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THEORY/CONCEPTUAL

The role of possessions for the extended self of sustainability-concerned anti-consumers

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Abstract

Belk's (*Journal of Consumer Research, 15(2), 139–168,* 1988, *Journal of Consumer Research, 40(1), 477–500,* 2013) seminal work on possessions and the extended self explains how possessions form and symbolize an individual's extended self. According to the framework, material possessions play a significant role for the extended self. In recent decades, individuals in consumer societies of the Global North have started to question their consumption patterns and their impact on the natural environment in light of the climate crisis. These individuals engage in anti-consumption practices which aim at reducing environmental impact through reducing and rejecting consumption including the acquisition of material possessions. This paper assesses if Belk's (*Journal of Consumer Research, 15(2), 139–168,* 1988, *Journal of Consumer Research,* 40(1), 477–500 2013) framework is still applicable in the case of sustainability-concerned anti-consumers and which modifications need to be made to account for a change in consumption patterns. We propose that the self-expressive aspect of the extended self framework remains salient, as the intentional non-consumption by anti-consumers helps them distance themselves from possible undesired selves. Through a de-extension of the self, consumers rely on experiences, people and places which are central to the self rather than on material possessions. The material objects that remain parts of the extended self and that have a symbolic meaning represent their owner's ethical and pro-environmental values and are often created through upcycling, refurbishing or acquired in second-hand or sharing markets. Since consumers increasingly consider the effects their acquisitions and actions have on the state of the Earth, they re-extend their selves to include experiences and the natural environment as a psychological possession.

Keywords Extended self · Anti-consumption · Consumerism · Sustainability · Natural environment

Introduction

Possessions play an important role in forming individuals' identities (Belk, 1988; Cherrier & Murray, 2007; Jackson, 2009). Individuals in consumer societies are inseparable from the material, as it allows them to express their values, beliefs, experiences and ultimately their self (Belk, 1988; Borgerson, 2005; Jackson, 2009). Over time, possessions have adopted a symbolic role, serving as means of expression and communication of individual and social values (Jackson, 2009; Levy, 1959). Belk's (1988) seminal work "Possessions and the extended self" describes these symbolic and identity-forming functions of (material) possessions in consumer culture. The author theorizes that possessions are integrated into the self and become an inherent part of who a person is.

However, consumer culture and the acceleration of global economic activity are incompatible with the ecosystem and its finite resource reserves (Jackson, 2009; IPCC, 2021). Current levels of consumption of natural resources exceed the ecosystem's capacity to regenerate them. Consumers are caught in a vicious cycle of continuous desire and acquisition for new and increasingly available goods (Nelson et al., 2007). This pattern, known as terminal materialism (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1978), is exacerbated by advertising (Belk & Pollay, 1985a) resulting in short-lived,

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informal, and opportunistic relationships with possessions (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2009).

Amidst this backdrop, individuals in the Global North are becoming increasingly aware of the ecological impact caused by their overconsumption and are questioning their behaviors (Bhar, 2023; Håkansson, 2014; Kotler, 2011; Shaw & Newholm, 2002; Zavestoski, 2001). An increasing number of consumers engage in anti-consumption practices to mitigate the ecological impact of their consumption. The recent "deinfluencing" trend on TikTok exemplifies this shift, with influencers urging users to resist short-lived trends and refrain from unnecessary purchases for the sake of the environment (Chokrane, 2023).

Anti-consumption, defined as "intentionally and meaningfully excluding or cutting goods from one's consumption routine or reusing once-acquired goods with the goal of avoiding consumption" (Makri et al., 2020, p. 178), manifests in various ways. Examples include the intention to purchase fewer lifestyle products for the sake of sustainability (Stifel, 2023), the growing number of individuals who reject the consumption of animal products during the so-called 'Veganuary' (The Guardian & Veganuary, 2022) or the increased interest in repair shops and tutorials to prolong the lifespan of goods (Butler, 2022). These trends are predominantly observed in the Global North, where societies engage in a post-materialistic discourse (Bhar, 2023). The Global South, on the other hand, is concerned with a developmental discourse and has adopted economic models that center around individual aspirations for a better life linked to growthism and overconsumption (ibid). For instance, meat consumption remains steady or increases in large emerging economies (Buchholz, 2022).

The observed anti-consumption tendencies in industrialized countries challenge the traditional understanding of consumption and consumerism, which is closely linked to the excessive acquisition of new material possessions (Kotler, 2011). This raises the concern that without consumption, individuals might lack a means of transferring meaning, potentially rendering anti-consumption a "no-sign system" and hindering "individual signification" (García-De-Frutos et al., 2018, p. 431).

Established frameworks in consumer culture theory, such as the cultural movement of meaning (McCracken, 1986), the meanings of domestic symbols (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981), material possession attachment (Kleine et al., 1995), and Belk's seminal work "Possessions and the Extended Self" (1988, updated in 2013), emerged after the postwar years of mass consumption (Cohen, 2003) and within a context of material abundance. These frameworks do not fully address the contemporary shift towards anti-consumption motivated by environmental concerns. However, revisiting the literature from an anti-consumption perspective can provide insights into how reducing consumption can still support identity formation and provide a holistic understanding of how individuals navigate the tension between personal identity and ecological responsibility.

To address this research gap, the purpose of this paper is to critically evaluate the applicability of Belk's (1988, 2013) original work on possessions and the extended self to environmentally motivated anti-consumption.[1] Belk's framework is highly significant, as the original 1988 article is one of the most widely cited works in consumer behavior, amassing over 15,000 citations on Google Scholar by the end of 2023 and ranking second in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. This enduring influence underscores its lasting impact on consumer research. Revisiting Belk's work allows us to update and adapt the established theoretical foundations to better reflect contemporary consumer realities.

In sum, this paper addresses the reciprocal pull between individuals' construction of identity through possessions and their endeavor to reduce consumption for environmental reasons. By analyzing anti-consumption practices under the propositions presented in Belk's (1988, 2013) framework, we aim to explore the following central questions:

(1) How can individuals express their values, norms, and beliefs and thus form their identity while adopting environmentally motivated anti-consumption behaviors?
(2) How can the existing framework be modified to account for a new perspective on material possessions?

We first revisit the foundations of consumption and identity by briefly summarizing the historical development of (modern) consumerism, reviewing the role of consumption in identity formation and signaling and outlining the main propositions presented in Belk's (1988) framework "Possessions and the extended self" and its update in 2013. We then turn to the contemporary shifts in consumption patterns which emerged through the awareness of overconsumption and the need for more sustainable ways of consumption resulting in the emergence of anti-consumption practices. Subsequently, anti-consumption behavior and its role in identity expression is analyzed in relation to the extended self framework. We propose a modified extended self framework to account for the phenomenon of anti-consumption and suggest modifications to the existing extended self framework with regards to self-expression of sustainability-concerned anti-consumers, the de-extension caused by anti-consumption, self-extension through creation, and a

[1] Consumers decide to engage in anti-consumption practices for a variety of reasons that span from political activism to social and ethical concerns of production practices (Makri et al., 2020). However, our analysis aims to focus on environmentally driven anti-consumption.

re-extension of the self through the natural environment. The last section discusses the main propositions, presents limitations, and outlines future research opportunities.

Foundations of consumption and identity

Historical evolution of consumerism

Consumerism is defined as a belief and value system in which the purchase and consumption of goods and services exceeds basic needs as a means of obtaining social status and forming a self-identity (American Psychological Association, 2018; Belk, 1988).

Consumerism is related to the materialist consumer culture prevalent in Western society, which spurs the consumption of short-lived, disposable, and modish goods (Albinsson et al., 2010; Twitchell, 1999). In other words, the concept of "consumerism" indicates the increasing availability and acquisition of new, fashionable, and improved material items (Håkansson, 2014; Slater, 1997). Consumerism promotes the belief that the more items individuals possess, the greater their satisfaction will be (Albinsson et al., 2010; Etzioni, 1998). According to Campbell (2018), modern consumerism is driven by the individuals' pursuit of self-expression and novelty-seeking and revolves around the expression of unique identities and individualism through the consumption of goods and services (Campbell, 2018; American Psychological Association, 2018).

The rise of modern consumerism is often attributed to the Industrial Revolution (Stearns, 2006). Growing supplies shifted the levels of demand (Fine & Leopold, 1990) and decreased levels of poverty (Stearns, 2006). Although there were signs of consumerism before modern times, societies in industrialized countries did not have a consumer culture before or right after the Industrial Revolution. This notion is grounded in the values of belief systems (i.e., Confucianism or Stoicism) as well as foundational religious texts that rejected the consumerist joy in acquisition, material wealth and accumulation because they contradict the values of hierarchies, adherence to social norms and serving the collective (Stearns, 2006), as well as self-control and prudence (Whiting et al., 2018) or condemn envy related to other's possessions[2] (Belk, 2011). As McCracken (1987, p. 151) points out "fundamental shifts had to take place in the psychological context of consumption before we could become fully fledged consumers." Campbell (2018, originally published in 1987) attributes the rise of modern consumerism to the Romantic movement. The Romantic ethic shaped the new, modern consumerism which revolves around the expression of unique identities and individualism through the consumption of goods (ibid).

The rule of consumerism was further strengthened through an increase in advertising which shapes and reinforces beliefs about the prevalent culture and the self (McCracken, 1987). This was especially the case in the early twentieth century when advertisements evoked a longing for new products and suggested them as necessities in various countries (Belk & Pollay, 1985a, 1985b; Tse et al., 1989; Zhao & Belk, 2008). The economic upturn in e.g., Japan, increased social mobility which required the adoption of status symbols and a greater focus on individualism (Clammer, 1997). Moreover, an increasing trend to focus on the product alone in advertising spurs terminal materialism which implies that consumers strive to acquire products to merely possess them, to display or improve their social status rather than benefit from their usability or function (Csikszentmihalyi, Rochberg-Halton, 1978; Belk & Pollay, 1985a, 1985b).

In a globalized world, the cultures, practices, and behaviors of consumer societies are overlapping and intertwined. Even though the West has historically been a great influence on consumer behavior globally, i.e., the adoption of the concept of "cool" in consumption (Belk et al., 2010), Japan's concept of "Kawaii", which is e.g., represented by Sanrio's cartoon characters like Hello Kitty (Yano, 2013), has also influenced consumer culture in the West (Granot et al., 2013).

The focus of our paper are sustainability-motivated anti-consumption practices which are observed in the Global North where the prevailing discourse has transitioned towards post-materialistic values (Bhar, 2023). Makri et al.'s (2020) literature review on anti-consumption practices demonstrates that most empirical studies in this field were also conducted with subjects from the Global North. Even though their study is not exclusively focused on environmentally driven anti-consumption, it becomes evident that anti-consumption research is more pronounced in the Global North. Therefore, the scope and generalizability of our following analyses will be limited to sustainability-concerned anti-consumers of the Global North.

Consumption's role in identity formation and signaling

Anti-consumption stands in contrast to but is defined based on the concept of consumption, as we will discuss below. Therefore, it is relevant to consider what purposes consumption serves before going over to an in-depth discussion of anti-consumption practices.

Consumption fundamentally contributes to identity formation (Gentry et al., 1995; Hogg & Michell, 1996;

[2] However, the possessions the world religions' foundational texts caution against coveting were different from the types of belongings many individuals possess and consume today (Belk, 2011).

Zavestoski, 2001). Individuals acquire items that reflect and enhance their self-concept, while they avoid other items that are incongruous with their present or desired selves (Banister & Hogg, 2004; Hogg et al., 2000; Levy, 1959; Patrick et al., 2002; Sirgy, 1982). The self-concept refers to "the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to [themselves] as an object" (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7). It defines individuals' values, attitudes, and beliefs. The self-concept is ultimately how consumers see themselves (Zavestoski, 2001). The maintenance of a positive self-view is one of the key motivators of human behavior (Dunning, 2007; Goffman, 1974). To achieve this, consumers strive toward positive associations (approach behaviors) while avoiding negative associations (avoidance behaviors) (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In other words, the undesired self functions as a reference point to assess individuals' proximity to or distance from their unsought self-images (Hogg & Banister, 2001; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Individuals strive to move away from their undesired self and toward their ideal self (Hogg & Banister, 2001).

Consequently, consumers acquire material items or access to certain services to signal status, social affiliation, and group membership (Jackson, 2009). The literature calls this phenomenon symbolic consumption. Individuals imbue material objects with meanings beyond their physical, utilitarian functions (Banister & Hogg, 2004). Levy (1959) argues that individuals "buy things not only for what they can do but also for what they mean" (Levy, 1959, p. 118). The actual value of an object for the consumer thus exceeds its economic value (Richins, 1994). Symbolism refers to situations in which objects are interpreted as meaning not only themselves but also other attributes and feelings. Products function as symbols for communicating and expressing personal meanings and values (Jackson, 2009; Levy, 1959) and thus reflect and enhance the self. Each possession carries a unique meaning, and in conjunction, they all contribute to and constitute the self as a whole (Levy, 1959). In addition, the increasing variety of offered products and services enables individuals to pursue individuated identities (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt & Thompson, 2004).

A further consideration concerns the fact that attachment to possessions is an important factor for self-formation. This mechanism is central to Belk's (1988, 2013) framework, as we will discuss in the next section. Attachment to possessions includes material objects, places, and experiences. Material possession attachment refers to the relationship between an individual and a particular material belonging (Kleine & Baker, 2004). The stronger this relationship, the closer the possession is held to the self (Kleine et al., 1995). Place attachment, in turn, refers to "the emotional bond formed by an individual to a physical site due to the meaning given to the site through interactional processes" (Milligan, 1998, p. 1). Experience attachment, as the name suggests, is the psychological bond to situations or activities (e.g., bungee jumping, paragliding) that provide symbolic benefits to the individual (Kleine & Baker, 2004) and is not limited to the tangible, physical world (Belk, 2013). Experiences are closer to the self than material possessions and places (Belk, 1988; Carter & Gilovich, 2012). Carter and Gilovich (2012) argue that material belongings are more removed from the extended self, while experiences (in the form of memories and stories) are perceived as more connected and central to one's self and thus constitute individuals' autobiography. Belk (1988, 2013) incorporates the different forms of attachments and orders them in terms of their proximity (or centrality) to the extended self.

Belk's (1988, 2018) framework of possessions and the extended self

Belk (1988) posits in his 1988 article that possessions are an inherent part of the individual. Possessions not only reflect but also allow for the development, enhancement, and expression of the self. Possessions are all the tangible and intangible items one can call one's own. Belk's model incorporates possessions into an extended self, which constitutes the body, internal processes (e.g., conscience), ideas, and experiences as well as people, places, and things. The original framework organizes possessions in different areas that reflect their proximity to the core self, such that the "body" is closest to the core self, whereas "things" are the most extended ones from the core self. Single items are unable to represent the diverse and potentially incongruous aspects of the self. Individuals are rather the sum of all items they possess (Belk, 1984; Solomon & Assael, 1988).

However, Belk's (2013) update to the framework of the extended self abandons the idea of a core self. According to the author, the idea of a core self is an illusion as the self changes throughout different life stages and individuals take on different personas in different settings, e.g., in online encounters (Belk, 2013). The author therefore incorporates the notion that the self is composed of many parts, which is prevalent in social psychological research (Stryker & Serpe, 1994), into the framework. In line with Carter and Gilovich (2012), we will therefore categorize possessions in relation to their centrality to the extended self (see Fig. 1).

An involuntary separation of individuals from their belongings (e.g., due to loss) causes feelings of grief, invasion, and violation. This fact evidences the strong connection of possessions to the extended self. If a belonging is lost, it feels as if part of the self is lost. Feelings of loss do not occur in the case of voluntary disposition due to the individuals' intention to distance themselves from a possession that has become inconsistent with the self-concept (Belk, 1988; La Branche, 1973).

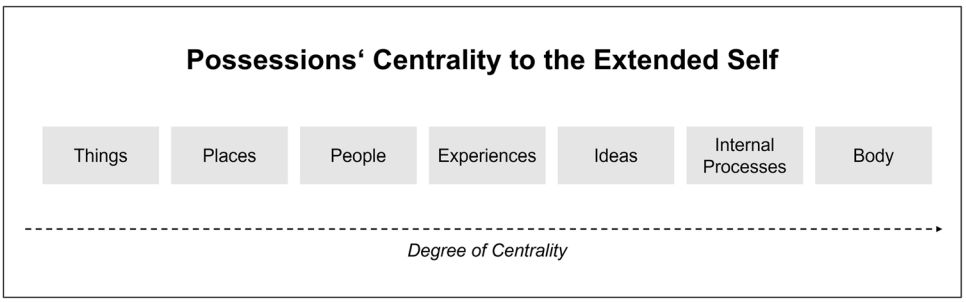

Fig. 1 Possessions' increasing degrees of centrality to the extended self (own illustration)

Possessions further characterize the identity by reflecting the individual's memories (van den Hoven et al., 2021), feelings (Mead & Baumeister, 2021), relationships, and experiences (Wheeler & Bechler, 2021). Through the acquisition of antiques and preowned items, individuals further seek to identify with the epoch, place, and people to which these belonged and to integrate the associated values into their self. Such items present an added appeal, as they are often rare and unique, which contributes to the acquirer's authenticity (Belk, 1988). Seeking authenticity is a key motivator for consumers' behavior and decision-making and refers to the extent to which individuals act according to whom they believe themselves to be (Gecas, 1986, 1991). In addition, hand-crafted items have more of their creator's identity invested in them, which the buyer can then appropriate (Belk, 1988).

Three voluntary[3] ways describe how the extended self incorporates possessions. The first way is through control of an object for personal use. For example, by controlling the use of a new car, it becomes part of the extended self (Belk, 1988; Sartre, 1943). In addition, control by objects may also contribute to their integration into the extended self. This implies that not only can individuals impose their identities on possessions, but these can also impose their identities on individuals (Belk, 1988; Prelinger, 1959). The second way an object can become part of the extended self is by creating it. Items are part of their creators' identity if they have a marking or some association with them. The argument is that buying an object constitutes a form of creation. The third way describes how individuals integrate possessions into the self by getting to know them better (Belk, 1988; Sartre, 1943). For example, by exploring the different settings of a new coffee machine, the individual becomes more familiar with the object and can better integrate it into the self.

[3] Belk (1988) contends that contamination is an additional but involuntary way in which objects become part of the self. This process is not relevant for the present analysis.

Contemporary shifts in consumption patterns

Overconsumption versus sustainability

As outlined above, the first framework on possessions and the extended self (Belk, 1988) assumed that "material things (i.e., objects in the noun categories) most clearly make up the extended self" (Belk, 2013, p. 478). This focus on material objects, which is referred to as materialism and also present in early consumer culture theory literature (i.e., Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1986), can be considered an aspect of consumerism that emphasizes the importance attributed to one's possessions and reflects the belief that money and material artefacts are the primary sources of happiness and fulfilment (Belk, 1985; Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Dittmar et al., 2014; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Sirgy et al., 1998). Materialism leads to the pursuit of power and fosters envy of what others possess (Belk, 1998). Moreover, people in the postmodern era were increasingly surrounded by objects rather than people (Baudrillard, 1970).

A materialistic consumer culture also spurs overconsumption, that is, the excessive acquisition of nonessential hedonic objects (Håkansson, 2014) in volumes that are incompatible with the ecosystem's resource reserve (Alexander & Ussher, 2012). This overconsumption, in turn, creates waste which has been understood as a necessary condition for the prosperity of consumer culture (Baudrillard, 1998). The sale and availability of disposable and modish goods ensure that consumers constantly desire new and varied objects and has led researchers to equate consumer culture with a "throwaway culture" (Kotlowitz et al., 1999; Young, 1991). The contribution of consumer culture to waste levels and pollution becomes especially evident in the case of fast fashion (Niinimäki et al., 2020; United Nations Environment Programme, 2022). In sum, human beings' overconsumption is one of the main causes of environmental degradation (Shaw & Newholm, 2002).

Amidst these ecological developments linked to consumption patterns, especially young consumers in the Global North (Wallis & Loy, 2021; Ziesemer et al., 2021)

are becoming increasingly aware of their impact on the environment and are recognizing the need for more sustainable behavior to counter the damage caused to natural ecosystems (Shaw & Newholm, 2002; White et al., 2019).

Environmental sustainability refers to the idea of human beings living in a manner that is compatible with the environment's capacity and that will thus be able to be sustained over time (Morelli, 2011) given the environment's limited resources (Mont & Heiskanen, 2015). In other words, "rather than viewing society and the environment as separate or even antagonistic spheres, the concept of sustainability assumes that humans and their economic systems are indelibly linked" (Caradonna, 2014, p. 8). Therefore, adopting a more sustainable[4] consumption behavior is a fundamental step toward preserving the environment (Black & Cherrier, 2010).

Sustainable consumption is consequently defined as "the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the lifecycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations" (Oslo Symposium on Sustainable Consumption, 1994 as cited in Šajn, 2020, p.2). Broadly speaking, sustainable consumption behavior aims to utilize fewer natural resources and cause a less negative impact on the environment (Roberts, 1993). Instead of focusing solely on their personal benefits, consumers consider broader society and the environment when making choices (Black & Cherrier, 2010; Dobson, 2003; White et al., 2019).

Two distinct approaches characterize sustainable consumption behavior. Green consumption and anti-consumption (which is the focus of the next section). *Green consumption* refers to the acquisition of "green" products that possess at least one environmentally friendly attribute (Moisander, 2007; Tezer & Bodur, 2020). This form of behavior translates into the acquisition of, for instance, products with recycled or biodegradable packaging instead of "conventional" products with nonrecycled and non-biodegradable packaging. Green consumption generally receives more attention in the literature (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013) and is easier to integrate into consumers' existing lifestyle. Green consumption may have a smaller environmental impact than consumption of conventionally produced goods and services, yet the competitive status game of being perceived as a green and therefore more altruistic (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010) or authentic (Potter, 2010; Zukin, 2008) consumer also results in unnecessary purchases which in turn cause emissions and deplete resources or excludes other consumer groups (Zukin, 2008) which is not the case for anti-consumption practices.

Emergence of anti-consumption practices

Defining anti-consumption

Anti-consumption[5] seeks to reduce the overall amount of consumption (Makri et al., 2020). Whereas green consumption allows consumers to maintain their present consumption patterns and lifestyle (Helm et al., 2019), anti-consumption requires greater changes in behavior and life conduct (Sekhon & Armstrong Soule, 2020). The latter is a broader understanding of sustainable behavior, which often questions the social function of consumption and materialism (Schumacher, 1973). Anti-consumption reduces negative environmental impacts more than green consumption (Kropfeld et al., 2018) and represents one of the most effective ways to reduce environmental degradation caused by overconsumption (Benton, 2015; Jackson, 2009). Motivated by environmental concerns, consumers seek to reduce their consumption to cause less harm to the environment (Cherrier et al., 2011; García-De-Frutos et al., 2018; Moisander, 2007). Anti-consumption includes the rejection of overall consumption as well as the refusal to acquire certain products, brands, or services (Craig-Lees, 2006; Iyer & Muncy, 2009). Regardless of the distinctions, anti-consumption describes the intentional and voluntary avoidance of consumption.[6]

As mentioned before, environmental reasons predominantly drive anti-consumption, however, reasons for anti-consumption behavior can also be self-interested or political (Iyer & Muncy, 2009; Makri et al., 2020). Political consumption involves punishing (boycotting) and/or rewarding (buycotting) companies that are (not) in line with one's values (Copeland & Boulianne, 2022) which is also reflected in the so-called commodity activism (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012). Even though political consumption can be motivated by environmental concerns, it also involves moral, ethical, and religious stances (Copeland & Boulianne, 2022), which would exceed the scope of this article.

Other concepts exist that are related to and often used interchangeably with anti-consumption. However, these concepts have different meanings, and it is thus relevant to delimit the understanding of anti-consumption in this analysis.

[4] Throughout the subsequent analysis, the term "sustainability" is employed referring to its environmental dimension.

[5] The terms anti-consumption, reduced consumption and de-consumption are employed interchangeably.

[6] Cases in which consumers do not acquire a product due to unavailability or economic reasons are not considered as anti-consumption acts in the literature (Makri et al., 2020).

Non-consumption is an unintentional action by individuals (Cherrier, 2009). It occurs, for example, when consumers' acquisition of a product from one brand automatically leads to the nonconsumption of other brands offering a similar product (Cherrier et al., 2011). Anti-consumption, in contrast, is the intentional choice against a specific product or brand. Non-consumption might also occur in cases where a product is not consumed because better alternatives that fulfill the same function or cater to the consumer's personal taste exist. An example would be the choice of a vegetarian over a meat-containing option (Armstrong Soule & Sekhon, 2018).

Anti-materialism also differs from anti-consumption. Anti-materialism is the direct opposite of materialism and refers to the rejection of material possessions (Lee & Ahn, 2016). In contrast, anti-consumption does not deny the role of the material (Lee & Ahn, 2016). It simply implies the reduced acquisition of material objects and the longer usage of these before disposal.

Consumer resistance intersects with and can be considered a subtype of anti-consumption (Cherrier et al., 2011; Galvagno, 2011). It involves anti-consumption practices motivated by an opposition to a force of domination (Lee et al., 2011). Often, this opposition is directed at the prevailing consumer culture, which acts as a dominant force in current society (Penaloza & Price, 1993). It rationally plans and dictates the needs of consumers and calculates progress (Slater, 1997). Resistant consumers withstand certain norms, brands, or organizations (Cherrier et al., 2011). However, some authors suggest that consumer resistance is not always expressed through anti-consumption. They argue that resistance can likewise be manifested through consumption and acts of support (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013; Lee et al., 2011). In this article, we adopt the standpoint of Cherrier et al. (2011) and consider consumer resistance as the aspect of anti-consumption that is mainly focused on rejecting consumption. In the following analysis, anti-consumption is thus to be understood as including consumer resistance practices.

Forms of anti-consumption behaviors

Anti-consumption is based on the avoidance of the complete consumption process, from the acquisition and the use of new products to their disposal. Thus, its practices aim at *rejecting*, *reducing*, and *reusing* products or consumption activities (Black & Cherrier, 2010; Iyer & Muncy, 2009; Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010). *Rejection* of consumption refers to consumers abstaining from acquiring a new product or service. *Reduction* means less consumption of certain items. Instead of completely rejecting the possession of certain material objects, individuals might decrease their use of these products (Black & Cherrier, 2010) or turn toward sharing objects with others instead (Ozanne & Ballentine, 2010). *Reusing* seeks to maintain already owned objects in use for a longer period. Practices of reusing also include purchasing second-hand goods, repairing broken objects, and producing homemade goods (Shaw & Newholm, 2002). In sum, individuals resist the acquisition of new items and their precocious disposal (Black & Cherrier, 2010).

Buying or renting *second-hand* is an alternative to acquiring needed items previously owned by other individuals. This practice likewise ensures that items are used for longer periods and are kept from being disposed of unnecessarily. While it certainly has environmental benefits, it can also serve self-expressive functions (Jain et al., 2022). Some individuals opt for second-hand items as an opposition to consumerism, thus expressing anti-consumerist values (Shaw & Newholm, 2002). Many preowned objects, like vintage items and antiques, are also associated with more individuality and authenticity because of their unique and unusual character (Guiot & Roux, 2010). Items may additionally carry signs and thus part of the identity of their previous owner like in the case of heirlooms that embody a family's identity (Türe & Ger, 2016). However, by materially altering or repurposing these inherited objects, their meanings are rejuvenated, symbolizing the personal identity of the heir (ibid). Spaces where second-hand goods are exchanged, i.e., flea markets, also provide consumers with the opportunity to test new identities because the goods are sold at lower prices and therefore carry less risk (Gregson & Crewe, 1997). The act of bidding, bargain hunting, and the social exchange with other buyers and sellers on flea markets constitute experiences which add to the consumer's identity formation (ibid). Lastly, the practices of divestment, i.e., the decision to dispose of, donate or sell goods shape the previous owner's understanding of themselves and their social relations. The newly found absence of goods requires the consumer to settle the memories and traditions that were linked to an object and the social relations attached to it (Hetherington, 2004).

Sharing "involves the non-reciprocal pooling of resources resulting in joint ownership" (Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010, p. 486). It leads to a reduced overall number of purchased objects by individual consumers, saves resources and creates synergies by ensuring the more efficient and longer use of belongings (Belk, 2007; Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010). Examples include car-sharing in small tight-knit communities whose members take responsibility for the car's maintenance or platforms that allow neighbors to share their personal household objects like drills or vacuum cleaners with each other (Belk, 2014a).[7] In addition to material objects, it

[7] These forms of sharing need to be distinguished from pseudo-sharing activities like the (unwilling) sharing of data or services of the so-called sharing economy like carsharing or homestay platforms that charge their users for the access to the sharing object and do not foster communal feelings (Belk, 2014a).

is also possible to share places, experiences, people, ideas, and values (Belk, 2007). As sharing is a communal practice, it can have benefits for the self, as it connects people and creates solidarity, care, and trust (Belk, 2010). Closely related to the concept of sharing is *collaborative consumption* in which the acquisition and distribution of a resource is coordinated for a fee or compensation (Belk, 2014b) while the goal of achieving a less possessive, wasteful and thus more sustainable way of consuming remains the same (Belk, 2014c).

Consumer resistance, as a subtype of anti-consumption that is motivated by an opposition to a dominant force, manifests itself in different ways (Fournier, 1998; Penaloza & Price, 1993). Its practices involve individual and collective acts and reformist as well as radical actions and may seek to alter the marketing mix of a certain company (e.g., demanding more product safety) or alter the general meaning of a product (e.g., its usage) (Penaloza & Price, 1993). Such practices range from avoidance on one end of a continuum to active rebellion by complaining and boycotting on the other end (Fournier, 1998). The line of differentiation between overarching anti-consumption and specific consumer resistance practices is blurred, as these behaviors are interrelated, as previously mentioned.

Boycotting is a common practice of (temporal) consumer resistance. A boycott refers to "an attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace" (Friedman, 1985, p. 97).[8] It is typically initiated by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to protest corporate practices (Klein et al., 2004) and has the intention of resuming consumption once the denounced practices are rectified (Hirschman, 1970). Boycotts are employed as a tactic to influence firms' behavior (John & Klein, 2003; Smith, 2001). They are a source of power to consumers, as they employ their purchase votes to sanction firms failing to behave in a socially or environmentally responsible manner (Klein et al., 2004; Penaloza & Price, 1993). Boycotts allow participants to express their individuality and enhance their self-concept (John & Klein, 2003; Klein et al., 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998). Participants distinguish themselves from the hedonistic interests of other consumers through their lack of conformity to corporate practices. Moreover, boycotts are a prosocial behavior, as they are primarily intended to benefit a group of people in addition to oneself (Batson, 1998; Klein et al., 2004). Thus, by participating in them, individuals may reinforce personal values such as solidarity, altruism, equality, and morality. The outcomes of the boycott, while still of interest, become secondary, as the act of boycotting is the primary purpose (Kozinets & Handelman, 1998).

Voluntary simplicity is a social movement consisting of people who resist a high-consumption lifestyle, who seek to reduce their consumption, and who simultaneously increase their quality of life (Alexander, 2011; Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Grigsby, 2004). Consumption reduction and life simplification are a means to focus on intrinsic and non-materialistic sources of satisfaction, such as interpersonal relationships, social interactions, and activities (Black & Cherrier, 2010; Cherrier & Murray, 2007; Elgin, 1981; Iyer & Muncy, 2009; Zavestoski, 2002). The underlying motivations to pursue voluntary simplicity are also present in asceticism where detachment is believed to free the individual from the distractions of the material world and facilitate spiritual growth (Bort & Kieser, 2023). Voluntary simplicity allows adherents to attain a greater sense of authenticity, one of the main motivational bases of the self, which in most cases cannot be achieved through consumption alone (Marden & Belk, 2018; Zavestoski, 2002). Yet, voluntary simplifiers remain living within consumer culture and not in complete opposition to it (Etzioni, 1998). However, voluntary simplifiers are more satisfied with daily consumption choices, e.g., purchase decisions regarding food, than more consumerist individuals (Balderjahn et al., 2021).

Downshifting is sometimes regarded as a form of voluntary simplicity (Nelson et al., 2007; Shaw & Newholm, 2002). Downshifters make lifestyle simplification changes, such as working less, earning less money, and consuming less (Fournier, 1998; Schor, 1998). They strive to reduce stress, have more time for other activities, and achieve "balance in life" (Nelson et al., 2007). They are focused on attaining an uncomplicated and self-centered life, with less regard for wider external issues (e.g., environmental concerns) (Shaw & Newholm, 2002). They adopt many of the anti-consumption practices discussed above, such as repairing, reusing, making their own products, sharing with others, and occasionally boycotting (Nelson et al., 2007).

Custodian behavior refers to "an everyday practice that resists the wastefulness of consumer culture" (Cherrier, 2010, p. 261). In contrast to lifestyles such as voluntary simplicity and downshifting and the conventional conception that anti-consumption implicitly denies material possession attachment (Elgin, 1981; Schor, 1998), custodian individuals do not seek to reduce their number of physical belongings. They do, however, reject the acquisition of new items by collecting, keeping, and restoring all kinds of worn and used objects with the ultimate intention of saving them from being thrown away (Cherrier, 2010). Through

[8] The inverse of boycotts are *buycotts* in which consumers and activists reward companies that act responsibly or ethically through purchases (Friedman, 1996). However, buycotts and 'carrotmobs', temporary buycotts performed in a flashmob-style, do not require the participating individuals to make sacrifices or actively refrain from consumption (Hutter & Hoffmann, 2013). Buycotts are therefore less fitting in the discussion of anti-consumption practices.

their preserving practices, custodian individuals differentiate themselves from the throwaway ideology by constructing and expressing an identity based on values such as care, responsibility, heroism, and environmentalism. Their physical belongings materialize their subjective values and allow them to create new meanings through them (Cherrier, 2010; McCracken, 1986). In sum, by keeping used objects and preserving old artifacts, custodian behavior represents a form of anti-consumption (ibid).

Revising Belk's framework of possessions and the extended self

Based on the discussion of the present development toward anti-consumption behavior and its symbolic function, the following section will examine the extent to which Belk's (1988, 2013) propositions retain their validity with respect to such practices and in what aspects they require complementary considerations or an update. The guiding questions are how individuals who engage in anti-consumption practices can express and form their identities through their possessions and how Belk's existing framework would have to be modified to incorporate the shift in consumption patterns.

Environmental, self-expressive and symbolic motivations are interrelated and jointly drive anti-consumption behaviors (Black & Cherrier, 2010). Consumers' environmental concerns are based on certain personal values, such as environmentalism, responsibility, and altruism. Like consumption, anti-consumption allows individuals to express their beliefs, values, and overall identities as we will investigate.

Self-expression and de-extension through anti-consumption

Belk (1988) mainly analyzes how possessions positively contribute to the self and how they aid individuals in expressing their present and/or desired identities. The common conception is that consumption is necessary not only to maintain individuals' existing values, attributes, and beliefs but also to develop and enhance themselves in the pursuit of a better, desired version of their self (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Levy, 1959). Following this line of thought, reducing overall levels of consumption, although fundamental for environmental protection, would engender deleterious consequences for identity formation and development. However, anti-consumption practices stem from a motivation to avoid goods and services that are incongruent with the self. Therefore, anti-consumption may present a means for achieving a less extended self.

While anti-consumption ideally aims at the reduction of overall consumption, it does not mean that individuals completely cease to acquire products and services. As previously discussed, it involves acquiring only certain types of goods while avoiding others. Therefore, when consumers decide against acquiring an item due to environmental concerns, they do so by translating these values into action as a form of self-expression (Black, 2010; Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013). Individuals avoid products and brands due to symbolic incongruence (Lee et al., 2009a, 2009b), e.g., these objects are not consistent with their personal values (Kozinets et al., 2010). Brands may be further avoided because of a perceived lack of authenticity and an associated loss of individuality (Lee et al., 2009a, 2009b). As illustrated by custodian behavior, individuals' resistance to acquiring new items as a protest against throwaway culture additionally reflects their values (Cherrier, 2010).

By distancing themselves from such incompatible or undesired attributes, anti-consumption aids individuals in expressing and developing their identity (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013; Cherrier et al., 2011; Englis & Solomon, 1997; Kozinets et al., 2010). To arrive at a clearer definition of identity, they avoid possessions that would symbolize carelessness and selfishness associated with an undesired, non-environmentally conscious self (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013; Cherrier et al., 2011). Additionally, consumers wish to distance themselves from materialistic values such as possessiveness, selfishness, non-generosity, and envy (Belk, 1985). Such values spur a constant desire for material possessions and lead to a loss of autonomy, loss of consciousness, and loss of careful decision-making when consuming (Lee & Ahn, 2016). Dislikes and distastes are potentially more influential in defining identity than likes and tastes (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013; Hogg & Banister, 2001; Ogilvie, 1987; Wilk, 1997). This indicates that the self-concept is formed as much by anti-consumption as by consumption choices (Hogg & Banister, 2001).

Thus, anti-consumption behavior is driven by and allows individuals to distance themselves from their undesired selves which may lead to greater congruence between the present and the desired self. Therefore, anti-consumption results in a more clearly defined identity. In sum, what individuals decide not to consume may reveal more about them than what they choose to acquire. In his framework, Belk (1988) mainly focuses on the relationship between possessions and the desired self. Separating oneself, or de-extending the self, from certain material objects that symbolize undesired characteristics and therefore from a possible undesired identity constitutes a relevant update to the original formulation, as it helps explain how anti-consumption behavior contributes to the formation and development of the self.

Anti-consumption further implies a shift in individuals' focus from material possessions to immaterial possessions constituting the extended self. For example, voluntary simplifiers reduce (material) consumption and simplify their life to focus on non-materialistic sources of fulfillment. They

engage more in interpersonal relationships, social activities, and experiences (Black & Cherrier, 2010; Cherrier & Murray, 2007; Elgin, 1981; Iyer & Muncy, 2009; Zavestoski, 2002).

Thus, anti-consumption practices, by aiming at the reduction of consumption and often of material possessions, may enable a de-extension of the self. A de-extended self, in turn, would imply that fewer yet more value-based material possessions as well as people and experiences which are more central to the self constitute an individual's extended self. Such an identity may be more consistent over time, as it does not overly rely on (disposable and modish) material objects for its continuity but rather on fewer material possessions (except for custodian individuals) that have undergone a values-based selection process or other more central possessions like people or experiences.

Self-extension through creation

A further development related to the adoption of anti-consumption behavior is that possessions are increasingly incorporated into the extended self through creation. Belk (1988) presents three ways in which possessions are internalized, as outlined in Sect. 2.3.: control, creation, and acquaintance. It is argued that the monetary acquisition of an item may be considered an act of creation (Sartre, 1943). However, creation is usually commonly understood in the sense of actively bringing something into existence. Although buying an item brings it into existence within the self, its physical form has already been constructed. Monetary acquisitions may be more of a means of gaining control over the acquired object (ibid). Therefore, creation is understood here as the active contribution to the shaping of a possession.

Anti-consumption practices involve reusing, repairing, and creating one's objects or products, i.e., in the case of second-hand consumption (Türe & Ger, 2016) or custodian behavior (Cherrier, 2010). By employing objects in new uses and repairing them, individuals shape their form and meaning (Gregson et al., 2009). Custodian individuals, for example, restore an old and worn object to prolong the object's life (Cherrier, 2010). They contribute, even if partially, to its creation. This allows them to imprint their own sign and identity on it. The attachment to possessions is even greater when individuals make their own objects (e.g., a table, a piece of clothing) or products (e.g., making one's cleaning products). As Belk (1988) posits, hand-crafted possessions have more of their creator's identity invested in them and reflect more of their creator's self. Such behavior serves greater individuality.

Since possessions are understood as being all that individuals can call their own, beliefs and ideas can also be regarded as one's possessions. While Belk (1988) acknowledges the presence and importance of internal processes and ideas in the extended self, the framework does not discuss them in detail and rather focuses on how *objects* become part of the extended self. In his work on the extended self in a digital world, Belk (2013) incorporates virtual and dematerialized objects into the existing framework. As the term "user generated content" suggests, consumers can extend their selves through the creation of dematerialized and entirely online goods in virtual worlds (Nagy & Koles, 2016). One can conclude that other immaterial and intangible possessions such as ideas and values and their resulting behaviors will further influence the construction of identity for sustainability-concerned anti-consumers. This analysis could encompass ideas and values that are exchanged in the physical world, e.g., in community meetings with other environmental activists, as well as in the virtual world, e.g., in forums held in the metaverse (Nagy & Koles, 2014). These aspects would constitute a relevant contribution to the original framework in acknowledging the current development toward the reduced acquisition and (often) ownership of physical objects and the greater self-expression through decisions and behaviors.

Adherents of lifestyle movements such as voluntary simplicity and downshifting further move their focus from material to interpersonal and experiential domains (Balderjahn et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2007). Individuals must necessarily involve themselves with people and experiences and create value with them to integrate them as possessions in the extended self. Therefore, immaterial possessions offer added opportunities for the creation of meaning. Not only do individuals impose their identities on them, but these can also impose their identities on individuals. This notion is reflected in the creation of digital user-generated content (Belk, 2013), e.g., posts that inform others about climate change, activism, or pro-environmental behaviors. These posts become more central to the extended self once others engage with them through liking, commenting, or sharing. In turn, other users who have engaged with the post have then also allowed this post to become part of their extended self.

Moreover, boycotting, as a practice of consumer resistance, presents the possibility of partaking in the creation of products and services. As discussed above, participants seek to alter the products or services of a specific company or the overall meaning of an object (Friedman, 1985; Penaloza & Price, 1993). If the requested changes are met, individuals are likely to resume the acquisition of such goods.[9] Thus, boycotting may constitute a means for partaking in the creation of a product or service with the aim of subsequently acquiring it as one's possession.

[9] Due to the moral goals of boycotts, some consumers might continue to boycott certain companies, e.g., Nestlé, even after changes have been made (Friedman, 1985; Mayer, 1989).

In sum, anti-consumption practices offer opportunities to draw possessions closer to the extended self through creation. Through these alternative forms of consumption, the extended self is represented in and shaped by upcycled, homemade or restored objects as well as by user-generated content on pro-environmental or anti-consumerist behavior online.

Re-extension through experiences and the natural environment

The greater expression and formation of the self through people, places, and experiences rather than tangible items which are connected to anti-consumption practices may allow individuals to achieve greater balance between the different types of possessions constituting the self (Belk, 1988). Moreover, in comparison to people, places, and objects, experiences are more centrally located to the self and constitute a more significant part of individuals' identities (Belk, 1988; Carter & Gilovich, 2012). Thus, the greater emphasis on experiences and the connection to other people through anti-consumption practices, i.e. in the case of sharing (Belk, 2010) or boycotting (Klein et al., 2004), may assist and allow for the re-extension of the self to include the more lasting and central possessions of an experience or a personal connection.

Observing how the environment is negatively affected by the behavior of individuals and companies, e.g., littered forests and mangroves, water contamination through chemicals used in manufacturing processes, or high air pollution due to exhaust fumes, results in negative emotions such as sadness and anger. This is connected to consumers' experience of protective feelings toward the environment (Li et al., 2022). Destroying the environment results in the same responses as destroying someone's property or possessions, which is a consequence of perceived psychological ownership (Süssenbach & Kamleitner, 2018; Wang et al., 2022). Psychological ownership is defined as an individual's subjective and emotional sense of possessing an object and reflects a psychological tie to the target of ownership. It goes beyond legal or physical possession and involves the perception that something is 'mine' in a psychological or emotional sense (Pierce & Peck, 2018). In line with previous research, we propose that the perceived psychological ownership of the environment is equal to seeing the natural environment as a possession. While consumers de-extend their selves of material possessions for the sake of the environment, they also re-extend their selves to include the environment as a collective possession. Greta Thunberg's claim "our house is on fire" (The Guardian, 2019) refers to the natural environment with a possessive pronoun. Climate activists consider the environment to be a collective possession that needs to be protected from negative influences. It is important to stress here that the proposed possession of the environment is not meant in a controlling or dominant sense that could imply humans' superiority to the natural environment but in a protective and respectful sense that acknowledges its value and the interconnection between humans and the environment.

Rivers around the world, e.g., the Ganges in India, have been granted personhood. The lagoon Mar Menor in Spain is the first body of water in Europe to obtain legal rights. Consequently, the river has legal guardians that defend its rights to be restored and evolve naturally (Stokstad, 2022). This example stresses the proposition that the natural environment can become part of the extended self. Here, the natural environment, or rather the river, is seen not only as a collective possession but also as a person who becomes part of the extended self. In terms of centrality, the environment therefore becomes similarly significant to the construction of the extended self as people.

In conclusion, the environment becomes more central to consumers' decision-making and perception as well as the construction of the self. Shifting one's focus from material possessions to these collective possessions for the sake of the environment automatically incorporates the environment into the self, which we call the re-extension of the self.

Figure 2 visualizes the three anti-consumption outcomes: de-extension of things, self-extension through creation, and re-extension through experiences and the natural environment.

Conclusion

Our analyses shed light on the growing awareness and concern for environmental issues and especially the current development toward anti-consumption (e.g., Cherrier, 2009, 2010; Kozinets et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2009a, 2009b). The framework "Possessions and the extended self" by Belk (1988) and its update (Belk, 2013), which discusses the role of possessions for the self-concept, served as a basis to assess the symbolic implications of anti-consumption. Utilizing Belk's framework as a theoretical lens, this study illustrates how individuals have the capacity to articulate their inherent values, norms, and beliefs, thereby shaping and evolving their identity even as they curtail their consumption. In doing so, this research establishes a vital link between consumer culture theory and the domain of anti-consumerism, contributing to the literature and enhancing our comprehension of both consumer culture and anti-consumption.

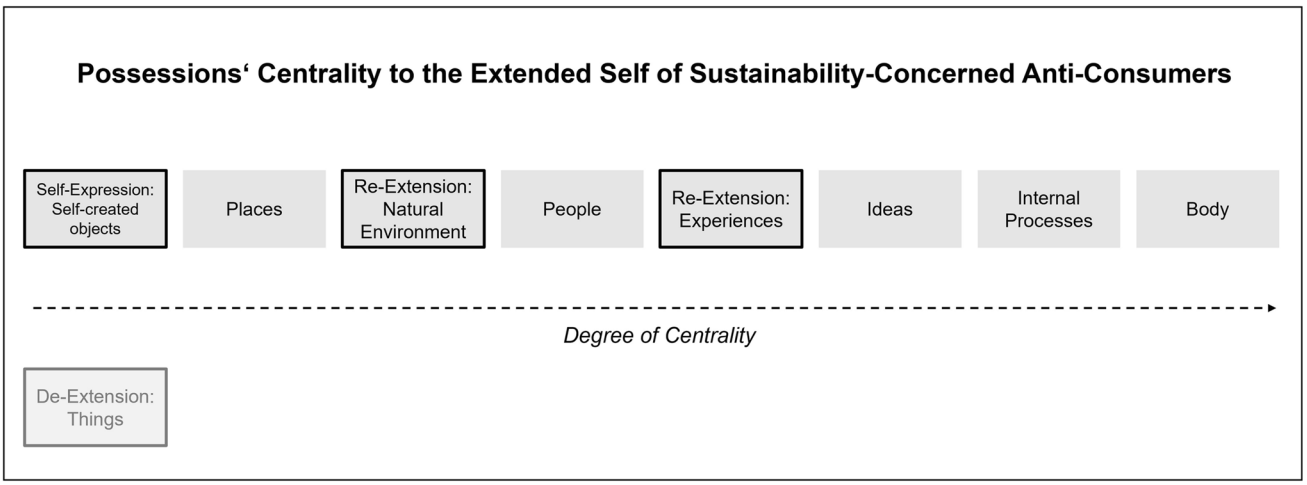

Fig. 2 Possessions including de-extension, re-extension and self-extension in increasing degrees of centrality to the extended self of sustainability-concerned anti-consumers (own illustration)

Research implications

We will first turn to research implications that arise due to the self-expressive function of anti-consumption behaviors. The propositions presented in Belk's (1988, 2013) framework apply to anti-consumption practices in that possessions continue to play an important role in self-formation and self-expression. They not only permit individuals to express themselves but also to develop themselves in the pursuit of their desired, ideal selves. In other words, although anti-consumers often strive to acquire only those products and services that are needed to fulfil fundamental human needs, this does not mean that consumption is regressing from its symbolic function toward its former predominantly utilitarian function. Possessions potentially adopt an even greater symbolic function, as those possessions that remain represent the altruistic and pro-environmental values of their owners.

As has been demonstrated with anti-consumption practices, individuals' lifestyles, behaviors, and decisions equally contribute to their self-formation. One might argue that behaviors and decisions are formed based on individuals' internal processes (e.g., their conscience) and ideas, which constitute Belk's (1988) extended self. Nonetheless, it may be difficult to determine how individuals decide or act solely by assessing their thoughts and ideas. Belk (1988) analyzes the symbolic role of possessions that have been consciously acquired. Furthermore, individuals are not only a reflection of their possessions but also of their behaviors, lifestyles, and decisions. What consumers choose *not* to consume reveals as much, or potentially more, about them as that which they choose to consume. The undesired self plays an important role in anti-consumption research, as it contributes to a greater congruence of behaviors with the present self and a more clearly defined identity.

Our analysis also suggests that consumers experience a de-extension of the self through anti-consumption. Since anti-consumers often (this is not a general rule, as demonstrated with custodian behavior) own fewer possessions due to their decreased consumption, material belongings with a symbolic function have undergone a values-based selection process and may therefore be of greater central significance to the self and hold more meaning to the individual. This stands in contrast to the short-lived, informal, and opportunistic relationships individuals typically have with their belongings in materialistic consumer culture (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2009). Such behavior allows for a potential de-extension and greater balance of the self by shifting individuals' focus away from material possessions and toward more immaterial possessions in the constitution of the self. Rather, they concentrate on immaterial sources of fulfilment and satisfaction. These constitute predominantly experiential acquisitions and interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, the fact cannot be disregarded that experiences, people, and objects equally belong to an extended self and that an entirely centralized self is not achievable (based on the presented propositions and analyzed literature contributions).

The above analysis also acknowledges that anti-consumption does not eliminate the expression and enhancement of the self through physical possessions, as it does not oppose itself entirely to the acquisition of new products and services and does not deny the material. Rather, anti-consumption is characterized by the increased incorporation of possessions into the extended self through individuals' participation in their creation. Anti-consumers extend the life of products by repairing, refurbishing, or upcycling them (Cherrier, 2010; Türe & Ger, 2016). Investing time, creativity and physical

labor into the creation or alteration of these material objects incorporates them into the extended self. Purchasing second-hand items that have been carefully sought after and selected from piles of discarded items also increases their personal value to the new owners (Guiot & Roux, 2010). In sum, material possessions and 'things' still play an important role for the extended self, yet self-created objects are more central to the self, as the creation of these objects provides greater value than merely buying new and impersonal possessions.

Finally, our analysis proposes that anti-consumers' selves are re-extended. Due to the value-expressive (non-)selection of certain material possessions, anti-consumers de-extend themselves, yet the stronger focus on experiences and the new focus on the natural environment re-extend the self. The anti-consumption practices and the possessions that remain parts of the extended self symbolize the importance the natural environment has for the individual. As a possession within the realm of the extended self, anti-consumers develop a sense of psychological ownership and protective feelings toward the natural environment (Süssenbach & Kamleitner, 2018; Wang et al., 2022).

Overall, the presented considerations derived from the discussion of anti-consumption behavior and its symbolic function imply that the reduction in consumption does not lead to symbolic losses, as could potentially be expected to be the case. Material possessions retain their significance for the self, as those symbolic possessions that remain represent the values of the individual and are often self-created. Moreover, the increased acquisition and integration of other (collective) possessions such as the natural environment into the self compensate for the potential reduction in material possessions and may even lead to greater self-definition. Table 1 summarizes the modifications proposed to Belk's (1988, 2013) extended self framework in relation to the dimensions of anti-consumption.

Practical implications

What do these implications signify for businesses and marketers? Essentially, they reveal that anti-consumption is not necessarily contrary to business success and progress. The current development toward anti-consumption presents a valuable opportunity for business actors to learn more about consumers and their behaviors, practices, and goals. By considering this distinct form of consumer behavior, they may further seize the opportunity to understand, reflect on and potentially shape the future meanings and functions of consumption.

The presented analysis implies first that businesses should invest in developing and offering environmentally sustainable products and services, as anti-consumers are greatly motivated by environmental concerns. Companies should adopt ecological responsibility and provide greater transparency over their practices. Since anti-consumers are greatly engaged in behaving sustainably, they do not fall for false claims of sustainable corporate activities (e.g., greenwashing) and are likely to engage in consumer resistance practices in such a case.

Second, and potentially most importantly, businesses should consider the symbolic meanings and associations of their products and services. By understanding how consumers associate goods with negative connotations and how these relate to the undesired self, they will be more capable of shaping and managing the positive symbolic consumption of their products and services. As Sekhon and Armstrong Soule (2020) have pointed out, anti-consumers who refrain from purchasing, e.g., new clothing to follow the current trend, could be perceived to have lower socioeconomic status because others attribute their non-consumption to financial constraints. However, brands can aid anti-consumers in forming and maintaining a higher perceived status by offering visible signals that convey the owner's environmental

Table 1 Summary of the modifications proposed to Belk's (1988) extended self framework in relation to the dimensions of anti-consumption

Label	Anti-Consumption Dimension	Self	Possessions
Self-Expression and De-Extension	Critique of overconsumption Reduction	• Distance from undesired self • Focus on desired self • De-extension of the self • Achieving a more value-based, enduring sense of self	• Conscious selection / decrease of overall amount of material possessions • Remaining possessions represent pro-environmental, altruistic values • Ideas, values and behaviors are important possessions
Self-Extension through creation	Alternative forms of consumption	• Extended self based on alternatively (self-) created possessions	• Upcycled, homemade, restored shared; overall (self-created) (im) material possessions
Re-Extension	Focus on (inter-personal) experiences Natural environment	• Re-extension of the self • Incorporation of the natural environment	• Possessions = People, Places, Experiences, Natural Environment / Nature / Earth

motivations. If individuals derive symbolic benefits from such products and services, they will not feel that they must make personal compromises to behave more sustainably, which will consequentially increase sustainable consumption. This applies not only to the sale of new but also to second-hand and vintage items, which play a significant role in anti-consumption. The second-hand, sharing, repair, and do-it-yourself markets present valuable business opportunities. The development toward reduced (material) consumption further presents the opportunity to offer more experiences and activities.

Limitations and future research opportunities

This paper presents a broad discussion of anti-consumption motivations and practices, yet anti-consumption constitutes a complex and comprehensive behavior, and not all its aspects could be represented in the scope of this paper. There exist further anti-consumption practices which may be motivated by additional reasons to the ones presented. Since it is broadly defined, anti-consumption may be subjectively interpreted in different ways by different individuals. Plentiful opportunities for further research exist in association with the topics addressed in this paper:

Academic research in the field of consumer culture theory and symbolic consumption is extensive and ever-evolving. This paper solely focuses on the applicability of Belk's (1988, 2013) framework and its inherent merits in the context of anti-consumption from a theoretical standpoint. Therefore, the implications derived from the analysis are based on the scope of the presented literature and theory and have yet to be explored in empirical research.

Given the concentrated focus on Belk's (1988, 2013) framework, the implications drawn from this study are specific to its parameters and may not be universally applicable to other existing frameworks, such as the movement of cultural meaning proposed by McCracken (1986), the meanings of domestic symbols (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981), or material possession attachment (Kleine et al., 1995). The exploration of these alternative frameworks remains a prospect for future research endeavors.

Belk (1988) describes four different levels of the self: the individual self, family self, community self, and group self. Only the individual self has been pertinent to the analysis at hand. It is relevant to analyze what symbolic functions anti-consumption behavior fulfils concerning the further levels of the self. A possible opportunity for future research could be how communal aspects of anti-consumption, such as collective activism, e.g., participating in organizations such as Fridays for Future, or shared experiences, e.g., community gardening, shape the extended group self. Social identity theory may especially prove pertinent in analyzing how anti-consumption practices contribute to self-expression through individuals' association and identification with certain social groups. The role of social status as a driver of consumer behavior and the concept of conspicuous (anti-)consumption (Sekhon & Armstrong Soule, 2020; Sun et al., 2021; Veblen, 1899) associated with it may be of added interest to this proposition.

Political (anti-)consumption could not be thematized in the scope of this analysis but constitutes an additional driver of anti-consumption behavior. It addresses issues of exploitation, inequality, and oppression caused by consumer culture. It further advocates that, contrary to the common conception, the actions of single individuals may positively influence the social and natural environment. Individuals reject products and services that are incongruent with their political ideologies (Cherrier, 2009; Sandıkcı & Ekici, 2009). Thus, political consumption presents a relevant research area within the realm of symbolic anti-consumption.

While globalization has introduced consumer societies and consumerism to most countries worldwide, the way consumerist values are conveyed and experienced is not uniformly consistent. We have limited our analysis to (anti-) consumers of the Global North who live in long-standing industrialized and consumerist societies that engage in post-materialistic discourse. However, differences in the way consumerism is discussed, questioned, and rejected will certainly vary depending on gender, place of residence (urban vs. rural), and personal aspects as well. These nuances and how they influence anti-consumption beliefs and practices await further exploration.

By focusing on anti-consumption tendencies in consumer societies of the Global North, we reinforce the Euro-centric nature of existing research. There is a pressing need for future research to extend the scope of inquiry to encompass a more diverse range of cultures, economies, and socio-political contexts. As Das and Albinsson (2023) point out, the subversive consumption practices observed in the markets of the Global South possess the potential to challenge and disrupt the standard and normalized Western discourses of sustainability prevalent in the Global North. Further research in this area will not only enrich our understanding of anti-consumption but also foster a more comprehensive and globally inclusive perspective on sustainable consumer behaviors. Regarding the reduced levels of consumption and de-extension of the self, the dispossession of belongings would constitute a relevant and encompassing aspect. Anti-consumers aim to keep and use their belongings as long as possible (Lee & Ahn, 2016). Yet, when these are no longer compatible with the present or the desired self, anti-consumers are likely to dispose of them in sustainable alternatives. As Trudel et al. (2016) have shown, identity-linked products are more likely to be recycled. However, it is worthwhile to investigate whether other forms of sustainable disposition, e.g., donating or selling products in the

second-hand marketplace, are preferred by anti-consumers as they further extend the products' lives.

Future research opportunities also arise in relation to self-extension through self-created possessions. The restoration, repair, or transformation of objects serves self-expressive purposes that motivate consumers to shop second-hand (Guiot & Roux, 2010). The connection between self-created items and the extended self could provide more benefits than mere self-expression to consumers. Identifying other underlying motives that strengthen the link between self-created possessions and one's extended self, e.g., creativity, could be investigated. However, the resulting research questions are not limited to the creation of physical goods but should also extend to pro-environmental user-generated content online.

Lastly, the natural environment has been introduced as a form to re-extend the self to incorporate this collective possession. Thus far, it has been established that the natural environment can evoke feelings of psychological ownership (Süssenbach & Kamleitner, 2018, Wang et al., 2022). However, the connection between the extended self and the natural environment is novel. A possible research endeavor would be to examine the link between the natural environment that can be physically interacted with, and which is tangible, e.g., the tree in front of the house, the lake or ocean that we swim in, versus the intangible natural environment in the form of climate or the atmosphere and the self. Is it more likely that consumers extend their selves more to the material and tangible environment than to the intangible natural environment?

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Declarations

Ethical approval Compliance with ethical standards is given as no data was collected from participants.

Competing interests The authors have no financial or proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.

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