Transforming Self and By Extension Society. an Exploration of Activism Against Consumerism

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This paper aims to further our understanding on activism against consumerism in contemporary consumer culture. Using a theoretical framework inspired by Foucault’s ideas on power and resistance, focussing on an ethical, anti-consumeristic campaign as a research domain and applying a combination of qualitative techniques, this research tries to investigate how radical activists, largely marginalized and sited as “others” within dominant discourses, position themselves and engage in resistance towards western, materialistic consumption culture.

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Introduction
This paper aims to contribute to a deepened understanding of activism against consumerism in contemporary consumer culture, a topic that only recently has started to feature in consumer research debate (see among others, Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001; Cherrier and Murray, 2002; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Thompson, 2004; Gabriel and Lang, 2006). Making use of a theoretical framework inspired by Foucault’s ideas on power and resistance, focussing on an ethical, anti-consumeristic campaign as a research domain and applying a combination of qualitative research techniques, this research attempts to investigate how radical activists, usually cited as “others” within dominant discourses on consumption, position themselves and resist traditional materialistic consumption culture.

Theory
Consumer research addresses the issue of the movements that seek to undermine consumeristic ideology using several different theoretical perspectives, ranging from NSM theory to eco-feminism from Foucault’s ideas on power to Plummer’s framework of identity construction.

This paper, following Thompson’s suggestions (2004), aims to study consumer activism that seeks ideological and cultural change in the market using the conceptual categories introduced by Foucault.

An analysis of power and resistance in Foucault’s works has been conducted (among others, Foucault, 1978; 1983; 1985; 1988). Consideration of some of his later publications clearly reveals an interesting evolution in the notion of resistance, which ultimately emerges as much richer and viable than that initially put forward in Volume I of The History of Sexuality in 1976.

In fact, Foucault concludes that resistance to power is better understood not merely in terms of agonistic force relations, but also in the sense of creative movements in the field of possible actions; resistance is no longer just the sabotage of a dominant agenda but also concerns the constitution of novel types of subjectivity, forms of agency that develop a genuine alternative to mainstream contemporary life. Therefore, an important point of resistance is in forging new forms of living, or innovative, non-conventional modes of existence; in short, self-formation.

Building on this more complex notion of resistance, I study how activists involved in an extremely active, ethical, anti-consumeristic, Italian campaign named “Bilanci di Giustizia” (Balance Sheets of Justice) engage in resistance to consumption.

Methods
The investigation of the Bilanci di Giustizia activists commenced in 2002. At that time I began informally observing their highly active, group participants’ Internet community and downloading and analyzing their computer mediated communications. Additionally, pertinent articles, documents and other cultural data available through mass media and via Internet were collected and analyzed.

After approximately one year of building a knowledge base, I undertook participant observation at the two day annual meeting in 2003. Following this, I subscribed and contributed to the Bilanci di Giustizia mailing list and maintained e-mail contact with several participants I had met and interviewed. This more intensified online activity was followed by participation in the successive annual meetings. During immersion in these events I kept detailed written field notes. The ethnography also encompassed interviews and interactions with several activists. All the material was transcribed, coded, repeatedly read in detail and analyzed using constant comparative analytic techniques (e.g., Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Findings
Findings demonstrate that the activists’ adoption of counter-discourses drawing on cultural models of fairness, environmental sustainability and quality of life ideals results in the undermining of existing dominant discourses on consumption in general, and thereby the creation of conditions for the establishment of a permanent critique of all consumerism.

However, these simultaneous and ubiquitous forms of resistance that focus on transforming power relations combine with activists’ creation of new forms of subjectivities more in line with their anti-consumeristic ideology and contrasting their received subjectivities as “western mainstream consumers”. Activists transform themselves in accordance with their ideals and standpoint on what is genuinely beneficial and meaningful in life, rejecting their traditional roles as consumers.

These new forms of subjectivities, these “alternative” approaches in relating to society, nature and oneself are creatable through their coherent linkage of modes of organizing thoughts, conduct and ways of being.

In particular, the philosophy of “sobriety” appears to be the most marked issue activists consider in transforming themselves, with which they aim to “make the difference” in relation to mainstream consumers, considered to be dozing in conformist behavior or, as in one respondent’s words, a “comfortable torpor”.

With this philosophy guiding their everyday and concrete actions, activists can become credible evidence that change is possible and that this can significantly contribute to the attainment of a better world.

In synthesis, this idea of transforming themselves and by extension the society in which they live could prove to be of great interest in enriching the discussion on activism against consumerism in contemporary consumer culture.


When Ads Make Drama Seem Silly and Comedy Seem Dull: Role-Fulfillment Effects of Mood on Evaluations of Emotional Television Commercials

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Previous consumer research has examined how moods induced by emotional television programs influence viewers' evaluations of commercials. For example, Goldberg and Gorn (1987) showed that happy and sad television programs induce parallel moods among viewers, that viewers continue experiencing these happy and sad moods during commercial breaks, and that these moods influence their reactions to individual commercials. Drawing on research on mood congruency and accessibility (e.g., Bower 1981; Isen et al. 1978), Goldberg and Gorn hypothesized that viewers evaluate commercials more favorably when they appear during happy (vs. sad) programs, and provided experimental support for this hypothesis.

We believe that previous consumer research only captures part of a more complex relationship between the emotional valence of television programs and viewers' evaluations of commercials.

Role-Fulfillment Evaluation Processes

In this paper, we draw on psychological research on mood as an input to role-fulfillment evaluation processes. Whereas most theoretical models of the relation between mood and evaluations suggest that people in positive moods provide more favorable evaluations than do people in negative moods (e.g., Bower 1981; Isen et al. 1978; Schwarz and Clore 1988), role-fulfillment research suggests that the more people experience the feelings (positive or negative) that they would expect to feel if some mood-inducing object or event had fulfilled its role, the more favorably they evaluate that object or event.

For example, Martin et al. (1997) showed that participants in an experiment evaluated a comedic television program more favorably after being incidentally placed in a happy (vs. sad) mood, whereas they evaluated a dramatic television program more favorably after being incidentally placed in a sad (vs. happy) mood. Martin et al. argue that happy participants evaluated the comedy more favorably than did sad participants, because, for them, the comedy seemed to have fulfilled its role: they expected it to make them feel happy, and (due to the positive incidental mood induction) they indeed felt happy. Similarly, Martin et al. argue that sad participants evaluated the drama more favorably than did happy participants, because, for them, the drama seemed to have fulfilled its role: they expected it to make them feel sad, and (due to the negative incidental mood induction) they indeed felt sad.

Hypothesis

In this paper, we propose that when a television program establishes a mood, viewers expect to continue experiencing that mood throughout the duration of the program, including commercial breaks. Then, based on research on role-fulfillment processes, we hypothesize that viewers evaluate commercials more favorably when they support, rather than break, the moods established by programs. Based on this hypothesis, we predict that viewers like happy commercials more than sad commercials during happy programs, and that they like sad commercials more than happy commercials during sad programs. The notion that, under some circumstances, viewers may prefer sad (vs. happy) commercials is counterintuitive and a key contribution of this paper.

Experiment 1

The goal of Experiment 1 was to test our hypothesis that viewers evaluate commercials more favorably when they support, rather than break, the moods established by programs.

Design: The experiment had a 2 (program mood: happy vs. sad) X 2 (chronological positioning of commercial in program: middle vs. end) X 2 (commercial mood: happy vs. sad) X 2 (commercial replicates) between-subjects design.

Procedure: Participants watched a 15 minute clip from a happy vs. sad television program, followed by one of two happy vs. sad