Journal of Macromarketing Special Issue: Anti-Consumption Research and Society

Michael S. W. Lee¹, Hélène Cherrier², and Russell Belk³

Abstract
In this introductory editorial we briefly discuss anti-consumption research and society, the focus of this special issue of the Journal of Macromarketing. We then introduce the four peer reviewed articles and two invited commentaries that comprise the special issue, and conclude with future research opportunities.

Keywords
anti-consumption research, society, consumer culture, macromarketing

Background
During the southern hemisphere winter of 2012, Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia hosted the fourth ICAR (International Centre for Anti-consumption Research) symposium. The theme was anti-consumption research and society and Griffith Business School was the perfect venue. As Co-host, Professor Sharyn Rundle-Thiele, remarked in her opening address, Griffith is committed to research that develops and promotes social, financial and environmental approaches that lead to sustainable businesses and communities. On-going attention needs to be directed by the research community to understand the impact that our consumption behaviour has on ourselves, our loved ones, our society, and our planet.

This broader picture approach enabled us to organize the ICAR 2012 symposium in conjunction with this special issue of the Journal of Macromarketing (JMK).

Our commitment to develop this special issue springs from our conviction that anti-consumption research often challenges society to question its own practices, and by doing so, plays an important role in understanding how we can build sustainable and socially progressive communities. As Lee, Fernandez, and Hyman (2009) state in an early editorial “It is the progress at the margins of humanity that drives civilisation forward” and similarly “knowledge harvested from both ends of the consumption continuum will increase understanding of consumers, consumer culture, and society” (p. 145). While studies on, and attention to, anti-consumption phenomena has grown since the first ICAR symposium in 2006, “normal” consumption, as expected, remains the more ubiquitous of the two constructs, even in spite of a lengthy global financial crisis. This suggests that we are still immersed in a consumption driven society. Hence, a special issue looking at the influence and relationship between anti-consumption and society, we believe, is still highly relevant.

By discussing acts, practices, and lifestyles located outside of the values, norms and behaviors that guide consumerism, anti-consumption research provides new narratives to shape our hopes for the future. On the one hand, anti-consumption narratives highlight the dominance of a system built around consumerism; a system that has to be understood as both historical and contingent. Acts, practices, or lifestyles of anti-consumption go against prevailing norms and, as such, help us understand the barriers, conflicts, tensions, and struggles to reject or avoid consumption. On the other hand, understanding the relationship between anti-consumption and society provides a great awareness of the role that non-choice and consumption rejection can play in enacting societal and cultural change. By making choices to not consume, individuals become not only lead actors in the film of their own life, but also agents of change in the trajectory of our society and the planet. In this respect, anti-consumption reaches out to transformative consumer research and pro-social and environmental disciplines such as social marketing and green marketing whereby proposed behavioral changes include the rejection of unhealthy or environmentally damaging acts, practices and lifestyles. The articles and commentaries that follow are at the forefront of current thinking about the connections between anti-consumption and society, how to approach this relationship and its significance.

The Articles and Commentaries
This special section comprises four double blind peer reviewed articles and two invited commentaries. To preserve the

¹ University of Auckland Business School, Auckland, New Zealand
² Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia
³ York University, Toronto, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Michael S. W. Lee, University of Auckland Business School, Marketing Department, Level 4 OGGB, 12 Grafton Rd, Auckland, New Zealand.
Email: msw.lee@auckland.ac.nz
academic integrity of the process in cases where the paper authors were also involved in guest editing, Journal of Macromarketing Editor-in-Chief Terry Witkowski controlled the review process and assigned double blind reviewers. The commentaries were invited to add a novel touch to the area of anti-consumption; a touch, we hope, will inspire new ways of thinking about anti-consumption and society.

In the first article, “Anti-Consumption as the Study of Reasons Against” authors Andreas Chatzidakis and Michael Lee acknowledge that while anti-consumption studies are gaining in popularity, confusion still reigns as to whether anti-consumption, as a concept, can add anything unique to consumer research that other similar topics cannot. They believe that it does, and proceed to explain the distinctive nature of anti-consumption and how it contributes to the marketing field beyond other related phenomena. Drawing upon reasons theory and utilizing the metaphor of a broken mirror, they contend that the “reasons against” consumption are not always the logical opposite of the “reasons for” consumption. Subsequently, Chatzidakis and Lee conclude that by focusing on the reasons against consumption, anti-consumption research may act like a lens that scholars and practitioners could use to view similar phenomena in a new light.

The next article “Non-participation in Anti-consumption: Consumer Reluctance to Boycott” by Ulku Yuksel, explores why individuals are not willing to boycott a well-known company accused of labor-related misconduct. To date, the majority of studies investigate the effect of boycotts on public welfare and businesses in society, and others have expounded on the self-image development that boycotting provides individuals. In contrast, Yuksel’s study moves beyond motivations of why consumers participate in boycotts, and examines instead why people choose not to participate in boycotts. In a hermeneutical analysis of qualitative data, Yuksel discovers that informants’ reasons for not boycotting can be classified into three broad themes: “out of sight, out of mind,” the “urge for freedom and self-defense,” and “counterarguments – skepticism or accounts.”

The third article, “Carrotmob and Anti-Consumption: Same Motives, but Different willingness to Make Sacrifices?” by Katharina Hutter and Stefan Hoffman, looks at carrotmobs, a new fast diffusing form of pro-environmental consumption. Carrotmobs are “flashmob boycotts,” organized by activists, where consumers swarm a predefined store and collectively buy its products. In return, the company engages in pro-environmental actions. Theirs is the first study that empirically analyses consumer attitudes toward carrotmobs and participation intentions. The research compares the drivers of carrotmob and anti-consumption and argues that while both forms of consumer activism are triggered by ecological concern, carrotmobbing differs because participants do not have to sacrifice their preferred consumption patterns. In two studies, Hutter and Hoffman demonstrate that willingness to make sacrifices moderates the impact of ecological concern on attitudes towards the carrotmob, thus confirming that carrotmob activism is an attractive avenue for consumers wishing to express environmental concerns but unwilling to make sacrifices.

While this might in some sense seem less noble than other forms of anti-consumption involving consumer sacrifice, it potentially offers a more broadly appealing way to engage consumers in anti-consumption practices. Carrotmobbing is also a demonstration of the power of social media in encouraging and facilitating anti-consumption. It raises the question of whether engagement with an activity like anti-consumption on Facebook or Twitter is sufficient to cause changes in behavior, especially behaviors that may be more “radical” than carrotmobbing (e.g., protest marches, sit-ins, or dramatically downsizing one’s consumption footprint). A parallel question came up in the so-called “Arab Spring” revolutions in the Middle East, with some calling them social media revolutions, while others like Malcolm Gladwell (2010) announced that “The revolution will not be tweeted.” Gladwell argued that social movements like the American Civil Rights Movement only happened because people who knew and engaged one another face-to-face built up enough joint courage to “take it to the streets.” While it is easy to join an online discussion, it is perhaps too easy. To actually get people off their seats and into the streets, more may be needed. On the other hand, for milder forms of anti-consumption behavior that do not involve putting your life on the line, social media may be particularly appropriate, as Hutter and Hoffman’s study of carrotmobbing suggests.

In the fourth article, “Anti-consumption Choices Performed in a Drinking Culture: Normative Struggles and Repairs,” Hélène Cherrier and Lauren Gurrieri explore the normative barriers to anti-consumption practices and highlight the role that not-for-profit organizations have in facilitating the rejection of consumption. Through thirteen phenomenological interviews with individuals who engaged in one month of alcohol anti-consumption, the authors highlight three cultural barriers to rejecting alcohol consumption: the obligation to participate in entrenched shared practices, the collective expectation to reciprocate in gift-giving, and the identification of abstinence as deviant nonconformity. Cherrier and Gurrieri then discuss the important role of nonprofits as change agents within society, emphasizing their ability to mobilize disenfranchised groups, give voice to unpopular causes and facilitate community building that breeds trust and cooperation.

The fifth article in this special issue is Brigitte Biehl-Missal’s commentary on “Art, Fashion, and Anti-Consumption.” Her piece is an interesting look at the way in which contemporary artists deal with many forms of social interaction, including consumption. Analyzing fashion projects presented at dOCU-MENTS(13), Biehl-Missal demonstrates how art’s aesthetic language speaks against fashion’s ultimate commercial meaning. She argues that an aesthetic perspective is important because the reasons against consumption are not merely intellectual but include other emotional and symbolic forms of knowing. Referring to art critics’ assessments and aesthetic theory, she interprets her observations through theories of anti-consumption. Included in her commentary is a review of Elizabeth Cline’s critical book, Overdressed: The Incredibly High Cost of Cheap Fashion. Biehl-Missal reveals some of the motifs of the fast-fashion industry that resonate in contemporary artwork and investigates
opportunities to reject, resist and reclaim fashion (Lee et al. 2011).

What Biehl-Missal’s commentary brings to our attention is the global interconnectedness of consumption. What happens in the affluent world’s fashion consumption is increasingly distant from what happens in the less affluent world’s fashion production. Worker rights, labor conditions, environmental damage, child labor, and other issues are human issues, but when their impact is thousands of kilometers away it is easy to invoke the psychic defenses that Uksel finds in her research, especially that of “out of sight, out of mind.”

The special issue ends with “Rack of Want” by John Sherry. Here, through a cycle of poems, Sherry contributes a fresh perspective on anti-consumption, illustrating his viewpoint with a pair of timeless examples, and probing the complications and sequelae of compulsive desire. Like Biehl-Missal, Sherry shows the important role of art and humanities in countering the narrow economic arguments and self-interested high capitalism that are often invoked in pursuing the status quo in production and consumption. What is likely to capture our attention and imagination is not the single bottom line of profits and share prices, but the moving portrayal of the human and environmental costs of having ever more stuff.

Future Research and Acknowledgements

The Journal of Macromarketing is an ideal vehicle for addressing anti-consumption issues. It goes beyond the narrow micro-marketing and microconsumption foci that tend to blind us to the broader implications of our small, individual choices. We live in a global, resource-constrained, polluted world with growing chasms between the rich and poor. If marketing can be a vehicle for improving these dilemmas, it must begin to adopt a macro point of view. If consumption is a path to bettering the world, it too starts by opening our eyes to macro issues. Just how to accomplish these shifts in perspectives is something that the articles in this special issue only begin to suggest. Further research should continue to explore a creative cornucopia of ideas to make us more reflective, global, and macro in our perspectives. This means returning to the most basic assumptions that have underpinned our consumption driven society, including notions of sovereignty and empowerment. It means considering the power of institutions in creating, supporting, and maintaining norms of consumerism and the place of non-consumers within a consumer society. It entails sensitivity to contemporary shifts from anti-consumption being “a terra incognita for the collective social sphere” (Cherrier, Szuba, and Ozcaglar-Toulouse 2012, p. 415) to normalization. It demands detailed analysis of our daily interaction with consumption and society.

In presenting anti-consumption in relation to society, we also put forward pressing ethical, environmental, and health concerns that accompany consumption, abundance, and excess. As a critically engaged field, anti-consumption researchers need to further explore the significance of non-consumption on complex issues such as climate change, the global obesity epidemic, technological engineering, and the saturation of our lives by digital and virtual technologies. In addressing these issues, anti-consumption studies will unavoidably offer new ways of thinking about society, consumption and life.

Finally, we end by sincerely thanking Journal of Macromarketing Editor-in-Chief Terry Witkowski who initiated the idea of a special issue on anti-consumption research and society. We also acknowledge our valued reviewers who are thanked at the front of this issue.

References


Author Biographies


Hélène Cherrier is currently Senior Lecturer at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. Her research interests relate to the sociology of consumption and 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 disposal in identity construction.

Russell Belk is the Kraft Foods Canada Chair in Marketing at the Schulich School of Business at York University, Toronto. His areas of academic specialization include the meanings of possessions, collecting, sharing, gift-giving, extended self, and materialism. His work tends to be cultural, qualitative, and visual. He has more than 500 publications, a number of awards, and honorary professorships on four continents.