A Revisited Concept of Anti-Consumption for Marketing

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Abstract

A big part of the world appears to be living in the era of consumption backed by economic policies of western states and by their large corporations. To some authors, the abundant choices made available through capitalization and globalization add positive and special meanings to consumers' lives. Some, on the other hand, claim that such a transformation brings along unhappiness and disillusionment to people. While many people seem to feel exhilarated with the power of consumption, an authentic group of people prefer to go against the flow. We call them anti-consumerists. The aim of this study is to come up with a holistic definition and a brand-new classification of anti-consumption. The study, overall, provides important insights about anti-consumerists, a little-known group, aiming to help marketers synchronize their efforts with the segment.

Keywords: Anti-consumerism, Anti-consumerists, Anti-consumers, Anti-consumption, Marketing

1. Introduction

A big part of the world appears to be living in the era of consumption backed by economic policies of western states and by their large corporations. These powerful parties are spreading out across the globe with the notion of providing their goods and services with the citizens of the developing world. The spread of capitalism through globalization seems to affect international markets one by one, fast and furiously. The rise of capitalism around the world has dramatic effects on consumers, and some social scientists sensed this transformation long before it has heightened to a drastic level over the past years.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, the prominent duo of the 'Frankfurt School' of the Marxist critical theory, mentioned in their well-known work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that business leaders create and sell an artificial world of commodities and services to consumers (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1976; McRobbie, 1999; Hesmondhalgh, 2002). The duo named this phenomenon *the culture industry* to stress that the consumption culture is designed by businesses for maximum revenue, adding this process is supported by governing authority, media and advertisement industry. So do Galbraith (1958) and Gummer and Goldsmith (2007, p. 41) discuss the use of advertising to concoct artificial demands the human would not require unless served. These artificial needs are so strong that they may even help elevate social status in the community (Veblen, 1899), creating a harsh system of social image racing (Binswanger, 2006; Cherrier & Murray, 2004) and a disillusioning experience for the consumer (Campbell, 1987). Some authors, on the other hand, takes these analyses to another level and direction by claiming that brands and the power of consumption add positive and special meanings to consumers' lives through various channels such as customization, status/identity construction, creativity boosting and experience (Lash & Lury, 2007; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Cova & Pace, 2006). At the end of the day, there seems to be a huge disagreement about whether the concept of consumption orchestrated by liberal marketers and their sidekicks exists for good or bad.

In the colorful world of brands many people indeed seek—or are influenced—to be loyal members of brands, identifying themselves with their favorites. We frequently hear from people around us they are either Nike or Adidas people. Some of our friends would feel humiliated if they were seen in public wearing anything other than a Louis Vuitton bag. A contestant participating in Survivor Panama gets super-excited about the winner's prize, which is a 3-day-long shopping experience in New York City. He says he wants to feel 'worthy' with brand-new and cool clothes. Such people are apparently taken by the power of marketing and consumption. Yet, there is also an overlooked segment that chooses to follow anti-consumer practices by going against mainstream consumption practices. We call them *anti-consumerists*.

Are these consumers aware of the clique of governments and large corporations? Is their behavior a natural human act? And most importantly, what kind of goods and services do anti-consumerists prefer whilst rising up against ambitious business and marketing practices? These important questions and the alike are still awaiting satisfying answers. The phenomenon of anti-consumption is an under-researched topic that is likely to attract the attention of many researchers in the near future.

Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring and latest anti-government demonstrations in Turkey and Brazil depict that in every corner of the world there may actually exist an invisible yet large cluster of people who are willing to break free from the hegemony of autocratic economic and management systems, and the political behavior of these people could be representing their authentic consuming habits that are little known to businesses and marketers. Moreover, it is claimed that green consumerism may be just a myth, but anti-consumption not. Three-quarters of people polled in OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] countries consider themselves 'environmentalists', stating that they would purchase a green product over an environmentally problematic product. However, only 10–12 percent of real-life consumers actually purchase such products (Devinney, Auger & Eckhardt, 2010, p. 39). According to Black and Cherrier (2010), the anti-consumption practices of rejection, reuse and recycle may be filling this green gap existing between attitudes and behaviors (Black, 2010, p. 404). In brief, the anti-consumption behavior may actually be a rational consumer reaction against conventional market practices, but not a marketing effort initiated by marketer.

It is a well-known phenomenon that any type of consumption—as well as non-consumption—is a means of identity reflection and identity construction (Hogg, Banister and Stephenson, 2009). Subcultures of consumption and brand communities, for instance, unite around collective identities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), helping their members feel content by belonging to a community and by being different from some others. But, anti-consumerists, on the other hand, are individuals who are against the phenomenon of 'symbolic mainstream consumption' (i.e. luxury consumption, superficial consumption attached to any type of reference/avoidance group, etc.). They tend to think that the exaggerated price levels of high-end brands are just a gimmick to deceive consumers by making them think as if they were special or better than others. Consuming merely in purpose of feeling unique is also a main concern of anti-consumerists since they conceive this behavior as a clear sign of superficiality, mainly caused from illusionary marketing efforts.

In this study, the conception of anti-consumption is reviewed thoroughly. Firstly, a fresh definition is introduced by the author. Afterward, a new classification of anti-consumption behavior based on real-life consumers is served. This study, overall, provides insights about this little-known group, aiming to help marketers synchronize their efforts with anti-consumerists who are likely to constitute a considerable part of future generations.

2. The Definition and Classification of Anti-Consumption

Few business and marketing conceptual work about anti-consumption, unfortunately, create a lot of confusion due to the inconsistencies between the definitions and their implicit nature. It could easily be claimed that the limits of this term are not adequately set by theorists, causing ambiguities about what really anti-consumption is and what boundaries it has. Therefore, the author, first of all, aims to draw the zone of anti-consumption in a more clear way.

An anti-consumerist may be defined as a person who follows anti-consumption practices, and she is expected to show consistency in her consumption behavior. Yet before introducing this term, it looks necessary to explain what anti-consumption is and what it is not. Zavetovski (2002, p. 121) defines the term as "a resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment of consumption", but *is the resistance to buying a green product just because one hates Mother Nature considered an act of anti-consumption?* Penaloza and Price (1993, p. 123) defines it as a "resistance against a culture of consumption and the marketing of mass-produced meanings". Yet, *what about buying fair-trade products that have started becoming a part of the strong consumption culture in a few European countries?* Anti-consumption is also considered a sub-branch of political/ideological consumerism as it enables consumers to "express their values, ideas, beliefs and overall identities" (Cherrier & Murray, 2007). And *how does it differ from symbolic consumption that aims to do the same thing?* These descriptions, even all together, show no complete picture about the contextual nature of the term. Hence, the author suggests that there be a few rules of thumbs to qualify an action as an anti-consumption activity:

(1) a non-consumption, reduction-of-consumption or selective-consumption initiative is a prerequisite for the qualification,

(2) such a deed needs to have a link to a societal and systemic problem on the local and/or global scene (e.g. reducing the level of consumption due to environmental problems, economic injustice, social discrimination, unethical marketing or a hegemonic culture),

(3) the practitioner of this act should be aware of why she acts the way she does—being anti-something, after all, requires a sense of awareness,

(4) non-purchase of a product due to personal dissatisfaction with its functional attributes (e.g. quality, price and service) should not be confused with the anti-consumption behavior,

(5) compulsory non-consumption (e.g. price is out of budget; product is inaccessible; consumption is minimized due to economic crisis) is not anti-consumption.

Furthermore, non-consumption, reduction-of-consumption or selective-consumption activity due to unethical ideological concerns (e.g. a boycott supporting any type of negative discrimination) resides in the area of unethical anti-consumption. There is also a controversial area in the anti-consumption literature attracting the attention of the scholars over the past years, including non-consumption of vaccines and peer-to-peer file sharing on the Internet.

The details provided above leads to the following definition of anti-consumption: the non-consumption, reduction-of-consumption or selective-consumption act that has a rational link to a societal and systemic problem on the local and/or global scene.

Having introduced a fresh definition and a couple of clarifications, the author notes that the anti-consumption behavior is known to be multi-dimensional in terms of consumer values and motives. For instance, a passenger using the public transportation may be aiming to lessen her carbon footprint score, which is more of a societal concern. This passenger may also prefer spending the riding time with reading her book, an action providing her with personal benefits in the first place. Cherrier, Black and Lee (2011) came across two main themes of non-consumption personality in their research. One part of the participants seemed to get motivated by differentiating themselves from others, thinking of themselves as responsible and caring human beings while positioning the 'irresponsible ones' on the opposite side. The second segment had both personal and societal concerns. Both supporting a cause and acquiring personal benefits from the non-consumption activity seemed a common characteristic for this group. This study portrays that anti-consumerists, by their nature, may hold mixed—both social and personal (e.g. constructing an original identity, socializing with significant others, belonging to a specific group or being thrifty)—motives in the background. But by definition, as the author suggests, activities carried out due to mere personal reasons with no connection to a societal and systemic problem (e.g. economic preferences, personal distaste or hedonistic motives) do not qualify as anti-consumption acts.

A couple of classifications have been offered by scholars before. The leading one by Iyer and Muncy (2009) serves four types of anti-consumerists on a two-by-two matrix, differentiating the categories based upon whether the non-consumption purpose is societal or personal and whether such behavior is directed toward a specific brand/product. But here, a classification of anti-consumption behavior will be offered by the author. When the anti-consumption literature and real-life examples are reviewed, 5 types of real-life anti-consumption behavior emerge to the surface (*depicted and summarized on Figure 1 and Table 1, respectively*). These categories are not mutually exclusive as one person could conduct more than one category. The offered classification does not claim to be collectively exhaustive either. As the anti-consumption research gains strength and as the technology improves further, some categories may disappear with time or change, and new ones could join in the list. And lastly, the total number of categories that one conducts shows one's anti-consumption behavior intensity. Hence, if a continuum of anti-consumption were drawn, at one end, there would be *light anti-consumption*, and on the other, *hard-core anti-consumption*.

2.1. Full-Time Reducing

The activity of full-time reducing consists of eliminating the excesses of the mainstream consumption culture from one's own life (Etzioni, 1998; Zavestoski, 2002; Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002; Nelson, Rademacher & Paek, 2007; Ballantine & Creery, 2010) or helping using the resources with the maximum efficiency.

Energy saving, reducing the number of shopping trips, minimization of furniture at home, non-consumption of meat, using public transportation, resisting to consumption craziness occurring throughout holidays (Close & Zinkhan, 2009; Boivie, 2003), and even having fewer children are some typical practices that fall under this title. *Recycling*, *reusing* and *non-wasting* can also be considered full-time reducing practices that many anti-consumerists carry out.

A process of transforming waste into new products, recycling is a common consumer activity in high-affluent societies. A striking example is a family of four in Canada that cut their trash output to just one bag of garbage for the entire year by buying products wrapped in recyclable material (CT News Website, 2013). Furthermore, recycling projects and markets have been gaining power in emerging countries over the past years.

Reusing consists of specific activities such as storing goods for future use, having missing or broken parts replaced, buying second-hand and using the available as long as possible. Albinsson, Wolf and Kopf (2010) explored the transition experiences of a group of consumers in East Germany, where used to be under the Communist rule before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The researchers found that when the capitalist market practices were introduced to these consumers, at first glance many of them felt very happy by reaching abundant goods and services, but they retaliated to their *re-user* habits later on, feeling that hyper-consumption practices were not 'right'.

A hybrid activity of recycling and reusing, which the author calls non-wasting, puts the thrown-away and idle resources to use. Dumpster diving, freeganism, seed-planting, composting, squatting, wild foraging and wastewater saving (Portwood-Stacer, 2012, p. 93; Black & Cherrier, 2010, p. 445; Pentina & Amos, 2011, p. 1773) are a few non-wasting activities. Specific non-wasting activities such as seed-planting could even lead to resource-multiplying (e.g. a planted peach pit would grow to a peach tree producing many more peaches).

All-time reducing does not necessarily mean that its dedicated practitioner lives a convenient life. Being away from conventional market offerings and practicing resource saving activities could be time and energy consuming. Furthermore, some full-time reducing activities such as avoiding vaccines and medicaments (Lee & Male, 2011; Demirbag-Kaplan & Kaplan, 2011) are deemed controversial by some scholars.

2.2. Anti-Consumerist Boycotting

Boycotters, individually or collectively, avoid specific brands to punish businesses for their unfavorable acts (Neilson, 2010; Hoffmann and Mueller, 2009). Boycotters with societal motives expect companies to behave ethically throughout their overall efforts not to harm society at large. Contrarily, boycotting activity could be carried out due to mere personal reasons such as solidarity and personal affiliations (Hoffmann, 2011). Hence, on the cross-section of boycotting and anti-consumption lie *anti-consumerist boycotting*, which is short or long-term non-consumption behavior conducted mainly for societal concerns. Moreover, while there are subtle differences between the terms brand avoidance and boycotting (Hirschman, 1970; Lee, Motion & Conroy, 2009, p. 170), people who commit the brand avoidance behavior due to a societal and systemic problem may also be gathered under the umbrella of this term.

Many corporations, especially the global ones, have suffered from consumer boycotting throughout their history. Nike—one of the gigantic companies that have been in the target of the anti-consumerists for a long while—has been criticized many times for exploiting children and employees in sweatshops. Anti-consumerist boycotting could also take the form of unethical behavior as we see on the J.C. Penny's case. A leading department store in the United States, J.C. Penny was boycotted in 2012 by a conservative group of consumers, *One Million Moms*. Having exposed to some ads and commercials with homosexual components, the group boycotted the company, stating that their children and traditional family values were affected negatively by J.C. Penny's marketing communications (Sieczkowski, 2012).

2.3. Anti-Consumerist Buycotting

Buycotting is the consumption of products with socially favorable features. Although the anti-consumption literature tries to exclude the buycotting activity from classifications and definitions, the selective consumption habits of anti-consumerists represent the missing link between rejection and choice. While anti-consumption is not synonymous with pro-social consumption (Lee, Fernandez & Hyman, 2007, p. 145), the concept of anti-consumption embraces this concept as well. After all, a selective consumption activity helps the anti-consumerist reduce the negative impact of her presence on world's resources or make the world a better place.

Sensitive about the environment, public health or other societal issues, *buycotter anti-consumerists*, individually or collectively, support specific businesses by performing selective buying. Hence, buying directly from the producer (i.e. local producers, local shops or co-ops) and taking alternative consumption paths (e.g. consuming organic produce and working with alternative banks and green energy companies) can also be classified as typical buycotting activities. Given the fact that buycotting could be expensive and inconvenient (i.e. it could be money, time and effort-costly to reach such products and producers), the behavior of bearing such extra costs indicates a special mode of protest against the conventional market.

## 2.4. Interactive Anti-Consumption

Interactive anti-consumption activities, conducted by more than one person, comprise a wide and varied set of practices such as *sharing* (i.e. carpooling, cohousing, home/car swapping, using all types of libraries, file sharing on the Internet, etc.) (Belk, 2007; Garcia-Bardidia, Nau & Rémy, 2011; Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010), *exchange practices* (e.g. commodity exchanging, hospitality exchanging and time banking), *gift economy practices* (e.g. gift giving and taking) and *collective production activities* (collective cooking and committing to the Open Source Software (OSS) community (Cromie & Ewing, 2009) that designs software for all and for free). The recent privatization of couchsurfing.com, the leading global company for hospitality exchanging, has proven that the segment is capable of serving feasible and profitable business opportunities.

2.5. Self-Producing

Self-producing is mainly producing what is needed rather than purchasing what is provided in the market. Food growing (e.g. people cultivating gardens and raising farm animals) and do-it-yourself activities (e.g. repairing one's own car, cooking at home and cycling to work) are typical examples under this category. The enlarging domestic chicken-keeping market in the UK, for example, is a sign that there is some potential for development in this particular segment (Bettany & Kerrane, 2011, p. 1750).

Three-dimensional (3-D) printing may be named another contemporary anti-consumption activity design and/or manufacture what they wish with minimum waste and a high rate of recyclability (Petrovic *et al.*, 2011; Smith, 2013), and most strikingly independent of market value. Moreover, broken parts of commodities could be replaced very easily and time-efficiently (Grens, 2012, p. 15). As this technology evolves into the next level—while necessary steps should be taken to eliminate the negative aspects of 3-D printing such as manufacturing 'ghost guns'—this niche segment is expected to stretch to a great extent, transforming production and marketing dramatically (Boselovic, 2012). With further developments, 'Just-in-time operations' could evolve to 'Just-in-requirement' operations serving an advanced version of customized, timely and resource-efficient production management.

Figure 1. Classification* of Anti-Consumption Behavior
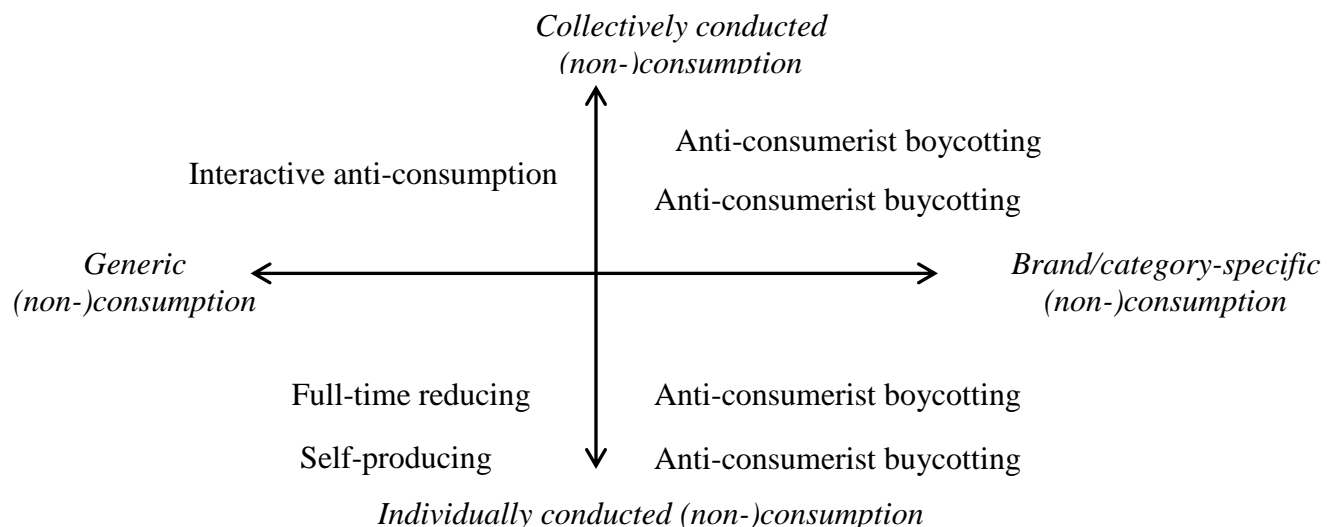
*This classification has been created by the author in respect to the real-life practices of anti-consumerists.

3. Discussion, Implications and Directions for Future Research

From the business perspective, it would not be unreasonable to claim that goods and services directed to the expanding anti-consumerist market can even be considered a revolutionary solution to economic and marketing crises we have been experiencing for a long while. Companies that invest in sustainable ideas to tap into the needs and wants of anti-consumerists could indeed create a philosophical shift in the market. Moreover, thought the first duty of marketing is to make the customer happy, reaching both sustainable and convenient solutions is an acquired right for anti-consumerists. Sustainable home systems with social benefits, state-of-the-art devices helping reuse the waste, customizable domestic animal-keeping solutions, new forms of sustainable holiday destinations and 3-D printing services are some examples coming to mind. A new generation of products and services may appeal to not only big companies but also to start-ups owned by local people including unemployed women and home-makers, reducing unemployment rates while strengthening social bonds in the community. In sum, such initiatives could serve profitable solutions to businesses while transforming the market and society to a more social and sustainable version.

From the marketing communications perspective, the anti-consumerists are expected to have strong political affiliations, and social media and the Internet seem to be a critical communication and educational tool for this segment. Given the fact that specifically young segments use a considerable amount of time on social media, such high intensity of connectedness may lead to a better understanding of global economy and politics and introduce the youngsters to alternative lifestyles such as anti-consumerism.

The fact that the anti-consumerism is an overlooked and under-researched subject, many interesting research questions arise before us. One of them is the role of the government in performing anti-consumption activities such as banning unsustainable market practices and the reaction of the conventional consumer to such interferences. For instance, Sharp, Høj and Wheeler (2010) analyzed the proscription initiative of the state of South Australia on plastic bags in 2006, finding that shoppers show some resistance at first glance, but they tend to adjust to such practices with time. Another important question appears to be related to the culture. As societies appear to differ from one another in terms of purchasing behavior, the cross-cultural examination of anti-consumerism would be worthwhile to see the differences between countries. Moreover, in the midst of intense capitalization and globalization of our era, it would be fascinating to explore the changes in the anti-consumption behavior of the 'markets in transition' by means of longitudinal studies.

Philip Kotler, the acclaimed marketing guru, once stated that "marketing is not the art of finding clever ways to dispose of what you make. It is the art of creating genuine customer value." For next-generation marketers, trying to understand the anti-consumerists would be a good start to comply with this motto.

Table 1: Anti-Consumption Activities

Anti-consumption activities	Description summary	Distinguishing feature	Exemplary Activities
Full-time reducing	Eliminating the excesses of the mainstream consumption culture from one's own life and helping using the resources with the maximum efficiency	Generic (non-)consumption Conducted individually	Energy saving, reducing the number of shopping trips, minimization of furniture at home, non-consumption of meat, using public transportation rather than driving, resistance to consumption on holidays and special days, recycling, reusing, dumpster diving, freeganism, seed-planting, composting, squatting, wild foraging and wastewater saving
Anti-consumerist boycotting	Punishing specific products and businesses for their unfavorable acts by performing non-consumption	Brand/category-specific non-consumption Conducted both individually and collectively	Boycotting Nike due to its sweatshops located in Southeast Asia
Anti-consumerist buycotting	Supporting specific products and businesses by performing selective buying	Brand/category-specific consumption Conducted both individually and collectively	Buying socially responsible brands, buying directly from local producers and local shops and preferring alternative industries such as alternative banking and green energy
Interactive anti-consumption	Collectively practicing anti-consumption activities	Generic (non-)consumption Conducted collectively	Carpooling, cohousing, home/car swapping, using all types of libraries, file sharing on the Internet, gift giving, commodity exchanging, hospitality exchanging, time banking and collective software designing
Self-producing	Producing what is needed rather than buying it	Generic (non-)consumption Conducted individually	Cultivating gardens, raising farm animals, repairing one's own car, cooking at home, cycling to work, and 3-D printing

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