

Research Report

Conspicuous Anti-Consumption? The Motives of Anti-Consumption and their Connection to Conspicuous Consumption

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Abstract:

The conscious renunciation of different types of consumption is justified by various motives, such as the sustainability aspect. This fact suggests that motives are very different from the ones of conspicuous consumption. But is that true? The aim of the study is to examine whether the motives for anti-consumption can be found in the motives for conspicuous consumption. The research question therefore is: What motives lie behind anti-consumption, and can these motives be found in classical conspicuous consumption? As part of a qualitative study, eight in-depth interviews were conducted in order to generate a broad range of motives for different anti-consumption behaviors. In addition to previously deductively determined motives for the renunciation, the motives obtained from these interviews were then inductively summarized in a motive scheme and subsequently compared to the motives of classical conspicuous consumption. As a result, there is a connection between the motives of anti-consumption and the motives of conspicuous consumption. While the primary motives for anti-consumption are not related to conspicuous consumption motives, there are secondary motives (supporting the primary motives) for anti-consumption that can also be assigned to conspicuous consumption. This implies that some kind of “conspicuous anti-consumption” is part of today's consumer culture.

Keywords: Anti-Consumption; Conspicuous Consumption; Consumer Culture; Renunciation; Conspicuous Anti-Consumption

1. Introduction

A common understanding of consumption is that consumers purchase goods for reasons beyond the functional utility of the products (Belk et al., 1982). One related example we want to consider in this research is the concept of conspicuous consumption as part of the “theory of leisure class” (Veblen, 1899). Conspicuous consumption is defined as the behavior of a consumer to move himself from his social class to higher social classes or as signaling higher class through consumption. It is also associated with the purchase of luxury products in order to show personal image to other people (Chaudhuri et al., 2011). These goods often do not provide additional functional value compared to “lower-status-products”. The motives of conspicuous consumption rather include the desire for recognition and prestige, distinction from others, demonstration of superiority, increase of social status, impressing of the environment or admiration/envy experienced by others. Therefore, by comparing oneself with other people, a person can behave through conspicuous consumption in order to gain status, power, and exclusivity (Mazzocco et al., 2012; Chaudhuri et al., 2011). Conspicuous consumption behavior is associated with non-utilitarian, luxurious, materialistic, exaggerated, and wasteful consumption behaviors (Campbell, 1995). Consumers engaging in this behavior focus on social needs such as prestige and status as well as the physical needs they will fulfill from the products they purchase (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005).

Nowadays there is a growing wave of trends like social consciousness and environmental awareness which impacts consumer culture and consumption behavior (Hammad et al., 2019). As one consequence, more and more consumers are turning to anti-consumption (Culiberg et al., 2022) by abstaining from a particular type of consumption. In the following study, we focus on individual anti-consumption as the “intentional anti-consumption” of a particular product or service type consumed in the past, regardless of the possible consumption behavior a consumer might engage in to substitute the renunciation. Therefore, we do not focus on the understanding of “incidental anti-consumption” (Cherrier et al., 2011), which results from a choice towards a preferred alternative. Instead, there has to be a decision made not to consume something. Following our focussed understanding of anti-consumption, it is possible to “not consume” a certain product or service. We are not focussing on anti-consumers who did not consume the product in their past. The terms anti-consumption and renunciation are used synonymously in this paper. Furthermore, we use the term “consumers”, by which we mean people who are not performing a specific anti-consumption behavior. It is used here to separate potential consumers in the group of either consumers or anti-consumers.

There are multiple motives to engage in any kind of anti-consumption behavior, varying among political, personal and environmental aspects (Iyer & Muncy, 2008). Due to the focussed definition of anti-consumption, there is a lack of specific motives occurring from this perspective. One purpose of this study is to close this gap and find as many motives as possible for anti-consumption and connect them with the motives of conspicuous consumption.

Anti-consumption often tends to overlap with sustainable consumption as it plays a key role for sustainability. Consumers can actively choose not to consume certain products which they perceive as harmful for the environment. As a consequence, they reject them due to self-interested and socio-economical motivations and express their values, beliefs and overall identities (Cherrier et al., 2011). Compared to conspicuous consumption, sustainable consumption is normally seen as a contradictory behavior. This is due to the materialism aspect in conspicuous consumption which is believed to impede public-welfare and pro-social dispositions as well as efforts of sustainable consumption (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000). But recently, there is a research stream examining the relationship between sustainable and conspicuous consumption as well as the conditions under which conspicuous motives could promote sustainable consumption (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2010; Dastrup et al., 2012). Following this, we think that due to the overlap of anti-consumption and sustainable consumption, there could be motives of conspicuous consumption promoting different forms of anti-consumption behavior.

At first glance, anti-consumption and conspicuous consumption also seem to be forms of behavior that could not be more different. But simply looking at the hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970) offers insights on what they might have in common: Lower-level needs (physiological, safety and belongingness/love needs) can be achieved through consumption, but normally, consumption cannot fulfill higher needs (self-actualization and individual needs like recognition or prestige). Instead, consumer behavior like conspicuous consumption and anti-consumption may enable consumers to fulfill those needs. So why should they not be motivated in the same manner under certain conditions? Might anti-consumers not also want to seek recognition, experience admiration or even demonstrate social status through their anti-consumption behavior? We suspect an overlap of the motives of anti-consumption and conspicuous consumption, take a closer look on their possible connection and pose the following research question: What motives lie behind anti-consumption and can these motives be found in classical conspicuous consumption?

2. Materials and Methods

As conspicuous consumption in combination with anti-consumption is a new research area, we found it most suitable to follow a qualitative approach to examine the research question. This approach is highly recommended, if researchers do not have enough insights and further information on the issue they are interested in (Burns & Bush, 2003). As the specific qualitative approach of the study, in-depth interviews were conducted to serve as a base for a content analysis. Especially here,

where different motives from consumers are part of the objectives in the study, the approach of qualitative interviews with implemented “laddering” is effective. The laddering technique helps to get an in-depth understanding of the thoughts and motives participants have and provides flexibility in discussions (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988).

To elicit the desired information, an interview guideline (see appendix 7.1), including different deductively constructs of conspicuous consumption motives, was designed. To effectively create the guideline, we conducted a literature review and used exclusive knowledge from a university seminar. The guideline consists of a large part on self-perception (participants talking about their own anti-consumption motives) and a small additional part on external perception (participants talking about the anti-consumption motives of others).

The sample used in this study is made up of eight subjects who voluntarily participated. To guarantee their conscious renunciation of a product or service, they were asked for their anti-consumption behavior before conducting the interview. As a consequence, the anti-consumption topic was specific to the interviewee. The sample was composed of four males and four females to achieve gender heterogeneity. Their age ranges from 22 to 33 and all of them are university students. The renunciation behavior of the participants refers to meat (6)¹, all animal products (1), imported food (1), fast fashion (1), environmentally harmful transport (1), social media (1), smartphone (1) and alcohol (1).

After conducting the interviews, the audio-content was transcribed into a written form for further investigation and documentation purposes. From that, we followed the instructions provided by Kuckartz (2014) to conduct a qualitative content analysis: After identifying study-relevant parts, thematic main categories were built and text parts were assigned (coding) to the categories while going through the material. In this process, we differentiated between content expressed about oneself (self-perception) and the content expressed about others' anti-consumption behavior (external perception). Also, subcategories were built inductively. If relevant aspects were found which are not fitting in existing categories, a new category was created. After these processes, a motive scheme on the self-perception content was developed and visualized (chapter 3.1). As a next step and to answer our research question, the motives of the self-perception part were analyzed and it was independently checked by the researchers, if they also occur as motives of conspicuous consumption described by existing literature (chapter 3.2). The four assignments were compared and checked for consensus. A motive was seen as occurring in both, anti-consumption and conspicuous consumption, if at least three of the four researchers found that the motive also appears in the context of conspicuous consumption. While comparing the assignments, we checked for interrater reliability. Finally, we extended our scheme by adding the motives of external perception (chapter 3.3).

3. Results

3.1 Anti-Consumption Motive Scheme

As our main result, we developed the motive scheme on the self-perception part, which is shown in figure 1. It is structured as follows. The left column displays all 33 identified motives. These are then aggregated by similarity which results in the subcategories shown in the middle column. The subcategories are grouped and assigned to a main category. It is important to note that only items in the left column are motives while the middle and right column represent categorizations of these motives.

Our analysis has shown that the motives have different strengths of influencing the behavior of the participants. We thereby identified 6 motives to be primary motives and 27 to be secondary motives. Primary motives influence a person's anti-consumption behavior strongly. The participants state them to be the main driver of their anti-consumption decision. Secondary motives only have a supporting function. Without a complementing primary motive they would not be strong enough to trigger an anti-consumption behavior. Therefore, secondary motives rather play a supporting role for

¹ (x) = total amount of the study participants renouncing to the specific consumption behavior

the primary motives or might act as moderators. The analysis showed that the primary motives are mostly specific for the type of product that a participant renounces. Therefore, there is a wide variation of primary motives among the renunciation of different product types. The secondary motives seem to be less product type specific. Many of the secondary motives were identified in multiple different interviews for the anti-consumption of different product types.

Figure 1. Motives, subcategories and categories

Motives	Subcategories	Main categories
Being interesting		
Being respected		
Receiving positive feedback	Reputation enhancement	
Being admired		
Proving oneself to others		
Overcoming a challenge, others fail	Sense of superiority	Social reputation
Being a „better“ person than consumers		
Emulating role model		
Avoiding condemnation from anti-consumers	Sense of inferiority	
Feeling less inferior to anti-consumers		
Influencing other's thoughts	Role model	
Influencing other's behavior		
Striving for similarity with others	Sense of community	
Feeling connected		
Feeling reciprocal confirmation		Group affiliation
Feeling like belonging somewhere	Acceptance	
Satisfying other's expectations		
Being individual	Uniqueness	
Being independent		
Being ideal (self-idealization)		
Proving willpower	Pride	
Being satisfied with oneself		Self-image
Experiencing self-efficacy		
Maintaining animal welfare	Conscience	
Living sustainable		
Escaping social comparison	Self-determination	
Winning self-control		
Having more time to study	Gain of time	Efficiency
Challenging oneself		
Making new experiences	Comfort zone escape	
Creating awareness for own consumption behavior		
Improving one's mental health		Health
Improving one's physical health		

Main Category: Social Reputation

The first main category in our scheme (fig. 1) is “social reputation”. It consists only of secondary motives, starting off with “being interesting”, “being respected”, “receiving positive feedback”, “being admired” and “proving oneself to others”. All of these motives are based on the perception of oneself by others. “Receiving positive feedback” seems to be an important secondary motive, because it was mentioned in more than half of the interviews. An exemplary quote is:

„Ich habe das gemerkt so in meinem sozialen Umfeld die Leute, ja, finden das toll [...] ich merke es gibt da so ein schönes Feedback.“

The quote refers to the positive feedback received from the social environment for the renunciation behavior. All of these mentioned motives are bundled in the subcategory “reputation enhancement”. The next subcategory “sense of superiority” consists of the motives “overcoming a challenge, others fail to” and “being a better person than consumers”. The latter one is mentioned often and therefore pretty boldly stated in this quote:

„Also ich glaube, im Vergleich zu anderen Menschen fühle ich mich tatsächlich einfach als besseren Menschen.“

The participant refers to himself as a better person in comparison to others through his anti-consumption. We continue with the next subcategory “sense of inferiority”, containing the motives “emulating role models”, “avoiding condemnation from anti-consumers” and “feeling less inferior to anti-consumers”. The first motive in this lineup, “emulating role models”, means that the renunciation behavior of others is seen as a preferable consumption model, and it again is an important secondary motive. To conclude the main category “social reputation”, the last subcategory “role model” consists of the motives “influencing others thoughts” and “influencing others behaviors”.

Main Category: Group Affiliation

We continue our derived secondary motives with “striving for similarity with others” and “feeling connected”, while the latter one is an often-stated secondary motive. Both of them derive from an individual's need of a social community and are depicted in this statement:

„Auf jeden Fall Verbundenheit. [...] Also das kann ich mir schon vorstellen, weil bei Verzicht oder wenn ich jetzt auch wieder an den Veganismus denke, glaube ich schon, dass man sich da zusammen[gehörig] fühlt.“

This quote describes that there is a feeling of connection among anti-consumers, in this case in the renunciation-area of veganism. These two motives sum up to the subcategory “sense of community”. The following secondary motives “feeling reciprocal confirmation”, “feeling like belonging somewhere” and “satisfying others expectations” are reflected in the following statement:

„Es gibt einem halt ganz oft Bestätigung [...], weil eben die Denke ne sehr ähnliche ist und man dann ja sich gegenseitig bestärkt indem, was man tut.“

This quote states that there is a similar way of thinking among anti-consumers and that this leads to reciprocal confirmation. They are summarized as subcategory “acceptance”, meaning the acceptance of an individual by others. All the motives in this part can be assigned to the main category “group-affiliation”.

Main Category: Self-image

Next, we identified the secondary motives “being individual” and “being independent”. “Being individual” is based on a person’s urge to set themselves apart from others and to be different for the sake of being different. This urge can be fulfilled by the anti-consumption of a product that many others consume. “Being independent” is a motive that represents the endeavor to make choices independently from others which can lead to unconventional consumption decisions. The two motives can be attributed to the subcategory “uniqueness”. The following subcategory, “pride”, consists of the secondary motives “being ideal”, “proving willpower”, “being satisfied with oneself” and “experiencing self-efficacy”. Especially noteworthy are “proving willpower” and “being satisfied with oneself” as these two motives were identified in more than half of the conducted interviews. One participant said:

„Also in meinem Fall zumindest [ist es] einfach das Wissen, dass man das jetzt schon so lange durchgezogen hat, also die Willensstärke, die dahinter steht. Die gibt einem schon Selbstbewusstsein.“

The quote states that proving willpower by following through with one’s anti-consumption makes the person more confident and thereby shows that this can motivate a person towards further anti-consumption.

The first primary motives of the scheme are “maintaining animal welfare” and “living sustainably”. Both were described as very important motives by the participants. Also, both motives were only found in the context of animal or environment friendly anti-consumption, thus, supporting the thesis that primary motives may relate to a certain type of renunciation. Both motives are always embedded in the context of wanting to have a clean conscience. An exemplary quote shows this:

„Ich habe ein gutes Gewissen.[...] Weil ich von mir behaupten kann, dass ich nicht dafür verantwortlich bin, zumindest in dieser Hinsicht, dass andere Lebewesen leiden müssen.“

Paraphrasing, the participant stated that she has a good conscience because she knows that no animals have to suffer because of her consumption. Following this line of argumentation, the motives “maintaining animal welfare” and “living sustainably” can be assigned to the subcategory “conscience”. Two further motives are “escaping social comparison”, which is a primary motive of social media anti-consumption and “winning self-control”. The two motives show the urge to escape behavior control by others and therefore can be grouped and categorized as self-determination.

The subcategories “uniqueness”, “pride”, “conscience” and “self-determination” are related with the way a person sees themselves. They are subsumed by the main category “self-image”.

Main Categories: Efficiency, Comfort Zone Escape & Health

“Having more time to study” is a primary motive of social media anti-consumption. It is the only motive that can’t be grouped with other motives. As we suspect that conducting more interviews would result in more motives that can be associated with a gain of time or in a broader sense with efficiency, we establish these categories, nevertheless. This way the scheme aspect is easy to extend, as shown in chapter 3.3.

The subcategory “comfort zone escape” consists of the secondary motives “challenging oneself”, “making new experiences” and “creating awareness for one’s own consumption behavior”. As we can’t sum this up further, the main category is identical with the subcategory. Lastly, participants stated that motives for anti-consumption are the “improvement of physical health and the “improvement of mental health”. A participant that renounces alcohol said:

„Also ich glaube, die wichtigsten Gründe für Verzicht sind tatsächlich [...] und die eigene Gesundheit“

He clearly stated that improving his health is one of the main reasons for his anti-consumption which shows that we are dealing with a primary motive. Again, the primary motives are typical for

a specific anti-consumption type. The improvement of physical health was only identified as a motive for alcohol renunciation while the wish for improvement of mental health was only expressed by the person that anti-consumed social media. Again, we did not find a second categorization level. So, “health” covers both the subcategory and the main category level.

3.2 Classification (of Motives) in Conspicuous Consumption

In this section, we focus on the second part of the research question: “[...] can these motives be found in classical conspicuous consumption?”. Our research suggests a connection between the motives of anti-consumption and conspicuous consumption. We found this by independently categorizing the motives and comparing them to motives of conspicuous consumption, based on our definition in the introduction (see appendix 7.2). The interrater reliability (Fleiss’ Kappa) of this procedure was $\kappa = 0,704^{2*}$. This value states that about 70% of the assignments are equal, which shows “substantial” agreement among the independent assignments of the researchers (Landis & Koch, 1977). After this process, the motives “being interesting”, “being respected”, “receiving positive feedback”, “being admired” and “proving oneself to others”, which are motives of the subcategory “reputation enhancement”, can be seen as motives of conspicuous consumption too. They all relate to the gain of a higher social status or superiority. “Being a better person than consumers” was treated similarly. It is important to mention that these motives have different implications in the context of conspicuous consumption and anti-consumption. For example, “proving oneself to others” as a motive means that conventional conspicuous consumers want to show off what they have bought and therefore achieved, while anti-consumers want to state their willpower and strength not to consume a certain asset. This shows that the motive is the same, but the actions to archive the motive are context specific.

Further identified motives in both contexts are “emulating role models”, “avoiding condemnation from anti-consumers” and “feeling less inferior to anti-consumers”. Whereas individuals in one context try to avoid a feeling of inferiority towards other individuals (anti-consumers) by their own renunciation behavior, individuals practicing conspicuous consumption try to avoid the inferiority towards higher status individuals. Again, we see the same motive in two different contexts.

Further, the motives “feeling reciprocal confirmation” and “satisfying others expectations” can be devoted to the issue of being admired by others for their own behavior and fitting into a certain social group. The focus on the distinction from others as part of conspicuous consumption can be found in the identified motives “being individual” and “being ideal”. With conspicuous consumption, people see individuals with higher social status as ideal and try to gain this status with their consumption, while anti-consumers see a specific renunciation behavior as ideal and try to conform with that through their own anti-consumption. Their own behavior is seen as better in both contexts, whereas they have the same motive: “to be individual and to be ideal”, while having an own understanding of what is ideal for them.

3.3 Motive Scheme Extension

To show an example how the motive scheme could be extended, we supplemented it by the part of external perception (see appendix 7.3). Participants were asked to consider what motives they can imagine regarding the renunciation of others, e.g., friends, relatives, acquaintances. Many of the motives mentioned in the part of the external perception agreed with those of the self-perception, which seems logical, because one can imagine motives among others, which oneself has for own behavior. These were not further identified in the motive scheme, only taken into account for the frequency of the occurrence of the motive. However, the additionally named motives were added to the scheme but colored to show the difference from self-perception. It is to be emphasized that two of the added motives “generate social media reach” and “trend participation” are motives that can also be assigned to conspicuous consumption. As the external perception part was not the main

² calculation of the value can be found in an extra excel sheet

research question and thoughts on others are not a valid way to find actual motives, this finding is just mentioned to shed some light on possible further motives which could be found in further research and extensions of the motive scheme.

4. Discussion

An important finding of the study is that primary motives are specific to the type of consumption. For example, the motive “maintaining animal welfare” always goes hand in hand with abstaining from meat. It is important to note that the primary motives of renunciation cannot be assigned to the classical motives of conspicuous consumption. Secondary motives, on the other hand, tend to be independent of the type of renunciation, e.g. the motives “receiving positive feedback” or “being a “better” person than consumers” fit in with different types of renunciation, e.g. renouncing meat, but also with social media renunciation. Also, a large part of secondary motives of renunciation can be assigned to the classical motives of conspicuous consumption. A main part of them focuses on the perception and acceptance in the society, higher level of satisfaction, individualism and the enhancement of reputation. As a consequence, it may be possible that the secondary motives are sort of positive side effects for anti-consumers. Anyway, we clearly see connections to the motives of conspicuous consumption. They may not be the main drivers for renunciation decisions as they are in the context of conspicuous consumption, but they play an underestimated supporting role in anti-consumption decision making. Secondary motives can actually work as a trigger of the renunciation behavior by building the bridge to close a potential attitude-behavior-gap as shown by this quote:

„[...] vorher wo es vielleicht ein kleiner Gedanke war, aber so richtig an der Umsetzung hat man sich nie probiert. [...] in den ersten zwei Wochen hier in Rostock [...] habe ich das dann gemacht. [...] Ich habe gemerkt, hier ist es so.“

The quote shows that the actual renunciation behavior of a participant, who mentioned animal welfare and sustainability as primary motives for his vegetarianism, was not only triggered by his attitude. External influences (secondary motives connected to conspicuous consumption) like satisfying others' expectations in his new social environment played a significant role in translating attitude into behavior.

We suggest the term “conspicuous anti-consumption” for the phenomenon we identified in this study. It refers to the role of motives found in both anti-consumption and conspicuous consumption, supporting the decision-making process of anti-consumption behavior.

5. Limitations

It must be said that there are several limitations related to the sample, situation and environment as well as the guideline which limits the validity of the study results. Regarding the sample, it must be said that the subjects were selected by us which leads to a selection bias. This is also accompanied by the fact that the demographic information of the participants is very homogeneous. Participants were quite young and exclusively students. Furthermore, the number of subjects is quite low with eight interviews conducted. In addition, there is little variance in the types of renunciation. This is because the test subjects predominantly abstain from meat. Limits also emerged regarding the situation and environment. First, actual renunciation behavior of the participants could not be observed. Thus, socially desirable answers of the particularly intrinsically motivated subjects cannot be excluded. This problem should be overcome by the external perception part. Due to the small differences in the results, it is not certain whether this procedure had the desired effect. Another limitation is given by the fact that the interviews were conducted by four different researchers with no experience in laddering. The final limitations relate to the boundaries of the guideline. This is because a high degree of subjectivity flows into the structure since it is based on the identified

definition of conspicuous consumption and its motives. Finally, the questionnaire also has limitations regarding the choice, different nature and directness of the questions.

Further studies are needed to verify the results and overcome the mentioned limitations. This could be done by exploring a broader range of anti-consumption, quantitative research methods or by field studies.

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