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"I regularly weigh up just getting rid of Facebook": exploring restriction as a form of anti-consumption

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Recent years have witnessed increased interest in anti-consumption with various conference and journal special issues devoted to clarifying our understanding of the concept (Lee et al. 2011; Lee et al., 2013). This body of research reveals that anti-consumption is manifested in a variety of ways, some more extreme than others. Lee et al. (2011) identify three non-exclusive types of anti-consumption: reject, restrict and reclaim. A review of relevant literature reveals theoretical advancements in relation to rejection and reclamation, but restriction has received significantly less attention. To address this imbalance, this paper aims to gain a deeper understanding of restriction as a form of anti-consumption. The context for our study is Facebook. Social networking sites have been shown to facilitate anti-consumption (Hutter and Hoffman, 2013), but research has yet to investigate anti-consumption of social networking sites themselves.

The contribution of our paper is twofold. First, we demonstrate that restriction may be more wide-ranging than currently acknowledged and we illustrate how restriction enables consumers to negotiate tensions between their anti-consumptive discourses and their decision to continue to consume. Second, while previous research favours more extreme examples of anti-consumption such as dumpster diving (Fernandez, Brittain and Bennett, 2011), Freeganism (Pentina and Amos, 2011) and boycotting (Friedman, 1999), we contribute by demonstrating how anti-consumption develops within mundane, daily practices.

Ubiquitous Facebook. Mundane consumption can be considered as "consumer behaviour which occurs in situations that the consumer perceives [as] neither extraordinary nor dramatic and which are often characterised by routine" (Holttinen, 2014:3). Such consumption though unremarkable and everyday has nevertheless been theorised to be particular insightful across a range of consumer culture issue including: consumer identity (Klein et al., 1993), subcultural belonging (Cronin et al, 2014) and display of cultural ideals (Holttinen, 2014). User statistics reveal that social networking sites have become particularly embedded within the mundanity of everyday consumer culture. Ulver-Sneistrup et al (2011) suggest that exploration of mundanity allows more subtle understandings to emerge. To date there are 1.4 billion Facebook users worldwide with American users spending on average 37 minutes each day on the site (Business Insider, 2014). Miller (2011) argues that as a form of mundane consumption the consequences of Facebook are particularly far-reaching both in terms of consumer identity ("On Facebook, you find out who you are" (179) and the "expansion and transformation of social relations" (204). Miller (1998:12) argues that researchers should pay more attention to the mundane and every day since these practices are the essential components of consumer experience and if such activities "matter to them [they] should matter to us". Such references to the pervasiveness and influence of mundane consumption such as Facebook may however conceal the contested relationship between consumers and everyday consumption and mask their anti-consumption practices

Technology consumption has often been typified as dichotomous with consumers loving or loathing technology (Kozinets, 2008; Borgmann, 2000). Recent studies however have begun to consider that this oppositional approach conceals a greater complexity of emotions and interaction. Laing, Newholm and Hogg's (2009) study of online health-based forums

consider the mix of anxiety, ambiguity and alienation experienced by users and members of these communities. Mick and Fournier (1998) suggest that in these negative and uncertain situations consumers employ coping strategies, some of which have anti-consumption characteristics, such as avoidance and distancing. These strategies allow consumers to negotiate their feelings of dislike, resistance and resentment (Zavestoski, 2002). Within our research, we witnessed similar instances of complex and coexistent emotions specifically in relation to Facebook. Because of Facebook's ubiquity consumers considered avoidance impossible and so employed various forms of consumption restriction beyond distancing. The following section situates restriction within the broader framework of anti-consumption.

Conceptualizing Anti-Consumption. Broadly anti-consumption can be understood as a means against consumption (Zavestoski, 2002; Lee et al., 2009) which can manifest itself as both an attitude and an activity or behaviour (Cherrier, 2009; Hogg et al., 2009). Anti-consumption can be oriented at the macro level and include discourses of dislike and acts of opposition to consumption in general or at the micro level where it is directed to particular consumption activities, products or brands (Cherrier, Black and Lee, 2011; Craig-Lees, 2006). This distinction is present within Iyer and Muncy's (2009) typology of anti-consumption which distinguishes between 'general' (against all consumption) and 'specific' (individual brands and products) as the objects of anti-consumption, and 'societal concerns' and 'personal concerns' as the purpose of anti-consumption. According to Cherrier, Black and Lee (2011) self-interested and socio-environmental concerns relate to a consumer's subjectivity and their desire of self-expression. This perspective is particularly relevant to social networking sites which do not correspond to any grand narrative of anti-consumption. Instead, anti-consumption of social networking sites reflects greater consumer subjectivity and personal choice. As such, considering consumer's anti-consumption from the micro lens allows us to consider individual choice. Contributing to this perspective, Cherrier, Black and Lee (2011) introduce the concept of intentional non-consumption. This can be understood as both an act of resistance against other careless consumers and anti-consumption positioned by the consumer's own subjectivity.

Lee et al. (2011) categorise anti-consumption into three types; *reject, restrict* and *reclaim*. These three phenomena are non-exclusive and can overlap within consumption practices. Rejection occurs when consumers intentionally avoid or exclude certain products from their consumption habits. The concept of rejection has amassed much research from boycotting behaviours to brand avoidance (see Lee et al., 2009; Friedman, 1999). In comparison to more visible displays of anti-consumption, rejection has been described as passive because it "involves products not purchased; services not accessed; and brands not chosen" (Hogg et al., 2009:156). In relation to symbolic anti-consumption, Hogg et al. (2009) found aversion as an affective element would precede the behaviours of avoidance and abandonment. Iyer and Muncy's (2009) typology of anti-consumers focuses upon rejection, such as rejection of brands perceived as contributing to societal or environmental problems.

Reclaiming consumption occurs at the ideological level where consumers through their practices actively alter the normal consumption cycle of acquisition, use and disposal, for example by growing their own produce or upcycling products. Hunter and Hoffmann (2013: 219) offer a recent example in their investigation of carrotmobbers, who reward pro-environmental behaviour and "reclaim social and ecological responsibility from companies instead of rejecting or restricting their own consumption patterns."

Finally restricting consumption can occur when consumers reduce or lower their consumption of certain products. According to Lee et al. (2011) the reduction of certain consumption acts occurs when full reject is not possible, such as consuming utility services.

However, in comparison with rejection and reclamation, restriction has been less well researched. We argue that there is a need to better deconstruct the concept of restriction.

Importantly, Lee et al. (2011) claim anti-consumption (acts of rejection, restriction, reclamation) can overlap with consumer resistance (opposing an organisation's products, practices and partnerships). Resistance to consumption (particular or general) can be understood as an active manifestation of anti-consumption (Garcia-Bardida, Nau and Rémy, 2011). Consumer resistance is distinguished from other anti-consumption elements by opposition against the power of institutions (Price and Penaloza, 1993). It has been suggested that anti-consumption attends to consumption issues whereas consumer resistance focuses upon power issues (Lee et al., 2011). As such, the blending space between anti-consumption and consumer resistance opens up the opportunity to explore consumer's consumption acts and discourses which are shaped by multiple, yet distinct consumption and power concerns. Supported by Cherrier, Black and Lee (2011) who propose the intersection of consumer resistance and anti-consumption provides greater understanding to empirical phenomenon.

Methods. The findings within this paper form part of a larger project concerning the consumption of social networking sites, specifically Facebook. Anti-consumption discourses and behaviours appeared as an emergent theme. This research was informed by interpretivism and used ethnographic interviews of 15 participants (aged 19-26). This demographic was selected as they are amongst the heaviest users of social technology and have grown-up using it since the mid-1990s (Ellison et al., 2011). As the findings emerged from a larger project participants were not selected based on their anti-consumption behaviours.

This located conversational approach to interviewing allows the researcher to gain richer understanding of consumer experiences (Sherman Heyl, 2008; Holt, 1997). Due to the mobile nature of social networking site consumption interviews were conducted in participants' homes, public places, restaurants and cafes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. To prompt reflection upon their consumption practices participants were ask to display their own social networking pages (e.g. Facebook Timeline) using a laptop, tablet or smartphone device. These pages were used as an elicitation method following Heisley and Levy's (1991) account of 'autodriving' which can stimulate underlying responses and helps participants convey richer meaning. Following interview guidelines from Holt (1997) participants were encouraged to give rich descriptions of their consumption practices by recalling previous uses of social networking sites, share stories about experiences. This approach allowed participants to think deeply about their consumption practices and how it affected their lives.

The data was analysed using Stern's (1996) guidelines for deconstructive analysis. This method focuses upon revealing contradictions within texts (Derrida, 1982). As such, it was particularly useful for pulling-apart the paradoxical and dichotomous assumptions which were previously imposed upon technology consumption. A close reading of each text was undertaken followed by a structuralist reading to expose recurring patterns. Finally, deconstructive stage sought multiple meanings within participants complex narratives. This used Derrida's conceptualisation of *différance* which focuses on revealing plurality and acknowledging contradictions (Stern, 1996). As such, reading for *différance* allowed the multiple meanings of anti-consumption to surface and be explored.

Findings. Findings begin by exploring the mixed emotions our respondents exhibited towards Facebook consumption and then discuss the forms of restriction they employed.
Consuming Facebook: Love/Hate. For all participants, the consumption of Facebook was revealed as central to everyday life so much so that it becomes "daily routine" and "second nature", characteristics of mundane consumption (Gronow and Warde, 2001). This is

demonstrated by Kate, a 24 year old student, who did not consider herself a heavy user but admitted checking Facebook throughout the day:

> Kate: *I check it a lot every day. I think it is becoming a bit of a habit, whenever I'm bored or if I haven't been on it for a couple of hours. I will check mine multiple times a day. It is hard to put a number on it. Like at least 20 times as day. If not every hour then every couple of hours..... I generally try to have read everything on the newsfeed. So I will go down until I think I have seen that before and then I stop.*

Other participants made similar comments in relation to regular daily checking of the site. The ability to connect with friends, keep up-to-date with social happenings and centralise communication in groups were viewed as the main drivers for continued consumption. These hourly, daily, weekly routines are means of consumers negotiating and enacting group belonging through their practices (Cronin et al., 2014).

However, alongside discussion on the perceived communication and social benefits of Facebook, participants would simultaneously comment on how much they disliked their behaviour, variously referred to as "tragic", "sad" or "horrible." The mixed feelings towards technology that were evident in Mick and Fournier's (1998) research are therefore equally relevant within the social networking era. Although many of our participants questioned their consumption behaviour, none of them had ever deleted Facebook or fully rejected it. Jack, a 23 year old student, came the closest to deleting his profile, however he remained active on Facebook from 9am to 5pm most days.

> Jack: *I regularly weigh up just to get rid of Facebook. [...] I hate how I use it. [...] I have such a disdain for it that I wonder why I am even on it. [...] If you choose not to exist on Facebook, everyone always says "Aw but you can't communicate with other people!" But yes you can. It is not that hard. And I find that I have actually a great deal of respect for the people who do [delete Facebook].*

While it is possible to reject Facebook, for Jack he chose to participate despite his antipathy for Facebook consumption. Along with other participants, Facebook consumption had become so mundane and embedded within daily lives they would not consider deleting it however strong their negative affective response. It stresses the importance of consumer subjectivity within anti-consumption (Cherrier, Black and Lee, 2011) as consumers choose their own position along the consumption to anti-consumption continuum. Our findings therefore support the idea that Facebook is a form of normative consumer behaviour. Much like Cherrier and Gurrieri's (2012) study of alcohol abstinence, we suggest that cultural barriers prevent total Facebook rejection. As a compromise, our participants engaged in various restrictions which we now discuss.

Restricting Facebook Consumption. We recognise that instances of anti-consumption are not always driven by motivations that are against consumption (Chatzidakis and Lee, 2013). Within our data we found examples of restricted Facebook consumption explained in terms of age (those who used Facebook less as they got older) or substitution (participants who had switched to alternative social networking sites). However, here we focus specifically on participants who translated their dislike of Facebook consumption into actively restricting how they use the site.

Self-imposed Barriers: Reducing and Replacing. Our findings reveal that participants used a variety of self-imposed barriers to facilitate the restriction of Facebook consumption. Having been a heavy user of Facebook in the past, Wendy replaced her morning routine of checking Facebook before getting out of bed with checking news websites.

> Wendy: *I actually downloaded SkyNews as an app so I have something more productive in the morning. So now I have started looking at the news to save me going on Facebook... I'm trying to go on other things like SkyNews and Groupon to see if*

there are any offers on! And then I'm like "Oh 10 minutes up I need to get out of bed can't check Facebook!"

Wendy also actively restricted her Facebook consumption by putting her phone on silent until she arrived home from work. It is important to note Wendy is not rejecting Facebook as she uses the site every evening to check notifications and communicate with friends. Instead she restricts her consumption and replaces Facebook with other "more productive" media sites. A further example of a self-imposed barrier was given by Megan, a 23 year old amateur dramatics co-ordinator, who actively restricted her Facebook consumption by not buying an internet enabled phone. Instead Megan would continue her Facebook consumption by visiting the site each night on her laptop. Like Wendy, Megan has created a practical strategy which allows her to limit the amount of time spent of Facebook whilst continuing to consume Facebook in a restricted fashion. In earlier research Mick and Fournier (1998) termed similar behaviours 'coping strategies' where consumers would create practices in order to mediate their paradoxical feelings towards technology consumption. However, the strategies devised by Facebook consumers should not be understood as affective coping strategies, but instead should be viewed for their practical utility at the functional level.

Social restrictions: Deleting and Withholding. Our findings also revealed instances of restriction when participants would limit their online visibility in order to regain control over their projected selves. This relates to the concept of intentional anti-consumption where acts against consumption are directed towards other 'careless' consumers (Cherrier, Black and Lee, 2011). Participants viewed 'over-posting' as 'careless' and disliked behaviour. In response to such behaviour, participants would delete friends, erase comments and 'de-tagg' themselves from photographs in order to reduce the amount of information other 'friend' connections could see:

> Kate: *I have often thought I need to clear out some friends. A few weeks ago I did actually delete a few people. I was just like "I don't really know you that well". I don't speak to you. There's no need for you to…It is more about me not wanting them to see what is going on in my life. […] Like there is the odd horrible picture that crops up and you think oh my God why did someone feel the need to put this up? I have seen me untagg from pictures that I really don't want people to see.*

For Kate, reducing the amount of people who can see information regarding her personal life, and restricting what information gets posted on Facebook allows her a degree of control over her identity. Other participants admitted withholding their birth date from Facebook to stop annual congratulations, and posting profile pictures late at night to avoid catching the attention of other users. As such, this type of restrictive behaviour allows consumers to minimize their presence and reduce their online footprint.

Interestingly, other participants actively restricted what they shared online, thereby going against the cultural norm (Cherrier and Gurrieri, 2012) associated with Facebook. This is demonstrated by Jack who decided not to post his degree results on Facebook:

> *Researcher: Did you put your exam results up?*
> *Jack: No. But yet again that is me just being…yet again I've been doubly devious about it because by not engaging in that I am critiquing that. I am above it apparently. But I mean I see what everyone is doing because I am on Facebook. So I am essentially looking and not telling. You could argue which one is worse. I'm not sure. […] But in reality I am still looking at it all. I am still part of the circle so I really don't have any right to that criticism. So perhaps it should be either do it and engage with it or don't do it and don't engage. […] I am a hypocrite.*

As expressed earlier, Jack considered deactivating his Facebook account, but chose not to discontinue his heavy use of the site. For Jack, limiting his actual participation on Facebook

(posting, commenting, and uploading) allows him to anti-consume whilst still checking it daily, even if he remains unsettled by his consumption behaviour (*I am a hypocrite*).

Withholding behaviour provides us with a nuanced form of restrictive anti-consumption which limits the expansion of social relations, deemed as central to Facebook.

<u>Institutional Restriction: Concealing and Disguising.</u> Findings reveal that another driver of restriction is against the commercial forces of Facebook and other data collecting corporations, indicative of the blending between anti-consumption and resistance suggested by Lee et al (2011). Some participants believed their Facebook profiles were viewed by corporations as "marketing data". These concerns had prompted them to restrict and conceal the majority of their personal information from Facebook:

Martin: *Yeah mine is completely locked down. The threat nowadays is probably more relevant to what it has been in the past. [...] That is one of the kind of flaws that not everyone understands how open their information is... They think that we live in this kind of small world and only their friends can see it. Folk can abuse it and they do.*

Jack: *I don't have where I work. I don't have my current city. I don't like...that is maybe a minor quibble. I don't like that Facebook knows things about me.*

Many participants shared similar concerns about how companies could manipulate their personal information. Some had even considered adopting pseudonyms to protect their identity from corporations, an adaptation they believed would enable them to continue using the site whilst simultaneously consuming against wider forces. Such restrictions could be viewed as resistant and efforts to reduce the power of institutions (Price and Penaloza, 1993).

Conclusions. Although it is recognised that anti-consumption can be classified in multiple ways (Lee et al., 2011), understanding of restriction as a form of anti-consumption remains limited. Lee et al. (2011) suggest that restriction involves "cutting, lowering and limiting consumption when complete anti-consumption is not possible." This definition therefore implies that restriction is a compromised form of anti-consumption that is only enacted if a more extreme manifestation is unachievable. Our findings suggest that motivations driving restriction are not always as straightforward as this definition implies. While Facebook can be considered as a form of mundane consumption (Holttinen, 2014) it remains a context within which "complete anti-consumption" is possible. If so desired, consumers could completely reject Facebook. Although it is embedded within our participants' daily lives, they do not depend on its consumption to survive and in this respect it is far removed from the examples of "restricting electricity and water use" offered by Lee et al. (2011). Rather it is the affective and cultural aspects of mundane consumption (Cronin et al., 2014) which act as barriers (Cherrier and Gurrieri, 2012) to total Facebook rejection such that rejecting Facebook completely would be a personal, social and cultural sacrifice. Hunter and Hoffman (2013) concluded that an unwillingness to make sacrifices often discourages engagement in pro-environmental behaviour. We suggest that avoidance of sacrifice is not solely limited to the ecological context but may also be applicable to other forms of anti-consumption.

Exploring mundane consumption allows a more nuanced insight (Ulver-Sneistrup et al., 2011) into restriction and shows how consumers adapt their pattern of consumption by creating their own self-imposed barriers, such as reducing their consumption or replacing traditional routines with new ones, withholding and deleting information from other consumers and resisting the power of institutions. We suggest that previous contributions in relation to rejection and reclamation may be extended to restriction. First our consumers exhibit characteristics of Iyer and Muncy's (2009) anti-loyal consumer (resistance to a brand (Facebook) that is driven from personal concerns). Previous research focused upon such consumers' rejection behaviour. We demonstrate that a combination of specific brand and personal concerns can also lead to restriction. Second in relation to reclamation, Fernandez,

Brittain and Bennett (2011) suggest that consumers use a variety of coping strategies to negotiate the tensions between their anti-consumption ideologies and the fact that they rely upon consumption to survive. We suggest that a similar negotiation is evident with reference to restriction: restricting consumption allows anti-consumption discourses to co-exist alongside continued consumption. We finally suggest that the definition of restriction needs to be broader: "cutting, lowering and limiting consumption when complete anti-consumption is either not possible or not desired."

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