

7. Anti-consumption

Definition of the Term

The initial definition of anti-consumption “resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment or rejection of consumption more generally” (Zavestoski, 2002, p. 121) goes back to Zavestoski and is still being used. Put very simply, the term means against consumption (Lee, 2022). However, the concept includes a variety of different phenomena, ranging from simply preferring one brand over another and therefore choosing products and services of that brand and intentionally not from the other to a more radical rejection of consumption in general (Lee, 2022). More specifically, anti-consumption can be directed toward a specific brand (e.g., anti-consumption; Thompson & Arsel, 2004), behavior and product categories (e.g., anti-alcohol; Piacentini & Banister, 2009), and/or consumer culture altogether (e.g., minimalism; Wilson & Bellezza, 2022). Importantly, the concept of anti-consumption does not only cover behavior such as boycotting a specific brand, but it also includes attitudes (e.g., not even considering a certain brand for a consumption choice; Lee, 2022). Furthermore, anti-consumption doesn't only apply to the level of consumer behavior, it can rather occur on all the different market levels (micro, meso, and macro level), meaning that businesses or even governments can follow an anti-consumption ideology (Lee, 2022).

While in many cases the underlying driver of anti-consumption is environmental consciousness or conscientiousness in general, the concept is not limited to pro-social movements (Black, 2010). Rather, the research around anti-consumption focuses on reasons against consumption, such as consumers' reasons for avoiding a product or brand (e.g., Thompson & Arsel, 2004).

Because of the increased importance of the concept of anti-consumption and the likewise increased interest of scholars around the world in this phenomenon, the International Center for Anti-consumption Research (ICAR) was established in 2005 and is hosted by The University of Auckland Business School in New Zealand. The ICAR aims to provide a network for academics and practitioners interested in the topic of anti-consumption. The ICAR consists of more than 50 affiliates,

with diverse yet complementary backgrounds which are spread across 14 countries. In June 2006, the ICAR held its first symposium at The University of Auckland Business School in New Zealand and is continuing and growing since.

Key Findings and Insights

There is a large number of studies on anti-consumption and the variety of contexts in which the phenomenon occurs, and the concept has been studied. While early studies had mainly focused on studying the reasons against consumption, the question arose of whether anti-consumption is distinctive enough from similarly used terms such as ethical consumption, environmental consumption, or consumer resistance (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013).

Therefore, Chatzidakis and Lee (2013) outlined that most studies investigating ethical and environmental consumption focus on buying eco-friendly products (green consumption) rather than not buying products that are environmentally polluting. Studies looking at the more radical way of reducing consumption altogether (anti-consumption) for environmental reasons (green activism) therefore add additional insights to ethical and environmental research.

Lee et al. (2009a) on the other hand argue that the distinctive characteristic of anti-consumption compared with consumer resistance is that resistance can sometimes be expressed through consumption rather than against. This would be the case for open-source software communities for example, where the movement is expressed through more consumption of the good.

Apart from research distinguishing anti-consumption from other similar concepts, literature to date distinguishes different types of anti-consumers (Iyer & Muncy, 2009), which differ in two dimensions: (1) the object of anti-consumption which can either be general (all consumption) or specific (individual brands or products), and (2) the purpose of anti-consumption which is either societal or personal concerns. This differentiation by two dimensions leads to a two-by-two matrix with four distinguishable types of anti-consumers:

1. *General–Societal: Global impact consumers*: These consumers are interested

in reducing the level of consumption in general to benefit society or the planet. The most common drivers are environmental concerns and material inequity.

2. *General–Personal: Simplifiers*: By buying only what is really needed, this group of anti-consumers aims to live a happier life. They are convinced that the consumption culture of today resulting in always wanting more, leads to negative outcomes such as stress and distinction of higher meaning.
3. *Brand–Societal: Market activists*: This type of anti-consumer tries to impact societal issues with their behavior. They might avoid using a product or brand because they are convinced that it causes a specific societal problem (e.g., Nike because it uses child labor). The activism of this type of anti-consumer can be directed toward products from certain conglomerates (e.g., Phillip Morris) or urging consumers to refrain from potentially harmful activities (e.g., smoking cigarettes).
4. *Brand–Personal: Anti-loyal consumers*: These consumers follow the opposite approach to brand loyalty where they commit to avoid purchasing a product because of sensing inferiority or a negative experience with it.

Outlook

So far, research about anti-consumption has mainly focused on the drivers and motivation as well as antecedents and consequences of anti-consumption (e.g., Hoffmann et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2009b). However, research lacks insights into how these anti-consumption practices develop over time. Since anti-consumption practices are not constant it would be insightful to know more about their peaks and valleys over time (Lee, 2022). Furthermore, especially in the early stages, the focus was on qualitative approaches and most researchers were interested in the “why” and the “how” of anti-consumption. Research to date, however, lacks objectively measured outcomes of anti-consumption. Future research directions could for example look at actual sales data or stock market valuation of brands affected by anti-consumption.

JULIA GISLER

Key Reference

Zavestoski, S. (2002). Guest editorial: Anticonsumption attitudes. *Psychology & Marketing*, 19(2), 121–126.

Related Terms

Ethical consumption
Mass consumption
Materialism
Minimalism

Other References/Further Recommended Literature

- Black, I. (2010). Sustainability through anti-consumption. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 9(6), 403–411. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.340>
- Chatzidakis, A., & Lee, M. S. (2013). Anti-consumption as the study of reasons against. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 33(3), 190–203. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146712462892>
- Hoffmann, S., Balderjahn, I., Seegebarth, B., Mai, R., & Peyer, M. (2018). Under which conditions are consumers ready to boycott or buycott? The roles of hedonism and simplicity. *Ecological Economics*, 147, 167–178.
- International Centre for Anti-Consumption Research (ICAR). (n.d.) retrieved from <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/business/our-research/research-groups/international-centre-anti-consumption-research.html>
- Iyer, R., & Muncy, J. A. (2009). Purpose and object of anti-consumption. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(2), 160–168. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2008.01.023>
- Kozinets, R. V. (2002). Can consumers escape the market? Emancipatory illuminations from burning man. *Journal of Consumer research*, 29(1), 20–38.
- Kozinets, R. V., & Handelman, J. M. (2004). Adversaries of consumption: Consumer movements, activism, and ideology. *Journal of consumer research*, 31(3), 691–704.
- Lee, M. S. (2022). Anti-consumption research: A foundational and contemporary overview. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 45, 101319. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101319>
- Lee, M. S., Fernandez, K. V., & Hyman, M. R. (2009a). Anti-consumption: An overview and research agenda. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(2), 145–147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2008.01.021>
- Lee, M. S., Motion, J., & Conroy, D. (2009b). Anti-consumption and brand avoidance. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(2), 169–180. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2008.01.024>
- Lee, M. S., Ortega Egea, J. M., & Garcia de Frutos, N. (2020). Anti-consumption beyond

- boundaries: From niche topic to global phenomena. *Psychology & Marketing*, 37(2), 171–176. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21330>
- Piacentini, M. G., & Banister, E. N. (2009). Managing anti-consumption in an excessive drinking culture. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(2), 279–288. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2008.01.035>
- Thompson, C. J., & Arsel, Z. (2004). The Starbucks brandscape and consumers' (anticorporate) experiences of glocalization. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(3), 631–642. <https://doi.org/10.1086/425098>
- Varman, R., & Belk, R. W. (2009). Nationalism and ideology in an anticonsumption movement. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36(4), 686–700. <https://doi.org/10.1086/600486>
- Wilson, A. V., & Bellezza, S. (2022). Consumer minimalism. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 48(5), 796–816. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucab038>