Consumer Resistance as Struggle over Subjectivity

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Abstract
This paper expands the anti-consumption and consumer resistance literature by directing focus on an important domain of resistance that has not been dealt with extensively: consumer subjectivity. Drawing on Foucauldian ideas on power and resistance, organization studies literature on discursive resistance, and recent works on anti-consumption and identity projects, a theoretical framework of consumer resistance as struggle over subjectivity is developed. It is argued that resistive discursive practices can have transformative potential as they facilitate envisioning and crafting alternative subject positions. This paper contributes by enhancing understanding of the discursive power that consumers exercise in the marketplace.

Keywords: Anti-consumption, consumer resistance, subjectivity, power, discursive strategies.
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Introduction

In recent consumer and marketing literature different forms of consumer resistance and other kinds of anti-consumption practices (Cherrier 2009; Lee, Fernandez and Hyman 2009; Lee, Motion and Conroy 2009) such as voluntary simplification and dispossesson (Cherrier 2009; Cherrier and Murray 2007), custodian behaviours (Cherrier 2010), product non-usage (Cherrier 2006), and deployment of the nationalist ideology (Varman and Belk 2009), are becoming increasingly common, and of rising importance to both marketing theory and practice (see for example Austin 2005; Roux 2007). Consumers, as part of different social movements, are targeting marketers in order to bring about social and political change, via new practices of resistance that have been enabled by, for example, social media (Dalli and Corciolani 2008; Hemetsberger 2006).

As Cherrier (2009) notes, consumer research literature has explored a variety of manifestations of anti-consumption and consumer resistance “at the level of the marketplace as a whole, the marketing activities, and/or the brand/product” (p. 181). At the brand/product level resistance is often manifested in boycotting (Herrmann 1993), or other overt behaviours such as protesting and complaining (Bradshaw and Hollbrook 2008). At the level of marketing activities resistance can take form in acts such as active appropriation and resignification of brand logos and advertising slogans (Ritson and Dobscha 1999). Resistance towards the whole ideological domain of consumerism has taken many shapes, from using homemade food to counter the
market’s invasion of the home and family identity (Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004) to serving as a “product custodian” to counter the expansion of throwaway culture (Cherrier 2010).

In this paper we want to expand the anti-consumption literature by directing focus to yet another important domain of consumer resistance, subjectivity, which has not been dealt with extensively in consumer research literature. We also continue the recent discussion on Foucauldian perspective of power that has been taking place in marketing and consumer literature (e.g. Becket and Nyack 2008; Bonsu and Polsa 2011; Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder 2006; Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford 2006).

The subject position of ‘the consumer’ is one of the most significant categories of knowledge in contemporary market culture (Humphreys 2006) One of the important struggles of consumer resistance takes place in the realm of consumer subjectivity which is being – intentionally or inadvertently – constructed, shaped and normalized by marketplace ideologies and actors (e.g. Firat, Dholakia, and 1995; Firat and Dholakia 2006; Moisander and Eriksson 2006; Zwick and Dholakia 2004a and 2004b; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008). We posit that in order to understand the complexity of consumer resistance, it is necessary to study marketplace ideologies and marketer-constructed consumer subjectivities as the targets of consumers’ discursive strategies of resistance.

Such an examination requires an understanding of power which differs considerably from the two “traditional” perspectives of power, the sovereignty model and the cultural authority model (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder 2006) that have formed the basis for most discussions on consumer resistance. Both these perspectives see power as a feature of a specific locality or
entity, and primarily repressive in nature. We argue that in the contemporary participatory marketplace culture, the traditional perspectives alone are no longer sufficient for understanding and theorizing all the new forms of consumer resistance. A discursive power perspective, which builds on the work of Michel Foucault, enables us to recognize and appreciate consumer resistance as not merely destructive and reactive but also productive and proactive. Through engaging in resistance consumers are constructing “new knowledges and new truths” (Meriläinen et al. 2004, 545) that are then circulated in the marketplace and culture more broadly. For example, Goulding and Saren (2009) exemplify gothic subculture as a site of resistance where conventional gender norms are challenged and alternative sexual politics are established through a variety of gendered performances. This subculture “positively embraces the active reconfiguration of gender norms” (p.43). Thus, the individuals are not merely complaining about conventional gender norms, but actively crafting new ways of being male and female.

In this paper we develop a theoretical framework that maps out and elaborates on different forms of consumer resistance that takes place in the realm of subjectivity. We conceptualize consumer resistance as struggles over subjectivity in which marketer-constructed and imposed subjectivities are resisted through discursive strategies, often through construction of alternative subjectivities. Using this approach, we contribute to a better understanding of the discursive power that consumers exercise in the marketplace.

This framework builds on the Foucauldian ideas on power and resistance, organization studies literature on discursive and subjectivity-level resistance (e.g. Thomas and Davies 2005a and
2005b; Laine and Vaara 2007; Meriläinen et al., 2004), literature on anti-consumption (e.g. Cherrier 2010; Cherrier 2009; Iyer and Muncy 2009) and recent consumer research literature on identity projects as consumer resistance (Mikkonen, Moisander, and Firat 2011).

**Discursive power and ideologies**

Denegri-Knott et al. (2006) have provided a useful cartography of the perspectives on power within consumer and marketing research. According to the authors, this literature has drawn from three distinct models of power 1) the consumer sovereignty model which draws from classical and neoclassical economic thinkers such as Adam Smith; 2) the cultural power model, which emerges from social science traditions, and focuses on cultural meanings as the site of power and domination; and 3) the discursive power model, which builds on the French philosopher Michel Foucault\(^1\).

The discursive perspective on power is constitutive in the sense that power builds knowledge, constructs truth, and forms subjectivities (see Haugaard, 2002). In essence, instead of being primarily visible and repressive, power is seen as embedded in normalizing disciplinary discourses, institutions, and ideologies; and it acts on people by persuading them to internalize sets of norms, views and ideas that make “sensible and accountable that which people should do, can do and thus do” (Clegg 1989, 156). Power constructs subject positions containing models of obedience, ideals that we are all enticed into approximating. Power is not held, but practiced (Nealon 2008, 24), and it thus works in a profound and covert manner:

> In a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relation of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented
without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse...” (Foucault 1980, 93)

Power operates through discourses. A similar term often employed in culturally oriented marketing literature is ‘ideology’, understood not in the Marxist sense as ‘false consciousness’, but as a specific normalizing discourse, which fixes certain meanings within a society as “true”, “acceptable” and “normal”. In the marketplace context ideologies are the “systems of meaning that tend to channel and reproduce consumers’ thoughts and actions in such way as to defend dominant interests in society” (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 874). An ideology is, in a sense, a regime of truth, a “discourse [a society] accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault 1984, 73).

Power is also intimately tied to knowledge, and is “exercised by virtue of things being known” (Foucault 1980, 154). To be able to steer their conduct, people, objects, and concepts need to be rendered “objects of knowledge”. Knowledge – produced in (scientific) discourse – renders some forms of being, thinking, and talking intelligible and natural, while at the same time excluding others as meaningless and abnormal or even deviant. Therefore knowledge does not refer to ‘facts’, but to what is currently and widely accepted as reality. Thus, in the marketplace, power is also deeply embedded in the ways in which we have come to “know” economy, markets and market practices; and the marketplace actors (consumers and marketers). Capitalism and its accompanying market economy constitute a regime of truth (ideology) that has become the normalized way of being in society. Through the Foucauldian lens ‘economy’ appears not solely as the physical production and consumption of goods and services – and as the ways of managing scarce resources (i.e., money, materials, and labour) – but as yet another object of knowledge, and as a realm for the exercise of power.
Consumer subjectivities

Ideologies also produce subjects that fit into, constitute, and reproduce the social order; which in turn is constructed in discourses of power (e.g. Barker 2000, 81; Moisander and Valtonen 2006, 197). We use the term ‘subject’ to refer to the core ideas that we hold about human beings, not tied to any one individual. The subject “is not the speaking consciousness, not the author of the formulation, but a position that might be filled in certain conditions by various individuals” (Foucault 1977, 115, italics added). Subjects, in this view, are not fixed and permanent. Human subjectivity is not defined biologically, but historically (Hall 1992, 277): we are not subjects, but we are made subjects through normalizing ideologies that render certain forms of personhood thinkable or unthinkable, acceptable or deviant, normal or abnormal. Foucault explored these processes of normalization in the institutional contexts of prisons (1977) and hospitals (1975). In marketing and consumer literature the normalizing tendencies of ideologies has been discussed in terms of systematic predisposition of consumers toward certain kinds of identity projects (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

The consumer as a subject position is created through a multitude of practices that render her knowable on both macro-level of capitalist discourse (e.g. Humphreys 2006; Zwick and Dholakia 2004a and 2004b) and the micro-level of industries (Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Moisander and Eriksson 2006), brands (Holt 2006), and consumer policy (e.g., Autio, Heiskanen, and Heinonen 2009); all which construct and present “ideal” consumer subject positions to be filled.
The consumer, as we know her, argue Miller and Rose (1997, 4) is a subjectivity that was ‘made up’ in the post-war period from 1950 to 1970. More recently, Zwick and Dholakia (2004b, 36) have argued that “the consumer... does not exist outside this constitutive field of discursive power” that operates though marketplace ideologies and technologies. Customer Relationship Management (CRM), for example, can be approached as a discourse that is premised on the database’s power to differentiate and particularize consumers. Databases, through which companies can generate and access identifiable customer profiles, enable “codification, classification, and comparison [of consumers]” (Zwick and Dholakia 2004a: 216). Thus, CRM emerges as a disciplining technology aimed at producing an individualized customer, a customer that can be isolated from all others, and “becomes [an] observable, measurable, and quantifiable” (2004a, 219) object “upon which the marketer can now act strategically” (2004b, 32).

Importantly, both in the post-war England and in contemporary marketing practice and literature, the consumer is constructed as an essentially free and active decision maker, communicator, and contributor (Cherrier and Murray 2004). According to many critical writers, there is a good reason for such a subjectivity to be constructed and upheld. Bauman (1992, 51) contends that the “reproduction of the capitalist system is... achieved through individual freedom” and Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody (2008, 164) argue that the ‘free consumer’ is a deliberately constructed subject position that is in the interests of the marketers. Indeed, as consumption serves a key purpose in capitalism by ensuring the steady flow of capital the idealization and normalization of consumption-centered subjectivity is vital for the workings of modern economies in their current form (Jubas 2007). Materialism, while often condemned in our everyday language, is in many
ways an essential feature of the contemporary economic system (Cherrier 2010), and as such needs to be reproduced and advanced, made honourable instead of shameful.

**Resistance as struggle over subjectivity**

The consumer has in itself become an ideal subject position in contemporary (Western) societies. Consumption is both the right – and the responsibility – of an active, mindful member of society. In the ideological discourses circulating in marketplace cultures, consumption is constructed as a democratizing activity, which creates well-being for all members of society (Jubas, 2007).

It is not inevitable, however, that consumers take on these subjectivities to build their identities and lifestyles. Foucault (1983) discussed resistance as *struggle for a new subjectivity*. He argued that most of the contemporary “oppositions” (“men over women”, “medicine over population”) can be seen as examples of struggle against subjection (Foucault 1983, 211); they are struggles that are “against the ‘government of individualization’” and struggles that “revolve around the question: Who are we?” (Foucault 1983, 212). This type of resistance requires that people refuse what they have been made into; and *invent*, not *discover*, who they are (Bernauer and Mahon 2004) by creating new forms of subjectivity that can subvert government.

Organization studies has drawn from this Foucauldian conceptualization of resistance: for example, Meriläinen et al. (2004, 545) describe resistance as the ‘counter discourses’ and ‘reverse discourses’ that challenge “the ways in which an individual is defined, labelled and classified”. Thomas and Davies (2005a; 2005b) theorize *micro-politics of resistance*, and Laine and Vaara (2007, 36) utilize the concept of *discursive struggle* to illustrate how specific discourses and the subjectivities they offer can “serve as a means of managerial control”. In
consumer research literature, however, subjectivity as a realm of power and resistance has thus far been discussed only in a handful of empirical works (e.g. Moisander and Pesonen 2002; Goulding and Saren 2009).

For example, Mikkonen, Moisander and Firat (2011) elaborate on consumer cynicism in online environments as a form of resistance against the normalized forms of subjectivity. When the currently prevailing marketplace ideology is seen as offering only objectionable subject positions, they are rejected through ridicule and intellectual condemnation. At the same time, these critical consumers actively assemble an alternative form of subjectivity, essentially disillusioned and critical towards the market and the marketing institution.

Consumer resistance can, therefore, be conceptualized as a struggle over subjectivity in which the targets of the resistance are marketer-constructed and imposed subjectivities rather than any specific marketing practices. In this conceptualization resistance includes not only openly vocalized criticism and intentional disregard towards hegemonic organizational discourses, but also the construction of alternative subjectivities. The resistive discursive strategies can, in time, affect the cultural ideologies and discourses by producing “new knowledges and new truths” that “constitute new powers” (Meriläinen et al. 2004, 545). Thus, while many of the “traditional” ways of resisting, such as boycotting (e.g. Herrmann 1993), can be seen as culturally destructive, the discursive modes of resistance can also entail creative and productive value; through resourceful use of cultural narratives and norms (Goulding and Saren 2009; Moisander and Pesonen 2002) and playful, imaginative practices (Mikkonen and Bajde, forthcoming) consumers produce and craft new emancipatory spaces (Firat and Dholakia 2006).
The framework of consumer resistance as struggle over subjectivity is illustrated in Figure 1. Drawing from broader cultural conceptions and ideologies, marketplace ideologies construct, proffer, and mobilize certain consumer subjectivities. These subjectivities become normalized in the marketplace, as they are presented in different cultural texts as the ideal or natural forms of being; ideologies, after all, not only tend to make certain configurations of being visible, but at the same time marginalize others. For example, Markkula, Mikkonen and Vicdan (2011) discuss style manuals directed at women as a form of government, as they construct an ideal female subject. The ideal woman appreciates the choice of dress as a highly important aspect of her life and consequently takes a high interest in her clothing. She is willing to make any changes necessary based on a critical rule-based scrutiny of herself. On the other hand, a woman who is either disinterested or unwilling to engage in such rule-based scrutiny becomes an object of ridicule.

FIGURE 1 HERE

Consumers are not, however, preordained to fill the proffered and imposed subject positions. The marketer-created subjectivities are resisted through various discursive strategies that problematize the existing – and may facilitate crafting of alternative – subject positions. These strategies can vary in terms of assertiveness from reasonably cordial to downright aggressive and confrontational, and in their prominence from rather understated to blatantly aggressive (e.g. Dobscha and Ozanne 2001; Mikkonen, Moisander and Firat 2011).
**Discussion**

We contend that conceptualization of resistance as “struggle over subjectivity” constitutes a significant extension of research on anti-consumption and consumer resistance. Such conceptualization enables recognition of forms of power that are embedded in normalizing discourses, and challenges our current understanding of consumer-marketer power dynamics in the marketplace.

‘The consumer’ cannot be seen only as detached, rational individual making purchasing decisions. Instead the category of the ‘the consumer’ is a subject position that has been produced in modernism (Cherrier and Murray 2004, Firat 2001; Firat and Dholakia 2006; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Murray and Ozanne 1991), and the liberal-democratic ideology (Sassatelli, 2006). Constructing people as (free) consumers is an effective form of responsibilization (Rose 1991): consumers are made moral agents, who are responsible for making the “correct” choices through which they vote and, supposedly, police companies (e.g. Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson 2006), and for making sustainable development possible (see Moisander, 2001).

At the same time, consumers are responsibilized to consume. While the contemporary trendy co-production discourse (e.g. Vargo and Lusch 2008) appears to blur, even erase, the modernist separation of consumers from producers and production, critical voices have questioned whether “putting consumers to work” (Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008, see also Cova and Dalli 2009) in fact benefits them, or whether it is a clever ruse through which consumers are made to take on the duties of the producers. In the value co-creation literature consumer responsibilization is, in
fact, strikingly transparent: for example, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a; 2004b; 2000), the “fathers” of the concept value co-creation, have repeatedly called for consumers to “shoulder more responsibility” (2004a: 7) in the marketplace and for their own actions.

The discursive perspective to power and resistance enables us to evaluate critically and problematize the empowerment discourse that currently seems so widely accepted. The discursive perspective renders visible the construction of the consumer. Regardless of fashionable labels – such as ‘consum’actor’ (Cova and Cova 2009), and ‘prosumer’ (Toffler 1980) – people are increasingly constructed as consumers, in commercial markets as well as in areas that were previously considered being ‘outside’ of the marketplace (e.g. Firat 2001). The ‘consumer-patient’ (e.g. Chance and Deshpandé 2009; Møldragon 2006) for example is “expected to be responsible for his/her health and to have sought the information that is needed to share the making of decisions with practitioners” (Hardey 2010, 135); the ‘mother-consumer’ is a thoroughly ‘good’, selfless being, who – motivated by “instinctual love” – will provide her family with only the best products and services (Cook 2003); the consumer in the marketplace of love shops for mates (Ahuvia and Adelman 1993).

It is by no means suggested here that we should embrace the perspective of consumers as “largely irrational or foolish, to be manipulated through methods not far removed from those of political propaganda” (Miller and Rose 1997, 3) at its face value. The discursive power perspective, in fact, suggests that consumers are not inevitably ‘hailed’ into certain subject positions, but there is always a possibility of challenging the subjectivities made available via
marketplace ideologies. The idea of struggle, in fact, highlights the notion that the range and forms of available subjectivities is not stable, but constantly under redefinition and renegotiation.

Within organization theory, the discursive perspectives, which have been discussed more widely than in marketing and consumer research, have also become a target of rather strong criticism. Some writers, such as Fleming and Sewell (2002) have taken the position that nothing short of a complete revolution is acceptable when assessing resistance. In this vein, Contu (2008, 367) writes off most of the discursive strategies of resistance as practically inconsequential, arguing that…

[t]hese transgressive acts that we call “resistance” are akin to a decaf resistance, which changes very little. It is resistance without the risk of really changing our ways of life or the subjects who live it.

Here she continues on a path laid out by Paul Piccone, Michael Buruwoy, and Slavoj Zizek (see Fleming and Spicer 2003) that have all argued that critical negativity towards domination can be a conserving rather than a disruptive force. Piccone (1976, 1978 in Fleming and Spicer, 2003) coined the term artificial negativity, which suggests that any system of power in fact relies upon “a degree of channelled criticism in order to avert stagnation”. Thus, they argue, many discursive and material practices of dissent may in fact serve as tension-releasing safety valves, which allow people to blow off some steam, so to speak, but do very little to actually upset the structures of power. While Fleming and Spicer (2003) deal with cynicism in particular, it is easy to see how these criticisms could also be extended to other forms of discursive resistance such as humour, parody, irony, and sneering. The problem, they conclude, is that these forms of dissent discreetly reproduce existing relations of power because they give individuals an impression of being autonomous agents, while still acting in ideologically inscribed ways: a McDonalds
worker may well wear a “McShit tee” under her work uniform, but “crucially...she performs as an efficient member of the team nevertheless” (Fleming and Spicer 2004, 160).

In a very similar vein, many writers within cultural studies and consumer research literature have pointed out that consumer resistance is often rendered harmless when it is appropriated and commodified by marketing agents and institutions. Whatever forms of rebellion consumers may conjure up, the market will quickly absorb them, appropriate them, assign them economic value with branding and packaging, and then (re)sell them back to consumers (e.g. Holt 2002; Peñaloza and Price 1993; Rumbo 2002). This market co-optation argument is put forth sharply by Holt (2002, 89), who maintains that...

[c]onsumers are revolutionary only insofar as they assist entrepreneurial firms to tear down the old branding paradigm and create opportunities for companies that understand emerging new principles. Revolutionary consumers helped to create the market for Volkswagen and Nike and accelerated the demise of Sears and Oldsmobile. They never threatened the market itself. What has been termed “consumer resistance” is actually a form of market-sanctioned cultural experimentation through which the market rejuvenates itself.

As aptly noted by Giesler (2008), there seem to be two alternative theoretical explanations of what co-optation is, both rather bleak: either “commercialism creeps in and destroys” any subversive distinctiveness that consumer resistance may hold “simply feeds the flames [of consumer capitalism], creating a whole new set of positional goods for these new rebel consumers to compete for” (Health and Potter 2004, 322, cited in Giesler, 2008). Consumer creativity and the ability to conjure up new meanings and expressions are “grist for the branding mill” (Holt 2002, 88) that is constantly on the lookout for new raw materials to process into commodities. And once a symbol, taste, idea, or whatever is responsible for subversive distinctiveness of a group or movement gets appropriated, according to the co-optation theory,
there is no way of reclaiming it. To drive the argument home Thompson and Coskuner-Balli
(2007, 136) cite Clark (2005 225):

Even punk, when reduced to a neat mohawk hairstyle and a studded leather jacket,
could be made into a cleaned-up spokesman for potato chips... Like their subcultural
predecessors, early punks were too dependent on music and fashion as codes for
expression; these proved to be easy targets for corporate cooption . . . which mass
produced and sterilized punk’s verve.

Since similar examples are aplenty, especially in the history of subcultures, we need to ask
whether there is a possibility of resilience against cooption and commodification? And if so,
what are the characteristics of the more unwavering modes of resistance? It can be argued that
many highly visible forms of resistance, especially those that are easily traceable to an
(organized) source, have rarely provided the expected and anticipated subversive efficacy: highly
distinctive stylistic expressions are rather easy to emulate and repackage. And when it is possible
to pinpoint and locate the specific acts of resistance and the particular people responsible for
them, these acts and arguments can be counter-argued and offset (e.g. Bolfing 1989; Bunting and
Lipski 2000; Wang, 2005). Thus, we think it is justified to ask whether the visible means of
resistance, such as boycotting, have resulted in any ‘real’ changes in our consumer culture.

In fact, it is our suggestion that perhaps resistance in the realm of subjectivity may prove to be
more elusive, and less amenable to cooption. Discursive forms of resistance, especially those
that are subtle and conciliatory, are much more difficult to identify and locate than vocal visible
forms of resistance. Thus, they can be also be more difficult to isolate and cancel out; especially
the forms that work under the cloak of anonymity of online environments or in the privacy of
people’s homes and involve neither an organized formal structure nor external coordination of
activities can be difficult to detect and normalize.
Furthermore, it is essential to notice that the rather gloomy outlook of co-optation seems to spring from the (Marxist) idea that consumer resistance ought to enable consumers to escape the marketplace and consumer culture altogether. Some would challenge this viewpoint, questioning whether such an escape is required, or more importantly, even possible (e.g., Arnould 2007; Kozinets 2002).

We do not interpret this as a hopeless situation. From a Foucauldian perspective we can hardly envision a situation that would be “outside” of any power structure, but the current structure can certainly be altered and even replaced with another order. Hence, we maintain that resistive discursive practices, which may facilitate envisioning and crafting alternative subject positions, can have transformative potential (Mick 2006; Ozanne 2011). Through resistance in the realm of subjectivities individuals can avoid becoming the people that ideologies suggest they should be; critical dis-identification from and crafting meaningful alternatives to existing subject positions challenges current ideological realities of consumer culture that marketing institutions assemble and uphold.

Within every system of power there exists a possibility for opposition and resistance. As the power exercised in the realm of subjectivity is essentially discursive, so are the strategies through which resistance is exercised.

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1 It should be noted that these models are by no means specific to marketing and consumer disciplines, but rooted in broad historical paradigms. For example, they roughly parallel the perspectives offered by Haugaard (2002) in *Power: A Reader*. 
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**Figure** Error! Main Document Only. Theoretical framework of consumer resistance as struggle over subjectivity
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