Anti-consumption and self-identity: How does anti-consumption transformation contribute to self-identity construction?

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper explores customers' insights to understand how they can construct self-identity through the anti-consumption transformation.

Design/methodology/approach: Adopting the grounded theory methodology, this paper presents findings from laddering interviews conducted with twenty-two anti-consumers in Sri Lanka. All interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was undertaken.

Findings: Our findings uncovered that the anti-consumption transformation process is mainly influenced by the social and moral valuation of the environment, external pressure, willingness to change, monetary savings, and having children. In particular, the acts of rejection, reduction, and reuse are vital behavioral patterns observed in anti-consumption. Moreover, findings reveal that anti-consumption transformation contributes to individuals' self-identity by changing their surroundings, expressing anti-consumption to others, using increased control, and experiencing inner change.

Originality: This paper is one of the first attempts to qualitatively explore how pursuing anti-consumption behavior contributes to self-identity construction of an individual from the transtheoretical model of behavioral change perspective.

Keywords: Anti-consumption, Anti-consumption transformation, Self-identity, Self-identity construction, Transtheoretical model of behavioral change

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the exchange of goods was the dominant form of trade to manage living (Chaney et al., 2018; McCracken, 1987). Holding a commodity was felt as enhancing a sense of fulfillment, satisfaction, and happiness (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018; Ribeiro et al., 2019). Contemporarily, the exchange and possession of goods are replicated in consumption, thus enhancing an individual's self-identity (Moschis, 2017). It is attributed to establishing social relationships, involving a firm, its customers, and the reference group members (e.g., family and friends) (Moschis, 2017; Thompson and Loveland, 2015). However, overconsumption has taken a considerable toll on the environment (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018; Cherrier et al., 2011), resulting in excessive exploitation of natural resources and loss of bio diversity, thus threatening environmental sustainability (Lee et al., 2020).

Environmental sustainability today has become a mega trend in consumption literature, emphasizing the need to consume less (Ackermann and Gundelach, 2020). Responding to an increase in consumption, the recent anti-consumption movement has become a success (Cherrier et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2020). Anti-consumption refers to finding reasons *against consumption* and is defined as *"resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment or rejection of consumption more generally"* (Zavestoski, 2002, p. 121). Notably, an individual's effort toward becoming an anti-consumer, known as anti-consumption transformation (Basci, 2016), is a complex and broad study area, including its antecedents and consequences, which needs to be understood correctly (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018; Makri et al., 2020). However, anti-consumption research is still in its infancy (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018; Makri et al., 2020). Existing research in this field is uni-dimensional, focusing only on factors that influence anti-consumption (cf. Lee et al., 2020; Makri et al., 2020), thus could not capture the broad spectrum of the anti-consumption transformation process fully. Specifically, despite consumption being a significant predictor of an individual's self-identity (Thompson and Loveland, 2015), previous studies do not explicitly explore how anti-consumption transformation contributes to constructing an individual's self-identity (Lee et al., 2020; Udall et al., 2020). The one exception is Fernandes and Saraiva (2022), who examined how opting for alternative consumption enhances a self-transformation process towards a sustainable consumer identity. However, these researchers did not fully explore the notion of anti-consumption and restricted only to organic consumption.

On the other hand, although today, environmental sustainability is considered a top priority by consumers (cf. Lee et al., 2020), marketing literature reveals a dilemma about consumers' attitudes toward environmental sustainability and consumption behavior (Lubowiecki-Vikuk et al., 2020; Moraes et al., 2012; Park and Lin, 2020). Most consumers still desire overconsumption, particularly in collectivist societies (Patel et al., 2020). This is because, in collectivist societies, individuals perceive consumption as a symbol of a *"good life"* that gives them an esteemed identity (Fernandes and Saraiva, 2022). However, on the contrary, with the escalated attention toward environmental sustainability, there is an emerging trend among consumers to move away from overconsumption into a more spiritual, ethical, and simple lifestyle (Pangarkar et al., 2021; Ziesemer et al., 2021). As can be seen, such a fragmented, dualistic model of resistance against consumption exists in society (Lubowiecki-Vikuk et al., 2020; Park and Lin, 2020). Simultaneously, most scholars (e.g., Cambefort and Pecot, 2020; Fernandes and Saraiva, 2022) recently called for further research to portray the reality of anti-consumption transformation and its influence on self-identity construction.

This paper answers this call and aims to increase understanding of how individuals initiate the anti-consumption transformation process and how the initiation leads to self-identity construction by approaching the phenomenon of anti-consumption from the transtheoretical model of behavioral change perspective. Transtheoretical model of behavioral change is selected as the theoretical underpinning of this paper as it assesses an individual's intention to act on a new, healthier behavior (Prochaska et al., 2020). By doing so, our paper provides a novel theoretical conceptualization of how the anti-consumption transformation process can be used to reinforce and promote individuals' self-identity. This is because, although consumption and identity are profoundly inter-connected (Black and Cherrier, 2010), anti-consumption and self-identity are rarely qualitatively explored in marketing literature from the transtheoretical model of behavioral change perspective. As findings revealed, anti-consumption is not innate; instead, fostering anti-consumption behavior among individuals triggers a self-transformative process, eventually enhancing their identity.

In the following section, we present the theoretical reasoning and the associated concepts on which our study is conceptually anchored. We then offer details about the research methodology adopted, followed by a detailed discussion of the descriptive framework and key

themes identified from the analysis. Finally, we discuss the limitations of the paper by offering recommendations for future researchers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transtheoretical model of behavioral change

The transtheoretical model of behavioral change theory was developed in the 1970s by James Prochaska and his colleagues (Prochaska et al., 2020). The theory is formed by highlighting major psychological theories in a uniform framework to help people change their undesirable behaviors and develop positive behaviors. This theory was first used in cigarette smoking cessation, but over time its use has extended to promote positive health behaviors (Jiménez-Zazo et al., 2020). In recent years, the transtheoretical model of behavioral change theory has been applied to studies in the consumer behavior research domain, such as examining regular and sustainable consumption (Xiao, 2019).

The transtheoretical model of behavioral change theory is cyclical and explains behavior change as a dynamic process through a temporal dimension by describing them as a sequence of stages and processes by which an individual progress in adapting a specific behavior (Prochaska et al., 2020). Major concepts of this theory include the stage of change, the process of change, confidence, and decisional balance. It also identifies five stages of behavior change: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. Since fostering anti-consumption requires behavioral changes in individuals, the transtheoretical model of behavioral change is selected as the theoretical underpinning of this paper to explore how the anti-consumption transformation process can be used to reinforce and promote individuals' self-identity.

Anti-consumption

To fully understand the notion of anti-consumption, one must first comprehend its opposite, i.e., consumerism. Several scholars have defined consumerism in various ways. One of the widely cited definitions of consumerism derives from Bocock (1993), who defines consumerism as *"the active ideology that the meaning of life is to be found in buying things and pre-packaged experiences"* (p.50). Since the dawn of the 21st century, the advancement of technology and rapid changes in the business world concerning environmental sustainability have dramatically

changed individuals' consumption patterns (Bögel and Upham, 2018; Nykiel, 2001). Consumerism seemed out of control, and moral criticism of consumption began to appear (Chen et al., 2019; Makri et al., 2020). Consequently, the notion of anti-consumption attracted more attention because it is not a desirable ideal but rather an achievable reality (Lee et al., 2020; Pecot et al., 2021).

There is diversity in how the notion of anti-consumption is conceptualized in prior research (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018; Makri et al., 2020). Marketing scholars have conceptualized anti-consumption differently (Garcia-Bardidia et al., 2011; Makri et al., 2020), focusing on consumer resistance (Lee et al., 2011), boycotting (Delistavrou et al., 2020), ethical consumption (Sudbury-Riley & Kohlbacher, 2016), non-consumption (Cherrier et al., 2011), or emancipated consumption (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018). Implied in all these various definitions, it is an activity of refusal ranging from the polite *"I would prefer not to buy"* to the explicit *"total refusal of consuming."* One of the most cited definitions of anti-consumption by Zavestoski (2002) is followed in this study.

Building on this definition, Lee et al. (2011) broadly characterize anti-consumption behavior into three non-exclusive phenomena: *rejection, restriction*, and *reclaim*. Rejection indicates the exclusion of particular goods from consumption due to functional, ethical, or symbolic reasons (Lee et al., 2011; Makri et al., 2020). Restriction refers to the limitation of consumption when rejection is impossible (i.e., in cases such as electricity or water supply) (Lee et al., 2011). Finally, reclaim is the action or practice of using a product for its original purpose or to perform a different function (Lee et al., 2011).

Research on anti-consumption reveals that individuals' transformation to reduce consumption is a complex process that has received less attention (Fernandes and Saraiva, 2022). Literature has further shown that individuals can enact identity by transforming to consume less. (Fernandes and Saraiva, 2022; Makri et al., 2020).

Self-identity construction

To approach the self-identity concept, we refer to Bauman's (2002) theorization of self-identity, in which he comprehensively explains how the individualization of society influences the creation of individuals' identities. With the breakthrough of individualization, today, individuals

face different problems such as, choosing an attractive self-identity in the market and constantly struggling to maintain the selected identity (Titarenko, 2020).

Following contemporary marketing scholars (e.g., Berzonsky et al., 2003; Hitlin, 2003), Hermans and Dimaggio (2007) note that self-identity is socially constructed and constantly changing. Jenkins (2014), agreeing with Hermans and Dimaggio (2007), discusses self-identity as an interrelated process between an individual and the collectives. Collectives strongly influence an individual's self-image and view of the world through socialization processes and interaction between and with other individuals (Barbarossa et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Jenkins (2014) further emphasizes that self-identity is derived from differences and similarities, how an individual takes a stand from other individuals who are different from themselves, and how an individual identifies collectively by similarities with others, leading to group building and collectivism.

The notion of self-identity is of significant importance to this study in understanding why consumers move towards anti-consumption and how anti-consumption allows them to individuals' build self-identity. This is because evidence consistently portrays self-identity as a significant predictor of consumption choices (Becerra et al., 2023; Confente et al., 2020; Van der Werff et al., 2013a, 2013b, 2014).

Anti-consumption and self-identity construction

Although consumption and identity are profoundly inter-connected (Black and Cherrier, 2010; Fernandes and Saraiva, 2022), marketing scholars have studied the notions of anti-consumption and self-identity mostly in separate studies (e.g., García-de-Frutos et al., 2018; Makri et al., 2020), except for the following exceptions.

Cherrier (2009) adds a new perspective to anti-consumption by studying consumer resistance using the notion of resistant identity. Cherrier (2009) proposed two types of resistant consumer identities: the *hero* and *project identities*. The hero identity is associated with anti-exploitative consumer discourses and is imbued with values that express an alternative to the existing society (Cherrier, 2009). It is oriented toward an outer change. On the other hand, the project identity draws on discourses against positional consumption. The project identity is a process of *"freeing oneself from oneself"* (Hoy, 2004, p. 90). Creating the project identity allows

consumers to reposition themselves in society by carving out a niche or finding their place (Cherrier, 2009). As such, it is oriented toward an inner change.

Recently, the exhaustion of environmental resources and concerns for social consciousness has given rise to a new concept called *"political consumerism"* (Ackermann and Gundelach, 2020; Becerra et al., 2023). A political consumer addresses social inequalities and exploitation of the natural resources and the environment produced by the modern consumer society (Kam and Deichert, 2020). Consequently, a political consumer is described as having the *"hero identity"* based on how they aim to reshape and re-structure their everyday lives through active choices with an ideology of resisting unlimited mass production and consumption (Cherrier, 2009).

The notion of neoliberalism is also helpful in understanding how anti-consumption projects an individual's self-identity in modern society. Discussing neoliberalism and anti-consumption, Verdouw (2017) presents the notion of a downshifter. Downshifting is defined as an individual's decision to considerably reduce the income as a choice regarding the quality of life (Verdouw, 2017). By choosing to earn less thoughtfully and conscientiously, downshifters aim to think morally about their departure from social norms of everyday life instead of thinking economically, offering very little friction to neoliberal principles (Verdouw, 2017).

Recently, exploring how opting for organic consumption creates consumers' identity, Fernandes and Saraiva (2022) suggest that regular organic food consumption and environmentalism operate as a self-transformative catalyst to anti-consumption projecting sustainable self-identity. However, anti-consumption transformation trajectory has not explored fully in anti-consumption literature and little is known about how anti-consumption trajectory leads to self-identity construction. Thus, we decided to resort to a qualitative methodology to extend our knowledge of how individuals can develop self-identity through anti-consumption transformation.

METHODOLOGY

We decided to focus on Sri Lanka as it sets an ideal research setting due to the inconsistent and often conflicting consumption behavior of most Sri Lankans (cf. Gayathree and Samarasinghe, 2019). Although frugality has always been regarded as a virtue by Sri Lankans, the collectivist culture influences most Sri Lankans to make an impression about themselves on others by

consuming more (Rathnayaka et al., 2019). Moreover, the notion of anti-consumption is relatively unexplored in the Sri Lankan context (Gayathree and Samarasinghe, 2019); thus, a qualitative study is deemed required. Consequently, we adopted the grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Straus, 1967) primarily because it provides real insights to understand subjective social phenomena such as anti-consumption from the perspective of those involved (Basci, 2016). Further, the grounded theory methodology is used in this study as it is best utilized when researchers want to explain a process in detail (Graham et al., 2020; Goulding, 2002; Tajeddini, 2013), which is precisely the aim of this study. When using the grounded theory methodology, it is essential to use multiple qualitative data collection techniques and tools (e.g., observations, interviews, participant diaries, and memos) to ensure consistent data flow to the researchers (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Sample Selection and Data Collection

Since the population of this study is not visibly apparent, following Basci (2016), first, we created a Facebook group called *"The anti-consumer advocate"* to identify the potential respondents. We decided to focus on Facebook as it enables users to communicate and disclose their interests among other members and is the most popular social media platform in Sri Lanka (Rathnayake and Rathnayake, 2018). Several inclusion criteria have been applied when sending invitations to this group. All the potential members had to have a *"buy-free"* year at the time of data collection (i.e., they must have taken active action to lower their regular consumption and avoid impulse buying throughout the year). One month after forming the Facebook group, we could find 212 members. Because there are no specific guidelines for choosing sample size in qualitative research, we used the theoretical saturation strategy suggested by Eisenhardt (1989) to determine sample size. A strategic selection procedure was applied in selecting the sample, and accordingly, potential respondents representing different generations and living in crowded cities were identified. The theoretical saturation (Eisenhardt, 1989; Guba and Lincoln, 1994) was achieved with a sample of 20 respondents, with no further insights being obtained. Although we reached theoretical saturation with 20 interviews, we conducted two additional interviews to clarify relationships between conceptual categories and identify variations (Dworkin, 2012), resulting in 22 interviews.

A series of in-depth, face-to-face interviews were carried out by following the laddering interview technique to collect data (Ziesemer et al., 2021). The laddering technique allows respondents to freely express themselves during the interviews and, at the same time, enables the researchers to dig into detail whenever required, adapting to ever-changing circumstances (Ziesemer et al., 2021). All the authors, who are extensively trained in conducting in-depth face-to-face interviews, conducted the interviews themselves. Since we aim to understand how the respondents' initiated the anti-consumption within their everyday life, respondents were initially asked to describe sequences of consumption activities from the "*buy free*" year they had, including what they purchased, why, where, when, and with whom. As we delve deeper into the interview process, these initial descriptions were further probed with follow-up questions requesting the respondents to pronounce their understanding, experiences, and viewpoints about anti-consumption and how it contributes to self-identity construction. An interview protocol grounded in the anti-consumption literature was used in conducting the interviews (see Appendix A). Before the interviews, a pre-study consisting of three was conducted to test and refine the interview protocol, resulting in various changes, notably the order of questions or phrasing.

The interviews were conducted in each respondent's private space, took one to one and half hours on average, and were conducted over two months, from January 2021. The interviews were recorded with the respondents' consent, transcribed verbatim soon after each, and supplemented by field notes. Each interview transcript produced an average of twenty typed pages. In addition, we employed the member checking technique to assess the internal validity of the transcripts (Lincoln, 1995). Consequently, the interview transcripts were forwarded to the respondents through e-mail, requesting them to determine whether we appropriately interpreted the viewpoints based on what they said during the interviews.

Following the grounded theory methodology requirements, their living spaces were examined and photographed during in-home interviews with three respondents. Two more respondents sent photos of their living spaces via email at the researchers' request. Three respondents' social media profiles were also examined, and their anti-consumerism posts were considered in the analysis with their consent.

Data Analysis Method

Data collection and analysis continued in parallel, and all the researchers actively engaged in the data analysis. To begin, we carefully read and reviewed interview transcripts and supplementary materials several times to become acquainted with the content. Next, we inductively identified the in-vivo codes emerging from the data by meticulously going through the interview transcripts and research notes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We coded in a shared codebook to make viewing each other's coding simpler as we went along. Before finalizing the codes, we had multiple rounds of detailed discussion to reach a consensus about the identified codes. Further, intercoder reliability was calculated to test the consistency and validity of the shared codebook, and a substantial intercoder reliability value of 0.63 was received (Landis and Koch, 1977). This process led us to identify first-order categories through in-vivo codes, classify the first-order categories into second-order themes, establish the boundaries of themes, and summarize each theme's content through several rounds of intense discussions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). During this phase, we were attentive to the context in which the respondents shared their experiences to ensure that we understood the intended meaning of coding. After conducting such an inductive coding approach for six interviews, we identified a preliminary coding framework, and after that, the remaining interview transcripts and supplementary materials were analyzed deductively. Although a deductive approach is followed, we closely examined the remaining data to identify whether any other themes and categories emerged that the preliminary coding framework did not capture. After several rounds of constructive discussions, all the researchers agreed with the three overarching themes and categories that emerged from the data.

Table 1 contains information regarding the respondents' demographic profile and anti-consumption behavior. Pseudonyms were used to identify the respondents, ensuring anonymity. The respondents ranged in age from 23 to 55 years. The sample profile reflects that most respondents were females (80%) and had a *"buy-free year"* over two years during data collection. Further, more than 50 % of the respondents were degree holders and held managerial positions. Describing the *"buy-free year"* they had, most respondents highlighted that during that period, they reduced their regular household consumption by nearly one-third and purchased only essential items once a month from nearby retail outlets. The respondents further elaborated on the experience mentioning that all their family members also supported the decision to have the *"buy free year."*

FINDINGS

The findings stemmed from the thematic analysis are organized into three themes related to anti-consumption and self-identity: (1) the factors influencing anti-consumption transformation, (2) the anti-consumption transformation process, and (3) contribution of anti-consumption transformation process to self-identity construction. Each of these themes is discussed in detail below.

Theme 1: Factors influencing anti-consumption transformation

The findings indicate that different factors motivated the respondents to change their consumption patterns and become anti-consumers. These factors can be seen in five major categories as follows.

    1. Social and moral valuation about the environment

As opened up in the interviews, the willingness to be more sustainable and the perception that they can contribute to sustainability as individuals were the prominent driving forces behind most of the respondents' transformation towards anti-consumption. The following quote from Respondent C exemplify how environmental concerns influence them to consume less and become anti-consumers.

> *I want to contribute to more sustainable living and encourage the people around me to do so. By becoming an anti-consumer, I feel like I have set an example for others to follow. (C)*

Aligning with Makri et al. (2020), the above quote exemplifies, it was an emerging process, from thinking about how the respondents' actions adversely affect the environment to moving towards a more sustainable lifestyle by consuming less.

2. External pressure

The analysis shows that some respondents reduce consumption due to external pressure. In most instances, such external pressure has stemmed from social media, where the individuals experience stress or shame for consuming more.

> *Through social media, I saw how people had unnecessarily purchased New Year gifts for their children, relatives, and friends, and shops were selling counterfeited labels while keeping high profit margins. That is when I decided to do the contrary that my family and friends should receive the heartiest warm wishes for the New Year, nothing else. (A)*
>
> *I had been trapped in a dark hole of excessive consumption for years, making my life stressful. That's when I started to see how others lived their lives differently, and I felt almost ashamed of living the way I did and started consuming less. (F)*

The quotes above support Lee et al.'s (2011) view, exemplifying that the external pressure for the growing demand for excessive consumption should not be something individuals should espouse in their lives. Instead, as illustrated in the quotes, the adverse consequences of increased consumption allowed the respondents to rethink their consumption patterns and embrace anti-consumption.

3. Willingness to change

The following quote from Respondent G emphasizes that excessive consumption has resulted in poor self-esteem among some respondents. They felt terrible about consuming more and said that the anti-consumption transformation enhanced their self-esteem and enabled them to pursue sustainable living.

> *I used consumption as a show-off. I always thought wearing branded clothes and carrying branded handbags would project my social status. By doing all these things for years, I never felt satisfied. Instead, I became tired. However, when I started consuming less, I felt more liberated and comfortable and didn't miss anything. (G)*

As the above quote exemplifies, many respondents emphasized that they felt more liberated and healthier after pursuing anti-consumption behavior.

4. Monetary savings

The fourth category is linked to what motivates the respondents to pursue anti-consumption from an economic perspective. It discusses how monetary savings became an incentive to start consuming less. A typical pattern observed among the respondents is that they initially began anti-consumption to save money; however, over time, other motivations (i.e., pursuing sustainable living and feeling inner satisfaction) motivated them to consume less. As Respondent J reveals, *"Although I initially thought of consuming less as I had tight monetary constraints at the beginning, now I feel proud about doing so. Today, I have enough money to spend but still consume very little. Today, I want to lead a sustainable lifestyle, which motivates me now to consume less."*

Like Fernandes and Saraiva (2022), our findings echoed that most respondents perceived that pursuing an anti-consumption behavioral pattern allowed them to experience financial savings while preserving the environment and their non-materialistic values.

5. Having children

The findings uncover that having children influenced most respondents to follow anti-consumption. As the respondents emphasized, they have experienced a change in their perspectives on consumption after having children. These changes mainly stemmed from *"experience of inner change"* and *"fear for the future."* During the interviews, it was evident that all the respondents who are married and have children are experiencing an inner change in their consumption habits, feeling more responsible about the earth. Respondent R emphasizes that she felt an inner change after living "*buy-free"* for several years. She wanted to pass these values on to her children, thinking that future generations would have good living conditions. *"I will follow this lifestyle throughout my life and try to convince my children about the value of consuming less. That way, we can make a happy place for them to live."*

Respondent D sometimes feels too strict with her children as she also determines what they should buy from weekly pocket money. However, she says that she does these things as she firmly believes that *"I am responsible for making them understand how we consume things unnecessarily, which may create harmful effects in the future."*

Having an entirely contrasting viewpoint from others, Respondent I emphasized that he and his wife voluntarily chose to have a *"child-free"* marriage. The following quote describes

that their choice is closely linked to unsustainable living and the willingness not to contribute to more people consuming the ecological assets of the earth in an unsustainable manner.

> *My wife and I believe we do not need more people because today, humans have messed up our ecological systems with excessive production and consumption, all in an unsustainable manner. So why must we bring more people into this world and worsen it? (I)*

This view reflects the concept of political consumerism (Ackermann and Gundelach, 2020) and is closely linked to an active criticism of the social norms in collectivist cultures that stimulates consumerism.

Theme 2: Anti-consumption transformation process

The findings revealed that anti-consumption requires behavioral changes in individuals, and fostering anti-consumption behavior among individuals is a self-transformative process. How anti-consumption has initiated a transformation process within respondents could be better described by referring to respondents' anti-consumption behavioral patterns and experiences they obtained through that.

1. Anti-consumption behavioral patterns

As uncovered in our interviews, the anti-consumption behavioral patterns of the respondents were not uniform, and there were considerable variations in their approaches to anti-consumption. We identified that the respondents demonstrate anti-consumption by rejecting, reducing, or reusing. Theoretically, our findings align with Lee et al. (2011), who conceptualize anti-consumption using rejection, restriction, and reuse. Further, as some respondents emphasized, although they tried their best to have *"buy-free"* years, it was never an easy option. Still, there are some exceptions where they had to deviate from anti-consumption. Each of these instances is detailed below.

Rejection

It was revealed that seventy percent of the respondents have started rejecting consuming a wide range of products to become anti-consumers. For instance, Respondent E echoed, *"I have stopped purchasing branded clothes for quite some time now, and I feel like it is just a waste of*

money." Further, Respondent I emphasized, *"I try not to use global brands as much as possible. By doing this, I can save money and express support for uplifting local businesses."*

Reduce

In addition to rejecting consuming particular goods, our findings reveal that anti-consumption behavioral patterns include reduced consumption. For instance, Respondent D describes her anti-consumption behavior mainly referring to reducing her consumption levels. As she describes:

> *I will wait until I have a full load before using the washing machine, mostly twice a week. Also, I am trying to minimize using other electronic devices at home as much as possible. Also, I use my car when going to the office, but I try to limit it as much as possible by carpooling whenever possible. (J)*

> Respondent J explained her anti-consumption behavior: *"I don't buy many packaged food or pre-cooked meals, primarily fresh fruit and vegetables, so there's nothing much to keep in the refrigerator. We use the washing machine less frequently for power and water conservation, and that's easier with only two of us at home. Also, I walk to work, so I use the car fairly sparingly."*

> As reflected in the above quotes, both respondents' behaviors show a diversity of anti-consumption behavioral patterns that cover a broad range of essential activities in their everyday lives, such as washing, cooking, eating, and traveling. In addition, these quotes highlight that their efforts and commitment to anti-consumption are contingent upon their lifestyles without compromising other roles they have to play.

Reuse

Apart from rejection and reduction, some of our respondents emphasized another practice positioned against consumption: reuse. On the one hand, reusing is opposed to acquiring and using new products, but it is also against the unnecessary disposal of products (Cherrier et al., 2011). Regarding her anti-consumption habits, Respondent H said she uses ice cream tubs and yogurt containers to store food items in the refrigerator.

> *Items like ice cream tubs and yogurt containers come in various sizes and are perfect for storing a range of foods, from fresh vegetables and fruits to cooked meals, in the refrigerator. Some have tight enough seals to hold curries and liquids too. (H)*

Respondent V showed and explained that he and his wife reuse plastic bottles at home instead of buying expensive pots for gardening. He describes:

> *We are trying to use plastic bottles for gardening by setting bottles on its side, cutting an opening in the middle, filling them with compost fertilizer, and adding a plant. We even attach cords or chains to create hanging planters with varying levels of bottles arranged horizontally to add more colors to our garden. (V)*

Exceptions

Most quotes included expressions such as *"trying"* or *"as much as possible,"* demonstrating that anti-consumption is not an innate concept and it requires efforts, commitments, and acceptance of failures. Sharing their thoughts on failures, many respondents revealed that it was not always easy to adhere to anti-consumption, and there were some spontaneous exceptions. However, they emphasized that these exceptions do not mean that they ultimately gave up the *"buy-free"* pattern but resulted in regret or shame. As the below quote from Respondent G exemplifies, she had difficulty resisting spontaneous shopping in some instances.

> *Although I always try not to consume unnecessarily, sometimes it happens to me on impulse. Sometimes I "accidentally" buy items, such as clothes and house decors, as it gives temptation. Every time it happened, later I regretted it and, in some instances, returned to the store." (G)*

Most respondents find it extremely hard to apply anti-consumption regarding *"experiences."* According to them, despite transforming to anti-consumption, experiences were considered a must in enjoying life. As Respondent S emphasizes, *"Experiences were never in my "buy-free" year, as I make a lot of trips and adventures with my family. I firmly believe that it allows me to spend quality time with my family, and gives me a free mind, at least for some time."*

In line with Black and Cherrier (2010), our findings uncovered consumption of experiences is considered an exception in anti-consumption. It is considered necessary as they create new memories and allow individuals to spend time with close associates.

2. Anti-consumption experience

The following section describes the anti-consumption experience of the respondents mainly from two different aspects: time and social aspects.

Time aspects

The findings revealed that the respondents had experienced significant time savings after transforming to anti-consumption. As Respondent C described, she experienced a big difference in not having to deal with all the possessions she had before, explaining that the more things she had, the more time she took care of these things in terms of repairs and maintenance. It allows her to socialize and focus more on the family while saving her time on routine maintenance and repairs.

> *Every week several hours were spent on repairs and maintenance. However, after pursuing a buy-free pattern, I now experience a huge difference and have much time with my family at home. (C)*

Emphasizing a different aspect of time savings, Respondent G explained how her choices about reducing consumption had influenced her to lower 25% working hours. As the quote below clarifies, she quickly felt that choosing the time in advance of money was the right choice.

> *Today I reduced my workload by 25%, and it is entirely self-chosen. I quickly felt that choosing time instead of money was the right choice. Now, I lead a simple life with my family without feeling I have to earn much money since I have given up expensive buying habits. (G).*

During the interviews, as an initiation in their self-transformation efforts toward anti-consumption, we also uncovered that several respondents deescalated social media use which has been time-consuming and made them more inclined to consume. It was evident from their social media profiles and usage during the last 2 to 3 years. As some respondents emphasized, the rejection of social media has resulted in significant time savings.

> *Today, I do not spend much time on Facebook, Instagram, or any other social media. I have realized that social media often forces us to go for unnecessary consumption to be*

part of the trend. However, once I control social media, I experience a massive difference in my time for my children and family. (K)

Given the above extracts, it is evident that most respondents had an opinion that anti-consumption has resulted in significant time savings. Thus, now they are getting used to a new sustainable lifestyle where they can spend more time with their families with inner peace.

Social aspects

The findings uncovered how the collectivist culture in Sri Lanka has shaped how individuals perceive consumption and consumption patterns.

We have learned from early childhood that overconsumption is the only way to have a satisfying life and be recognized by society. But today, I feel that we are getting fed up with a culture that says, "buy this, you need this." (D)

I grew up with the ambition to be like an average person who lives today in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, owning a car, working all the time, owning a house, getting married, and having children are essential. It is, of course, the norm of the society we have grown up in, and I also imitated the same norm that already existed. However, today, when I look back, I feel like it is a vicious cycle that we all go through and need to relook at. (B).

As illustrated in the above quotes, the consumption behavior of the respondents is a learned approach influenced by the social norms in Sri Lanka that they were exposed to during their upbringing. However, most respondents emphasized the need to wake up from this learned approach and revive the consumption behavior, focusing on living with less consumption. Our analysis further indicates that during the interviews, the respondents criticized the conventional social structure and consumption behavior in collectivist cultures, emphasizing that this way of life affects their mental peace and neglects their relationships with themselves and the environment. The below quote from Respondent A further clarifies this point.

I realized my whole life is based on following this sick idea of growth. Everything is supposed to grow all the time, and everything is supposed to be better. This is how our society is "supposed to look." Sadly, most people in this society never talk about growth correctly without harming the environment. (A)

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As demonstrated in the above quote, aligned with Fernandes and Saraiva (2022) and Makri et al. (2020), some respondents believe that there is an alternative way of living that is different from how ordinary people live in collectivist cultures like Sri Lanka. Additionally, most respondents hope for a *"better way"* of remodeling modern society with a more sustainable approach to growth and consumption.

Theme 3: Contribution of Anti-consumption Transformation to Self-identity Construction

Aligning with the transtheoretical model of behavioral change theory (Prochaska et al., 2020), the following section presents the findings regarding how the respondents perceive behavioral changes initiated by anti-consumption habits allow to construct their self-identity.

1. Changing the reference groups

During the interviews, it was revealed that some respondents firmly believed that consuming less and getting their reference group to do the same helped them form their identities among their close associates.

> *I started with myself and explored to identify why I go shopping unnecessarily. Today, I have taken an important step by consuming less. I started convincing my family and friends and making them realize what a hunt it is. (G).*

As exemplified in the above quote, Respondent G described how willingness to change at a personal level has significantly impacted society by making her reference group realize the value of anti-consumption. In line with Respondent G, Respondent S also shared her experience by describing how she feels different by living consumption-free and her willingness to make many people do the same.

> *If I could make many people think, "How would it be if I only bought food, medicine, and consumables for a month?" then many would realize that it's not that hard. I felt so much better after I became an anti-consumer. I want others to experience this change and make their lives more meaningful. (S)*

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2. Expressing anti-consumption to others

During the interviews, it was revealed that some respondents' descriptions of living *"buy-free"* align with the desire to inspire others by exposing their consumption habits through social media.

> *Among my followers, I have known for living consumption-free for quite some time. I feel that my followers are a bit impressed by it, which has redefined my identity. (C)*

As exemplified in the above quote, some respondents shared with us some of the posts and photographs they shared on their social media profiles, encouraging their followers to pursue anti-consumption behavioral patterns. Similar to Verdouw (2017), our findings show that the respondents appreciate talking and appearing on social media about living consumption-free and believe that it helped them influence their followers while redefining their identity or *"what they become known for."*

3. Using increased control

As uncovered in the interviews, we could identify that some respondents have created their self-identity through increased control for consuming less. Sharing their experiences, many respondents describe how they felt better and more thoughtful in their choices after living with less consumption. Many respondents now feel less stressed and more comfortable as the focus has shifted from different types of goods to a greater emphasis on themselves and their well-being due to consuming less. This is mostly reflected when it comes to consuming clothes. As Respondent E revealed:

> *Earlier, I used to think for several weeks before any function what I would wear for that, and everything was so connected to new purchases and what others would think about me. But, now I feel more relaxed and comfortable as I have a different focus in life. Today, I am focusing more on myself and the experience. I want to be myself more at any function. (E)*

As Respondent P emphasized, her peers and social media constantly pressured her to consume more. To clarify her claim, she shared social media posts encouraging purchasing fashion and beauty cosmetic items that her friends tagged her. However, now she has become fed up with these and has become more controlled and responsible when consuming. As she emphasized:

I do not want to be a slave of anything to anyone, whether it is a product/ brand or any of my peers. Therefore, I have stopped engaging in discussions related to shopping or consumption on social media. Instead, today, I have started to think about how I consume with some contempt, and I have begun to question everything. (P)

The above quote echoes back to the section on factors influencing anti-consumption transformation. Moreover, it relates to how respondents experienced stress or shame regarding consumption due to external pressure from peers and social media. Consequently, our findings reveal that several respondents have chosen to actively avoid discussions about consumption, which contrasts with the views presented by Lee et al. (2011). As they indicate, such practices allow them to experience relief and a reduced perceived need for consumption.

4. Experiencing inner change

During the interviews, respondents discussed how anti-consumption transformation helped them to construct their identities by experiencing inner change and gaining self-esteem. The following quote exemplifies this.

I discovered myself over the last two years and noticed that earlier I always wanted confirmation from others for all that I purchased, but it is not the case anymore. Earlier, it happened due to my insecurity about me and lack of self-esteem. But, today, I have redefined my identity through anti-consumerism, and even if I buy something, I do it for my purpose. (H).

Similar to Black and Cherrier (2010) and Fernandes and Saraiva (2022), as the above quote conveys, some of the respondents' previous consumption patterns were a part of their identity construction by impressing others, focusing on what others think about them, and getting confirmation from others. However, as Respondent H emphasized, reducing consumption has contributed to a sense of finding themselves and creating the feeling that they are consuming for themselves, not others. Also, by doing so, they feel more *"like them."* In other words, it implied that consumption is more closely linked to and contributes to an individual's self-identity. The quote below from Respondent A clearly illustrates how anti-consumption contributes to redefining their identity by changing needs and values in life.

All this is more than just avoiding purchasing goods, this is personal development, and one must constantly investigate their needs and what is important to them. Knowing what to have and not to have in life and how it reflects an individual's identity is vital. (A)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

By proposing the anti-consumption transformation model (see Figure 1), this paper endeavored to understand how individuals initiate a self-transformation process due to pursuing anti-consumption habits and how it has helped an individual construct self-identity through it.

<< Insert Figure 1 here>>

As suggested in the model, our findings align with the transtheoretical model of behavioral change (Prochaska et al., 2020), and are mainly structured on three key themes: the factors influencing anti-consumption transformation, the anti-consumption transformation process and how it contributes to self-identity construction. As our results indicate, anti-consumption is integral to trying to live a more sustainable life. In particular, in line with Lee et al. (2011), the acts of rejection, reduction, and reclaim are uncovered as vital behavioral patterns observed in anti-consumption. However, contrary to Lee et al. (2011), we understood that most respondents considered the consumption of experiences as an exception to anti-consumption. This is because unlike goods, experiences allow individuals to create new memories and spend time with family and friends. Thus, whenever possible, it appears that no one wants to miss such an opportunity.

In keeping with the transtheoretical model of behavioral change (Prochaska et al., 2020) and Jenkins (2014), our findings indicated that transforming toward anti-consumption enables respondents to redefine their identities, both implicitly and explicitly. Our findings also relate to consumer-resistant identities proposed by Cherrier (2009) in many ways. As uncovered in the interviews, the respondents who aspired to change their reference groups had more in common similar to Cherrier's (2009) description of the hero identity. However, unlike the hero identity, they are more expressive and willing to share their experiences of anti-consumption transformation, thinking that such efforts will become a part of their identity or contribute to *"what they become known for."*

However, the respondents we categorized as those who exercise increased control in building their self-identity through anti-consumption have similarities with Cherrier's (2009) project identity. Similar to project identity, these respondents also focus on controlling their consumption in constructing their self-identity. Respondents who believed that anti-consumption transformation allowed them to build their self-identity through experiencing inner change shared considerably more with Cherrier's (2009) notion of project identity.

Our findings further entail that anti-consumption is closely interrelated with the notion of neoliberalism. Verdouw (2017) describes that downshifters thoughtfully and conscientiously depart from normative forms of everyday life to anti-consumption, contributing to society's welfare more meaningfully and sustainably. Our findings strongly support this notion, which shows that all respondents are conscious of what they consume and actively depart from social norms in collectivist cultures to form a better society. Although there are still some exceptions in certain instances, most respondents emphasized that their consumption patterns are now primarily governed by social and moral valuation about the environment and willingness to experience an inner peace within their souls by doing less harm to the environment.

Theoretical implications

The variation in anti-consumption behavior has been puzzling academics for decades (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Makri et al., 2020). Although consumption and identity are profoundly interconnected (Black and Cherrier, 2010), so far, anti-consumption and self-identity are rarely qualitatively explored in marketing literature. In such circumstances, our paper makes a unique theoretical contribution in several ways. First, our paper is one of the first attempts to qualitatively explore how pursuing anti-consumption behavior contributes to self-identity construction of an individual from the transtheoretical model of behavioral change perspective. Second, this paper contributes to burgeoning anti-consumption literature by emphasizing that anti-consumption is not innate; instead, fostering anti-consumption behavior among individuals triggers a self-transformative process, eventually enhancing their identity. As uncovered, the anti-consumption transformation process of individuals is not uniform, thus resulting in different behavioral manifestations (i.e., rejection, reduction, and reuse).

The third and the most vital contribution of this paper to anti-consumption literature is proposing a theoretical conceptualization of how the anti-consumption triggers a self-

transformation process within individuals that can be used to reinforce and promote their self-identities. As presented, the anti-consumption transformation carries undeniable changes in individuals' attitudes toward consuming less; some focus on inner changes, whereas others concentrate on outer changes. Through the proposed framework, our paper highlights how disparities in changes in individuals' attitudes resulting from anti-consumption transformation contribute to constructing their self-identity differently.

Implications for practice

The existence of dualistic consumers with significant variations in anti-consumption behavioral patterns indicates that though individuals seem concerned about environmental sustainability, they are still dazzled by materialism and its accompanying charm (Lubowiecki-Vikuk et al., 2020; Park and Lin, 2020). Moreover, consumption patterns in collectivist cultures are not always consciously chosen but are constrained mainly by materialism and social norms (Makri et al., 2020). On such grounds, our findings provide important implications for public policymakers and marketers in collectivist societies. They should focus on making mainstream customers aware of their unquestioned consumption habits and how materialism could decrease their well-being. Simultaneously, they should also educate and effectively communicate with mainstream customers on anti-consumption and how it can help them to experience a change in their lives. Such knowledge could help individuals falling in the dualistic cluster move to the anti-consumption trajectory and thus help construct self-identity.

Limitations and future research directions

Our paper has some limitations that present opportunities for future research. First, data collection happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, which altered many people's lifestyles, including consumption patterns (Chen et al., 2020). Therefore, we urge future researchers to conduct this study once the country returns to the new normal to see whether these findings hold by then. Second, this study mainly explored the respondents' opinions and attitudes through verbal responses. While laddering is a sophisticated method for eliciting customer cognitions through verbal responses (Ziesemer et al., 2021), it isn't easy to believe that the verbal responses accurately reflect actual behavior (Kallmuenzer et al., 2021). An ethnographic study would allow future researchers to understand better how self-identity can be constructed through anti-

consumption transformation. The findings of this paper also present several intriguing questions for future investigation, three of which will be discussed here. First, future researchers can supplement the qualitative inquiry of anti-consumption in other ways, such as focusing on different social groups or gender disparities, which were not studied more thoroughly in this paper. Second, a quantitative investigation to determine the extent of anti-consumerism in the Sri Lankan context is highly recommended. Third, conducting our study in Sri Lanka, a country with high economic instability and collectivist culture, limits the scope of our research to relatively less privileged consumer groups. Examining anti-consumption behavioral patterns of affluent individualistic Western consumer culture context will require reframing the proposed framework. Thus, comparing our findings with other consumer cultures would be interesting in evaluating the differences in anti-consumption patterns among various cultures.

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