EDITORIAL

Don’t read this; or, who cares what the hell anti-consumption is, anyways?

It’s embarrassing when you try to overthrow the government and you wind up on the Best Seller’s list. – Abbie Hoffman, referring to the ironic success of his countercultural monograph, *Steal This Book* (Haber 1971)

Yeah, yeah. Blah blah blah. We already know that, despite our relative inability as a middle-aged scholarly field to adequately define it, consumption is everywhere. Despite all the global recessionary moaning and groaning, we still live as Perfect Little Consumers in our perfect Consumer Society, still positively soaked with choices to consume this or that. As we walk down the street we are “consuming” advertising as our eyeballs gulp up the billboards; we are consuming our Nike and Reebok shoes and wearing down our high heels; we are consuming our sense (or lack it) of fashion and identity with what we wear. We are burning up calories – even faster if we drink our Starbucks’ and Red Bulls, as we think about our next tasty little snack or meal. From where we sit, sovereign upon our gold-plated consumer thrones, everything is consumption. Yet, over the last three years or so, this issue, this topic has been a bit of a quandary. It’s made us ponder.

No, more than that. It hasn’t just perplexed us in some sort of rational, theoretical, cognitive way. It has frustrated us. Vexed us.

Rob and Jay have been talking about these issues since they were students together at Queen’s, staying up late into the morning, creeping the back alleys of Kingston, and tossing around ideas about the morality and immorality of consumption and marketing, our chosen field. They have been working on these ideas for years, presenting on boycotting at ACR to an empty room (yep, no one showed that lonely Sunday morning), finally seeing some of those ideas in print in the *Journal of Consumer Research* article on “Adversaries of Consumption” (Kozinets and Handelman 2004), and continuing to crank away, all the while getting angrier and more nasty about the whole topic.

Mike has been a little more innocent, more idealistic, a little wetter behind the ears, but he’s equally perplexed and obsessed. Now that he is in contact with Rob and Jay, they are clearly getting on his nerves and he’s turning angrier and meaner (and if you’ve seen the size of Mike’s biceps, you don’t wanna see him angry). Mike is forever clarifying that anti-consumption does not preclude consumption, that the two phenomena must surely co-exist, and that the reasons people have for “going against” consumption are just as interesting as the reasons they have for consumption. That’s why Mike devoted his thesis to exploring brand avoidance, organized the International Centre for Anti-consumption Research (ICAR), and has been networking like a maniac on the topic.

While the 2009 *Journal of Business Research* special issue that Mike put together with Karen Fernandez and Mike Hyman was diverse and intended to appeal to a wide...
Exposing anti-consumption

We kept returning to the sheer ubiquity of consumption in our culture – the taken-for-granted, unquestioned nature of consumption. Consumption equated with morality, imagination, creativity, re-enchantment, aesthetics, and even social responsibility and patriotism (consider the patriotic call by politicians after 9/11 for us to keep consuming, or President Obama’s recent calls for Americans to Buy American). In the face of this ideological bulwark, anti-consumption must be an act of ideological
extravagance – wandering beyond the accepted limits of cultural acceptance. But, in this cultural context, acts of anti-consumption cannot simply be random acts. They must be purposeful, mindful acts of ideological protest. In such heterogeneous construct as “consumer culture,” they can certainly be held to occur with different motives behind them, and different focuses in mind for each subculture, culture of consumption, or individual.

Joe Blow’s participation in acts of anti-consumption can be driven by a collective motivational frame where he, as a social member, is trying to affect a big group of other people in society, reframing their ideological notions of figure and ground. Joe may drive his RV to Gerlach, Nevada, to join with other Burners at the annual Burning Man festival (Kozinets 2002). He might burn his Christmas tree and his old socks and underwear in his utopian acculturation and expression of sentiment that countervail the commercialization of contemporary society.

Or we might find Joe joining Greenpeace, and engaging in an overtly activist effort to stop the Canadian seal hunt by boycotting Canadian seafood, and other environmentally and morally offensive companies (Klein, Smith, and John 2004). Joe and his friends may also set their activist sights against consumers themselves in an effort to shake them out of their mindless infatuation with consuming (Kozinets and Handelman 2004).

Alternatively, Joe’s ideology could be taken quite personally. He might be operating from an individualistic, micro-emancipatory frame, where his act of not consuming, or refusing to think/do/be as a consumer thinks/does/is, is not aimed at a change in society, but instead at making a statement. “Down with the ‘hegemony,’” Joe says. Although he probably doesn’t use that word, he may feel a very real pressure from the marketplace, as he goes about his business and his life. In his transformative efforts to change his own general way of life, Joe may appropriate and invert the meanings of aspects of consumer culture, systems of fashion (Thompson and Haytko 1997) or the vagaries of healthcare (Thompson and Troester 2002). He will use them to construct personalized narratives that express resistance to the dominant consumption discourse.

In Joe’s personal life, his transformative efforts may also be more tactical in nature, such as adopting a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity (Grigsby 2004). Or, in an expressive statement of personal sovereignty, he might direct his counter-consumer-cultural efforts at more specific targets, discursively attacking brands, marketers, personnel and their marketers in order to demonstrate that these entities, and the ideology of consumption that sustains them, do not hold cultural authority over him (Holt 2002).

Combining these ideas with the manuscripts we received for this special issue on anti-consumption, we came to see two motivational frames and two levels of situational specificity that help us understand the domain of anti-consumption. People who engage in anti-consumption may carry a collective motivational frame or a personal motivational frame. These anti-consumption acts by Joe may also be situated quite specifically, targeted precisely at Coca-Cola, at sweatshop labor, at China, or at rich white males. Or, anti-consumption could have a very broad target. Not the rifle-shot of anti-Nike, but shotguns against a general way of life, such as going against a wasteful, throw-away lifestyle, in favor of an environmentally friendly, “green” approach to living.

Putting these two motivational frames and two levels of situational specificity together, we arrive at Figure 1 as our way of exposing and understanding different
types of anti-consumption. These different types of anti-consumption are not mutually exclusive and absolute. They transcend structuralist and post-structuralist assumptions of how we might approach culture and ideology. What binds together these different types of anti-consumption is the core idea that anti-consumption is about challenging the ideological primacy of consumption. The framework in Figure 1, as with the articles that comprise this special issue, is meant to make sense of, yet not constrain, the cultural dynamism of anti-consumption.

The articles that comprise this special issue
The five papers accepted for this special issue illustrate the range and diversity of anti-consumption that Figure 1 attempts to capture. In “A Brief History of Frugality Discourses in the United States,” Terrence Witkowski helps us understand the utopian and transformative aspects of the “way of life” situational framing of anti-consumption. The article’s historical account of the phenomenon of frugality in the

![Diagram of Types of Anti-consumption](image-url)
United States over six eras covers the timeline of the early seventeenth century to the late twentieth century. Many of the reasons for frugality are showcased in the article, ranging from practical necessity to religious and spiritual virtue to political and patriotic statements about an idealized way of life. In some ways, frugality has historically been regarded as an individual, transformative act of resistance by individuals who seek alternative lifestyles to mainstream consumption imperatives. In other ways, frugality has been a collective effort to forge a way of life on Earth that is more in line with religious (utopian) beliefs. In the article, Witkowski applies his considerable historical knowledge to tracing the transformative and utopian aspects of frugality in the United States.

Hélène Cherrier’s paper, “Custodian Behavior: A Material Expression of Anti-Consumerism,” provides further empirical insight into the complex nature of transformative anti-consumption. In her paper, Cherrier demonstrates that the motivation for anti-consumption should not be limited to the rejection of material possessions. In fact, Cherrier innovatively argues that some consumers may actually use material ownership as a way of countering the dominant consumerist ideology. Her study suggests that the specific motive behind the anti-consumption of new purchases is driven by an attachment to old possessions, and the attachment to old possessions is, ironically, a broader expression of what we come to understand as transformative anti-consumerism.

The article by Caroline Moraes, Isabelle Szmigin, and Marylyn Carrigan, “Living Production-Engaged Alternatives: An Examination of New Consumption Communities” provides further understanding about the “way of life” situational frame of the collective motivational stance. The empirical work in this article draws upon an impressive array of new consumption communities in order to demonstrate the value that members of such groups place on being actively engaged in the production–consumption–disposal process. The article provides a nuanced interpretation of the utopian motives for engaging in alternative consumption communities, moving beyond the typical “anti” discourse found in the extant literature. Highlighting the positive connotations of utopian discourses, the authors suggest that people in these consumption communities may be more interested in entrepreneurial and production-engaged discourses than in acting against mainstream consumer culture or markets.

Elif Izberk-Belgin’s review article, “An Interdisciplinary Review of Resistance to Consumption, Some Marketing Interpretations, and Future Research Suggestions” provides a useful overview of various types of resistance discourses. Izberk-Belgin’s coverage of Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno, Ewen, and Baudrillard, and their critique of consumption culture as manipulation and enslavement, provides insight into the conceptual underpinnings of the activist anti-consumption stance. The paper’s account of Douglas and Isherwood, Bourdieu, and de Certeau’s celebration of consumer culture as agency and empowerment highlights the expressive nature of consumer resistance over time. Taken as a whole, this paper underscores the inseparable relationship between anti-consumption and society.

In their study of activist anti-consumption, Candace Hollenbeck and George Zinkhan’s article, “Anti-Brand Communities, Negotiation of Brand Meaning, and the Learning Process: The Case of Wal-Mart,” explores countercultural communities that target Wal-Mart. Their work focuses on communities that come to be defined by their active resistance of established consumption patterns as embodied by the dominant cultural presence of Wal-Mart. In addition to providing a
useful summary of new social movements and the controversy surrounding Wal-Mart, Hollenbeck and Zinkhan’s results reveal the counterfactual thinking, discursive storytelling, and non-compulsory observations that accompany activist anti-consumption.

What’s next in the study of anti-consumption?
A culture that treats consumption as the taken-for-granted, unquestioned, de facto, unitary path to societal well-being spurred us to take on the challenge of this special issue. We embarked on our little journey perplexed, vexed, but adamant and fascinated. How could we best use this opportunity to bring to light those cultural spaces that spit in the face of the ideological imperative of consumption?

This journey has offered a mix of satisfaction and frustration. There are no easy answers. Instead, through the engagement with each other as guest editors, the privilege of reading the work of the many talented and thoughtful authors who submitted manuscripts for this special issue, and the time and expertise contributed by reviewers, we have come to see the enormous potential for our society in general, and our academic discipline in particular, in considering a break in the ideological inertia that is our culture of consumption. The number of scholars taking serious interest in this realm of research, and the range of anti-consumption practices that they have revealed, presents a plethora of truly exciting opportunities.

Ongoing research may work to consider the implications, both positive and negative, of altering consumption’s ideological framework, or the structures that guide the societal arrangements that undergird contemporary consumption as a set of (im/a)moral meanings and practices. For example, activist efforts to change the morality that shapes the structuring of companies and even nations may have negative implications. Could the anti-consumption of large multinational corporations (such as Wal-Mart), with the positive intentions of preserving local entrepreneurial diversity, actually lead to reduced quality of life for the many employees of those large companies? Similarly, boycotting goods from China and other developing countries that are alleged to allow “unethical” employment practices may lead to fewer jobs for people in those countries who have few economic alternatives. And although utopian efforts to transform collective ideology to a different way of life may sound, well, utopian, could these efforts not be regarded as exclusionary, myopic visions of society that reject diversity and pluralism? Considering anti-consumption activists who advocate alternative cultural arrangements for others, we must wonder from which social loci they draw their own moral authority?

And what about the potentially paradoxical nature of anti-consumption that is personal and micro-emancipatory? Such acts of anti-consumption may effectively allow individuals to disengage from mainstream cultural arrangements in their effort to resist the cultural hegemony of consumption. But with such hyper-individualism and inward focus on personal resistance, who is left to share in the collective effort at ensuring societal welfare (as opposed to individual welfare)? Is it any better for our society to replace the brand of individualism that comes from a culture of consumption – societally disengaged, hedonistic consumers thirsting for their next consumption fix – with an anti-consumption brand of individualism: micro-emancipated individuals rejecting, but not contributing to, societal arrangements? How will we know whether we are better or worse off?
What about the role of researchers? We wonder if it is enough for us to study and reveal these acts of anti-consumption from our ivory towers of privilege and relative wealth, situated oh-so-comfortably within marketing departments situated in business schools, situated in a global culture that privileges consumption? Is it enough that we investigate those forces that constrain or enable societal welfare? Or do we have responsibilities to more proactively participate and democratically dialogue with those who engage in anti-consumption or who claim to be negatively impacted by a culture of consumption? Ozanne and Saatcioglu’s (2008) call for participatory action research urges researchers to develop solutions to societal problems in collaboration with the consumers they research. They provide a framework that may move anti-consumption research beyond the university and into the communities where people are directly affected by the ideological arrangement we investigate.

In actuality, this special issue raises more questions than it answers. But, for us, it also provides inspiration and excitement with the possibilities of what such research may reveal about our society, and the actions we may take as researchers to effect change. What has also been inspiring to us is the passion and hard work put into this effort by the authors, reviewers, and editors whose work made this special issue happen. This issue began with 14 solid submissions and ended with five quality articles. The journey in-between comprised three rounds of revisions with three reviewers per manuscript. This rigorous process would not have been possible without the time, expertise and helpful recommendations of the individuals we appreciatively thank below (in alphabetical order).

Finally, a Great Being

We would like to end this introduction, following the listing of generous reviewers and talented writers who contributed so much to this issue, with a reflection on the life of perhaps the most inspirational practitioner of anti-consumption of all. Where we are angry, he is peaceful. Where we have sat on the sidelines and reported, he has been at the center of activist action. Where we have struggled to know, he has somehow just understood. Where we have presented to empty rooms, he has inspired hundreds of millions.

As a young man, Mohandas K. Gandhi described himself as “in love” with the British Empire, but eventually began to see the unfairness of their system. Influenced partly by the philosophy of disobedience of the American transcendentalist Henry Thoreau, Gandhi began perfecting the art and practice of renunciation, the disobedience of habits, and the resistance of the easy way (Black 2008). At the age of 36, Gandhi renounced sex with his wife. Although he had eaten meat as a child, as an adult he became a strict vegetarian and eventually wrote a book titled *The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism*. He also refrained from drinking any alcohol (Gandhi 1956).

A trained lawyer and skilled writer, his spiritual discipline involved daily work on a spinning wheel, a practice that he believed would help him to develop soul force. As Indian cotton was being exported to Britain, where it was spun and then sold back at extreme profits to India, Gandhi stated that his spinning wheel not only charged his spiritual force but also spun the destiny of India (Black 2008).

In a turn reminiscent of consumer activists studied by Kozinets and Handelman (2004), Gandhi blamed the people of India for India’s occupation, and not the Britons.
The reason? That 100,000 Britons could not control 300 million Indians unless the Indians were complicit in their own subjugation (Gandhi 1956).

Perhaps his greatest act of anti-consumption was his challenge of the British government’s monopoly on salt manufacture. The British government forced Indians to pay the British for their salt, even though it was abundant in India. So, in March 1930, the 60-year-old Gandhi began a 24-day walk to the sea. Staff in hand like a prophet of old, he gathered a crowd of thousands with him on his trek.

Combining ritual purification with consumer and political resistance, Gandhi waded into the city, leaned down and scooped up a small handful of salt. Resisting the cultural and military imposition of force that manifests in particular kinds of consumption, Gandhi turned food, drink, and leisure time into spiritual and moral statements that continue to galvanize generations. He lived by principles of self-sacrifice that reflected themselves in consumption/anti-consumption acts that expressed morality, built community, and inspired love. He believed that with his soul force and the power of his intention, he could deflect the world’s greatest military powers.

Although we began this introduction on an angry, rebellious note, we wish to finish it differently. We invite you to enjoy and contemplate the topics of this special issue from a perspective that appreciates the role that Mohandas K. Gandhi, and all who have inspired him and been inspired by him, have played in this area.

For when consumption meets morality, perhaps our perspective must change. Perhaps it is only because we have been focusing on consumption and marketing, on worlds of individualistic greed, hedonistic hungers, and self-fulfilments, that anti-consumption is “anti.” Were we to focus, as Gandhi did, on human potential, self-sacrifice, meaning, community, selflessness, and giving, then, perhaps, we would see something else. A pro, not an anti. Pro-self-mastery. Pro-cultivation. Pro-development. Pro-amelioration. Pro-advancement. Pro-Utopia. Perhaps, just perhaps, what we are seeing is not so much the tailing off of the ideology of consumption, as the beginnings, the intimations, of our next stage, our post-consumer age: a new stage of Pro-Humanity.

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