**Intentional Non-consumption for Sustainability:
Consumer Resistance and/or Anti-Consumption?**

Purpose: we contribute to the special issue theme by analysing intentional non-consumption through anti-consumption and consumer resistance lenses.

Design/methodology/approach: Sixteen in-depth interviews with women who intentionally practice non-consumption for sustainability.

Findings: two major themes were identified: 1) *I versus Them: The careless consumers*, and 2) *The objective / subjective dialectic in mundane practices*.

Originality/value: while it is tempting to delineate one concept from another, in practice, both anti-consumption and consumer resistance intersect and represent complementary frameworks in studying non-consumption.

1. Introduction

Marketing scholars often research sustainability by looking at consumers' preference for environmentally friendly choices. However, non-consumption also plays a key role in sustainability. For example, consumers can choose not to consume products/brands that harm the environment or are incompatible with their ideology on conservation (Sandıkçı and Ekici, 2009). The underlying notion of these non-consumption practices is that the consumer is concerned about "the effects that a purchasing choice has, not only on themselves, but also on the external world" (Harrison et al., 2005).

Non-consumption is a broad phenomenon which we classify in three ways (3 Is): 'intentional non-consumption' resulting from a decision not to consume something, 'incidental non-consumption' resulting from choice towards a preferred alternative (e.g. when a person chooses one brand over others, non-consumption of those unconsidered brands occurs), and 'ineligible non-consumption' that results when a person cannot act as a consumer for a particular product (e.g. an underage person not eligible for certain types product/services). This study focuses on 'intentional non-consumption' and the way it is manifested in pursuit of sustainability. Specifically, we ask which concept helps us understand intentional non-consumption better; anti-consumption, consumer resistance, or both?

Our question directly relates to this special issue, which aims to clarify the notions of anti-consumption and consumer resistance. This study critically reflects on each concept by analysing sixteen narratives from women who have chosen to live more sustainably. In addition to helping us understand practices of intentional non consumption, this research

shows that, although consumer resistance and anti-consumption are enacted in different conceptual sites, using each framework simultaneously offers valuable insights on intentional non-consumption activities.

1. Literature Review:

1.1. Anti-consumption for Sustainable Development

The literature shows consensus in describing anti-consumption as “a resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment of consumption” (Zavestoski, 2002). While the term may be taken literally as against consumption in general (a macro perspective), a more practical view (micro perspective) of anti-consumption focuses on specific acts against consumption which, we argue, relate to a person’s self-identity project. This latter position does not preclude researchers from studying anti-consumption as a lifestyle or a practice operating within the system of consumer culture and capitalism. For example, research on voluntary simplicity shows anti-consumption as a lifestyle driven by a desire to live the good life (Cherrier and Murray, 2007). In most cases, voluntary simplifiers reject items that do not improve their level of happiness (Elgin, 1981) and activities such as private education that do not correspond to their self-concept (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002). Here, voluntary simplifiers adopt anti-consumption practices, within the consumption system, not as ‘weapons’ against a particular antagonist (as is the case for consumer resistance) but rather in terms of personal reflection, individual fulfilment and desired self.

We propose that anti-consumption stems from the subjectivity of the consumer, which includes self-interested and socio-environmental motivations (Iyer and Muncy, 2009, Lee et al., 2009, Sandıkcı and Ekici, 2009). Whether understood as a practice motivated by self-

interest and/or by socio-environmental concerns, anti-consumption studies emphasize the situated, localized and subjective aspect of the practices. As Lee, Conroy and Motion (2009) convey, brand avoidance stems from the consumer's subjectivity either in terms of unmet expectations, identity incongruity, inadequate value trade-offs, or ideological incompatibility. The pivotal role of consumer subjectivity in practices of anti-consumption is further emphasized in Iyer and Muncy's (2009) anti-consumption scale, in which self-consciousness, self-actualization and assertiveness are the three main constructs. To argue that anti-consumption practices stem from consumers' subjectivity (personality, experience, and self-concept) allows us to inscribe these practices within the discourse of postmodernity. Here, consumers' actions are oriented, no longer by objectivity, essentialism or grand narratives, but rather by personal experiences, self-representation and individual freedom (Best and Kellner 1997). Accordingly, anti-consumption, like consumption practices, enable consumers to "express their values, ideas, beliefs and overall identities" (Cherrier and Murray, 2007) in relation to their social, environmental, historical and political contexts. Hence, consumers' anti-consumption decisions respond to a situated rationality that, unlike universal rationality, is always situated within subjective narratives, experiences, traditions, culture and practices.

1.2. Consumer Resistance for Sustainable Development

Consumer resistance is frequently conceptualized as a "resistance *against* a culture of consumption and the marketing of mass-produced meanings" (Penaloza and Price, 1993). Thus, resistant consumers are agents who oppose a well-defined antagonist, such as a brand (e.g. Nike), an organization (e.g. WalMartSucks.com) or marketing images, norms, and

devices (e.g. Culture Jammers). The mark of consumer resistance, then, is acting against a particular antagonist, which, for the most part represents a system of domination (Penaloza and Price, 1993, Ritson and Dobscha, 1999).

Here, like consumers performing anti-consumption practices, resistant consumers are understood to be rational decision-makers, however they differ in that they carefully evaluate what to buy and what not to buy based on universal consensus regarding who are the antagonists and who represent the system of domination (Richardson and Turley, 2006; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). This notion cultivates the existence of a normative framework that delineates good versus bad, ethical versus unethical, or sustainable versus unsustainable practices. This overarching framework, no matter how it is construed, has to be large in scale and wider than consumers' micro-social experiences. When consumers resist socially irresponsible businesses and/or unethical products despite superior characteristics such as price, quality, style, and convenience, they rely upon this larger/universal framework to influence their practice. In this account, consumer resistance research emphasizes what is outside of the individuals' micro experience as motivations to resist brand, products or activities.

Under this perspective, we argue that consumer resistance emphasizes the modern notions of an objective truth and/or universal principles looming over the consumer's head. Resistant consumers respond to a universal rationality which promotes calculable, objective and law-like decision making processes (Best and Kellner, 1997).

Based on the notions of 1) anti-consumption as a self-interested and/or socio-environmentally motivated act located within the system of consumer culture and grounded in the postmodern discourse of contextual and subjective affairs and of 2) consumer

resistance as an act against a system of domination that responds to a unifying, totalizing and universal modern scheme, we explore whether non-consumption should be understood as an act of consumer resistance, an act of anti-consumption, or both.

2. The study

Sixteen in-depth interviews following Thompson et al.'s (1989) seminal methodology were conducted with women who had consciously changed their lifestyle to reflect their growing environmental awareness. Interviews lasted between 1.5-3 hours, revolved around avoided products or activities, and were audio taped and transcribed.

All respondents were aged between 23 and 64 with a household income above \$60,000 AUD (Table 1). The participants were screened to ensure that within the last 3 years, they had modified their consumption practices toward sustainable living.

In order to capture both anti-consumption and consumer resistance discourses in our informants' non-consumption practices, we adopted the hermeneutic circle (Thompson, 1997) where meaning-based linkages were developed for and between each informant through multiple readings and documentation of recurring patterns.

Insert table 1 about here

3. Findings

In expressing their non-consumption practices for sustainability, two major themes emerged: 1) *I versus Them: The careless consumers*, and 2) *The objective / subjective dialectic in mundane practices*.

3.1. Theme One: “I versus Them: The careless consumers”

In this theme, we find non-consumption for sustainability practiced by informants situating their identity in opposition to careless, unaware individuals. An important aspect of informants’ narrative is their sense of being different when compared *against* other consumers. Each narrative offers a clear picture of “I” versus “them”. For example, Rachel explains in the excerpt below that her colleagues are different from her. She does not use her car to go to work whilst her colleagues and manager do not even “consider” refraining from using their car.

Rachel: [work colleagues] they seem to have no qualms about having such a car, and also my manager who comes to work in a car, even though she lives I think in a place that’s very well serviced by public transport, she would never consider, ever, you know hopping on the train and coming.

Rachel delimits her sustainable practices by differentiating herself against others who do not incorporate sustainable consumption in their daily lives, thus reflecting a consumer resistance perspective. However, under this “I versus them” framework, non-consumption also becomes an act of identity position that signals an alignment to discourses on “*organic production*” (Francis), “*ecological footprint*” (Rachel), “*environment*” (Susan), “*nature*” (Katherine), or “*global warming*” (Kate). This is evident when Rachel, during a conversation with colleagues, aligns her identity with discourses on recycling and thus differentiates herself against “*the girls at work*”.

Rachel: the girls at work (laughs), there's one girl, she's a bit younger than me and I'm there talking about, telling them exactly what can be recycled and what can't and how you cut the ring from the milk bottle or no, you don't have to cut the ring from the milk bottle to recycle it and ... you have to cut the screens out of envelopes because it's not recyclable and all that sort of stuff and this girl just looked at me and she was like, I wish I was like you (laughs)

Rachel reinforces sustainability as a material expression of her identity in terms of difference and desirability. First, her sense of knowing the process of recycling and sharing her knowledge and skills with colleagues emphasises the difference between her and the “unaware” individuals. Apart from positioning herself against “*unaware others*”, none of the informants describe a resistance against particular antagonists such as specific brands or organizations. Instead, informants’ non-consumption practices reflect their consciousness, care and sense of responsibility in opposition to careless people living unsustainable lifestyles. However, such knowledge and awareness also enables Rachel to develop a desired identity that “*this girl*” aspires to become, thus some aspects of anti-consumption are also evident.

In Rachel’s narrative (and in all the others), the rhetoric of “*knowing*,” “*being aware*,” “*conscious*,” or “*caring*” about sustainability serve as indicators of being different from the “*careless*” consumers. Furthermore, the practice of non-consumption serves as an identity marker associated with a perceived ideal of being a “*good*” desirable person. For

example, when Katherine explains not using electricity to dry her clothes, she refers to being a “*good*” person.

Katherine: I do have to admit like when I hang my laundry out and stuff, I feel like I’m pretty good.

In highlighting the positive characteristics of their sustainable consumer identity, other informants also position themselves as “*good*” people against mainstream consumers who are “*not very environmentally friendly*” (Mandy). Indeed, Mandy defines herself as someone with a “*higher sense of responsibility*” that other people do not have, therefore partly constructing her identity against those people who “*don’t realise*”.

As discussed, our informants refer to an “I versus them” framework to construct a sustainable consumer identity that is affiliated to being a good and an admirable consumer. In order for consumers to claim such identity, their acts of non-consumption rest principally in positioning their identity against an undesired identity (unaware individuals) and in the recognition of this difference.

Considering this “I versus them” perspective, we can understand non-consumption as a form of consumer resistance. However, unlike the majority of studies in consumer resistance, the main antagonist here is not a corporation, brand, ideology, globalisation, marketers’ practices, or the capitalist market in general but a group of individuals and their consumption practices.

3.2. Theme Two: The objective / subjective dialectic in Mundane Practices

While some studies emphasize non-consumption as part of spectacle that might be at the climax of consumer identity change or revelation (for example Kozinets, 2002), our informants' non-consumption practices are carried out on a more mundane level. Simple actions of non-consumption that were well-integrated into the informants' life narratives include: not using microwaves or air conditioners (Lisa), reducing the number of car trips to a minimum (Carol and Katherine), and not using the washing machine except for full loads (Francis) or turning off lights (all informants). Where non-consumption is carried out regularly and includes trivial acts performed as part of ordinary practice, it becomes quickly suffused into the consumers' subjectivity. We see this in the excerpt below, where Lisa emphasizes the localized and subjective aspect of her non purchase of white (bleached and virgin wood pulp) toilet paper.

Lisa: it's hard to think about it because it's so normal for me. Like, I didn't even tell them about the recycled toilet paper because that's normal for me, like when I go to someone else's house and they've got white toilet paper – what's that?

The act of not buying white toilet paper is completely integrated in Lisa's self concept as she suggests it is "*normal for me*". The normalization of sustainable non-consumption activities for her and for all informants is made possible through a process of integrating their personal and/or socio-environmental concerns to their personal circumstances. While the previous section alluded to themes of 'I versus them' and 'right versus wrong', which is common in consumer resistance, the narratives here still show concern for environmental responsibility and a sense of being a good person, but are never described as superior or in

conflict with the routine expectations of everyday life. For example, Rachel uses public transportation to go to work. When describing the non-consumption of her car and use of the train, she refers to the discourse of ecological footprint in a circumspect way, and not as if it were a moral/ethical code of conduct that stands above her self-concept.

Rachel: I mean, of course there's that sense of satisfaction that your ecological footprint is not as bad, but ... public transport is fantastic for reading books- I do all my professional reading on the train. It's quite relaxing, well reasonably, I mean, there are times when it's a real annoyance, you know, missing a connection and then the train is late and you know... but overall, I'd say it's a more relaxing way to get to work so I often get to work you know pretty relaxed, having done my professional reading and... perhaps, written up some notes for a, on a client and, or having looked at my diary and just assessed what, you know, you have time to reflect

This excerpt shows that the positive effects of non-consumption on environmental preservation are an added benefit to her subjective desire to read and relax whilst going to work. Similarly, whilst Francis describes numerous sustainability activities such as car-pooling or limiting use of the washing machine, she links these mainly to her personal circumstances.

Francis: I don't know whether it helps the environment but I mean economically its better and I think it helps the environment because the hydro isn't used as much.

As penetrating as environmental conservation might be for Francis, these issues share experiential space with other aspects of her self-concept such as acting as a mother, a wife, and more importantly a financially responsible woman. As such, hers and all the other narratives show that practices of non-consumption are shaped by myriads of interrelated concerns encountered in the informants' micro-level experience. Here, the practices are constructed around an environmental discourse of "*recycled toilet paper*" (Lisa), "*ecological footprint*" (Rachel), "*help the environment*" (Francis) and yet outside of grand narratives affiliated to being or acting as an "ethical", "political", or "green" consumer. The underlying notion is that the narratives depict non-consumption rooted in the informant's subjective localized experience. This is evident in Francis' narrative. During the interview she explained her rejection of environmentally friendly household cleaners (though she eats organic food, grows her own vegetables and uses public transport) because these cleaners challenge her conceptualisation of "mother as homemaker", where cleanliness is critical. She conveys a myriad of concerns and circumstances that influence her non-consumption practices. What appears vital for the informants is that non-consumption for sustainability "*needs to ring with you and needs to ring true with what you're doing and when you're doing it*" (Sarah).

Although these variations of non-consumption stem from the informant's subjective localized experience and do not respond to an overarching narrative on how to live a sustainable lifestyle, the narratives do not show that the practice is restricted to the anti-consumption discourse of self-expression and individual freedom. Rather, non-consumption practices also incorporate instrumental constraints and objective value-rational concerns. For example, Rachel explains refusing to renovate her 60 year old house by

referring to being a non-material person (self-expression) and to financial consideration (objective concerns).

Rachel: "I guess we wouldn't be big on renovating even if we did own the home, just because we figure, we're just not that into material things as well and that's cheaper. Not renovating your house is cheaper... and it's environmentally friendly. So our house looks the same as it did when it was built 60 years ago"

For Rachel, participating in environmental preservation is not antithetical to financial considerations. Rather, her non-consumption integrates objective financial calculations. Yet, financial concerns alone are not sufficient to justify her refusal to renovate her house. Refusing to renovate is also linked to non-materialism. In other words, here, non-consumption results from an interaction between Rachel's subjective quality of being a non-materialistic person and her objective reflections on saving money and preserving the environment. In the excerpts below, Lucy exemplifies non-consumption as a practice integrating situated /subjective and value-based/objective concerns.

Lucy: I use the washing machine less frequently both for power and water conservation... that's easier with only 2 of us here but I'll save towels up and do, so I've tried to reduce that to more of a minimum... I don't buy a lot of packaged products, mostly fresh fruit and vegetables so there's not much, we don't use much in the way of sort of junk foods, but we do recycle pretty faithfully. I suppose we do have a reasonable turnover of wine bottles. So

we recycle. I have a worm farm that all the kitchen scraps go to. I use the vacuum cleaner minimally. I walk to work, um, so use the car fairly sparingly.

In practising non-consumption for sustainability, Lucy refers to the objective notions of power and water conservation. To her objective contemplation, she adds her subjective values against buying packaged products and personal preference to walk to work. Clearly, non-consumption for sustainability stems a dual rational: one emerging from a local, situated perspective and one that rises from universal considerations. As Mandy explains below, the practices do not arise from grand narrative on environmental preservation and sustainability but rather on subjective, localized experiences and on objective monetary evaluations, thus reflecting a practice situated between an anti-consumption and a consumer resistance perspective.

Mandy: I've learnt little things from other people, um, like with water, um, just the water fountain that we have here, um, rather than have the kids drink straight from the tank, it was cheaper to get the water fountain.

Rejecting bottled water and having her children drinking from a fountain is a practice that Mandy has learnt from her desire to preserve the environment and also to save money.

Lucy, Mandy and the other informants' references to objective principles and self-expression lend weight to the position that non-consumption combines together the modernist claim of objectivity and universal rationality (consumer resistance) and the post-modern view on self-expression (anti-consumption). Table 2 summarises our findings and

displays non-consumption in relation to the trans-modern discourse, re-institutionalizing the ties between self-expression and universal rationality (Vitz and Felch, 2006).

Insert table 2 about here

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study shows that intentional non-consumption can be understood as an act of consumer resistance against “them”, the other careless consumers, as well as an act of anti-consumption motivated by the subjectivity of the consumer. The first theme named “I versus Them: The Careless Consumers” shows non-consumption which is articulated against an opponent. The opponent is not a brand or organization but the mainstream consumer who does not consume in a sustainable manner. The second theme named: “The subjective / objective dialectic in mundane practices” shows non-consumption for sustainability acted out in a series of everyday, mundane practices motivated by a range of objective and subjective concerns. Here, consumers express their concerns not according to universal and transcendental norms but rather referring to their self-concepts, individualities and everyday circumstances.

This special issue asks whether or not anti-consumption and consumer resistance are redundant, distinct or convergent concepts. Our informants’ acts of non-consumption for sustainability were best understood when analysed through a mix of both concepts. We find that non-consumption can manifest as a form of protest against other careless consumers (*normally* consumer resistance), and as self-interested concerns (*normally* anti-consumption). However, our analysis shows that the act of resistance actually helps to

develop informant's identity, so shades of anti-consumption are evident even when resistance is in focus. Similarly, we see that even the most mundane, contextualised, and subjective acts of anti-consumption may contribute to overarching goals such as environmental preservation and resistance against the possible dominance of careless consumers. Thus, while it may be theoretically tempting to delineate, separate, or even ignore one concept over another, our study shows that, in practice, both concepts of anti-consumption and consumer resistance intersect, and a richer understanding is achieved when we apply both lens simultaneously. Overall, anti-consumption and consumer resistance represent complimentary frameworks in studying the myriad of actions where consumption is rejected and/or has not taken place.

This study offers discussions for further research. For example, is consumer resistance a communal, public expression? Is anti-consumption an individual act performed privately? Furthermore, in reference to Baudrillard theory of sign value, should we refer to consumer resistance as a system of exchange value whilst anti-consumption may represent a system of sign value? Finally, do consumption resistance and anti-consumption represent different power domains: sovereign power, cultural power or discursive power (Denegri-Knott, Zwick and Schroeder 2006)? Responses to these questions could help further develop the summary of our findings in table 2.

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Table 1: Informants:

Name	Age	Profession	Partner	Children
Rachel	50	Social Worker	Yes	4
Susan	23	Environmental scientist	No	0
Angie	50	High-School teacher	No	0
Mandy	51	Homemaker	Yes	2
Taylor	38	Homemaker	Yes	2
Anne	41	Homemaker	Yes	0
Lucy	57	Homemaker	Yes	3
Lisa	25	Personal Assistant	Yes	0
Laurie	55	Clinical psychologist	Yes	2
Carol	64	Registered nurse	Yes	3
Katherine	36	Homemaker	Yes	2
Sarah	43	Teacher	Yes	2
Kate	43	Homemaker	Yes	1
Deborah	36	Homemaker	Yes	3
Francis	43	Primary-School teacher	Yes	2
Pearl	42	Lead Trading Co.	Yes	1

Table 2: Summary of Findings

	Anti-consumption	Intentional Non-consumption	Consumer resistance
Resistance	Resistance to express (brand avoidance to express unmet expectations, symbolic incongruity, ideological incompatibility in Lee et al. 2009)	Resistance against unaware consumers in order to express (being a good person)	Resistance against some antagonists (brand, corporation, culture)
Concerns	Constructed concerns, context dependent and multiple concerns (self-interested and/or socio-environmental)	Reflection between objective and subjective concerns.	Objective concerns based on an overarching framework outside of the individual
Decision making	Contextual, situated, subjective	Situated and value-based	Objective, value-based
Discourse	Postmodern	Trans-modern	Modern