Consumer cynicism: from resistance to anti-consumption in a disenchanted world?

Philippe Odou
Pauline de Pechpeyrou
Lille School of Management Research Center

Symposium ICAR – NACRE 2010
INTRODUCTION

Cynicism

- Long research tradition in the managerial literature
- But a regain of interest in the consumption field during the last decade:
  - Cynicism is intrinsically associated to Postmodernity, “a period of disillusionment with Grand Narratives and totalizing ideologies” (Bewes, 1997)

- Instead of focusing only on the perverse effects of cynicism on consumers and firms, we also refer to the antique perspective which views cynicism as a technique to free the individual from the society influence to reach autonomy (Foucault, 1986).
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- The concept and its relationship with the resistance literature need some clarification.

- How can we integrate the different forms of cynicism identified?

- What is the ability of cynicism to deeply transform the marketplace?
FOUR FIGURES OF CYNICISM

Defensive Cynicism
One should protect from persuasion attempts of self-interested companies and mistrust their altruistic motives (anti-corporate and anti-marketing discourse, psychic distancing)

Offensive Cynicism
Everybody is looking for his own interest and one should get the most before being fooled by someone else (neoliberal discourse, moral neutralization)

Subversive Cynicism
One should strongly denounce the hegemony of consumerist ideology to help consumer decipher the consumption code (anti-corporate and anticonsumerist discourse, moral condemnation)

Ethical Cynicism
One should mastering one’s own life by casting off the chains of artificial pleasures and Doxa and living a life of frugality (anti-corporate and anticonsumption discourse, moral creation)
DEFENSIVE CONSUMER CYNICISM
Resisting marketing manipulative attempts

● Central belief that “self-interest alone motivates companies”, leading people to distrust corporate altruistic motives (Lee et al., 2009)
  ● Cynicism and its milder form, skepticism, can be considered as defensive mental devices against marketing stimuli (Roux, 2007)

● Two consequences of these defensive tactics:
  ● **Recursivity** of cynicism (Goldman and Papson, 1994; Rumbo, 2002; Mc Alister, 1996; Thompson and Arsel, 2004).
  ● **Halo** effect: Consumers treat in the same way virtuous and non-virtuous firms (Brunk, 2010)
DEFENSIVE CONSUMER CYNICISM
Resisting marketing manipulative attempts
Confrontation to firms’ self interest behavior may also lead consumers to adopt the same logic:

- **Mild** form: diverting all marketing resources such as promotions, free products and cash refund offers to get their consumption free (Odou et al., 2009).
- **Radical** form: deliberately manipulating in order to derive personnel interest, such as taking advantage of your blog by insidiously promoting brands without telling it to your audience (Kretz, 2009).

**Same premise** (everybody is hiding one’s self interest beneath apparent virtue) but **different interpretation** (be part of the game by using the same techniques).
OFFENSIVE CONSUMER CYNICISM
The Shield versus the Sword
(Kanter & Mirvis, 1989)
SUBVERSIVE CONSUMER CYNICISM
“Shocking a deluded humanity into awareness of its [consumerist] foolishness”

- The Antique Cynics preferred to shock through their words and acts, using an acerbic form of humor to deride institutions, social norms and the hypocrisies of the system

- Discursive strategy to denounce and deride efficiently the market colonization
  - Diversion of advertisements (Adbuster, Culture Jamming)
  - Attack against the very symbols of the consumerist ideology (Bansky, Arte Povera)
  - Christmas hate site (Mikkonen et al., 2010)
SUBVERSIVE CONSUMER CYNICISM
“Shocking a deluded humanity into awareness of its [consumerist] foolishness”
Beyond a violent criticism of social conventions, Cynics proposed, like other philosophical schools in the Antiquity, to transform one’s self through an ascetic process. The accomplishment of one’s own nature can’t be conceived without casting off two chains:

1/ Distinguishing between essential needs and superfluous ones will be a daily reflexive process.
2/ Ignoring the sensitivity to other people opinion in general, social conventions or norms (Doxa)
ETHICAL CONSUMER CYNICISM
Mastering one’s own needs and consumption - DIOGENES
Disappointing and deceiving buying experiences
Indirect learning of manipulation
(media, anti-consumption movements)
Cumulative exposures to persuasion attempts

Disappointment/Consumption experiences
Marketing as producer of fake discourses
→ Mastering one’s consumption

Resistance to marketing techniques

Disenchantment/Happiness quest through consumption
Marketing as producer of artificial needs
→ Mastering one’s life

Resistance to consumerist ideology

Defensive Cynicism
One should protect oneself from persuasion attempts of self interested firms and mistrust their altruistic motives

Offensive Cynicism
Everybody is looking for his own interest and one should get the most before being fooled by someone else

Subversive Cynicism
One should strongly denounce the hegemony of consumerist ideology to help consumer decipher the consumption code

Ethical Cynicism
Master one’s life by casting off the chains of artificial pleasures and Doxa and living a life of frugality
Conclusion

● Consumer research has focused mainly on the defensive form of consumer cynicism
● A central belief but different manifestations
  ● Resistance to marketing techniques
  ● Resistance to consumerist ideology
● Neutralization effect of disappointment by consumer cynicism
● Anti-consumption and cynicism?
Thank you for your attention

Questions / comments / suggestions are welcome