Intentional non-consumption for sustainability
Consumer resistance and/or anti-consumption?

Helene Cherrier
Department of Marketing, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia
Iain R. Black
Discipline of Marketing, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia, and
Mike Lee
Marketing Department, The University of Auckland Business School, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to contribute to the special issue theme by analysing intentional non-consumption through anti-consumption and consumer resistance lenses.
Design/methodology/approach – A total of 16 in-depth interviews with women who intentionally practise non-consumption for sustainability were completed.
Findings – Two major themes were identified: I versus them: the careless consumers, and 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.
Keywords Non-consumption, Sustainability, Consumer resistance, Anti-consumption, Consumers, Consumption, Sustainable development
Paper type Research paper

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 (Sandıkcı 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 I’s): “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 16 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.

2. Literature review
2.1 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 et al. (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.

2.2 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 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 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.

3. The study
A total of 16 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 I). The participants were screened to ensure that within the last three 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.

4. 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.

4.1 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”. Rachel, a part-time social worker, who lives with her husband and two of their four children in a Southern suburb of Sydney Australia, has been practicing sustainable consumption for over 24 years. She explains in the excerpt below that her colleagues are different from her. Whilst she does not use her car to go to work, her colleagues and manager do not even “consider” refraining from using their car.

Rachel: they [work colleagues] seem to have no qualms about having such a car, and my manager comes to work in a car, even though she lives in a place that’s 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”.

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 marks the difference between her and other “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. Such knowledge and awareness also enables Rachel to develop a desired identity that “this girl” aspires to become.

In our informants’ narrative, 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 Katherine, who lives in an inner suburb of Toronto, Canada with her husband and their two young children (two- and four-years-old) not using electricity to dry her clothes is a marker of 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 identity, informants 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 an 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, globalization, marketers’ practices, or the capitalist market in general but a group of individuals and their consumption practices.
**4.2 Theme two: the objective/subjective dialectic in mundane practices**

While some studies show non-consumption as part of extraordinary experiences that might be at the climax of consumer identity change, transformation or revelation (for example, Kozinets, 2002), our informants' non-consumption practices are carried out on a more mundane level. Simple actions of non-consumption 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 practices, it becomes suffused into the consumers' subjectivity. We see this in the excerpt below, where Lisa emphasizes the localized and normalized practices of not purchasing 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?

Lisa lives with her boyfriend in the North West of Sydney and has actively tried to include sustainability in what she eats, how she cleans, and what she wears. As described above, Lisa's act of not buying white toilet paper is completely integrated in her self-concept as she suggests it is “normal for me”. The normalization of sustainable non-consumption activities is made possible through a process of integrating personal and environmental concerns to 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 looms 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, a teacher and more importantly a financially responsible woman. As such, hers and all 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 conceptualization of “mother as homemaker” (she lives with her two boys and husband), where cleanliness is critical. 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 constrains 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, a clinical psychologist living with her husband in Western Sydney (their two children have moved out), exemplifies non-consumption as a practice integrating situated /subjective and value-based/objective concerns. Her narrative describes her enjoyment of gardening, outdoor pursuits, and gradually altering her home to save money, power and water.

Lucy: I use the washing machine less frequently both for power and water conservation … that’s easier with only two of us here but I’ll save towels up, 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 objective considerations. We see this clearly in Mandy’s narrative. Mandy lives on 14 acres of land at the Western edge of Sydney. She has both a large house and a large amount of land to maintain, and describes how the chores of gardening, mowing and fencing fall to her. As she 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.

*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 II summarizes our findings and locates non-consumption in relation to the trans-modern discourse, re-institutionalizing the ties between self-expression and universal rationality (Vitz and Felch, 2006).

### 5. Discussion and conclusions

This study shows that intentional non-consumption can be understood as an act of consumer resistance against “them” (other careless consumers), as well as an act of anti-consumption motivated by the subjectivity of the consumer. The first theme

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<tr>
<th>Anti-consumption</th>
<th>Intentional non-consumption</th>
<th>Consumer resistance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resistance</td>
<td>Resistance to express (e.g. brand avoidance to express unmet expectations, inadequate value trade-offs, symbolic incongruity, ideological incompatibility, in Lee et al., 2009)</td>
<td>Resistance against unaware consumers in order to express (being a good person)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concerns</td>
<td>Constructed concerns, context dependent and multiple concerns (self-interested and/or socio-environmental)</td>
<td>Reflection between objective and subjective concerns</td>
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<td>Decision making</td>
<td>Contextual, situated, subjective</td>
<td>Situated and value-based</td>
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<td>Discourse</td>
<td>Postmodern</td>
<td>Trans-modern</td>
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**Table II. Summary of findings**
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 analyzed using both notions. 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, contextualized, 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.

Whilst the focus of the special issue and this paper is primarily conceptual, practical implications for sustainability are also evident. A key finding is the central nature of simple, mundane practices performed by the informants as part of trying to live sustainably. Typically, our participants practice sustainability on a day-to-day, task-by-task, basis where small contributions are made, rather than large-scale actions such as political protesting or radically simplifying their lives. On one hand, this supports governments, businesses and pressure groups who often promote sustainability by calling for small changes, such as walking or cycling to work. These approaches demonstrate how sustainability can fit into people lives without radically altering their consumption lifestyle or sense of self. On the other hand, these mundane acts do not represent the scale of change, which some authors suggest are required in order to balance human activity with the earth’s carrying capacity (Jackson, 2009).

The findings also describe how everyday sustainable practices share experiential space with other aspects of the respondents’ self-concepts. This can lead to conflicting meanings and identity struggles (Black and Cherrier, 2010). For example, Francis ascribed conflicting meanings to using environmentally friendly household cleaners: they are green but do not clean. As a mother, Francis privileges cleanliness over green and thus does not purchase eco-friendly cleaners. It is important therefore that when practitioners call for anti-consumption (or consumption) for sustainability, they consider subjective meanings and potential contestations with consumers’ identity projects.
In terms of further research, we ask whether consumer resistance leans towards communal/public expression, while anti-consumption remains more individual and privately performed. Furthermore, in reference to Baudrillard’s 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 consumer resistance and anti-consumption represent different power domains: sovereign power, cultural power or discursive power (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006)? Responses to these questions could help further develop the summary of our findings in Table II.

References


**Corresponding author**
Iain R. Black can be contacted at: I.Black@econ.usyd.edu.au