“Have you heard that...”  
Anti-Consumption Morals in Urban Legends  

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“Cabbage Patch dolls were designed to get people accustomed to the appearance of mutants following a thermonuclear war...”
Urban Legends (Contemporary Legends, Modern Legends…)

- Narrative structure
- Unknown original author
- Unverifiable
- Content is credible, although sensational, but untrue
- Many variants, same story

Urban legend as self-perpetuating narrative virus
Urban Legends and Consumption

- 45% of urban legends refers to products (Donovan et al., *ML*, 1999)
- 10% refers to brands (Donovan et al., *ML*, 1999)

- Brands are stories (Brown, Patterson, *Psy&Mktg* 2010; Woodside, *Psy&Mktg*, 2010)
- Fears and anxieties (Bauman, 2006)
Urban Legends and Anti-Consumption

- The maximum propensity to refer a urban legend
  - The consumer is depicted with negative intents
  - The outcome for the consumer is negative
  - The brand is mentioned (as opposed to a generic product)

(Donovan, Mowen, Chakraborty, ML, 1999)
Research

- **Snopes.com**
  - The most important repository of urban legends (Brunvand, 2010)
  - Around 100 urban legends collected
    - About 40% refer to brands, products, marketing, or consumption-related topics
- **Narrative analysis** (Bal, 1985; Brown, Patterson, Psy&Mktg 2010; Woodside, Psy&Mktg, 2010)
  - Characters, actions, genre
Results

- The powers that be
  - Super-power
    - Only the war can stop McDonald’s new opening
  - Hidden agenda
    - The Harley-Davidson shape celebrates the nuclear “Fat Boy” bomb of Hiroshima
- Hidden code
  - Coca Cola subliminal messages
Results

- And the consumers?
  - Victims
  - Sometimes overcome the company, but due to its dumb power
    - Pepsi awarded a 30 million fight jet to customer, because of an ad
Discussion

- Conspiracy theories
  - Used to broaden the scope of anti-consumption (Varman, Belk, *JCR*, 2009)

- Age of innocence
  - The consumer is innocent but should stay vigilant

- Target
  - Through urban legends, the anti-consumption discourses are adopted by some non-resistant consumers too

The truth is out there…
A Possible Mechanism

- The ideology of anti-consumption contains the *fabula* (Bal, 1985)
- Then the urban legend translates the *fabula* into a *story*
- Finally, the consumer utters a *text* and passes it to other users for further texts

Open questions

- Is anti-consumption an ideology or is it inserted into a wider ideology (conspiracy theories)? (Varman, Belk, *JCR*, 2009)
Limits

- Database
- Method
- ...
Final Thoughts...

- A urban legend might be an extreme form of resistance, since it slips through the planned and intentional narratives created by corporate and by consumers.
- They create new narratives that no one can control and that anyone is “compelled” to spread around.

Is consumption itself creating its own antibodies?
Thanks for your attention

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