

Conspicuous anticonsumption: When green demarketing brands restore symbolic benefits to anticonsumers

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of conspicuous anticonsumption and provides evidence that it can be an effective means for green demarketing brands to encourage anticonsumption. Conspicuous anticonsumption refers to practices whereby brands provide visible signals imbued with meaning that consumers use to convey environmental motivations for consumption reduction activities. Two experiments suggest that without a signal, observers perceive anticonsumers to have lower socioeconomic status. However, when a visible signal communicates environmental motivations for anticonsumption actions, negative status inferences are mitigated and perceptions of the associated brand become more favorable. These visible signals confer status and restore the symbolic benefits that are often lost when consumption is forgone. Because symbolic benefits are powerful drivers of consumption choices, conspicuous anticonsumption can appeal to a broader base of moderate consumers. This practice has the potential to reduce negative environmental impact on a societal level as well as have positive outcomes for the brand. Counter to the prosocial perspective taken in most anticonsumption literature and activist thinking, This study highlights the importance of focusing on the personal symbolic benefits and costs of anticonsumption at the individual level.

KEYWORDS

anticonsumption, conspicuous consumption, demarketing, green demarketing, status signaling, sustainability, symbolic benefits

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2015, REI, an outdoor supply retailer, began a campaign that implored consumers to “opt outside” on Black Friday. For the past 4 years, on the day following Thanksgiving, the company closes all its retail locations, including the website, and gives its employees the day off. Importantly, it also asks consumers to join the movement by refraining from shopping anywhere and instead of getting outdoors. There are currently over 11 million Instagram posts with the hashtag #OptOutside and over 1.4 million people and 170 other businesses pledged to do so on REI’s website in 2017 (#OptOutside – Will You Go Out With Us?, n.d.). Consumers can find free OptOutside stickers at REI for their reusable water bottles, bikes and maybe even cars. A

large communication campaign surrounding the movement contributed to its momentum and codified rich cultural meaning into the hashtag “#OptOutside” while establishing REI as a front running crusader against our culture’s obsessive focus on consumption. The #OptOutside campaign is a prominent example of green demarketing, which refers to for-profit brands that encourage consumers to reduce consumption (Armstrong Soule & Reich, 2015). Subsequently, REI won a Titanium Grand Prix at the 2016 Cannes Lions, one of the highest awards in advertising (Coffee, 2016).

From an actor’s perspective, “opting outside” is an anticonsumption practice, that is, intentional reduction of consumption due to a negative attitude or resistance towards consumption (Zavestoski, 2002). There could be various motives behind reduced consumption,

about which observers make inferences to form judgments. It is possible that the most salient motive to observers is a financial constraint, which would result in the lower perceived socioeconomic status of the anticonsumer. On the other hand, meanings codified by demarketing brands into signals such as hashtags allow observers to decode the hashtag's meaning and interpret the users' actions as well as make inferences about their motives for engaging in those actions. For example, the meaning of the same Instagram image of an outdoor landscape could change radically when paired with #OptOutside. It signals not only that this person went for a hike, but it also provides a clear message to observers that the consumer did not shop on Black Friday, and further the reason for abstaining was due to concern for the environment. This meaning has been created by REI through its marketing communications. The #OptOutside campaign is one that harnesses the power of conspicuous anticonsumption—an anticonsumption practice leveraging a visible signal, created by brands or consumers that convey environmental rather than financial motives for reduced consumption. As such, these signals can be a means to provide symbolic benefits by conferring status on the anticonsumer and can also bolster perceptions of the brand in the eyes of observers.

This article focuses on the urgency of addressing the environmental imperative with immediate, effective and widespread action. Marketing and its hand in driving overconsumption is both a cause of and potential source of solutions/progress on this front. For-profit brands can play an important role in assisting consumers to reduce their consumption while remaining financially viable. There is an increasing amount of attention focused on shifting to “green” or environmentally friendly consumption. Although these efforts are very important, it is difficult to argue against reduced consumption being more impactful. Unfortunately, switching from conventional products to parallel green products may be much easier for consumers than abstaining from unnecessary or overconsumption as reducing consumption entails more extreme lifestyle and behavioral changes. Consumption reduction actions can be hindered due to the loss of both functional and symbolic benefits. Here, the authors explore whether conspicuous anticonsumption practices can restore some symbolic benefits, namely status, through provision and usage of visible signals. Humans have a deep-seated desire for status, therefore, signaling status by clarifying one's environmental motives for anticonsumption can be a powerful lever to encourage anticonsumption. Another benefit of This study is that symbolic benefits can motivate a large number of moderate consumers, rather than just a small subset of hardcore anticonsumers, to reduce consumption. Therefore, This study suggests a means to scale the anticonsumption movement beyond the fringe.

Adding a visible anticonsumption signal to consumption reduction practices not only confers status on the anticonsumer, but it can also reflect positively on a brand that provides and imbues these signals with meaning. Importantly, this practice also allows for-profit brands to address legitimate concerns around overconsumption and create positive brand perceptions while maintaining a competitive position in the marketplace. Finally, most research on anticonsumption has

treated it as an individual (or microlevel) phenomenon, ignoring the opportunities that exist at the organizational (meso) and national/cultural (macro) levels for scaling such behaviors (García-de-Frutos, Ortega-Egea, & Martínez-del-Río, 2018). As much of our consumption is influenced by interpersonal and social concerns, understanding the interpersonal dynamics in terms of social penalties and rewards for anticonsumption behaviors can help bridge the gap between the micro and macro perspectives on anticonsumption. Moreover, This study identifies an opportunity for brands to be part of mesolevel solutions to the environmental crisis, driving large-scale change. Focusing on the consumer motivations paired with strategic for-profit brand support allows space inside societal and cultural structures for change-driven at the brand level.

Following, the marketing case for anticonsumption activities is briefly reviewed from an environmental imperative perspective. Next, the literature on symbolic benefits of consumption and consumption-based signaling is reviewed. The authors suggest that by providing consumers a means to engage in conspicuous anticonsumption, brands can achieve a win-win-win solution, benefiting the brand itself, the consumers and the environment. The hypotheses are tested with two experimental studies and the results, as well as contributions to theory and practice, are discussed.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Sustainability, marketing, and anticonsumption

Sustainability is defined as business development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Recently, sustainability has received intensified interest in the marketing discipline, from both firm and consumer perspectives. This attention can be attributed to the immense urgency of the environmental situation (Watts, 2018) and the role that consumption and marketing continue to play in aggravating it. The severity of the issue necessitates monumental shifts in consumer preferences and firm-level responses to nudge those shifts while seeking win-win-win solutions. Win-win-win describes triple bottom line strategies, where not only do companies make profits from selling goods and services, but they also contribute to consumer/societal well-being and positive environmental impact (Elkington, 1998). Miles and Covin (2000) make the case that environmental responsibility can increase marketing and financial performance and be an important driver of firm success.

Marketing research historically has been focused on the antecedents and outcomes of corporate sustainability strategies (e.g., Banerjee, 2002; Banerjee, Iyer, & Kashyap, 2003; Cronin, Smith, Gleim, Ramirez, & Martinez, 2011; Menon & Menon, 1997) or around “green” products (for reviews see Chabowski, Mena, & Gonzalez-Padron, 2011; Kilbourne & Beckmann, 1998; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014). Often, the focus is on the supply chain related to better sourcing of raw materials to create products with reduced

environmental impact (e.g., Maxwell & van der Vorst, 2003) and reducing packaging (e.g., Vergheze & Lewis, 2007). In cases where the research focuses on consumer behaviors, the emphasis is on understanding the “green” consumer (Black & Cherrier, 2010; Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013; Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, & Raghunathan, 2010), persuading moderate consumers to shift from conventional products to green products (e.g., Ottman, Stafford, & Hartman, 2006; Pickett-Baker, & Ozaki, 2008), or disposal behavior changes such as recycling (e.g., Trudel, Argo, & Meng, 2016) and reusing products rather than discarding them (e.g., Geyer & Jackson, 2004). Other work has examined the possible pitfalls of green strategies on marketing outcomes (Luchs et al., 2010; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006).

Marketing researchers have recently been emphasizing the need to extend solutions beyond selling green products by exploring sustainable actions during the consumption rather than the pre- and postpurchase periods (Kotler, 2011; Prothero et al., 2011). However, very little research has explored consumption reduction, or anticonsumption, at the consumer or the brand level as a means to lessen environmental impact. Because marketing has historically had demand creation as a foundational pillar, it follows that anticonsumption research can be viewed as antithetical to traditional capitalist perspectives.

Over the past two decades, academic research has focused increased attention on the reasons “against” consumption as meaningfully different than the existing consumer behavior lens that has taken an approach perspective (Lee, Fernandez, & Hyman, 2009; Zavestoski, 2002). Researchers have delineated how anticonsumption practices such as refusal or product lifespan extension are different from ethical, green, alternative, conscious, and conscientious consumption practices (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013). Product lifespan extension refers to many activities that a brand or a consumer can do to lengthen the amount of time that a product can be used which results in a slowdown of new purchases (Den Hollander & Bakker, 2012). Whereas green consumption focuses on using a more sustainably made (and often more expensive) product/service without necessitating any behavioral change, anticonsumption does require meaningful lifestyle changes. Anticonsumption practices essentially compromise functional benefits and require behavioral/lifestyle changes but no additional purchases (Brooks & Wilson, 2015; De Nardo, Brooks, Klinsky, & Wilson, 2017; Jansson, Marell, & Nordlund, 2010; Kristin & Weaver, 2018). For example, buying a hybrid vehicle or a sustainably sourced and the produced jacket is green consumption while taking the bus or repairing and extending the lifespan of an old jacket is anticonsumption. Recent research has provided empirical evidence that anticonsumers have lesser ecological impact compared with green consumers (Kropfeld, Nepomuceno, & Dantas, 2018).

Consumers are beginning to adopt lifestyles of reduced consumption for many reasons (Cherrier, Black, & Lee, 2011). There are several individual-level motivations against consumption, including specific brand avoidance (Lee, Motion, & Conroy, 2009; Sandıkcı & Ekici, 2009), culture jamming or market activism (Carducci, 2006; Cherrier, 2009), voluntary simplification (Cherrier, 2009; McDonald, Oates, Young, & Hwang, 2006), antiloyal or retaliation actions

(Funches, Markley, & Davis, 2009), ethical/social concerns (Sudbury-Riley & Kohlbacher, 2018) and global impact (or environmental concern; Cherrier et al., 2011; Iyer & Muncy, 2009). From an environmental perspective, the focus tends to be on prosocial or intrinsically motivated consumers, specifically global impact anticonsumers, although other types of anticonsumers could also achieve inadvertent environmental benefits.

Global impact consumers engage in environmentally oriented anticonsumption (EOA), defined by García-de-Frutos et al. (2018) as “acts directed against any form of consumption, with the specific aim of protecting the environment.” Importantly, the researchers suggest that EOA as an identity serves an important *self-expressive* function. In fact, global impact anticonsumers are quite interested in how society views their activities and tend to engage in more visible actions (Iyer & Muncy, 2009). This paper explores the process by which global impact motivations for EOA can be signaled via anticonsumption practices. We suggest that more consumers would be willing to reduce consumption if only their environmental motivations could be observed and readily understood by others, thereby providing symbolic benefits. Therefore, the present research focuses on a broader base of consumers, those moderate in environmental concern, and aims to increase the attractiveness of anticonsumption actions by providing signaling mechanisms.

García-de-Frutos et al. (2018) also suggest that brands can be seen as EOA change agents. Counterintuitively, brands acting as allies in anticonsumption have the potential to be more effective than individual efforts as well as social (de)marketing activities driven by governmental or non-profit agencies. Unfortunately, there is even less research adopting this mesolevel (i.e., organizational) perspective (i.e., the role of individual brands in the anticonsumption space) with research on green demarketing being an exception.

Kotler and Levy (1971) define demarketing as a brand’s efforts to reduce demand for its products and provide three motivations: general (reaction to supply shortage), selective (to support a segmentation strategy), or ostensible (a scarcity signal). Green demarketing is an extension proposed by Armstrong Soule and Reich (2015) whereby a brand can use demand reduction messaging and product development to reduce category demand while supporting the responsible consumption of the focal brand. Initial research in this area suggests that for-profit brands can successfully support consumers’ anticonsumption motivations under certain conditions (Armstrong Soule & Reich, 2015; Kim, Ko, & Kim, 2018; Reich & Armstrong Soule, 2016). There have been multiple calls for increased research on the brand’s role in consumption reduction (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018; Iyer & Muncy, 2009; Kotler, 2011) and This study answers the call to explore how brands might be powerful players that support individual level anticonsumption activities, for the sake of the environment.

2.2 | Symbolic benefits as (de)motivators for anticonsumption

Reducing consumption at a societal level is challenging because consumption provides important functional and symbolic benefits to

individual consumers (Jackson, 2005; Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). All humans need a minimum level of physical consumption to fulfill their functional needs and survive. Although functional benefits cannot be restored when consumption is forgone, symbolic benefits can provide a lever into persuading consumers to buy and use less. This study focuses on the separation of symbolic benefits from actual physical consumption to encourage reduced consumption.

Conspicuous, or socially visible, consumption is a major means to signal one's unobservable characteristics to others (Veblen, 1899) and gain symbolic benefits. Goffman (1959) suggests that props, such as products and brands, play an important role in impression management as they can convey particular symbolic meanings (Levy, 1959). Observers use actors' consumption to form impressions about a range of dispositional characteristics such as wealth (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011), intelligence (Manz & Lueck, 1968), taste/cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2013), and so forth. For example, observers can form impressions of a Jaguar driver to be wealthy and a Prius driver to be environmentally conscious. However, what impressions are formed of someone who does not own a car and instead rides the bus or a bicycle? It is possible that an observer will attribute the lack of car ownership to the most readily available motive for not consuming, a lack of financial resources, rather than a deep environmental anticonsumption motive.

Signaling one's worth or status to others is considered a central symbolic benefit that consumption can provide (Eastman, Goldsmith, & Flynn, 1999). As status is not directly observable, observers infer others' status from their consumption (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982) and this inferred status has implications in terms of how well one is treated in a social situation (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). In line with Veblen's (1899) conceptualization of conspicuous consumption, the consumption literature has mainly focused on status signaling via the conspicuous display of luxury products and brands (Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010). However, what confers status depends on the context. As status is measured in the eyes of the observers, signals of status differ depending upon the characteristics that are valued in one's reference group (Marwick, 2010). For example, as wealth is a valued characteristic across multiple reference groups, luxury brands are commonly considered to be status signals. Similarly, being environmentally conscious is increasingly becoming a valued characteristic and therefore, green brands (such as Tesla, Prius, Patagonia, etc.) can signal status (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010). Prior work suggests that incurring personal costs for the greater good can translate into higher status inferences by observers and these social benefits can manifest in terms of competitive altruism at a group level (Van Vugt, Roberts, & Hardy, 2007). Therefore, both luxury and green consumption provide symbolic benefits in terms of increased status inferences.

However, when one is not consuming, there is no observable signal to communicate one's motives. Motives for not consuming are ambiguous at best. Even though anticonsumption or reduced consumption entails lifestyle/behavioral costs, it is also accompanied by significant financial benefits. Therefore, anticonsumption behaviors could be interpreted as borne out of financial constraints rather than a prosocial environmental motivation (De Nardo et al., 2017; Sadalla &

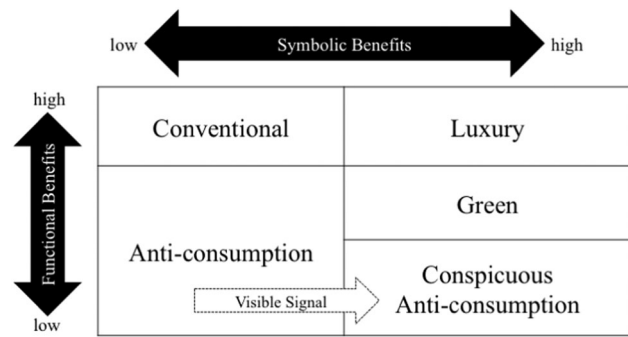


FIGURE 1 Comparing symbolic and functional benefits across consumption types

Krull, 1995). Anticonsumers are not only missing on the positive signal of prosocial motives (common in the case of consumers who buy green products) but could also be sending out a negative signal of financial duress. In sum, anticonsumers not only lose the functional benefit of consumption but also face a double penalty in terms of symbolic benefits by potentially being perceived as lower status. Figure 1 illustrates this penalty that anticonsumers might face by losing on both functional as well as symbolic benefits as compared with conventional, luxury, and even green consumption. These personal costs can be a major demotivator for anticonsumption and can make the shift away from consumption doubly painful to consumers.

2.3 | Conspicuous signals of intentional anticonsumption

Because anticonsumption is more impactful compared with green consumption but potentially more painful for consumers, it is crucial for the greater good that research addresses mechanisms to reduce the barriers to anticonsumption practices. Unlike consumption behaviors or acts, anticonsumption, by definition, refers to the absence of a consumption act. Therefore, common anticonsumption acts such as rejecting or reducing are generally not observable to others. However, can consumers and brands use signals other than physical objects to make intentional and *environmentally motivated* anticonsumption (and associated prosocial motives) more visible to avoid incurring a penalty in terms symbolic benefits?

A signal, defined as an indicator of unobservable quality, is effective only if the receiver is familiar with the signal and what it means, to decode the signal correctly (Donath, 2007). Consumption and product/brand choices are visible and often easily understood signals by observers. From the observers' perspective, intentional behaviors such as one's consumption choices are interpreted in terms of the actor's motives and the context surrounding the action plays an important role in identifying the actor's motives (Ames, Flynn, & Weber, 2004; Reeder, 2009). *Conspicuous* anticonsumption signals (such as REI's #OptOutside) can provide such a context to clarify anticonsumers' actions (or inactions) to be driven by environmental (rather than financial) motivations and in the process restore the symbolic benefits previously provided by physical consumption. These signals also allow brands to take a central and impactful role

in supporting consumers in sustainable behaviors. Consumers are motivated to gain the approval of others and within materialistic cultures, consumption is a path to do that (Rose & DeJesus, 2007). The authors test whether conspicuous anticonsumption signals can act in a similar manner, by providing consumers with the symbolic benefits conferred from observers' positive motive attributions.

H1: *When a conspicuous anticonsumption signal is present (absent), the anticonsumer will be evaluated as having a higher (lower) socio-economic status.*

H1: *When a brand provides a conspicuous anticonsumption signal, it will (a) be evaluated more positively, and (b) result in a higher willingness to pay.*

These hypotheses are tested in two experimental studies reported below. The first study tests whether observers make status inferences about anticonsumers and how those inferences are changed when the environmental motive is made known. The second study tests whether brands perceived as environmentally friendly can act as signals, suggesting that a brand's positioning itself can act as a means that allows observers to infer environmental (rather than financial) motives for the actions of anticonsumers, and attribute higher status to that consumer.

3 | STUDY 1

3.1 | Participants, design, and procedure

Two hundred ten US-based Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers participated in an experimental study with four between-subject conditions (control, information only, the signal only, and both information and signal). We excluded data from 11 participants who did not respond correctly to an attention check. Thus, the final sample size for this study was 199 participants with 39% who identified as female, 84.4% having a yearly household income less than \$80,000 and 88.4% had completed some college-level or higher education (Table 1 provides frequency and percentages for income and education levels).

All respondents were shown a picture of a person wearing a visibly distressed old jacket (please see Appendix A for images). The presence of the signal was manipulated through a patch on the jacket. We used an image of the actual "Worn Wear" patch that Patagonia sews onto the clothes it repairs for its customers (an example of product lifespan extension). No brand name was present in any conditions. The presence of information about the brand's demarketing initiative and the consumer's anticonsumption behavior was made known by providing information that the jacket the person was wearing was repaired under the company's "repair and reuse" initiative. In the control condition, participants were shown the image of the person wearing the jacket without any patch. In the information only condition, information about the jacket being repaired under the "repair and reuse" initiative was provided before the respondents were shown the image of the person wearing the

TABLE 1 Study 1: Sample demographics

	Frequency	Percent
Yearly household income before taxes		
Less than \$10,000	14	7
\$10,000 to \$19,999	21	10.6
\$20,000 to \$29,999	32	16.1
\$30,000 to \$39,999	18	9
\$40,000 to \$49,999	21	10.6
\$50,000 to \$59,999	30	15.1
\$60,000 to \$69,999	20	10.1
\$70,000 to \$79,999	12	6
\$80,000 to \$89,999	5	2.5
\$90,000 to \$99,999	4	2
\$100,000 to \$149,999	16	8
\$150,000 or more	6	3
Total	199	100
Highest level of education completed		
Some or all grade school	1	0.5
Some or all high school	22	11.1
Some or all college	156	78.3
Some or all graduate school	20	10.1
Total	243	100.0

jacket without any patch. In the signal only condition, participants were not provided any information and were just shown the image of the person wearing the jacket with the "Worn Wear" patch. Finally, both information and signal conditions included information about the anticonsumption behavior as well as the patch on the jacket.

After seeing the picture, all respondents were asked to rate the person on 7-point scales (1 = not at all and 7 = very much) related to perceived socioeconomic status ("has high status," "is respected," "is rich," and "has a lot of money"; $\alpha = .84$), attractiveness (attractive, good-looking; $\alpha = .94$), warmth (kind, friendly; $\alpha = .77$), sincerity (trustworthy, honest; $\alpha = .80$) and environmental consciousness ("cares about the environment," "buys environmental-friendly products"; $\alpha = .89$; adapted from Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007, and Sadalla & Krull, 1995). Next, the respondents indicated their attitude towards the jacket itself ("dislike/like," "negative/positive," and "unfavorable/favorable"; $\alpha = .98$), attitude towards the company ("dislike/like," "negative/positive," and "unfavorable/favorable"; $\alpha = .98$), likelihood of buying another product from the company and willingness-to-pay for a new jacket from the company. Finally, they provided demographic information and completed an attention check item.

3.2 | Results

3.2.1 | Perceptions of the consumer

Planned contrasts revealed that socioeconomic status was perceived to be higher when both signal and information was present ($M = 3.36$; $t(195) = 2.02$; $p = .045$) as well as when only signal was present ($M = 3.35$; $t(195) = 1.99$; $p = .048$) as compared with the control condition ($M = 2.96$). However, perceived status was not different in the information-only condition ($M = 3.13$; $t(195) = 0.89$; $p = .37$) as compared with the control condition ($M = 2.96$; see Figure 2).

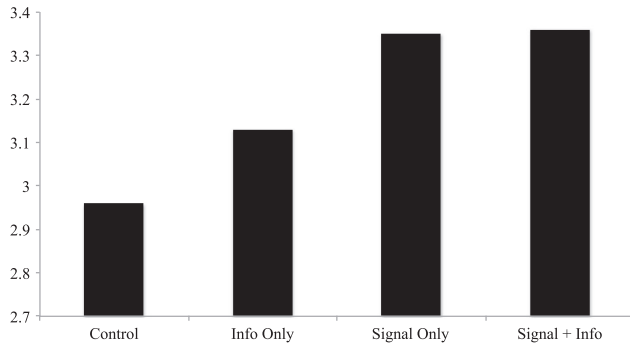


FIGURE 2 Study 1: Perceived SES by the condition. SES, Socioeconomic status

Planned contrasts also revealed that perceived environmental consciousness was higher when both signal and information was present ($M = 5.60$; $t(195) = 5.50$; $p = .000$) as well as when only information was present ($M = 5.30$; $t(195) = 4.41$; $p < .001$) as compared with the control condition ($M = 4.23$). However, perceived environmental consciousness was not different in the signal only condition ($M = 4.29$; $t(195) = 0.25$; $p = .81$) as compared with the control condition. There were no differences between the conditions for perceived attractiveness, perceived warmth, and perceived sincerity providing evidence that this is not a broad halo effect but operates only on judgments of perceived status.

3.2.2 | Perceptions of the brand

Attitude towards the product (the jacket) was more positive when both signal and information was present ($M = 4.09$; $t(195) = 2.92$; $p = .004$) as well as in the “information only” condition ($M = 3.93$; $t(195) = 2.52$; $p = .013$) as compared with the control condition ($M = 3.06$). However, attitude towards the jacket was not different in the “signal only” condition ($M = 3.52$; $t(195) = 1.32$; $p = .188$) as compared with the control condition (see Figure 3). Attitude towards the brand was more positive when both signal and information was present ($M = 5.36$; $t(195) = 5.60$; $p < .001$) as well as in the “information only” ($M = 5.31$; $t(195) = 5.58$; $p < .001$), and the “signal only” ($M = 4.36$; $t(195) = 2.19$; $p = .03$) conditions as compared to the control condition ($= 3.73$; see Figure 4). Purchase likelihood for a new

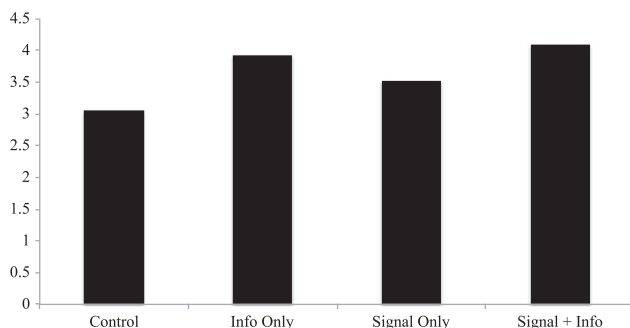


FIGURE 3 Study 1: Attitude toward the product by condition

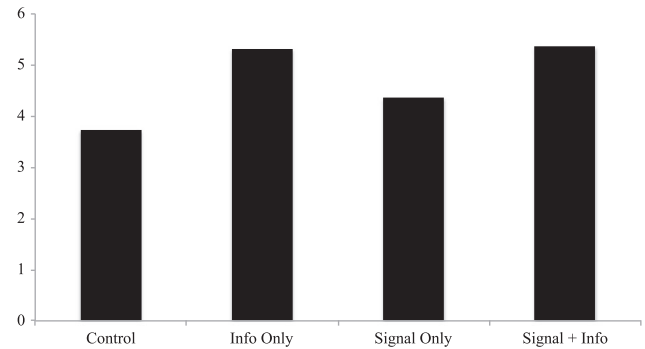


FIGURE 4 Study 1: Attitude toward the brand by condition

product by the same brand was more positive when both signal and information was present ($M = 4.45$; $t(195) = 4.12$; $p < .001$) as well as in the “information only” condition ($M = 4.37$; $t(195) = 3.99$; $p < .001$) as compared with the control condition ($M = 3.02$). However, purchase likelihood was not different in the “signal only” condition ($M = 3.45$; $t(195) = 1.25$; $p = 0.21$) as compared to the control condition ($M = 3.02$). Willingness to pay (WTP) for a new jacket by the same brand was higher when both signal and information were present ($M = 57.04$; $t(195) = 2.82$; $p = .005$) as compared with the control condition ($M = 35.88$). However, WTP was not different in the “information only” condition ($M = 46.71$; $t(195) = 1.48$; $p = .14$) or in the “signal only” condition ($M = 46.22$; $t(195) = 1.40$; $p = .16$) as compared with the control condition ($M = 35.88$). See Table 2 for all means.

3.3 | Discussion

These results support both hypotheses and demonstrate that information about anticonsumption initiatives and anticonsumption signals each can have positive impacts on consumer evaluations and brand perceptions. It suggests that observers' perceptions about the brand are impacted more by information about green demarketing initiatives. However, the visible signal (the patch in this case) appears to be more important in terms of impacting observers' perceptions about the anticonsumer. Furthermore, the biggest impact for both dimensions is achieved with the combination of both the visible signal and information about the brand's initiative behind the signal, which imbues said signal with meaning in the eyes of the observers. The

TABLE 2 Study 1: Means

	Control	Info only	Signal only	Signal + Info
SES	2.96	3.13	3.35	3.36
ENVIRO	4.23	5.3	4.23	5.6
Att product	3.06	3.93	3.52	4.09
Att brand	3.73	5.31	4.36	5.36
Purchase likelihood	3.02	4.37	3.45	4.45
WTP	\$35.88	\$46.71	\$46.22	\$57.04

Abbreviations: SES, Socioeconomic status; WTP, willingness to pay.

next study tests whether the brand itself could act as a visible signal of anticonsumption for environmental motivation depending on the known positioning and heritage of the brand.

4 | STUDY 2

Study 2 aimed to replicate the findings of study 1 using a different paradigm and extend its findings in two important ways. First, study 2 tested whether a brand that holds an environmental position could act as a signal that clarifies the actor's motivation for anticonsumption behaviors. Second, this study explored whether familiarity with the brand and what it stands for is an important prerequisite for using the brand to clarify one's motivations to observers. It was expected that a signal is valuable only to the extent it can be decoded by observers.

In sum, this study aimed to show that although repairing a product leads to negative inference about one's status, such inferences could be mitigated using either a high-status brand (as an additional signal of status) or an environmentally conscious brand (as a signal to clarify the motivation behind the repairing act to be environmental rather than financial).

4.1 | Participants, design, and procedure

Two hundred fifty-two US-based MTurk workers participated in an experimental study with five between-subject conditions (control, repair, low-status repair, high-status repair, and green repair). Data from nine participants who did not respond correctly to an attention check were excluded. Thus, the final sample size for this study was 243 participants with 54% who identified as female, 79.4% having a yearly household income less than \$80,000 and 89.3% had completed some college-level or higher education (Table 3 provides frequency and percentages for income and education levels).

Participants read a schedule for a person named Pat that was described as a typical Saturday morning and were asked to evaluate Pat based on the activities (please see Appendix B for screenshots of each list). This list was modified from past research (Sadalla & Krull, 1995; Welte & Anastasio, 2010) and described various domestic activities (such as "prepare and eat breakfast"). The only difference across the five between-subject conditions was in the description of a repairing activity on this list. In the control condition, there was no mention of any repair activity. In the repair condition, the repairing activity was described as "10:30-11:00: Repair my old jacket." In the three branded (low status, high status, green) conditions, it read "10:30-11:00 Repair my old [Walmart, Gucci, Patagonia] jacket." After reading the schedule, all respondents rated Pat on 9-point scales related to perceived socioeconomic status ("low status/high status," "poor/wealthy," and "blue-collar worker/executive"; $\alpha = .87$), and perceived warmth (unpleasant/pleasant, unlikable/likable, unfriendly/friendly; $\alpha = .88$), along with some filler items. Then, as a manipulation check, participants also rated Walmart, Patagonia, and Gucci (along with some filler brands) on familiarity (not at all familiar/

TABLE 3 Study 2: Sample demographics

	Frequency	Percent
Yearly household income before taxes		
Less than \$10,000	15	6.2
\$10,001-\$20,000	25	10.3
\$20,001-\$30,000	41	16.9
\$30,001-\$40,000	26	10.7
\$40,001-\$60,000	49	20.2
\$60,001-\$80,000	37	15.2
\$80,001-\$100,000	21	8.6
\$100,001-\$125,000	14	5.8
\$125,000-\$150,000	6	2.5
More than \$150,000	9	3.7
Total	243	100
Highest level of education completed		
Some or all grade school	1	0.4
Some or all high school	25	10.3
Some or all college	171	70.4
Some or all graduate school	46	18.9
Total	243	100.0

very familiar), status (very low status/very high status) and environmental consciousness (does not care about the environment at all/cares a lot about the environment), followed by the attention check and demographic questions.

4.2 | Results

4.2.1 | Manipulation checks

Participants were familiar with both Walmart ($M = 7.30$; $t(242) = 46.72$; $p < .001$) and Gucci ($M = 6.30$; $t(242) = 13.97$; $p < .001$) with familiarity ratings differing significantly higher than the midpoint of the scale (i.e., 4.5). However, the familiarity in this sample with Patagonia was low and not significantly different than the scale midpoint ($M = 4.44$; $t(242) = -0.34$; $p = .73$). The implications of this low familiarity is discussed later in the results section. As expected, Walmart was seen as a low-status brand with status ratings significantly lower than the midpoint ($M = 3.6$; $t(242) = -6.38$; $p = .001$), and Gucci was seen as the highest status brand with status ratings significantly higher than the midpoint ($M = 7.19$; $t(242) = 32.47$, $p < .001$). Patagonia was also seen as a relatively higher status compared to the scale midpoint ($M = 6.05$; $t(242) = 12.68$; $p < .001$). Also, Gucci was seen as a higher status brand as compared with both Walmart ($t(242) = 20.86$; $p < .001$) and, importantly, Patagonia ($t(242) = 8.94$; $p < .001$). Similarly, Walmart was seen as a low on environmental consciousness with ratings significantly lower than the midpoint ($M = 3.83$; $t(242) = -4.67$; $p < .001$), and Patagonia was rated the highest on environmental consciousness with ratings significantly higher than the midpoint ($M = 5.75$; $t(242) = 9.58$; $p < .001$). Gucci was also seen as relatively lower on environmental consciousness compared with the scale midpoint ($M = 4.20$; $t(242) = -2.25$; $p = .025$). Also, Patagonia was seen as a higher on environmental consciousness as compared with

TABLE 4 Study 2: Means

	Walmart	Gucci	Patagonia
Familiarity	7.30	6.30	4.44
Status	3.60	7.19	6.05
Green	3.83	4.20	5.75

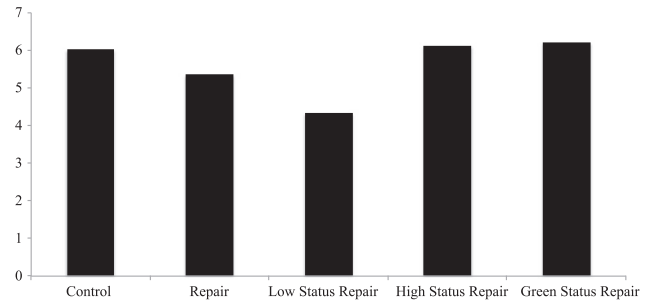
both Walmart ($t(242) = 10.56$; $p < .001$) and Gucci ($t(242) = 10.07$; $p < .001$; see Table 4).

4.2.2 | Perceptions of the consumer

There was no difference between the conditions for perceived warmth and other filler characteristics, suggesting that this is not a broad halo effect. As hypothesized, there was a main effect of condition on perceived status ($F(4, 238) = 12.53$; $p < .001$). Planned contrasts revealed that perceived status in the control condition ($M = 6.02$) was higher than the repair condition ($M = 5.35$; $t(247) = 2.39$; $p = .017$). Perceived status was depressed further in the low-status brand condition ($M = 4.33$; $t(247) = 3.59$; $p < .001$) as compared with the repair condition. These results demonstrate that the simple act of repairing signals resource constraints and results in lower perceived SES, though repairing a low-status brand amplifies that effect even further. However, perceived status for a person repairing a high-status brand (i.e., Gucci, $M = 6.11$) was higher than the repair condition ($t(247) = 2.72$; $p = .007$) showing that mentioning a high-status brand mitigates the negative status perceptions associated with an anticonsumption activity. Counter to H1, it appeared that repairing a green brand ($M = 5.58$) did not mitigate the lower status perceptions as compared with the repair condition ($M = 5.35$; $t(247) = 0.814$; $p = .42$). However, as mentioned above, the familiarity with the Patagonia brand was low in this sample ($M = 4.44$ on a 9-point scale) indicating that the participants might not recognize the brand's environmental position. When considering only participants whose familiarity with Patagonia was higher than the scale midpoint ($n = 27$) and comparing to the repair condition ($n = 49$), perceived status was higher when repairing a green product ($M = 6.20$) as compared to a product with an undisclosed brand ($t(74) = 2.46$; $p = .016$). This provides further evidence that a familiar brand that is a well-known signal of environmental consciousness can mitigate the negative status inferences attached to anticonsumption by highlighting the environmental (rather than financial) motives behind anticonsumption. Please refer to Figure 5.

4.3 | Discussion

The results from this study show that brands themselves can act as proxies that clarify the consumer's motivation behind anticonsumption behaviors as environmental rather than financial. In the absence of other information, observers tend to assign financial motives to a

**FIGURE 5** Study 2: Perceived SES by the condition. SES, Socioeconomic status

consumer who is engaging in anticonsumption (such as refusing a new product or extending the lifecycle of a product by repairing or reusing). This assumption translates into perceptions of lower socioeconomic status. However, in the marketplace, observers might have other types of information that signals consumers' motivations. Examples of this additional consumer information could be occupation, educational level, outward appearance, other consumption/brand choices, and so forth. An important implication of this finding is that brands themselves can be used as additional signals based on positioning in the marketplace and the user-imagery of their typical consumers and thereby can motivate anticonsumers. However, brands can act as signals of environmental motives behind anticonsumption only to the extent that observers are familiar with the brand as well as the brand's associations with green demarketing and other environmental and anticonsumption initiatives and activities.

5 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Two studies reported herein demonstrated that anticonsumption actions are ambiguous at best in regard to symbolic benefits. Without any tangible signal, observers are unable to categorize an anticonsumption action as intentional and not due to a lack of financial resources. However, when a brand makes known its green demarketing initiatives through information provision and/or a visible signal, it imbues anticonsumption actions with symbolic meanings that observers decode resulting in positive outcomes for the anticonsumer and the brand, thus supporting H1 and H2. The first study demonstrated that green demarketing brands are viewed more positively and that signaling environmental motives for product lifespan extension result in higher status evaluations of the anticonsumer. In study 2, it was found that anticonsumption activities in general lead to suppressed perceptions of status, but these evaluations can be mitigated by using brands as proxies for signaling wealth or environmental consciousness, again supporting H1 using a different paradigm.

Overconsumption is the most pressing cause of environmental degradation and this presents both a critique and an opportunity for for-profit brands. Although marketing has historically focused on-demand creation, the industry is shifting towards sustainable ideals.

However, the biggest impact cannot be realized through postconsumption actions (e.g., recycling) or product creation, packaging and distribution efforts (green products), but rather through supporting decreased consumption on a large scale. Anticonsumption efforts not only pay off for the planet and its inhabitants but can be profitable for individual brands as well. Conspicuous anticonsumption signals supported by green demarketing brands, such as REI's #OptOutside hashtag and Patagonia's Worn Wear patch are two real-world examples of brands that have imbued signals with anticonsumption related meanings, combatting some of the negative psychological aspects of forgone consumption.

Although consumers are attempting to decrease consumption for a myriad of reasons, this study has value not only for those intrinsically motivated consumers but for more moderate ones as well. Most anticonsumption literature provides case studies of activists engaging in anticonsumption in peripheral enclaves in hope of inspiring consumers to make revolutionary changes in how they consume, which is akin to preaching to the choir and does little to scale the anticonsumption movement (Holt, 2014). Scaling a movement that requires significant lifestyle/behavioral changes is a formidable task that requires winning a broad base of consumers by focusing on personal (in addition to prosocial) benefits to encounter personal costs involved in such actions. When consumers are able to achieve symbolic benefits through reduced consumption, it is more likely that moderate consumers can be motivated to do so.

Zavestoski (2002) suggests that one reason for the scant research in anticonsumption is because it requires a fundamental shift in the role of marketing and capitalism and that there is a problem in the system itself. The authors believe that acknowledging the role marketing has played historically is imperative to reverse decades of environmental degradation due to overconsumption, supported and exacerbated by marketers. Instead, it is possible that marketing and consumer behavior can be used to support proenvironmental actions at the mesolevel. Even such win-win-win strategies can be critiqued because the brands involved are still measuring success at least in part based on profits, and selling tangible goods, albeit less of them. Armstrong Soule and Reich's (2015) research suggests that consumers do attribute motives to green demarketing initiatives and if they are not congruent with brand perceptions, they can backfire. Does the fact that REI still sells products inherently discredit the green demarketing initiatives? In addition to #OptOutside, the retailer has recently launched a platform on its website to sell used gear that has been returned by customers in exchange for credit. Moves such as these demonstrate that the motives are being hardwired into the business strategy and are not just one-off ad campaigns to drive sales. It is the perspective of the authors that operating within the system is possible, and that for-profit brands can support these types of radically different marketing strategies and that we all can benefit.

Anticonsumption, particularly EOA, is not a mainstream practice, for brands or consumers. Part of this hesitation to scale back consumption for the everyday consumer is due to the lay understanding that "things" bring us happiness (Richins & Dawson, 1992).

There is a substantial stream of literature on the pleasure, value, and joy that consumers experience from purchases (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). On the other hand, there is also a very large body of work on the negative aspects of consumption, particularly in the "dark side" or overconsumption literature, such as compulsive consumption and materialism linked to decreased well-being and satisfaction with products (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi & Halton, 1981; Kleine & Baker, 2004). Despite the complexity of the relationship between consumption and consumer well-being, people still must consume to some extent to achieve functional and symbolic benefits.

Cherrier and Murray (2007) report that anticonsumption acts and lifestyles also allow consumers to express their "values, beliefs, and identities" just as a product or brand choice would. The issue at hand herein is whether observers are readily able to understand those expressions. Lee and Ahn (2016) and Oral and Thurner (2019) find links between anticonsumption practices and increased well-being despite the established link between consumption and symbolic benefits, suggesting that there could be ways to garner symbolic benefits without physical consumption resulting in increased well-being. This study suggests that conspicuous anticonsumption is a mechanism to deliver these symbolic and self-expressive benefits to more consumers, a nudge that can encourage anticonsumption behaviors at a large scale rather than simply preaching to the choir.

This study also extends theory into a timely and important area of consumption-related signaling. With the advent of social media, carefully crafted impressions of one's positive qualities have become commonplace and consumption plays an important role in such impression management (Sekhon, Bickart, Trudel, & Fournier, 2015). However, it is difficult to signal one's unobservable traits in the absence of a consumer product. In fact, the very absence of a product (or efforts to extend product lifecycles by repairing/reusing) can signal resource constraints. This paper suggests that separating the symbols from the physical "stuff" can be a way forward to reduce consumption while still providing symbolic value. Moreover, this study also underscores the importance of the decoding aspect of signals and shows that not everyone understands a particular signal to have the same meaning. Investments in effective marketing communications are needed to imbue the signals with the right meanings.

Practical implications for marketers are that consumers find value in brands supporting reduced consumption, in the more positive brand and product evaluations and higher WTP. Furthermore, the value of these sustainability efforts can be amplified by creating or supporting consumer-created anticonsumption signals. By harassing the power of status motivations, it is possible to move the needle from anticonsumers who are intrinsically motivated to a much larger, broader base of consumers—and thereby achieve real impact.

5.1 | Limitations and future directions

The current research has explored a Western perspective and it is important to recognize that status-signaling and symbolic benefits

may be culturally dependent. Because the research presented herein used US samples, cross-cultural research is necessary to explore whether conspicuous anticonsumption has similar effects in other cultures and parts of the world. Moreover, as consumers and cultures change, the particular products and brands that are the right signals of status also evolve over time. For example, Silicon Valley tech workers signal status by spending on events like TED Talks and South by Southwest Conference (Marwick, 2010). Because signals and their meanings are subjective and can be transient, it is quite possible that the effects will change over time.

Another fruitful direction for future research would be to explore other contextual variables that can clarify the motivations behind different anticonsumption actions. For example, one's profession, political orientation, educational level and the constellation of other consumption choices could help clarify a particular anticonsumption action to be driven by environmental and not financial reasons. Future research can also look at how observer-specific factors such as observers' concern for the environment can moderate the motives that one ascribes to anticonsumption.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

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APPENDIX A

STUDY 1: IMAGES BY CONDITION

Signal Condition



No Signal Condition



APPENDIX B

STUDY 2: MANIPULATIONS BY CONDITION

Control: Unbranded Repair

**Pat's Saturday Morning
Schedule**

8:30-9:00 Wake-up and exercise
 9:00-9:20 Shower and dress
 9:20-9:50 Walk dog.
 9:50-10:00 Prepare and eat
 breakfast.
 10:00-10:05 Wash dishes.
 10:05-10:20 Take trash out.
 10:20-10:30 Pay bills.
 10:30-11:00 Repair my old jacket.
 11:00-12:00 Shop and run
 errands.

Control: No Repair

**Pat's Saturday Morning
Schedule**

8:30-9:00 Wake-up and exercise
 9:00-9:20 Shower and dress
 9:20-9:50 Walk dog.
 9:50-10:00 Prepare and eat
 breakfast.
 10:00-10:05 Wash dishes.
 10:05-10:20 Take trash out.
 10:20-10:30 Pay bills.
 10:30-12:00 Shop and run
 errands.

Low Status

**Pat's Saturday Morning
Schedule**

8:30-9:00 Wake-up and exercise
 9:00-9:20 Shower and dress
 9:20-9:50 Walk dog.
 9:50-10:00 Prepare and eat
 breakfast.
 10:00-10:05 Wash dishes.
 10:05-10:20 Take trash out.
 10:20-10:30 Pay bills.
 10:30-11:00 Repair my old
 Walmart jacket.
 11:00-12:00 Shop and run
 errands.

High Status

**Pat's Saturday Morning
Schedule**

8:30-9:00 Wake-up and exercise
 9:00-9:20 Shower and dress
 9:20-9:50 Walk dog.
 9:50-10:00 Prepare and eat
 breakfast.
 10:00-10:05 Wash dishes.
 10:05-10:20 Take trash out.
 10:20-10:30 Pay bills.
 10:30-11:00 Repair my old Gucci
 jacket.
 11:00-12:00 Shop and run
 errands.

Green

**Pat's Saturday Morning
Schedule**

8:30-9:00 Wake-up and exercise
 9:00-9:20 Shower and dress
 9:20-9:50 Walk dog.
 9:50-10:00 Prepare and eat
 breakfast.
 10:00-10:05 Wash dishes.
 10:05-10:20 Take trash out.
 10:20-10:30 Pay bills.
 10:30-11:00 Repair my old
 Patagonia jacket.
 11:00-12:00 Shop and run
 errands.