Anti-consumption and consumer resistance: concepts, concerns, conflicts, and convergence

Guest editorial

1. Background

During the Northern Hemisphere Summer of 2010 the International Centre for Anti-consumption Research (ICAR) and New Approaches in Consumer Resistance (NACRE) approached Euromed Management Marseille to host the first anti-consumption and consumer resistance symposium in Europe. Geographically a port in the Mediterranean basin, Marseille is a European city heavily influenced by a melting pot of ideas and practices. It is simultaneously complex, conflicting, and convergent; a perfect place for the topic of our symposium. Indeed, as Thierry Fabre (1998, p. 12) a major Mediterranean thinker wrote:

Markets and exchanges may have always been at the heart of Mediterranean societies, but money has never been our main value. Trading things involves first and foremost trading with other people, and we feel that the economic domain continues to be subordinate to the human one.

This ancient and enduring perspective on trade, economy, and human interaction seems obvious, but has somehow been lost to the majority of business practices in less than two centuries of industrial/commercial expansion and only a few decades of neoliberalism. Thus, one major contribution of topics such as anti-consumption and consumer resistance is to redress this “momentary” slip and force business scholars to reconsider the broader focus of our discipline.

The Marseille symposium was organised in conjunction with this special section in the European Journal of Marketing (EJM), which focuses on the concepts, concerns, conflicts, and convergences prominent within the discursive space on anti-consumption and consumer resistance; its intention is to delineate between the two burgeoning areas. We hope that the combined effort of more than 50 first round submissions, 107 initial authors, 66 valuable reviewers, a two-day symposium, one roundtable at the European Advances in Consumer Research London, two competitive rounds of review, and four grateful Guest Editors will fulfill this objective.

2. Consumer resistance and anti-consumption defined and delineated

Consumer resistance is a rich and well-defined area. Drawing from Peñaloza’s and Price’s (1993) seminal work, this growing field of research has explored, in various contexts, the reactions displayed by consumers towards companies and their influences and practices. As the term suggests, all acts of consumer resistance must include:

- "consumer": a person, or persons, definable as a consumer, or consumers, acting within, but sometimes attempting to escape, the marketing system; and
- “resistance”: forms of variable oppositional responses to a practice of dominance within the marketplace such as commercial pressure, influence, strategies, logic or discourses that are perceived, by the consumer/person, as dissonant and antagonistic to their beliefs.

Therefore, the focus of consumer resistance always revolves around the topic of power or, rather, power asymmetry (Foucault, 1975, 1982).

In contrast, anti-consumption literally means against consumption (Zavestoski, 2002; Lee et al., 2009). The focus always relates to consumption, or more accurately, phenomena, which are against the processes of consumption. Here, the definition of ‘consumption’ must be one that is specific to business discourse, as opposed to the physiological definition of consumption whereby all living things consume oxygen, water, etc. Thus, we define consumption as the process by which people acquire, use, and dispose of commodified goods (including ideas, services, products, brands, and experiences). It is important to note that no definition of “consumption” assumes that the process involves acquisition, use, and dispossession of all goods; instead, it is implicitly accepted (perhaps by common sense) that business scholars are interested in the acquisition, use, and dispossession of some commodified goods. Therefore, by logical extension, anti-consumption research focuses on phenomena that are against the acquisition, use, and dispossession of certain goods.

We broadly classify anti-consumption into three non-exclusive phenomena: reject, restrict, and reclaim. In processes of rejecting, individuals intentionally and meaningfully exclude particular goods from their consumption cycle, for example, rejecting Nike because of functional, symbolic, or ethical reasons. The idea of restricting incorporates cutting, lowering and limiting consumption when complete anti-consumption is not possible; for example, restricting electricity or water use. Whilst reject is about avoiding the consumption of some goods, restrict is about the reduction of some goods, reclaim represents an ideological shift regarding the processes of acquisition, use, and dispossession. For example, voluntary simplifiers reclaim their identity via production instead of consumption, when they choose to grow their own vegetables rather than acquire them through conventional markets. Similarly, dumpster divers and ecological artists reclaim “trash” from the process of dispossession, and imbue “waste” with new meaning/value.

In contrast, consumer resistance focuses on consumer/s opposing or escaping a dominant force exerted by certain actors, behaviours, and devices (Roux, 2007). Specifically, as firms and their representatives attempt to influence consumers’ choices and decisions, they exercise power over consumers (Marsden, 2001). However, by resisting such influences, consumers can adversely affect the achievement of company objectives. Consumers have power over firms to the extent that firms depend on their cooperation. Because power is based on dependence, some firms use legitimization as a strategy for remaining favourable (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Firms try to be legitimate through their products (inclusive of all offerings), their practices, and by presenting themselves as worthy partners in the exchange process (Bourgeois and Nizer, 1995). These three facets of legitimization are also the echo chambers in which consumer discontent is amplified. With regards to the first facet, products and other offerings presumed legitimate by the firm, may still be swept aside by consumers’ claims to freely chosen codes and signs, and rejection of mass-marketed meanings.
Considering the second facet, legitimate practices, individuals can feel saturated and repelled by the manipulative, if ineffective, advances made by companies (Fournier et al., 1998). Selling tactics are resisted in the name of autonomy and ethics. Complaining behaviour, boycotts, and “culture jamming” are all expressions of dissatisfaction, feelings of harassment and moral sanction applied against hegemonic practices and propaganda. Finally, at the third level of legitimate partnerships, some consumers question if certain companies are acceptable as trading partners and as responsible actors for future generations. Whereas companies urge consumers to trust them and to rely on their business skills, individuals can choose to ignore or avoid them, and instead pursue partnerships with alternative distribution channels such as second-hand markets and consumer-to-consumer exchanges.

So, in some cases, consumer resistance is expressed by acts of anti-consumption, directed against a domineering corporation, leading to boycott behaviour of its products. At other times resistance may also be expressed through certain consumption choices, for instance, opposing the dominant retail channel through the formation of consumer co-opts that fulfil consumption needs (Kates and Belk, 2001). Similarly, not all acts of anti-consumption need involve resistance against a dominant force. For instance, functional voluntary simplifiers perform many acts of anti-consumption that are primarily motivated by a desire to reclaim a more authentic self-identity than to oppose specific actors or situations; here, anti-consumption may still be ideological (Kozinets et al., 2010) however, there may not be a specific target of dominance that the voluntary simpifier actively confronts. Similarly, many studies of undesired self highlight the relationship between anti-consumption and the rejection of the undesired self, once again, in these studies, anti-consumption of certain goods/brands allows a person to negotiate their self-identity project without resisting a well-defined dominant antagonist.

Figure 1 displays our thinking around how anti-consumption and consumer resistance differ and overlap. The main arguments are that anti-consumption focuses on the reasons against consumption as expressed through rejecting, restricting, and reclaiming. Whereas consumer resistance focuses on consumers opposing the products, practices and partnerships, associated with a structure of dominance. Anti-consumption is concerned with consumption issues while consumer resistance is

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**Figure 1.**
Delineating anti-consumption and consumer resistance
concerned with power issues. The Venn like nature of our model acknowledges that overlaps undoubtedly exist.

3. The papers
The first paper by Marco Galvagno “The intellectual structure of the anti-consumption and consumer resistance field: an author co-citation analysis” speaks well to the conflicts and convergences that exist between anti-consumption and consumer resistance. Using a novel methodology, Galvagno shows that anti-consumption studies are informed by voluntary simplicity, social economics, and organisational psychology, whereas consumer resistance studies have a strong background in cultural studies.

The next set of four papers are empirical illustrations of collective struggles, responses to powerful actors, and “individualized collective action” (Micheletti, 2005), and as such fit into the overlapping area between anti-consumption and consumer resistance, skewing perhaps slightly into the realm of consumer resistance. In “Anti-consumption as a means of saving jobs” Hoffmann reinforces Galvagno’s paper, but does so through the investigation of boycotting behaviour due to factory closures. Russell, Russell, and Neijens, in their paper “Consumption expressions of ideological resistance” show how ideological consumer resistance expresses itself naturally through the anti-consumption of films. Nuttall and Tinson’s paper “Resistance to ritual practice: exploring perceptions of others” further explore anti-consumption and consumer resistance within the context of in-groups versus out-groups by discussing peers’ perceptions of anti-consumers. Isabelle Chalmon provides the final paper dealing with power imbalance, “Consumer resistance between conflict and cooperation: the extreme case of orphan drugs”. Hers is an interesting illustration of pro-consumption activism or productive resistance. Here, resistance is led by non-consumers (excluded from the marketplace) who strive for consumption rather than anti-consumption, thus, we position her paper solely in the realm of consumer resistance as it illustrates a case of consumer resistance for consumption rather than against it.

The second set of four empirical papers deals with anti-consumption and consumer resistance as it relates to values, worldviews, and practices of sustainable or green consumption. These studies place less emphasis on power relations and struggles against a well-defined structure of dominance, therefore while positioned in the overlap they lean slightly towards the realm of anti-consumption. In “The (post-human) consumer, the (post-avian) chicken and the (post-object) Eglu: towards a material-semiotics of anti-consumption” Bettray and Kerrane use the interesting case of urban hen keeping and the Eglu to critically reinforce that many phenomena, in reality, cross the anti-consumption/consumption and consumer resistance/domination divide”. “Intentional non-consumption for sustainability: consumer resistance and/or anti-consumption?” by Cherrier, Black and Lee, continues along a similar theme of sustainable living. They show that while intentional non-consumption is a broader, more subtle, and less intense form of consumer negation, than either anti-consumption or consumer resistance, it is nevertheless a phenomena motivated, and best understood, through both complimentary frameworks. Narrowing the focus to a specific lifestyle, Amos and Pentina show how market-defying radical consumer resistance and market-mediated anti-consumption activities are equally applicable in
their analysis of “The Freegan Phenomenon: anti-consumption or consumer resistance?” Within the same area, Fernandez, Brittain, and Bennett hone in on the specific practice of dumpster diving in “Doing the duck”: negotiating the resistant-consumer identity”, discovering three dynamic and interrelated reasons motivating the practice. Although these two papers are situated in the overlap between anti-consumption and consumer resistance, they are clear examples of the “reclaim” characteristic of anti-consumption.

The final set of three papers connects anti-consumption and consumer resistance with the broader areas of cynicism and deviance. As these papers clearly show, consumer deviance and cynicism undoubtedly share conceptual space with anti-consumption and consumer resistance. Garcia-Bardidia, Nau, and Remy map the career progression of illegal downloaders focusing on the notion of deviance for their paper “Consumer resistance and anti-consumption: Insights from the deviant careers of French illegal downloaders”. Then, Odou, and de Pechpeyrou reconceptualise the notion of consumer cynicism in “Consumer cynicism: from resistance to anti-consumption in a disenchanted world?” Whilst deviance and cynicism exist beyond our framework provided in Figure 1, both concepts offer great insights to anti-consumption and consumer resistance as converging notions. Finally, in “Rethinking resistance and anti-consumption behaviours in the light of the concept of deviance” Amine and Gicquel finish the special section with a broad conceptualisation of consumer deviance, positioning anti-consumption and consumer resistance in relation to social norms.

4. Future research and acknowledgements
While we believe we have successfully delineated between the two concepts at a theoretical level, the papers show that in practice, the majority of works lay most comfortable within the overlap of anti-consumption and consumer resistance. One study was, and a few others could potentially be, positioned only in the realm of consumer resistance. What then of cases that speak to the concepts of reject, restrict, and reclaim, without opposition towards any antagonist? Do such purely anti-consumption phenomena exist? This editorial is based on a hunch that such cases must exist, but future research could utilise, or challenge, the framework provided here to either position work in, or redefine, this burgeoning area.

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