



Consumer cynicism

From resistance to anti-consumption in a disenchanted world?

Consumer
cynicism

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer a new perspective on resistance and anti-consumption literature by relating it to consumer cynicism.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper proceeds to a conceptual deconstruction of consumer cynicism by comparing the contemporary meaning of the term with the original signification of cynicism, contrasting the psychological approach with the philosophical one. This perspective sheds light on disparate forms of consumer cynicism found in previous research.

Findings – Four different figures of consumption related to cynicism were distinguished in this paper. Defensive cynicism and offensive cynicism are psychological tools used to neutralize persuasion attempts or divert marketing techniques. Subversive cynicism and ethical cynicism, which are reminiscences of cynicism in Ancient Greece, challenge the consumerist ideology and even propose an alternative ethics.

Originality/value – Prior research on consumer cynicism has focused on the defensive psychological dimension of the concept, limiting it to a coping device for deceived consumers. Three other facets have been explored in this paper and provide a broader framework that can account for the disparate manifestations observed in the resistance and anti-consumption literature. This new conceptualization of consumer cynicism could also explain why consumers' disappointment with private consumption does not always lead to public involvement.

Keywords Consumerism, Moral responsibility, Business ethics, Post-modernism, Trust

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

“Can you read the newspapers, watch television and generally try to keep informed about what is going on in the world without becoming cynical?” this statement (Keyes, 2006) shows how pervasive and central cynicism could be in our society, a part of our contemporary zeitgeist. Bewes (1997) notes that cynicism is intrinsically associated to postmodernity, “a period of disillusionment with Grand Narratives and totalizing ideologies”. Disappointment with unfulfilled promises in the politic or economic realm entails a massive distrust of any altruistic discourses: “because virtually all citizens seem to recognize this tendency of ad language to distort, advertising seems to turn us into a community of cynics, and we doubt advertisers, the media and authority in all its forms” (Pollay, 1986, p. 29).

In line with Pollay's (1986) argument, consumer cynicism is often seen as a defensive psychological tool against persuasion attempts through constant suspicion toward messages, but also, and more specifically, toward the intentions of brands or



retailers (Chylinski and Chu (2010); Darke and Ritchie, 2007; Friestad and Wright, 1994; Helm, 2004). As a psychological tool, this kind of cynicism is used to resist marketing techniques and is linked to suspicion toward corporate virtuous discourses but not necessarily toward the consumerist ideology. Yet, the defensive nature of consumer cynicism might be questioned. Like marketers who put aside their moral principles to attain their performance objectives (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989), consumers can do the same, exploiting the system or even other consumers (Kretz, 2010).

However, consumer cynicism should not be reduced to this psychological perspective. Cynicism core beliefs also enable consumers to regain control over their existence. Indeed, cynicism is a powerful critical tool. It will help consumers to unveil the “hidden facet of marketing” (Cherrier and Murray, 2004), to see the manipulation behind the persuasion attempt, to decipher the consumption code imposed by the consumerist society. In that sense, consumer cynicism should not be limited to resistance toward marketing techniques but considered as a part of a more global anti-consumerist project (Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Roux, 2007b; Cherrier, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2009).

Additionally, the “contemporaneous” conceptions of cynicism as a coping strategy should also be contrasted with the Antique roots of the concept. Cynicism as a philosophy aims at “the government of self”, based on philosophical fearless speech (*parrēsia*) which “consists in showing himself [Diogenes] in his natural nakedness, outside of all the conventions and laws artificially imposed by the city” (Foucault, 2010). In that perspective, cynicism is more terminal than instrumental, defining the individual’s ethics. The conception of cynicism borrowed from Ancient Greece brings a more positive perspective of the concept (Mikkonen *et al.*, 2011) that stands in contrast with the classical definition of cynicism as a negative attitude (Chylinsky and Chu, 2010, for a review).

We therefore propose to explore and integrate the different forms of cynicism in relation to specific resistance and anti-consumption behaviors (Figure 1). Consumer cynicism considered as an individual form of resistance questions the entanglement of individual and collective forms of resistance as well as its capacity to transform the marketplace. We will discuss each figure of consumer cynicism in the following parts.

2. Defensive consumer cynicism: resisting marketing manipulation attempts

Cynicism and its milder form, skepticism, can be considered as defensive mental devices against marketing stimuli (Roux, 2007b). Fear of being deceived, doubt, distrust and suspicion are part of the usual cognitive reactions toward such selling techniques as telephone selling (Roux, 2008), direct selling (Kirmani and Campbell, 2004) or toward advertising in general (Darke and Ritchie, 2007; Pollay, 1986). These general beliefs about how marketers are trying to persuade consumers are known as marketplace metacognitions (Friestad and Wright, 1994). They enable consumers to remain alert, to quickly identify persuasion attempts and to resist them by writing them off as manipulation. Through direct disappointing buying experiences (Darke and Ritchie, 2007), “cumulative exposure to advertising clutter” (Rumbo, 2002) or indirect learning (Capella and Jamieson, 1997), metacognitions are developed, allowing “deconstruction and critical distanciation” from firms’ discourses (Roux,

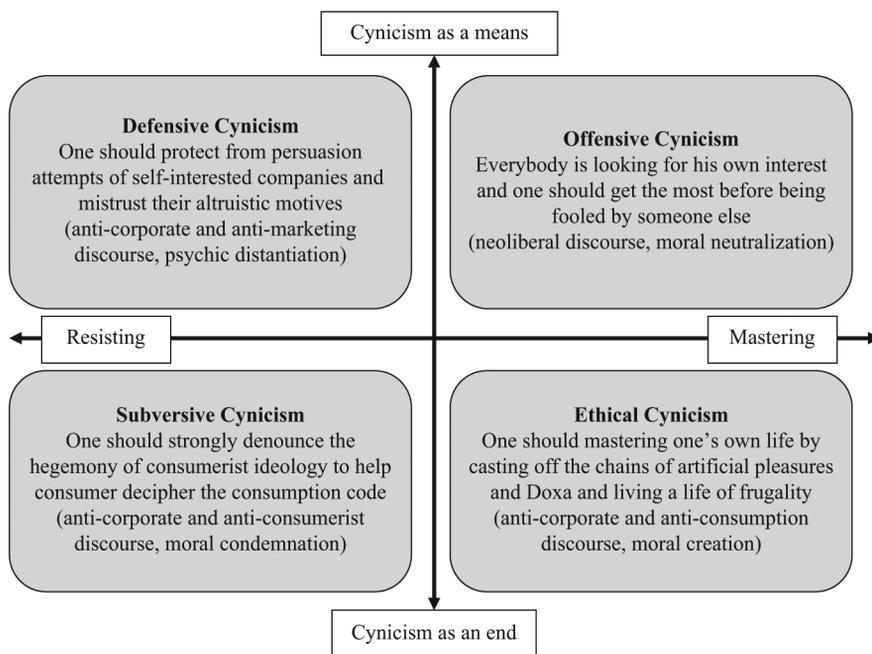


Figure 1.
Four types of consumer cynicism

2007a) and at the same time emancipating (at least from the consumer's point-of-view) the "reflexively defiant consumer" (Ozanne and Murray, 1995) from marketplace influence. In this sense, skepticism and cynicism are part of a continuum from trust to mistrust and distrust (Helm, 2004). The main difference between both concepts is that for the cynic, distrust applies not only to the message but also to the source (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989), implying some kind of hostility (Eisinger, 2000). This resentment comes from the central belief that "self-interest alone motivates companies", leading people to distrust corporate altruistic motives (Webb and Mohr, 1998; Lee *et al.*, 2009). Defensive consumer cynicism should thus be considered as a coping psychological strategy to protect oneself from corporate persuasion attempts.

Two consequences of defensive tactics have to be stressed. The first one is linked to the recursivity of cynicism. Advertisers have to use more sophisticated persuasion tactics trying to "break through the advertising clutter" (Goldman and Papson, 1994), by captivating "jaded viewers" (Rumbo, 2002), using "camouflage ads" (McAlister, 1996), or countering anticorporate discourses with altruistic motives (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). This should in return fuel viewers cynicism when decoded. Second, by constantly applying the cynical filter to any communication message, consumers treat in the same way virtuous and non-virtuous firms. Hence, any form of corporate communication aimed primarily at showcasing virtuous behavior is likely to suffer from a lack of credibility and consequently fails to impact corporate perceived ethicality in an inspired way (Brunk, 2010). Therefore, firms might be tempted to obtain third-party labels, which themselves may in return be scrutinized by cynical consumers.

3. Offensive consumer cynicism: countering through market resources exploitation

Research on consumer resistance to persuasion techniques or buying impulse has focused mostly on the defensive aspects of consumer behavior, eschewing the offensive aspects usually ascribed to marketers (Kanter, 1989). “Command cynics” are characterized by “their single-minded opportunism and an unrivalled capacity for sophistry (making the better argument appear to be the worse)” and “Articulate Players” put ethical considerations aside “in favour of what they consider achievement” (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989).

This kind of cynicism has been denounced in anti-corporate discourses that consider organizational changes toward ethical values as “cynical marketing ploys” (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). Defining clearly and stigmatizing the adversary is an important component of a social movement (Touraine, 1981), with the function of “unifying and motivating activist mobilization” (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). Thus the portrait of “large corporate puppeteers” is a powerful narrative in the anti-corporate ideology and serves also the purpose of social marketing like in the “Truth campaign” where manipulation by tobacco companies is the main argument (Peattie and Peattie, 2009).

However, the conception of the consumer as victim of a cynical capitalist system, if not totally false, is incomplete. And cynical marketing tactics may have other consequences than denunciation. Confrontation to corporate self-interest may also lead consumers to adopt the same logic. For example, Kirmani and Campbell (2004) have shown how “ordinary” consumers can develop offensive and opportunist strategies when dealing with a seller. In that case like in many others, the manipulative attempt is therefore on the consumer’s side. To get a little further, consumers adapt the classical principle of maximizing profits, minimizing costs to their own consumption. In that sense, they will contribute to consumption opportunism, diverting all marketing resources such as promotions, free products and cash refund offers to get their consumption free (Odou *et al.*, 2009). But consumption opportunism is not to be assimilated to cynicism when there is no manipulation intent. Being as cynical as the marketers described by Kanter (1989) would imply a dissimulation component where people are deliberately manipulating in order to derive personal interest, such as taking advantage of your blog by insidiously promoting brands without telling it to your audience (Kretz, 2010). This offensive consumer cynicism should be viewed as an opportunistic exploitation of marketplace resources using manipulative devices in order to achieve one’s own consumption objectives. This behavior is based on the same premise that everybody is hiding one’s self interest beneath apparent virtue but the consequence is not to protect oneself from manipulative attempt but to be part of the game by using the same techniques.

Through this analysis of defensive and offensive consumer cynicism, we suggest that consumers’ enlightenment doesn’t lead automatically to resistance or anti-consumption. Defensive cynicism entails an exaggerated and global mistrust of every persuasion attempt, casting doubt on everyone and thus discouraging even the well-intentioned. For offensive cynicism, emancipation and critical deconstruction is used for self-interested purposes, making the most of marketplace resources. These two forms of cynicism – defensive and offensive – do not question the consumerist ideology. On the contrary, they represent two different ways to cope with the

marketplace, according to the given interpretation: defensive cynics interpret the marketplace in a dramatic way whereas offensive cynics interpret it in a pragmatic and challenging manner. Still, more radical forms of cynicism exist which question the marketplace itself.

4. Subversive consumer cynicism: “shocking a deluded humanity into awareness of its foolishness”

1803

Contemporary conceptions of cynicism as a psychological tool, either offensive or defensive, give a natural boundary to its initial critical power. Antique Cynics actively sought to transgress norms defined by a hypocritical society: “in ancient times, the Cynics held to virtuous ideals and sought to shock a deluded humanity into awareness of its foolishness” (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989). Like Socrates, Diogenes made it his mission to expose the social artifices in which reality is shrouded. But whereas Socrates favoured dialogue, the Cynics preferred to shock through their words and acts, using an acerbic form of humour to deride institutions, social norms and the hypocrisies of the system. In the same way, to denounce the cultural hegemony of the old system (Gramsci, 1971), anti-consumerist movements take the form of a counter-culture that aims at breaking the codes of the old system in a creative way (Rumbo, 2002). The symbolic force of the creative gesture is at the service of a scathing social denunciation, which links this movement to antique cynicism. The goal is to provoke consumers seen as “robotic sleepers” (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004) suggesting that most consumers are unaware that they are being manipulated.

Marketing is creating a cultural code (Baudrillard, 1998) and consumers “reproduce the current social arrangements” (Cherrier and Murray, 2004) without any consciousness of the social bounds consumption is creating. The idea is to make this code totally apparent to the consumers, to denounce the artificiality produced by the spectacular society (Debord, 1994). “The hidden facet of Marketing” (Cherrier and Murray, 2004) has to be unveiled and come under fierce attack by way of the creative subversion of many symbols of the consumption society. This creative diversion of advertisements aims to denounce the physical colonization of public space and the psychological colonization of consumers’ minds, and more recently the gap between the public image of corporations and corporate practices, as in the Adbuster magazine and culture jamming (Rumbo, 2002; Rémy, 2007). Beyond advertisement diversion, some artists have chosen to attack the very symbols of the consumerist society (such as Ronald Mc Donald or Mickey for a famous Bansky’s poster) or to denounce consumerism by recycling waste into works of art (Arte Povera movement for example). Symbolic marketplace resources are reworked and rearranged to regain autonomy (Cherrier, 2009). Subversive cynicism should also be used as a discursive strategy to denounce and deride efficiently the market colonization and diversion of traditional customs. Sarcasms, irony and sardonic forms of humour are the best allies of this discursive form of “contre-pouvoir”, as we can see on Internet hate sites (Mikkonen *et al.*, 2011).

The efficiency of such a strategy has yet to be discussed. As suggested by Foucault (1986), “resistance to one’s own domination is ultimately incorporated by the cultural producers as to increase domination” (Cherrier, 2009). In particular, this form of subversion has been incorporated into many commercials where “reflexive ironic brands” (Holt, 2002) are mocking the traditional way to advertise and “artistic works

that rebel against economic domination are themselves converted into economic objects” (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). In so doing, they create affinity with a reflexive and cynical consumer by becoming a resource for his cynical identity project (Mikkonen *et al.*, 2011). Finally, subversive consumer cynicism should be defined as a provocative and discursive practice denouncing sarcastically the marketplace colonization. Implicitly, this is leading to the idea of a polluted self that one should reassess through a critical self continuous examination, which Foucault described as part of the “technology of the self” defined as “reflection on modes of living, on choices of existence, on the way to regulate one’s behavior, to attach oneself to ends and means” (Foucault, 1997). This will not imply “the existence of a natural and authentic self apart” as Rumbo (2002) has suggested but at least an authentic examination of oneself. If subversive cynicism is linked to a fearless speech toward others, ancient cynicism advocates a much more demanding task: to be true to oneself.

5. Ethical consumer cynicism: mastering one’s own needs and consumption

Beyond a violent criticism of social conventions, Cynics proposed, like other philosophical schools in the Antiquity, to transform oneself through an ascetic process. This ascetic path is getting the individual to the self realization of one’s natural potential, leading to happiness through a virtuous life and contributing to the well-being of society: “the true richness is auto-sufficiency, as material wealth can’t be possessed but on the contrary possesses us [. . .]. Desiring only what one can possess is the path toward happiness” (Onfray, 1992, p. 138). This ascetic ethics is relatively common in the Antiquity, as the stoicism school advocated constant striving for self-mastery and the quest for a virtuous, dignified life, which could be achieved by concentrating on essential needs and discarding unnecessary ones (Foucault, 1986).

The life project proposed by the ancient Cynics starts with an uncompromising examination of the self. The accomplishment of one’s own nature can’t be conceived without casting off two chains: pleasure seeking and the sensibility to opinion (*doxa*). First, distinguishing between essential needs and superfluous ones will be a daily reflexive process. Clothes, look, material possessions and money were meaningless to advocate of this philosophy, as they were arbitrary social constructs without importance to individuals who value strict autonomy more than anything else. Their coat (called *tribonium*) was the only garment they possessed. It was a symbol of dispossession as well as the expression of their utilitarian relation to objects: “the Cynic reduces the garment to its sole utility function: protect from cold, sun, bad weather or natural aggressions” (Onfray, 1992, p. 36). The second enslaving bound is linked to the sensitivity to other people opinion in general (*doxa*), social conventions or norms that society is artificially imposing to us, or more specifically the importance that we attach to other peoples’ opinion on oneself, social recognition translated in disparaged social practices such as flattery, fear of slander or looking for glory (Vergnières, 2001). Refusing any fashion is also a way to escape from mass consumption practices and to affirm one’s singularity (Onfray, 1992, p. 36).

In that sense, ethical consumer cynicism could be defined as a spiritual quest for a natural self, stripped of the commoditization imposed by a deluded consumerist society. The project of mastering one’s own life concretizes through a constant daily examination of one’s true needs. The distinction between what is necessary from artificial needs coming from socially embedded lifestyle is quite similar to voluntary

simplifiers and downshifters project (Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Cherrier, 2009). Anti-consumption is situated at the ethical level, by rejecting the consumerist eudemonism and defining what the virtuous life leading to happiness should be. The main focus of simplifier motivation is more personal than linked to a global concern (Iyer and Muncy, 2009). Like Cynics, the aim is to “release oneself from one self” (Foucault, 1997) in order to regain the “government of the self” by the self (Foucault, 2010). Cynics define their own ethics on a personal level because they mistrust any external influence. External moral principles should be seen as *doxa* and rejected, enabling the individual to define their own personal ethics. Relying only on their own judgment, Cynics might encounter difficulties in constructing a collective project. Their individual resistance only translates in a public denunciation. Therefore, the cynical posture can’t lead to anti-consumption movements, as belonging to these movements requires the sharing of a common faith (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). This could explain why eco-feminists have cynical statements but feel bad about it (Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001).

6. Discussion

Our first contribution is to broaden the psychological perspective of cynicism mostly used in consumer research and to offer three other perspectives: offensive, subversive and ethical cynicism. All perspectives have in common the core idea that firms are hiding self-interest behind altruistic discourses. The four types of consumer cynicism we identified adopt different answers to these “false” discourses.

Defensive and offensive consumer cynicisms are sharing the same concern of not being fooled by marketers. The main difference between these two forms is lying in the way corporate greediness is interpreted. In the defensive case, marketing tactics are viewed as unfair practices and marketers are stigmatized. In the offensive one, the cat and mouse game should be a better metaphor of the consumer-marketer relationships from the consumer viewpoint. In both cases, cynicism should be conceived as a psychological resource used to resist marketing techniques, but not specifically the consumerist ideology. In contrast, subversive cynicism challenges consumerist ideology, disparages publicly (subversive cynicism) its core values and condemns individuals who subscribe to this society corroded by hypocrisy and social conventions seen as fake constructions. Finally, the ethical cynicism, based on the ancient Greek school of philosophy, shifts the concept to a life project. Cynics are defining a normative ethics based on individual autarky. This path is linked to an ascetic process, a continuous self-improvement (ethical cynicism) but not to a metaphysical revelation.

Beyond an enlargement of the concept, our second contribution is to link cynicism manifestations to the vast literature on resistance and anti-consumption. Our reflection on consumer cynicism distinguishes a lower (instrumental) level of expression, mostly linked to resistance to persuasion techniques, and a higher (terminal) level, which questions the consumerist ideology. This second level of consumer cynicism relates to the revision of modern meta-narratives that characterizes postmodernism (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Bewes, 1997). Most cynics belong to the lower level (our offensive and defensive forms) and do not question the consumerist ideology. The transition from the lower to the higher form of expression of consumer cynicism could be a fruitful research area.

A final contribution is to introduce consumer cynicism as an additional explanation in the shift from concentration on private goals to intense interest in public issues. According to Hirschman (2002), disappointment and frustrations associated with private consumption lead to public involvement and public participation that eventually lead back to those private concerns. Our analysis of the various forms of consumer cynicism offers insights into the reasons why such a shift might not occur. A first explanation could be the “neutralization” of disappointment. The first (instrumental) level of cynicism enables the consumer to protect himself against persuasion attempt and, in a more offensive way, even to undertake a more opportunistic and materialistic quest. A second explanation could be that cynicism, in its higher form, disparages public action. Subversive cynicism favours a verbal criticism of the consumerist system (like in Hirschman’s thesis) but develops an aversion toward collective action, considered as pure utopia (Turner and Valentine, 2001). This higher level of cynicism stays in the realm of private interest (government of self) and the spiritual quest aims at liberating one’s self from social conventions. Still, as underlined by Hirschman, 2002, p. 63), the shift from individual concerns to collective engagement requires that “we deal with consumers who are also conscious of being citizens and who live in a culture where the private and the public are important dichotomous categories permanently vying for the attention and time of the consumer-citizen”. This basic assumption does not seem to be fulfilled in the case of cynical consumers. Consequently, cynicism as a psychological tool or philosophical ethic should be considered a major obstacle to collective forms of resistance.

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