

Consumer cynicism: developing a scale to measure underlying attitudes influencing marketplace shaping and withdrawal behaviours

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Abstract

This article develops the construct of consumer cynicism, characterized by a perception of a pervasive, systemic lack of integrity in the marketplace and investigates how cynical consumers behave in the marketplace. The construct was developed based on a qualitative study and triangulated through developing a scale and investigating antecedents and consequential marketplace behaviours. The cynicism construct is uniquely suited to explain the underlying psychological processes hinted at in practitioner perceptions of the growing mistrust and consumer research about rebellion behaviours, as well as to offer insight on consumers' response to the increasingly sophisticated market. Previous research has offered a glimpse of extreme rebellion behaviours such as culture jamming, anti-market rallies and movements and anti-consumerist festivals such as Burning Man explored through qualitative research. [Drawing audiences around 50 000 and running annually near San Francisco since 1986, the Burning Man festival lists decommodification among its 10 core principles, prohibits commercial sponsorships, exchange transactions and advertising, and culminates in burning a 40-foot effigy of 'the man'.] This research builds on that through both qualitative and quantitative approaches to empirically demonstrate that the cynical attitudes underlying such behaviours are widespread and have a subtle and pervasive effect on more everyday consumption behaviours as well as high-profile activist behaviours. Cynical consumers see consumers (not just activists but also ordinary consumers) as players in a marketplace system, and they believe that role comes with the responsibility to make socially conscious choices. The consumer marketplace system is so pervasive that simple apathy or avoidance is rarely possible. Cynical consumers are forced to continually interact with a system they mistrust, and they use various coping strategies. The consumer cynicism construct was initially developed through a grounded theory study of in-depth interviews. Interview analysis showed these consumers share a consistent, complex network of marketplace beliefs and negative affect, which shapes their behaviour in the marketplace. Based on the qualitative study, consumer cynicism is defined as a stable, learned attitude towards the marketplace characterized by the perception that pervasive opportunism among firms exists and that this opportunism creates a harmful consumer marketplace. A series of studies was conducted to develop a scale to measure consumer cynicism. A large-scale national survey provided the final scale validation sample and primary research instrument for testing hypotheses, and additional studies were conducted for a rigorous scale development process, establishing internal consistency, invariant unidimensional factor structure, scale norms, test-retest reliability as well as face validity, known-groups validity, convergent validity, discriminant validity and nomological validity. Consumer cynicism is shown to impact marketplace behaviours and perceptions, leading to marketplace shaping or consumer activism and criticism behaviours, and marketplace withdrawal behaviours such as voluntary simplicity lifestyles.

Introduction

Increasingly, consumers are showing distrust for business and the marketplace. Edelman's (2014) Trust Barometer shows just 61% of the global population views business as trustworthy, and for many specific industries it falls below half. Yankelovich Monitor (Wood, 2004) reports consumer trust declining steadily over the last 30 years; 80% of study participants agreed that 'American business is too concerned about making a profit and not concerned enough about its responsibilities to workers, consumers and the environment'. Similarly, 42% of British consumers lack trust in brands today (Lidstone, 2005).

Such sentiments can be characterized as cynicism. Societal cynicism or cynicism towards society and its institutions, has been conceptualized as a relatively stable, learned attitude associated with negative affect (Abraham, 2000). This cynical attitude is typically formed when 'unrealistic expectations' lead to disappointment, which, in turn, leads to disillusion, a 'sense of being let down or of letting oneself down, and more darkly, the sense of being deceived, betrayed or used by others' (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989, p. 3). Cynicism has been applied to more specific contexts, such as organizational cynicism (towards one's employer; e.g. Andersson, 1996) and, in a buyer-seller context, purchasing managers' cynicism about top management efforts to motivate inauthentic relational behaviours (Kothandaraman and Agnihotri, 2012). Recently, this ideological belief has also been applied to the consumption context. Research finds that cynical consumers use Christmas hate web sites to express their disillusionment with the highly commercialized holiday season through 'Scrooge identity projects' (Mikkonen *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, research shows that, in some instances, cynical consumers may use the same manipulative tactics that distrusted firms are perceived to use (Odou and de Pechpeyrou, 2011). For example, a consumer negotiating a car trade-in may hide the car's flaws from the salesperson, or a consumer who had changed his mind about a purchase might lie that the product was defective in order to make a return, rationalizing their behaviour on the grounds that the businesses would treat them equally opportunistically.

Consumer cynicism likely explains various consumer behaviours targeted at the marketplace. An increasing body of research on consumer rebellion behaviours such as culture jamming, in which consumers take guerilla actions to make a point such as graffiti on a transit ad to transform the ad into an anti-advertising commentary, suggests at least some consumers are aggravated enough to fight back (Fournier *et al.*, 1998; Ritson and Dobscha, 1999; Ward and Ostrom, 2006; Gregoire *et al.*, 2009) or withdraw as in voluntary simplicity, when consumers try to minimize spending, commercial transactions and materialism (Zavestoski, 2002) and abandonment (Hogg *et al.*, 2009). Brenton (2013) found that ethical consumption as a form of activism is often motivated not purely by altruism or desire to help others, but by consumers' own identity and desire to ease their guilt, consistent with findings that cynical attitudes can be central to identity and that actions may be taken more to ease internal dissonance by disassociating from the corrupt system than with any real hope of changing the corrupt system. Nonetheless, previous research has not yet explored the effects of consumer cynicism, as no scale to measure it currently exists.

While a scale labeled as consumer cynicism was recently created (Chylinski and Chu, 2010), that scale measures a consumer's *behaviours* directed at a specific distrusted *firm*, rather than one's *attitude* towards the *marketplace*. Additionally, while a measure of general (societal) cynicism exists (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989), consumer cynicism is proposed to be distinct from societal cynicism, a notion that is consistent with research in other disciplines that have measured specific cynicisms in different contexts.

As such, the goals of this article are to:

- Conceptualize the consumer cynicism construct using a grounded theory approach,
- develop a consumer cynicism scale, laying groundwork for future research,
- investigate cynics' consequent behaviour in the marketplace.

These goals are accomplished via eight studies involving a total of 1223 respondents, as outlined in Table 1.

Construct development methodology

Conceptualizing consumer cynicism: a grounded theory approach

The conceptual framework outlined here is based on 23 in-depth interviews (Study 1). Study 1 was conducted in two phases. A pilot study ($n=8$) included participants that were recruited from community organizations likely to represent the general population. A larger study ($n=15$) included participants drawn from organizations whose members were likely to experience cynicism (e.g. Center for Sustainable Living). Individual interviews typically lasted 1–2 h and were recorded and transcribed (McCracken, 1988). The transcripts were analyzed following the grounded theory procedures for open and axial coding outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). A researcher not involved in the project conducted an independent open and axial coding analysis on a subset of three interviews, and his conclusions were fairly similar to the initial coding.

Results suggest that cynicism in the consumer context is characterized by a belief in a *pervasive* lack of integrity among consumer companies and negative affect such as bitterness or resentment. Cynics in this study perceived a pervasive dishonesty or sham and see companies as frequently manipulating consumers. Specifically, cynical consumers' beliefs seemed to fall into three consistent categories:

- There are systemic faults that make it difficult for 'good' businesses to compete, such as overemphasis on short-term performance and distance between top management and their employees and customers.
- Protective systems, such as the legal system and government agencies, or the free market are not working effectively.
- Consumers have some responsibility to shape the larger marketplace system by rewarding and punishing firms and socializing other consumers.

Based on this qualitative work, consumer cynicism was defined as:

An individual consumer's stable, learned attitude towards the marketplace characterized by the perception that pervasive opportunism among firms exists and that this opportunism creates a harmful consumer marketplace.

Table 1 Summary of scale development studies

Study 1: Qualitative interview study		
Participants: 23	Sample: Adults	Recruitment: Local organizations
<i>This exploratory study developed the construct and theory; transcripts were a source for generating scale items.</i>		
Study 2: Member check		
Participants: 3	Sample: Adults	Recruitment: Study 1 participants
<i>Study 1 participants reviewed and discussed a summary of the construct and the items in the initial pool.</i>		
Study 3: Expert rating		
Participants: 15	Sample: Consumer scholars	Recruitment: Colleague survey
<i>Faculty and Ph.D. students rated scale items for construct representativeness.</i>		
Study 4: Initial item reduction		
Participants: 263	Sample: Students	Recruitment: Student organizations
<i>Item reduction, exploratory factor analysis, and discriminant and convergent validity with consumer alienation, societal cynicism, and advertising skepticism. Conclude unidimensionality.</i>		
Study 5: Scale refinement		
Participants: 221	Sample: Adults	Recruitment: Organizations
<i>Item reduction, exploratory factor analysis, discriminant and convergent validity with consumer alienation; scale development of marketplace shaping and marketplace withdrawal.</i>		
Study 6: Hypothesis testing and scale validation		
Participants: 561	Sample: Adults	Recruitment: National panel
<i>Scale validation, confirmatory factor analysis, testing of consequences (marketplace withdrawal, marketplace shaping).</i>		
Study 7: Test-retest		
Participants: 77 organization	Sample: Students	Recruitment: Student
Study 8: Known groups validity		
Participants: 60	Sample: Adbusters	Recruitment: Online forum

Developing the consumer cynicism scale

The consumer cynicism measure was developed following scale development procedures outlined by Churchill (1979), Lastovicka (1982), Rossiter (2002), and Netemeyer *et al.* (2003).

Item generation and purification

The consumer cynicism item pool drew from comments taken from consumers' own words in the interviews, as well as items based on the literature. The initial item pool presented in the purification studies (discussed subsequently) included 49 items, with the goal of eventually reducing the scale to 10 items or fewer (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003). Three facets were identified early in the scale development process (1) to ensure that the item pool encompassed the full content domain and (2) to allow for the possibility of multi-dimensionality and included the following:

- 1 General opportunism: firms seek their own self-interests, without regard for basic principles or eventual consequences (8 items in the initial pool)
- 2 Opportunism specifically directed towards consumers: firms seek their own self-interests, disregarding eventual consequences even for their own customers (11 items)
- 3 Deception: forms of opportunism specifically emphasizing deceptive marketing practices (13 items)

Initially a fourth element specified that the other three elements resulted in harmful consequences, but this element was dropped. This initial 49-item pool was purified in Studies 2, 3 and 4. The goals of these studies were to eliminate those few items with unacceptable performance. In Study 2, three former interview participants that were classified as highly cynical provided 'member checks' of the conceptual development and

served as judges for content and face validity of the items. In Study 3, 15 faculty members and upper-level PhD students with an emphasis on consumer behaviour across 12 universities served as expert judges. They rated how well each item represented the overall construct, as well as how well each item fit its particular facet. Study 4 used a student sample of 270 and was administered via an online survey. Participants were recruited through a variety of student organizations at a large US university. These items were assessed using exploratory factor analyses. An iterative process simultaneously considered multiple issues (e.g. means, standard deviations, item-to-total correlations, multi-dimensionality). Although numerous items were flagged as likely candidates for elimination, most items (39) were retained in the pool and tested again with the adult sample in Study 5.

Scale refinement

The goal of Study 5 was to select the best-performing items. Adult consumers completed an online survey. The participants were recruited through four nonprofit organizations (in two Midwestern US cities) expected to represent a broad cross-section of the population. Responses rates for each organization ranged from 52 to 75%, with an overall response rate of 58%; a total of 221 responses were received. Household annual income ranged from less than \$20 000 to greater than \$250 000. Thirty percent of respondents were 18–40 years old, 46% were 41–50 years old, and 24% were 51 years old or greater. Eighty percent had a college degree.

Multiple statistical issues were considered when using principle axis factor analysis to select the best-performing items. Further, the simultaneous interpretation of factor analyses of the Studies 4 and 5 samples, as recommended by Netemeyer *et al.*

Table 2 Summary of 12 finalist items

	Study 3			Study 5 Adult Consumer Sample		
	Expert rating	Mean	Std. Dev.	Item-to-total correlation	<i>r</i> ²	Factor loading
To make a profit, companies are willing to do whatever they can get away with. ^a	4.69 ^b	2.71 ^b	0.85	0.74 ^b	0.61 ^b	0.78 ^b
Companies see consumers as puppets to manipulate. ^{a, c}	4.08 ^b	2.77 ^b	0.93 ^b	0.71 ^b	0.53 ^b	0.75 ^b
If I want to get my money's worth, I cannot believe what a company tells me. ^a	4.31 ^b	2.75 ^b	0.83	0.68 ^b	0.49	0.71 ^b
Most companies do not mind breaking the law; they just see fines and lawsuits as a cost of doing business. ^{a, c}	4.31 ^b	2.67	1.01 ^b	0.68 ^b	0.48	0.71 ^b
Most businesses will cut any corner they can to improve profit margins. ^a	4.31 ^b	2.97 ^b	0.91 ^b	0.65 ^b	0.49	0.69 ^b
Most companies will sacrifice anything to make a profit. ^a	4.23 ^b	2.61	0.86	0.64	0.48	0.68 ^b
Manufacturers do not care what happens once I have bought the product. ^{a, c}	4.00 ^b	2.76 ^b	0.92 ^b	0.64	0.46	0.67 ^b
Most businesses are more interested in making profits than in serving consumers. ^a	4.54 ^b	3.52 ^d	0.91 ^b	0.62	0.42	0.65 ^b
Most companies walk a fine line between legal and illegal practices.	3.83 ^d	2.76 ^b	0.89	0.72 ^b	0.57 ^b	0.76 ^b
Sales people are insincere.	3.77 ^d	2.88 ^b	0.85	0.59 ^d	0.38 ^e	0.63 ^b
Businesses are willing to throw away long-term customer relationships for short-term profit.	4.08 ^b	2.82 ^b	0.91 ^b	0.55 ^d	0.37 ^e	0.59 ^d
It is hard for an honest company to succeed in today's competitive world.	3.31 ^d	2.82 ^b	1.12 ^b	0.53 ^d	0.39 ^e	0.55 ^d
	Study 4 Student Sample					
	Item-Self Rating Correlation	Mean	Std. Dev.	Item-to-total correlation	<i>r</i> ²	Factor loading
32 whatever can get away with ^a	0.42 ^b	2.96 ^b	0.89	0.58	0.38	0.63 ^b
13 puppets to manipulate ^{a, c}	0.44 ^b	2.89 ^b	0.96 ^b	0.62 ^b	0.41 ^b	0.68 ^b
18 do not believe to get \$ worth ^a	0.41 ^b	2.84 ^b	0.82	0.59	0.40 ^b	0.64 ^b
04 cost of business ^{a, c}	0.38	2.64	0.95 ^b	0.50 ^d	0.33 ^e	0.54 ^d
34 cut any corner for profit ^a	0.33	3.15 ^b	0.90 ^b	0.56	0.35	0.60 ^b
23 sacrifice anything for profit ^e	0.31 ^d	2.84 ^b	0.92 ^b	0.53 ^d	0.36	0.58 ^d
14 do not care after purchase ^{a, c}	0.43 ^b	3.10 ^b	0.97 ^b	0.61	0.43 ^b	0.66 ^b
07 profits over customers ^a	0.46 ^b	3.71 ^d	0.88	0.60	0.38	0.65 ^b
25 fine line	0.37	2.90 ^b	0.91 ^b	0.53 ^d	0.37	0.57 ^d
39 sales people insincere	0.39	3.05 ^b	0.90 ^b	0.45 ^e	0.24 ^e	0.49 ^e
10 throw away for short-term	0.30 ^d	2.81 ^b	0.98 ^b	0.52 ^d	0.33 ^e	0.57 ^d
05 hard for honest to succeed	0.34	3.15 ^b	1.11 ^b	0.46 ^e	0.24 ^e	0.50 ^e

^aincluded in final scale.

^bbest-performing items.

^crated as a favourite item in the Study 2 member check.

^dmarginally acceptable items.

^elower than acceptable items. Item-to-total correlation: corrected item-to-total correlation between the item and the scale sum excluding the item. *r*²: Squared multiple correlation: the *r*² for a multiple regression with the item as the dependent variable and the other scale items as predictors. Factor loading: in an EFA of these 12 items, with 1 factor extracted, 4 iterations required.

(2003) was used, with more emphasis placed on the Study 5 sample given its greater representativeness. These iterative analyses resulted in 12 items producing a single-factor solution explaining over 50% of the variance in both samples. Table 2

summarizes various data analyzed for those finalist items, including reliability statistics, factor loadings, mean and standard deviation and two measures of content validity – expert ratings (Study 3) and student ratings (Study 4) of their own

Table 3 Consumer cynicism: final scale items

4) Most companies do not mind breaking the law; they just see fines and lawsuits as a cost of doing business.
7) Most businesses are more interested in making profits than in serving consumers.
13) Companies see consumers as puppets to manipulate.
14) Manufacturers do not care what happens once I have bought the product.
18) If I want to get my money's worth, I cannot believe what a company tells me.
23) Most companies will sacrifice anything to make a profit.
32) To make a profit, companies are willing to do whatever they can get away with.
34) Most businesses will cut any corner they can to improve profit margins.

cynicism based on a plain-language definition. The interpretation of these results, along with the interest of keeping the scale short, resulted in four of these 12 items rejected.

As such, eight items were selected for inclusion in the final consumer cynicism scale, summarized in Table 3. Consistent with initial conceptualizations of the construct, the unidimensional final scale encompasses all of the three elements of the cynicism concept: general opportunism (items 4, 23, 32 and 34), opportunism specifically harming consumers (items 7, 13, 14) and deception (item 18).

Scale validation: Internal consistency and dimensionality

The eight-item consumer cynicism scale was validated in Study 6 using an online survey conducted through Survey Sampling Inc. international marketing research firm. Participants were members of the firm's SurveySpot US census-balanced panel, and 569 usable surveys were completed with a response rate of 10.2%. Respondents were 44% male and 56% female and 89% white, 2% each for black, Hispanic, Asian and other. The sample was slightly heavy on white and middle income compared with the general population (16% of the sample in the <\$20 000 income bracket compared with 22% of the census population; 7% of the sample in the top >\$100 000 annual income bracket compared with 16% of the census population.) The large national sample was randomly split into two groups (Studies 6a and 6b) to facilitate analysis of the scale's consistent performance.

Internal consistency

Table 4 summarizes standard measures of scale performance for the consumer cynicism scale across the two Study 6 samples, along with that of Studies 4, 5 and 7 (Study 7 is discussed subsequently). Mean, standard deviation, Chronbach's α , corrected item-to-total correlations, and average inter-item correlations were calculated for the final eight-item consumer cynicism scale.

Next, separate structural measurement models were created for each sample. Each measurement model was composed of the consumer cynicism scale plus the other latent constructs available for that data set. The consumer cynicism scale meas-

ured up to the most rigorous scale standards for both randomly split samples. In both samples, the scale showed an α greater than 0.8 and a composite reliability greater than 0.8 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003), and both samples exceeded the recommended criteria of greater than 0.3 for average inter-item correlation (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003).

Dimensionality and Factor Structure Invariance. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to evaluate the unidimensionality of the scale and test for invariant factor structure across the two Study 6 samples, as well as the Study 5 sample. A first-order factor measurement model was constructed with the consumer cynicism scale items. Except for the lower than desired RMSEA in Study 6a, the model for each sample individually had an acceptable level of fit, as presented in Table 5.

To test invariance of factor structure across the three samples, constraints were added in hierarchical fashion, first testing an unconstrained model across the three samples, then constraining the factor loadings, then constraining the factor variance, and finally constraining the error variances (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003). Results are summarized in Table 6. Constraining each of the factor loadings one at a time resulted in no significant changes in χ^2 , as well as constraining all of the factor loadings simultaneously. Constraining all of the variances also resulted in no significant changes in χ^2 . Constraining the error variances does result in a significant χ^2 change; however, the χ^2 difference test has been recognized as a very conservative one (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003). Overall, the results suggest strong support scale invariance across multiple samples.

Test-retest reliability

Since consumer cynicism is conceptualized as stable over time, test-retest reliability was evaluated. In Study 7, students were recruited through student organizations. The minimum interval between the Time 1 and 2 surveys was 14 days, as recommended (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003); all the surveys were completed within a 21-day interval. For completing both the Time 1 and 2 surveys, response rates were 44 and 39% for the two participating organizations for a total of 77 surveys. Based on a paired samples *t*-test for Time 1 and 2 cynicism in this sample, the test-retest reliability correlation for the consumer cynicism scale was calculated at 0.985, with no statistically significant difference in scores.

Evaluating validity of the consumer cynicism scale

Convergent validity. Convergent validity was established by investigating the correlation between consumer cynicism and two related constructs from existing literature: advertising skepticism and the normlessness dimension of the consumer alienation scale. Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) define skepticism towards advertising as a 'tendency towards disbelief of advertising claims'. Thus, advertising skepticism should positively correlate with consumer cynicism. The advertising skepticism measure (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998) was included in the student sample in Study 4. A measurement model was constructed including consumer cynicism and

Table 4 Performance of final 8-item consumer cynicism scale across five samples

	Study 4 ^a	Study 5 ^b	Study 6a ^c	Study 6b ^c	Study 7
Participants	Students	Midwestern US Adult Consumers	National US Adult Consumers	National US Adult Consumers	Students
Sample size	263	221	251	251	75
Number of items in pool	49	39	15	15	49
Scale mean	3.00	2.85	3.27	3.32	2.63
Standard deviation	0.60	0.68	0.70	0.72	0.59
<i>Internal Consistency</i>					
Chronbach's $\alpha^{a,b}$ (Goal >0.8)	0.83	0.89	0.92	0.90	0.85
Lowest corrected item-total correlation ^a (Goal: >0.5)	0.45 ^{ccyn4}	0.59	0.66	0.60	0.43 ^{ccyn7}
Average interitem correlation ^a (Goal >0.3)	0.38	0.56	0.58	0.55	0.41
<i>Confirmatory Factor Analysis</i>					
Average standardized loading ¹ (Goal: 0.6–0.9)	0.61	0.70	0.76	0.74	0.64
Composite reliability d, f, g (Goal: >0.8)	0.82	0.88	0.94	0.92	0.86
Average variance extracted ^{a,b,b} (Goal: >0.5; >0.45 for new scales)	0.38	0.50	0.59	0.55	0.44

^a(Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003).

^b(Churchill, 1979).

^c(Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

^d(Bagozzi and Yi, 1988).

advertising skepticism (CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.065). As expected, the correlation between the two constructs was 0.548 ($P < 0.001$). Additionally, the normlessness dimension of customer alienation was expected to correlate with consumer cynicism. Normlessness, conceptualized as feelings of suspicion and mistrust towards marketers, was measured by the three items of the normlessness subscale (Lambert, 1980; Durand and Lambert, 1985). Although measurement models with the alienation scale did not achieve an acceptable level of fit for statistical evaluation either as a unidimensional or multidimensional scale (most likely because scale development standards have become more rigorous since 1980), simple correlations showed normlessness was also positively correlated with consumer cynicism at 0.849 in Study 4, at 0.987 in Study 5 and at 0.842 in Study 6 (all significant at $P < 0.001$).

Discriminant validity. Two constructs were of particular concern as possible threats to the discriminant validity of the consumer cynicism construct: advertising skepticism and societal cynicism.

While both consumer cynicism and consumer skepticism towards advertising (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998) focus on consumer distrust, advertising skepticism is more narrowly defined (focused on advertising claims). Based on the model presented in the previous section, advertising skepticism showed an average variance extracted of 0.57, and consumer cynicism

showed an average variance extracted of 0.37. The squared disattenuated correlation between consumer cynicism and advertising skepticism is 0.36 ($r = 0.596$). Because the average variance extracted by consumer cynicism exceeds the squared disattenuated correlation between advertising skepticism and consumer cynicism, discriminant validity can be concluded (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003).

Societal cynicism is theoretically proposed as an antecedent of consumer cynicism, as it should be a more basic (cardinal) trait. Kanter and Wortzel's (1985) six-item adaptation of Wrightsman's Revised Philosophies of Human Nature scale was used to measure societal cynicism, as it has been used to represent societal-level cynicism in numerous studies (e.g. Kanter and Wortzel, 1985; Kanter and Mirvis, 1989; Guastello and Pessig, 1998). Discriminant validity was assessed using Studies 6a and 6b. A measurement model was created with consumer cynicism and societal cynicism (Sample 1: CFI = 0.927, RMSEA = 0.08; Sample 2: CFI = 0.936, RMSEA = 0.08). Each of the scales showed an average variance extracted above 0.50 in both samples (consumer cynicism: 0.58 in Sample 1, 0.55 in Sample 2; societal cynicism: 0.56 in Sample 2 and 0.54 in Sample 2). Further, in both samples, the average variance extracted by societal cynicism and consumer cynicism exceeded the squared disattenuated correlation between societal and consumer cynicism (0.29 in Sample 1; 0.40 in Sample 2), indicating discriminant validity.

Table 5 Model fit for CFA of unidimensional consumer cynicism in three samples

	Study 5	Study 6a	Study 6b
	Midwestern (US) Consumers	US Consumers	US Consumers
Sample <i>n</i>	221	269	270
Root mean square residual	0.026	0.030	0.026
Goodness of fit index	0.962	0.942	0.961
Normed fit index	0.958	0.947	0.963
Comparative fit index (>0.9)	0.984	0.963	0.979
Root mean square error of approximation (<0.08)	0.052	0.091	0.068

Known groups validity. One method of confirming content validity of a scale is to infer the presence of the trait or attitude from other information, such as group membership, and verify that this group does in fact score higher on the scale (e.g. Lastovicka *et al.*, 1999). Known groups' validity was assessed in Study 8 using participants from Adbusters, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting culture jamming and anti-commercial activism. A link to the online survey was posted on Adbusters' online discussion forums with Adbusters' encouragement. (Due to Adbusters' strict privacy policy, a member list was not available.) Study participants were offered their choice of a \$10 donation to Adbusters on their behalf or a \$7 Amazon.com gift certificate. (Most chose the Adbusters donation option, raising \$450 for Adbusters which went towards airing the organization's 'Unbrand America' television commercial.) Sixty completed surveys were received. As expected, the mean consumer cynicism score for the Adbusters sample (4.03 on a 5.0 scale) was substantially and statistically significantly higher than the mean consumer cynicism score for the other samples (2.85) (*t*-test $t = -12.040$, $df = 279$, $P < 0.001$).

Hypotheses

Consequences of consumer cynicism: Marketplace behaviour

A cynic perceives a system as corrupt or lacking integrity and may respond with two coping responses. First, consumer cynics may distance themselves by limiting contact with the system or

by disparaging it to communicate that they are separate from the system. Cynical consumers interviewed described active 'anti-brand loyalty', as well as reducing consumption in general. Additionally, cynical interview subjects perceived a responsibility as consumers to shape the larger marketplace system. Cynical participants described efforts to socialize others by bringing children up to be critical consumers and getting friends on board for boycotts.

These two coping responses are somewhat analogous to how consumers react to a firm's failed service recovery attempts: desire for revenge and desire for avoidance (Gregoire *et al.*, 2009). Gregoire *et al.* (2009) define desire for revenge as 'customers' need to punish and cause harm to firms for the damages they [firms] have caused', and desire for avoidance as 'customers' need to withdraw themselves from any interactions with firms' (Gregoire *et al.*, 2009, p. 19). The two desires can be distinguished with the 'fight-flight' analogy, with desire for revenge associated with fight tendencies and desire for avoidance associated with flight tendencies.

As such, marketplace shaping is defined as deliberate attempts to influence the marketplace system by rewarding good companies and punishing bad companies and/or by raising consumer awareness of the hypocrisy and opportunism of the marketplace in general and of specific companies as icons of the marketplace. Marketplace withdrawal is defined as deliberately reducing or minimizing one's contact with the marketplace in any way. Consumer cynicism is proposed to influence both marketplace behaviours. Formally stated:

H1: Consumer cynicism is positively associated with marketplace shaping.

Table 6 Factor invariance of consumer cynicism across three samples^a

	Unconstrained 3-group model	Factor loadings constrained	Variance constrained	Error variance constrained
Root mean square residual (<0.05)	0.027	0.040	0.052	0.051
Goodness of fit index	0.954	0.950	0.950	0.938
Normed fit index (>0.9)	0.956	0.952	0.951	0.939
Comparative fit index (>0.9)	0.974	0.974	0.974	0.967
Root mean square error of approximation (<0.08)	0.042	0.038	0.037	0.039
χ^2	141.478	154.176	155.900	196.000
df	60	74	76	92
Δ df		8	2	16
$\Delta\chi^2$		12.699	1.724	40.100
<i>P</i> value for Δ		0.550	0.422	0.001

^aThree samples included: Study 5 (US Midwestern consumers, $n = 221$), Study 6a (US [national] consumers, $n = 269$) and Study 6b (US [national] consumers, $n = 270$).

Table 7 Marketplace shaping behaviour index items

- Have you ever participated in an organized boycott?
- Over the last 6 months, how many times have you decided to stop buying from a business?
- Over the last 6 months, how many times have you decided to stop buying a brand?
- In the last 6 months, how many times have you encouraged someone else to avoid buying a product or to avoid a certain brand, company or store?
- In the last month, how many times have you criticized a brand, store, product or advertisement to friends or acquaintances?
- In the last 6 months, how many times have you criticized a brand, store, advertisement or product so that other customers could hear?

H2: Consumer cynicism is positively associated with marketplace withdrawal.

Hypotheses testing Methodology

Data from Study 6 were used to test H1 and H2. Prior to testing these hypotheses, measures for marketplace shaping and marketplace withdrawal were developed in Study 5. Marketplace withdrawal was measured with 10 items, some compiled from voluntary simplicity scales (Leonard-Barton, 1981; Iwata, 1999) and some new items. Based on an exploratory factor analysis, four items loading on the first factor were retained. The retained items capture general withdrawal from the marketplace (Table 7), and this four-item scale had an α of 0.77. Marketplace shaping was measured with 13 items from the exit, voice and retaliation scale (Huefner *et al.*, 2002), and a new set of 11 items designed to capture additional marketplace shaping behaviours. Qualitative research on consumer rebellion behaviours (e.g. Fournier *et al.*, 1998; Ritson and Dobscha, 1999; Kozinets, 2002) was used to generate these new scale items which cover mocking, rebellion, boycotting, anti-brand loyalty and socializing others. Based on Study 5 results, items which showed frequent enough occurrence to be statistically useful were selected to form a six-item formative index scale, as shown in Table 8. (Cronbach alpha cannot be computed for formative scales.) The scale calls for reports of actual behaviour within the last 6 months and uses a never-once-twice-three or more times scale.

Results

H1 and H2 were tested via multiple regression, and results, shown in Table 9, suggest strong support for both hypotheses.

Table 9 Regression tests of H1 and H2 in Study 6

Dependent variable	One-predictor model			Model with other predictors, with consumer cynicism entered last			
	Adj. r^2	β for consumer cynicism	P	Predictors	Adj. r^2	β	P
Marketplace Shaping	0.063	0.252	<0.001	Consumer cynicism	0.076	0.262	<0.001
				Gender		-0.122	0.003
				Societal cynicism		nonsig.	
Marketplace Withdrawal	0.055	0.239	<0.001	Consumer cynicism	0.097	0.264	<0.001
				Age		0.214	<0.001
				Income		nonsig.	

Table 8 Marketplace withdrawal scale items

- I try to live a simple life and not to buy articles which are not necessary.
- I prefer clothing that does not carry a noticeable brand logo.
- I try to avoid impulse buys.
- I shop only when I need something specific.

Concerning H1, a simple linear regression with the mean of the marketplace shaping scale as the dependent variable and consumer cynicism as the predictor shows a statistically significant standardized regression coefficient of 0.252 ($P < 0.001$). Thus, H1 is supported. Including other predictors in the model shows that consumer cynicism explains additional variance in marketplace shaping beyond that explained by gender (males did more marketplace shaping) and societal cynicism. Societal cynicism primarily influences marketplace shaping through its role as an antecedent of consumer cynicism; it has a statistically significant standardized coefficient of 0.183 but drops out of the model once consumer cynicism is added (consumer cynicism fully mediates). Other possible control variables (i.e. income, race and age) show no statistically significant impact on marketplace shaping even when regressed as sole predictors.

Concerning H2, a simple linear regression with the mean of the marketplace withdrawal scale ($\alpha = 0.80$) as the dependent variable and consumer cynicism as the predictor shows a statistically significant standardized regression coefficient of 0.239 ($P < 0.001$). H2 is supported. Including other predictors in the model shows that consumer cynicism explains additional variance in marketplace withdrawal beyond that explained by age, income and societal cynicism. Other possible control variables (i.e. race and gender) show no statistically significant impact on marketplace withdrawal even when regressed as sole predictors.

Discussion

This study defines and quantifies the consumer cynicism phenomenon that consumer advocates celebrate and marketing practitioners lament. The survey studies reported in this article triangulate the basic principles found in the qualitative interviews: consumer cynicism exists, and cynical consumers are a force in the marketplace. They are likely to go out of their way to punish and reward companies as part of their perceived role as marketplace shapers, through boycotting, socially conscious

purchase decisions, retaliation against firms they see as harmful, and conscious efforts to make other consumers more aware. They are also likely to express their disillusionment by withdrawing from the marketplace, via reduced spending and marketing exposure.

The research herein contributes to the literature in several ways. First, this research is the first to present a measure of consumer cynicism conceptualized as an attitude directed towards the marketplace. As noted, a previously developed consumer cynicism scale conceptualizes the construct differently – as behaviour directed towards a particular distrusted firm (Chylinski and Chu, 2010). Relatedly, this research is the first to empirically demonstrate that consumer cynicism does affect anti-consumption behaviour. Previous cynicism research suggests such a relationship (Odou and de Pechpeyrou, 2011), but this relationship had not yet been empirically demonstrated.

Previous research in consumer cynicism has addressed a more specific level of cynicism directed at specific firms (Chylinski and Chu, 2010; van Dolen *et al.*, 2012), and the anti-consumption literature also recognizes that such behaviours exist at both firm and societal levels (Iyer and Muncy, 2009). Thus, future research should address how and/or when the more general consumer cynicism presented herein relates to firm-level cynicism. It seems likely that cynicism directed towards a particular firm may be the precursor to more general consumer cynicism. As noted, the societal cynicism research suggests cynicism develops through the disappointment after being let down by social institutions, and research recent has developed a measure of this construct in the consumer context – the consumer disillusionment towards marketing activity scale (Pervan and Martin, 2012). As such, future research should empirically examine the relationship between this construct and consumer cynicism, specifically at what point a disillusioned consumer transforms into a cynic (Pervan and Martin, 2012). Lastly, while consumer cynics are wary of the marketplace, they still must purchase and consume. As such, it is possible that while they distrust the general marketplace, they may place great confidence and trust in the particular brands from which they do purchase. As such, future research should explore this possibility.

Several different longitudinal panel studies suggest there may be empirical evidence that consumer cynicism is becoming more prevalent (e.g. Keller, 2003; Lidstone, 2005). The cross-sectional surveys in this article do not address trends, and existing longitudinal measures do not correspond exactly to consumer cynicism. But many practitioners believe cynicism is rising and the cynical consumer movement seems to be getting more organized, with organizations like Ad Busters (Canada-based global network that advocates anti-commercial activism and organizes global Buy Nothing Day protests) Occupy Wall Street anti-corporate protest which spread from the United States into a global movement, Spain's anti-corporate Indignados protests (with the slogan 'We are not goods in the hands of politicians and bankers') and Commercial Alert (US consumer advocacy group that works to limit advertising). Cynical consumers' role in the marketplace suggests they should be taken seriously by marketing managers as well as by consumer behaviour scholars.

Cynical consumers' desire to withdraw from the marketplace means they are difficult to reach, skeptical and sometimes reluctant to spend. They are consumer activism leaders and

vote with their dollars, and they are also more likely to retaliate against companies they feel have crossed ethical lines. This means marketing communication becomes both more important and more difficult. Public relations campaigns highlighting the socially responsible behaviour of firms (and successful crisis management when firm behaviours are seen as less than socially responsible) will be particularly important.

In an age when corporations are either guilty or suspected of protecting profits at any cost, it takes a lot more to successfully manage a brand. Indeed, business executives must realize that to counter consumer cynicism, a company's communication program must work overtime. (Canfield, 2003)

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