



Heriot-Watt University  
Research Gateway

## Changing the narrative in our relationship with consumption

### Citation for published version:

Black, I, Shaw, D & Trebeck, K 2016, 'Changing the narrative in our relationship with consumption', *Families, Relationships and Society*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 463-466.  
<https://doi.org/10.1332/204674316X1475850854242>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1332/204674316X1475850854242](https://doi.org/10.1332/204674316X1475850854242)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Heriot-Watt Research Portal](#)

### Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

### Published In:

Families, Relationships and Society

### Publisher Rights Statement:

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copy edited version of an article published in Families, Relationships and Societies. The definitive publisher-authenticated version Black, Iain, Deirdre Shaw, and Katherine Trebeck. "Changing The Narrative In Our Relationship With Consumption". Families, Relationships and Societies 5.3 (2016): 463-466 is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1332/204674316X1475850854242>

### General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via Heriot-Watt Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

Heriot-Watt University has made every reasonable effort to ensure that the content in Heriot-Watt Research Portal complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [open.access@hw.ac.uk](mailto:open.access@hw.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## Changing the narrative in our relationship with consumption

Iain Black,<sup>1</sup> [I.R.Black@hw.ac.uk](mailto:I.R.Black@hw.ac.uk)  
Heriot-Watt University, UK

Deirdre Shaw, [Deirdre.Shaw@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Deirdre.Shaw@glasgow.ac.uk)  
University of Glasgow, UK

Katherine Trebeck, [ktrebeck@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:ktrebeck@oxfam.org.uk)  
Oxfam UK

This paper introduces two interrelated Open Space articles, *Changing the narrative: Measuring progress by measuring what matters to families* and *Places of prosumption: Community gardens putting the 'we' into neighbourhoods*. These articles explore how space can be created that facilitates relationships that do not rely on social and environmentally damaging consumption, and help create space for socially, environmentally and economically sustainable societies.

**key words** sustainability • consumption • society • government policy • materialism

---

From 'I' to 'we': Changing the narrative in Scotland's relationship with consumption written for the Common Weal policy think-tank, the authors explored how the dominant meta narrative of individualistic consumption, labelled the narrative of 'I', which is promoted over the socially collective and community oriented 'we' (Black et al, 2015) might be challenged. This work is founded on the perspective that neoliberal economic policies and current marketing and consumption practices encourage 'invidious materialism' where goods and their symbolic value mediate the relationships we have with ourselves, families, friends and the relationship society has with itself (Miller, 2010; Wilson, 2014). Consumption of this type has invaded these relationships and contributed to the social fragmentation and individualism that lie at the heart of the environmental crisis we currently face (Stocker, 2014).

Materialistic consumption and the marketing that encourages it, have been linked with a long list of environmental (Black and Cherrier, 2010) social and personal damage (Badot and Cova, 2008; Simms and Potts, 2012; Stocker, 2014). For example, Wilkie and Moore (2012) highlight the link between high levels of consumption and high levels of dissatisfaction and regret, while Redmond (2005) linked consumption to decreasing quality of life. Marketing has also been accused of being manipulative, partly because of the disparity between the happiness and fulfilment promised by

consumer goods (Hastings and Saren, 2003) and research highlighting how this ‘stuff’ does not make us happy (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Typically, the reaction when examining what to do about this is to put the onus on the consumer to resist buying goods or to in some way reduce their consumption (Connolly and Prothero, 2003). We take a different view. We contend that when one considers the pre-eminence given to our role as consumers by governments, the ubiquity of marketing messages and the sovereignty given to businesses attempting to sell us something (via planning legislation, privatisation and bank regulation), the *choice* to shop for consumer goods is an illusion, and the choice *not to shop* is harder. We argue strongly, therefore, that considering this and the size and scale of the solutions required to avert the ever-advancing environmental crisis, solutions must also come from governments and via increasingly interventionist public policy.

A crucial macro-level policy change required is in how governments measure societal progress, in particular, that we move away from the narrow, economic-focused Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Our first article, ‘Changing the narrative: Measuring progress by measuring what matters to families’, presents Oxfam Scotland’s Humankind Index as an attempt to align what matters to people, families and communities with measurement of societal and national progress. Such ‘Beyond GDP’ (Jackson, 2009) projects are premised on the expectation that broader measures of societal progress will lead to funding allocations and policy decisions that are aligned to achieving these broader conceptualisation of progress.

Further, progress can be made via the language used by governments, as this frames their intentions and their vision of how a country should develop. Over the last 30 years the language of governance in the US and the UK has lauded private ownership over public, consumption over active citizenship, and individual rights over collective rights and responsibilities. Challenging this and consistently using pro-environmental, pro-society, pro-community language will, through desires to maintain consistency between what we say and subsequently do (Abelson, 1968), make it easier to restrict the marketing of personally and socially damaging products and activities.

An area of significant concern is the failure of policy to address the consumption practices that damage our familial, societal and ecological relationships by directly controlling the current marketing practices that sanction the expansion of invidious materialism (Page, 1992; Ger and Belk, 1999). We therefore support calls to control marketing (Schor, 2004; Harris et al, 2009) where it seeks to manipulate those unable to understand its intentions, where it looks to hide its negative influence, and where it supports damage to our environment. This would include a complete ban on targeting children and other vulnerable groups and the sponsorship of sporting, cultural and community groups by socially and personally damaging products such as alcohol and gambling. The amount and size of advertising allowed in civic and shared spaces should be restricted, and product labelling must provide full information on both the resources used in making and using a product and the waste produced. To oversee this we need to move from self-regulation of advertising to a fully co-regulated system. Finally, we need ensure prices fully reflect the price of the pollution created across a product’s life cycle, and this is likely to require an appropriately priced international greenhouse gas (GHG) pollution cap and trading scheme.

We contend that given the appropriate narrative and space from identity-based, symbol-laden marketing practices, families, individuals and society will have more time, energy and resources for other activities that have been shown consistently to make

us happier, healthier and feel more prosperous (Pretty, 2013). In our second article, 'Places of presumption: Community gardens putting the 'we' into neighbourhoods', we examine what these other activities could be, and explore different possible relationships with production, consumption and community experienced by people participating in community gardens.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author.

### References

- Abelson, R, ed, 1968, *Theories of cognitive consistency: A sourcebook*, Chicago, IL: Rand McNally College Publishing Company
- Badot, O, Cova, B, 2008, The myopia of new marketing panaceas: The case for rebuilding our discipline, *Journal of Marketing Management* 24, 1–2, 205–19
- Black, IR, Cherrier, H, 2010, Anti-consumption as part of living a sustainable lifestyle: Daily practices, contextual motivations and subjective values, *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 9, 6, 437–53
- Black, IR, Shaw, DS, Trebeck, K, 2015, *Changing the narrative in Scotland's relationship with consumption*, Biggar: Common Weal
- Connolly, J, Prothero, A, 2003, Sustainable consumption: Consumption, consumers and the commodity discourse, *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 6, 4, 275–91
- Csikszentmihalyi, M, 2000, The costs and benefits of consuming, *Journal of Consumer Research* 27, 2, 267–72
- Ger, G, Belk, RW, 1999, Accounting for materialism in four cultures, *Journal of Material Culture* 4, 2, 183–204
- Harris, JL, et al, 2009, A crisis in the marketplace: How food marketing contributes to childhood obesity and what can be done, *Annual Review of Public Health* 30, 211–25
- Hastings, G, Saren, M, 2003, The critical contribution of social marketing theory and application, *Marketing Theory* 3, 3, 305–22
- Jackson, T, 2009, *Prosperity without growth: Economics for a finite planet*, London: Earthscan
- Miller, D, 2010, *Stuff*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Page C, 1992, A history of conspicuous consumption, in FW Rudmin, M Richins (eds) *SV – Meaning, measure, and morality of materialism*, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 82–7
- Pretty, J, 2013, The consumption of a finite planet: Well-being, convergence, divergence and the nascent green economy, *Environmental and Resource Economics* 55, 4, 475–99
- Redmond, WH, 2005, Intrusive promotion as market failure: How should society impact marketing?, *Journal of Macromarketing* 25, 1, 12–21
- Schor, J, 2004, *Born to buy: The commercialized child and the new consumer culture*, New York: Simon & Schuster
- Simms, A, Potts, R, 2012, *The new materialism*, London: bread, print & roses
- Stocker, TF, 2014, *Climate change 2013: The physical science basis: Working Group I contribution to the Fifth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Wilkie, WL, Moore, ES, 2012, Expanding our understanding of marketing in society, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 40, 1, 53–73

Wilson, S, 2014, 'Sad to say but my whole life is on that computer': Reflecting on emotions, intimacies and consumption in difficult circumstances and how to make sure these issues are reflected in policy discourse, *Families, Relationships and Societies* 3, 1, 149–52





































