

Anti-consumption beyond boundaries: From niche topic to global phenomena

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Abstract

The first anti-consumption special issue was published by *Psychology & Marketing* in 2002. More than a decade later, in 2018, the International Center for Anti-consumption Research held its seventh Symposium at the University of Almería, Spain. This gathering was accompanied by an open call-for-papers in *Psychology & Marketing* to create a much-anticipated follow-up special issue. Many papers were received for both the symposium and official call. This editorial introduces the final 10 papers that comprise the *Psychology & Marketing* 2020 special issue on anti-consumption. While the area of anti-consumption has mushroomed into a vast array of work since 2002, this editorial provides four major themes that help to frame the contributions of the 10 new papers as well as set the scene for future work in anti-consumption. The four themes are: Conceptual clarity and refinement; ideological perspectives; environmental and sustainability focus; and novel outlooks on anti-consumption.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Nearly two decades ago, the first special issue focusing on anti-consumption was published by *Psychology & Marketing*. At the time, anti-consumption was a little-known concept. Indeed, the scope of anti-consumption within that special issue was narrow and, for the time, rightly so, as it focused predominately on voluntary simplification (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002; Shaw & Newholm, 2002; Zavestoski, 2002), culture jamming (Rumbo, 2002), and consumer resistance (Duke, 2002).

Since 2002, the focus of anti-consumption—still defined as the “resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment or rejection of consumption more generally” (Zavestoski, 2002, p. 121)—has extended well beyond its original boundaries. Special issues in the *Journal of Business Research* and the *European Journal of Marketing* have established the business significance of understanding anti-consumption (Lee, Fernandez, & Hyman, 2009) and expanded the idea of anti-consumption more broadly to phenomena that reject, restrict, or reclaim consumption (Lee, Roux, Cherrier, & Cova, 2011).

Then, in the 2013, a special issue of the *Journal of Macromarketing* was published that provided much needed clarity on the topic when Chatzidakis and Lee (2013, p. 194) argued that “anti-consumption is a worthy field of investigation because it pertains to a particular set of reasons against consumption, which are more than and different from their conceptual opposites—reasons for consumption.” Subsequently, anti-consumption, as a scholarly field, was recognized as a legitimate area of inquiry, and accordingly given its own topic stream by the *Association for Consumer Research*.

Special issues in the *Journal of Consumer Affairs* in 2016 and the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* in 2018 have demonstrated the staying power and impact of the field within consumer research and marketing specifically, as well as the business and policy sphere more generally. Needless to say, we were delighted when an opportunity arose enabling us to revisit anti-consumption, and its now much-expanded boundaries, within the journal, which gave birth to the area nearly two decades earlier.

Anti-consumption research now encompasses a wide range of phenomena, from specific avoidance of brands (Iyer & Muncy, 2009;

Lee, Motion, & Conroy, 2009) to sustainable resistance of mainstream consumption in general (Cherrier, Black, & Lee, 2011). It is heartening to see that the study of the “reasons against consumption” (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013) has moved beyond fringe dwelling “hippy” and “dumpster-diving” lifestyles (Fernandez, Brittain, & Bennett, 2011; Zavestoski, 2002), to include a multitude of phenomena where individuals consciously make the decision to reject certain products, brands, organizations, or countries. Indeed, research has documented that “regular” citizens are also capable of performing anti-consumption behaviors (Lee et al., 2009). Hence, anti-consumption comprises a plethora of manifestations, which differ in terms of actors, goals, targets, duration, and intensity. Consequently, anti-consumption can be researched in different ways by varying the object of analysis, the research purpose, the sample, the methods, and the analysis employed.

Yet, it is evident that while anti-consumption remains a growth area of research, the topic has predominantly focused on how and why individuals engage in anti-consumption practices, with a marked emphasis on the antecedents and meanings of individual behaviors. This special issue is based on the argument that it is now necessary to take a more complete approach to the different phenomena comprising anti-consumption. We believe that anti-consumption is worthy of exploration from multiple perspectives, considering multiple actors—not only individuals, but also the “psychology” of communities, companies, or even nations.

Furthermore, the study of the consequences of anti-consumption has been mostly overlooked in previous literature. This is problematic because while most anti-consumption behavior holds considerable promise for fostering a more sustainable society and diminishing the environmental impact of human activities, there is still very little understanding of how this process will unfold. Moreover, although many anti-consumption practices seek to achieve substantial environmental changes in the current society, considerable uncertainty remains on the existence of societal or aggregated effects of anti-consumption behaviors; thus, a significant research gap remains, which this special issue, hopefully, begins to address.

Nevertheless, despite the current gaps in research and plethora of new phenomena that has fallen under the welcoming, and ever expanding, umbrella of anti-consumption, one valid argument in support of anti-consumption remains. That “it is the progress at the margins of humanity that drives civilization forward. Likewise, knowledge harvested from both ends of the consumption continuum will increase understanding of consumers, consumer culture, and society” (Lee, Fernandez, & Hyman, 2009, p. 145). With this thesis in mind, it gives us great pleasure in introducing the 10 articles (from the opposite end of the consumption continuum) that comprise this *Psychology & Marketing* Special issue: Anti-consumption beyond boundaries.

2 | THE PAPERS

The first set of articles set the scene by taking a deep dive into the open (and perhaps blurry) idea of anti-consumption. In their paper

“What we know about anti-consumption: An attempt to nail jelly to the wall,” Katerina Makri, Bodo B. Schlegelmilch, Robert Mai, and Katharina Dinhof argued that a lack of definitional clarity and overlapping constructs prevent the field from reaching its full potential. To this end, they conducted a systematic review of 120 anti-consumption papers and developed a research framework revealing antecedents, causal sequences and consequences of anti-consumption, enabling the field to move forward. They concluded with a research agenda for future work. Positioning this paper first was a bold way for us to start this follow-up special issue on anti-consumption because the challenges raised in this first paper not only reveal how far the area has come in the last two decades, but how much more there is to do.

Following their definitional and operationalization of anti-consumption, in “The impact of the implicit theories of social optimism and social pessimism on macro attitudes towards consumption,” James A. Muncy and Rajesh Iyer adopted a societal macro approach to anti-consumption. They developed a Macro Attitudes Model explaining how social optimism and pessimism influence people's macro attitudes towards consumption. Their work revealed that social optimists have more positive attitudes towards consumption while social pessimists have more negative attitudes towards consumption, thus elucidating the implications of how anti-consumption may address problems associated with overconsumption.

These first two definitional papers segue nicely into the second set of three papers, which all tackle anti-consumption from an ideological perspective, contrasting it against materialism.

In “The ethical underpinnings of non-materialistic values and voluntary simplicity behavior in the United States.” Jared L. Peifer, Sunaina Chugani, and J. Micah Roos acknowledged overconsumption as a serious ethical problem because of its adverse effects on the environment. Their multimethod paper explored the ethical underpinnings of two related consumer expressions of anti-consumption: Nonmaterialism and voluntary simplicity. In their first study, Structural Equation Modeling of U.S. data revealed that nonmaterialism and voluntary simplicity have unique ethical underpinnings: Nonmaterialism is positively associated with an ethical ideology focused on universal rules and principles while voluntary simplicity is associated with an ethical ideology focused on the consequences of the individual's actions. Then an online experiment in their second study indicated that concerns about landfill waste and depleting natural resources induced voluntary simplicity only for participants who were influenced by consequentialist ethical ideologies, while concerns about climate change increased voluntary simplicity across consumers. Their findings contribute to the understanding of anti-consumption ideology by delineating key anti-consumption constructs, identifying messages that effectively reduce consumption behavior, and recognizing the people most likely to respond to such appeals.

Following along this theme of anti-consumption ideology, Antonio Azevedo used a religious lens, arguing that Catholics have always been concerned about consumerism, which according to them, stems

from deep spiritual dissatisfaction leading people to compulsively “fill the emptiness of the inner self.” Consumption, for the most stringent believers, is a form of idolatry where malls are modern cathedrals. His conceptual paper “Recognizing consumerism as an “illness of an empty soul”: A Catholic morality perspective,” involved a literature review of this specific ideological topic within anti-consumption and acknowledged the thoughts written in the encyclical letters of three Popes of Catholic Church: John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis I. This paper also proposed a new ethical decision-making model, which described the implications of recognizing consumerism as a moral/spiritual issue according to the Catholic Church. This paper provides useful ideological insights about the influence of Catholic teaching on anti-consumption behavior.

In the last of the “ideology and materialism” themed papers, Abhisek Kuanr, Debasis Pradhan, and Himadri Roy Chaudhuri drew on the theory of values to study the fledgling culture of anti-consumption in urban India. Their paper “I (don't) consume; therefore, I am: Investigating materialism and voluntary simplicity through a moderated mediation model,” empirically examined the relationship between materialism and voluntary simplicity in India. Utilizing an experiment and a survey, their study examined how satisfaction with life, self-efficacy, and individualism interact with materialistic values to influence voluntary simplicity. Contrary to the suggestions in the existing literature, their study demonstrated that some Indian materialists espouse voluntary simplicity attitudes when environmental degradation around them directly impacts their health, wealth, and wellbeing. Furthermore, they revealed that satisfaction with life and self-efficacy serially mediated the positive relationship between materialism and voluntary simplicity, providing a contrast to the dark-sided conceptualizations of materialism. Their results help global marketers and public policy makers better understand the relationship between materialistic values and sustainable consumption attitudes, from a developing country perspective.

The link between anti-consumption and sustainability continues to be a central research theme, as reflected in the third set of papers of this special issue. With climate change as the most pressing environmental issue of our time, both globally and locally, environmentally oriented anti-consumption (García-de-Frutos, Ortega-Egea, & Martínez-del-Río, 2018; Seegebarth, Peyer, Balderjahn, & Wiedmann, 2016) is a promising pathway to transition from the current, unsustainable paradigm to a sustainable future. As a result, a series of papers have appeared over the past decade that discussed and examined the role of anti-consumption actions and lifestyles for environmental sustainability (e.g., Black & Cherrier, 2010; García-de-Frutos et al., 2018; Kropfeld, Nepomuceno, & Dantas, 2018; Lasarov, Mai, García-de-Frutos, Ortega-Egea, & Hoffmann, 2019; Seegebarth et al., 2016).

Progress has been made in conceptualizing and delimiting environmentally oriented anti-consumption, with marked emphasis on the micro-level antecedents and meanings of individual anti-consumption practices, mostly through qualitative methods (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018). However, study of the multilevel implications of environmentally oriented anti-consumption has been mostly

overlooked in the previous literature. Arguably, looking beyond the micro-level boundaries of (anti)consumers' individual decision-making—e.g., by directing attention to organizational (meso), industry, and national (macro) levels—is crucial in advancing current understanding of the anti-consumption-sustainability link (Caruana & Chatzidakis, 2014).

The first article within the anti-consumption/sustainability theme, “Conspicuous anti-consumption: When green demarketing brands restore symbolic benefits to anti-consumers” by Tejvir S. Sekhon and Catherine A. Armstrong Soule, offers a quantitative analysis of consumers' symbolic benefits and costs from environmentally oriented anti-consumption. The concept of “conspicuous anti-consumption” was introduced as referring to practices whereby brands provide visible signals imbued with meaning that consumers use to convey environmental motivations for consumption reduction activities. The authors considered conspicuous anti-consumption as an effective means for green demarketing brands to encourage anti-consumption among consumers' seeking symbolic benefits. The self-expressive function was a defining characteristic of environmentally oriented anti-consumption, along with the consciousness of action (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018). By means of two experiments, the authors examined how signaling (vs. not signaling) environmentally oriented anti-consumption relates to perceived status of anti-consumers and brand perceptions. The findings suggested that, without a signal, anti-consumers were perceived to have lower socioeconomic status. Interestingly, a visible signal communicated environmental motivations for anti-consumption actions, thereby mitigating negative status inferences and rendering perceptions of the associated brand more favorable. Visible signals appeared as an important means to restore the symbolic benefits that are often lost in anti-consumption practices, particularly for a broader base of “middle-of-the-road” (anti)consumers. Environmentally oriented conspicuous anti-consumption, then, has the potential to reduce the negative environmental impact on a (macro) societal level, as well as have positive outcomes for brands/companies (meso level). However, counter to the prosocial perspective emphasizing mostly the (other-centered) environmental benefits of anti-consumption, this study evidenced the importance of personal (self-centered) symbolic and self-expressive motivations for environmentally oriented anti-consumption on the consumer, (micro) individual level.

The second paper by Marlon Dalmoro, Celso Augusto de Matos, and Marcia Dutra de Barcellos, “Anti-consumption beyond consumers: The role of small organic producers in environmentally oriented anti-consumption,” extends the focus on the meso level: The role of food producers as anti-consumption agents. The paper builds on influential qualitative analyses of environmentally oriented anti-consumers' practices and meanings, published in the early 2010's (e.g., Black, 2010; Black & Cherrier, 2010; Shaw & Moraes, 2009), to explore small organic producers' practices and discourses faced with the growing trend towards sustainable/healthy food production. Findings from 29 interviews with Brazilian organic farmers and experts in organic production discovered two different discursive mechanisms used by farmers to support the hegemonic and conventional food production system, and two sets of supporting

practices that promote an alternative approach to food production and consumption. The authors concluded that farmers' discourses and practices build an alternative food system, enabling the anti-consumption of conventional food. Fully in line with the special issue's call for anti-consumption research beyond traditional boundaries, this study expands the dominant, consumer-centric perspectives to producer-centered anti-consumption studies.

In the third environmentally oriented article, "Behavioral prediction of environmentally oriented anti-consumption and consumption: A multilevel study of five Eurobarometer surveys," José Manuel Ortega Egea and Nieves García de Frutos took a micro/macro level look at the emergence of environmental spillovers on environmentally oriented anti-consumption and consumption actions in response to climate change. This study was part of the authors' continued efforts (Lasarov et al., 2019; Ortega-Egea & García-de-Frutos, 2013) to infuse sustainability, societal factors, and climate change into anti-consumption research. They argued that widespread adoption of environmentally oriented anti-consumption is a "fast-track" pathway to change the dominant, unsustainable lifestyles in most developed countries and effectively respond to climate change. Multilevel analysis was conducted on a massive European dataset ($N = 137,097$ consumers) combined with secondary country data on the societal level ($N = 30$ countries). On the micro level, the findings provided overall evidence for positive behavioral effects or spillovers for environmentally oriented anti-consumption and consumption behaviors. Specifically, spillover was more likely when actions pertain to the same anti-consumption/consumption path, the same behavioral category, and similar behavioral frequency. On the macro (societal) level, the country's (postmaterialist) value-orientation was the only significant country-level enabler of environmentally oriented anti-consumption, but less so of environmentally oriented consumption. A macromarketing perspective is clear in studies that take macro level issues, such as climate change and societal factors, into traditionally consumer (micro) analyses of anti-consumption.

Overall, the three anti-consumption/sustainability papers included in the special issue cross many boundaries being representative of the micro (Sekhon & Armstrong-Soule), meso (Dalmoro, de Matos, & de Barcellos), and macro levels (Ortega-Egea & García-de-Frutos), as well as qualitative (Dalmoro, de Matos, & de Barcellos) and quantitative methods (Ortega-Egea & García-de-Frutos; Sekhon & Armstrong-Soule).

The fourth and final set of articles introduce a plot twist to the anti-consumption narrative, going beyond the linkage of anti-consumption and well-being, and identifies circumstances where a "dark side" of anti-consumption comes into play.

To provide some context, anti-consumption practices, such as voluntary simplification and boycotting, have always been accompanied by a narrative of sacrifice or "missing-out." Yet, in the last few decades, these "sacrifices" have been shown to net positive rewards such as identity building, group solidarity, and/or self-actualization (Black, 2010; Lee et al., 2009; Zavestoski, 2002; Sekhon & Armstrong-Soule in this issue). Indeed, the special issue of "anti-consumption and wellbeing" in the 2016 *Journal of Consumer*

Affairs provided much evidence of the linkage between anti-consumption and individual subjective wellbeing. However, to help us "close the conceptual circle" on anti-consumption, the novel perspectives argued in our last set of three papers suggest that anti-consumption values and messages also may generate psychological discomfort, which can manifest through different mechanisms that further translate into lower wellbeing and less commitment with anti-consumption actions and lifestyles.

The paper "Being green in a materialistic world—consequences for subjective well-being" from Pia Furchheim, Christian Martin, and Felicitas Morhart (published earlier in issue January 37:1) delved into how the strategy of enhancing green values, which are closely linked with anti-consumption, can have negative effects for materialistic individuals. The authors explained how conjointly holding both sets of values generated conflict, which lowered self-concept clarity, created stress, and in-turn diminished subjective wellbeing. The authors also delved into the moderating effect of preference for consistency in the self-concept clarity-stress relationship. Overall, the work offers important implications for current calls to fostering green values—currently perceived as a perquisite to engage citizens in the fight against environmental issues. For this strategy not to affect subjective wellbeing, it is necessary that green values replace rather than coexist with materialistic values.

Along a thematically similar (yet topically different) vein, the penultimate paper also revealed that individuals characterized by other anti-consumption-related traits are also not free from suffering the negative effects of certain anti-consumption messages. The work from Matthew Philp and Marcelo Vinhal Nepomuceno "When the frugal become wasteful: An examination into how impression management can initiate the end-stages of consumption for frugal consumers" addresses how frugal individuals, whom normally desire extending product lifespans to avoid new consumption, decide to stop using the products they own. Such movement toward end-stages of consumption is motivated by reading negative online reviews. When frugal consumers, received negative information about products they have and are satisfied with, they perceive that their image as a resourceful and smart purchaser is threatened and therefore report lower intentions to use these products. Whereas the literature has focused on the role of negative product reviews as anti-consumption motives during the preconsumption stage, these findings revealed an important role of negative product reviews during the postpurchase stage as potential antecedents of premature product disposal for frugal consumers.

The final paper also melds the influence of the Internet with a dark side of anti-consumption. Interestingly, the Internet's influence on consumer behavior and decision making was an emergent topic when the first 2002 special issue on anti-consumption was published. Now, beyond enhancing consumer information exchange, the advent of web 2.0 has provided consumers with tools to raise their voice against corporations. One example of this is the signing of online petitions to boycott companies. Yet, the over usage of this tool can result in a source of psychological discomfort as demonstrated by

Ulku Yuksel, Nguyen (Beo) Thai, and Michael S W Lee. In their paper “Boycott them! No, boycott this! Do choice overload and small-agent rationalization inhibit the signing of anti-consumption petitions?” The authors discovered that individuals provided with numerous boycott calls experienced the “small agent rationalization,” and perceived themselves as powerless people living in an unequal world that cannot be changed. Such counterarguments in turn inhibited signing online boycott petitions and kept individuals away from this anti-consumption practice. This paper concludes the special issue fittingly, as it vividly validates the prevalence and growth of anti-consumption since the first special issue published in 2002. The final paper highlights that anti-consumption ideology and activity is now much more mainstream and accessible (paradoxically *too* accessible as the paper suggests) than what many scholars and practitioners could have imagined nearly two decades ago.

3 | CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As explained on its official journal website, the scope of *Psychology & Marketing* is to utilize psychological theory to gain greater understanding of marketing phenomena “spanning the entire spectrum of offerings (products & services), price, promotion (advertising, publicity, public relations, and personal selling), place (channels and distribution), and politics (public opinion, law, and ethics), all revolving around the individual and collective psyche of consumers.” Fittingly, the theme of The International Centre for Anti-consumption Research (ICAR) symposium in Almeria, Spain, 2018 was “Anti-consumption Beyond Boundaries”; therefore, the match was perfect, both in terms of timing and content. This special issue was the product of the papers received during the symposium and afterwards through the official call-for-papers. Nearly 40 papers were received covering a wide-range of methodological approaches, contexts, and anti-consumption focal points. Through a series of double-blind peer review rounds, as well as preliminary feedback received at the 2018 ICAR symposium, the final special issue comprises of 10 articles organized into four broad themes.

The guest editors believed these four themes not only summarize the papers presented here but also offer a framework for the next 20 years of anti-consumption research. To reiterate, those four areas are: Conceptual clarity and refinement; ideological perspectives; (as expected) environmental and sustainability focus; and finally, (to ensure that interest in the area continues to grow) novel outlooks on anti-consumption. Of note, in the original 2002 *Psychology & Marketing* special issue, all six works employed qualitative methods (perhaps corresponding with the incipient state of the field at the time). By contrast, without renouncing the qualitative approach, quantitative methods were predominant in this 2020 issue, potentially signally maturation of the field. However, aside from this observation and the four aforementioned themes, much work remains to be done. For instance; while

current research now has much to say about what precipitates (antecedents) and what occurs (consequences) once an actor decides to engage in anti-consumption, little is known about how such practices develop over time. Anti-consumption practices are not a constant, and to date, little is known about their peaks and valleys over time.

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