Rethinking resistance and anti-consumption behaviours in the light of the concept of deviance

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to address an under-researched issue in marketing, atypical consumption behaviours. More particularly it focuses on the deviant behaviours of consumers in a commercial or consumption situation and on their reactions in regard to the market system.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on multidisciplinary literature, this work articulates the concepts of deviance, resistance and anti-consumption. It looks at the interactions between these concepts and positions deviant, resistant and anti-consumption behaviours in relation to the norm.

Findings – Through the notion of deviance, the research provides a new framework clearly differentiating and articulating the concepts of resistant and anti-consumption behaviours. This integrative framework is sufficiently flexible and broad to cover and position the various behaviours and practices involving consumption rejection, opposition and avoidance.

Originality/value – This contribution answers a need for theoretical clarification of consumers’ behaviours that challenge and oppose the market system and culture of consumption. By mobilising the concept of deviance, this research provides an original topological model that increases understanding and positions the concepts of resistant and anti-consumption behaviours around the notion of social norm.

Keywords Deviant behaviour, Consumer resistance, Anti-consumption, Social norms, Market ideology, Topological model, Social deviance

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction
Shoplifting, addiction to a product, defacing an advertising poster, asking for leftovers in a restaurant, or recovering them directly from waste bins, are all, to a greater or lesser extent, deviations in conduct, which infringe on normal behaviour. Although such practices are not all of equal seriousness, they nevertheless indicate a lapse in moral or physical integrity or in public order.

While such behaviours seem isolated, some are more frequent and have been recorded in marketing for 20 years (Pen˜aloza and Price, 1993). Nevertheless, researchers have shown little interest in them. Viewing unexpected, abnormal behaviours as a brake on the economy is not enough. Rather they should be understood as an explanatory variable in the economy’s functioning. Research on consumption behaviours should not seek only to increase consumption (Lee et al., 2009).

In order to describe and explain such behaviours, researchers mobilise (usually independently) the notions of resistance, anti-consumption and to a lesser extent deviance. Nevertheless, simply exploring these notions separately does not address the interactions that may exist between them. Considering the way in which these notions
conjoin enables us to understand the extent of such behaviours. Conceived as
deviations in conduct, these behaviours entail the notion of the norm (normality) as
central to thinking about them.

We first examine deviance, the nodal concept of our study, then we explore the
notions of norm, resistance and anti-consumption in order to reveal the interactions
between these concepts through a topology of consumption behaviours in relation to
the norm.

1.1 What is deviant consumer behaviour?
The sociologist Howard Becker (1963) describes deviance as the product of a
transaction carried out between a social group and an individual who, in the eyes of the
group, has violated a norm, and Goffman (1975) defines it as a regrettable difference
from what we were expecting. At a more general level, deviance for Merton (1963,
p. 128) is “a symptom of dissociation between culturally prescribed aspirations and
socially structured avenues for realising those aspirations”.

From these definitions, the essential notion is that deviant behaviour is the result of
a discrepancy in relation to what is normally expected by society. However, before
such a convergent position was reached, there were many changes of perspective that
restricted the meaning of deviant behaviour. Understanding this evolution allows a
better grasp of the extent of consumer deviant acts.

In the past, lapses in moral or physical integrity or in public order were primarily
the domain of criminologists, who were concerned with them solely on the basis of
formal sanctions pronounced by the judiciary and the police. Subsequently, sociology
widened this notion under the impetus of Durkheim (2007a), who extended the scope of
such conduct, going beyond offences liable for prosecution. The origin of action is no
longer solely moral, but social as well.

A similar shift also occurred in management studies as regards the conception of
the consumer’s deviant behaviour. Initially, this was viewed as an inappropriate act in
a retail store (Mills and Bonoma, 1979). Fullerton and Punj (1993) describe such deviant
acts as aberrant and list them according to whether they involve:

1) destruction of property;
2) abuse, intimidation or physical and psychological victimisation of other
consumers and the company’s personnel; and
3) material loss, including various forms of insurance or credit card fraud and
shoplifting.

It must be admitted that researchers, having started off with too narrow a view of
deviant acts, restricted the extent of these acts. Deviant consumer behaviour cannot be
grasped solely through a crime-focussed lens. Moschis and Cox (1989) offered a new
perspective, by opening up the field of deviancy by including compulsive behaviour
and (chronic) impulsive buying. The potential multiplicity of deviant behaviours
makes it very tempting to create cartographies to facilitate their analysis and study.

Budden and Griffon (1996) note that deviant behaviours:

[. . . ] include, but are not limited to, shoplifting, credit misuse and abuse, compulsive buying,
purchase of illegal products, illegal market transactions, misuse of products, fraudulent
return of merchandise, fraudulent requests for warranty service, purchase of counterfeit products, violation of license agreements, gambling, and other addictive behaviours.

Thus, a distinction is made between criminal or harmful behaviour on the one hand and pathological behaviour (addiction, compulsive behaviour, etc.) on the other. In addition to this dual categorisation, Fowler (2007) introduces a third category pertaining to what “may be not considered ‘normal’ by the general populace”. For instance, belonging to brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Muniz and Schau, 2005) or to consumption subcultures (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). From this standpoint, the category links up with the work of Becker (1963, p. 32), for whom social groups produce deviance by establishing their own norms and distinguish themselves from the broader cultural system to which they belong (Becker, 1963, p. 105).

Another, more sophisticated, approach is to differentiate deviant behaviours according to the circumstances of their occurrence, depending on whether they take place during the act of purchase or the act of consumption. Houston and Gassenheimer (1987) view deviant behaviour in the retail outlet as expressing expectations between the actors that have not been met at the end of the transaction. During the act of consumption, deviant behaviour refers to the quantitative (volume of consumption culturally viewed as abnormal) and qualitative (nature and characteristics of the goods consumed) levels of satisfaction. Being a deviant consumer consequently means that the person’s needs are overly or unfairly (un)satisfied in relation to what is normally accepted (or practised) in a society.

Durkheim (2007b) differentiates deviant behaviour in relation to the norm by distinguishing disparities with the norm which, though a sign of social dysfunction, remain customary and “normal”, and those which are the reflection of social pathology, a kind of shortfall from the norm, that he terms “anomie”.

A further attempt at classification separates deviant acts according to the scale on which they are manifested: some such acts are situated at a micro-social level (e.g. the vendor-customer relation) and others at a macro-social level (e.g. relationship with the system). This approach chimes with the views of sociologists of deviance in regard to the phenomenon: Becker and Goffman, unlike Merton, are interested less in the macro-social level than the micro-social level.

Merton (1963) work refines Durkheim’s broad twofold classification, and hence improves our knowledge of deviant consumer behaviour (Moschis and Cox, 1989). Certain forms of deviance thus defined refer more or less directly to notions of resistance and anti-consumption. Merton conceives the social system as a balance between a cultural structure (socially approved goals) and a social structure (legitimate means for achieving these goals). Nevertheless, even if deviant behaviours are seen, on the basis of this principle, as ways of adapting to the norm, we maintain that deviant acts aim to readapt or change norms rather than adapt to them.

Innovation, as the first mode, expresses the way certain people engage in deviant behaviour because they seek to modify society’s cultural structure in order to improve it (e.g. militants) or use illegitimate means to obtain what they want (e.g. shoplifters). In ritualism, the subject envisages his existence within the restrictive framework of norms and abandons legitimate goals (e.g. reducing consumption through voluntary simplicity). Rebellion is a strong form of deviance in reaction to the existing order; the subject rejects existing goals and means and seeks to replace them so as to create a new
social order (e.g. advocates of alter-globalisation). Finally, in the mode of retreatism, the subject abandons societal goals and means and/or substitutes other goals and means in order to resolve the disequilibrium: he becomes asocial, similarly to dependents (Merton, 1963, p. 186).

In sum, although Merton’s theory has advantages for marketing, it also has its shortcomings (Cohen, 1965), particularly in regard to reactions to deviance, even if being deviant is based on the other’s perception of the subject (Becker, 1963). Deviance is therefore the effect of a characterisation by others. De facto, it cannot by systematic: certain deviants could be so “secretly” (Becker, 1963, p. 43), concealing the nature of their “stigma” (Goffman, 1975).

Whichever approach is adopted to understand consumer deviance behaviour, the researcher still faces a problem, and this lies in his obligation not to pass judgement. While some behaviours, such as shoplifting, are easily designated as deviant, others are not so easy to categorise, especially when they appear among social trends such as green behaviours or subcultures of consumption. Hence, the need to objectivise the notion of deviance, to question the notion of norm, and to admit that the description of a deviant act requires formulating a judgement which is based on a certain idea of normality. Norm and deviance are two complementary notions (Durkheim, 2007b, p. 40; Goffman, 1975, p. 150) that are probably inseparable – which brings us back to the issue of how to distinguish deviant and normal behaviours.

1.2 What is normal consumer behaviour?
Durkheim lays down the foundations of the sociology of deviance and puts the question of normality on the agenda in his discussion of what is normal and what is pathological. He defines a normal social fact in terms of time and statistically. The “normal” can then be described as that which is inherent in most individuals and, conversely, the “pathological” (deviant) as that which is unusual, characteristic of a minority, and limited in time (Durkheim, 2004, p. 56). These conceptions of the norm recur at an etymological level: the norm is a usual, regular state and designates a (sometimes non-formalised) rule to be followed that establishes social relations. In regard to this last point, Becker notes that deviance is “the consequence of the application, by others, of norms and sanctions to a ‘transgressor’” (Becker, 1963, p. 33). On this basis, we suppose that the norm is characterised by:

- a set of rules forming a reference framework;
- an authority originating the standard; and
- a sanction, from which results an opposition between what is marginal and what is mainstream.

For Durkheim (2004, p. 120), formal and informal norms coexist in a society, thus tending to signify that the reference framework may vary in nature according to the authority. By extension, we propose that the rules are produced by either public or private entities. Central to the concept of deviance are thus the idea of violating a rule and the idea of a sanction. A deviant then becomes someone to whom a sanction is applied. Depending on the authority, the sanction will involve either legal action or general social disapproval (Ogien, 1999, p. 17). It thus functions as a standard: that which does not comply with it constitutes an anomaly. The antinomy of the norm is thus whatever is not generally expected. This type of behaviour can be represented
through a Gaussian distribution (Wilkins, 1964). The frequency of observations thus makes possible the distinction between the (normal) majority and the (deviant) minority.

To these conceptions of the norm, there must also be added the notion of the elasticity of the norm over time. The norm is subject to changes due to progress and evolution in beliefs, politics, social group values, etc. Some past deviances (e.g. homosexuality, techno-music) are today considered by some groups to be normal. Conversely, the development of modern societies led to the criminalisation of behaviour hitherto tolerated or accepted (pollution, etc.). Thus, there is a historical and social relativity of norms.

The notion of “judgment” also needs to be taken into account for a better conception of the norm. It implies too a certain “subjectivity” on the part of whoever labels an act deviant or non-deviant. Labelling theory (Becker, 1963) could be usefully deployed to clarify this point, and certainly to open many research possibilities.

In raising the question of normality and of deviance, this paper addresses both the hidden and critical face of consumption behaviour. Consequently, we consider that the normal/deviant duality is a meta-category that covers all consumption behaviours. We then ask whether, in contrast to the normality, deviance should not be envisaged as a meta-category of “abnormal” behaviours covering resistance and anti-consumption phenomena.

1.3 Are resistance and anti-consumption forms of deviance?

Studies on resistance in consumer behaviour are relatively recent compared to those in philosophy and critical sociology, which offer an indictment of consumer society (Barthes, 1957; Packard, 1958; Marcuse, 1964; Baudrillard, 1970). Etymologically, the term “resistance”, resisteren, signifies stopping, not going any further. This is the property through which a body resists the action of another body. In management studies, Roux’s (2007) definition refers to acts of riposte, neutralisation or opposition, implemented by an individual or group in order to thwart or counter the actions of firms that are viewed as oppressive (Fournier, 1998).

Those who resist share a system of values and norms that undermine any analysis based on the concept of a clear distinction between what is individual and what is collective (Sitz, 2009). In this sense, being deviant and/or resistant implies “learning techniques” (Becker, 1963, p. 68). This is a first similarity between the two concepts.

Studies on consumer resistance show that various ideological currents such as freedom of expression, the quest for autonomy, the will to act and being a smart customer are expressed (Roux, 2009). Such work should be linked to the fact that “most deviant groups have self-justifying rationales (‘an ideology’)”, even if they are not necessarily very developed (Becker, 1963, p. 61). Along the same lines, in the recent macro-analysis of resistance behaviours, Izberk-Bilgin (2010) emphasises this ideological perspective among consumers in regard to consumerist culture (or market ideology) with a view to initiating or encouraging change of social order. Such resistant behaviours originate in feelings of risk, lack of control, impotence, contradictions between values and the means of implementing them, and social constraints. Note here that these individual and collective reactions are comparable to some of the ways of adapting to the norm introduced by Merton, namely, innovation,
rebellion and, to a certain extent, retreatism. Most of the adaptations to the norm most often result from pressure exerted by society on the individual or social groups.

Such an embedding of resistance within the concept of deviance implies that resistant behaviour can be based on the evaluation of factors contributing to the commission of this act and the consequences that derive from it. This is plausible, since “resisting” requires being aware of the current state of affairs and a possible reality that the subject wishes to be part of.

Furthermore, acts of anti-consumption, such as voluntary simplicity (Cherrier and Murray, 2007; Elgin, 1981), match one type of deviance, as identified by Merton (ritualism), and thus anti-consumption may also be linked to the notion of deviance. Moreover, anti-consumption behaviours adopt this principle of awareness of the current situation and its future projection. Further, they imply control of consumption in order that consumption practices, self-image and individual values and goals converge. More than a reaction to corporate oppression, anti-consumption emerges as a philosophy of life, a lifestyle.

Roux (2007) categorises resistant behaviour into three types, behaviour opposed to:

1. firms;
2. market ideology; and
3. materialist ideology.

Although the behaviours thus categorised can be assimilated to deviant behaviours and can be opposed to majority behaviours that supposedly describe the “norm”, such a categorisation nevertheless needs to be qualified. Thus, we consider that behaviours involving non-adherence to materialist ideology reflect anti-consumption positions and not resistance, since they express a tendency to self-control through avoidance or escape (Table I).

This difficulty of distinguishing resistance from anti-consumption stems largely from the fact they overlap, at least partially. They express apparently shared positions in the sense that each of these categories stresses the position of individuals in relation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviours opposed to firms</th>
<th>Collective refusal to buy the products or services of a firm whose practices are considered to be immoral</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boycott</td>
<td>Shoplifting, defacement, vandalism and negative word-of-mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vengeful behaviours</td>
<td>Defacement of advertising sites and media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviours opposed to market ideology</td>
<td>Acquisition of goods through second-hand markets. Fairs, auction sales, discussion about the merchandise, bargaining</td>
</tr>
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<td>Adbusting</td>
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<td>Alternative modes of exchange</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoiding or escaping consumer culture or materialist ideology</td>
<td>Reducing consumption by reorganising work to as to have more free time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downshifting</td>
<td>Reduction of consumption for spiritual or ethical reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary simplicity</td>
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Table I. Overview of anti-consumption and resistant behaviours
to an established (public or private) standard (e.g., companies' expectations in regard to the consumer). In addition, this convergence of both notions can also be pointed toward consumer culture. However, they are ultimately driven by different objectives: "counter-oriented" objectives (resistance) and self-control and avoidance objectives (anti-consumption). Similarly, both notions occur spatially with under-consumption in relation to the norm, while resistance may also involve over-consumption through pathological consumption phenomena (addiction).

This bringing together of deviance, resistance and anti-consumption shows that there is material to make good certain lacunas, and also to resolve issues viewed as aporias, that currently surround the concept of resistance. Other questions also arise. Designating resistant or anti-consumption behaviours, which contravene the expected order in a given cultural context as deviant, is not entirely satisfactory. Is it then possible to envisage an ordering of resistant behaviours according to their extent and their direction (deviation) in relation to the norm?

2. A topology of consumption behaviours
Answering this question implies that there are significant behavioural variations around the norm. As envisaged, not all forms of deviance have the same weight in the face of society's opinions and reaction. Examining resistance thus reveals different intensities, as proposed by Peñaloza and Price (1993) and Fournier (1998). The attempt at conceptual clarification undertaken in this paper and the summary of the many deviance, resistance and anti-consumption behaviours allows us to envisage the articulation of these concepts around the norm (Figure 1). This topology organises consumer behaviours in relation to a social norm. They are hierarchised according to whether they are normal and expected, accepted and tolerated, understood and excused or rejected by society.

There is also a dynamic element in establishing a designation of behaviours into the categories "normal behaviours" and "deviant behaviours". The status of a behaviour may change over time, as with homosexuality, which was rejected, then understood and excused since it was deemed pathological, and finally tolerated and accepted. But there is a break between the category of "deviance" and the category of the "norm":

![Figure 1. Framework of consumer behaviours in relation to norms](image-url)
although ecological behaviours are accepted, they do not appear conventional insofar as they are still the subject of fierce debate in society.

From this principle, expected behaviours are the reflection of officially or socially agreed conventions; accepted behaviours emerge from consent or approval in relation to the phenomenon. To a lesser extent, tolerated behaviours originate from an ideology and only concern groups of individual in society. Along with accepted behaviours, they constitute the margin in which behaviours can be perceived over time as emergent normality or as deviance.

The evolution of green behaviours over time clearly illustrate this dynamic. They were viewed in the 1970s as marginal (similarly to hippies) and a hindrance to modernity (and technology growth in particular). Then growing fears linked to globalisation led to attempts to operationalise environmentalist concepts, while today they are now in the process of entering into all spheres of society.

Pathological deviant behaviours are understood or excused by society, since they stem from cognitive dysfunctions associated with illnesses. At the far extreme from expected normal behaviours, criminal rejected behaviours are seen as harmful, and are therefore legally sanctioned, in contrast to all other forms of behaviour.

This way of conceiving of consumption in relation to the norm makes all practices that diverge from it, to some extent, deviant. Through this approach, convergences between the concepts of resistance, anti-consumption and deviance are highlighted. This is perhaps perceived all the more clearly since these behaviours all have a marginal character except for normally expected or, to a lesser extent, accepted behaviours.

3. Conclusion
Our conceptualisation of deviance, resistance and anti-consumption enables us to establish points of convergence and to propose an interesting linkage of these concepts, as shown in Figure 1. Through this approach, new lines of research emerge, as well as a number of questions at a theoretical and managerial level.

This contribution answers a real need for theoretical clarification on the part of marketing researchers interested in consumers who challenge and oppose the market system and consumption. It opens up a line of research on how the concept of deviance is differentiated and articulated with that of resistance. Moreover, through the notion of deviance, this research provides a new framework for clearly understanding and positioning the concepts of resistant and anti-consumption behaviours.

This study is a first step in a more far-reaching programme on the concepts of deviance, resistance and their relations to consumption. We can also envisage the potential implications and extensions of the research both at a theoretical level and at a managerial and societal level.

Theoretically, the concept of deviance is particularly fertile. It opens up important areas of research for the understanding of resistant and anti-consumption phenomena and, conversely, over-consumption and addiction. Our study therefore initiates new research perspectives insofar as, on the one hand, within the types identified in the topological model (Figure 1), it will be possible to introduce new distinctions based on other morphological features of deviance, and on the other, work on dependence behaviours could be envisaged in order to explore the extent to which some of them might conceal oppositional behaviours. For instance, our paper raises a wide range of...
questions in regard to addictive and/or market exit behaviours, in relation both to their functioning and to their impact on the performance and image of brands and companies. The extent of this phenomenon is far from insignificant. For example, nearly a million people in France have an addictive relation to games of chance (Adès and Lejoyeux, 2001) and between 600,000 and 800,000 young people engage in addictive behaviour, particularly those involved in MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games).

The present study also presents opportunities for further researching the entry process of consumers into a resistant pattern of behaviour and for understanding the strategies played out by these actors in relation to the norm.

Our research has also implications for companies and society in general. Although deviance through excessive consumption (addiction) may be profitable to companies and brands, it also generates serious societal problems (dependence, debt, obesity, breakdown of social bonds, etc.) and involves corporate social responsibility and profound moral questioning. On the other hand, deviance through abnormal reduction of consumption (downshifting, voluntary simplicity) certainly threatens actors operating in the conventional market by destructuring it, but also generates opportunities and potential through the creation/development of alternative markets and by stimulating the economy (with new “local” actors making their appearance, evolution/revolution of norms, etc.)

The questions and research opportunities generated through the linking of deviance, resistance and anti-consumption could be applied, in future, to the two ends of the consumption continuum (voluntary simplicity vs. addiction) in order to bring out the potentialities and specific risks associated with these individual and collective behaviours for firms and their implications in social terms. This perspective allows the idea to be explored that deviant behaviours may diverge from the norm both “upwardly” (through over-consumption) and “downwardly” (through under-consumption). Such research should also enable re-examination of the informing constructs so as to enrich the topological model put forward in this study.

References


Further reading


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