



# Inside the sustainable consumption theoretical toolbox: Critical concepts for sustainability, consumption, and marketing



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## ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**  
Sustainable consumption  
Responsible consumption  
Anti-consumption  
Mindful consumption

## ABSTRACT

This article provides a foundation for future marketing research on sustainable consumption through the application of three prominent theoretical perspectives of consumer behavior: responsible consumption, anti-consumption, and mindful consumption. This article considers how each perspective can help researchers better understand how consumers can engage in sustainable consumption practices, and develops insights that emerge from the simultaneous examination of multiple theoretical perspectives.

## 1. Introduction

Today's consumers live in a society with unprecedented individual comfort, convenience, and choice. The products consumers purchase come from sellers in the marketplace, which in turn acquire those products or their inputs from factories and farmhouses, whose supply chain starts in the same place—namely, the natural environment. Although the connections between how people live and the ecological system are made opaque by the complexity of today's economy, the simple truth is that consumption patterns cannot continue at their current rate (Lim, 2016; Peattie & Collins, 2009).

The idea of sustainable consumption has received a great deal of attention. International policy organizations (e.g. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, United Nations, Commission for Sustainable Development) and national research programs (e.g. in the United States, Norway, and the Netherlands) are beginning to realize that the patterns and levels of contemporary consumption are not ecologically sustainable. Many people from the scientific research community, as well as others, have argued convincingly and forcefully that current levels of consumption of natural resources and practices are unsustainable. This is evident from the nascent efforts not only to encourage sustainable consumption but also to understand how changes in sustainability might be undertaken. For example, prior research has investigated ethical consumption (Cherrier, 2005; Shaw & Shiu, 2003), environmental consciousness (Schlegelmilch, Bohlen, & Diamantopoulos, 1996), ecological intelligence (Jacobs, 2009), irrational desires (Elliott, 1997), consumption values (Lee, Levy, & Yap, 2015), place identity (Lee, Yap, & Levy, 2016), extended self (Kunchambo, Lee, & Brace-Govan, 2017), social loading (Wilhite & Lutzenhiser, 1999), cognitive dissonance (Thøgersen, 2002),

experiential meanings (Ger, 1999), ecological marketing (Chouinard, Ellison, & Ridgeway, 2011), pro-social marketing (Dibb & Carrigan, 2011), and plenitude consumption (Schor, 2010, 2012), among others. Similarly, various public policy approaches have also explored ways to resolve these problems (Lodge, 2001; Martens & Spaargaren, 2005; Prothero et al., 2011; Quinn, 1971; Thøgersen, 2005).

Despite the work conducted in academia, business communities, governments, and non-profit organizations to understand and change unsustainable practices, such practices persist and are being amplified by the continued growth of the global economy (Assadourian, 2010; Henderson, 1999; Peattie, 1999; Seth, Sethia, & Srinivas, 2011; Varey, 2012). Furthermore, the notion of sustainable consumption itself is a problematic issue and field of scholarship. According to Gordon, Carrigan, and Hastings (2011) and Peattie and Collins (2009), critics view sustainable consumption as an oxymoron because to “consume” something means to use it up or destroy it—the complete opposite of “sustainability.” A different perspective of “consumption” is therefore required. Traditionally, consumption is narrowly discussed as being confined to the contextual lens of purchasing (e.g. Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Mason, 1993; Wertenbroch, 1998; Westbrook, 1987). This creates a problematic situation because understanding the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of any form of consumption requires a holistic comprehension of all potential impacts (e.g. social environmental) that occur throughout the entire production and consumption cycle of a product (Jones, Clarke-Hill, Comfort, & Hillier, 2008). Thus, consumption needs to be understood not as an activity of purchase but as a process of decisions and actions that include purchasing, product use, and the handling of any remaining tangible product after use (Peattie & Collins, 2009).

In addition to consumption, only narrow discussions of sustainable

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.05.001>

Received 9 April 2016; Received in revised form 30 April 2017; Accepted 2 May 2017  
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development, which includes both consuming and producing, have appeared in the literature, most of which emphasizes environmental dimensions rather than economic, social, and ethical dimensions of sustainability (Lim, 2016). Furthermore, of the environmental dimension, impacts such as energy use or carbon emissions have dominated discussions over others, such as the impact on biodiversity (Peattie & Collins, 2009). Although researchers agree on the need to reduce resource utilization (sustainable consumption) as part of sustainable development (Kotler, 2011; Peattie, 2001), a lack of consensus exists on whether consumption should be reduced or just changed and whether individual consumers have the capability to contribute significantly to resource conservation (Banbury, Stinerock, & Subrahmanyam, 2012). It has also proved difficult thus far to agree on a precise definition of the term “sustainable consumption” (Dolan, 2002). As Peattie and Collins (2009, p. 108) stated in their guest editorial in a special issue on sustainable consumption:

More than one contributing author, when requested by referees to provide a clear and explicit definition of sustainable consumption, decline to do so on the basis that they do not believe attempts to settle on a single view were genuinely helpful.

Nonetheless, the realization that consumers' choices, behaviors, and lifestyles—that is, their consumption decisions—play a vital role in achieving sustainable development is one of the (relatively few) points of agreement to have emerged in the last decade (Jackson & Michaelis, 2003). Ultimately, the problems related to unsustainable consumption are growing, and the approach to addressing them must become more intentional, comprehensive, and systematic (Prothero et al., 2011).

If marketing is truly the ultimate social practice of postmodern consumer culture (Firat, 1993; Firat & Dholakia, 2006), it carries the heavy burden of determining the conditions and meaning of life in the future (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). Van Raaij (1993) echoes the idea that marketing plays a key role in giving meaning to life through consumption. Although academics and practitioners from various disciplines (e.g. marketing, psychology, sociology, and economics) have explored ways to encourage consumers to choose more sustainable products, scholarship still lacks understanding of how to encourage more sustainable patterns of consumption, especially for the society at large. This article agrees with Lim (2016) and Webster (2009) that marketing has been more data driven than theory driven, which highlights the need for a sound theory base to understand the interplay between sustainability and consumption. Marketing theories (and theoretical perspectives) to analyze and describe sustainable consumption practices remain underdeveloped. As sustainability continues to grow as a central concern of many stakeholders in society, researchers need to offer new insights that build on current knowledge on sustainability and consumption and strive to develop a holistic conceptualization of sustainable consumption. Toward this end, this article draws on a set of well-established theoretical perspectives to articulate their contributions to promote sustainability in consumption for marketing and consumer behavior research. According to Connelly, Ketchen, and Slater (2011) and Lundberg (2004), relying on theories (and theoretical perspectives) that have demonstrated their usefulness for explaining empirical phenomenon should instill a measure of confidence in the insights derived from them.

The main goal of this conceptual article is to inspire marketing scholars to consider how sustainable consumption fits into their research agendas and to provide a broad conceptual foundation for that research. By bringing consumption issues to the fore, this article reviews, extends, and integrates three prominent theoretical perspectives relevant to the pursuit of encouraging greater sustainability consumption practices among consumers—namely, responsible consumption, anti-consumption, and mindful consumption. Recently, Connelly et al. (2011) leveraged nine theoretical perspectives to set an agenda for research on sustainability marketing. This article takes a similar approach by developing a “theoretical toolbox” that marketing

and consumer behavior researchers can use to build knowledge about sustainability, consumption, and marketing. More specifically, this article considers how each perspective can help researchers better understand how consumers engage in sustainable consumption practices. This article then attempts to extract critical features of a turbulent field that pervades the entire fabric of society and to condense them into a forward-looking blueprint for sustainable consumption—that is, the article's concentration on social-psychological frames of reference should directly propel greater discussion in closely related areas, such as consumer behavior, marketing, psychology, and sociology, and indirectly provide greater insights and foundations for multidisciplinary work (e.g. behavioral economics and finance) on the topic of sustainable consumption.

In essence, this article makes three major contributions. First, it offers greater clarity on the concept of sustainable consumption by delineating its conceptual boundaries. Second, this article makes a case for taking responsible consumption, anti-consumption, and mindful consumption as theoretical perspectives to sustainable consumption and delivers a comprehensive review of key insights from the extant literature in these areas. Third, this article provides a critical evaluation of these theoretical perspectives, including how they can be extended individually and integrated collectively, and offers contributions and insights that can be gleaned from them. As a whole, this article should help academics, practitioners, and policy makers fully grasp the notion of sustainable consumption, as well as encourage its practice more prominently among consumers through the conceptual insights discussed herein.

## 2. Sustainable consumption

Consumption, which lies at the heart of economic, social, ecological, and ethical debates, is being increasingly challenged by consumerist and anti-consumption movements (Forno & Graziano, 2014;). According to a survey by Delpal and Hatchuel (2007) 44% of consumers report that they consider social awareness issues when shopping (e.g. not buying products involving child labor, not causing suffering to animals, reducing pollution), 61% are prepared to pay 5% more to respect such commitments, 31% have boycotted a particular product at some point, and 52% have bought a committed product in the last six months. Sensitivity to ethical aspects of consumption has also increased, particularly among younger consumers, from 6% to 15% since 2002. Although these figures appear promising, a substantial amount of the larger population remains ignorant of or chooses not to engage in sustainable consumption practices. For example, on average, 46% of Europeans claim to be willing to pay a higher price for ethical products (MORI, 2000), but at the same time most products with ethical labeling initiatives (e.g. organic food, products free from child labor, legally logged wood, fair-trade products) often have a market shares of less than 1% (MacGillivray, 2000). Moreover, the industrialized economies, which represent only 23% of the world's population, consume more than 77% of its resources (including 72% of all energy) and generate approximately 80% of overall pollution (Tolba, 2001). Relatedly, Peattie and Collins (2009) argue that many consumers find it difficult to consume sustainably primarily because the acts of consuming and sustaining are contradictory to each other. This raises a key question: Is the concept of sustainable consumption theoretically coherent and practically actionable to consumers either as a collective group or as individuals?

To pinpoint transformative action for the discourse of sustainable development, the imperative need for an established conceptualization of sustainable consumption is apparent. Both governments and non-governmental organizations attending the 1992 Earth Summit agreed that major changes in present consumption patterns were necessary to solve the global environment and development problems (Reisch & Scherhorn, 1998). This leads to the question: What is sustainable consumption? Peattie and Collins (2009) contend that it is

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