day practices that differentiate them from the throwaway culture. This differentiation is explicit in Jeff's comments when describing a graduation cap: "Who would throw away a graduation cap? Did I graduate in this? No, I didn't, I found it!" Jeff proudly identifies himself as a person different from an individual who throws things away.

In all narratives, informants were engaged in practices that were opposed to the act of throwing away and/or being wasteful. Even old and torn items were kept, stored amongst dust and clutter. For example, Lisa, Robert, and Jeff do not comprehend the rationale behind throwing away objects, even some of their visibly old and torn items: "You're asking me to throw away!?" (Lisa); "Throwing away does not solve anything; if I have it I can take it and use it but if I throw it away it is gone forever" (Robert); "Throw it away? No, that's like the whole denial of the rationale of why you keep things" (Jeff). For Thomas, Gary, and John, the notion of throwing away is unthinkable and painful to conceive: "I cannot throw anything away, I find it impossible to throw away any bits and pieces" (Thomas); "I never throw away things, that is very painful; it is even hard to think about it" (Gary); and John prefers "to never throw away, it is too painful to throw away" (John). Each informant rejected the idea of throwing things away even when the object is broken or has lost all utility. For example, Fiona keeps her broken CD player and comments that even if it cannot play music anymore, it "just seems wasteful or too indulgent to buy a new one."

In addition to resisting throwing away and/or being wasteful, the analysis shows that non-clinical hoarders very rarely purchase new objects. Instead, they rescue objects "abandoned on the street" (Thomas) and bring them into their private space for future use.

Robert explains: “Anything I see [as] workable or working or made to work, it’s in my hand.” Similarly, while driving, Lisa positions herself as a rescuer; she comments: “You drive past and see something that is retrievable, something that deserves better than landfill, you may not need it, you may not know where it will go, but you just have to take it off the side of the road” (Lisa).

Non-clinical hoarders recuperate forgotten or unwanted objects. Everything from bricks to old blow-dryers has a potential value in the future. For example, Thomas amasses anything he finds: I “collect anything, whether it be books, or paper, you never know when you’re going to need it” (Thomas). Broken things are recovered and kept with the aim of fixing them or converting the objects for a different use: “I stimulate my mind by getting this piece with that piece and making something else” (Thomas). Informants see possible usages in most of the unwanted and discarded objects “abandoned on the streets” (Thomas). For example, on his way back from a hiking trip, Jeff saw an old chest of drawers on the side of the road. He stopped his car and brought the object back home. He explains: “When I saw it, I thought, oh my God, that could be so beautiful if you strip it back. And so I did it and it is beautiful.” The encounter with the object and the process of modification is a memorable experience that Jeff shares with passionate emotion and joy.

Informants’ mental energy and physical activity invested in keeping and re-creating a use for the object makes them active rescuers of the material. Justifications for rescuing objects are peppered with words such as “you just *never know*” or “I might need,” which suggest that informants recover diverse types of objects on the basis of their possible use in the future. Jeff furthers this notion by explaining that preserving the “life” of the objects provides a sense of security for an uncertain tomorrow: “Tomorrow things won’t be there, or I might not be able to afford a thing. It doesn’t matter, I’ve got it here. I might just have to go and look for it” (Robert).

As rescuers of the material, informants almost compare their private space to an orphanage where objects are protected from a throwaway culture and a wasteful world. Gary says objects are “like your children, you care for them, you nurture them, and then you want to see them go out into the world.” Similar to protecting orphans until they find caring parents, informants commented upon having the responsibility to rescue the objects and to protect them until they find “a good home” (Fiona). Keeping objects appears to be an act of heroism. “Once you let it [the object] go and you are comfortable it went to a good home, you can relax. It is like getting free from your self-imposed burden” (Gary). In this study, acting as a custodian of material objects is about the heroic venture of rescuing and preserving objects in the face of all pressures to throw them away.

Informants’ reluctance to throw things away and their concern for the future life of the object positions their consumer identity under the notion of “*custodian*” or “*caretaker*.” John is “a custodian of things, I save unvalued items.” Mary elaborates: “[They’re] not my things to keep, I’m just a custodian I think, it’s my job to make sure anybody that wants access to this material or whatever, gets them.” Informants’ custodian practices secure permanence in a world that is always subject to change, loss, or decay. The attention to preserve the continuity of the objects throughout time is described by the informants’ efforts to keep the material until they have found a new life or a “*good home*” (Fiona). For example, Robert will give away his belongings only if he is certain that the object will not be wasted and that someone “would use it again.”

If it’s to be thrown away, I’m not going to give it to them. If they are going to use it, by all means, I would give it to anyone who would use it again. (Robert)

Informants self-appoint responsibility to ensure that an object is preserved until it can be given to the rightful owner: “I make sure they go to a home” (Lisa); “that it can be

relevant to later life” (George). As Lisa demonstrates in the following excerpt, informants feel responsible for the continuity of the objects. The object had to be passed on to another person who would also respect and preserve the object, thus elongating its life cycle.

If I got rid of it, I would really regret getting rid of it because I couldn't be sure that it had gone to the right person. It's one of those pieces that really has to go to the right person ... I'll put up with the space that it takes, it stays. (Lisa)

Focusing on rescuing the unwanted and discarded objects and on acting as custodians of material objects empowers non-clinical hoarders to feel that they can enact change without having to protest against the production system or to manifest against short-lived consumption lifestyles. For example, Robert speaks of his hoarding behavior with pride and hopes for a better society when he says, “The more people pursue this [hoarding], the world is going to become a better place.” And Fiona identifies her practices as “a very noble thing to do.” Non-clinical hoarders do not emphasize conflict with consumer culture and capitalism. Instead, they describe being engaged in saving, protecting, and preserving objects from the dominant throwaway culture. Informants’ everyday custodian practices diverge from the dominant norm and are opposed to the ideology of a throwaway culture. By differentiating themselves from the throwaway culture, non-clinical hoarders productively reshape the meanings provided by the marketplace. This production and incorporation of subjective meanings leads me to discuss the second theme uncovered during the analysis of non-clinical hoarders’ narratives: blurring of the division between the material and the social. An exposition of this second theme demonstrates that anti-consumerism should not be regarded as an antithesis to material attachment.

Blurring the Division between the Material and the Social

In analyzing each informant's narrative, what becomes obvious is our inability to distinguish a borderline between objects and subjects. Throughout the analysis, objects bond with subjects. The objects appear as the materialization of deep subjective values and help the subjects cultivate new understandings and meanings. Material goods are the visible doors to the social world and its subjectivities. Informants speak of the material not simply as "things" or "objects," but as representations of past experiences, friendships, and engagement in the world.

Informants insist that the objects serve better than a mere photo in recalling memories. The object embodies a special event or place—"It's a historical link to a time and a memory" (Thomas). The power of the object to encapsulate the past is linked to its material tangibility—"You pick something up and you have all these memories that come with it" (George). As Lisa clearly emphasizes, an object instigates "the same emotions [from the past] when you physically hold something" (Lisa). For Thomas throwing an object is "like throwing away my memory", and for George, by throwing away objects "we just throw away our memories, it does not make sense." The objects can be extracted from the natural environment such as the root of a small tree or a rock; they can be as ordinary as a spoon or as unique as a painting. The point is that the objects impose certain memories on the custodian. The object activates memories of past experiences in the present.

Thus, the material is a cultural resource that non-clinical hoarders draw upon to reproduce past emotions and experiences. For instance, both Gary and Mary keep many vinyl records that can no longer be widely played. It is the role that the physical object plays in cuing memories that is important. Similarly, when Jeff was asked why he kept his old boots, he responded: "I just cannot bear to throw them away. This is something that has an immense psychological and sentimental value to me" (Jeff). The objects' unique, subjective historicity gives them absolute value, placing them above exchangeability or replacement. The object

has properties that make its monetary equivalence problematic and even impossible. For the object to be above exchange value and without a price dissolves the centrality of material–social distinction. After all, to be without a price is often what defines the incalculability of a human value. Lisa furthers this concept by stating that she will never “dump” her childhood teddy bear because “that object was something I could speak to and pour out all my worries. It was my psychiatrist, my psychologist, my doctor, my nurse. He was everything rolled into one.” The social activity performed with the object challenges the simple material–social dichotomy for it breaks down the system of reciprocity on one hand and the exchange theory on the other. Successive uses and re-contextualization of the objects renders the relationship with the object as more social than material. For example, Mary compares her possessions to close relatives: “The idea of jettisoning something that is a bit doddery, it seems a bit cruel to throw it out. A bit like tossing out an old relative.”

Informants’ narratives show that the material does more than recalling past events or emotions. Throughout each narrative, the material is loaded with social memberships and personal ties. Informants expressed keeping objects that remind them of individuals they once knew or that unite them with particular individuals from a “forgotten past” (Jeff). For example, Jeff owns the old and broken gardening tools of a person who used to work for him. Although Jeff does not remember the name of the deceased man, he has preserved the objects for several years and does not intend to throw them away. The objects are a symbolic retention of his social relations. Indeed, retaining objects to continue social lineage was prominent when informants spoke about members of their family. For example, George keeps “this thing my father made as a reminder of him,” Mary speaks of the horror of losing her uncle’s letters, John preserves his “mother’s ring in a special place,” and Fiona deeply cherishes her grandfather’s “old bow tie.” This objectification of love for family members or friends situates the objects at the level of inalienable possessions.

The objects that are imbued with the intrinsic identities of their past owners are kept either as unique reminders or as part of a collection of similar items. For example, Gary revealed owning around 300 tweed jackets as a social connection to his father and Lisa has accumulated over 20 teddy bears that all remind her of her mother. The object and the collection of objects attached to it assume a subjective value that places them above market exchange.

Because the material is loaded with membership significance to a time, a person or a place, it acts as a stabilizing force against change and rupture. As Lisa emphasizes, “objects are connections, everything is connected to you [in] some way or another.” Informants’ energy devoted to preserving objects gives them a sense of connection and fixity in the world. Objects serve as palpable, solid, and durable resources for connecting the deceased to the living and the past to the present. Objects create a bridge of trust to a durable world and anchor the future to the past. The historicity of the object retains for the future the memories, the emotions, and the lives from the past. The activity invested in regenerating the past leads non-clinical hoarders to preserve some objects whilst leaving in the shadow other items that do not respond to their heroic venture. The third theme, named “creating differences between past objects and modern objects,” uncovers that non-clinical hoarders cultivate custodian practices not on all objects, but on objects that carry a charged sense of history and traditions.

Creating Differences between Past Objects and Modern Objects

On entering informants’ private space, piles of objects bisect peripheral hallways and rooms conveying the visitor to diverse cluttered areas. On every visit, there is a feel of entering “Aladdin’s cave” (Lisa) where informants’ “treasures” (Gary) are offered to the visitors’ eyes. This feel of discovery is maintained throughout the informants’ private space and is reinforced through the display of old, worn-out, and dusty objects. This particular inclination for storing particularly aged and torn objects informs us that informants were

selective in their custodian practices. Indeed, none of the informants expressed having visited the landfill to rescue abandoned objects. Similarly, none of the informants were advertising their private home as a space in which others could deliver their unwanted goods.

Informants' private space is an orphanage for carefully selected objects. Based on the hermeneutic analysis, the selection of the objects to be rescued concentrates on the reassertion of origins and traditions. For example, Lisa mentioned the importance of historical craftsmanship. The objects accumulated in her "Aladdin's cave" are "handmade" and "historical" (Lisa). For Lisa, as for all the informants, acting as a custodian of "handmade" items serves as evidence of past production processes and anchors the attributes of durability and quality to the objects. As the excerpts below show, the objects that are valued are objects that encapsulate workmanship or craftsmanship.

The workmanship, the craftsmanship, this is all the potentiality of the objects. (Gary)

I found this bird bath in perfect condition—as you can see it is glass, compared that to the plastic ones of today. (Thomas)

This is the real thing. It is not something that has been manufactured by a machine. This has been manufactured by somebody's hands.

(Lisa)

You can imagine the skill needed to make this by hand, it is real.

(John)

The caring for crafted objects involves nurturing. It responds to one's attention and provides evidence of one's sensitivity to the past and to human skills. Handmade objects are like trophies that commemorate human accomplishment. In the excerpt below, Lisa demonstrates the importance of nurturing handmade objects so that "future generations have an example."

They are beautiful pieces of work that need to be kept with other pieces of work. You are not sending it to someone who values the piece of plastic more than they do for something manufactured by somebody's hands. You are a custodian and you look after it and you hand it down so that future generations will have examples. (Lisa)

While handmade objects are to be nurtured and passed on to future generations, machine-made objects are seen as meaningless pieces of plastic. The remarkable antithesis between modern machine-made objects that fail to last and carry history and past handmade objects that unmask our origins and traditions is offered in all informants' narratives. The analysis of the verbatim text shows informants' incessant discursive work to mark symbolic boundaries between past objects and modern objects. Modern objects are "machine-made" (Lisa), they "are not made to last" (Robert), and "there is no history attached to [them]" (Lisa). They are "crap" (Jeff) objects "made in China" (Gary, Jeff) and in "plastic" (Mary). Against this, informants posit past objects as items that have "been manufactured by somebody's hand" (Lisa), "are built to last" (Gary), and "represent our history" (Thomas), "the real thing" (Lisa, Thomas). Preserving objects created by humans rather than those created by machines is, for the informants, a way to relate to their human "history" (Gary) and to their "historical heritage" (Fiona).

This sharp demarcation between modern objects and past objects is constituted by the logic of differentiation through which the modern or new is solely described by its negative aspects and becomes an adversarial space. The modern emphasizes consumer culture as an ongoing destruction of the past without the functional replacement of traditional craftsmanship and history. By contrast, past objects are taken to represent human craftsmanship, offering "the real thing" (Thomas, Lisa).

Informants construct and imbue past material objects with authenticity, value, and significance. Past objects offer an example of “the real thing” (Thomas, Lisa) and represent “how things should be” (Jeff); yet they are “undervalued” by society (Gary). These notions of truth, continuity, and authenticity associated with past objects are central to the existence of being, developed by Fromm (Fromm 2005). Acting as custodians of past, torn, and old material objects is for non-clinical hoarders a way to live a “being” mode of “existence and reality as defined as that which is authentic, consistent and true” (Fromm 2005, 20). For non-clinical hoarders, the *mode of being* is not in contradiction with the *mode of having* defined as one that is of “possessing and owning” (Fromm 2005, 21). In this research, the distinction between a *mode of being* and a *mode of having* does not relate to material possessions but rather to informants’ capacity to construct meanings of consumption around truth, continuity, and authenticity.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study analyzed a particular group of consumers who act as custodians of the material. Instead of throwing away objects, these consumers accumulate and preserve objects in their private space. In line with previous research on material culture, this study shows that the material is necessary for the development of any subject or subjectivity (Borgerson 2005, 441). Through the act of taking, preserving, and storing objects, custodian consumers materialize their subjective values and/or meanings. Their subjectivity is constantly constructed with and created by the material world. Acknowledging the necessity of the material for the subjects’ existence posits custodian behavior not solely as the process through which subjects “relate to the objects offered by the industry” (Slater 1997, 101) but as the process through which subjects “extract items from the markets and make them social or personal” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006, 259). Through custodian behaviour, consumers

incorporate the material and use it to counter the consumerist ideology of newness. This finding supports the view that consumer protest is to be found in day-to-day product use and signification and not as antagonist or exterior to the material (Giesler and Venkatesh 2005; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets et al. 2004).

In this analysis, anti-consumerism does not reflect a cohesive, organized, and overt form of consumer resistance against a particular antagonist such as the marketplace, a precise organization, or some specific brands. Rather, this study shows a hidden and scattered form of anti-consumerism grounded in meaning appropriation and product preservation.

For non-clinical hoarders, objects are cherished not because of their exchange value or functionality but because of their historical trajectory and their ties to others. The significance of the objects is outside the manipulations of the market. Similar to Zelizer's concept of memory, informants' subjectivity "exist[s] in the world rather than in a person's head, and so is embodied in different cultural forms" (Zelizer 1995, 25). Cultural forms are the material possessions produced by the market. The material affords a space for expressing what matters in life. Objects that matter to non-clinical hoarders are representations and reminders of the historical, the social, and/or the personal. In the analysis, questions of life-experiences, memories, friendships are never immaterial; neither can they be discussed or solved in non-material terms. Rather, informants' subjectivity is encoded in the material and the material anchors their subjectivity to the real world. This description implies that the symbolic meanings of the objects are not simply representations of what used to be or what is. The objects are re-contextualized and transformed by one's life-world experience; and thus also become a symbol of what could be. By layering their subjective experiences and personal meanings onto the material and by physically preserving objects, non-clinical hoarders channel and alter the direction of our culture against the manipulation of mass culture "whose ultimate goal is utility rather than quality of life (Csikszentmihalyi and

Rochberg-Halton 1981, 241). In this study, custodian behavior becomes a vital force in determining cultural evolution. The objects that non-clinical hoarders decide to preserve against the throwaway world are “both models of and model for reality” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, 27).

In addition, the distinction expressed in the narratives between custodian practices and throwing away practices represents a resource that non-clinical hoarders use to differentiate themselves from the consumerist ideology. The analysis of nine non-clinical hoarders’ narratives shows individuals who are conscious of and reflective about the promotion of ephemeral consumption and the diffusion of throwaway and wasteful practices. Posing the question of one’s position in the face of a consumerist ideology leads informants to engage in practices that differ from a wasteful and/or throwaway culture. Through their custodian practices, non-clinical hoarders refuse the new and the ephemeral and opt to nurture the old and the historical. By preserving the old instead of buying the new, non-clinical hoarders engage in a form of anti-consumerism. Rescuing and acting as custodians of the material allow informants to take a stance against the ideology of newness and material replacement and to resist the throwaway culture.

Understanding custodian practices as a form of anti-consumerism supports the view that “the proliferation of narrowly focused consumption communities [...] can be understood as a defensive posture toward consumer culture” (Holt 2002, 87). Furthermore, this study responds positively to Grayson and Shulman’s call on the possibility of counteracting the market by using commodities as irreplaceable possessions (Grayson and Shulman 2000). One of the challenges for future anti-consumerism studies is to understand how consumers extract items from the marketplace to make them social or personal. That is, studying the set of social processes in which the aptitude to rescue, exchange or withhold objects can become a marker of meaning and render the material inalienable.

Like previous research in consumer behavior, this paper highlights the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic as pivotal to consumer discourses (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Grayson and Shulman 2000; Lowenthal 1975). Non-clinical hoarders identify the old, worn-out, and handmade objects as being authentic and the new-looking machine-made objects as being inauthentic. The distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic confers a sacred meaning to the old, aged, and historical objects. Yet, the analysis does not reveal how informants classify the objects located in between the new and the old. For example, could modern objects recently built by hand be considered authentic and hence carry sacred meanings? Further research in this field could support or reject the notion that “progress cannot be through recapturing something simpler and past, but only through a new mastering of the enormity of the present” (Miller 1987, 192).

This study raises additional questions. For example, when consumers engage in anti-consumerism, their engagement needs an appeal of its own. What is the initial motivation for engaging in custodian behavior? Studies on identity construction could further inform us on the development and the incorporation of everyday custodian practices in day-to-day consumer lives (Cherrier and Murray 2007). The use of event history analysis, longitudinal studies, or retrospective research would take into account the impact of previous life experiences in the incorporation of custodian behavior. In addition, recent studies show that cluttered spaces suffer from negative connotations and stigmatization (Belk et al. 2007). Further research could explore the extent to which non-clinical hoarders justify their cluttered space in the face of social stigma.

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