Consumer Resistance and/or Anti-Consumption?
An Analysis of Non-consumption in Sustainable Practices

Helene Cherrier, Griffith University, Brisbane.
Iain Black, The University of Sydney
Michael S W Lee, The University of Auckland Business School
## Conceptual Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Anti-consumption</th>
<th>Consumer resistance</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resistance</strong></td>
<td>Resistance to express (i.e.: unmet expectations, symbolic incongruity, ideological incompatibility Lee et al. 2009)</td>
<td>Resistance against an antagonist (brand, corporation, consumer culture)</td>
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<td><em>Within the Market:</em> AC as a self-interested or environmentally motivated act located within the system of consumer culture</td>
<td><em>Outside the Market:</em> CR as an act against a system of domination responding to environmental norms</td>
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<td><strong>Discourse</strong></td>
<td>Post-modern</td>
<td>Modern</td>
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<td>Constructed truth</td>
<td>Objective truth</td>
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<td><strong>Concerns</strong></td>
<td>Self-interested and socio-environmental</td>
<td>Overarching framework outside of the individual</td>
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<td><strong>Decision making</strong></td>
<td>Contextual, situated rationality</td>
<td>Universal rationality</td>
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Anti-Consumption and Consumer Resistance?

Research question:
Should non-consumption for sustainable development be understood as an act of consumer resistance, an act of anti-consumption or both?
The study

> N= 16, in-depth interviews

> Women who had consciously changed their lifestyle (for 3 years min) in order to reflect their growing environmental awareness.

> Aged between 23 and 64 with a household income above $60,000 AUD (circa 42K Euro).

> Interviews 1.5 and 3 hours in length. took place in Informants homes. Audio taped and transcribed.

> Topics discussed were guided by questions on brands, products or activities that were avoided and reasons for this.

> Analysed by adopting the hermeneutic circle (Thompson 1997)

> Two major themes where identified within the narratives:

  > *Claiming resistance without stigma* which is identified as a Consumer Resistance theme and

  > *The environmental significance of mundane practices*, which represents an anti-consumption theme.
Theme One: Claiming resistance without Stigma

> An important aspect of informants’ narrative is their sense of difference in relation to other consumers. Each offered a clear picture of “I” versus “them”.

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

> Notions from this quote:

> Delimits her sustainable practices by differentiating herself from others who do not incorporate sustainable consumption in their daily lives.

> Constructed under this framework, not consuming is act of identity that signals alignment to discourses on “sustainability”, “organic production”, “ecological footprint”, “nature”, and “global warming”.

Rachel: And like the girls at work (laughs), there’s one girl, she’s a bit younger than me and it’s like, 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, … and this girl just looked at me and she was like, I wish I was like you (laughs)

> Notions from this quote:

> Sustainability reinforced as a material expression of identity in terms of difference and desirability.

> She see this part of her identity being desired by others
Katherine: I do have to admit like when I hang my laundry out and stuff, I feel like I’m pretty good

Rachel: “go for a drive. It would be something we have never ever done and we’ll never do”

> Notions:

> Knowing/being aware, conscious is “good” and differentiates them from “bad” unaware people

Susan: Like I look at people like, for example, like, give an extreme example, like Bob Brown. He’s like the ultimate conservationist guy. He just has done so much stuff, like I don’t go out there and tie myself to a tree and, you know, I don’t go out there and have to auction, like half my house because I’m being sued for speaking out against a logging company. That’s pretty extreme, so I’m not really like that.

> Notions:

> Not going to extremes and becoming stigmatised
CR: Resistance against

> In resistance terms, the main antagonist is not:

  > A corporation, a brand, an ideology or the capitalist market in general.
  > But also the antagonist is a group of individuals and their consumption practices.

> This theme shows that CR can be conceptualized as a consumer reaction not only against consumer culture, marketers’ practices, or globalization but also against other types of consumer and consumer practices.
Theme Two: The environmental significance of mundane practices

> Studies emphasize not consuming as part of spectacular practice, the climax of consumer identity change or revelation (for example Kozinets 2002),

> Our non-consumption practices are carried out on a more mundane, regular level that are well-integrated into the informants’ life narratives i.e.:

> Not using the microwave to defrost meat or not turning on the air conditioning (Lisa), Reducing the number of car trips to a minimum (Carol and Katherine), Waiting for a full load before turning on the washing machine (Francis) or turning off lights (all informants).

> These regular and ordinary practices quickly suffused into the consumers’ subjectivity and occur within the market

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?”
Theme Two: The environmental significance of mundane practices

Rachel: I mean, of course there’s that sense of satisfaction that your ecological footprint is not as bad, um, but also like public transport is fantastic for reading books and- I do all my professional reading on the train. It’s quite relaxing, well reasonably… overall, I’d say it’s a more relaxing way to get to work

> Notions:

> Informants’ concerns for environmental responsibility were never described as superior or in conflict with the routine expectations of everyday life.

> Not described as if it were a moral/ethical code of conduct that stands above her self-concept
Theme Two: The environmental significance of mundane practices

> Conservation shares experiential space with other aspects of self-concept such as acting as a mother, a wife, financially responsible woman.

> As such, non-consumption for sustainability are shaped by myriads of interrelated concerns encountered in the informants’ micro-level experience.

> i.e., Francis explains how her rejection of environmentally friendly household cleaners is because these cleaners challenge her conceptualisation of mother as homemaker, where cleanliness is critical.

> Therefore non-consumption is rooted in the informant’s subjective localized experience.

> Outside of grand narratives
Theme Two: The environmental significance of mundane practices

> 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. … So our house looks the same as it did when it was built 60 years ago”

> Notions:

> As non-consumption is a response to environmental and self-interested concerns it operates within the capitalist system that nurtures rational decision making and self-expression.

> References to modern values and post-modern values of self-expression suggest these acts of AC cannot be understood as a consumer reaction against modern values which are affiliated to the capitalist system.

> Therefore non-consumption for sustainability can be act of anti-consumption that combines:

> modernist claim of individuality, agency and rational autonomy;

> the traditional stand for wisdom, goodness, harmony, simplicity, and quest for balance life; and

> post-modern view on self-expression through (non)-consumption activities.
Discussion and Conclusions

Non-consumption for sustainable development is best understood when using both anti-consumption and consumer resistance:

- **An act of consumer resistance**
  - Takes place outside the market
  - Against the system of consumer culture
  - Outside in perspective
  - Opponent is not a brand or organization but the mainstream consumer who does not consume in a sustainable manner.
  - Resist whilst nurturing modern values of progress and efficiency.

- **An act of anti-consumption**
  - Takes place within the market
  - Resistance to the act of consumption that occurs within consumer culture
  - Inside out perspective
  - Responds to consumers’ need to voice their environmental concerns in their daily lifestyle.
  - Motivated not according to universal and transcendental norms but rather referring to their self-concepts, individualities and everyday circumstances.
Discussion and Conclusions

> Theoretical implications

> CR and AC are not theoretically distinct concepts

> Both are forms of non-consumption;

> Informants used both when enacting the desire to live a more sustainable lifestyle and integrating non-consumption practices in their behaviour.

> Overall, this research helps to clarify the similarities and differences between anti-consumption and consumer resistance by suggesting that individual acts cannot be categorised as the one or the other. It is the following that differentiates them:

> It is the motivation for that act,

> the repetition of the act and

> the subsequent site of the action
Limitations

> Anti-Consumption and Resistance: Some conceptual grey areas?

  > Consumers have more sovereignty in anti-consumption than CR?
  > AC is more individual and CR is more collective?

> Findings:

  > “The discussion of the findings suggests that consumer resistance and anti-consumption are porous and that actions can from one framework to the other, from there are claims regarding brand avoidance. Here I think there is much mileage in exploring this porosity and how it is manifested”
Thank you for your ideas!