“Doing the duck”: negotiating the resistant-consumer identity

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine how dumpster divers’ practices and tension-resolution strategies facilitate their construction of resistant-consumer identities outside the dominant paradigm of consumer choice.

Design/methodology/approach – Interview data were interpreted with the assistance of relevant literature, netnography and observation.

Findings – By viewing ideological motivations as paramount, even divers initially having economic or psychological motivations are able to negotiate a positive hero identity. Sharing forms community and constructs a “self-for-others” narrative that accommodates the paradoxical need to consume while resisting.

Research limitations/implications – The illegality of the practice prevented researcher participation. Examining the reacquisition of waste informs identity construction and consumer resistance, and suggests that corporate and public policies should facilitate waste reclamation.

Originality/value – This investigation, unlike prior research, does not examine only one set of motives nor only those who dive for food. Thus, this paper uncovers the complex inter-relationships between ideological, economic and psychological motivations, permitting a more complete understanding of how divers’ practices shape their identities.

Keywords Anti-consumption, Consumer resistance, Dumpster diving, Motivation (psychology), Identity, Consumer behaviour

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Some people, concerned about the sustainability of mainstream consumerist lifestyles, attempt to resist the attitudes and actions of consumers and/or the market. Their actions range from avoiding specific products or brands (Lee et al., 2009) to espousing voluntary simplicity (Cherrier, 2009). Our interpretive research examines one such form of resistance – dumpster diving. Dumpster diving involves entering a commercial or residential dumpster (a large standardised metal waste receptacle) to retrieve rubbish. This is emically termed “doing the duck” because of the popular notion that enthusiastic participants dive into dumpsters headfirst. Although the term “dumpsters” originated in 1936 (Tumblin, 2002), dumpster diving only surfaced in popular culture in 2000 (Edwards and Mercer, 2007). Also called skip-dipping in Australia, it is practised by “divers” (an emic term) in North America, Europe and Australasia (Rush, 2006) who search dumpsters belonging to diverse entities such as
supermarkets, department stores, restaurants, construction sites and multi-unit residential dumpsters to collect food and inorganic items that others have discarded.

However, diving creates multiple tensions that must be negotiated. First, divers seek to provide for themselves without the need to enter the market place but without it they would have nothing to scavenge. Ironically, divers need the very market they are trying to resist. How do divers reconcile their desire to resist, with their paradoxical but unavoidable need of the market? Second, a fundamental tenet of marketing is the notion that consumption choices are critical for creating an identity (Cherrier, 2009) and achieving community (Cova, 1997). Conventionally, these consumption choices are realised by choosing from products and brands offered in the market. How then do divers express identity, while resisting the dominant paradigm of consumer choice? Third, dumpster owners often lock, guard and/or sabotage their garbage, making divers feel like the unwelcome “other”, in stark contrast to the sought-after retail consumer (Edwards and Mercer, 2007). How do divers create positive identities that accommodate engaging in socially deviant behaviour?

Today’s divers may offer insights into tomorrow’s mainstream consumers, suggesting that marketers urgently need to understand this paradoxical consumption lifestyle. Consequently, our interpretive research examines the inter-related motivations underlying diving. We reveal the strategies and tactics used by divers to resolve the tensions involved in resisting while consuming. In doing so, we discuss how divers’ identities as resistant-consumers are constructed from their struggle to negotiate the dualities they regularly encounter. Next, we present the theoretical foundations of our research, focusing on how the limitations of previous work provide opportunities for our research to contribute.

2. Theoretical foundations
Items discarded in dumpsters may appear, at first glance, to have little economic or other value to their previous owners. Yet some of these are re-acquired by others, meaning that the disposal of these items does not end their consumption lifecycle (Cappellini, 2009). Examining dumpster diving could deepen our understanding of the re-acquisition of discarded items. However, only two studies of dumpster diving have been reported in the academic literature, and both were circumscribed by design. Eikenberry and Smith (2005) surveyed and conducted focus groups with low-income Americans, hence only uncovering financial motives. Conversely Edwards and Mercer (2007) interviewed middle-class Australians who dumpster dived to protest against waste, thus uncovering only ideological motives. Consequently, this previous research could not explain if divers have multiple motivations for diving, much less how they resolve any conflicting motivations. Furthermore, both these studies dealt only with diving for food, even though a technical report (Rush, 2006) described dumpster diving as involving diverse individuals reclaiming diverse discarded items beyond food. Consequently, we offer the more holistic examination of dumpster diving that is needed to understand divers’ various motives, the inter-relationships between these motives, and how any conflicts are resolved.

Acquiring the discarded waste of others tends to be viewed as violating social norms (Rush, 2006). This raises the question of how divers create a positive identity while being marginalised by society. We believe an answer may be found in community. Being viewed as the marginalised “other” increases the desire to be in community with others like oneself (O’Guinn and Belk, 1989). Communities were
originally centred upon geographic proximity or kin affinity (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). More recently, communities have formed around a shared passion for particular pastimes, fictional characters or brands, suggesting that postmodern communities share passions (Cova and Cova, 2002), and are linked by products (Cova, 1997). Divers undoubtedly can share passions, but can they still be linked by products, when community members are anti-consumption (Lee et al., 2009) rather than pro-consumption? Unlike the retail market, the quantity of dumpstered goods are limited and do not increase in response to increased demand. How do divers resolve their need for community (which implies cooperating) when their common activity is inherently competitive?

The market cannot be permanently escaped (Kozinets, 2002), suggesting that divers who resist the market must often also conform to the market’s laws and norms. For example, a seller of dumpster “finds” must, like any other seller, pay prescribed fees to participate in weekend or online markets. Preparation and re-entry rituals allow Burners to enter and exit the annual week-long hypercommunity of Burning Man (Kozinets, 2002). However, dumpster divers have to confront and negotiate the resistance-conformity dialectic daily. They espouse anti-consumption ideologies but have to consume to live. Cherrier (2009), called for consumer resistance research to utilise resistant identity, theorising two types of resistant identity:

1. a hero (“save the world”) identity; and
2. a project (“self-expressive”) identity.

How do divers’ constant struggles to negotiate these and other tensions construct their identities as resistant-consumers? Next, we describe the methodology we employed to answer our questions.

3. Method

Because diving is illegal in New Zealand, seven informants were recruited through the researchers’ peer networks and subsequent snowball sampling, and nine via a netnography of three online communities. The 16 informants, 60 per cent of whom were male, ranged in age from 20 to 60 and included students, artists, homemakers and full-time employed blue-collar, pink-collar, and white-collar workers. Following Strauss and Corbin (2002), the data was first open coded to generate general themes before more focussed, close coding of the data within the previously generated themes was used. The relevant literature, netnography, our own overt non-participant day-time observations of two informants’ dumpster diving activities (with the dumpster owner’s permission), and responses to our queries from representatives of the two dominant supermarket companies in New Zealand, informed our subsequent interpretation of the coded data.

4. Findings

4.1 Overview

We begin by interpreting some relevant dumpster diving practices. We found that divers cope with being viewed negatively by others by diving late at night and avoiding diving in large groups. However, diving alone at night can be dangerous and impractical. A common resolution of the danger-discovery dialectic is to: 
dumpster dive with other people. There are often heavy things to be moved and it’s easier with two people, three, max. Sometimes a lookout is nice too, in high-risk areas (Emily, USA, WF24, artist).

Others also described “schedules” where certain twosomes are expected to dive in particular dumpsters only on particular nights, leaving the dumpster available for others on the remaining nights. In effect, these informal schedules allow divers to share (Belk, 2010) particularly fruitful dumpsters. Divers also practise diving etiquette, taking care to leave bins tidy. If they meet other divers while diving, they often help each other find what the other is looking for. Participants often set aside items that they find, for other unknown divers to come along and take. Furthermore, if other divers come along whilst participants are diving, they often offer them a share of the food they have already scavenged, as expressed in the following statement:

If we meet someone else diving, the etiquette is to offer them like a decent like amount of food, so it’s like if someone shows up and you’ve got there before them you let them pick through and take what you want out of your food and we will even do that with strangers (Phil, NZ, WM25, Activist).

Sharing in this context operates as more than a rejection of market exchange – it also generates bonds between individuals, linking them into a community. Sharing rituals allow divers to resolve the dialectical tensions caused by the opposing needs of community and competitiveness; and between safety and conspicuousness.

4.2 Motivations
Our informants revealed three broad categories of motivations for dumpster diving:

(1) economic;
(2) ideological; and
(3) psychological.

We shall discuss each, focusing in particular on the tensions that dumpster divers experience, and their resultant coping strategies.

Economic motivations are based on divers’ recognition of the actual or potential value of recovered items for themselves or others. As was explained:

Well, we kind of find it a little bit disgusting the amount of rubbish that is thrown out here . . . and I guess we sort of band together to try and divert this waste, um large quantities of edible food . . . And put them to a good use [by] food banks, ourselves, and anyone else who could use it (Mike, NZ, WM22, Student).

However, those who began dumpster diving for economic reasons often found themselves acquiring additional motivations, along with their “finds”. For instance, Sue (USA, WF35, unemployed new immigrant) initially dived to furnish her home but then began to search for items to sell online to generate income. Although Sue seemed motivated by financial considerations initially, her resultant exposure to the waste of others made her more ideologically aware. She told the interviewer:

I can’t change the world but I can change myself. So my contribution to the planet is if I’m not buying new, I’m not encouraging, you know, somebody to ship it over here . . . let me find something that’s already been used up, nobody wants it anymore and I’ll use that, and I’m
happy to use that because I have to start somewhere and it starts with me (Sue, USA, WF35, Unemployed new immigrant).

Sue’s comments indicate that economically disadvantaged divers are able to view themselves positively by adopting an ideologically-consistent hero identity that resists consumerism by consuming discarded waste.

Ideological motivations stem from divers' concerns regarding both sides of the market. Many informants resist the market, because they believe that producers' abuse of power has led to an unfair distribution of wealth. As Phil explained:

I spend very little... I buy almost nothing new because I disagree with the way it's produced, I disagree with the sweat shops, and... industrial farming... a lot of farmers are screwed over... the way [supermarket] workers are treated... and then... the money goes... to some rich fat cats... so yeah I see it diving as stepping outside of that system and trying to create an alternative (Phil, NZ, WM25, Activist).

However, over and above these concerns with the supply-side of the market, our informants also expressed concerns with the demand-side of the market. They cited the detrimental effects of consumerism on the environment and on consumers themselves, as their motivation to dumpster dive. A common theme in interviewees’ statements was summed up by Sue’s earlier comment about people being addicted to consumerism, resulting in large amounts of waste that put pressure on the environment. Many believe that diving is not just a reaction to consumerism; it is a proactive effort to reduce the waste produced by pervasive consumerism. As Chris put it:

I dumpster dive because of the environmental ramifications of doing so. The more I remove from dumpsters and re-purpose or use the less that actually goes to waste and takes up space in landfills (Chris, NZ, WM22, student).

Netnography revealed that divers around the world are incredulous and angry at what retailers and consumers throw away, and perceive a consumerist culture as incredibly wasteful. One poster stated that “instead of dumpster diving being illegal, it should be illegal for corporations to throw food away.” Despite the strong feelings of divers regarding supermarket waste, supermarket claims regarding having waste minimisation policies in place, and the legality of donating short-dated food, no systematic donation of unsellable but still-edible food appears to be carried out by any major supermarket chain operating in New Zealand. We did however learn of a bakery chain that teams up with local charities to distribute nightly leftovers to the needy.

Marty (NZ, WM 53, Artist) who initially worked as a dustman, told us that his disgust at seeing useful objects discarded led him to become an environmental artist – he turns discarded items into saleable goods such as jewellery, wall art, clocks and robots. We believe that Marty and Sue (mentioned earlier) are able to resolve the dialectical tension inherent in needing the very market they are trying to escape by acquiring and repairing and/or creatively modifying discarded goods to satisfy others’ demands – demands that would otherwise have been met by new products. Thus, they were able to perceive themselves as primarily fulfilling ideological motivations while incidentally procuring goods and income they need. By viewing their income-generating activities as sharing, they prioritise ideological motivations. This precludes confronting their need to rely on the market for income and foregrounds a hero identity. Divers have not just found an alternative to the marketplace; they are
clearly resisting the market’s power and control. For example, Tom (USA, WM36, Student) statement that “In some instances dumpster diving means living but in others doing the duck is a way for me to fight the capitalist mind frame that “greed is good”. For me, diving is as much of an environmental statement as it is a political and economic statement,” shows that he is more interested in pushing back against the market, then in finding alternatives to it.

Sue’s unemployment economically motivated her diving, which in turn resulted in her becoming ideologically motivated. Similarly, when we interviewed Phil, who was unemployed, we expected to find a diver whose economic need was driving his actions, with his unemployment resulting in an anti-market ideology. Instead, we found that ideological motivations were driving his diving, with his economic gains from diving permitting him to avoid traditional employment, and thus resist the market. He said:

I don’t want to partake in the capitalist system, I don’t want to have to go to work nine to five in a job where you are going to be doing a thing that’s screwing up the environment or you’re going to be selling things you disagree with. So for me diving is a wider thing about not participating in the capitalist system.

Thus, diving allowed Phil to escape financial dependence on the market he despised. Divers believe their diving can change themselves, their community and their world. For example, Anna wrote:

Diving means that I can live almost entirely outside of the cash economy. I can dumpster ... really just about anything I need. Not needing to use money for these things means that I don’t have to have a full time job, which means that I can spend more time ... building community and community resources so we can end industrial civilisation (Anna, USA, WF22, Artist).

Anna’s comment also indicates that although divers may seem to be marginalised, lonely figures, diving in the dark night in ones and twos, they do believe in community. Their sharing facilitates community which in turn provides a sense of belongingness and acceptance, forming a communal identity that is one of the prime psychological rewards that dumpster divers receive from their lifestyle.

Psychological motivations refer to the positive feelings and psychological benefits resulting from dumpster diving. Many informants told us that dumpster diving was an enjoyable consumption activity. Sam’s (USA, WM19, Paralegal) comment, “I feel like a child looking through rocks or sticks and finding cool little toys and things. I have to admit that it is very rewarding to find good things while dumpster diving, I feel like an adventurer!” illustrates that divers enjoy the excitement of the adventure and the thrill that comes with hunting for goods and the potential of finding a “treasure”. In this respect, dumpster diving resembles more traditional second-hand shopping (Bhardi and Arnould, 2005). Divers are often motivated to “do the duck” for the sheer joy and possibility of finding something they really want and the concomitant surprise element. As the following excerpt demonstrates, our informants often stated that they never knew what they were going to find and this prospect of surprise was all part of the fun:

Um, it’s a lot of fun, like it, you get a rush when you like open up the bin and you see it filled with food and then it’s like, it’s always really exciting, you’re like ‘oh wow I’ve found some cans!’ and ... so ... you never know what you are going to get, and then you’re always getting like new and kind of funny and interesting stuff and so that, yeah that kind of surprise approach to food is quite enjoyable (Phil, NZ, WM25, Activist).
Divers often likened dumpster diving to gambling, as anything was possible, with some days being good days and others bad. Furthermore, an element of serendipity was thought to contribute to how well a dive went. Sue recounted:

    I put it in my mind a while back ago and I said . . . I need pasta bowls . . . and so I just said “okay universe, this is what I want, I want pasta bowls”. Well the funny thing is, I was out scavenging one day and I found, not only were they the right bowls but the box actually said “pasta bowls”!

Divers enjoy the element of surprise and wonder that comes from searching inside bins and the possibility of “a great score”. This enjoyment adds to the value gained from an item that the discarer might have seen as value-less rubbish (Cappellini, 2009). Rufus and Lawson (2009) summed this reaction up well when they stated that collectors of discarded goods have traded choice for chance. Consumers enjoy choice and seek to control their environment by making choices, while anti-consumers view themselves as choosing to leave things to chance. Sarah (US, WF23, Dietary aide] initially dived for economic reasons when she was a poverty-stricken youngster, but as an employed adult, dived to nostalgically re-experience the excitement of a “find”. Thus, when Sarah’s financial circumstances improved, her economic motivations gave way to psychological motivations. Conversely, Emily (WF 24, Artist) initially dived as a child for the fun of finding playthings but, because of her exposure to diving as a child, later dived for food as a poor student. For Emily, psychological motivations were supplanted by economic ones, when her financial circumstances deteriorated. However, both Emily and Sarah mentioned disgust at the extent of waste they encountered, suggesting they were developing ideological motivations.

The psychological benefits experienced by divers led to them wanting to share their activity with friends and family. For some, this desire to share resulted in their diving becoming a very social experience where divers hunted for items together, helped one another, and spent time with each other. Phil even likened their recent diving trip to socialising and shopping at a mall. He told the interviewer:

    Just recently . . . I was climbing inside a huge trash bin . . . with a friend and it was kind of like, like going to the mall together, like we were just talking about our day, and what we were planning to do the next day, but as we were doing this, I was standing on a mountain of pita bread, we were sorting through food like inside this bin . . . quite funny and quite surreal.

Sue believed dumpster diving together afforded a bonding opportunity with her young daughters, allowing her to propagate her new ideological beliefs. Perhaps she hoped that her daughters’ initial psychological enjoyment of diving would gradually be replaced by ideological motives, as was the case with Patrick (USA WM36, Homemaker). Patrick initially dived for items that he would enjoy restoring (a psychological motivation), but subsequently began to dive because “the more I remove from dumpsters and repurpose or use the less that actually goes to waste and takes up space in landfills” (ideological reasons).

Divers cope with being marginalised by converting friends and family into divers. They pro-actively create a community of divers by sharing finds, and stories of finds, deliberately focusing on the positives rather than the negatives of their experiences. Although diving is perceived as deviant behaviour that non-divers often associate with homelessness and poor hygiene, some divers actually indicated taking pleasure in the deviant nature of dumpster diving, by stating they enjoyed feeling “naughty” or “bad”...
whilst diving. Even these informants did, however, engage in decontamination practices in an attempt to minimise those negatives. For example, food was washed and cooked thoroughly before being eaten, and food that was obviously contaminated was not taken. Scalding and bleach was often used to decontaminate found items. Divers also coped by employing a reasoned adaptation strategy (Roux, 2007), choosing to view their decontamination of discarded items as comparable to everyday laundering of dirty clothes to enable their re-use. These, and the other coping strategies discussed earlier, enable dumpster divers to cope with the inconsistencies they have to reconcile on a daily basis.

5. Discussion and conclusion
As Figure 1 depicts, the ideological, economic, and psychological motivations for dumpster diving are inter-related. Initially dumpster divers can be motivated by any of the three types of motivations. However, over time, most economically-motivated or psychologically-motivated divers appear to adopt ideological motivations. This foregrounding of ideological motives allows divers to view their market-conforming consumption and production activities as consistent with their preferred self-view as market resisters. Divers’ adoption of a hero identity permits them to resolve the tensions inherent in resisting while consuming. Perceiving activities such as creating art from trash as subverting the market by reducing others’ needs to acquire new products from the market (rather than as filling their own need to be creative) privileges a hero identity over a project identity.

Although most divers are not well-off, they share particularly rewarding dumpsters, generously share their finds with family, friends and strangers, seeking to reduce what others buy, convert others, and form community. The practice of sharing suggests that they are willing to trade economic for ideological and psychological motivations. Furthermore, sharing also demonstrates that the linking power of products (Cova, 1997) is powerful enough to operate even when the “products” are discarded waste and the participants are anti- rather than pro-consumption.

Sharing also facilitates the creation of a positive identity, in the face of the disdain of more mainstream members of society. Foregrounding ideological motivations permits divers to construct identity around the rejection of consumer society (Edwards and Mercer, 2007). Reclaiming the value in discarded items allows divers to assert their identity as resistant-consumers just as feminist-environmentalists view themselves as “conservators” instead of “consumers” (Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001). Instead of choosing particular branded products from retailers to construct identity, divers choose to construct a hero identity by rejecting choice. They cannot avoid consuming, but they can trade consuming by choice for consuming by chance (Rufus and Lawson, 2009). Their identities are formed from the constant interplay of being true to oneself and the “otherness” of their true self. Sharing facilitates constructing a hero identity as a “self for others” that is different from the consumerist mainstream in a positive way.

The importance of community in influencing others to adopt a market-resistance ideology motivates us to call for research that examines how the inter-relationships between divers’ individual and communal identities influence their resistance of consumerism and the market. We also note that dumpster divers’ willing, and even enthusiastic, re-acquisition of products discarded by others is surprising, given recent research that has uncovered how buyers of new products reject products that might
have been touched by others (Argo et al., 2006). Thus, we call for future research to more fully examine how consumers of waste cope with issues of contamination.

Unlike a voluntary simplifier who consumes less to construct identity (Cherrier, 2009), identity-creation is not a diver’s raison d’être. Rather than consuming less, divers resemble new consumption communities (Moraes et al., 2010) in identifying an alternative means of consumption. However, new consumption communities were found to be more concerned with entrepreneurship than resistance (Moraes et al., 2010). In contrast, divers are more concerned with resisting consumerism and the market entities that they perceive as responsible for excessive waste. Divers’ acts of resistance (and resultant arrests and media coverage) are designed to draw attention to the excesses of a consumer society. They hope, by their actions, to change how marketers create and dispose of their waste, thus shifting power from producers to consumers.

The fury of divers at what they perceive as rampant waste has important implications for managerial practice – companies should be seen to minimise their discarded waste and, if possible, implement schemes whereby waste products are donated to worthy recipients. Public policy makers should facilitate donating unwanted food and goods, and find ways to legalise acquiring discarded items and make this practice safer. Our holistic study has revealed that divers resolve multiple tensions by privileging ideological motivations that support a resistant-consumer hero identity. However, like the divers seeking treasure from others’ trash, we believe further worthwhile insights could be gleaned by further examinations of dumpster diving, and other modes of re-aquiring discarded waste.

References


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