

Contemplative consumer activism as a driver for social change

Betul Cal, Kathy Hamilton, Eleni Tsougkou

University of Strathclyde

1. Problematization

Consumer activism often derives from widespread discontent with an existing system of authority or any constituent of it, and aims to create a change or even the replacement of the old system with the new one (Handelman & Fischer, 2018; Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003; Sherif, 1958). Many earlier studies on consumer activism are often shaped by two main research streams. The first research stream tends to adopt an individual approach by placing an emphasis on the individual actor's role on legitimizing the socio-political and cognitive validity of social movements (Fligstein & Dauter, 2007; Sine & Lee, 2009). The second research stream, mostly driven by the New Social Movements agenda, sees the same role as being shaped by intricate networks of larger economic, social and cultural forces (Buechler, 1995; Den Hond & De Barker, 2007). Despite their different standpoints, both streams are mostly in agreement about the conception of social change, which is often seen as being characterized by marked stratification among different social groups (Campbell, 1965; Sherif, 1970).

Although significantly contributing to the advancement of the agency of the consumer activist, these approaches often overlook a contemplative bearing of the consumer activist that relies on an innate resource base enacted through the cultivation of such abilities as inner look, self-observation and self-transformation. Moreover, their vision of social change is deeply engraved in the pole of inter-group patterns, which allows almost no room for the prospect of an alternative form of social change that is initiated at an intra-personal level, and later expands into the larger aspects of the society.

The aim of this research is to explore consumer activism, as is enacted by mindfulness, from a social transformation standpoint, and to theorize the role of *contemplative consumer activism* on driving social change. Contemplative consumer activism describes contesting the established social order or any constituent of it by introducing implied disruptions through the mobilization of an innate, secluded, and meditative resource base. The proposed view complements current research on consumer activism in three ways. Firstly, as opposed to the often-acknowledged importance of valuable, rare and inimitable resources in creating change (Cress & Snow, 1996; McCarthy & Zald, 1977), the suggested resource base is rather common, ordinary and indistinctive, yet can be still effective in instituting social change. Secondly, the research reframes 'social change' as the social actor's developing more effective responses towards their own experiences as well as any external stimuli that may cause unrest in their social arrangements. Unlike many previous views of social change as an inter-group process, this research proposes change that occurs at the perceptive state of the consumer, that is intra-consumer level, as the primary condition for change that occurs at the societal level. Thirdly, the research recontextualizes mindfulness, which is often seen as a passive and even apathetic state of being, as a means that provides the consumer with a contemplative but dynamic resource base that can be utilized in forging social change.

2. Positioning and Literature Review

2.1. Consumer Activism

Consumer activism describes “the decentralized but collective grassroots efforts by activist consumers to contest the actions of marketers and their organizations, as well as to more broadly mobilize a change in the cultural frames that guide consumption behaviour” (Handelman & Fischer, 2018, p. 257). The research approaches the topic of consumer activism from two particular standpoints, namely, the motivational aspect of the consumer activist and the change intended through social action.

What Motivates Consumer Activist?

Current research often views the consumer activist through four angles. *The interest view* assumes that the consumer activist makes their decision on the basis on a rational costs-versus-rewards analysis (Glickman, 2006; Hilton, 2007; Opp, 2013), while *the identity view* posits that the consumer activist is not always driven by a goal to satisfy their interests, but rather to affirm their collective identity (Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003). *The affection view* draws attention to the role of emotional responses on the emergence and development of social movements (Collins, 2001; Polletta, 2002). *The ideology view*, on the other hand, suggests that consumer activism involves a “dynamic relationship among an intricate set of interconnected beliefs and their associated attitudes” (Fine & Sandstrom, 1993, p. 24), and exploits the New Social Movement agenda (Handelman & Fischer, 2018; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004).

What is Being Achieved?

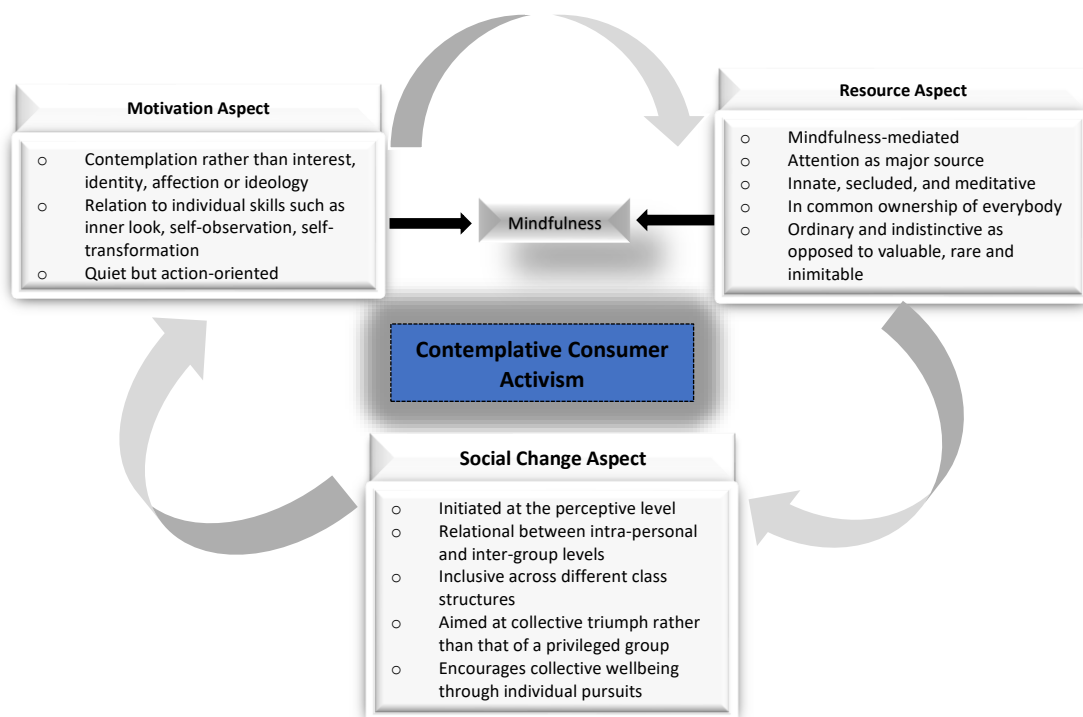
The current research on the social change element of activism is shaped around four main views of change. While *the business-level change* involves transformations occurring in an existing firm’s relationships with its customers (Georgallis, 2017; Hadani et al., 2019), *the market-level change* relates new market creation within an existing industry (Martin & Schouten, 2014; Sandikci & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2014). *The industry-level change* concerns those forms of consumer activism that introduce a new understanding of consumer needs which have not been met by prevalent organizational forms before (Den Hond & De Barker, 2007; Lounsbury et al., 2003). *The system-level change*, on the other hand, refers to larger scaled and more extensive disruptions in established perceptions, attitudes and acts of consumption (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Rumbo, 2002).

2.2. New Age Spiritualities and Mindfulness

The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed the revival of new spiritual tendencies and shifts in the understanding of established religions (Redden, 2002), which are

often framed as ‘New Age Spiritualities’ (NES) (Aupers & Houtman, 2013). The reflection of NES into the consumption space is often represented by the notion of consumer spirituality, which refers to “the interrelated practices and processes engaged in when consuming market offerings (products, services, places) that yield ‘spiritual utility’” (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019, p. 391). As one of many forms of NES, mindfulness describes a mental process cultivated to achieve a state of introspection through being in deep and serious thought for a period of time (Bahl et al., 2016; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Chan, 2019). It is often interpreted through three different lenses within social and natural sciences, that is, the Buddhist/religious, moral/secular view and integrative views of mindfulness.

3. Conceptual Framework



4. Contribution

First of all, through its conceptualization of contemplative consumer activism, this research will potentially contribute to the consumer activism literature by introducing an alternative insight into the current understandings of the consumer activist, which depends on the mobilization of an inner, secluded and contemplative resource base. In doing so, it will

complement the current understandings of the consumer activist by expanding individual resources co-opted in mobilizing social movement into a contemplative context through a discussion of the use of inner resources such as inner look, self-observation and self-transformation. Secondly, it will contribute to the literature on social change by challenging the existing conceptions of `social change` and reframing it in a way that creates a continuum between the change that occurs through the cultivation of the consumer`s inner resources and the change that reflects onto other stakeholder groups in the larger social space. Thirdly, it will contribute to consumer research on mindfulness by introducing an action-oriented view of mindfulness which can act as a means of providing an indistinctive, common but valuable resource base in transforming societies, as opposed to the remedial view of mindfulness against the aspirational aspects of consumption (Brunel & Dong, 2006; Shaw & Duffy, 2020). In that respect, the research feeds into the discussions on Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) in that it investigates how the unprecedented rise of mindfulness impacts and transforms the contemporary consumer society at a time of significant social change induced by the global pandemic.

Besides theoretical implication, this research is further expected to create some important implications at a managerial level through providing an alternative understanding of group conflict between consumers, and both internal and external sources of unrest, which may also be extended into a consumer versus firm/brand context. The study will provide a detailed analysis of the consumer-based factors behind the escalation of the mindfulness industry in terms of how consumers perceive and consume mindfulness in addressing issues concerning themselves and their surroundings, which can be of practical use to service businesses and digital platforms built on the idea of mindfulness.

Last but not least, the research will potentially yield important results to be used by the policy makers, especially in those matters related to collective wellbeing. The proposed

alternative form of consumer activism can be utilized in viewing and enhancing general wellbeing in society by helping consumers not to be driven by their pre-conceived assumptions and prejudices in their attempts to achieve collective goals. This would contribute to producing more effective solutions to those issues concerning different stakeholder groups during various stages of the economic exchange behaviour.

References

- Aupers, S., & Houtman, D. (2013). Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality. In S. J. S. a. I. S. Gilhus (Ed.), *New Age Spirituality - Rethinking Religion* (First ed., pp. 174-196). Routledge.
- Bahl, S., Milne, G. R., Ross, S. M., Mick, D. G., Grier, S. A., Chugani, S. K., Chan, S. S., Gould, S., Cho, Y.-N., Dorsey, J. D., Schindler, R. M., Murdock, M. R., & Boesen-Mariani, S. (2016). Mindfulness: Its Transformative Potential for Consumer, Societal, and Environmental Well-Being. *Journal of public policy & marketing*, 35(2), 198-210. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jppm.15.139>
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The Benefits of Being Present: Mindfulness and Its Role in Psychological Well-Being. *J Pers Soc Psychol*, 84(4), 822-848. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.4.822>
- Brunel, F. F., & Dong, W. (2006). The role of mindfulness in consumer behavior. *Advances in consumer research*, 33, 276-278.
- Buechler, S. M. (1995). New Social Movement Theories. *Sociological quarterly*, 36(3), 441-464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1995.tb00447.x>
- Campbell, D. T. (1965). Ethnocentric and other Altruistic Motives In D. Levine (Ed.), *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* (pp. 283-311). University of Nebraska Press.
- Chan, E. Y. (2019). Mindfulness and willingness to try insects as food: The role of disgust. *FOOD QUAL PREFER*, 71, 375-383. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2018.08.014>
- Collins, R. (2001). One Social Movements and the Focus of Emotional Attention. In Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, & F. Polletta (Eds.), *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (pp. 27-44). University of Chicago Press.
- Cress, D. M., & Snow, D. A. (1996). Mobilization at the Margins: Resources, Benefactors, and the Viability of Homeless Social Movement Organizations. *American sociological review*, 61(6), 1089-1109. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2096310>
- Den Hond, F., & De Barker, F. G. A. (2007). Ideologically Motivated Activism: How Activist Groups Influence Corporate Social Change Activities. *The Academy of Management review*, 32(3), 901-924. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2007.25275682>
- Fine, G. A., & Sandstrom, K. (1993). Ideology in Action: A Pragmatic Approach to a Contested Concept. *Sociological theory*, 11(1), 21-38. <https://doi.org/10.2307/201978>
- Fligstein, N., & Dauter, L. (2007). The Sociology of Markets. *Annual review of sociology*, 33(1), 105-128. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.33.040406.131736>
- Georgallis, P. (2017). The Link Between Social Movements and Corporate Social Initiatives: Toward a Multi-level Theory. *J Bus Ethics*, 142(4), 735-751. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-016-3111-0>
- Glickman, L. B. (2006). The Consumer and the Citizen in "Personal Influence". *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 608(1), 205-212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716206292366>
- Hadani, M., Doh, J. P., & Schneider, M. (2019). Social movements and corporate political activity: Managerial responses to socially oriented shareholder activism. *J BUS RES*, 95, 156-170. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.10.031>

- Handelman, J., & Fischer, E. (2018). Contesting Understandings of Contestation: Rethinking Perspectives on Activism. In O. Kravets, P. Maclaran, S. Miles, & A. Venkatesh (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of consumer culture [internet resource]* (pp. 256-272). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Hilton, M. (2007). Social activism in an age of consumption: the organized consumer movement. *Social history (London)*, 32(2), 121-143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071020701245751>
- Husemann, K. C., & Eckhardt, G. M. (2019). Consumer spirituality INTRODUCTION. *J MARKET MANAG-UK*, 35(5-6), 391-406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2019.1588558>
- Kozinets, R. V., & Handelman, J. M. (2004). Adversaries of Consumption: Consumer Movements, Activism, and Ideology. *The Journal of consumer research*, 31(3), 691-704. <https://doi.org/10.1086/425104>
- Lounsbury, M., Ventresca, M., & Hirsch, P. M. (2003). Social movements, field frames and industry emergence: a cultural-political perspective on US recycling. *Socio-economic review*, 1(1), 71-104. <https://doi.org/10.1093/soceco/1.1.71>
- Martin, D. M., & Schouten, J. W. (2014). Consumption-Driven Market Emergence. *The Journal of consumer research*, 40(5), 855-870. <https://doi.org/10.1086/673196>
- McCarthy, J. D., & Zald, M. N. (1977). Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory. *The American journal of sociology*, 82(6), 1212-1241. <https://doi.org/10.1086/226464>
- Opp, K.-D. (2013). Rational Choice Theory and Social Movements. In D. d. P. David A. Snow, Doug McAdam, Bert Klandermans (Ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (pp. n/a). Wiley Blackwell.
- Polletta, F. (2002). *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements*. University of Chicago Press.
- Redden, G. (2002). The New Agents: Personal transfiguration and radical privatization in New Age self-help. *Journal of consumer culture*, 2(1), 33-52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146954050200200102>
- Rowley, T. J., & Moldoveanu, M. (2003). When Will Stakeholder Groups Act? An Interest- and Identity-Based Model of Stakeholder Group Mobilization. *The Academy of Management review*, 28(2), 204-219. <https://doi.org/10.2307/30040709>
- Rumbo, J. D. (2002). Consumer resistance in a world of advertising clutter: The case of Adbusters. *Psychology & marketing*, 19(2), 127-148. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.10006>
- Sandikci, Ö., & Ger, G. (2010). Veiling in Style: How Does a Stigmatized Practice Become Fashionable? *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(1), 15-36. <https://doi.org/10.1086/649910>
- Scaraboto, D., & Fischer, E. (2014). Frustrated fashionistas: an institutional theory perspective on consumer quests for greater choice in mainstream markets. *The Journal of consumer research*, 41(1), S183.
- Shaw, D., & Duffy, K. (2020). Clothing Consumption: Developing a Theory of Mindful Consumption. *Advances in consumer research*, 48, 683-684.
- Sherif, M. (1958). Superordinate Goals in the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict. *AM J SOCIOL*, 63(4), 349-356. <https://doi.org/10.1086/222258>
- Sherif, M. (1970). On the relevance of social psychology. *AM PSYCHOL*, 25(2), 144-156. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0029429>
- Sine, W. D., & Lee, B. H. (2009). Tilting at Windmills? The Environmental Movement and the Emergence of the U.S. Wind Energy Sector. *Administrative science quarterly*, 54(1), 123-155. <https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2009.54.1.123>