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## **PURCHASE POWER: AN EXAMINATION OF CONSUMPTION AS VOTING**

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# **PURCHASE POWER: AN EXAMINATION OF CONSUMPTION AS VOTING**

## **Abstract**

There has been a reported increase in political activity through the marketplace in the form of 'consumer votes'. The use of marketplace votes by consumers to address their concerns about societal issues is a phenomenon that has growing relevance for firms, since they are often affected by such consumer citizenship. Therefore, this paper aims to enhance our conceptual understanding of the consumer voting phenomenon. It explores marketplace power relations, and the constraints and enabling mechanisms they may pose to consumers seeking change through consumer voting. Consumer voting practices, consumer sovereignty discourses and power tensions in marketplace encounters are examined in relation to Foucault's notions of power, technologies of the self, and governmentality. Foucault provides a critical lens to illuminate the potential for consumer resistance, an approach which so far has been somewhat neglected by the extant marketing and consumer research literature.

## **Keywords**

Consumer voting, consumer power, Foucault

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# **PURCHASE POWER: AN EXAMINATION OF CONSUMPTION AS VOTING**

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to enhance our conceptual understanding of the consumer voting phenomenon, which seeks to address individual and societal welfare concerns. Critical to this understanding are market-based power relations as well as any constraints and enabling mechanisms they may pose to consumers seeking change through consumer voting. Indeed, power tensions in marketplace encounters impact consumer voting effectiveness through effects on consumer sovereignty. Thus, insights into these power relations are essential to an improved understanding of how individuals acting in their role as consumers may seek to influence and address societal concerns, particularly since these actions are often directed at the activities of marketing organisations. This paper, therefore, draws on Foucault's theories of power, governmentality and technologies of the self as a lens to examine the consumption as voting phenomenon. Foucault sees power as relational; 'a productive network traversing social relations' rather than 'a negative force aiming to repress or oppress' (Foucault, 1991c, p.61). Power is a knowledge-related, omnipresent force field; it is exercised but not owned by either individuals or institutions (Foucault, 1991a), and is that which emerges from socially and historically-situated interactions. As put by Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford (2006), Foucault's view of power challenges many of the assumptions underlying notions of empowered consumer voting in liberal markets, and advances our understanding of power constructs in consumer research and marketing management. Through an exploration of market-based power relations,

this paper critically examines the consumption as voting metaphor and contributes to our understanding of consumer resistance and choice by bringing market-based political action to the fore.

Citizens have started using their votes in the marketplace as a means by which to voice their concerns due to a loss of faith in government and politics to address problems ensuing from global capitalism (Hertz, 2001; Ipsos, 2007). What has emerged is an alternative form of active citizen not imposed politically from above or through engagement with formal political institutions, but by taking action through the marketplace (Micheletti, 2003). Therefore, we consider the examination of consumer voting as pertinent to socially-responsible marketing in that concerned citizens, acting in their role as consumers, are seeking to voice and address concerns on a range of issues relevant to societal and individual welfare.

Consumer choices that seek to address issues of societal and individual concern in relation to consumption have been described as consumer votes (Dickinson & Carsky, 2005; Dickinson & Hollander, 1991; Shaw, Newholm, & Dickinson, 2006). Consumption-based voting can be witnessed in the established markets for products and services with clear pro-social agendas. However, it is important to note that those sectors responsive to such concerns remain marginal, and many areas of consumer voting are characterised by a lack of effective labelling and availability of alternatives (Shaw, Hogg, Wilson, Shiu, & Hassan, 2006). This questions the balance of power in marketplace relationships, as firms still control what is made available to consumers.

However, many have questioned consumer voting because it seeks to embrace the very market system and commercial spaces that are deemed so problematic (Carducci, 2006; Heath & Potter, 2004). Consumption has been blamed for environmental problems, unfair trade practices and human and animal welfare concerns, with a growing number of situations highlighting where the successful marketing activities of individual firms impact detrimentally upon consumers, society or other stakeholders in an unanticipated fashion (Fry & Polonsky, 2004). While firms may have considered the financial benefits to the organisation, the benefits and costs to all those involved in the wider exchange process may not have been fully identified. For example, consumers can now choose a large number of unseasonal goods grown outside their own country. Although this increases freedom of choice for their plates, and creates employment and markets for goods in developing countries, it does not necessarily improve human rights for the farmers and workers who produce those goods (Micheletti & Follesdal, 2007) and also contributes detrimentally to air miles and carbon emissions. Thus, responses to embracing the market through, for example, the mainstreaming of fair trade products (Low & Davenport, 2006) have been deemed to merely 'place more power' in the hands of dominant market players rather than effectively facilitate sustainable change. Indeed, for consumer voting to operate, individuals are required to engage with the market, be it through mainstream or alternative exchange spaces, which have the potential to create paradoxical choice situations. Thus, the exercise of consumer power through marketplace votes must be examined more closely.

## **Exercising consumer power through marketplace votes**

Consumption can be viewed as political in that it represents an avenue for direct citizen intervention, which would not be possible through traditional political systems (Micheletti, 2003). Indeed, scholars increasingly see consumption as political (Micheletti and Follesdal 2007; Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Shaw 2007; Shaw, Newholm and Dickinson 2006; Soper 2007; Tormey 2007). Consumer voting, therefore, refers to actions taken by citizens in their role as consumers in response to particular aspects of the market system deemed inappropriate or unfair. In this way, and following Harrison, Newholm and Shaw (2005), 'green consumption' (consumer behaviour that is predominantly driven by consumers' environmental concerns and their attempts to reduce or limit their environmental footprints) and 'ethical consumption' (purchasing and consumption that takes into consideration societal, animal welfare as well as environmental concerns) can be seen as consumer voting. Historically, examples abound of consumer movements (Hilton, 2003; Lang & Gabriel, 2005) using the marketplace as a site for political expression. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fetter (1907, p.394) suggested that 'the market is a democracy where every penny gives the right to vote'. Therefore, the concept of consumers using their purchases like votes is a long adopted metaphor, which, while under researched, continues to be advocated today.

Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle (2004) note that when people become disassociated from politics, or do not believe they have a political voice, they use the marketplace as a site for citizen expression and action. This echoes Hertz's (2001, p.190) argument, that 'the most effective way to be political today is not to

cast your vote at the ballot box but to do so at the supermarket'; as governments 'dithered' about GM foods and footballs sewn by child labour, supermarkets, faced with consumer concern, pulled these items off the shelves. Today, as governments are perceived to be failing in responding to the problems of a global economy, more recent examples of boycotting and buycotting (Friedman, 1996) illustrate the pressure exercised by consumer organisations or individual consumers directly on firms to modify their corporate behaviour. Arguably, the increased availability and convenience of ethical alternatives has had a major impact on the sales of such products in recent years (The Cooperative Bank, 2008), and the UK-based Ethical Consumer Magazine (2009) advocates such market-based voting: 'buying a gas guzzling 4X4, especially if you are a city dweller, is a vote for climate change'. Thus, while consumption as voting has been a long adopted metaphor, a discussion of what this concept actually entails has been neglected.

The existence of consumer voting as highlighted above illustrates actions taken by citizens, in their role as consumers, in response to individual and/or societal concerns. These actions usually reflect a concern for the general good rather than just personal gain; they are political and take into consideration environmental, societal and animal welfare concerns. Political use of the market may involve entry or exit from a specific firm or product, is purposeful, and involves conscientious thought and deliberate action. For example, Friends of the Earth's 'Shop Local' campaign encourages people to buy food from local shops rather than supermarkets, in order to cut greenhouse gases and avoid independent shops being driven out of business as consumers increasingly shop at

supermarket chains. But this view of the empowered citizen-consumer implies a shift in power from firms to consumers (see Rumbo, 2002). It also suggests that the market is prepared to listen, and respond, to 'sovereign' consumer demands. Indeed, this is the stance promulgated by UK supermarkets. Upon the release of the UK Government's Food 2030 (vision) paper, the British Retail Consortium (2009) recently argued that 'food policy has to be driven by customers if it is to be successful'. They implied that it is the consumer who dictates the UK food policy agenda rather than government, retailers or producers. Engagement with the market system as a means of citizen choice does, however, raise critical questions around the effectiveness of a consumerist approach to societal change under market conditions. This is particularly apparent where consumer sovereignty is critical but uncertain as a means by which citizens can signal their desire for change (see Sirgy & Su, 2000).

### **The myth of consumer sovereignty**

Consumer sovereignty can be defined as a market circumstance where individuals have the controlling power to decide which products and services will be produced and consumed (Garman, 1997; Hutt, 1940), which in turn should lead to a maximisation of consumer wellbeing (Suranyi-Unger, 1981). Hutt (1940, p.66) reminds us that early marketing literature already contained phrases like 'the customer is always right,' and that an old, Dutch proverbial expression said 'De klant is koning' (the customer is king). Also, Schwarzkopf (2010) suggests that the idea of consumer sovereignty can be traced back to the Enlightenment, and Hutt himself first used the term consumer sovereignty in the early 1930s (Hutt, 1940;

Persky, 1993; Reekie, 1988). Although Hutt (1940) seemed to believe that it was his usage of the term that fostered its wider use ever since the early 1930s, Schwarzkopf (2010, p.1) argues that it was 'the development of market research methods during the 1930s and 1940s, which provided the crucial backdrop for the sudden rise to prominence of an idea that assumes that consumers dictate what is produced through their votes'.

According to Hutt (1936), individual consumer sovereignty is comparable to political sovereignty exercised through the ballot, and enabled by competitive market conditions that regulate choice (Fraser, 1937; Viner, 1938). Hildebrand (1951, p.19), on the other hand, tried to limit the concept to 'the economic power exerted by individual consumers by their spending in the market,' and positioned it as an ideal moral value and as an alternative way to influence the economic process. Also, Gintis (1972, p.268) argued that when sovereignty expands to all social realms, 'society develops not according to the interests of ruling elites, oppressive traditionalism, or blind chance, but to the conscious struggle of all people toward molding their world in the image of their collective needs and aspirations, subject to the constraints of available knowledge and resources.' Similarly, Fisher, Griliches and Kaysen (1962) clearly state their belief in consumer sovereignty when presenting the costs to the consumer of the then new automobile specifications implemented during the 1950s as a response to consumers' preference for more powerful cars, while Sugden (2004) suggests that the overall effects of consumer sovereignty are positive, even if consumers' preferences are incoherent or volatile.

It has been suggested that consumer sovereignty is at the core of marketing thinking, and that negative consumer votes such as boycotts reflect the exercise of consumer sovereignty directed at undesirable firm practices (Smith, 1987). However, the weaknesses of consumer sovereignty discourses have been highlighted from a number of positions. For example, Schwarzkopf's (2010) work, which is also reviewed by Shaw (2010), states that the consumer sovereignty concept is historically important because it helped legitimize specific industries that have come under scrutiny for their negative impact on consumer social welfare. Additionally, Dixon (1992) argues that because marketing discourse and practice are so closely linked to the idea of consumer sovereignty, marketing managers' pursuit of their firms' interests are transformed into consumer benefits, which, in turn, is said to exclude the dimension of individual responsibility from the equation and, thus, lead to unrealistic beliefs about markets. In addition, Adams (1962) suggests that consumer sovereignty depends on market competition, which usually is not perfect and must be fostered through enabling market structures promoted by policy makers. Lerner (1972, p.259), on the other hand, highlights that consumer sovereignty is 'far from completely achieved even where appropriate institutions have been fully developed' and Rothenberg (1962) additionally concludes that the concept is incomplete and ambiguous. Indeed, Scitovsky (1962) argues that sovereignty of the consumer is not the same as sovereignty of the citizen in that the consumer is just one aspect of an individual's life, while Etzioni (1958, p. 251) highlights that 'in some sectors of the economy the consumer's influence is rather limited' and Birmingham (1969) points to the importance of legislation in correcting market imperfections that hinder consumer welfare. Reid and Vaile (1951) suggest that many of the benefits associated with

consumer sovereignty are not exclusive to it and Waldfogel (2005) points out that although consumer sovereignty underlies economic theory and is almost universally embraced, empirical data supporting it is scarce. Sovereignty suggests that consumers' wishes are the focus upon which firms design their offerings, when in fact control over the details may evolve over time and according to market conditions. Like consumer sovereignty, consumption as voting assumes that the market *will* respond to consumer votes. Consumer demand is obviously important to firms and provides a basis upon which they decide what to produce. However, as noted by Shaw, Newholm and Dickinson (2006) and also Fraser (1939), the perspective of the consumer is only one of the considerations of a firm, and ultimately firms will produce what is in their best interest. In evaluating the interests and concerns of various stakeholders, firms take into account complex interconnecting networks of exchanges among such groups. And during the exchange, firms may misjudge or ignore the effect of their behaviour on other parties and/or the environment due to self-interest, or may not have the market mechanisms available to control the (un)known effect (Fry & Polonsky, 2004; Mundt, 1993). Thus, while the expectation is of positive, intended outcomes, there are also negative, *unintended* consequences of marketing activities on a number of stakeholders, which a firm may choose to ignore or address when faced with negative consumer voting.

Consumer sovereignty discourses are also based on the assumption that consumers have the perfect quantity and type of information to make such informed choices. In fact, social commentators have reflected on the irony implicit in an era of maximal choice where the choices are effectively defined and

managed by the market (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2004). Although politicians have presumed the superlative benefits of choice, critics have argued that one of the major problems of choice is 'the discovery of better wants' (Reid & Vaile, 1951, p.41) and Zinkin (1967) proposes that, as free consumers, we do not always make the choices that maximise our welfare, but that it is still our choice. More recently, it has been suggested that the benefits associated with the provision of choice 'may be limited to issues in which decision complexity is manageable' (Botti & Iyengar, 2006, p.24). Earl (1986) notes that it is misleading to suggest that consumers are willing or able to perform the kinds of complex trade-offs required to achieve an optimal range of choice characteristics across market offerings. Consumers often use simple choice procedures, are unsure of what certain characteristics might imply for them, and are unwilling or unable to learn more about the characteristics in order to make the 'best' choice. Nelson (2002) argues that, when faced with choice complexity, only a minority of consumers prefer a lot of alternatives to a few alternatives, and cites the cause as the 'paradox of progress', i.e., that life has become faster, more stressful, and too complex.

There has been an implicit assumption that consumers are sophisticated enough to make appropriate market decisions (Titus & Bradford, 1996) and, therefore, votes. However, even consumers with strong problem solving skills may fail to engage in extensively gathering product information due to time constraints. Also, Connolly & Prothero (2008) highlight that, although people may feel empowered and responsible for environmental issues at an individual level, this is coupled with the insecurities of not knowing what the 'right choices' are. Questioning the instrumental ways in which consumers are expected to regulate their consumer

choices in relation to green consumption, these authors suggest that such consumer choices are circumscribed by a context of systemic risks, and the uncertainties caused by competing expert and lay knowledge in relation to such risks. Although green consumption is important in shaping and maintaining empowered green identities and desirable sustainability outcomes, there is much uncertainty about the choices to be made from a consumer perspective.

Furthermore, although choice and choosing may be critical to effective voting, too much choice can be detrimental and potentially paralysing (Shankar, Cherrier, & Canniford, 2006), the level of information processing required becomes overwhelming, potentially leading to a state of uncertainty and impasse (Lennard, Mitchell, McGoldrick, & Betts, 2001). Consumers who are more likely to be 'empowered' by choice are usually high-income earners, and less likely to be from the lower social grades (Nelson, 2002). This suggests an element of social exclusivity attached to choice complexity and consumer voting, and highlights the exclusion of minority, vulnerable, and less developed consumer groups from information society and choice (Williams & Windebank, 2002). Thus, 'choice editing' has been proposed as the solution to choice proliferation and confusion around sustainable products (Mayo & Fielder, 2006), for example, whereby consumers look to others (i.e., retailers, regulators, manufacturers) to organise the choices they face. Another, complementary proposition is the enabling of more 'ethical spaces' (Low & Davenport, 2007), such as fully fair trade coffee shops and sustainable clothing shops, which have the potential to make consumers 'ethical by default'. This has led Malpass, Barnett, Clarke and Cloke (2007), citing Rose (1999), to consider consumption as a new vector for governing

society by regulating the choices made by individuals in the context of their everyday commitments to friends, family and community. This, in turn, brings the notion of consumer sovereignty into question. Indeed, many authors have referred to the 'myth' of consumer sovereignty (Sirgy & Su, 2000; Smith, 1990). This also highlights the many conditions and, thus, challenges to consumer sovereignty discourses from the perspective of the consumer voter.

We suggest that in over emphasising the power and control of consumers over firms, sovereignty discourses depoliticise consumer action and votes. This shift to citizen responsibility as individual chooser is even more concerning in light of criticisms suggesting that acts of consumer voting are merely a means to further rejuvenate the very system they are designed to question (Carducci, 2006; Heath & Potter, 2004; Hilton, 2003), although Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) acknowledge that consumers may wish to reject materialism and/or other aspects of capitalism, but not the system as a whole. Thus, while choice and choosing may liberate consumer voters, it may also be challenging and potentially limiting. As highlighted by Smith (1990), we view these limits to be encompassed within the areas of choice, information and individual wealth, and impacted by uncertainty, as well as individual and collective action. Choice is critical to consumer voting, and includes access to information, wealth and market availability. Where these are lacking, consumer uncertainty can arise due to ambiguity surrounding appropriate consumer decisions.

In light of the above discussion, we raise the following pertinent questions: given the 'myth' of consumer sovereignty, why would those seeking to transform current

practices and improve societal welfare use the market as an arena in which to do so? Further, given the dominance of market-based social relations, how effective are acts of consumer resistance and 'positive choice' (Friedman, 1996) that engage in this very market system?

### **Power as a political and social force field**

Scanlon (2001) suggests an explanation, and argues that the currently witnessed citizen political discontent is due to the continuation of the 'consumerist model' adopted by the conservative governments of Thatcher and Regan, which in turn emphasised consumer citizenship. As the adoption of a consumerist model by governments gives legitimacy to a market-orientation, market relations exemplify all social relations, and consumer and citizen sovereignty become one and the same. Such approaches to consumer power suggest that all market participants are equal and free to choose, but consumer sovereignty is not adequate in ensuring the equality of rights associated with notions of citizenship.

Bennett (2001) complements Scanlon's (2001) arguments and suggests that, firstly, the consumerist logic exists throughout the conduct of political and public negotiations; this brings this logic directly into everyday conduct and discourse. Secondly, there is a broad acceptance of personal choice. This emphasis has resulted in a demonization of government, which, in turn, has weakened citizens' relations with traditional political institutions. Thirdly, as globalisation destabilises the power of national institutions, traditional citizen roles also become diminished. Therefore, the above discussion highlights the declining faith in Western

governments' ability and inclination to address the many problems associated with the global economy, including environmental degradation, poor working conditions and animal welfare. Rather, these issues exist and are played out in the market, highlighting the marketplace as the centre stage, and space, for countervailing consumer responses (Hertz, 2001). Therefore, change is sought through actions that are deemed to bring desired positive transformations and to directly affect perceived offenders in a market system that should afford the opportunity for consumer voting through a focus on the power people 'have' as 'sovereign consumers'. Fair trade is positioned to provide this opportunity, developing alternative spaces of production, trade, and consumption that enable consumers to exercise their purchasing power positively (Clarke, Barnett, Cloke, & Malpass, 2007).

Overall, the perspectives reviewed above imply that power can be owned (acquired or lost) by people and/or institutions operating in market economies, which, in turn, inherently implies that power can exist independently of subject-actors (Shankar et al., 2006). However, this is where a relational view of power may offer an alternative, and perhaps accommodating perspective on the consumer voting phenomenon. This is important because the consumerist logic and market economies are, at once, oppressive and liberating, hegemonic and accommodating; not 'either-or' (Moraes, Szmigin, & Carrigan, 2010).

Foucault saw power as relational rather than a negative and oppressive force (Foucault, 1991c), and distinguished between power, domination and control. Power, in his view, is a historically-situated, knowledge-related, omnipresent and

omnipotent force field, which is exercised but not owned by either individuals or institutions (Foucault, 1991a). Power is inherent to the formation of subjects; it can only be exercised if targeted at free individuals, which in turn reveals citizen consumers' capabilities as agents (Gordon, 1991). Although power is viewed as a ubiquitous aspect of human and political relations, it does not necessarily follow that it will be exercised against the interests of those involved in a given political situation (Lemke, 2001). In Foucault's view, where there is power there is resistance, as power itself depends on multiple forms and points of resistance for it to exist (Martin, 1988). In this sense the relationship between firms and consumers may be seen as a power game, in which a strategic reversibility of power relations is a possibility (Gordon, 1991). Therefore, we need to understand the circumstances underlying the use of power in market systems in order to evaluate the effectiveness of consumer voting as a means to achieve improved personal and societal well-being. This is discussed below.

### **Governmental rationality and market-based politics**

Foucault's notions of governmentality and technologies of the self buttress and complement Scanlon's (2001) and Bennett's (2001) views on why consumers seeking to voice discontent concerning current market practices would use the market as an arena in which to do so. In Foucault's view, power-formed subjects (i.e., 'consumers') are socially construed within discourses, and discourses refer not only to written and spoken language, but also to the manner in which knowledge is produced, disseminated and defining of our ways of knowing (Shankar et al., 2006). As put by Shankar et al. (2006, p.1016), 'these discourses

have provided standards of norms and have colonized many aspects of our daily life, glimpses of possible selves to aspire to and emulate through consumption'. In discussing the formation of people's identities as consumers and the possibilities for consumer votes, therefore, it is relevant to examine Foucault's concept of governmentality.

Foucault saw governmentality as a way of thinking about, and practicing the purpose and role of government (Cawley, 2001); as the 'contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self' (Foucault, 1988a, p.19). Foucault (1991b) argued that these definitions were important in that they encompassed the diverse governing practices 'by which a government in the framework of the state was able to govern people as individuals significantly useful for the world' (Foucault, 1988b, p.154). As put by Gordon (1991), Foucault viewed government in both a narrow and broad sense; he employed a general definition of government as 'the conduct of conduct', an activity aimed at shaping, guiding or affecting the conduct of (a) person(s), comprising the government of one's self as well as others. Government in this context refers to a continuum extending from self-regulation (technologies of the self) through to 'private and interpersonal relations involving some form of control or guidance, relations within social institutions and communities and, finally, relations concerned with the exercise of political sovereignty' (Gordon, 1991, p.2-3; Lemke, 2001).

Foucault was interested in government as a regime of practices, that is, programmes of conduct that involve techniques of knowing the nature of these practices, what these practices comprise, and how they are conducted (Gordon,

1991). Thus, we suggest that the consumerist logic, consumer sovereignty discourses, and related consumer practices discussed above are all closely related facets of Western neo-liberal governmentality, whereby the marketplace becomes a playing field for the signs in search of meanings and meanings in search of signs game (Bauman, 1997). Thus, while individuals are rejecting aspects of a consumerist model of government, they are also embracing a consumer-based approach to voice through the market as a means for political action. As governments have placed their faith in the market, so have individuals, who in turn have been guided and educated to do likewise through a politics of consumption. Yet, as Hertz (2001) points out, corporations are not the custodians of society. Rather they are morally ambivalent, profit seeking entities, whose business can, but may not always coincide with the interests of society. As she argues, downgrading the role of the state in favour of the politics of consumption 'threatens to make societal improvements singularly and irreversibly dependent upon the creation of profit' (Hertz, 2001, p.193).

Commentators on Foucault's work have argued that his earlier writings focused excessively on the disciplinary techniques intended to 'observe, monitor, shape and control the behaviour of individuals situated within a range of social and economic institutions where normalising judgments are exercised' (Gordon, 1991, p.3-4). Indeed, in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1975), the focus on disciplinary techniques is particularly strong, with an overemphasis on the construction of 'docile bodies' and techniques of domination and objectification (Smart, 1985). Therefore, while it may be comfortable to view individual conduct as solely guided by disciplinary techniques, Foucault acknowledged that doing so could be seen as

the adoption of a top-down, deterministic approach to theorising government and, in the case of consumption votes, theorising firms as the sole arbiters of consumers' actions. It would also mean the neglect of individuals' abilities as free social actors. Thus, Foucault elaborated on what he termed technologies of the self.

### **Governing citizens through self-governing consumers**

In his later writings, Foucault investigated the 'progression from external control to control and discipline exercised by individuals upon themselves' (Shankar et al., 2006, p.1017). Disciplinary control requires individuals to believe, think, and act in ways aligned to governmental norms, and those who do not comply with the norms encounter social pressures to conform and become 'normal' individuals (Shankar et al., 2006). Knowledge systems, argues Foucault (1988a), are used to teach and regulate people. And as that which constitutes normality and abnormality becomes increasingly disseminated and better defined, so too becomes the self-discipline to conform and shape oneself (the body, one's concept of self and identity) according to normalised ideals (Shankar et al., 2006). Those who do not conform justify the use of further disciplinary action, and are pushed to the margins of society as 'undesired others' (Shankar et al., 2006).

Over thirty years ago, social marketers identified the disadvantaged consumer of the 'urban ghettos' (Andreasen, 1975), neighbourhoods that lack income and attract a variety of retailers characterised by high prices, low competition, lower quality, and a smaller choice of available goods (Hill, 2008). More recently,

impoverished consumer spaces have been characterised by rural and urban 'food deserts' (e.g., Northern Ireland) where nutritionally adequate and safe foods are unavailable in socially acceptable ways, due to either monetary or mobility constraints (Furey, Strugnell, & McIlveen, 2001; Paddison & Calderwood, 2007; Wrigley, Warm, Margetts & Lowe, 2004). Other marginalised consumers have found themselves excluded from mainstream consumption practices, and consequently the rest of society, solely by the fact they cannot afford to buy goods (Williams & Windebank, 2002). The inability to buy new goods from formal retail outlets forces a reliance on alternative retail spaces (e.g., second-hand stores; car boot sales), and marks them out as separate from the rest of society through their acquisition practices. For consumers on the margins these are not the desirable 'retro', 'vintage', free consumption choices of the affluent middle class, but an undesirable, imposed choice driven by necessity. Technologies of the self, thus, require individuals to relate to themselves as subjects, possibly through practices of reflectivity, self-examination and confession, under the imagined or true gaze of an authority (Foucault, 1988a).

As discussed by Shankar et al. (2006), the function of these technologies of the self is to encourage individuals to relate to themselves as enterprising employees, responsible parents, conscientious citizens – and conscientious consumers – as a means through which to understand themselves and their lives in relation to ideal modes of being. To an extent, 'our lifestyles are influenced by the standard of living we have [learned] to accept and desire' (Solomon, Bamossy, & Askegaard, 2002, p.118), as we exercise our understanding of our selves, as we reject our 'undesired selves' (Hogg & Bannister, 2001), and as we construct our self

identities in relation to 'our' consumption ideals. Indeed, this is in line with Gintis's (1972) notion of sovereignty extending to all social spheres and shaping people's world according to their collective needs and aspirations as discussed above. Consumer votes, therefore, require that people engage with themselves as subjects, as they reflect on their roles as consumer-citizens. They can be seen at once as acts of individualised exercises of power in the marketplace, and as practical expressions of governmentality, for people cannot escape the systems of knowledge, discourses, regimes of practices, and self-discipline sustaining the construction of the self-regulated and free individual. In other words, this free exercise of consumer choice (and, thus, vote) is still managed, which in turn shows two sides of the same coin (Shankar et al., 2006). As argued above, consumption and choice can be at once disciplining and liberating; acts exercised by self-regulating and self-actualising consumers. Thus, we do not suggest that 'power remains a top down exercise for disciplining docile subjects' (Shankar et al., 2006, p.1018). Although Foucault believed that people's capability to exercise freedom was, on the whole, construed through governmentality, he acknowledged the possibility of partial severing from dominant ideologies (Shankar et al., 2006; Smart, 1985). He recognised people's ability and willingness to devise their own alternative spaces of meaning (Shankar et al., 2006; Smart, 1985), even if partially, which in turn opens up the possibility for transformation as discussed below.

## **What role for consumption votes?**

Foucault suggested that a new kind of counter-politics is generated through governmentality, namely a 'strategic reversibility' of power relations (Gordon, 1991). This point has been somewhat neglected in the extant literature on consumer power. With regards to the relationships between firms and consumers, it could be argued that consumers are becoming aware of the power tensions embedded in market exchanges, and are exercising power from within the marketplace, by reconnecting to production (or at least the issues of production to varying degrees), voicing their concerns and making positive choices (Szmigin, Carrigan, & Bekin, 2007). The addition of the National Trust's campaign voice to the resurgence of the allotment movement in Britain, for example, represents votes by citizens for 'real food' under the consumption constraints of recession (Smithers, 2009). Community gardens and urban production of food are part of an urban renewal that stimulates more sustainable forms of food production and consumption, alongside food-led community development (Martin & Marsden, 1999).

However, the extent to which people perceive to be escaping or desire to escape the market and its governmental rationality is bound to depend on which groups of consumer voters are under investigation, and on their various agendas. Varman and Saha (2009, p.821) note that 'a mere grant of voice to an actor' is not in itself 'a sign of empowerment or resistance'. This does not mean, as Foucault's critics have suggested, that resistance in Foucault's view is doomed to failure. It could be argued that acts of resistance challenge some of the discursive inconsistencies

and regimes of practice intrinsic to a particular form of governmentality; that, through the 'cooptation' of consumer concerns, marketing and markets are being challenged and reformed, albeit gradually, from within. Although Foucault's conceptualisation of resistance has been said to lack analytical clarity (Smart, 1985), Foucault argued that a better understanding of power relations may be achieved through the analysis of resistance efforts (Smart, 1985) and, by extension, the consumer voting examples discussed throughout this paper.

Foucault established some points regarding non-class resistance and argued that, firstly, resistance is not limited to a particular nation (Smart, 1985). Indeed, as argued by Thompson (2005), and Connolly and Prothero (2008), this fits well with the concept of systemic risks which spread through intricately-related causal chains with indefinable boundaries. Globalised markets can present and facilitate such risks, and in this way consumer votes in response to undesired externalities becomes utterly reasonable.

Secondly, Foucault suggested that the target of resistance is the immediate effect of power on people's lives (Smart, 1985). Therefore, a sensible approach to addressing the issues of market-based governmentality comprises alternative forms of consumption and consumer votes, and seeking to change a system from within through relational market encounters is considered more effective than market isolation or escape. Indeed, the intentions underlying many examples of consumer voting such as allotments or fair trade are, for the most part, reformist rather than anti-capitalist (Shaw et al., 2006). Thompson and Coskuner-Balli's (2007) participants, for example, engage in community-supported agriculture

schemes. Through their small-scale reconnection to food production, they address the politics of food by means of everyday acts of production-engaged consumer choice. Emicly, therefore, consumer votes can also be the search for transformation 'one household at a time' (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007, p.144), which, in turn, resonates with Micheletti's (2003) notion of individualised collective action. This also echoes Soper and Thomas's (2006) and Soper's (2007) conceptualization of 'alternative hedonism,' which states that people can recreate their own notions of the good life, not necessarily to change society at large, but to restructure the meanings of their own lives and experiences as 'seductive alternatives' of joy and high standard, and as imaginings against (and with) which to check and re-evaluate consumer culture (Soper and Thomas 2006; Soper, 2007).

A third point made by Foucault was that despite the global nature of some of the issues faced by social actors, resistance efforts are likely to be localised, that is, directed at local relations of power (Smart, 1985). A corollary is that a 'revolution' becomes not only elusive, but also undesirable. Indeed, consumers tend to have their own localised approaches to counter demands, which are reflected in their participation in boycotts or buycotts. Radical forms of resistance are more the exception than the norm, but even these manifestations of consumer exit tend to have localised approaches to power relations, and are advanced where they impinge upon an individual's life - e.g., growing own produce, purchasing from ethical retailers, buying eco-friendly, and so on (cf., Moraes et al., 2010; Dobscha & Ozanne, 2001).

Fourthly, Foucault suggested that resistance efforts oppose government of the individual and are concerned with self-identity (who am I / who are we?), not as determined by the techniques of government, but as determined by themselves (Smart, 1985). Indeed, Dobscha and Ozanne's (2001, p.210) work shows how a group of environmentally-concerned women construe their self-identities buttressing the relationship between these women and the natural environment as the 'mutual self;' this involves questioning taken-for-granted notions guiding daily decision-making and entails 'making consumption a less central component of life'. Also, Holt (2002) discusses how *bricoleur* individuals fight back against what he calls marketing's coercive cultural authority by investing commodities with more exclusive meanings and using them in their own idiosyncratic ways. Of course, the extent to which this is effective as a countervailing measure is questionable on many fronts, particularly the degree to which most consumers can really 'detach' themselves from cultural discourses. It does not mean that they can escape the market (Kozinets, 2002), as Holt's participants are still making use of brands in order to assert their subversive identities. It does mean, however, that they can play with market(ing) signs, which, in turn, has an empowering potential for consumers (cf., Jenkins, 2006). Indeed, such subversion of signs can be seen across political acts of 'ethical' (non-)consumption, which in turn are used by people to send signals to the marketplace.

A fifth point made by Foucault is that resistance efforts challenge knowledge, qualification and concealment if perceived as connected to dominant ideologies (Smart, 1985). An example is Kozinets's (2002) study, which investigates the emancipatory practices and discourses of participants of the Burning Man, an

annual anti-market event. In this study, consumer practices are used self-expressively to temporarily support a sense of community and resist market(ing) rationality. Interestingly, Kozinets (2002) acknowledges some of the resistance to his position as a researcher; as the embodiment of marketing surveillance and knowledge production. This poses a challenge to consumer voters, who face the difficulty of knowing how to act under these conditions of ambiguity.

Consumer votes may, thus, bring about localised displacements of particular manifestations of power, so they are not useless as may have been suggested by some of Foucault's critics (Smart, 1985). The point of resistance, in Foucault's view, is to challenge relations of power (Rabinow, 1991), which is evidenced through consumer-voters' discourses and actions. While some may seek to punish corporate behaviour deemed incorrigible (e.g., arms manufacturers) or inappropriate (Denny, 2002; Grolin, 1998; Irving, Harrison, & Rayner, 2002), others may seek to assist firms in becoming more responsible (Shaw & Newholm, 2002), such as the citizens of Modbury in the UK, who joined forces with retailers to ban plastic bags from the town. Others may seek to engage in alternative forms of production-engaged consumption with or without the intention to 'send signals' to firms and the marketplace, the 'new consumption communities' identified by Moraes, Szmigin and Carrigan (2010) being an exemplar. Thus, modifications of power relations may be achieved through alterations of critical aspects of normalised regimes of practice, even if just partially or ephemerally. Although etically valid and helpful, the extent to which power may be perceived as relational by consumers is debatable, and previous research suggests participants' understanding of power as 'owned'; something deeply connected to one's feeling

of capability. Nevertheless, from a theoretical perspective, Foucault's notion of power undermines views of consumers as sovereign, and justifies challenging normalised power relations through consumer citizenship.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this paper we have sought an enhanced conceptual understanding of the consumer voting phenomenon as a means by which to address consumer concerns. This paper advances current understandings through the joint examination of what are usually disconnected, multidisciplinary discourses including the consumption as voting metaphor, consumer sovereignty, Foucault's relational views on power, governmentality, technologies of the self and, in particular, his theoretical perspective on the potential for non-class resistance, which has been neglected by the extant consumer research and marketing literature. Indeed, this paper moves current understandings forward in that it enables additional insights into how individuals acting in their role as consumers may perceive and/or seek to systematically influence and address concerns that are of global significance in a localised way, where the exercise of power affects their daily lives and identities, and through constant vigilance of the legitimacy of sources of knowledge and ways of knowing. In this way, consumer votes may be seen as having the potential to generate a kind of counter-politics by locally and partially reversing the power relations (Gordon, 1991) of market interactions within particular realms of production-engaged purchasing and consumption. Citizen-consumers exercise power from within the marketplace, by reconnecting to production at varying degrees, voicing their concerns and purchasing positive

alternatives (Hirschman, 1970). This paper also enhances our understandings in that it positions all manifestations of consumer resistance and positive choice (e.g., anti-consumption, voluntary simplicity, downshifting, ethical and green consumption, etc.) as political; as expressions of consumer votes.

Therefore, through an exploration of market-based power relations, this paper offers an original and critical examination of the consumption as voting metaphor, and an enhanced understanding of consumer resistance and positive consumer choice. While consumers may still view power as something which can be owned, Foucault's theory of relational power is relevant in that it allows us to analyse the relationships between consumers and firms not through dualistic perspectives such as some of the 'manipulated dupes' versus 'sovereign consumers' discussed above, but through a multi-dimensional and commensurable perspective on the roles of practices, discourses and knowledge in shaping managerial and consumer rationalities. Through this analysis, the complexities of market-based power relations come to the fore, and clear boundaries between the roles of governments, firms and consumers are questioned as a result. It is important to emphasise, however, that Foucault did not clarify how individuals may become severed from dominant ideologies and come to think outside knowledge systems, which in turn suggests a considerable shortcoming in his theorisation.

Nonetheless, Shankar et al. (2006) suggest that the internet, and practices such as downshifting increasingly offer alternative ways of thinking and being for a varied range of creative consumer-activists (Szmigin, Carrigan & Bekin, 2007), ones which hold increasing significance for marketing firms in terms of how they

communicate and engage with their consumers. Indeed, firms are increasingly providing consumers with tools to create their own ads, blogs, unique YouTube videos, and previously unimagined relationships with their favourite brands through social networking websites. Although from a marketing management perspective this may be seen as a 'loss of control' by some firms, the enabling tools are still very much the property and creation of brand managers. Thus, consumer-citizen voting may offer diverse approaches to varied marketplace issues, but in turn may facilitate the emergence of new products, new ways of pricing, supplying and communicating with consumers, as well as new market trends and niches.

The discussion above presents managerial implications for marketers seeking to engage with consumer voters and their concerns, although we would like to eschew presenting such implications as overarching prescriptions that override the importance of context and specificity. For example, there is evidence to suggest that managers still react repellently and disapprovingly of consumer voting acts such as, for instance, subversive consumer-generated ads about well-known brands (cf., Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2008). However, if we apply the five points regarding resistance discussed above to this example, consumer voters can be seen to be creating these ads in order to voice and address issues of global significance from the comfort of their own homes and personal computers, in relation to brands that are part of their daily lives; because they feel affected by them; because of how they view themselves as conscientious consumers; because they have ready access to the internet, which enables them to upload their challenges to the legitimacy of the information and representations portrayed

by brands. This means that brand managers must acknowledge and engage with, rather than repel, such acts. Indeed, such acts can serve as 'barometers' for the brand, and managers that respond proactively, jointly and accountably in a co-creative and co-productive fashion are likely to make their brands be seen under a positive light, despite perceived issues. If we engage with consumers closely and work with them to co-create offerings that are significant in terms of addressing consumer concerns in a timely and effective way, this may prevent reputational harms which may be caused by a disconnect between firm-centric and consumers' broader concerns.

Therefore, when faced with negative consumer votes, marketing and/or brand managers could ask themselves the following questions:

- (1) What are the concerns that consumer-voters are trying to address through their actions against the brand?
- (2) With what types of (g)localised actions against the brand are they engaging and/or are likely to engage?
- (3) How are those concerns affecting their daily lives and relationships with the brand?
- (4) How are these issues currently linked to the brand affecting their identities as conscientious citizens?
- (5) Are consumers likely to reject information concerning the issues raised if provided by the brand and, if so, how can the brand engage with them to change attitudes toward the brand?

By asking such questions brand managers can begin to respond to consumer concerns in a positive and co-productive fashion, while avoiding reputational harms. Equally, if faced with positive consumer votes, managers can engage with similar questions in order to capitalise upon positive consumer choices that ensure patronage of their brands.

In terms of social policy implications, other issues concerning consumer voting must be highlighted. For example, some will argue that 'lifestyle politics' (Klein, 2000) will have little impact, if any, on markets and marketing, that consumption votes for social change can be astoundingly slow relative to laws being passed, and that the use of a system which promotes freedom of choice and the constant re-creation of the self through lifestyle consumption is primarily focused on the individual rather than the collective good. Heath and Potter (2004), too, reject ethical consumption initiatives as doing little more than allowing western consumers the opportunity to alleviate guilt over their consumerist lifestyles. Consumer votes are not, argue Klein (2000) and Hilton (2003), replacements for traditional political activity, and Hertz (2001) warns of the pitfalls of a world where government is handing over the public interest to corporations to safeguard. Pitching individual choice against global systems and institutions to solve global problems is at best challenging, and could result in unintended consequences due to a lack of collective focus. Citizenship concerns may at times work in opposition to individual consumers' interests, so contradictions may arise in the actions of those seeking to align their consumer and citizen roles. Also, as we constantly vote through everyday consumption, but not through traditional political systems,

seeing consumption as voting can be challenging given that individuals are conferred the responsibility for making moral choices in complex markets.

There is considerable scope for future investigation and debate on these issues. Shankar and Fitchett (2002) note that marketing efforts need to work towards helping consumers by providing the resources and technologies that will enable them to achieve rewarding and sustainable states of being. This requires marketers to understand and acknowledge that consumer expectations and requirements go beyond the point of purchase and consumption act. Future research should focus upon guiding marketers to better understand the relationship between consumer votes and traditional political votes, and help them to develop a marketing 'manifesto' that more closely meets the needs of the consumer voter. There are ethical issues that require closer examination and debate around the unintended consequences of marketing, the role of the firm as societal custodian (Hertz, 2001), and whether firms have a responsibility to act when confronted by negative consumer votes. Finally, studying the impact of specific cases of consumer voting on business conduct would provide further insight to this developing area of interest.

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