

Exploring Consumer's Propensity to Resist Marketers' Influences

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to deepen our understanding of consumer resistance, by analyzing consumer's propensity to resist marketers' influences as an individual variable antecedent to resistance behaviors. Analysis of twenty-two individual in-depth interviews allows us to characterize the propensity to resist as a personality trait that specifically manifests itself in market situations in which the consumer perceives an influence attempt. The study also considers the psychological antecedents and the situational determinants of this propensity to resist.

Keywords: Consumer resistance, marketers' influence, propensity to resist

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Introduction

An issue of importance to marketing is the determination of effective means of influencing consumer's behaviors and choices (Mann and Hill, 1984). However, marketers are more and more facing opposition from consumers, who tend to resist these influences. As stated by Brehm and Brehm (1981), any influence attempt can be expected to create two opposite forces: a force leading to positive change and a force leading to resistance. Consumers increasingly display non-allegiance to the consumption system and opposition to firms' commercial practices. They engage in various acts to proclaim their rejection of the market system through collective actions such as boycotts (Friedman, 1999) or culture jamming (Rumbo, 2002), but also express their opposition in individual everyday practices such as voluntary simplicity (Leonard-Barton, 1981), the rejection of brands (Dalli, Romani and Gistri, 2005) or certain marketing techniques (Roux, 2008a). The manifestations stemming from these various forms of resistance are expressed either in voice or in exit, as described by Hirschman (1970). Previous consumer resistance research has focused on the importance of the situational context in explaining those behaviors, with scant attention paid to the conception of the psychological reasons why some people are more likely to resist than others under the same situational context. Emphasizing the polysemy of the term, Roux (2007b) shows, however, that resistance involves both manifestations of opposition in an oppressive situation and the individual capacity to withstand the effects of a harmful environment. While the literature has largely focused on the first point, exploration of a form of dispositional resistance is almost non-existent. Our aim here is to explore an individual disposition – consumers' propensity to resist (CPR) – which in appropriate situations would explain why some consumers and not others tend to offer resistance. Thus, we model actual resistance behaviors as a function of personal (or psychological) and situational factors. The personal factor being explored here is the propensity to resist. Speaking of the propensity to resist suggests that there is a variable tendency of people to adopt oppositional behaviors in certain conducive circumstances.

1. Theoretical Background

1.1 Consumer Resistance

The research field on consumer resistance has steadily developed since its conceptualization by Peñaloza and Price (1993). These authors, following Poster's (1992) definition, propose conceiving of consumer resistance as "the way in which individuals and groups practice strategies of appropriation in response to structures of domination". Consumer resistance is approached as a socio-cultural phenomenon as it occurs in the marketplace and is related to marketplace ideologies and practices (Kozinets and Handelman, 2005). Consumer resistance is also a contingent reaction (Roux, 2007a); it represents a specific type of response that occurs at the intersection of individual and their interpretation of a situation.

In this work, we try to understand consumer resistance in an individual difference perspective.

1.2 Individual Differences in Resistance

Researchers in persuasion and resistance to change literature have studied resistance as a quality of a person, they dealt with the study of individual differences in resistance that are expected to be constant across topic, sources and situations. In this perspective, some researchers have tried to propose a personality trait that would capture the tendency of individuals to resist persuasion. Various personality variables have been found to predict resistance to persuasion such as: defensive confidence (Albarracín and Mitchell, 2004); social vigilantism (Saucier and Webster 2009). In the resistance to change literature, Oreg (2003) formulates a conception of a generalized disposition to resist change. He designed the Resistance to Change Scale to tap an individual's tendency to resist or avoid making changes, and to find change aversive across diverse contexts and types of change. This scale is used to account for the individual-difference component of resistance to change.

In consumer resistance literature, the emphasis has been mostly laid on the situational factors explaining consumers' resistant behaviors. Several individual traits have been however linked to consumer resistance: Consumer self-confidence (Bearden et al., 2001; Briñol, Petty and Tormala, 2004); consumers' skepticism (Dobscha 1998; Fournier 1998); and suspicion (Kramer, 1998; Darke and Ritchie, 2007). All these studies used assessment instruments that have been designed for other purposes and that are only indirectly related to a consumer's disposition to resist marketers' influences. Thus, in the present study, we try to formulate a conception of consumers' propensity to resist marketers' influences. This work does not suggest that consumer resistance is solely a personality trait; indeed, it occurs in the marketplace and is related to marketplace ideologies and practices. However, as it is admitted and recognized that some consumers may be more susceptible to interpersonal influence than some others (Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel, 1989), this work assumes that some consumers may be less susceptible to marketers' influence than others. We thus suggest that these may have a higher propensity to resist marketers' influence.

2. Methods

Since our main objective is to explore a new concept, a qualitative exploratory methodology was adopted. Twenty-two in-depth interviews were conducted across a variety of socio-demographic profiles. The final sample comprised 13 men and 9 women, ranging in age from 22 to 60 (average age 33), covering the spectrum of family and professional situations. Given that the aim was to cast light on a tendency to oppose perceived influences in market interactions, we explored three themes in particular: (1) our respondents' consumption practices; (2) their perceptions – or the absence of these – of influence attempts in market contexts, the nature of these influences and the type of reactions they provoked; and (3) their more general attitudes toward companies' practices and the functioning of the marketplace. Since we were using a comprehensive approach, the interviews were analyzed through a thematic content analysis which brought out the elements characteristic of the propensity to resist as well as its determinants and consequences.

3. Findings

The discourses collected reveal individual differences in the perception of and reaction to influence attempts, which enable us to differentiate individuals according to their susceptibility to influence. The discourses of those respondents who are least susceptible to influence illustrate certain attitudes and behaviors that we take as indices of a certain propensity to resist. The reactions of the most resistant respondents are the joint result of situational factors and of the psychological characteristics that distinguish them from the least resistant. The results we obtained suggest that the perception of the target consumer, of marketer's influence attempts is based upon his critical and emotional assessment of the situation. Thus three themes emerge from the discourses and enable us (1) to specify the elements contained in marketplace contexts that are likely to trigger resistance, (2) to identify the individual characteristics which combined with these situational factors underlie a continuum of consumers' resistance and (3) to reveal the types of manifestation arising from this combination of contexts and traits.

3.1 Situational Triggers of Consumers' Propensity to Resist

The discourses of our respondents highlight the situational elements of marketplace contexts that are likely to trigger their propensity to resist.

Influence Attempts and Manipulative Processes. Marketing discourses, salespeople's ploys, incentives to consume and the many enticements of the commercial world are immediately categorized as influence attempts and, as such, reinforce the desire to escape them:

Anne-Laure (28, communications manager): "People are pushed into buying too much. There are special offers like five boxes of cookies packaged together and people are encouraged to stock up and so consume more and more."

The respondents also perceive the sales and advertising techniques used by firms as influence devices which they are opposed to. They see in these influence devices a desire to manipulate consumers which involves insidious and dishonest tactics:

Yoann (26, company director): "I get the impression that they're trying to make people more and more stupid in order to sell them more and more stuff..., and that's horrible, it shocks me, it's horrible and shocking... They try to dumb people down, to stop them thinking for themselves, then they can impose mind control marketing."

The Perceived Limitation of the Consumer's Freedom. The refusal to be restricted and constrained is a second recurrent theme in our interviewees' discourses. It is manifested in their desire to assert their independence of choice and decision-making. As the following extracts illustrate, the domination of market actors, through situations that they help create, leads to a perception of restricted choice, of a channeling of people's behavior and of a reduction in their opportunities for changing the course of events:

Allison (23, student): "You only have to see all the billboards telling us how we're supposed to look – you must eat this, you must eat that...it disgusts me. What you read in women's magazines and see on TV commercials about women's weight, everything they promote as positive images of women, it's not necessarily how we see it. That influences my consumption habits."

This perception of a deprivation of freedom fuels people's resistance in all situations that constrain their freedom to decide and act.

3.2 Individual Factors Involved in CPR

The discourses, attitudes and behaviors of our interviewees shed light on a number of identifiable individual characteristics. These recurrent character traits are shared by the least influenceable respondents, and we treat them as indices of their propensity to resist.

The Need for Uniqueness. This need to stand apart from the majority echoes what Tian, Bearden and Hunter (2001) define as the need for uniqueness, that is, a wish to be different from other people which is expressed by acquiring and using consumer goods with the aim of developing and enhancing one's personal and social identity. Faced by consumer society and the homogeneity it produces, resisting thus emerges as the corollary of the expression of people's uniqueness and individuality. The following extracts illustrate this desire to escape the conformist pressures conveyed by consumption.

Fatma (22, student): "I don't want to be like everyone else. I don't want to be told how to think. I think it's essential to know how to stand out from the crowd and be yourself.

We're all different, all unique, but we live in the same society, and I think that the consumer society pushes us into wanting to all be alike. But I don't want to follow the crowd, and own this or that thing just because everyone else has it."

Skepticism. Our data reveal indices of skepticism that the most resistant among our respondents express in regard to marketing discourses and techniques and market actors. The following respondent illustrates the need of proofs, objective reference points and convincing information capable of moderating their potential resistance to what firms assert through the claims made for particular products:

Télès (28, journalist): "I'm not really a radical. If I hear opinions which differ from my own – I'm not talking about communication – if there are other arguments, I'm prepared to...well, not necessarily change my point of view, but maybe reexamine my position."

The Need for Cognition. The way in which some respondents explain how they make judgments illustrates their need for cognition, defined as the tendency to think and to seek explanations for events and realities (Cacioppo and Petty, 1982). These consumers tend to base their attitudes on analysis and reflection as to the relevance of the information provided, but they reveal that their skills also develop over time, in the course of commercial interactions.

Télès (28, journalist): "I've gotten into the habit of being cautious when someone tries to sell me something, and always try to find out more before deciding. It's a reflex I acquired bit by bit as I formed my consumption habits. Each time someone tries to sell or push a product, I find out as much as I can first. I think it comes from the fact that these days we're approached more and more frequently and if we are to be informed consumers, we have to be vigilant."

This excerpt shows that consumers' propensity to resist can be reinforced through knowledge of the system acquired through a succession of lived experiences. This point comes back to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) developed by Friestad and Wright (1994) who stressed the importance of the perception of influence mechanisms. Indeed, such consumers' resistance requires that they become aware of these mechanisms by identifying their origins and effects. But it is by encoding past situations that they acquire this knowledge of market functioning and the skills to detect influence situations.

3.3 Manifestations of CPR

Our data bring out three types of behavior expressed by consumers who are the most inclined to resist. These behaviors can be understood as ways of expressing their propensity to resist. *Inertia.* This shows a certain strength of attitude, the extent to which an orientation toward an object is considered as stable, resistant to change and predictive of behavior (Miller and Peterson, 2004). Inertia behavior can also result from a refusal to follow fashion and the changes imposed by marketing. It designates the habits that an external event will not be able to modify, as the following comment illustrates:

Fatma (22, student) : “If you’ve always bought the same product – let’s take washing powder, for example – it’s not because there’s a commercial on TV all the time for a new one that you’re going to change to the other one. If you’ve used something forever, you’ll stick to it.”

Avoidance. This is presented as a bypassing of potential sources of influence. For consumers it is a matter of staying clear of interactions with everything they categorize as contrary to their orientations. For some respondents, the influence source comes mainly from retailers and marketing devices set up to capture customers. Their response to it is thus to minimize their frequency of going to stores. Avoidance can sometimes be a tactic for protecting oneself or for keeping one’s distance from influence techniques such as advertising (Roux 2007a)

Damien (24, student): “I never go into stores, or at least, very rarely. I wait for the sales, I wear my sneakers right down until the soles tell me to stop.”

Stéphanie (30, project leader): “I don’t have a TV for example. I think the TV plays a big part in this consumer madness, especially the commercials.”

Confrontation. Consumers show their opposition through complaints, attitudes or negative emotions which characterize their refusal of certain situations or techniques deployed by firms. The following respondent recognizes, for example, his hostility toward, if not outright rejection of, salespeople’s approaches:

Damien (24, student): “When I go into stores, it just doesn’t work out with the sales people. In any case, I never go into stores; or at least hardly ever. I really don’t get on with sales people, and they can tell pretty quick I don’t need them. I can manage on my own, and if I needed them I would get them myself.”

Conclusion

This exploratory study aimed to explore consumers’ propensity to resist marketers’ influences. The main contribution of this research is to reveal the existence of an individual disposition to oppose perceived influence attempts in perceived commercial situations. Thus, we define consumers’ propensity to resist as the stable psychological tendency of a consumer to consciously and voluntarily resist perceived influence attempts in the marketplace context. Though exploratory, this study provides a first approach of a tool that could usefully enlighten consumer resistance in marketplace situations. Nonetheless, our study clearly has its limitations, the first of these being inherent to the research methodology. Indeed, asking people to talk about their susceptibility to influence attempts can lead them to overestimate these, due to unconscious rationalization of reactions or behaviors that do not necessarily exist. The constitution of the sample with people with high educational level and thus a greater ability decipher marketers’ attempts to influence their behavior, could also be a limitation to this research. Our objective was to examine consumer resistance in an individual perspective, thus, we designed our interview guide in the way that participants would reflect as individual rather than recognize wider influences such as culture and social norms. It would thus be valuable in a further research, to use methods such as the lived experience of consumers, in order to identify wider contextual influences on resistance. The findings of this research highlight the attitudes and beliefs of consumers towards marketer’s influence, it would be interesting to investigate the relationship between these attitudes and beliefs and actual behaviors. Another limitation pertains to the exploratory nature of this study. It opens the way to future development of this conceptualization by the measurement of consumers’ propensity to resist. Such a tool would be useful for predicting and anticipating not only resistance behaviors in market influence situations, but also their possible links with other variables such as voluntary simplicity, alternative consumption and insensitivity to brands.

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