

Cynical Attitude in Consumption: The Antecedents and Consequences of Consumer Cynicism

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Extensive Summary

In our modern world where consumer behaviours are essential for the future of the brand, the attitudes in the minds of consumers are getting more and more important. As attitudes are largely resulted from the experiences, consumers can have negative attitudes following the negative experiences with the brands.

Today's customers experience several consumption every single day and these experiences are causing the customers to develop new attitudes towards the brand or the company itself. When it comes to the consumption experiences of the customers, the negative experiences which will affect the customer trust adversely can be the reasons of damages or loses of the brand in the long run. Trust, one of the important determiners of the relationship quality between people, is also regarded to have the same effect on the communication between the customer and the brand. It is widely accepted that this relationship must be driven on the basis of trust again. When it is damaged, the potential problems for the brand or the company will be on the way.

Negative experiences and particularly dissatisfactions can be accepted as the most important underlying factors of a newly emerged concept in organizational behaviour : 'consumer cynicism'. According to the common view in marketing literature, the buying experiences between the brand and the customer have an impact on consumer socialization period and shaping the consumer attitudes. The negative experiences, lived in the market, can lead a perception that the companies are always opportunist and self-seeker. Such a perception will, as a result, be the reasons of the cynical attitudes for the customers. The most essential studies in the field (Stanley et al., 2005; Andersson, 1996; Dean et al., 1998) are agreed that cynicism is negative attitude which can be both broad and specific in focus, and has cognitive, affective, and behavioural components".

Cynicism is commonly related to suspicion, mistrust, skepticism, and distrust of agent's motives, as well as reactions of dissatisfaction, alienation, and resistance or even hostility towards the agent. Classification of these related constructs according to the cognitive, affective and behavioural components of attitude defines the scope of

cynicism represented in the literature. Realizing that company-customer relationship is also in need of trust and when it is broken, the consumer develops a negative attitude toward the product or the company. This negative attitude can be called as ‘consumer cynicism’. This study, setting out from the general cynicism concept, deals with a general literature review about a specific kind of cynicism, known as ‘consumer cynicism’ and aims to put a general frame about the content, the antecedents and the consequences of consumer cynicism. The study also tries to prepare a base review for the future research on consumer cynicism which is coming to the fore in the marketing field every other day.

When we talk about cynicism as a negative attitude, we will come across with some underlying reasons. Although the reasons are varied and extensive in the related literature, some of them come to the fore. When viewed from the aspect of Pollay (1986:19), cynicism functions as a defence mechanism not only against the intention and aims of the brands but against the persuasion attempts of the marketing messages as well. Cynicism, in that way, is used by the customers to stand against the marketing tactics of the brands and it is regarded to be related with a scepticism both towards consumption ideology and towards the general market. Just like the marketers neglecting all the moral values while trying to reach the goal, cynical consumers can also have a potential of abusing other consumers (Kretz, 2010 as cited in Odou and Pechpeyrou, 2011:1799).

These statements of Pollay pay attention to the viewpoint of advertisements in no doubt. When taken into consideration that today’s consumers are more conscious and inquisitive than ever, we can easily say that the reliability levels of advertisements in the eyes of the consumers are not so high. That kind of feelings towards advertisements can be an important factor to trigger cynical attitudes.

The belief that advertisements are the instruments transmitting the messages exaggeratedly are shared not only by the researchers but by the consumers as well. At that point (Pollay, 1986:29) states that ‘Because virtually all citizens seem to recognize this tendency of advertisement language to distort, advertising seems to turn us into a community of cynics, and we doubt advertisers, the media, and authority in all its forms. Thus, we may also distrust other received wisdoms from political authorities, community elders, religious leaders, and teachers of all kinds’ and again (Pollay, 1986:23) ‘We like to think of ourselves as personally immune to advertising’s inducements. This is clearly a delusion for some or perhaps many or even most of the public’. As it is seen cynical attitudes can be caused from different reasons.

Such a kind of negative attitude have some absolute impacts on the brand and the company as well. The consumers, losing confidence in the brand and having an opinion that the brands abuse the consumers, in other words cynical consumers, will have a high potential to give harm to the brand or the company especially in this internet age. From the aspect of attitude, the unsatisfied consumers can react in a three-dimensional way. This reaction can sometimes be affective, sometimes cognitive and sometimes behavioural reaction.

The affective dimension is the negative feelings of the consumers about the brand or the company especially when they are unsatisfied with the buying experiences in the market. So the disappointments following the unsatisfying consumption experiences

and the negative feelings after that can be evaluated in the affective dimension of cynicism.

When it comes to the cognitive dimension of cynicism, we need to mention the beliefs in the consumers' minds that the brand or the company is unreliable, self-keeper and they never give up abusing the consumers. The reason here is that they have experienced disappointments repeatedly and their rights haven't been regarded as valuable (Bougie et al., 2003:389).

Especially when they are convinced that the brand or the company itself is the responsible for their unsatisfying buying experiences, the consumers can exhibit some certain and usually predictable behaviours. This behavioural dimension, probably the most damaging one for the brand, can be seen in a variety of behavioural reactions. Those kinds of reactions can be seen in a variety of different forms from 'vigilant buying' to the actions of punishment attempts against the brand sometimes. All these behavioural reactions can be reflections of increasing cynicism in the consumers.

Among the reactive consumer behaviours are vigilant buying, complaint, negative word, and revenge in the related literature. These reactions of cynical consumers are regarded as vital to analyse especially for their damaging potential on the brand (Forehand and Grier, 2003:349).

In more violent reactions, consumer rebellion or upheaval is another compensation or defence method for the cynical consumers. These kinds of reactions, which can be seen as violent protests (Lacayo, 1999:25), against the brand, sometimes reflect the necessity to correct the unethical behaviours of the brands and can even cause to buy second hand items rather than new ones. (Dobscha and Ozanne, 1998:95). This reaction is at the same time a protest against the marketing hype. (Chu and Chylinsky, 2006:2).

To sum up, consumer cynicism is a negative attitude of the consumers against the brand or the company. This attitude can be resulted from many different factors but whatever the reason is, its results can be so damaging for the brands. To be able to avoid cynical consumers' damaging impacts, the companies must be able to deal with the reasons effectively.