The Freegan phenomenon: anti-consumption or consumer resistance?

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to investigate collective identity construction process and applicability of resistance dimensions to the Freegan phenomenon.
Design/methodology/approach – Data triangulation approach combines netnography of the Freegan online discourses, and content analysis of mainstream consumer views of Freeganism.
Findings – Participation in shared practices facilitates Freegan collective identity construction through convergence of radical consumer resistance and market-mediated anti-consumption.
Research limitations/implications – Multi-dimensional conceptualization of resistance is applicable to analyzing consumer movements.
Originality/value – Through data triangulation, this research offers an analysis of internally negotiated and externally ascribed Freegan group identities.

Keywords Anti-consumption, Consumer resistance, Freegan, Netnography, Consumers, Consumer behaviour

Paper type Research paper

Is Freeganism’s goal the transformation of society or finding individual solutions to individual needs? (Freegan.info blog post, January 23, 2009).

1. Introduction
There is a rising interest in anti-consumption movements and subcultures among marketing academics and practitioners. It is triggered by the evidence of deteriorating quality of life and environment around the world ascribed to excessive unsustainable consumption (NEF, 2009), and by growing consumer power facilitated by information technology (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006). While the dominant theoretical paradigm appears to deny consumer agency in challenging contemporary markets and consumption due to their fundamental role in human life (Arnould, 2007; Baudrillard, 1998; de Certeau, 1984), a growing volume of research on ideologies and consumer resistance practices confirms the reality of organized movements challenging the unsustainable consumption practices characterizing many developed economies. Extant research on culture jamming (Sandlin and Callahan, 2009), boycotting (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), voluntary simplicity (Shaw and Newholm, 2002), consumer emancipation (Kozinets, 2002a), and consumer resistance (Penaloza and Price, 1993) addresses motivations, ideologies, and practices of these phenomena. However, ambiguities exist regarding redundant terminology and, consequently, the possibility...
of arriving at a grand theory of anti-consumption (Lee et al., 2009). Some particular issues in this domain include consumers’ ability to defy markets (Arnould, 2007; Kozinets, 2002a), the overlap of anti-consumption and consumer resistance discourses, and the collective vs. individual anti-market actions (Cherrier, 2009).

While the abundant and diverse resistance definitions concur on its essence of “oppositional action”, they fall short of providing a useful framework for identifying and characterizing various manifestations of such actions (Brown, 1996). As a result, questions remain regarding classifying different modes (physical/mental), scales (individual/collective), directions (progressive/antisocial), and domains (political/self-identity-based) of oppositional actions. One suggested typology advances intent and recognition as the two major dimensions of variation useful for incorporating and acknowledging heterogeneity in oppositional action (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). It proposes that actions that are not only intentional and explicitly recognized as oppositional by others (boycotting), but also not intended but recognized (avoiding consumption for personal reasons) or intended but not recognized (guerilla community gardens) are parts of the resistance continuum. This paper explores applicability of this approach to the analysis of Freeganism, an emergent phenomenon amalgamating individual market-mediated alternative consumption practices, collective political actions, and radical anti-capitalist ideology. We evaluate varying degrees of internal oppositional intent expressed in the process of collective identity negotiation through netnographic analyses of the Freegan online sources and explore the magnitude of external recognition through content analysis of mainstream consumer essays.

2. Background

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But lets the greater felon loose
Who steals the commons from the goose (English protest chant, circa 1600).

The term “Freeganism” combines the concepts of free/shared resources (food, clothing, housing, etc.) and veganism (animal product avoidance). Freegan philosophy originated from the voluntary simplicity movement (Elgin, 1993) around the year 2000, and initially focused on minimizing environmental impact by consuming discarded food (Edwards and Mercer, 2007). Presently, Freegans associate themselves with broader economic, social, and political concerns. Their manifesto states:

Freegans ... practice strategies for everyday living based on sharing resources, minimizing the detrimental impact of our consumption, reducing and recovering waste and independence from the profit-driven economy. Freegans are dismayed by the social and ecological costs of an economic model where only profit is valued, at the expense of the environment, and human and animal rights ... Freegans envision a future based on self-sufficient, sustainable communities, where we obtain vital resources in ways that don’t exploit people, animals, and the earth and share them freely to ensure that everyone’s needs are met, and where cooperation, not competition is recognized as the fabric of a happy and healthy society ... (Freegan.info, 2009).

According to this philosophy, a return to a hunter-gatherer style society from the society of global competition striving for unlimited growth will stop the devastation of non-renewable resources and provide happiness. Freegans strive to promote their
views and overcome the mainstream stereotyping of their practices as unsafe and ineffective by engaging in public debate online, offering “dumpster tours”, and rigorous efforts to formulate a coherent platform. Freegan philosophy has adherents in many countries connected via online forums and listservs. Freeganism affiliates with Food Not Bombs, a global social movement dedicated to collecting, preparing, and distributing unused non-animal food to disaster survivors and political protesters in over 150 cities around the world (Foodnotbombs.net, 2009). While Food Not Bombs is an active worldwide political force with the clear goals of fighting hunger, and stopping globalization and environmental destruction, Freeganism emerges as a philosophy and lifestyle that focuses more on shifting individual consumption patterns and socio-political views. Currently, Freeganism garners publicity via mass media, thus creating wide awareness and diverse reactions from the general population. However, virtually no empirical research exists addressing the main ideological premises of this philosophy, its relationship to Freegan practices, or perceptions and evaluations of this phenomenon by the mainstream population.

3. Methodology
Following recent calls in ethnographic research for multi-sited, “in and out” observations (Marcus, 1995), we employed data triangulation methodology to compare the inner perspective provided by the netnographic analysis of major Freegan online discussion venues and communities (Kozinets, 2002b) with content analysis of free-form essays by “outside” of Freeganism mainstream consumers. The comparative investigation of different discursive frameworks, commonly used in linguistic and sociological studies (Cherrier, 2009), assisted in evaluating Freegan collective identity by combining internal and external perspectives (Cooley, 1902), and allowed simultaneous assessment of intent and recognition dimensions of anti-consumption manifestations (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004).

The Freegan World Listserv (1,800 members), selected for the netnographic analysis, facilitates information exchange and advice regarding alternative consumption practices, requests for volunteers in certain areas, requests to join protests and activities worldwide, reflections and discussions regarding Freegan philosophy and ideology, among other discussions. It was selected due to its high traffic and postings volume, very detailed data supported by photographs, and frequent interactions among members representing both Freegan ideologues and practicing members at large. The first author joined the Listserv in November 2008, and regularly contributed to online conversations, commenting on, clarifying and qualifying other members’ statements, and posing questions to confirm conclusions and interpretations. The author identified herself as an anti-consumption researcher interested in the Freegan phenomenon, allowing her to not only adhere to the appropriate ethical standards, but also to contact the listserv contributors by e-mail for member checks (Kozinets, 2002b). In addition, both authors content-analyzed the Listserv’s postings from January 2004 until December 2009 to trace the development of the movement discourse, and the changes that took place within it. To supplement the Listserv’s netnographic findings, and to be able to generalize the findings, as well as to provide corroborative evidence, these additional web sites were content-analyzed by both authors:

- Freegan.info, a web site and a blog created by The Wetlands Activism Collective, a political and environmental umbrella organization representing various social
and environmental advocacy working groups. It is an official portal for the Freegan movement, and contains the manifesto, materials for the press, and other official documents.

- Individual web pages and blogs on E-tribes.net, such as Dumpster Diving, Garbage Liberation Front, Food Not Bombs, Squatting, Thrifting, etc.
- Personal web sites and blogs (Funkypunkyg.blogspot.com, Freejunkfood.blogspot.com, Theburts.wordpress.com, etc.). These venues represent narratives and reflections of individual Freegans, and sites of politically active organizations. They were selected to aid in understanding behavioral and motivational aspect of the movement.

A content analysis of 56 essays assessed external recognition and evaluation of Freeganism. Written by students at two US universities after exposure to popular media and press coverage of Freeganism, the essays were analyzed to identify dominant discourses regarding mainstream consumers’ attitudes towards the Freegan philosophy and practices. Students were selected to represent mainstream consumers (Perrault and Leigh, 1989) because they:

- are fully socialized into the dominant social order;
- command sufficient purchasing power; and
- are extensively exposed to mainstream media. Inter-rater reliability for the online content and students essays ranged from 0.92 to 0.97.

A third coder resolved disagreements.

4. Findings
4.1 Primacy of consumer resistance stance in Freegan ideology
The analysis revealed that cohesive group identity development is a major issue for the Freegan World Listserv and Freegan.info site members. The opposing camps include those who define Freeganism in non-radical terms restricted to the description of shared practices and those who insist on developing a political stance and formal ideological statement behind those practices (Figure 1). For example, the Introduction to Freegan Philosophy (Freegan.info) defines Freegans as those who practice strategies to live independent of the mainstream economy to resolve the perceived conflict between their own values and unacceptable values of profit, competition, and self-interest. Although their ultimate goal is developing a society of sustainable, self-sufficient communities by way of working less for the capitalist enterprise, not spending money, repairing and reusing things, and putting waste to practical use, there is no apparent call for social or political action. The opposing view holds that a Freegan revolutionary strategy is necessary to dismantle capitalism via legal and even illegal actions including civil disobedience and sabotage (Freegan World listserv post, January 22, 2009). Although both views advocate replacement of the current “unfair” economic system with a localized sustainable “eco-village”, the former represents non-violent alternative consumption and less reliance on the mainstream economy, while the latter justifies violent and illegal actions in order to undermine the “criminal” capitalist system and its values. Although a number of contributors feel uncomfortable with the more radical approach and suggest using the online venues only for posting practical advice (e.g. dumpster locations, edible wild herbs, and urban gardens tips)
others feel that alternative consumption strategies are meaningless without the underlying revolutionary philosophy.

The identity issue is central to Freeganism since the cause for political resistance legitimizes such illegal practices as squatting, shoplifting, and cutting locks on dumpsters. Without defying the dominant cultural tenets, Freegan practices are reduced to marginal and/or criminal activities rejected by the broader population. Therefore, the more radical Freegan sections focus on formulating an ideology that denounces the cultural, political and legal edifice supported by the capitalist economy. By creating and promoting an alternative “code” (or sign) system (Baudrillard, 1998) that eradicates the dominant values of private property, individualism, hygiene, and money-based career success, Freegans attempt to transcend not only the market economy, but also the “structuring habitus” (Bourdieu, 1977) of its symbolic meanings. They believe that violating the existing order is necessary and is emblematic of effective social movements. Less radical Freegans maintain that social movements amalgamate extremists and moderates to appeal to the broader population and both ends of the spectrum display effectiveness over time (Freegan World listserv post, May 25, 2009).

An argument regarding advisability of cutting dumpster locks illustrates the “code transcending” discourse. While for the more radical members, this represents an act of protest against the capitalist system and private property, others contend that it is not a political symbol if the lock was placed to protect bio-hazardous waste, or if it leads to the lock replacement, which supports the capitalist cycle of purchase and production (Freegan World listserv posts, May 26, 2009). Similarly, obtaining food from grocery store dumpsters violates the modern norms and values of hygiene and cleanliness and thus attempts to redefine “garbage” as a resource rather than refuse. The arguments in this case include the Hygiene Hypothesis that attributes the current “allergy epidemic” to weakening immune systems due to cleaner living standards (Stanwell-Smith and Bloomfield, 2004) and the larger harm from industrial cleaning chemicals and
pesticides than from bacteria inside the dumpster (Edwards and Mercer, 2007). These instances exemplify an ongoing process of creating sign values that transcend the dominant paradigm as opposed to consumption-minimizing practices within this paradigm, and counter the existing views on consumer confinement within the prevailing capitalist exchange.

4.2 Dominance of anti-consumption approach among practicing Freegans

Among the wide variety of Freegan practices to “live beyond capitalism”, the most prominent and widely covered by popular media are dumpster diving and squatting. Public interest towards illegal trespassing and taboo-defying “garbage eating” is especially strong when these activities are performed for reasons other than dire poverty. Other Freegan alternative consumption activities include recycling, composting, wild foraging, growing community gardens, repairing and redistributing things at free markets and on Freecycle or Craigslist web sites. Freegans use alternative transportation, such as train hopping, hitchhiking, walking/skating, and biking. Finally, by limiting their financial needs, they consciously limit work hours to dedicate time to volunteering and to minimize economic participation.

Content analysis of the most prominent blogs dedicated to each of these activities (E-tribe.com communities Garbage Liberation Front, Dumpster Diving, Cheap Shelter, Squatting, Food Not Bombs, and numerous individual blogs) revealed motivations underlying their practices. When explaining dumpster diving and squatting activities, members of online communities most frequently mention environmental reasons, excitement and adventure, and savings and material value obtained from these activities. Only a few members of the practice-centered communities and blogs explicitly discuss political or philosophical underpinnings of their Freegan activities in their blogs and postings. Many of those involved in these practices are even unaware of Freegan philosophy and are motivated more by necessity than ideological choice. Additionally, similar to Cherrier’s (2009) creative consumers, some participants focus more on “inner change” and “resistance against one’s self” (Bourdieu, 1984) as opposed to influencing and mobilizing others. A lot of the listserv contributors practice Freeganism to reduce their own environmental impact much like Iyer and Muncy’s (2009) global impact consumers. They participate in online discussions more for social support, advice, and sharing resources than for devising strategies to change others’ beliefs and actions. Social support and approval provides legitimacy to their activities, instills the sense of pride/worthiness, and strengthens the cohesion of loose virtual networks. Not united by a radical militant ideology, these e-tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002) are unified by shared emotions, passions, and “symbolic rituals” of Freegan practices. Lack of political discussions on these sites may indicate a different social standing for contributors compared to Freegan radical ideologues. This explanation renders ideology as a type of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) available only to the elites: one blog considers Freegan ideology “a means for the middle class to separate themselves from the scum – the people who squat, the homeless, etc” (Emoware.org).

4.3 Mainstream perception of Freeganism: three archetypes

From the analysis of 56 student essays regarding their views of Freegan practices, motivations, and beliefs based on media reports and Freegan.info web site, the phenomenon appears to generate extreme emotions and assessments among
mainstream consumers. According to our findings, the consumer view of the Freegan identity can be represented by three different archetypes (Figure 1). The Hero Archetype is shaped by positive assessments of Freegans as courageous facilitators of social change and charismatic leaders who generate hope and vision. Respondents who support such positive evaluation believe that Freegans are “amazing”, “admirable”, respectable”, “inspiring”, “trying to make a difference in the world”, “protect our environment”, and “help us build a bright future”. Some respondents compare Freeganism to religion: “they exhibit sharing and generosity as in Christianity”, “going through a lot of sacrifice to help the world, the nature, and others”. The opposite view of Freegans, the Vagrant Archetype, considers them lazy individuals with scavenger lifestyles. Proponents of this assessment believe that Freegan practices “create a lazy society”, are unethical and illegal, and “only contribute to problems of the world” by “sophist rationalization” of breaking the law, breeding disease, “getting something for nothing”, and “violating property rights”. These respondents express anger towards Freegans and question their rationality since Freegans still depend on the capitalist system. They state “Freegans can only exist if others participate in the economy”, since they “cannot exist without waste”. Other negative comments consider Freegans “deranged, desperate, and dispossessed”, “extremists”, “modern day hippies”, and “parasites”. Interestingly, the analogy with religion is also present, but with a negative connotation: i.e. “religious nuts and fanatics”. Additional characterizations suggest escapism from reality and rebellion as motivations for Freegan activities: “people try too hard to be different”, “want attention”, “want to escape daily battles of the real world”. Finally, the Functional Archetype characterizes Freegans as a niche group whose functional societal role is consuming waste. This view grants Freegans authenticity through their motivation to balance out the wasteful society: “Freegans are reaction to today’s American values”, “an expected response to what is going on in the world”. They are considered “necessary for our ecological environment”, “voluntary waste managers”, and “just another kind of people”. While certain marginalization takes place in these evaluations (“a fringe movement”), the group’s distinctiveness (intensified by media coverage) also creates the image of a fashionable trend (“cool kids shop in thrift stores”).

These three clearly distinguishable prototypes of Freegans mirror the contradiction between the ideology of a developing social movement and individual practices motivated by personal reasons and goals. It appears that the Hero and Vagrant Archetypes reflect mainstream reactions to the Freegan radical philosophy and ideology, while the Functional Archetype manifests the assessments of market-mediated anti-consumption practices and motivations.

5. Discussion and conclusion
Freeganism is evolving from an unorganized amalgamation of practice tribes and e-tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002; Kozinets, 2006), brought together by common passions, rituals and shared emotions, to a more focused collective movement with an emerging ideology and “activist core”. In the dynamic process of Freegan “identity work” (Glass, 2009), market-defying radical consumer resistance and market-mediated anti-consumption activities represent divergent identities that are being negotiated to emerge into a collective identity supported by shared convictions as well as emotions. Unlike the division into “activists” and “members” (passive recipients of benefits) in other burgeoning collective movements (Glass, 2009), active participation
in common practices and experiences allows for Freegan collective identity construction and convergence. Defying dominant social structures and re-creating alternative social links sustained by anti-consumption passions and “symbolic rituals” forms the foundation for “convergence” of the Freegan extremes, and for constructing a coherent collective identity.

It appears that the radical political philosophy, with the goal to defy the capitalist economy and ultimately destroy the system, is important for providing legitimacy and direction to both political actions and alternative consumption strategies. According to one post, “Trying to separate Freegans from Freegan philosophy is like trying to separate religious people from the belief in God. Without their belief in God, they wouldn’t be religious. Without our philosophy, we wouldn’t be Freegans.” (August 3, 2009). From this viewpoint, such prominent Freegan practices as dumpster diving and squatting are only temporary and unsustainable, as they rely on the capitalist economy. Freegan philosophy should be the foundation for developing practices that do not perpetuate capitalism. Thus, growing community gardens, wild foraging, sharing, and reusing various items are suggested as possible community-based consumption practices that can persist beyond capitalism. While attempting to create an alternative cultural sign system by theoretically legitimizing the violation of norms, laws, and conventions, the radical anti-consumption ideology resembles manifestation of Baudrillard’s cultural capital, a fashionable middle-class discourse sustained by luxurious consumption of time and intellectual assets (Arnould, 2007). Freegan ideologues remain unperturbed that the advocated lifestyle provides 5 percent or less of the essential adult food ration. Their position is similar to utopian, escapist motifs of anti-consumption rhetoric that do not offer constructive alternative solutions (Arnould, 2007). However, this radical position stimulates such politically active and prominent organizations as Food Not Bombs, Food Not Lawns, Homes Not Jails, and others motivated to create awareness of hunger, homelessness, and ecological problems, achieve visible results, and attract adherents all over the world. The clear goal of transforming society through collective political action engenders the Freegan “hero ethic” of strict commitment and righteousness similar to Fournier’s (1998) “active rebellion” and Cherrier’s (2009) “hero identity” classifications and supports the actuality of consumer resistance action (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). The positive (Hero) and negative (Vagrant) stereotypes ascribed to Freegans by outside observers further underscore the role of human agency: recognition of Freegan activities as oppositional qualifies them as a manifestation of consumer resistance and thus contradicts deterministic views of consumer inability to challenge markets.

Unlike the ideological core, the numerous “periphery” of Freeganism is represented by individuals seeking solutions to more individual-level needs instead of trying to actively influence others, resembling Fournier’s (1998) “minimization behaviors”. They engage in Freegan practices because of lack of resources, sense of adventure, or feelings of personal responsibility for reducing ecological deterioration. United by common passions and emotions into “e-tribes” (Cova and Cova, 2002), they engage in social interaction for support and idea sharing with like-minded others, as well as for self-expression and self-reflection. Supporting Cherrier (2009), this group is characterized by heterogeneity of views and activities, as opposed to unitization via a common ideology. Freegans without a politico-ideological motivation are more likely to arrive at creative alternative solutions, even though they may be utilizing market-based means and paths. According to Arnould (2007), progressive social
movements that take market-mediated forms are more successful since they are better understood by the mainstream population and can attract more allies. However, although a Fair Trade movement, which utilizes available capitalist infrastructure to help producers disadvantaged by global capitalism, is spreading, it remains a niche phenomenon, and does not sufficiently aid farmers (Fairtrade Fortnight, 2009). Similarly, from our assessment of mainstream reactions to Freeganism, it is plausible that practicing Freeganism for personally-relevant goals of individual contribution to the ecology, fun and enjoyment, and thrift marginalizes the phenomenon and does not energize outsiders. Freeganism without ideology becomes a temporary curiosity, a fringe group, or a fad. The Functional archetype ascribed to Freegans reflects a lack of outside recognition of an oppositional action that, if combined with lack of oppositional intent, renders those activities as non-resistance and provides a rationale for dismissing the dynamics of the Freegan phenomenon and the potential for social change. Thus, consumer movements seeking to mobilize new members and avoid marginalization should emphasize generating wider external recognition.

The above findings confirm and illustrate earlier research conclusions about a continuum-like nature of consumer resistance movements (Cherrier, 2009; Fournier, 1998). They also support the need for multi-dimensional approaches to oppositional movements (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004) by extending the domain and incorporating borderline phenomena characterized by either intent or recognition. For example, utilizing the intent dimension extends the oppositional continuum from overt politically-charged resistance to “unwitting” (unintended) actions exhibited by Freegans with non-political motivations and personally-motivated “non-resistance” (or anti-consumption). Applying the outside recognition dimension shows that while Hero and Vagrant archetypes illustrate both intended and unintended actions recognized by outside observers, Functional archetype reflects both “attempted resistance” and “non-resistance” (e.g. minimization behaviors) that are unrecognized. This approach contributes to the current anti-consumption discourse by not only extending resistance conceptualization, but also acknowledging non-resistance (market-mediated anti-consumption) as part of the oppositional action continuum that informs the dynamics and identity work of consumer movements. Our findings suggest several new avenues for future research. Studying whether (or how) resistance might stem from anti-consumption and how it reproduces itself may help clarify the role of activist elites in sustaining a movement, and the role of unintended or unrecognized oppositional actions as depositaries of creativity for its renovation. Investigating views and behaviors of institutional resistance “targets” can help better conceptualize the recognition dimension and reveal the agency-structure dialectic. Finally, shifting research attention from definitional arguments to comparing limiting conditions and convergence dynamics of consumer oppositional activities may contribute to creating a comprehensive theory of consumer resistance.

To summarize, our study contributes to anti-consumption dialogue by identifying and describing the dynamic process of Freegan “identity work” through negotiating the meaning of Freeganism among representatives of radical “ideological core” and those practicing anti-consumption through market-mediated means. It suggests a possibility of a single collective identity construction as a result of participation in shared practices and recreating social links. The study finds support for multi-dimensional conceptualization of consumer resistance, suggesting a prospect of arriving at a typology of Freeganism along the intent and recognition dimensions.
Although limited to the context of Freeganism, our findings suggest agentic actions in consumer resistance, with market-mediated consumption representing part of a general resistance continuum. Our findings inform future research by confirming applicability of multi-dimensional resistance conceptualization to consumer resistance movements, as well as the usefulness of the “identity work” framework in analyzing meaning negotiation within anti-consumption subcultures to identify processes and mechanisms of identity construction.

References


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