

Towards an Understanding of Sources of Meaning in Sustainability

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Abstract

Characteristics of materialism and anti-consumption are examined in relation to the meanings of possession so as to define a stream of research that can lead to better theorisation on the promotion of sustainable levels of consumption. Anti-consumption is classified as 'anti-consumption by preference' and 'anti-consumption by rejection'. Where 'anti-consumption by preference' still requires consumers to engage in some level of materialism, 'anti-consumption by rejection' suggests moving away from possessions as sources of meaning. Eco-communities, where the number of individual possessions are limited through sharing, and values in relation to spirituality and environmentalism are praised, are suggested to be an understudied context within marketing which can help marketing with strategies to promote more sustainable levels of consumption and new product development.

Sustainability, eco-communities, anti-consumption, materialism

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Characteristics of materialism and anti-consumption are examined in relation to the meanings of possession so as to define a stream of research that can lead to better theorisation on the promotion of sustainable levels of consumption. Anti-consumption is classified as 'anti-consumption by preference' and 'anti-consumption by rejection'. Where 'anti-consumption by preference' still requires consumers to engage in some level of materialism, 'anti-consumption by rejection' suggests moving away from possessions as sources of meaning. Eco-communities, where the number of individual possessions are limited through sharing, and values in relation to spirituality and environmentalism are praised, are suggested to be an understudied context within marketing which can help marketing with strategies to promote more sustainable levels of consumption and new product development.

Introduction

Research on social values and cultural ethics highlights that within Western societies consumerism is not the only source of meaning for the consumer (Campbell, 2005). Studies indicate that in Western countries there is a growing trend towards 'post-materialism' (Inglehart, 1981), anti-consumerist (Zavestoski, 2002) and ecological values that may indicate that consumers are looking for a simplified lifestyle with lower consumption levels. Yet limited attention has been given to consumers who intentionally decrease the number of their possessions due to environmental and well-being concerns. Part of the reason for this could be the contradictions that reside in the term anti-consumption. Another reason could be the imperative to consume in industrialised economies in that very few are able *not* to consume. This paper provides an overview of the competing concepts of materialism and anti-consumption in an effort to find a way forward for research and also to consider the impact of meanings of possessions and not-possessing, particularly as this is relevant to sustainable consumption. The paper offers an organisation and summary of the various perspectives (table 1) and suggests that future research could focus on people who take significant steps to reduce their consumption. Eco-communities have been suggested to be a research context that has not been explored through marketing and has great potential to form a research context which will allow a detailed examination of sustainable sources of meaning. This kind of research focus could open up new ways for marketing to envision communications around possessions and sustainable living.

Meaning of Possessions

It is well established that material possessions are commonly viewed as an integral part of the extended self (Belk, 1988). Symbolic interactionism highlights the idea that material possessions not only have instrumental and functional value, but they have symbolic values that can express social power, or can be used as means of self-expression (Solomon, 1983). Moreover the expressive qualities of possessions are multiple and diverse. Material possessions can also "express cultural categories and principals, cultivate ideas, create and sustain lifestyles, construct notions of self, and create (and survive) social change" (McCracken, 1990, p.11), help express identity and sustain a self-concept, and symbolize the social role one must undertake, and stand as status markers (Belk, 1988). However, even though the symbolic value of material possessions serves such a variety of purposes, research on alternative sources of meaning is limited. This paper aims to highlight how sustainable

levels of consumption could be promoted based on the combined interest of research on anti-consumption and materialism in the symbolic meaning of possessions.

Materialism

Materialism focuses on the centrality of possessions for the consumer, thus analysing the meanings of possessions. The two most widely acknowledged understandings of materialism are provided by Belk (1984) and Richins and Dawson (1992). Whilst Belk (1984) has proposed materialism to be a behavioural trait, Richins and Dawson (1992) suggest it is a value orientation. Based on Belk's earlier work, Ger and Belk (1996) suggest that materialistic consumers carry four behavioural characteristics: possessiveness; non-generosity; envy; and preservation. They conclude that a materialistic person would be interested in controlling and exerting power over their belongings, which they would be unwilling to share and they would have negative attitudes towards others who had things that they desired. Finally, materialists would not feel content solely with experiences, but would need to acquire material signifiers of those experiences. Richins and Dawson (1992) on the other hand, conceptualized materialism as a set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life. They suggest that materialistic individuals have three sets of central values: the importance they attach to the acquisition of material possessions as sources of meaning; the ability of material possessions to create happiness; and material possessions being the sole representation of success and well-being in one's life.

Even though materialism has been portrayed as a negative character trait and value orientation, research justifies some level of materialism by distinguishing between two types of materialism. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) differentiate between 'terminal' and 'instrumental materialism'. For them *instrumental materialism* occurs when the individual values the acquisition of material possession in order to achieve another end goal that is independent from the functional value of the material possession, for example buying clothes for protection from weather extremes without regard to fashion. In contrast, *terminal materialism* is a result of material acquisitions being the end goal. This is a similar understanding of materialism as Richins and Dawson (1992) where material possessions hold central importance for meaning and happiness in the consumer's life, such as outfit to show off a prestigious brand name that links the consumer to a favourite leisure pursuit. This connects to Richins' (1994) further difference between the public and private meanings of possessions. She asserted that materialistic individuals value the public meaning of possessions over their private meaning due to the social symbolic value that possessions can display including status and power. Here an example could be a consumer purchasing expensive clothing to wear to work where a brand could represent social and employment status. Csikszentmihalyi concurs with this view and highlighted this characteristic of materialism by suggesting that;

a materialist is a person whose psychic energy is disproportionately invested in things and their symbolic derivatives—wealth, status, and power based on possessions—and therefore whose life consists mainly of experiences with the material dimension of life. (2004, p.92).

In other words he suggests that materialists source meaning through the symbolic value of possessions at the expense of their attachment and devotion to experiential aspects of life. In addition, materialism limited responses to the values of equality, peace and justice (Kilbourne

and Pickett, 2008). Importantly, this negativity has also been noted as extending to environmental concern and environmentally responsible behaviour (Kilbourne and Pickett, 2008).

It would therefore seem that material possessions have a broad diversity of meanings. Furthermore, for some consumers, concern with the meanings of possessions brings them to sacrifice some experiential aspects of their lives. Also, if the link between sustainability and material accumulation is negative, then how can we move forward to find alternative sustainable ways of consuming? Will it still be possible to find some solace in possessions? Or will marketing need to find strategies to shift consumers' attachment to possessions? Are there other sources of meaning that do not rely on the consumption of possessions that are more sustainable? Finally, how can marketing managers utilize this knowledge for new product development or strategies to target consumers who are lowering their levels of consumption? An examination of the literature on anti-consumption would be a good starting point (see table 1) as a comparison to materialism.

Anti-consumption

Based on consumer responses to consumerism and consumption, anti-consumption has been used in two different ways within the marketing literature: anti-consumption by preference and; anti-consumption by rejection. Zavestoski has suggested that anti-consumption is a "function of a preference to consume one object over another" (2002, p.121). This understanding suggests that anti-consumption paradoxically needs some form of 'consumption' to be realized; the consumption of the preferred object. Shopping at second-hand shops has been identified as a form of anti-consumption by preference (Binay and Brace-Govan, 2008). However, anti-consumption can also be "a resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment or rejection of, consumption more generally" (Zavestoski, 2002, p.121). Thus anti-consumption has also been used to describe an act of *not consuming*, leading to the suggestion that anti-consumption occurs when the consumer 'fails to consume' (Gould, Houston and Mundt, 1997). Both these views have been helpful in guiding research to date but given that they in effect contradict each other, it will be useful to identify how these can be separated by examining how they have been utilised in extant research .

The Paradox of Consuming for Anti-consumption

Understanding *anti-consumption as a preference* has helped uncover various motivations for the consumer to replace their consumption of one particular object with another. Some studies that use the preference understanding of anti-consumption have looked at symbolic brand rejection through the relationship between anti-choice and self-concept (Hogg and Mitchell, 1997). Others have examined anti-branding, through a study of the countercultural customer resistance movement and consumer boycotts (Holt, 2002). Also, politically motivated brand rejection, was explored through the rejection of Coca Cola in Turkey by nationalistic consumers (Sandikci and Ekici, 2009).

An understanding of 'anti-consumption as preference' relies on the postmodern assumption of objects carrying symbolic meaning that plays a significant role in shaping the consumer's understanding of who they are and how they can express themselves (Solomon 1983). Therefore 'anti-consumption as preference' is still a form of consumption that utilizes the symbolic meaning of possessions. For example, shopping second hand in order to present as

environmentally friendly continues to rely on the symbolic and public values of second hand clothing. Thus anti-consumption by preference is a type of consumer behaviour that is reminiscent of several theories of materialism where the public worth of possessions can still be valued for their terminal materiality and their social symbolic value. This is particularly true if the consumer is solely relying on preferred material possessions' meanings for well-being and happiness. Kozinets and Handelman suggest that consumer boycotts create an opportunity for consumers to "consume in ways that express their social values" (1998, p. 483). Where possessions are still needed in order to create and express meaningful social values. Kozinets's (2002) study of the Burning Man Festival further emphasizes the materialism of anti-consumption by preference. Although the Burning Man Festival celebrated anti-commercialism, freedom from the 'enslavement' of consumer culture was paradoxically dependent on the participants' consumption and understanding of the symbolic value of material goods acquired through this very consumerist market.

Moving away from consumption

Whilst anti-consumption as preference is about the choice *not* made (Zavestoski, 2002), *anti-consumption as rejection* of consumption focuses on the choice that we would argue is at the core of the intention of anti-consumption; the choice of 'not consuming'. However, the lack of material traces of anti-consumption as rejection has resulted in the generation of very limited research of this mode of anti-consumption, clearly because it is remarkably difficult to research what is absent. Nevertheless 'the craft consumer' introduced by Campbell (2005) and voluntary simplifiers (Elgin, 1981) are exemplars of anti-consumption as rejection.

Campbell (2005) introduces the concept of craft consumers, as consumers with a clear understanding of their self-concept where they are both the producers and consumers of their possessions. In a similar vein Cherrier uses the concept of creative consumer where "the goal of creative consumption is to favour human expression at its most fundamental level: it is consuming to *be* rather than to *display having*." (2009, p.8). What both these consumer types have in common is that they do not solely utilize the public value of possessions. Yet one could argue that consumption of possessions is still a source of meaning even if these consumers were defined as instrumentally materialistic.

Voluntary simplification, on the other hand, requires an understanding that possessions are insufficient to lead a meaningful life (Elgin, 1981). Voluntary simplifiers agree to consume less than the prevailing social norm, thus sacrifice the utilization of meanings that reside in consumerist consumption and invest their psychic energy elsewhere for example in interpersonal relationships, or spirituality and other pro-environmental behaviours. Arguably voluntary simplifiers are exemplars of post-materialism and are anti-consumers by rejection. However, research shows variations in voluntary simplification as some consumers 'simplify' more than others based on their subjective belief systems suggesting that some voluntary simplifiers still utilize the meaning of possessions (Cherrier and Murray, 2007).

Overall then, it would seem that there is still much confusion over who is consuming and who is not consuming and the extent to which possessions might play a role in defining these attitudes and behaviours. This effort to organise several factors in the overlap between materialism and anti-consumption and to identify key sources of definitions is presented in table 1 where issues for further research are linked with the concepts that have been discussed in relation to anti-consumption and materialism. However the question remains as to how

best to investigate the processes and meanings that reside in not possessing. A living space where the residents deliberately engage with anti-consumption is the eco-community and this would provide an excellent location for in-depth research of the issues in table 1.

Future Research: The Case of Sustainable Communities

Eco-communities are a form of intentional community where a group of like-minded people have decided to live communally due to their concerns about the impact of individualistic and materialist lifestyles on the environment. They strive to be self-sufficient in terms of food and energy production and focus on sharing (Fellowship of intentional communities). Community life and sharing possessions limit personal possessions and include communal decision making around the use of land. This helps to stop the support of unsustainable farming practices leading to the prevention of loss of soil and agricultural land (Christian, 2003). We suggest that an exploratory study on the meanings of sharing, spirituality and environmentalism for members of intentional communities would be a first step towards understanding better the processes and meaning around anti-consumption by rejection.

Conclusion

It has been identified that material possessions have symbolic value that consumers utilise for a wide range of purposes; from creating and communicating notions of self to expressing their self-concept. Yet it has been observed that research to date on materialism and anti-consumption does not allow for sufficient explanation on how venues of life such as interpersonal relationships, spirituality and environmentalism that depend on the meanings of not-possessing, are utilised as sources of meaning. Considering the growing interest in environmentalism marketing managers will benefit from understanding how consumers' views about their possessions are, in relation to their sustainable lifestyles which can assist with new product strategies. Moreover, sustainable strategies that promote sustainable living will benefit too.

Table 1 Key Concepts for Possessions

	Example from literature	Issues for further consideration
Materialism		
Instrumental materialism	Private value	Private value of non-possessing?
Terminal materialism	Public value ↓	Public value of non-possessing?
Anti-consumption		
Anti-consumption by preference	Consumer boycotts, Burning Man festival	Materialist anti-consumers?
Anti-consumption by rejection	Craft consumer, Voluntary simplifiers, eco-communities	Sharing, consumer spirituality, sacrifice

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