The Distributed Spirit of Consumerism: How Consumers Inform and Defend Themselves in a Fragmented World

Dominique Roux, Université Paris Sud, France
Corinne Chevalier, Université Paris Sud, France
Lydiane Nabec, Université Paris Sud, France

The paper aims at exploring how consumers inform and defend themselves in a more complex multi-actors environment. Using two sets of data, it shows the erosion of the preventive role of non-profit consumer organizations and unveils how consumers create support-based online communities to organize collective defense.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1011870/volumes/v40/NA-40

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
The Distributed Spirit of Consumerism: How Consumers Inform and Defend Themselves in a Fragmented World

Dominique Roux, Université Paris-Sud, France
Corinne Chevalier, Université Paris-Sud, France
Lydiane Nabec, Université Paris-Sud, France

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Research groups such as Macromarketing, Marketing Ethics, Consumer Economics, Public Policy and Marketing, Social Marketing, and more recently Transformative Consumer Research (Wilkie and Moore, 2012) frequently address issues related to consumer protection. However, though consumer education and rights constitute hot topics and common concerns, the way consumers inform and defend themselves in a more complex multi-actors environment remains understudied. Thus, we aim at exploring how mainstream consumers proceed, what representations they hold and types of relationships they maintain with non-profit consumer organizations (NCOs) and other competing new market actors who now contribute to the “consumerism industry” (Smith and Bloom 1984, 369). We also seek to investigate the links between individual and collective actions when addressing consumers’ demands of legal remedy. This objectives take place in a context where NCOs are experiencing a decline in their influence, while social media offer new opportunities for consumer empowerment and social change (Joseffson and Ranerup 2003; Kozinets, Belz, and McDonagh 2011; Rezabakhsh et al. 2006; Umit Kucuk and Krishnamurthy 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW
The many regulations in terms of consumer protection policy and lobbying by activist groups have led to major advances in consumer protection (Aaker and Day 1972; Barksdale and Darden 1972; Brobeck, Mayer, and Herrmann 1997; Buskirk and Rothe 1970; Day and Aaker 1970; Herrmann 1970; Rao 1998; Smith and Bloom 1984). However, the outcomes of excessive consumption as well as the recent threats of failure of the financial system have exposed the frailty of consumers faced with the corporate power of big businesses. In this gloomy context, the desired or implemented responses of the public authorities accompany growing questioning as to the state of consumerism and consumer well-being (Cohen 2010; Mick et al. 2011; Rotfeld 2010). At the same time, literature on online communities and social media (Kozinets et al. 2011), consumer resistance and empowerment (Kozinets 2002) opens more optimistic avenues as to the ability for individuals to share problems and educate one another.

METHOD
Two sets of data were used. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with 29 consumers to analyze the way they orient themselves among various informational channels and how they deal with post-purchase dissatisfaction. Informants were selected through a snowballing technique, with age, gender, socio-professional standing, and prior experience with NCOs taken into account (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The interviews focused on four themes: the types of actors and pre-purchased sources consulted; reactions to problems encountered with a company and types of actions undertaken; knowledge and representations of NCOs as well as other consumerist actors; and overall expectations in terms of information and defense. A second set of data then sought to provide a broader view of collective actions. Though class action is not legally valid in France, we conducted interviews with the main protagonists of four ‘collective actions’ against big firms. By ‘collective actions’, we mean groups of similarly situated individuals represented by the same lawyer, simultaneously bringing their case to court and sharing litigation costs. The three authors jointly developed a coding scheme for analyzing informants’ discourses. This inductive process helped illuminate the various strategies consumers deploy, with whom and how.

FINDINGS
The consumers’ individual discourses shed light on two main themes. The first shows the erosion of the preventive role of NCOs in a situation of informational excess and consumers’ ability to orient themselves alone. Regarding NCOs, several informants question their independence, largely ignoring their way of operating. Major contradictions also emerge around possible ways of correcting NCOs image deficit. Their need to communicate to make themselves more visible implies the use of marketing techniques but comes up against the idea of the possible confusion with market actors. Regarding difficulties encountered in marketplace relationships, the findings also stress the ability of mainstream consumers to deal with companies by their own. Again, informants do not rely upon NCOs to solve their problems but, instead, try to find direct arrangements with merchants. Turning to NCOs thus appears to be a “last resort” solution when the “seriousness” of problems requires seeking help to restore equity.

The second theme finally highlights the dominant idealized view of NCOs’ problem-solving capacity, ex post facto, for collective defence and prevention of abuses. Their perceived residual role consists of regulating the balance of power and defending an ideal of justice against big market actors. However, this federative role in protecting “little people” is mainly accounted by informants who never faced severe situations or who accepted to cope with poor performances of products and services. Conversely, those who decided to sue defaulting companies where not so prone to idealize NCOs’ power. The second set of data illustrates how mainstream consumers become entrepreneurs of consumerism by deploying new skills to defend themselves and others.

Findings pertaining to collective actions show that hard core members of these transient defence communities first problematize the unfair situation and generate interest from other “victims”. They then provide the arguments, moral support, skills and material devices to build support-based networks through communal websites (Kozinets et al. 2011). The second stage illuminates how they subsequently succeed in enrolling additional agents such as media, lawyers, private or institutional ombudsmen, political leaders, and NCOs. It shows that larger networks prove to be more successful in spreading influence far beyond the online community.

CONTRIBUTIONS
Our research challenges the more or less pessimistic predictions as to the survival of consumerism (Cohen 2010; Rotfeld 2010) in showing that it spirit and practices are distributed on multiple actors and enacted by new means that bring empowerment to isolated individuals. In line with Kozinets et al. (2011), the findings bring evidence of the emergence of support-based online communities that organize collective defence and actively struggle against unbalanced marketplace power. But they extend previous research in showing that these communities overstep their own limits by enrolling new actors and building powerful though ephemeral networks.
REFERENCES


