Ant-consumption as part of living a sustainable lifestyle: Daily practices, contextual motivations and subjective values

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This research examines anti-consumption practices, motivations and values within attempts to live a more sustainable lifestyle. Sixteen women were interviewed and from their narratives, anti-consumption for sustainability was found to be practiced via acts of rejection, reduction and reuse. In addition, practices of anti-consumption for sustainability are constructed through the collaboration between the needs of the individual and the needs for environmental preservation. This perspective moves sustainable consumption away from a rational information processing and environmentally motivated choice to incorporate various subjective and individualistic needs and values. Hence, the challenge for sustainable marketers is to position sustainable practices alongside self-interested notions such as independence, beauty, quality or value for money.

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Introduction

Global warming. It’s huge, everyone should be doing it. It’s, like it’s not a fad or a craze, it’s not going to go away any time soon, it’s just, this is the way that people should live, you shouldn’t have clothes dryers and we shouldn’t have a 4 wheel drive. (Lisa)

We have a fairly small car and one of the reasons, I mean it’s for gas and we find you don’t need a big SUV, and ‘oh why can’t we have a bigger car mummy, we want one of those cars that bas, you know, a DVD player and da, da, da...’ (Katherine)

In the excerpts above, both Lisa and Katherine express a strong resistance to acquiring and using an SUV. Although both informants avoid the same product, their motivations against SUV consumption are quite different. Lisa refuses to buy a four wheel drive because of its impact on global
warming and Katherine refuses to purchase an SUV because she does not really need it and it is expensive to run. Considering these motivational differences; should we say that only Lisa’s rejection represents a form of sustainable behaviour and that Katherine’s rejection is objective, self-interested and materialistic and therefore should not be viewed as being based on sustainability?

This question highlights some important concerns for the nascent field of anti-consumption and its association with sustainable development: does anti-consumption fit within the discourse of sustainability? If so, what are the characteristics and meanings affiliated to practices of anti-consumption for sustainability and what makes practices of anti-consumption part of sustainable living? In order to answer these questions, we examine practices of anti-consumption in a corpus of narratives from women who are trying to live a sustainable lifestyle. The analysis of 16 phenomenological interviews concentrates on the daily anti-consumption practices, the meanings that consumers give to their anti-consumption practices, and how these practices are incorporated within wider discourses of sustainable living.

The findings offer anti-consumption for sustainability as a practice of rejection, reduction and reuse. Although each of these practices associate with environmental preservation, they are mostly constructed through a web of identity claims and responsibilities. This perspective moves sustainable consumption away from a rational information processing and environmentally motivated choice to incorporate various subjective and individualistic needs. Hence, the challenge for sustainable marketers is to position sustainable practices alongside self-interested notions such as independence, beauty, quality or value for money. Finally, this study helps re-visit the notion of sustainability. For our informants, sustainable practices incorporate actions that do not necessarily have many green credentials. Yet, these actions allow consumers to integrate sustainability within their daily lives and experience anti-consumption for sustainability as pleasurable and self-fulfilling practices. This suggests that prescriptive and normative views of sustainability may be more alienating than inviting to consumers whose values, attitudes and beliefs do not necessarily fit the well-defined ‘environmentally conscious consumers’ (Ottman, 1993).

In the following discussion, we review the concept of sustainable consumption and its association to anti-consumption literature. We then offer details of the study and the themes theorized during the analysis. In conclusion, we highlight the importance of offering self-interested benefits when promoting sustainable lifestyles and make recommendations on how to frame the effects these practices have on identity.

**Sustainable consumption**

The question of sustainability is often discussed around issues of sustainable consumption (Heiskanen and Pantzar, 1997). Although increasingly central to academic and policy debates, this notion is still as elusive as its official definition: ‘sustainable consumption is the use of goods and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations’ (Norwegian Ministry of Environment, 1994, cited in OECD, 2002). The ambiguity of the concept has led to multiple interpretations and to a general acceptance that ‘there is no clear definition of sustainable consumption’ (Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997, p. 410).

For some, sustainable consumption refers to the consumption of ‘greener’ products; also referred to as green consumption (Ottman, 1993; Tanner and Kast, 2003; Moisander, 2007). Marketers often build on this view to develop and promote environmentally friendly choices such as organic and locally grown fruit and vegetables, recycled paper, alternative formulations for detergents, eco-friendly magazines or low-energy light bulbs. In each case, marketers promote ‘shopping with the
planet in mind’ and introduce new green retail environments such as the ‘Ecomall: a place to help save the planet’ (ecomall.com). This conceptualization supports the notion that continued economic growth based on improved efficiency, green taxation and informed consumers is compatible with sustainability (Fisk, 1973). Here, environmental preservation can be achieved through consumer demand for green and environmentally friendly products. The key to sustainable consumption from this perspective relies on rational and environmentally aware consumers who make decisions based on their deep values (Ottman, 1993). These consumers, named ‘environmentally conscious consumers’ (Ottman, 1993) or ‘green consumers’ (Elkington et al., 1990; Tanner and Kast, 2003), are individuals willing to use some of their time and money to express their concern and care for the environment. Support for the relevance of environmental concerns in motivating sustainable consumption is contained in Harrison et al.’s acknowledgement that ethical consumers all have in common, a concern ‘with the effects that a purchasing choice has, not only on themselves, but also on the external world around them’ (Harrison et al., 2005, p. 2). Here, being a consumer and purchasing of green or environmentally friendly products entails being environmentally informed and doing deeds greater than fulfilling personal desires and satisfaction for the self.

For others, sustainable consumption is broader and includes rethinking the social and cultural function of material consumption and affluence (Schumacher, 1974). This alternative view entails downsizing consumption and reframing the normative framework based on material prosperity and wealth to an ‘anticonsumerist ethic’ (Press and Arnould, 2009). Here, environmental consciousness and moral restraints on consumption choices undermine the traditional model of self-interested consumers and individualization of responsibility (Press and Arnould, 2009). Following this perspective, consumers are ‘ecological citizens’ who share personal commitments to sustainability and take actions in their daily lives to reduce their impacts on others and on the environment (Dodson, 2003). The idea of ecological citizens incorporates the notion of downsizing consumption. This, to some extent, signals that anti-consumption may represent an innovative motivational force for sustainable development.

Anti-consumption ‘literally means against consumption’ (Lee et al., 2009). Although most research in anti-consumption focus on the reasons behind product/brand avoidance, a review of the literature indicates that practices of anti-consumption are elements of sustainable lifestyles. For example, in studies on sustainability, green consumers refuse to purchase products that are harmful to the environment (Moisander and Pesonen, 2002; Moisander, 2007), in research on fair trade, ethical consumers reject products from socially irresponsible businesses (Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006), in political consumption studies, consumers do not purchase brands and products that do not respond to their particular political ideology (Micheletti et al., 2003; Sandıkcı and Ekici, 2009) and in anti-globalization analysis, resistant consumers boycott organizations that negatively impact society (Klein et al., 2004).

Although most sustainability studies note that practices of anti-consumption are most likely to be associated with environmental concerns, some show that anti-consumption can be motivated by individuals prioritizing their self-interests and well-being. For example, reducing consumption for voluntary simplifiers is mostly an inner experience driven by a desire to live the good life (Cherrier and Murray, 2007). Craig-Lees and Hill empirically noted that most of voluntary simplifiers surveyed did not refer to the environment as a key reason for their anti-consumption practices (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002, p. 198). Instead, in their reflections on the relationship between consumption and the good life, voluntary simplifiers refuse to purchase items that fail to improve their level of happiness (Elgin, 1981b) and reject consumption activities that do not correspond to their self-concept (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002). In addition to voluntary simplicity and downsizing, anti-consumption practices have been conceptu-
alised in terms of self-interested motivations in studies on ethical consumption. For example, during their discussion on virtue ethics, Barnett et al. (2005) extend our understandings of ethical consumption beyond consumers’ socio-environmental concerns to consider the relevance of self-interested concerns. Similarly, looking at boycotting, Kozinets and Handelman (1998) note personal integrity as a driver to product avoidance and anti-consumption practices.

The existence of practices of anti-consumption in sustainable lifestyles as well as the diversity of environmental and self-interested concerns are interesting pieces in the sustainable development puzzle, and yet not well-understood (Lee et al., 2009). In this paper, we explore anti-consumption within sustainable lifestyles and the meanings ascribed to the practices with the aim of offering details on the characteristics of anti-consumption within sustainable living. We also question whether self-interested concerns can be drivers to anti-consumption for sustainability and hence sustainable development.

The study

Sixteen in-depth interviews in total were conducted with women who had committed to living a sustainable lifestyle (see Table 1). All respondents were aged between 23 and 64 with a household income above 40,000 Euros. An initial set of interviews was conducted in Sydney, Australia with the informants recruited from a database of people who had attended a series of ‘greenhome’ workshops run by local councils and the Australian Conservation Foundation. These workshops provided information and tips on how to live more sustainable lives. Potential informants were screened to ensure they had made a conscious decision to change their consumption practices to reflect their growing environmental awareness and that this decision had been put into practice.

To allow a national comparison to this group, a second set of interviews were conducted in Toronto, Canada. The long term commitment by state and municipal governments in this part of Canada made it likely that a pool of women experienced in environmentally conscious behaviour existed from which the sample could be recruited. The Toronto mothers were recruited by a professional fieldwork agency working to a strict respondent screener. This measured socio-demographics (to ensure a match with the Sydney group), which environmentally friendly behaviours were

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practiced and the length of time they had been actively engaged in these behaviours.

The discussions followed the long interview design discussed by Thompson et al. (1989), were conducted in the informants homes and lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours. They topics discussed were guided by questions on brands, products or activities that were avoided and reasons for this. The discussions were audio taped, from which verbatim transcripts were prepared. During the analysis we adopted the hermeneutic circle (Thompson, 1997) where by multiple readings and documenting recurring patterns, meaning-based linkages where developed for and between each informant.

Findings

The findings showed that whilst the individual sustainable practices performed by the respondents differed (mainly due to product availability and local council facilities), they are all situated in a similar set of socio-environmental issues and share a common set of self-concerns. We found during the analysis that whilst both groups clearly practiced different behaviours, the underlying types of behaviour and their meanings and roles were similar. Hence, whereas Australians recycled sun tan lotion bottles more often than the Canadians, the meanings attached to these different anti-consumption actions were common to both groups. Therefore, for this paper, we feel it is appropriate to combine both groups within the analysis.

All informants offered myriads of anti-consumption practices shaped by their self-concepts, families, and occupations. A broad range of practices were discussed from common ones such as turning off lights and not driving a car where possible, to ones that can be described as more involved and extreme such as attempting not to use fresh water to flush toilets or not using purchased pesticides but instead making their own mixtures.

Informants referred to their anti-consumption practices using discourses on sustainability, organic production, ecological footprint, environment, nature and global warming. As well as being aware of the general concerns about the state of the ecosystem, they talked in detail about specific environmental issues such as greenhouse gas emissions, rubbish disposal and pollution in air, water and food. Air pollution was the most frequently mentioned concern, though water shortages were also mentioned regularly. They also discussed what they saw as the consequences of these issues, with global warming and health problems attributed to specific concerns. It was also common for a clear link to be made between environmental concerns, the potential consequences of this and their motivation to act.

Rachel: ‘Well because the Earth is in need of it I guess, and you know, worrying about your kids futures and what's it going to look like for them and the whole global warming thing.’ Here, we start to see the motivations for their actions are not primarily driven by concern over the environment but instead by self interest, an idea expanded upon during theme two.

In this finding section, theme one and two explain how anti-consumption is prioritized over green consumption and what types of anti-consumption practices our informants performed. These acts of rejection, reduction, and reuse, although diverse, highlight the efforts and commitments associated to practices of anti-consumption for sustainability.

Theme three shows practices of anti-consumption being incorporated in daily lives not so much as environmental investments but rather in terms of self-expressions. The last theme portrays the notion of sustainability as subjectively constructed where practices of anti-consumption help re-align unsustainable acts into discourses of sustainability.

Anti-consumption for sustainability versus green consumption

In our analysis, all informants are clearly aware that living a sustainable lifestyle involves ‘shopping with the planet in mind.’ Our
informants evaluate their purchase decisions and try to favour products that they consider ‘better’ ‘eco-friendly’ (Sarah) or ‘green, environmentally friendly’ (Katherine). The products ranged from food items (organic, less packaging, and locally grown) to cleaning products (green detergent, toilet paper) to renovating material (‘green’ paint).

Although references to green consumption are offered in the narratives, faithfully practicing these consumption activities are not fundamental to living a sustainable lifestyle. As expressed in the excerpt below, our informants do not necessarily purchase environmentally friendly products.

Katherine: I bought this very un-environmentally friendly product, a Swiffer. They're ... it's a mop but it's not like a pain in the neck mop where you have to wring out the stuff or ... you get a disposable pad that goes on it. And then you squirt stuff out of the actual mop and then go over it. They're fantastic but they're not very environmentally friendly because you've got this throw away thing that ...

Katherine expresses her personal preferences for using a mop that is ‘un-environmentally friendly’. Similarly, Sarah purchases ‘double ply toilet paper’ that is ‘not very sustainably friendly to buy’ and Francis admits that she ‘don’t use them (environmentally friendly cleaners) as much as my friends do or people...I think I want that just a little bit extra clean.’ For Susan, she believes that not only does using environmentally friendly products not necessarily preserve the natural environment but also ‘potentially you could lose money by choosing more environmentally friendly products—they’re a bit more expensive.’

The analysis here suggests that green consumption is not an essential part of sustainable living. Across the sample, each informant gave examples where they had set limits on what green products or eco-friendly items they could incorporate in their daily lives. In most occasions, these limits originate from conflicting identities. During the interviews, each informant discussed how, within their daily lives, they embraced diverse identities such as mother, wife, sister, artist, teacher and lawyer and how each identity contributes to a range of values. It is the management of the boundaries between these identities that, it is argued here, can help explain consumer’s inclination for anti-consumption practices over green consumption. For example, Susan cited above, considers green products as ‘too expensive’ (Susan). Similarly in the excerpt below, Katherine explains how important organic is and yet does not purchase this type of product.

Katherine: Organic is big and it’s getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And I ... I haven’t been buying it. I’ve just started kind of paying attention to some of the stuff and looking at price points and stuff, there’s some things are outrageously expensive. [...] Organic milk is big, like all my girlfriends seem to be buying organic milk right now. It costs twice as much as regular milk and I haven’t gone that route yet...I don’t know if I’m totally convinced yet.

Throughout her narrative, Katherine, a homemaker, expresses caring about money and savings as key value. As saving is a strong part of her identity, the idea of purchasing more expensive green products such as organic fruits, milk or beef conflicts with her core values: ‘because when I looked at the price I was like oh’ (Katherine). Similarly Kate, below, has not been ‘convinced yet’ by the superiority of green products over conventional goods.

Kate: We want to paint the house so my husband likes Benjamin Moore paint and I told him that there’s a new green paint that comes out. But there's issues about it because you know once I said the paint will start fading, you know it doesn’t have the right pigments and dyes in it. So they haven’t perfected it yet.

Here we see that for Kate, the idea of purchasing green paint is attractive but the uncertainty over its quality leads to conflict with her need for a beautiful home. As a homemaker, Kate’s main identity evolves around caring for the home and is proud to create a comfortable one for her family. When considering whether to purchase green paint or not, she faced a conflict between wanting to offer a beautiful home to her husband (wife values) and the desire to preserve the environment (environmental values). As we expand upon below, with most informants, family values are given priority over sustainability.

Whereas a range of identity conflicts occurred (mother versus wife, friend versus environmentalist), limitations were typically placed on green products that either challenged core mothering values or modified the home or body (core elements of self, Belk, 1988). For example, Francis is a mother. She eats organic food, grows vegetables and uses public transport yet refuses to purchase and use environmentally friendly cleaners. Her refusal is linked to her identity as a mother. Francis does not buy these cleaners as she does not think they clean well and using them would challenge her conceptualization of ‘being mother’ as a homemaker, where cleanliness is critically important. Similarly, Taylor will not acquire solar panels because they would change the look her home. Taylor’s core identity reflects strongly her care for her family and risking the aesthetic of her family home conflicts with this. In both of these examples, the eco-friendly cleaners and the solar panel were rejected because buying and using them involved modifying one’s core identity. Other examples showed the importance of hobby and work identities taking precedence over issues of sustainability. For example, Francis says that she does ‘love the environment, I am enjoying the trees, the birds and you know just the nature. I love nature’ and yet in the excerpt below, she acknowledge consuming non-environmentally friendly products to satisfy her passion for painting.

Francis: There’s no environmentally friendly ... there’s some recycled paper you can use but they’re not as ... the quality

Katherine: No, I’m pretty good now but I used to print off ... I do a lot of writing. And I used to print off the cases I would

This first theme shows that our informants appear to prioritize anti-consumption activities over green consumption. This lack of commitment to consumption of green alternatives despite professing positive attitudes towards such purchases is well known in the literature (see Mannetti et al., 2004 and Peattie and Peattie 2009 for review of this area). In addition to concerns for cost or quality often described in the literature on resistance to green consumption, our analysis suggests that part of this ‘green gap’ may be due to core elements of the self that clash with the purchase or use of green products. Furthermore, the following themes suggest that this ‘green gap’ may also be due to the performance of anti-consumption rather than pro-environmental consumption to provide diversities of practices that are sufficiently flexible to allow for self-expression.

Anti-consumption for sustainability: rejecting, reducing and reusing

As highlighted in theme one, our informants’ sustainable living is mainly expressed through practices of anti-consumption. The practices integrate processes of rejecting, reducing and reusing products, brands or consumption activities.

In term of rejection, our informants rejected the consumption of a wide range of products, brands or consumption activities. For example, Kate ‘can’t use any insecticides’ and Katherine will not buy non-organic fruits ‘like for apples, strawberries, I guess also fruits and vegetables that come in contact with a lot of pesticides.’ As shown below, this rejection of particular products or brands is often a practice that has been incorporated into a sustainable lifestyle.
have to read first and read them and then do it. Now I try to . . . I don’t print off stuff, I just read from my computer which isn’t as pleasant and you can’t do it anywhere unless I’ve got my laptop with me. But yeah, I won’t print stuff out . . .

Although Katherine used to print articles, her awareness on sustainability has led her to stop printing. Although incorporated into her lifestyle, this behaviour requires effort and commitment. As mentioned above, not printing means that she must read from the screen, which ‘isn’t as pleasant’ and requires her to carry the ‘laptop with me.’ Yet, as this behaviour does not clash with Katherine’s core values, she is prepared to bear these costs.

In addition to rejecting particular products, brands or consumption activities, our analysis shows that anti-consumption for sustainability incorporates practices of reducing. Theoretically speaking, we incorporate reducing consumption activity within the concept of anti-consumption based on Lee et al.’s (2009) conceptualization that: ‘anti-consumption literary means against consumption’ (p. 145). Under this conception, anti-consumption incorporates a rejection to the entire consumption process: acquisition, usage and disposal. Reducing represents a form of anti-consumption towards the usage of particular products, brands or consumption activities. For example, Francis describes her sustainable lifestyle mainly referring to reducing her consumption levels.

Francis: Well I first of all, for example, cleaning or laundry, I’ll wait until I have full loads before I run the machine. I try to hang up my clothes as much ... as much as I can in the summer ... I run my dishwasher at night, I compost, I recycle, we have a green ... green bin system where we put a lot of biodegradable and things like that and that's ... besides the garbage ... I do use my car but I try to limit ... try to car-pool as much as I can. I try not to idle my car.

Rather than rejecting owning a car or a dishwasher, Francis tries to drive as little as possible and ‘run my dishwasher at night.’ Similarly, Rachel will ‘try not to use the oven’ or ‘try not to use the oven too much’. Explicit to these examples of rejection and reduction is the notion of ‘trying.’ Expressions such as ‘trying’ or ‘as much as I can’ were present in all narratives and clearly show anti-consumption for sustainability as practices that entail efforts, commitments and acceptable failures. Rachel and Francis (and Laurie below) recognise that they ‘try’, even if sometimes they fail in trying to reduce their consumption, the simple aspect of ‘trying’ appears vital to their sustainable narratives. The practices explained by Laurie below do not represent a strict rejection of ‘packaged products’, ‘junk foods’, ‘towels’, ‘washing machine’, ‘vacuum cleaner’ or ‘car’ but rather an effort ‘to reduce that to more of a minimum.’

Laurie: I use the washing machine less frequently both for power and water conservation, so, and 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. Um, as far as water goes, we’ve fitted the shower, well we’ve, one our daughter’s bas moved out who had long hair and long showers - (laugh) that made a big difference but seriously we put um, the, you know, water saving shower heads and things like, all that on the taps, we’ve done that. Um, Ross certainly reduced how long he's in the shower. [...] we try, recycle waste as much as we-, well we don’t have a lot of-; I don’t think we have a lot of waste. We don’t, I don’t buy a lot of packaged products, um, 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, um, that all the kitchen scraps go to. Um, what else? I use the vacuum cleaner minimally (laugh). Um, yeah I can’t think of anything else. I walk to work, um, so use the car fairly sparingly. We’ve sold a car, so we, my, Ross has a work
vehicle and we have one other car but, and we use that at weekends, but I tend to, I walk to work because that’s local. So our petrol consumption’s fairly small.

Laurie’s behaviour shows a diversity of practices that touch a broad range of essential parts her day-to-day life such as transportation, washing and eating. In addition, this quote highlights that reducing consumption does not take precedence over other roles. Laurie’s efforts and commitment to sustainable living are contingent upon her life stages and since her daughter left home, sustainable living is more possible. Similarly, Laurie’s desire to reduce her consumption ‘to more of a minimum’ has not led to drastic changes in her daily life during which she continues to ‘have a reasonable turnover of wine bottles.’

In addition to rejection and reduction, our informants expressed another practice positioned ‘against consumption’ (Lee et al., 2009). Reusing is against all three processes that define consumption: acquisition, usage, and disposition (Holbrook, 1987). On the one hand, reusing is against the acquisition and use of new products; and on the other hand, it is against unnecessary disposal of products (Cherrier, 2010). For example, as seen below, Rachel collects the water from the washing machine and uses it to flush the toilet.

Rachel: Another thing, I mean another thing we do is, now this is really going and this is not something I would promote with anyone but the runoff water from the last couple of rinses in the wash, you know from the washing machine, I collect that and put it the bathroom to flush the toilet. So ah, that’s something I’ve been doing for the last, I don’t know, 6 months, but it’s something that’s almost crazy (laugh). And something I would never advocate to people because you’re constantly running back and it looks a bit silly, running back and forth with buckets of water to the bathroom and ab. And I try not to go crook on people for not using it (laugh). But it’s a, it is a bit of a weird thing to do (laugh). In all narratives, reusing was an important aspect of sustainable living and as Rachel’s excerpt above suggests, the practice could involve great efforts and demonstrate high level of commitment to sustainability. As stated above, Rachel understands that reusing water ‘from the washing machine’ ‘to flush the toilet’ is ‘almost crazy.’ It is an act she would not advocate. This behaviour interestingly demonstrates a high degree of motivation towards water conservation and reuse, but rather than being proud of her commitment, she expresses notions of embarrassment. As she does not want others to know about what she does, she is clearly uncomfortable about its social image and fears being stigmatized as a crazy person. Throughout the data there were examples, where despite performing radical conservation behaviours, informants rejected the label or identity of ‘conservationist’ (or indeed ‘tree hugger’). The fear of being stigmatized as deviant and acting outside the mainstream shows that our informants did not perform sustainable consumption practices that could potentially shift their identities. Rather, our informants’ anti-consumption practices were performed within their existing identities and desired identities.

Theme two offers examples where the informants reflected on rejecting, reducing, and reusing as essential to living a sustainable lifestyle. In this study, we categorize each of these practices as anti-consumption activities for three main reasons: (1) anti-consumption means against consumption, (2) rejection, reducing and reusing are activities that were performed by our informants so that they would not have to acquire, use or waste and (3) these practices do not involve any process of acquisition of new products or consumption activities. This second theme also shows that our informants’ anti-consumption practices were performed within their existing identities and desired identities.

Anti-consumption for sustainability and self-expression

When defining the green consumer, Elkington et al. (1990) emphasize that caring for the
environment leads consumers to reduce the number of purchases to a minimum. Although our analysis notes that our informants strongly adhere to environmental preservation and care for nature, the actual practices of anti-consumption for sustainability mostly relate to a concern for self-expression, either in terms of identities or desired identities. For example, Rachel identifies herself as a person of ‘faith.’ Her spiritual connection to Christianity is vital to her self-concept and it is her faith that leads to anti-consumption practices.

Rachel: ‘But the original energy for our motivation came more from our faith I think. There’s the importance placed within Christianity on our impact on others, our capacity to contribute to the quality of others’ lives or not, an orientation to social responsibility - which happens outside of faith contexts too, I know, but which for us is central to making the effort. The concept of justice was probably a key 30 years ago, for us - there are only limited resources on the planet and richer countries are taking a disproportionate share. It expresses solidarity with people who are poor and future generations to be prudent with the use of resources. Only gradually have we become more aware of concepts such as sustainability, ecological footprints and climate change, but they fit easily with the values derived from our faith.’

Each informant expressed a diversity of identities that led them to practices of anti-consumption for sustainability. As seen above, Rachel’s sustainable living is an expression of her faith and ‘an orientation to social responsibility.’ For Angela, it is her strong sense of involvement and her aptitude to make decisions that compelled her to join an environmental group and adopt a sustainable lifestyle.

Francis: I like ... I like to take care of things, yeah. And caring and ... and the quality of ... of what I do. And so, that would be you know taking care of people, taking care of plants, taking care of myself, so ... and taking care of the environment of course. And it’s all encompassing you know it’s ... when you take care of the environment you’re also ... you give something to it and

local historical societies to community sort of nursing groups to the hospital board and then becoming involved in local government in 1991, so lots of bands on experience I guess in making decisions, ab, in relation to um, ab issues of the environment.

All narratives depict a clear relationship between our informants’ identities and sustainable practices. Adopting a sustainable lifestyle allows informants to express who they are (identities) and who they desire to be (desired identities). In terms of desired identities, Susan dreams of becoming self-sufficient and one day having ‘my dream home, to have a fully, like self-contained sustainable house’. For all the informants, living a sustainable life is a goal, sort of a dream that entails ‘a shift along a continuum towards feeling more hopeful’ (Laurie). The dream, hope or the goals to become ‘self-sufficient’ (Susan), ‘more hopeful’ (Laurie) or to ‘be the leaders’ (Lisa), leads informants to question their way of living and leads them to gradually adopt a more sustainable lifestyle. Here, we see our informants explaining their choices to adopt anti-consumption practices for sustainable living as part of their pursuit of desired identities.

In addition, all anti-consumption practices, despite their different characterizations, (reject, reduce, reuse) are described as means for self-expression. For example, Francis explains that sustainable living is an expression of her identity as a caring woman who gives in order to receive something back. Francis’s identities relates to caring: ‘care of people, taking care of plants, taking care of myself,’ caring for her child, caring for her husband.

Angela: Um, I’m a teacher at a local school, local high school. I’ve been always very strongly involved in the community from...
it gives back to you. So, I also feel that with my child and my husband. I give them something and they give it back to me and it's more rewarding, yeah.

In Francis’s narrative (and for all informants) we find that using anti-consumption to express identities or desired identities does not require her to significantly compromise who she is or her way of life. Practices of anti-consumption for sustainability therefore seem to give the informants options for embracing sustainability within their daily life without compromising their core identities. For example, Sarah, who identifies herself as a saver, is strongly dedicated to reducing her electricity consumption because when her ‘last electricity bill came in, what a really great thing.’ Her core values evolve around saving money and reducing her consumption offers a means to saving money. Similarly, Susan is a ‘social’ animal, she loves interacting and networking with others. For Susan, anti-consumption for sustainability gives her a sense of belonging to a diversity of environmental groups.

Susan: It is being run by ‘FutureNet’ which is kind of run as a networking group for young enviro scientists and engineers etc. I have found out about other events mainly through mailing lists I’m a member of. For example, the NSW and Sutherland Greens and Green campus groups (not necessarily associated with ‘The Greens’ party but green groups). There’s a whole heap of e-lists and Yahoo groups that contain this sort of info. Also, there’s also an email called ‘Coo-ee’ that lists environmental jobs and also upcoming events and seminars.

For Susan, embracing sustainability in her life allows participating in ‘e-lists and Yahoo groups.’ Here, sustainability is not so much about following prescribed sustainable practices or acting as a ‘green consumer.’ Rather, Susan is using sustainability as means for self-expression, personal fulfilment and sense of social belonging. Hence, in contrast to existing literature where sustainable practices are expressions of care for the environment (Moisander and Pesonen, 2002; Moisander, 2007), our narratives shows myriads of concerns, ranging from financial evaluation, to comfort, independence and environmental concerns, all linked to anti-consumption for sustainability. Most importantly, each concern addresses both the needs of the individual and the need for environmental preservation. For example, Rachel below explains that her rejection of car usage is also motivated by road tolls and road injuries.

Rachel: There are, the road toll, that’s something that also, um, it’s another motivator for not getting into a car. I mean, we, we’re alive and well. You know, I have a number of clients who have had accidents or colleagues you know, who have major long term injuries because of car accidents.

At first glance, Rachel’s narrative reveals a series of objective evaluations based on price, availability, convenience and safety of public transport. Yet, this does not mean that Rachel views her anti-consumption practice as a purely objective and individualistic act that is just intrinsic to her individual needs. Rachel’s narrative combines multiple discourses that support both her individual needs and her care for the environment. For example, in the excerpt below, Rachel explains her resistance to renovate her 60 years old house using references to rational cost-evaluation criteria, environmental care and post-material values.

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, that is cheaper, and it’s environmentally friendly. So our house looks the same as it did when it was built 60 years ago.’

Rachel’s belief in financial saving and objective considerations are linked to her
desire to preserve the environment and to her non-materialistic values. Yet, being a non-material person is not sufficient to justify her resistance to renovating the house. Similarly, Rachel’s love for the environment does not command her to do goods greater than personal interests. In other words, the narrative shows that neither self-interests nor environment concerns are sufficient motivators to anti-consumption for sustainability. Instead, self-interests and environmental concerns are interrelated and both become drivers to anti-consumption for sustainability.

This third theme shows that our informants’ identities and desired identities define a space where they can enact the diverse practices of anti-consumption for sustainability and as such, these practices are performed within existing or desired identities. We show how the broad range of anti-consumption possibilities allows the informants to express themselves without compromises having to take place. This contrasts with green consumption which may require consumers to make compromises; for example, Francis classifies eco-friendly cleaners as antithetical to being a mother and when purchasing one she compromises her values as a woman who cares for the environment. The final theme shows how our informants subjectively construct their personal notion of sustainability and sustainable practices.

Anti-consumption for sustainable: a subjective construction of sustainability

Each informant discussed how, within their daily lives, they practice sustainable living and how each action, whether rejection, reduction, or reuse, is situated within narratives where long held, core values and desires are acted upon. For example, throughout her narrative, Mandy is a ‘saver,’ she enjoys saving money and preserving rather than wasting. These core values are also incorporated in to her views of what constitutes sustainability and what qualify as sustainable practices. In this theme we show how the informants, rather than following an objective prescribed view of what sustainability is or what constitutes a sustainable practice, subjectively construct these notions. To illustrate this we see in the excerpt below Mandy explaining a wasteful act of demolishing a house using discourses of sustainability by referring to values of saving, reusing and recycling the waste.

Mandy: But we did recycle a fair bit of the timber that came out of the demolition of the house and reused it in some of the structure where it was suitable, um, and um, we left a few existing ceilings in, which I’m sort of regretting now but um, and, all the rock that came out of the pool is, that we dug in a pool here and that was all rock so we put all that under this, this is ah, was elevated, this slab, so we recycled all the, so instead of just getting the rock off site, we used it as crush fill to fill all this area in and um that saved us um some money not carting it away.

Although Mandy’s decision to demolish the house (waste) does not have many green credentials, she still describes the action using discourses of sustainability. For Mandy, the materials she reused from the demolition site helped her realign an unsustainable act into a sustainable act, one which saved money (a core value of hers) and was environmentally friendly through reuse of waste. These descriptions of living sustainably do not conform to how sustainable practices are defined in positivists studies on green values and environmental attitudes (Balderjahn, 1988; Ottman, 1993). Indeed, several activities expressed in the narratives such as the ‘demolition of the house’ or driving to the ocean described below were not particularly green, though this was overlooked by the informants.

Mandy: We like to have, you know, like, the clean, like clean environment so you can swim and surf and fish and all that sort of thing, so, I mean, we instil that sort of ethic in our kids, like, you don’t pollute the
waterways, you don’t, you know, chuck rubbish on the road. You just, doesn’t matter where you are, just because you’re in the bush, you can’t just throw a can out the door, or whatever, so, um. I suppose we educate the kids like that. Um, and, because we do enjoy, like, getting out and going to places like up and down the coast and fishing and surfing and things like that, so we enjoy that, so, um, we, um, want that environment. There’s nothing worse that walking onto a beach and finding rubbish everywhere and cans floating in the water and stuff like that. You just don’t want to swim, you know.

Although Mandy’s leisure activities involve both the consumption of the car (unsustainable) and the anti-consumption of a boat (sustainable), they are described as sustainable practices. Mandy’s rational for positioning them in this way is that surfing and fishing are activities during which ‘you don’t pollute the waterways,’ and she is able to maintain this as she overlooks or ignores the transportation involved in the getting to the beach or river. In addition to overlooking unsustainable parts of an activity, our informants’ subjective interpretation of sustainability allow for ‘flexibility’, ‘permission’ or even ‘amnesty’. For example, when Rachel is considering what eggs to use when making something that requires large numbers, such as ‘a quiche or something like that,’ she may ‘cheat and I’ll buy the bad packaging ones.’

These overlooked unsustainable practices and the occasional deviances highlight that our informants allow themselves to be ‘human,’ or ‘imperfect,’; a finding that sits clearly outside of the normative views of sustainable practices (Elkington et al., 1990; Ottman, 1993). These permissions are individually set and constructed around prevalent values ascribed to core identities. For example, Rachel is not prepared to stop skiing as she sees it as part of family bonding and a healthy lifestyle, despite: ‘you know, we have to drive two hours to a hill and running the ski lifts and stuff can’t be that good for the environment. And logging the hills and stuff like that. But we’re not giving that up.’ And yet, throughout her narrative, Rachel defines her lifestyle as sustainable. Hence, contrary to the idea that consumers need to rebel against western affluence, materialism, and consumption culture in order to embrace sustainable living (Elgin, 1981a; Etzioni, 1998; Moisander and Pesonen, 2002), our informants do not become anti-consumerist whilst embracing sustainable living. Neither their actions nor their reflections referred to the common notion that the world will change when people change. For them, consumer culture and sustainability are not antithesis. Rather, our findings show that sustainability is informed and transformed in the course of consumer appropriation. For example, when describing her perception of sustainability, Angie continually mentions the relevance of restoring old buildings and the importance of having talented ‘heritage architects’ who can ensure that ‘the building will be saved for future generations.’ Although Angie adheres to the common notion that sustainability relates to living so as ‘not to jeopardise the needs of future generations’ (OECD, 1994), her conception in incorporated in her ‘interest in the arts, ballet and music’ and her love of historical buildings. Interestingly, Angie’s interests in historical sites often leads her to fly oversea to see how old buildings have been preserved over the years and passed on to the next generations. Clearly, Angie, like all of our informants, does not express a common identity of green consumer, environmentally conscious consumer or even ecological citizen. Rather, all of our informants were sustainable bricoleurs, negotiating sustainability within their daily lives using whatever is available to them. The actions are flexible, in constant movement amongst webs of identity claims and responsibility towards individual needs and environmental conservations.

Overall we see that anti-consumption for sustainability does not take place because the informants had develop a sustainable consumer identity over the years they have been practicing rejection, reduction and reuse. Instead, these practices allow them to sub-
jectively express who they are or who they want to be (within existing identities) rather than to conform to a prescriptive idea of green consumer. Indeed this subjective construction allows consumers to try, overlook and fail to act in the best interests of the environment yet still feel as though their action are sustainable.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper endeavoured to understand anti-consumption within attempts to live a more sustainable lifestyle. Our analysis focussed on the characteristics of anti-consumption within sustainable living and the meanings ascribed to these practices. Overall, we find that anti-consumption is an integral part of trying to live a more sustainable life and in particular, the acts of rejecting, reducing and reusing consumption are key elements to sustainable consumption. Indeed we found that green consumption, whilst practiced, is not an essential part of sustainable living.

Rather than finding that our informants follow a prescriptive, objectively defined view of a sustainable consumer and as such attempt to ‘become’ this sort of person, they used anti-consumption for self expression within their existing identities (or desired identities). All narratives depicted a clear relationship between their identities and sustainable practices with the adoption of a sustainable lifestyle allowing informants to express who they are (identities) and who they desire to be (desired identities). This suggests that efforts undertaken to establish an economic system based on sustainable consumption (Fisk, 1973) as well as individual marketing efforts design to promote a specific behaviour should not try to change people into sustainable consumers. Instead they should concentrate on highlighting how sustainable practices and values can allow expression of existing identities and indeed how these identities now require these practices and values.

This then questions green brands which either explicitly or implicitly within their position and communications, suggest that purchase helps one become a sustainable consumer. It may be, that as our informants practiced sustainability within existing identities, then these sustainable brands are doomed to fail because they represent the ‘sustainable consumer’ rather than a mother, husband, worker, who practices sustainability. Hence, will we only see sustainable brands dominating a product category when the existing market leaders transform themselves (without greenwashing) into the green products? As it is these brands that may be able to better satisfy the desires to express sustainable values with existing identities.

This research also emphasizes the simple yet important conceptual difference between anti-consumption and ‘green’ or environmentally friendly consumption. We found that our informants commonly do not purchase or use green products or brands in order to help them live more sustainable lives. In the few instances where consuming green alternatives was mentioned, consumers often expressed failure to adopt them in the long term. Beyond this, they all admitted to continuing to use unsustainable products regularly. Hence, we found that anti-consumption is more of an integral part of their sustainable lifestyles than the purchasing of green alternatives. Whilst this may be seen as bad news for the manufacturers of environmentally friendly product, this is mitigated by the environmental benefits of not purchasing.

We argue that the management of the boundaries between myriads of identity roles (mother, wife, lawyer, sister homemaker) and the range and flexibility of practices available, can help explain consumer’s inclination for anti-consumption practices over green consumption. We saw that whereas a range of identity conflicts occurred (mother versus wife, friend versus environmentalist), limitations were typically placed on green products when they either challenged core mothering values or modified the home or body. Hence, we identify that one of the main contributing factors to consumers not purchasing green products is that core elements of the self may clash with the purchase or use of green products.
In identifying ‘Rejecting’ as a key anti-consumption behaviour (in addition to the well known ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ categories of sustainable behaviour), our respondents are engaging in the most powerful mechanism available to them in order to minimise their ecological footprint (Jackson, 2009). Whilst it is often lamented that consumers do not convert their pro-environmental attitudes and beliefs into purchasing action (Roberts, 1996; Auger et al., 2003; Mannetti et al., 2004; Belk et al., 2005; Peattie and Peattie, 2009) one under-explored reason for this may be that they look to enact these attitudes by not consuming. It would make sense that consumers understand that in a world which we over consume (a message that is repeated regularly) then perhaps rejecting and reducing and reusing are the most sensible responses?

The rejecting, reducing and reusing practices performed fall outside of the dominant discursive framework of socio-environmental versus self-interest concerns. It is clear that the informants were well informed about environmental problems and they were concerned about the impact of this on them and their families. However, care for individual needs was found as a strong element of anti-consumption for sustainability. This suggests that anti-consumption for sustainability is not just a result of environmental concerns, but that it mostly stems from the subjectivity of the consumer and their personal needs. This subjectivity includes a diversity of values interwoven in the practices of rejecting, reducing, and reusing. Hence, contrary to the notion that sustainability will be conducted by ‘a responsible consumer, a socially-aware consumer, a consumer who thinks ahead and tempers his or her desires by social awareness, a consumer whose actions must be morally defensible and who must occasionally be prepared to sacrifice personal pleasure to communal well-being’ (Gabriel and Lang 1995, p. 175-176), our informants’ anti-consumption for sustainability do not require ‘sacrificing personal pleasure’ (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). This leads to a key practical contribution of this research.

We suggest that companies attempt to highlight the economic, convenience or functional benefits of their sustainable products rather than focussing on a charity type appeal (or more specifically the ‘sick baby’ appeal described by (or more specifically the ‘sick baby’ appeal described by Fine, 1990) commonly taken to promote pro-environmental behaviours. The ‘charity appeal’, promotes ‘the public good, not for assistance to any particular individuals’ (Wordnet, 2010) with an emphasis on helping those not directly related to the giver. The sick baby appeal highlights this by showing how something is wrong with something that the donor should care about and that they can do something to help fix it. This is commonly seen in communications attempting to promote sustainable practices such as not purchasing products made with palm oil, wood from old growth forests or recycling wine bottles. Here, the emphasis is typically placed on saving a particular animal (i.e. the orang-utan) the trees or the planet. A specific example is the slogan used to promote the Ecomall.com as ‘a place to help save the planet’. Our work suggests that companies, in addition to highlighting environmental concerns and successes (Fine, 1990; Obermiller, 1995) should also focus on the self interested notions of taste, durability, quality, value or positive emotions that can be anticipated prior, during and after the practices has been performed. This may help consumers feel that they do not have to compromise other parts of themselves in order to live more sustainable lifestyle.

Self interested motivations and integration of sustainability within current identities is also highlighted where, in contrast to the ‘antic-onsumerist ethic’ described as antithetical to material prosperity, our informants integrated practices of anti-consumption for sustainability with ‘their wallet in mind.’ Anti-consumption rather than consuming green products was described as a money saving practice.

Finally, this research allows us to see sustainable consumption being performed in three interconnected ways, first through the acquisition and use of green products, second
through anti-consumption practices such as rejecting, reduction and reuse and finally via the sustainable disposal practice of recycling. Further study is required in this field. First, what is the relation between post-material values, anti-consumption and frugality? Second, does anti-consumption for sustainability require consumers to have had experienced affluence? Finally, questions could focus on whether green consumption mostly satisfies environmental concerns and whether anti-consumption for sustainability satisfies environmental concerns as well as self-interested issues.

**Biographical notes**

Dr Iain Black (Ph.D; Strath) recently joined the University of Edinburgh having previously lectured at the University of Sydney, Australia. His main teaching and research interests revolve around sustainability and consumption, in particular he is interested in anti-consumption, consumer’s responses to scarcity and how consumers dispose of goods. He has published widely in academic journals including the *European Journal of Marketing, Marketing Letters, Journal of Marketing Management, Journal of Consumer Behaviour and Sustainable Development*.

Dr Helène Cherrier (Ph.D; University of Arkansas) is currently a senior lecturer at Griffith University, Australia. Her research interests embrace radical changes in consumption lifestyles; social and environmental activism; appropriation and reconfiguration of consumer meanings, symbols, and usage; identity politics; and the role of consumption in identity construction. Her work has been published in journals including the *Journal of Business Research, Consumption Markets and Culture, Journal of Marketing Management and the European Journal of Marketing*.

**References**


