Editorial

Sustainability through Anti-Consumption

Anti-consumption research has featured in a number of special issues, round tables and conferences since the inception of ICAR (International Centre for Anti-consumption Research) in 2005. Activity, thus far, has primarily discussed conceptual and theoretical issues surrounding the nature and boundaries of this nascent field. This special issue of the Journal of Consumer Behaviour serves a different purpose. It is designed to focus on practical recommendations, so as to see what contribution anti-consumption can make to sustainability.

It is not the place here in this editorial to outline the scientific case for the state of the earth’s environment and consumption that does not take sufficient account of the ecological limits of our planet. Instead I simply bow my head to the overall technical consensus on this issue highlighted in the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report (Solomon et al., 2007). In response to this scientific orthodoxy, there are a plethora of action groups, charities, vivid, emotive youtube videos, wailings from the drivers of the capitalist juggernaut and governments (now of all political shades) simultaneously sounding the standard call of the right wing radio commentator, ‘something must be done’.

But what? As described by English comedian Sean Lock, recycling your jam jars can feel like turning up to help at the aftermath of hurricane Katrina with a dustpan and brush. We need to consider more powerful alternatives than this, and as is pointed out by Jackson (2009) in Prosperity without Growth?, the most powerful and immediate mechanism we as individuals control is to not consume. Therefore, as a subset of non-consumption, anti-consumption has, potentially, a very important role to play in the doing of this ‘something’.

Well, in this issue I asked authors to consider, what can be done, what can anti-consumption research teach consumers, businesses, governments, charities, etc., to do? From the overall aim of providing an outlet for research into anti-consumption topics that could contribute to our understanding of how to develop
sustainable consumption, it was envisaged that a number of topics may be examined. These included work looking at the avoidance of specific brands or products and work into the practices of consumers actively looking to reduce their levels of consumption. It was hoped that research here would help us understand the typically disappointing market shares held by 'green' products and provide insight into the 'green gap' (where consumers report pro-environmental attitudes and beliefs but do not follow through with pro-environmental consumption). Other research may also provide insight into the effect of more radical policy positions.

Taking a holistic view of the 23 papers submitted and the six accepted, I am content that this aim has been achieved. The work published here provides a number of novel theoretical insights into anti-consumption and academic debates in related domains, as well as providing much desired practical recommendations.

Turning first to the academic and theoretical debates. The topics touched by the authors include: Why does the green gap exist (or indeed does it exist?) and how can it be closed? The relationship between consumption and happiness. What is the role for proscription and public policy in reengineering economies to deal with a resource constrained world and whether or not the sustainable consumer exists?

If one takes the position that greener consumption is a path to sustainability (Fisk, 1973) then, in a number of ways, the green gap remains the key issue facing organisations who provide sustainable consumption alternatives. This theme is taken up by a number of papers. Indeed Eckhardt et al. and Black and Cherrier question whether the gaps exist. Eckhardt et al. highlight how, when one delves deeper into people's justifications for behaving unethically, one finds instances where apparently unethical behaviour is quickly reconstituted toward the ethical, therefore making the gap disappear. As the authors put beautifully 'We may conclude from this that consumer ethics are perhaps best thought of as a luxury. But unlike the Louis Vuitton counterfeit goods in one of our scenarios, the luxury of consumer ethics was not very appealing'. Black and Cherrier found that living a sustainable life does not necessarily include the consumption of green products, instead the anti-consumption practices of rejection, reuse and recycle provided the informants with opportunities to maintain consistency between their beliefs, values and behaviour. Hence, in these circumstances, the gap can be said not to exist because people are behaving consistently with their pro-environmental values, just not in the way that marketers of green products would prefer to see.

In addition, without dipping into the measurement issues common when discussing the poor relationship between beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, Black and Cherrier, Eckhardt et al. and Isenhour all discuss how their informants try to consume in a sustainable fashion but often fail. They show how in the daily practices of anti-consumption for sustainability, their informants
lapse and take the convenient, easy, cheaper, environmentally more damaging alternatives. They also discuss how they succumb to the pressures of consumerism and treat themselves, for example, to more clothes than they need (made, of course, from fossil fuel based fibres). As Sharp, Høj and Wheeler find, even when a behaviour is proscribed and anti-consumption attitudes exist (in their study to toward the use of plastic bags) sometimes shoppers fail, simply because they forget. Interestingly, however, no sense of failure came through in the narratives, they do not beat themselves up for this; they still do their bit, they try hard but they are human and, therefore, imperfect. A position that suggests the use of a supporting not lecturing tone is likely to be more appropriate from government and policy makers.

This failure and lack of consequence further supports the idea that emerges from a number of papers that the sustainable consumer as an identity does not exist and is not what the informants are attempting to become. Instead they practice sustainability and anti-consumption within their existing identities (Eckhardt, et al.; Black and Cherrier).

A further identity-based theme to emerge from the papers is that anti-consumption seems to provide people with more flexible options to express themselves (Albinsson, Wolf and Kopf; Black and Cherrier; Eckhardt et al. and Ozanne and Ballantine). Albinsson et al. find how western style ‘overabundance’ and ‘hyper-consumption’ made it harder for East Germans to use consumption to self-express. Not only were individual styles of clothing available to all, therefore lessening their ability to show individuality but also East German citizens lamented how the ‘throwaway society’ of the West reduces the need for reuse or repair. Hence, by reducing these options, practices that informants used to express who they are, were subsequently lost to them.

These authors also comment on the fundamental question of human happiness and consumption, a relationship that divides the consumerist and the anti-consumerist. Whether one believes that higher levels of consumption do not lead to higher levels of happiness or that higher levels will take you closer to self-actualisation, Albinsson et al.’s East German informants having bought in to the latter view, felt let down, disappointed and resentful when they gained access to abundant consumer goods. To quote the authors ‘Nazism, Communism and Capitalism (all materialist philosophies) promised material progress. Finally through capitalism they have achieved the material abundance that eluded them for almost a century - only to learn that this did not make them any happier’.

So whilst a range of theoretical contributions have been made (whether they are original, supportive or clarifying) to stay true to the purpose of this special issue, it is critical that we outline the practical contributions. So what advice do the authors offer policy makers, businesses, charities and not for profit organisations? I
explore in more depth two areas where ideas and findings from a number of authors intersect.

The sustainable consumer?

Overall, the research published in this issue suggests that one way to develop sustainable consumption is by promoting the notion that anti-consumption activities can provide citizens with more opportunities for self-expression and environmental benefit than green consumption. In other words, progress towards sustainability does not necessarily involve encouraging people to become sustainable consumers. Not only do we find a lack of evidence for sustainable consumers (Ekhardt et al. and Black and Cherrier) but also support the CCT position that the ‘consumer’ identity does not exist (Arnould and Thompson, 2007). Instead we are sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, friends and workers who consume and do not consume as required. It may be that in more recent times this activity and consumerist values have become more important but this position also suggests that with time their importance can wane.

Taking this further, these ideas suggest we did not become nations of consumers as many commentators suggest, instead, consumption practices became infused within the daily practices of core roles. Indeed, as these practices became part of what we did, so can anti-consumption practices. Though for this to occur this special issue suggests that focussing on appeals to save the environment, ignores the self-interested motivations that may be more successful. This is not say self-interested equates to selfish, rather it suggests that, for example, efforts to reduce carbon footprint could be framed as helping your children and friends to live with less fear of asthma or the opportunity to live in a fair world or enjoy social gatherings in beautiful surroundings - whichever self-interested motivations to which they are attuned.

In this way, this issue highlights how there may be success to be had ensuring that the values and ideas of sustainable consumption become part of the core identities and roles we all play. We should be looking to re-define what being a good mother or father or boss are, so that they include ideas such as care for the environment, thrift and frugality. I say re-define as these values have been somewhat forgotten. Thrift, frugality, environmental care are not new concepts dreamed up since the release of ‘An Inconvenient Truth’ (Guggenheim, 2006). It also suggests that products and brands positioning themselves as sustainable, rather than attempting to represent being part of the ‘sustainable consumer’, should instead attempt to appeal to the mother, husband, worker, who wants to practice sustainable consumption.

The notion of the individual motivated by general pro-environmental concerns is questioned, instead consumers mentioned throughout the papers how they tried to consume more...
sustainably and often more in response to specific issues than in trying to live a sustainable life in general (Black and Cherrier, Eckhardt et al. and Isenhour). We need to accept our imperfections and that progress is likely to be slow, sporadic and inconsistent and to understand that moving people toward sustainable consumption will most often not be the result of a road to Damascus conversion that leads to an almost religious adherence to dogma, but instead will involve a gradual change to the everyday mundane practices that make up our lives.

**The role for proscription?**

Whilst non-consumption due to proscription is not anti-consumption as there is no choice (Cherrier, 2008), work in this special issue spanned both these ideas and examined the relationship between the two. One of the most powerful recommendations made by our authors revolves around where and how it may be necessary to use the powerful tool of proscription.

Sharp et al. suggest that people are unlikely to adopt voluntary anti-consumption behaviour for habitual and frequent behaviour without the use of negative reinforcers. In other words, price and proscription are required. What is more, Ekhardt et al. show us, amongst other things, how people are quite able and willing to rationalise unethical behaviour as ethical. This challenges not only the use of moral or informational appeals but also the use of marketing on its own.

Ekhardt et al. (supported by Ishehour and Sharp et al.) highlight how social, cultural and identity barriers make it very difficult for anti-consumption to be practiced generally and, therefore, to motivate the scale of changes required, changes in global public policy are necessary. These authors either implicitly or explicitly raised the sometimes unpalatable question about where should public policy makers consider using proscription (supported by demarketing).

To conclude this editorial, I now turn to outlining the individual papers. Albinsson, Wolf and Kopf’s work entitled ‘Anti-consumption in East Germany: Consumer Resistance to Hyper-consumption’ supplies the lead paper for this special issue. It provides a tale of the rejection, disappointment and resentment of the over-consumption available in West Germany by newly freed citizens of East Germany. They describe how from a position where the West was seen as a promised land of abundance – a nirvana, an escape from the demand economy of make do and mend, the new consumers soon rejected the apparently boundless opportunity to buy new. The informants accept that there are benefits to the Western way of life but after trying it out, its ‘hyper-consumerism’ and ‘throwawayism’ provide too great a challenge to their values and sense of self. They describe the joylessness of modern...
consumption quickly leading to the novelty of access to Western abundance wearing off or wearing thin. They describe how cheapness and poor quality deprived informants of the ability to reuse and mend. They talk about how it reduces social cohesion and undermines their identity. Indeed, they talk about how this access to abundance actually leads to decreased feelings of uniqueness where self-expression was harder to achieve.

In ‘Why don’t Consumers Consume Ethically?’, Eckhardt, Belk, Devinney, tackle head on, the issue of the green gap by exploring justifications of why we do not consume ethically. Drawing on Tilly’s (2006) typology of accounts used to rationalise behaviour, it examines the reasons given by consumers from a range of cultures, to make sense of the discrepancy between what they profess to believe in and what they do or do not do. They classify these accounts in three ways: Economical Rationalization, Institutional Dependency and Developmental Realism. In Economical Rationalization, we are provided with more detail on the financial reasoning given by consumers for not acting in an ethical manner. These reasons rely on the concept of value and as such move beyond justification via price (it costs too much) into the core marketing concept of customer value. As such, it makes comment on marketers’ efforts to frame value of sustainable products. It suggests that either we do not really value a clean earth fit for habitation by all species or that marketers are not able to encapsulate the benefits into the value statement for their goods or services. Using Institutional Dependency rationales, consumers give governments institutional ascendancy in ethical matters, passing the buck, as it were, to the government to make decisions as to what is morally, as well as ethically, acceptable. These accounts hints at a situation where consumers avoid making the hard decision themselves, confident in the notion that the government will not make it for them. Finally, informants using Developmental Realism explain how not acting on ethical issues is a price one must pay for economic growth. Here we see the primacy of economic growth as a fundamental human concern and that other concerns including the environment, human rights and animal rights should be subordinate.

In ‘Anti-consumption as Part of Living a Sustainable Lifestyle: Daily Practices, Contextual Motivations and Subjective Values’, Black and Cherrier examine the relationship between anti-consumption and sustainable consumption by exploring the everyday practices of a sample of women from Sydney and Toronto. Their work looks to uncover the characteristics and meanings affiliated to practices of anti-consumption for sustainability. They find numerous practice of rejection, reduction and reuse which are motivated not primarily by concerns over environmental protection but by self-interested notions such as autonomy, beauty and value for money. They show how anti-consumption practices, because of the range of options available,
allow for self-expression (whether it is an existing or desired identity) without compromise, a theme also developed by Albinsson et al. This is contrasted with green consumption where compromise is required. They also point to evidence that living a sustainable life does not necessarily include the purchase and use of green products. Instead, the anti-consumption practices of rejection, reuse and recycle provided the informants with opportunities to show consistency between their beliefs, values and behaviours. At theoretical level they suggest that their informants (who expressed a desire to live a more sustainable life) do not try to become sustainable consumers, instead they incorporate sustainable practices (including anti-consumption) within existing roles such as mother, wife and friend and hence it is integrated within their daily lives and experience.

Similarly, coming from an anthropological background and taking a structuralist perspective, Isenhour, examines how Swedish consumers practice sustainability in her paper 'On Conflicted Swedish Consumers, the Effort to Stop Shopping & Neoliberal Environmental Governance'. Her ethnographic work, based on informants who are attempting to reduce their impact on the environment demonstrates that one of the hardest things for them to achieve is to buy less. Whereas specific anti-consumption behaviours could be successfully promoted and undertaken by her informants (she uses the examples of turning off lights or riding a bike to work), they are far less successful at generalized anti-consumption. In explaining this, she argues that it is not a lack of information that is the main barrier here; instead, she highlights the structural nature of the barriers confronting sustainable development. She makes the point that agency can be expected to wield power here and that (anti)consumers can make an impact on the environmental issues facing humanity; however, she also reminds us (along with Eckhardt et al.) of the critical role of governments and corporations. Isenhour's paper highlights the limits on providing information to develop sustainability, and on the embedded structures within society which make movement outside consumerism extremely difficult. For her, the answer lies in both consumer choice and political and corporate leadership.

In the paper, 'Proscription and its Impact on Anti-consumption Behaviour and Attitudes: The Case of Plastic Bags Proscription and Anti-consumption' Sharp et al. describe the effect of the proscription by the South Australian government of single use plastic bags. A type of bag, which it is estimated, a staggering 4–5 trillion are used globally each year. We are reminded by their work that changing behaviour is quite easy: through proscription! But it is much harder to change attitudes. They grouped shoppers into two categories depending on their use (or non-use) of plastic bags prior to the ban and studied them before, during and after the ban. Their partially longitudinal design, allowed them to show that anti-consumers before the ban were supportive of forcing others to
practice anti-consumption. In addition, those who tended to use the bags before the ban did not show high levels of behavioural and attitudinal resistance to having this option taken away from them. The authors make the point that whereas proscription is an effective behavioural tactic, it needs to be supported with demarketing activities to change attitudes.

In ‘Sharing as a Form of Anti-Consumption? An Examination of Toy Library Users’, Ozanne and Ballantine provide a detailed view of the motivations of individuals who are members of toy libraries. As such their work in the area of sharing supports and develops recent efforts in this area (Belk, 2007, 2010). Using a quantitative methodology, they surveyed 397 toy library members to explore why members choose to participate in this form of sharing. Their analysis finds that this cohort can be categorised into four groups, each motivated by a different combination of reasons: the Socialites are motivated by the social benefits of active participation. The Market Avoiders look for social and community benefits as well as an interest in sharing. The Quiet Anti-Consumers show strong anti-consumption values, such as frugality, and feel a sense of belonging to their toy library. Finally, the Passive Members are neither socially involved, nor hold strong anti-consumption values.

The authors make the useful point that not all those performing what can be classified as anti-consumption behaviours are anti-consumers who hold anti-consumption values and beliefs. They also note that sharing provides a further anti-consumption practice available to those who are against consumption. The authors conclude, in similar fashion to Black and Cherrier, that self-interested motivations are important in anti-consumption. By identifying a range of users of toy libraries which include groups of anti-consumers, they identify that within one environmentally beneficial community based practice, motivations cannot be assumed to be altruistic or environmentally based.

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