Anti-Consumption Research: Exploring the Boundaries of Consumption

Michael S W Lee, The University of Auckland Business School, New Zealand

This paper describes evolution of the anti-consumption phenomenon from pre-historic times to modern counter-cultural ideology. Anti-consumption is then defined and the various topics that could be classified under anti-consumption research outlined. Two examples of anti-consumption behavior are discussed, the rejection of specific brands and of entire product categories. Finally, a newly developed initiative, ICAR is introduced. This paper in the special session provides a conceptual overview of anti-consumption and concludes by introducing two specific studies conducted by ICAR affiliates.

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
ANTI-CONSUMPTION: REJECTING, REFUSING, AND RESISTING THE MARKET.
Michael Shyue Wai Lee, Dept. of Marketing, The University of Auckland Business School
Karen Fernandez, Dept. of Marketing, The University of Auckland Business School

SPECIAL SESSION OVERVIEW
Anti-consumption refers to a continuum of responses that consumers have towards traditionally marketed products, ranging from non-consumption to active rejection. Increasing numbers of consumers reject specific brands or specific product categories; others refuse to purchase from specific retailers and/or multi-nationals; some even attempt to resist the market altogether. Although consumer researchers have begun to augment their traditional focus on acquisition with research on consumption and disposition, anti-consumption remains under-researched. The limited extant research on anti-consumption has already revealed nuanced insights into consumers’ responses to the market. For example, passive failure to consume has been distinguished from active choice to non-consumption (Gould, Houston and Mundt 1997), and non-choice has been differentiated from anti-choice (Hogg 1998). Other studies suggest that anti-consumption behaviors may be driven, at least in part, by a drive for authenticity (Kozinets 2002) or frugality (Lastovicka et al. 1999). The overarching objective of this session is to stimulate more research on anti-consumption. To that end, we establish the scope of the anti-consumption research domain, demonstrate its longevity as a phenomenon, and explore a unique example of extreme anti-consumption behavior in-depth.

ANTI-CONSUMPTION RESEARCH: EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES OF CONSUMPTION.
Michael S W Lee, University of Auckland Business School

The developed nations have become increasingly consumer driven—of this there is little doubt. Consumption, boosted during the post WWII economic boom, has now developed into an all encompassing way of life. Citizens of first world nations can be defined as consumers, while people of the third world are sold the dream of consumption. Every aspect of the former’s lives is directed towards the accumulation of possessions and hedonic experiences, while the latter strives to break free from ‘poverty’ and join the ranks of their more ‘fortunate’ cousins.

One could argue that this has always been the fate of human kind, a genetic urge to amass resources, attain status, and out-do the Jones’s. Now in the 21st millennia, instead of safer caves, bigger clubs, and warmer furs; we covet grander houses, faster cars, and trendier accessories. The transition from prehistory to present may appear significant; however the psychology underlying these behaviors is fundamentally the same. The only difference being that our human specific abilities, reason and foresight, finally have permitted our inclination towards laziness and greed? Over the last half century as mainstream consumption has sky rocketed, so have counter-cultural movements, first in the 1960’s and more recently in the last two decades. Some people have realised that while some possessions are useful to have, and perhaps even necessary to modern life, there is much more to being human than ceaseless acquisition.

Marketing has grown hand in hand with the consumption driven civilization in which we live. From ancient merchants and traders, to modern brand managers and multi-national companies, the objectives remain similar though the scope has escalated. More recently, in response to consumer demand, government policy, or perhaps even, true conscience, an increasing number of companies have begun to conduct their operations in a less than traditional manner. Now, the focus for some is no longer on ever increasing profit, productivity, and market dominance, but sustainability, work-life balance, and ethics.

In parallel, marketing academia has also followed a similar trend. Although the majority of past research (and indeed a large part of current research) focused on consumption, interest in anti-consumption has increased sporadically (Banister and Hogg 2004; Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). Anti-consumption is a vast area in scope; some fields of inquiry range from the mere expression of preference for one brand over another, to the intense distaste and rejection displayed by activists against multi-national companies and the globalisation that they represent (Zavestoski 2002). In effect, anti-consumption research is the study of why a person might have simply failed to consume, through to why they might have actively chosen not to consume (Gould, Houston, and Mundt 1997). Anti-consumption encompasses the inert and inpet set; choice and anti-choice (Hogg 1998). One example of contemporary anti-consumption research is the exploration of brand avoidance, which has highlighted the need for marketers to understand consumer’s negative behaviors and attitudes towards the brand, rather than simply focusing on the positive. Another anti-consumption area of great interest in Australasia and Europe, is the trepidation consumers have towards genetically modified products.

Nevertheless, anti-consumption remains an under-investigated domain when compared to its better studied counterpart ‘consumption’. As a strategic response to the growing desire from international academics to collaborate on anti-consumption related research, the International Centre for Anti-consumption Research (ICAR) was created in late 2005. ICAR comprises a network of marketing academics, practitioners, and social scientists from various universities. Members come from diverse yet complementary backgrounds and all share a common interest in anti-consumption. ICAR exists for two main purposes. The first is to investigate all aspects of anti-
consumption academically in order to understand the reasons underlying its existence. This involves the study of anti-consumption incidents, antecedents, consequences, and related phenomena. Second, though the knowledge gained could be used in some circumstances to assist practitioners in preventing or alleviating anti-consumption, our long term aspiration is to determine if a compromise is possible between the consumption driven society in which we live, and some of the legitimate philosophies behind anti-consumption. ICAR promotes the academic exploration of anti-consumption attitudes and behavior via a pluralistic approach and supports all research regardless of its relativistic or positivistic philosophical base, or its quantitative or qualitative focus.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE PARANOID TO SHOP HERE BUT BEING SCEPTICAL HELPS: EMPOWERED NEW ZEALAND CONSUMERS, PAST AND PRESENT?
Ian Brailsford, University of Auckland
Deidre Shaw, Glasgow Caledonian University

Reports of a growing consumer countercultural movement have been receiving increased attention both from academics (e.g., Holt, 2002; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Carducci, 2006) and the popular media (e.g., Klein, 2001; Schlosser, 2002). However, attempts to redistribute the power between consumer and supplier are not new. Rather than a contemporary phenomenon, examples of consumer empowerment can be found in the 18th century bread riots (Rudé, 1981) and the boycott of absentee landlords in the 1800’s (Brewer, 2003). As with contemporary consumer counterculture these acts of resistance occurred both as reactions to and within the extant market structure.

While much of counterculture is considered within an anti-consumption ideology, such as culture jamming (e.g., Rumbo, 2002; Carducci, 2006) and voluntary simplicity (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002), the ability of individuals to eschew the market and consumption are brought into question. Indeed, much of counterculture is incorporated into consumer culture. This can be witnessed through the growing markets for ‘green’ and ‘ethical’ products across Western countries. Indeed, anti-consumption organisation Adbusters has themselves launched a consumer product in the form of the Black Spot sneaker (Walker, 2003) and Etzioni (1998) pointed out that the practice of voluntary simplicity is one of living within consumer capitalism, not in complete opposition to it. Indeed, reports of growing consumer resistance and manifestations of power are often reported in terms of the growth in ethical markets (e.g., Doane, 2001; Williams, Taylor and Howard, 2005). Thus, while many in the anti-consumption movement view marketing and capitalism as part of the problem in over-consumption, many are using that very market system to find a solution. Shaw, Newholm and Dickinson (forthcoming) describe this as a consumer struggle for power in relation to the market where voice in the market through consumption votes was considered more powerful than traditional mechanisms including politics.

Reports of consumers seeking to engage and influence suppliers of products and services through their actions in the marketplace are well documented in marketing and consumer behaviour literature. Such acts of consumer resistance are mainly viewed and described in terms of ‘consumer empowerment’ (e.g., Rumbo, 2002; Carrigan, Szmigin and Wright, 2004; Shaw, Newholm and Dickinson, under review; Harrison, 2005). Increasingly viewed as a legitimate form of empowerment, consumer actions aimed at changing marketing and business behaviour can be manifested through, for example, boycotting and protesting against those suppliers deemed unethical and rewarding those displaying genuine ethical credentials through boycotting (e.g., Friedman, 1996). As we seek to understand this paradoxical relationship between countercultural consumers and their attempts to seek empowerment through marketplace actions, it is important to conceptualise consumer empowerment in a way that increases our understanding of the dynamics and complexities of consumer and market power relationships. Drawing on previous conceptions of power and empowerment a framework of consumer empowerment will be specified and examined in relation to resistant consumers past and present from Dunedin, New Zealand. This will enable an exploration of how contemporary conceptualisations of consumer empowerment have evolved historically. As consumer empowerment exists in relationship to market forces, we believe it is critical to understand how acts of consumer resistance have developed alongside market conditions in the same geographic area. This will allow the authors to speculate on how the current consumer empowerment phenomenon may develop in future.

EXPLORING THE SYMBOLIC UNIVERSE OF THE RAINBOW: A FRAMEWORK FOR DOING CONSUMER RESEARCH AT THE MARKET’S EDGE
Joseph Rumbo, James Madison University

This inquiry examines conceptual and methodological issues involved in designing and conducting research on a loosely affiliated social formation known as the Rainbow Family of Living Light. Its unofficial website says that the group “means different things to different people” and that it is “…into intentional community building, non-violence, and alternative lifestyles” (Rainbow Family, 2005). At a remote U.S. location during the first week of July, roughly 10,000 to 20,000 of its members convene annually at what is known as the Rainbow Gathering. At the Gathering members build harmonious communities dedicated to embracing difference, pursuing pleasure, and enhancing understanding of self and others human and non-human.

A review of the existing literature on consumer resistance finds its frameworks inadequate for explaining phenomena such as the Rainbow Family that exist “at the market’s edge.” This literature is hard-pressed to “…investigate the underlying motivations and processes whereby communities of various forms resist and attempt to distinguish them from markets” (Kozinets 2002, 23). At issue is the extent to which consumers can liberate themselves from the market. Accordingly, the core aim of this inquiry is to understand how Rainbow Family members interpret (or discursively frame) their practices, attitudes/beliefs, relationships, and selves with respect to the marketplace. However, much literature on consumer