Consuming Activism: Peace, War, and Consumer Research
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This paper reports an ethnographic study of activists in a current peace movement. Through observations of and extended conversations with twenty-three informants, the researcher attempts to understand the factors that most influence the orientations and behaviors of activist members of a peace alliance. The paper also attempts to provide some discussion on the domain of consumer research and definition of consumption. The claim is made that current definition of consumption and consumer may be limiting our ability to gain insights into the human condition through consumer research.

INTRODUCTION
There is a fast growing literature in consumption activities that are outside the sphere of activities conventionally deemed as consumption, that is, acquisition, use and disposal of goods and services (see, for example, Belk 1991; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Roberts, Scammon and Schouten 1988; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Yet, there have also been concerns as to whether any and all human behavior can be considered as consumption, whether there may still be some utility in delineating a certain set of behaviors to be studied under the rubric of consumption. Is, for example, someone participating in a “meals on wheels” program, where volunteers carry meals to people in need, a consumer in this activity? Yes, s/he is usually driving a car or riding a bicycle to carry the meals and, as such, s/he will even conventionally be considered as a consumer, but is the whole activity in which the car is used consumption; is carrying meals to the needy a consumption activity? Therefore, should such behaviors be the domain of consumer research?

Sociological and anthropological studies have implied that distinctions made between production and consumption depended on the definitional constitution of value in modern economics, but that such constitution of value is debatable (Bataille 1985; Baudrillard 1981; Bourdieu 1984). Based on this literature, it has been argued that distinctions made between production and consumption, producer and consumer are culturally constructed, thus historically contextual and arbitrary (Fırat 2000). The conventional content of consumption has further been challenged by studies that expose the “consumptive” nature of performative, anti-market, counter-consumption movements or activism (Kožinets 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate some of the issues raised above about the nature of consumption and consumer research by studying a group involved in the current “Peace Movement,” an activist movement that proposes peaceful policies to deal with terror acts, as specifically exemplified by the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., and opposes the use of military force as a solution. Some theoretical propositions are advanced in the conclusions.

THE STUDY
This research was performed in a large metropolitan city in southwestern United States. It is an ethnography of contemporary activism. Participant observation was the methodology used in studying an organization of peace activists.

The Organization
The organization studied is a loosely organized alliance without any elected or appointed officials except a treasurer. Around eleven to fourteen different groups are represented by the alliance’s members, but many members participate as individuals, without any group representation. The groups represented include faith and church based organizations, peace organizations, civil rights organizations, and other organizations for varied social causes.

The decisions are made by all who come to the general assembly that meets every other weekend. This body assigns tasks to several ongoing committees and infrequently formed ad-hoc committees. The most central committee is the organizing committee that meets on weekends alternating with the general assembly. Other ongoing committees are the events committee (planning the events to be undertaken by the alliance, such as peace rallies), the education committee (planning the educational programs to be undertaken by the alliance), and the outreach committee (planning the contacts that the alliance decides to make with other organizations). An early media committee was later combined with the events committee.

At each meeting of the general assembly, two people who volunteer to lead the discussions at the next meeting are selected. These two people, along with all who choose to come to the organizing committee meeting, are responsible for putting together the agenda for the next general assembly. The organizing committee discusses what topics need to be on the agenda, organizes tasks that were assigned by the general assembly, hears committee reports, and makes budget allocations for the tasks that have been authorized by the general assembly. Membership in all committees and in the alliance is based upon turning up at the meetings.

The alliance has many ongoing activities. The core of these activities is the varied weekly vigils. One vigil is called “Women in Black” and is an extension of such vigils across the world, where women clad in black and wearing black veils stand silently at a central spot and distribute flyers of information. This vigil takes place on three different days of the week in different parts of the city—the city library and two separate campuses—with participation of different women. The numbers have been changing between six and twenty-five in these vigils.

Another weekly vigil, on two different days of the week at two different major street intersections of the city, is the peace vigil. At these vigils, with numbers changing between nine and forty, signs are held, flyers are distributed to pedestrians and vehicle occupants, peace slogans and songs are voiced. Recently, a third weekly peace vigil that focuses on puppets and street theater has started at a major university campus in town.

The alliance also participates in peace and anti-war rallies, gatherings, marches, and teach-ins that are organized by other organizations, sometimes in partnership with the alliance. It has been active, for example, in the worldwide peace marches organized on February 15, 2003, and March 8, 2003. It was also very active in the 2003 Martin Luther King, Jr., march that had a strong peace contingent and message. It is the local organizer of the global “Candlelight Vigil” that is to take place on March 16, 2003. Two major peace concerts were organized by the alliance in cooperation with student and municipal bodies.

The Informants
The alliance now has several hundred “members” in the city and is part of a peace movement across its state that has thousands of participants. This study has especially focused on twenty-three alliance members, of which thirteen are women and ten are men. While there is no official count of the sex distribution of the alliance’s membership, most meetings have a majority of women.
Of these twenty-three members, five are professors (two at community colleges), four represent faith organizations (their employment is unknown to the researcher), two are students, four are small business owners, three are retired, one is semi-retired (working out of the home), one works for the Green Party state organization, one is in construction, and one is a state government employee. The youngest is in her mid-twenties and the oldest in his mid-seventies. The researcher participated in multiple activities with this group of members, although for separate events, and had a chance to converse with them at length many times. None of these conversations were pre-planned, but followed the natural course of sharing experiences and thoughts among co-activists.

A Brief History of the Alliance

The alliance was started when a peace organization in the city called for a meeting of citizens following September 11, 2001. Over one-hundred people turned up for this meeting. An original ad-hoc committee drafted a mission statement for the alliance, which was finalized after several weeks of intense discussions. An original organizing committee developed proposals about how the alliance should be structured and operate, as a result of which the structure and operating procedures described earlier were constituted. Later, an attempt at developing a document for short and long term peaceful alternatives to military actions to represent the alliance’s view failed due to extreme disagreements on its content and language.

The alliance has continued and undertaken several effective actions, however, despite the ideological differences among its members. While a few of the most active members have dropped out from general assembly and committee meetings due to these differences and other personal reasons (dissertations, address changes, work changes, etc.), they continue to participate in the major events that the alliance takes part in. Recently, there is an attempt at evaluating the alliance’s successes and failures in keeping active members, as well as considerations of its future. With the impending war in the Persian Gulf, there seems to be a greater unity of purpose and a rejuvenation of commitment to working for the alliance among its members.

Numbers that participate in the general assembly have fallen from over one hundred in the early days of the alliance to around thirty to forty, sometimes around twenty, currently. While there are no set officers of the alliance, there have arisen a few very active members who regularly participate in the committees and other meetings and who, thus, have become major players in decisions made and tasks undertaken. These members contributed extended time to the alliance’s activities and tasks. Seven of the twenty-three informants this study focused on belong to this category.

An interesting development in the last seven months has been that two of the informant members who stopped coming to the alliance meetings have, together with two other informants, who are active members of the alliance, formed a new group that comes together to organize actions—specifically, rallies and teach-ins—inviting organizations to join in, the alliance being one of them. Once the organized action is done, this group disperses until the next action to be organized. They find this format able to react to the next action to be organized. They find this format able to react to events much faster and more effectively. This perception may be validated by the fact that this group was the leader in organizing three very successful events: two marches and one teach-in, all of which attracted unprecedented numbers in the state.

SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

While the alliance has been successful in uniting several peace groups together and enabling them to bring in a growing number of people into the peace movement in the state, it has encountered difficulties. Specifically, while the numbers of people joining the actions have increased, the number of active members who take on tasks has decreased, putting more pressure for time allocation and effort on fewer members. The reason for this is a fractionaling of the members of the alliance.

The most significant fraction among the membership seems to have occurred due to three reasons. One is the relatively slow pace and seeming anarchy in decision making. Related to this is the feeling among some that the heated discussions have sometimes become too aggressive and offensive. Several members voiced their discomfort due to their perceptions that they have been attacked and, at times, verbally abused. Other members have found the “endless” discussions too distracting from actions that need to be taken in view of, what they consider to be, looming issues and impending events, got frustrated with the pace of meetings and decision-making, and have left to work with other organizations.

A second reason for the fraction is the frustrations with what some feel to be a failure to be more inclusive and understanding of the values of varied faith and ethnicity based groups. Several have complained that the general assembly is always on Sundays, a day not convenient for certain faiths to allocate to such activities. Others have complained that Islamic and Jewish values do not get equal acceptance. All members agree that the alliance has not been able, and according to some not sufficiently active, to draw into the alliance and the movement members of African American, Hispanic, and Native American backgrounds. These concerns have created discontent among members who, nevertheless, are still active in the alliance.

The third reason for the fraction has been the relations with anarchist groups that are in the peace movement. During rallies and marches, the anarchist groups are more reluctant to follow discipline and rules. While they have not until now engaged in destructive acts during these events, there have been arrests of members of these groups for offenses such as stepping into the traffic during pedestrian stop lights—when the police force expects the marchers to halt the march—and shouting slogans at the police. While practically no one in the alliance agrees with the anarchists’ tactics during the peace events, there is a difference of opinion as to whether they should still be allowed in the events. Three major opinions are voiced: (1) anarchist tactics are in conflict with the “peace” message of the movement and, therefore, they should not be allowed to participate in events organized by the alliance, (2) all who are for peace, regardless of their views and tactics should be included, and (3) we cannot control or police who comes to the events, so we should concentrate on what we do, not on what others do.

This disagreement has caused a very few number of alliance members to stop coming to the events. While this is a recurring argument, specifically following every large event, no clear decision has been made to this date.

FURTHER OBSERVATIONS AND PRELIMINARY INTERPRETATIONS

A purpose of this research was to understand the motivations that led people in the alliance to take the positions they took. Why did some stay in the alliance despite their disappointments while others left? What were the reasons that led to the different behaviors among those that did stay, and what caused those who left to take different paths after leaving the alliance? Do insights into these issues enlighten us about people and consumption? Following are some observations and related interpretations regarding these questions.

From conversations with the informants and discussions in the general assembly and committee meetings, it was possible to discern some differences in the political backgrounds of the alliance
members. One difference that seems to make a significant contribution to the variance in behaviors is the degree of knowledge and analysis with which members came into the alliance. Mediating the effect of this was the political orientation of the member.

Members who came into the alliance with the most articulated analyses and greatest degree of knowledge regarding world affairs tended to have the least patience for the slowness of decision making and organizing actions in the alliance. Of these members, however, some left and some did not. Those who left the alliance were the ones who perceived that the links they already had with political organizations, such as the Democratic and Libertarian parties, or organizations with social or environmental agendas, such as labor unions and ecological groups, were strong. As mentioned, while they continue to participate in marches and other events organized or co-organized by the alliance, a common theme that runs through their justifications for no longer participating in the meetings of the alliance bodies is that they can do more with their time allocated to other activities.

Those with articulated analyses and knowledge who did not have perceived strong links to other organizations have stayed with the alliance meetings—meaning the general assembly and committees, and tasks needed to realize alliance actions. Despite discontent with the pace and perceived inactivity, what keeps these members in the alliance is a shared belief that peace is the most significant purpose to work for in a contemporary world where much danger of terror and violence loom. There are, however, following the threat of a war in Iraq, two differing views among these peace activists. One view is that all effort needs to be put into averting a war in Iraq. A second view is to keep the theme of resolving world’s problems through peace central, while opposing war in Iraq.

A second stream of differences is observed based on the alliance members’ perceptions of the mainstream media. As a result of differing analyses regarding the nature and role of mainstream media, there are two different approaches to how media ought to be encountered. One approach insists on letter writing campaigns, contacting the media to invite them to the events, and is built on the belief that there is sufficient neutrality in the mainstream media to have an impact and representation.

A second approach to mainstream media is based on the belief that they are basically controlled by corporate economic interests, which are currently heavily represented in the government. According to this view, media’s representation of movements, such as the peace movement, will be biased and, while there may be some minimal coverage of the peace movement, the overall tone and accompanying items will be orchestrated to undermine the peace efforts. Two sometimes overlapping proposals regarding how the media should be encountered arises out of this approach. One is to not waste time with the media, but to concentrate peace efforts on actions that will carry the message directly to the masses. The second is to target the media and its role in current political predicaments as part of the peace efforts, to get the media interested in its own interests.

Another significant difference in the members’ approach to the alliance, maybe a more interesting factor in exploring consumption, has to do with how the alliance is perceived and what is expected of it. A group of members view the alliance very instrumentally. That is, the alliance and their efforts in it are to achieve certain goals that specifically have to do with the advancement of peace and avoidance of war. They often ask that clear, reachable goals ought to be set that, when achieved, success may be measured by the fact that the alliance would be no longer needed. They are focused on the ends of the process. Another group of members focus on the process. For them the ends are not the only, maybe not even the more important purpose of the alliance. The alliance, its workings, the theater of actions and activities constitute not only means to reach ends, but a way of life, a form of existence and, maybe, a model for a peaceful world.

This distinction in the perceptions of the alliance results in more or less a completely overlapping distinction in strategic orientations to the alliance’s actions. Members from the ends focused group tend to concentrate and see greater value in actions that are confrontational, in the sense that the messages, signs, etc., of the actions take on the policies of the government and other parties, opposing them and calling for change. Their signs at the rallies will say, for example, “No Blood for Oil,” “Drop Bush, Not Bombs,” “Regime Change in the USA.” Members from the process focused group, on the other hand, concentrate on and express value in performative actions. While they participate in rallies and marches with signs such as “Economy in the Service of the People,” “God Does Not Only Bless America,” and “Let’s Try Preemptive Peace,” they prefer actions like teach-ins, silent vigils, and street theater.

**DISCUSSION**

Clearly, this is research that is ongoing, the activism studied may be, at this very time, in its crucial moments. Events may yet create major turns in the reactions and behaviors that are being studied. However, some preliminary insights may be possible now.

One insight that stands out, specifically in relation to “consumption,” is the clear distinction in the orientations of the activists between getting involved in activism for the goal(s) to be achieved versus immersing in activism for the experience. In conversations with the informants it is evident that three groups emerge in this respect. One group of members is the goal-oriented one, for whom the experience of being at the meetings and undertaking tasks is quite a miserable, almost a torturous, necessity. They express feelings of time pressures and usually are the first ones to leave when meetings are over.

A second group cherishes the time spent in meetings, finding these to be satisfying social times. They enjoy dwelling on the issues that arise in the meetings and that require involved discussions. Meetings are something they look forward to, as are the events organized by the alliance, where they look forward to interacting with the participants and to having long conversations with co-activists. In effect, for this group, these meetings and events are not simply means to achieve results, but are part of living and being.

A third group has characteristics of both the first and the second groups above. They appreciate that the alliance exists to achieve some goals, but also consider it to be a part of a (worthy) way of living. For these last two groups, being a member of the alliance is not just something they do, but something that defines who they are and how they choose to live their lives. That is, while for the first group membership in the alliance is not a matter of identity, for the last two groups it certainly is.

Based on the conversations with the informants, it is found that the motives that place the members into these groups include, along with some of the reasons discussed earlier, the member’s ideological affiliation. These ideologies are not exclusive of each other, but often overlap, making the analysis more complex. However, some tendencies are discernable. Specifically, the ideologies that are most often voiced among the alliance members are politically (most frequently Marxist and progressive), ecologically, anti-consumption culture, feminist, minority/civil rights, or faith based ideologies.

Among the informants, there are two who almost exclusively espouse a Marxist ideology. Both of these members belong to the first, ends-oriented group, as do the four who exclusively espouse...
faith based ideologies. One informant who particularly is an environmentalist with also feminist background, two others with strong anti-consumption culture ideologies with ecological values, and one who has a long civil rights activism history belong to the second group, for whom the participation in the alliance is simply a way of life. The remaining thirteen informants who espouse combinations of post-Marxist/progressive, environmentalist, feminist and minority/civil rights ideologies belong to the third, hybrid group. These informants express, in varying words and degrees, the necessity of life styles, as practiced in and through the alliance, to be models for the goals that are sought to be achieved by the peace movement.

The existence, preferences, and behaviors of the “purely way of life” and hybrid groups, and the actions they tend to prefer, as discussed earlier, seem to support some sociologists’ claims that both the form and meaning of activism has been changing, beginning with the 1960s. Berman calls this the aestheticization of politics (Berman 1989) following theories of the new avant-garde (Bürg 1984), while others see it as a “post-” phenomenon (Cohen 1998; Eschle 2001; Grossberg 1992), or the rise of personal politics (Jamison and Eyerman 1994), or the popularization of theory (McLaughlin 1996). In each case, there is the implication that a transformation from the modern sense of agency and activism that was confrontational and instrumental (Rejai 1973) is taking place. The fact that informants who represented the more modern forms of organized ideologies, political or faith based, especially exhibited an affinity to and preference for this modern sense of activism corresponds with this implication.

In terms of consumption, as Roberts, Scammon and Schouten explore with the craftspersons (1988), what conventionally is deemed as work or productive activity or hobby, and the like, is often an act of “consumption,” whether in terms of one performing the act as a way to “enjoy” life or as a means of “living” life. Hirschman (1983), in pointing to the limits of the marketing concept also had presupposed the limits of the clear distinction marketers and consumer researchers were making between consumption and production. Artists’ work is often not simply an act of producing artworks, but a model of and a proposal for consuming/living one’s life. Finally, Fırat and Dholakia (1998) have observed a growth in the orientation of consumers globally in terms of approaching all of their life activities as constructing theaters of consumption. The activists approaching activism with “purely way of life” or hybrid orientations do indeed seem to be interested in constructing theaters of consumption as a way of living.

**CONCLUSION**

From the point of view of consumer research, the transformation implied in the trends in activism and agency indicated by sociological studies and supported by these observations of a current peace alliance and its members, further tends to indicate the superficiality of the distinctions made in modern thought in defining consumption as separate or different from other human behaviors. Indeed, as the brief study in this paper shows, living, making life choices, acting for social change, or activism for peace are not only consuming the people involved, for many it is the consumption of life experiences, camaraderie, ideologies, ideas, time, and identities as, simultaneously, these same things that are consumed are being produced. This confusion, therefore, makes it difficult to explore our human condition with constructs that are unrepresentative and illusory. They may, in fact, be blocking our insights.

As consumer research continues to break down the received limitations of what is to be or should be studied, consumer researchers may be well advised to consider breaking ground for a new vocabulary.

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