

## **Anti-Consumption Discourses and Consumer-Resistant Identities**

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Original submission: July 2006;

Revisions and resubmissions: February 2007; July 2007; September 2007

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**Keywords:** Consumer ResistanceIdentity, Voluntary Simplicity, Culture Jamming

**Abstract**

This article presents the analysis of two dominant anti-consumption discourses (the voluntary simplicity discourse and the culture jammer discourse) to show the importance of anti-consumption practices in the construction of consumer identities. Specifically, two consumer-resistant identities are presented: a hero identity and a project identity. Each resistant identity is produced by and produces overreaching cultural discourses against consumer culture, namely resistance to exploitative consumption and resistance to positional consumption. In addition, each identity expresses resistance either in terms of political consumption for an outer change or in terms of creative consumption directed toward an inner change. By stressing the importance of hero resistant identities and project resistant identities, this article offers the concept of identity formation as central rather than peripheral to the development of consumer resistance.

## Anti-Consumption Discourses and Consumer-Resistant Identities

### 1. Introduction and Objectives

The Journal of Business Research special issue dedicated to anti-consumption brings forward a diversity of researches on consumer rebellion (Dobscha, 1998), consumer resistance (Fischer, 2001, Fournier, 1998, Prenaloza & Price, 1993, Ritson, Dodscha, Brown, Thompson, & Troester, 1991, Zavestoski, 2002), boycotting (Herrman, 1993, Kozinets & Handelman, 1998, Kozinets & Handelman, 2004), counter-cultural movements (Victoria, 2002, Zavestoski, 2002), ethical consumption (Shaw & Newholm, 2002), non-consumption (Stammerjohan & Webster, 2002), or emancipated consumption (Holt, 2002). Common to each of these anti-consumption manifestations is the expression of an aim “to withstand the force or affect of” consumer culture (Penaloza and Price 1993, p. 123) at the level of the marketplace as a whole, the marketing activities, and/or the brand/product (Fournier, 1998). Zavestoski affiliates anti-consumption with “a resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment of consumption” in general (Zavestoski 2002, p. 121) and Penaloza and Price refer to a “resistance against a culture of consumption and the marketing of mass-produced meanings” (Penaloza and Price 1993, p. 123). These descriptions implicitly relate anti-consumption to a resistance that is both an activity and an attitude. It is an activity of refusal that can range from the polite “I would prefer not to buy” to the explicit 1968 French slogan “Soyons realists, demandons l’impossible” (translated: be realistic, demand the impossible). It is also an attitude that declines to give resignation to the ideology of progress and material growth (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004, Schor, 2000).

As an heretical attitude, resistance to consumption is not easy to adopt and refusing to purchase certain items can often be emotionally and financially costly (Cherrier & Murray, 2007). Furthermore, consuming provides comfort, satisfies physical needs, and ultimately contributes to the

construction of one's self and the communication of it to others (Ewen, 1988). The increasing diversity of products or services to choose from offers consumers the possibility to creatively pursue individuated identities (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, Holt, 2004). In addition, the development of virtual marketing permits consumers to actively reshape the meaning of their loved brands (Cova & Pace, 2006). Together, the development of marketing and retail systems and the global diffusion of consumer culture facilitate self-expression and creativity (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Hence, a key question arises: why do some people resist the dominant culture that sustains a capitalist economy based on materialism and consumer expenditures?

To this question, Nietzsche would respond that resistance comes from encountering constraints against freedom (Dudley, 2002). For him, resistance can either be a resistance to domination in the name of emancipation or a domination's resistance to emancipatory efforts (Hoy, 2004). Here, domination and resistance are in opposition. Domination takes a negative position and resistance is a reaction against it. This dualist approach mirrors Marx's basic division between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, both similarly related to the means of production. For Marx, production contains many possibilities, including the possibility for freedom and the possibility for domination. On the one hand, the possibility for domination through production indicates that one group can illegitimately monopolize resources or desired goods at the expense of another group's freedom (Giddens, 1991). On the other hand, the possibility of freedom through production shows that, due to incessant exploitation, workers can develop a class consciousness, thus developing actions in order to promote their own interests (Panichas, 1985). Marx's view emphasizes that resistance occurs when oppressed people are able to seize power from the group that dominate them.

In addition to Marx's understanding of domination in connection with class, production and exploitation, Weber stresses the market, consumption and distribution. Consumer culture, as Weber

argued, represents a rational planning of needs and a calculation for progress that serves as a system of domination (Slater, Andrews, & Laven, 1997). For Weber, resistance to domination is performed by heroic individuals who elect whether or not they want to be part of the system. Resistance is a mind process against domination. Together, Weber and Marx claim that resistance occurs in opposition to a constraining system that uses methodological calculation to dominate others. Such a view clearly accentuates the existence of a demarcation between the dominated and the dominant.

Considering resistance as existing in opposition to domination in the name of emancipation has left a lasting mark on consumer research. Erich Fromm, for instance, describes a mode of being in opposition to a mode of having. Under a being mode of existence, individuals negate the dominating system of having (Fromm, 1979). Similarly, Kozinets and Handelman looked at consumer resistance toward specific corporations (Kozinets & Handelman, 1998) and Dobscha considered how consumers are rebelling against marketing in general (Dobscha, 1998). In both studies consumers “chose to define themselves in opposition to the dominant consumer culture” (Dobscha 1998, p. 91). They rebel against or oppose a dominating system located outside of their control, which happens to be consumer culture.

But is this dualistic model of resistance / domination adequate to understand the complex set of anti-consumption discourses? The genealogical theorists, who argue for a co-constitutive process between resistance and domination, offer some help. In the works of Michel Foucault, domination is inscribed in the power operating in modern discourses, always provoking resistance (Foucault, 1988, Foucault, Faubion, & Hurley, 2000, Shankar, Cherrier, & Canniford, 2006). In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* he states: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault 1988, p. 94). What Foucault’s definition presupposes is that resistance and domination shows that a

power exists and that, to exist, domination needs resistance. Resistance occurs as both a reaction against domination and as a production of domination. Domination can be resisted but this resistance is then taken over and exploited in such way as to increase domination. In terms of the possibility for resistance, Foucault uses the French phrase ‘*dépendre de soi-meme.*’ This expression reflects an orientation toward the self: “freeing oneself from oneself” and / or “detaching oneself from oneself” (Hoy 2004, p.90). This Foucauldian view of resistance as a resistance against one’s self is offered in Bourdieu’s writings. For Bourdieu, resistance occurs when the dominated retrench from the system that has led to their own domination. Resistance is conceptualized as a resistance to one’s own domination (Bourdieu 1984). Resistance to one’s domination is performed by individuals who foster autonomous creation. Resistance is not a process of gaining power over the dominant but rather an inner process of self-reflection and self-expression. It is characterized by heterogeneity, rather than by a set of common beliefs. Yet, as Bourdieu (1984) and Foucault (1988) indicate, resistance to one’s own domination is ultimately incorporated by the cultural producers as to increase domination (Featherstone, 1995). This is the paradox of the resistant consumer: their “necessary dependence on, yet dislike of or desire for independence from, the market” (Featherstone 1995, p. 23).

Although anti-consumption attitudes and practices are traditionally studied based on a dualistic model of resistance against domination, the present research considers both the dualistic and the co-constructive models. In addition, in order to analyse whether the motivations to resist consumer culture depend upon a specific type of manifestation, this study considers two subcultures of consumer resistance. These sub-cultures are identified as the voluntary simplicity movement and the culture jammer movement. In order to analyze whether these movements follow a dualistic or a co-productive approach to resistance, a discursive analysis is performed.

## **2. The Study**

The aim of this study is to shed light on consumer resistance. Based on a dualistic and a co-constructive conceptualization of resistance, the analysis focuses on the voluntary simplicity and the culture jammer discourses. Under the light of socio-linguistic theorists, discourse refers to language use as a social practice. As a social practice, language is a mode of action, which is simultaneously socially constructed by and socially constructs our social world. By this account, analyzing anti-consumption practices requires studying the diverse linguistic markets and social fields where anti-consumption is identified and learned. The analysis of voluntary simplicity and culture jammer discourses is operationalized using three levels of discursive analysis: the written text, the discursive context and the textual torrent. Each of these facets respectively corresponds to a discursive analytical framework commonly used in linguistics and sociological studies, namely analyzing the written or spoken text, the discursive practice, and the social practice (Chilton & Wodak, 2005, Coulthard & Caldas-Coulthard, 1996, Widdowson, 2004, Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Each text is perceived as a “container” of data used to better understand consumer resistance.

The written texts are respectively Duane Elgin’s book, *Voluntary Simplicity, Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*, first edited in 1981 and revised in 1993 (Elgin, 1981) and Kalle Lasn’s book, *Culture Jam, How to reverse America’s Suicidal Consumer Binge – And Why We Must*, edited in 1999 (Lasn, 1999). The selection of these two texts is based on their impact on the development and dissemination of the voluntary simplicity movement and the culture jammer movement, respectively, in consumer culture. Within these texts, the plots, characters, metaphors, and language use are considered. The rhetorical analytical framework is based on Aristotle’s triangle: Logos, Pathos, and Ethos. Logos refers to the logic of the text in its overall structure. Pathos represents the emotional references of the text and draws on resonant analogy. Ethos looks at the credibility of the text and how the text draws on other discourses and other texts.

Finally, the analysis of the textual torrent concentrates on how the text has been used in other texts and how the meaning of the text has evolved. Three areas are considered: the scientific, the public, and the political arenas. The analysis gradually expands to the voluntary simplicity movement and the culture jammer movement discourses.

The discursive context includes two voluntary simplicity websites (The Simple Living Network and Awakening Earth and the Millennium Project, directed by Duane Elgin) and one culture jammer website (Adbusters Culture Jammers Headquarters). For the analysis, particular attention is given to the inter-discursivity or how the texts draw on other discourses and inter-textuality, or how the texts draw on other texts. Each textual reference is codified as “good guys”, “bad guys” and neutral.

Finally, the textual torrent brings in other narratives relevant to the voluntary simplicity movement and the culture jammer movement. For this study, six in-depth interviews with voluntary simplifiers and five in-depth interviews with culture jammers were performed and analyzed using a hermeneutic endeavor (Thompson, 1997). Existential phenomenological interviewing was used to attain voluntary simplifiers and culture jammers’ first-person descriptions of their everyday experience with consumer culture and consumer resistance. In 1989, Thompson, Locander, and Pollio’s article introduced existential phenomenology interviewing within interpretive consumer research (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). Throughout their article, Thompson et al. (1989) emphasize that narrative reflects individuals’ lived experience and that each narrative story is intertwined with a specific context. The interviews took place in a Western consumer culture context. The six voluntary simplifiers were selected through their affiliation with voluntary simplicity and the five culture jammers were selected through their subscription to Adbuster magazine and/or their participation in Buy Nothing Day events (see table 1). For an accurate

understanding of resistance to consumer culture, the audio-taped interview took place in a comfortable and quiet environment in which detailed descriptions could last between two to three hours. Each informant was given a pseudonym and was assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The eleven interviews resulted in 437 double pages of transcribed text. The interpretation of the text followed a hermeneutic analysis. Hermeneutic methodology helped articulate the meanings that specific voluntary simplifiers / culture jammers' stories have in relationship to the broader narrative of resistance to consumer culture (Thompson, 1997).

The analysis of the texts (books, websites, and interviews) and a review of the social and cultural field reveal that the discourses on resistance to consumer culture embody two main themes: living in an uncontrollable world which emphasizes current ecological issues and social inequalities, and emotional solitude which relates to consumption addiction and anonymity. Each theme draws two cultural discourses: exploitative consumption and positional consumption. Exploitative consumption represents consumption as exploitation of natural resources and social inequalities. Positional consumption refers to consuming for social integration.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1. Themes**

##### 3.1.1. Living in an Uncontrollable World

Both the voluntary simplicity and the culture jammer discourses highlight ecological uncertainty as a claim against consumer culture. Drawing on discourses of living at the edge of the world (Kroker & Kroker, 1997), crises of the fin de siècle (Davis, 1999), the end of history (Fukuyama, 1993), and global risk society (Beck, 2000, Beck, 1999, Beck & Ritter, 1992), anti-consumer culture discourses present the consumption-driven society in terms of a “detachment from nature” (Lasn 1999, p.4) and an exploitation of the universe for our own ends (Elgin 1991, p. 38). In

regard to ecological uncertainty, books such as Rachel Carson's bestseller "Silent Spring" (Carson, 1963), Carolyn Merchant's "The Death of Nature" (Merchant, 1980) are represented. The following excerpts from a voluntary simplifier clearly exemplify how ecological degradation is a consequence of consumer culture. Tendra, 25 years old, daughter of two teachers, grew up in an environmentally conscious community. Her awareness of the environmental impact of "extravagance" and "wastefulness" consumption makes her feel uncomfortable toward consumer culture. Tendra's uneasiness with consumer culture is reflected in her recurrent nightmares on a deep fear of running out of non-renewable resources such as gas, aluminum cans, plastic, and synthetic fiber.

Or just, I remember a dream where we wanted to get something to drink. I can't remember if it was soda or what. Lemonade or something. And the dispensing machine in my dream was giving it to us in paper cups because there wasn't any more plastic. [...] I had a dream about really needing feminine hygiene products really bad in class, of course, and going around holding my books down. But there weren't any more because we'd run out of plastic and all those synthetic fibers that make them. So just that whole concept of running out of things, knowing that there is going to be a point eventually that we do because there are a lot of things that aren't renewable. (Tendra)

Tendra's narrative is deeply embedded in the discourse of global risk society developed by Beck (Beck, 1992, Beck, 1999). She understands the world as "one small planet" and fears "the fact that we've only got one of them and we have no idea of how to go to another one or where we would get another one if this one became unlivable" (Tendra). She is bothered and scared that people consume without considering the impact of consumption on our ecological environment. In order to

limit her ecological footprint, she consciously resists any “extravagant” and “completely pointless” consumption practices promoted by consumer culture.

It’s a really big planet compared to us, but it’s not infinite and just the changes that I’ve watched in my life as how we’re actually able to affect the planet and what’s happening on it. And it’s a lot of concern to me because a lot of people don’t seem to notice it. And really what bothers me is how many people go around not at all aware of how small a planet it really is compared to everything else out there. [...] And so much of what we’re asked to consume isn’t renewable at all, and that’s really scary to me. (Tendra)

Beck’s concept of global risk society was evident in both voluntary simplicity and culture jamming narratives. For Beck (1992, 1999), our current stage of history reflects a world of risk, hazard, and danger. He points out that the risks of industrial overproduction, such as polluted water, environmental pollution, the greenhouse effect, and so on, are more prevalent now than ever before. Within discourses of voluntary simplicity and culture jamming, environmental risks are showed in the sense that they concern everyone; they are global, local and personal. We live, as the culture jammer Cora mentions, in a “connected and interrelated” world.

Getting older and reading and hearing about things, and environmental problems that have to do with consumption and workers in other countries and stuff like that. The more I became aware of the world and how things are connected and interrelated, it just became more and more obvious to me that the kind of consumptive lifestyle that everybody lives almost is just really bad for our future. I think the U.N. calls it "intergenerational prejudice." (Cora)

In addition to the idea of living the risks of unpredictable and incalculable dangers, the anti-consumption discourses claim that global consumerism creates social inequalities, destroys cultures, and gradually reduces all values to those of a global hamburger / Coca-Cola society. The “local” consumer is portrayed as massified and serialized, subject to the power and domination of uncontrollable “global” producers. This distinction between the local and the global is vibrant in Kendal’s narrative. For Kendal, the global corporations are taking over the local shops, serializing consumers for easy profit.

The big corporations are like they don’t care because hey, as soon as you walk out, there’ll be three more walking in. It’s like the customers have been a waste product now. Get them in, use them up for what they can and then get them out so more can come in. And with, their marketing, you’ve got to have the box that it comes in. Then you’ve got the bag inside for freshness. Then you’ve got a freaking toy in the bottom. When’s it stop? And the box is just riddled with extraneous information that you don’t need. But it’s all there to catch your eye and Buy me! Buy me! (Kendal)

Although Kendal identifies himself as a voluntary simplifier, his discourse is drastically similar to the culture jamming discourse. For instance, John, a subscriber of *Adbuster* magazines, *Utne Reader*, and *Harper’s* magazine, describes the food industry, the fashion industry and the “whole system” of global capitalist corporations in term of social abuse and injustices. For John, the whole corporate American lifestyle of eating out in chain restaurants, buying fashion clothes, and mass consuming contributes to the disappearance of local stores and the loss of authenticity, bringing New York to the level of “a surface-oriented kind of place” and the United States to a

“culture that can no longer appreciate art.” In sum, the theme living in an uncontrollable world shows consumer culture in terms of environmental degradation and social injustice.

### 3.1.2. Emotional Solitude

In addition to living in an uncontrollable world, the analysis of the voluntary simplicity and culture jammer discourses shows that the development of consumer culture comes at the expense of meaningful lives. Each discourse blames consumer culture for obsessive consumption behaviors that are related to a feeling of emotional solitude. For instance Lasn notes how “people have intense, sometimes obsessive relationships with their cars” (Lasn 1999, p.80) and Elgin directly states that one goal of voluntary simplicity is “to affirm that our happiness cannot be purchased, no matter how desperately the advertiser may want us to believe the fiction that we will never be happy or adequate without his or her product” (Elgin 1981, p.150). The idea of unnecessary consumption promoted by advertisers is voiced in Jacques’s narrative: “I think of marketing - have different strategies to get people to buy - most of that is just things that people do not need.”

Acquiring “unnecessary” (Tendra) material objects that “people do not need” (Jacques) is described by one of the informants as an “addictive” (Dan) behavior. During the interview, Dan explained being “scared” of “uncontrolled consumption.” He defines his mother’s material accumulation as an addictive consumption behavior that leads to a burdensome life and unhappiness.

I think it was watching the way that she lived her life and feeling like she was unhappy; she was burdened by these things. [...] She was looking for a document that she had to take to a meeting that night and couldn't find it because it was buried in stuff. And I guess I felt anxiety and didn't feel like her life was as good as it could be. (Dan)

The notion of addictive or unnecessary consumption is present in all informants' narratives. In the following excerpt, Dan notes that addiction to material accumulation exists in most individuals' lifestyle, even in his best friend's.

She [Dan's best friend] lives in Dallas, and she has a tendency to accumulate things and we talked about it. And I see a similar effect to what I witnessed with my mother that her life, her quality of life is lessened because of this desire to accumulate things. And I think there's, I guess people want to have these things because they offer them comfort, something tactile in a scary, empty world. But she tries to understand my view point and come to terms with her sometimes irrational desire to have things, but I see her, she has money problems. She can't afford her habit. She'll go to a thrift store, she'll get to a music store and buy compact disks or shoes or clothes or something that she doesn't need. She owns a car that is brand new. It's like an addiction to stuff. (Dan)

For the informants, addiction to consumption is a response to living in an "empty world" (Dan). Living in an empty world, consumers desperately "consume stuff that they do not need in an attempt to feel better, to feel happy" (Jacques), even when it is accompanied with "money problems" (Dan's best friend, Tendra), "burden" (Dan's mother), emotional distortions with loved ones (Sarah), meaningless lives (Jacques), or unhealthy behaviors (Sarah). In the following excerpt, Tendra defines consuming for "comfort" using the term "emotional medication."

The shopping was almost an emotional medication to feel better. Well, I won't feel alone if I have enough furniture in the house. There's not that empty spot where the big easy chair used to be. Maybe I won't feel so abandoned. (Tendra)

The idea that consumer society creates an “empty” world in which consumers use material objects for “comfort” (Dan) or “emotional medication” (Tendra) mirrors what Duane Elgin calls emotional solitude (Elgin, 1981) or what Paul Wachtel defines as living in exile with strangers (Wachtel, 1983). One of the culture jammer informants well exemplifies consumer culture in terms of emotional solitude. During College, Sarah recalls her desire to wear the “better clothing” that the “cool kids were wearing,” “wearing consumer’s clothing, wearing the Tommy Hilfiger, wearing the - practicing all these things they do in the movie, all popular, popular, popular.” Yet, Sarah’s mother could not afford buying branded clothes for her daughter. Faced with the impossibility to look like the cool people, Sarah argued with her mother and criticized her for being an “unloving mother.” Throughout the interview, Sarah strongly blames consumer culture for making her feel different and lonely at school, for causing arguments with her mother that led to a long-lasting emotional distance, and for turning her into an addictive person who heavily consumed cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, and experienced bulimia. Sarah’s narrative depicts consumer culture as a struggle to be socially included. In sum, emotional solitude shows a lack of meaningful relationships relevant to consumer culture, which is accompanied by a sense of emptiness.

### **3.2. Cultural discourses**

The themes identified in the voluntary simplicity discourse and the culture jammer discourse draw on two specific cultural discourses: exploitative consumption and positional consumption. Both discourses emphasize different types of resistant identities: hero identities and project identities.

#### 3.2.1. Exploitative Consumption

The theme *living in an uncontrollable world* accentuates the idea of consumer culture in terms of *exploitative consumption*. Exploitative consumption refers to the manipulation of social inequalities and the exhaustion of natural resources. Here, the critique of consumption is driven

toward producers and businesses more so than toward consumers. Manufacturers and businesses are viewed as cost minimalists and production optimizers, using available natural and social resources without environmental concern or social consciousness. Along with the exploitation of natural and social resources for wealthy production come environmental risks and social inequalities (Beck & Ritter, 1992, Glassner, 1999). For example, the sites of consumption such as department stores or shopping centers are presented as entities that waste natural resource, exhaust the excess of production, and foster social inequalities. For Sarah, therefore, refusing to buy any new products, especially when they are sold at the mall is a question of self-esteem and respect for the natural environment: “Buying a dress in the mall, then I start getting into self esteem issues because then I start thinking I’m a dirty, wasting American who just kind of wants to soil the earth with cotton and use up the rainforests.”

In regard to social inequalities, not everyone can enjoy all sites of consumption. Some are excluded and cannot access the pleasure to consume what they wish for. Sites of consumption create social privileges and social exclusion, which encompass inequalities and polarization. For John, most chain retailers are “making money until no one in the lower classes has any money any more.”

The lower class is getting larger and the upper class is getting smaller, but the upper class is getting exceedingly wealthy and I see big corporations and chains are what’s pushing that trend. Like Wal-Mart forcing people to work overtime but they only hire them for 38 hours a week, so they don’t have to give them full-time benefits. And meanwhile, they’re like five of the top 10 richest people in the United States, and they’re doing that by basically cracking the whip over people that really need a job and don’t have a choice. (John)

#### 3.2.1.1. Responses to Exploitative Consumption: Political Consumption

The view that consumer culture is a significant cause of global ecological uncertainties and social inequalities compels voluntary simplifiers and culture jammers to political consumption practices (Elgins 1981, 2001; Lasn 1999, 2006). Here, political consumption is an alternative lifestyle or “sub-genres” (Sarah) on the fringe or margins of consumer culture that resist exploitative consumption: “I think really that, strangely enough, rebellion in a sense gets thrown a lot to sub-genres. I guess I’m part of a sub-genre. Like punk and industrial and goth. I see them being drawn to anti-consumerism a lot more than just mainstream society.”

Political consumption addresses issues of exploitation, inequality, and oppression produced by consumer society. These issues are all connected to the perception of global risk society (Beck, 1999). Political consumption criticizes the ideologies of unlimited progress and growth that emphasize technological optimism. It is a conscious choice. As Tendra describes, political consumption entails self-education, personal research and learning: “I started self-educating myself on it. So I know what materials are recyclable before I buy them.”

#### 3.2.1.2. Goals of Political Consumption: An External Change

The goal of political consumption is to break the illusion that individual actions have no impact on the social and natural environment. As a reactive change against exploitative consumption, political consumption expresses the idea that each individual’s action can influence the world in which we live. For example, Kendal wrote several letters to influence environmental preservation.

I’ve gone so far as to write them and say, “Please change your packaging. You could serve the same purpose and put it in a plastic bottle instead of the metal aerosol cans that we can’t recycle. That’s doing two things. One we can’t recycle the metal out of the cans, and two, the PCPs destroy the ozone. So there’s no

reason for you all to use this product when you could put it in a pump plastic bottle. So why do you all do this? (Kendal)

For Kendal, writing letters to manufacturers and retailers is a way to bring environmental awareness to the marketplace. The desire to create, diffuse and “teach” (Holly) environmental and social awareness is one of the primary goals of political consumption. This was the case with Holly: “I found environmental activism as being the truth and wanted to share that with everyone...So I was just a perfect activist because I wanted to convert everyone. I wanted to teach everybody the light and the truth, so as soon as I got turned on to this stuff, I was just all over the place.”

The idea of diffusing awareness models Paul Ricoeur’s view of political participation. For him, political actions do not necessarily aim at influencing governments; they mostly strive to affect the collective understanding of human interactions (Ricoeur, 1975). The notion of collective awareness is well represented in Laura’s dedication to make cycling a communal priority.

We are a coalition of bicycle-friendly folks and organizations creating a unified voice for a more bicycle-friendly community. The BCO will achieve this goal through bicycle safety education, advocating for basic bicycle-friendly infrastructure like wide turn lanes or trails, and creating awareness of an often overlooked - I mean, awareness is half the battle - of an often overlooked superior form of transportation and recreation. And I - there has been so much happening in this town since this group started, and people have come to understand that there is an advocacy group and they call on us to put input onto trails plans and stuff. It's become, it's been worthwhile. It's a burden too. (Laura)

As described by Laura in the above excerpt, political consumption is a “battle,” which often creates “burdens” and demands strong “dedication” and “life-long commitment.” The political

consumer is one that fights against a dominant power. Engaging in political consumption practices is an expression of resistance against the power of “mass consumerism” (Holly) or “giant corporations” (John). It entails commitment, consistency and a sense of duty. These values reflect Weberian’s ideal of ‘Hero Ethics’ or ‘Genuine Idealism’ (Featherstone, 1995, Weber, 1948). For Weber, individuals who commit to an ultimate value and organize their lifestyle accordingly have a greater sense of self-worth. The prospect of developing an individual personality by following hero ethics occurs in opposition to the rationalization and methodological calculation of material progress and the commodification of life (Weber, 1948).

### 3.2.1.3. Political Consumers: Hero Identity

Political consumers re-shape and re-structure their everyday life according to a discursive choice against the ideology of unlimited mass-production and mass-consumption. They re-articulate the meanings of consumption toward justice, equality, and participation. For example, Sarah considers eating meat an act of animal cruelty, buying “untested” brands a careless behavior and acquiring new things an unnecessary act.

I’ve been a vegetarian probably since I was 13 or 14, and an animal rights activist since a really long time. I was involved in PETA and Animal Liberation Front. Always pretty anti-consumer. I don’t buy brands usually unless they’ve proven themselves through time. To me personally, I usually buy thrift store clothes or like second-hand clothes my friends give me. (Sarah)

The self-sacrifice and commitments to a consumption lifestyle dedicated to environmental preservation and / or social justice are important themes in Weberian’s heroic life. Just as Kendal mentioned during his interview, “I am a solo individual ... on my own against people who do not want to recycle,” political consumers act according to their personal belief on how others and the

world should consume. Incorporated in their actions is the desire to influence consumers' awareness and consumption lifestyles. The construction of political identity is marked by individual perceptions of risk society and its political dynamic. This perception is lived as being the truth and clearly delineates the dominated from the dominants. The political consumer represents a heroic being who can, consciously and rationally, distinguish between doing the wrong and doing the right in society.

### 3.2.2. Positional Consumption

The theme *emotional solitude* relates to cultural discourses on *positional consumption*. The voluntary simplicity discourse and the culture jammer discourse both describe the triumph of conspicuous consumption under the cult of material positioning and the elevation of what Lasch calls 'narcissistic individualism' (Lasch 1991). The notion of conspicuous consumption was invented by Thorstein Veblen in his 1899 book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen, 1965) to describe consumption patterns that are prompted by increased social status rather than being justified by concrete needs (Veblen, 1899). The struggle to acquire positional goods and status visibility pushes everybody to compete with one another (Binswanger, 2006), all thriving narcissistically for upward mobility and adulation (Lasch, 1991). Under this conception, the practice of consuming is mainly structural; it results from a system of codes that systematically dictates consumers' lives (Cherrier & Murray, 2004). Along with the idea of conspicuous consumption, positional consumption intensifies the concept of narcissistic behavior. Consumer culture, with its marketization of glamour and excitement, directs consumers toward narcissistic dreams of fame and glory (Riesman, Denney, & Glazer, 1970). Consumer society asks the common person to want, to expect, and to dream of an ever higher and more prestigious life, because, according to Loreal cosmetics, "I am worth it!"<sup>1</sup> By setting up a dreamed-for or "pre-packaged" (Tendra) consumption lifestyle, the average man attempts to copy the others more glorified or more respected. These

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<sup>1</sup> Slogan from Loreal television commercial, 2002.

idealized others are present in any ordinary aspect of life. Recall, for example, Sarah who wanted to join the “cool” group of friends by consuming and displaying branded clothes. Her desire for consumption was based upon the principle of differentiation and separateness. Wearing branded clothes bought in a trendy store are symbols of coolness and outgoing personality. The material object helps differentiate the ‘trendiest’ from the non-trendy individuals. This principle is linked to what Bourdieu calls situational objects (Bourdieu, 1984, Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993). Entry to the ‘trendy’ reference group depends upon one’s access and one’s knowledge of the “cool” goods, their social and cultural values, and how one uses them. Consumers seek their identity through consumption, appearance and social performance (Sennett, 1977). They accept social expectations and conform to the visible cultural categories created by the media, fashion, and advertising authorities. As Sarah could not afford the “cool” material goods, she felt differentiated and associated with ‘unfashionable’ people. As such, positional consumption responds to the ideology that consuming and displaying material objects provide a sense of self that is recognized and accepted by others. Both the voluntary simplicity and the culture jammer discourses emphasize that copying others’ consumption lifestyle does not provide a lasting sense of self; it only provides the illusion of escaping the anonymity of life. It does not provide admiration or glory, and the feeling of being alone persists; “because there's really no meaning in that” (Jacques).

#### 3.2.2.1. Responses to Positional Consumption: Creative Consumption

The development of creative consumption proceeds as a reaction against unreachable social accomplishments. When practicing creative consumption, consumers no longer acquire, consume and dispose of material objects in response to others’ expectations. They consume according to their individual values and concerns. For example, Jacques constructed his own solar house. For him, building his house in the woods with photovoltaic electric solar systems and composting toilets is an

endless project that reflects his environmental values. On his land, Jacques grows his vegetables, hand-makes his furniture and pottery, and resists “just buying stuff.” As Jacques posits, creating “is much more, much better than just buying stuff;” it leads to happiness and community.

Creative consumption does not directly negate consumer culture. Rather, the development and the practice of creative consumption draw on mass culture and social structuring for the pursuit of individuality (Holt and Thompson 2004). Here, the message of consumer culture is no longer unitary but heterogeneous, subjected to constant processes of individualization. For example, rather than throwing away junk mail or complaining about flyers, Laura uses the paper to write letters to her friends and family.

I would use the back of junk paper, flyers that have something on the back to write a letter on. But it could be - just anything. We have tons of papers like this, advertising. But not necessarily colorful. Just anything that gives you a little bit of view of life in my area. (Laura)

For Laura, writing on the back of carefully chosen junk papers is not only a way to recycle but also a personalization of her written communication, which adds to “the fun of getting a letter.” The creative consumer is an individual who personalizes meanings of consumption. Here, the individual is perceived not only as a consumer but also as an active producer reflecting on a wide social and cultural sphere.

#### 3.2.2.2. Goals of Creative Consumption: An Inner Change

In comparison to political consumers, creative consumers do not seek to influence others. Creative consumers personalize their consumption lifestyle so as to express and construct their identity. As Laura explains, her philosophy and ways of consuming suit her personality and could not accommodate or satisfy other consumers.

If everyone believed the way I believe, this would be a really primitive, agrarian society similar to what we might find in remote portions of Asia or maybe Africa. Somalia maybe. And a lot of people would not like it at all. So I don't think that it's the only way or the right way. I just know it's what suits me. (Laura)

For the creative consumers, there is no meaning in copying the consumption lifestyles displayed in the media. Here, the self is not perceived as a performative self influenced by sign values and codes of practices, but as a creative self who can reformulate cultural meanings and practices according to personal preferences and social history. By practicing creative consumption, consumers express their evolving identities: “And I change and yet that clothing doesn’t, so I make it” (Sarah). In Ruann’s narrative, driving an old pick-up truck is her own choice; a choice which responds to her current needs.

I mean I drive a black pickup now, and I drove a BMW convertible for 10 years prior to that. And I think that was important to me at the time because having things and looking good and trying to be somebody maybe was more important to me at that time. (Ruann)

Ruann’s narrative is not exhibiting rebellion against prevailing cultural stereotypes and domination. Rather, her decision to drive an old pickup truck instead of a BMW represents her active self-expression outside of social pressures. In sum, the goal of creative consumption is to favor human expression at its most fundamental level: it is consuming to *be* rather than to *display having*.

### 3.2.2.3. Creative Consumers: Project Identities

Practitioners of creative consumption personalize their ways of consuming as to fit their values and concerns. For them, the triumph of consumerism and the cult of individualism have rendered contemporary lives meaningless. According to Manuel Castell (1997), a search for

meanings in life takes place in the construction of project identities. These project identities highlight a retrenchment in the face of meaningless practices and the making of consumption lifestyles around subjective and personalized principles. In the following excerpts, Jacques and Ruann clearly suggest that their project identities are developed using consumption as an artistic expression of self.

My house is an expression of myself. It's like artwork. It means - it's a very meaningful thing to me, that house (Jacques). I think we're just using this house as an artistic expression of who we are and we're not really trying to do anything else with it [wisely invest in the cabin to sell it in the future] I think we'll always keep the cabin; it is such a reflection of who we are and what we were. (Ruann)

Project identities emerge on the basis of the most immediate sources of self-recognition and autonomous organizations (Castell 1997). A rejection of imposed cultural codes and a process of careful selection of the meanings of consuming are necessary for this to happen. This process includes a rejection of commercial exposure. For example, Jacques associates television commercials to being an “insult” to his intelligence.

TV for the most part is an insult to my intelligence, I think. Mostly commercials really bother me. The messages you get from your TV telling you to consume, telling about violence, getting very slanted view of news and stuff about the world - also you're just sitting on your butt, not exercising. Just think if you took one hour a day and practiced the guitar for one hour every day, you'd become a really good musician. (Jacques)

Commercials are portrayed as a poison spreading in the public's brain and in all mediums of communication. Conversely, informants' exclusion from commercial exposure frees them from the

existing mechanism of social control and consumption representations. This negation of commercial invasion allows for the construction of personalized meanings of consumption.

The personalization of consumption practices is marked by one central axis: consuming as a path for being. Judith Cherni notes that identity can be understood as either having a sense of personal experience – ‘I know myself therefore I am’ or seen as a social constructs in which others know me – ‘others know me, therefore I am’ (Cherni, 2001). The construction of a project identity is primarily a reflexive action that uses consumption to communicate: - ‘I know myself therefore I am’.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

Susan Fournier shows consumer resistance using a continuum that ranges from avoidance behaviors to minimization behaviors (coping-strategies, downshifting) to active rebellion (complaining, boycotting, dropping out) (Fournier 1998). Categorizing consumer resistance using particular types of manifestations is supported by Ritson and Dobscha (1999) who classify consumer resistance under ‘not futile’ and ‘futile’ groupings. For them, the ‘not futile resistance’ groups individuals who reject particular aspects of marketing; their manifestations are public and include complaining to sponsoring organizations, boycotting a specific manufacturer or retailer, or creating anti-brands and practicing acts of anti-brand categories. In contrast, the ‘futile resistance’ includes individuals who choose not to act against the system; their manifestations are private, take place within the practices of everyday lives and involve controlling consumption. In addition to Fournier’s (1998) consumer resistance continuum (active rebellion to minimization behaviors) and to Ritson and Dobscha’s (1999) typology (not futile versus futile resistance), this study points to a new approach of consumer resistance. It calls for studying consumer resistance using the concept of resistant identity.

This study notes two types of resistant consumer identities: the hero identity and the project identity. Each resistant identity is produced by and produces overreaching cultural discourses against consumer culture, namely resistance to exploitative consumption and resistance to positional consumption. In addition, each identity expresses resistance either in terms of political consumption for an outer change or in terms of creative consumption directed toward an inner change. The difference between each anti-consumption narrative is based on one's resistant identity rather than on the type of manifestation.

The hero identity relates to discourses against exploitative consumption. These discourses are in opposition to the ideology of economic progress and unrestrained productivity. Max Weber noted that in capitalist societies, individuals are the instruments of the economics of the market. They are possessed by the economic system. Voluntary simplifiers and culture jammers who draw on discourses against exploitative consumption to construct their identity are concerned with social and environmental threats. The development of their identity is directed against a well-defined system of domination. A hero identity is invested with values that express an alternative to the existing society. It is oriented toward an outer change. For those who reject the dominating ideology in society, such positions promote the ordering of a new system of power, regime of truth, and ideology. Interestingly, the heroic ideal is also a prominent theme within consumer culture, which advertises heroic values using figures such as Superman, Tarzan, or Rambo.

In contrast, a project identity draws on discourses against positional consumption. Here, resistance is not in opposition to domination. Rather, project identity results from a process of "freeing oneself from oneself" and / or "detaching oneself from oneself" (Hoy 2005, p. 90). Developing a project identity enables consumers to reposition themselves in society. It represents making a space for oneself, of finding one's place. Creating one's place means resisting one's own

domination and developing a space perceived as more authentic or more one's own, where issues of inclusion and exclusion are not culturally determined. It is interesting to note that, as a creative act, a project identity largely observes the rules of consumer culture, even if its objective is to undermine them. Hence, project identities are not strictly negating the principle of material position but are rather constitutive of it, creating new cultural codes, practices, and alternative market structures.

By stressing the importance of hero resistant identities and project resistant identities, this article offers the concept of identity formation as central rather than peripheral to the development of consumer resistance. Like consumption behavior, anti-consumption practices take place alongside the construction of consumer identity. The conceptualization of resistant identities acknowledges that whether anti-consumption is a resistance to dominant powers or a resistance to one's own domination, that manifestation depends to a large extent on a sense of identity grounded in social positions, empowerments and a vision of society. This approach calls for further examination of anti-consumption practices in terms of identity construction rather than in terms of group manifestations.

On a managerial note, this study provides evidences for rethinking the way anti-consumption lobbying go about informing consumers and changing the marketplace. Although a communication campaign on environmental devastation and social exploitation plays a major role in creating consumer awareness, it mainly appeals to hero resistant identities. As shown in this analysis, consumer resistance also includes individuals who express a project identity. They resist positional and respond to discourses of self-expression and self-realization. The formation of project resistant identities emerge from various practices and values in which individuals negotiate for themselves what is valuable, right, wrong, deviant, normal, ethical and so on. That process is located within everyday life, within the routine practices of consumers. Under this perspective, consumer resistance does not emerge from promoting an objective truth on environmental degradation or social

inequalities but from promoting discursive fields in everyday life as a source for self-reflection and self-expression. Therefore, it is important for anti-consumption lobbying to consider how and why individuals resist particular consumption practices, who those individuals are, and the meanings they give to their participation. Is it about a concern for social change, or is it about self-discovery? Studies on identity construction suggest considering consumption practices as both an expression of independent, personal and unique identities, distinct from that of others and a facilitation for connectedness, harmony with certain others, and group affiliation (Cherrier and Murray 2007). Further research could use this dialectical perspective self/other to study consumer resistance. In addition, questioning the impact of one's cultural context in the development of consumer resistance identities could enlighten us on the diversity of consumer resistant manifestations around the globe. For example, are project resistant identities more prevalent in collectivistic cultures rather than in individualistic cultures? Also, are project identities expressed in all types of consumer-resistance manifestations? For example, consumer boycott, which used to be understood in terms of political consumption "forcing functional and structural change" (Herrman, 1993, p.133), is also recognized as a creative consumption practice, also termed "expressive boycott" (Friedman, 1999). Is 'expressive boycott' an expression of project resistant identity more so than an expression of hero resistant identity? Similarly, are Kozinets and Handelman speaking about project identities when they note that consumer boycott can be understood as an "expression of individual uniqueness" (p. 476) "allowing moral self-expression" (p. 479) (Kozinets and Handelman, 1998). Clearly, the interest in questions of identity and consumer resistance can help further understand consumer behavior based around the prevalent issues of the environment, animal rights, vegetarianism, anti-nuclear stances and the development of alternative consumption lifestyles.

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**Table 1: Informants**

		Gender	Age
Tendra	Voluntary Simplifier	Female	25
Cora	Culture Jammer	Female	24
Kendal	Voluntary Simplifier	Male	31
John	Culture Jammer	Male	28
Jacques	Voluntary Simplifier	Male	40
Dan	Voluntary Simplifier	Male	27
Sarah	Culture Jammer	Female	24
Asley	Culture Jammer	Female	22
Holly	Culture Jammer	Female	25
Laura	Voluntary Simplifier	Female	43
Ruann	Voluntary Simplifier	Female	55

**Table 2: Two Types of Resistant Identities**

Identity Type	Hero Identity	Project Identities
<b>Themes</b>	living in an uncontrollable world	emotional solitude
<b>Discourse</b>	exploitative consumption	positional consumption
<b>Resistance</b>	Political consumption	Creative Consumption
<b>Goals</b>	Outer change	Inner Change

