# Anti-consumption and brand avoidance ☆

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## Abstract

This article focuses on a particular form of anti-consumption; brand avoidance. Specifically, it explores why people may avoid some brands, even when their financial circumstances allow them the option to purchase. The authors use qualitative data to develop a conceptual framework that helps clarify why consumers avoid certain brands. This study reveals three types of brand avoidance: experiential, identity and moral brand avoidance. Experiential brand avoidance occurs because of negative first hand consumption experiences that lead to unmet expectations. Identity avoidance develops when the brand image is symbolically incongruent with the individual's identity. Moral avoidance arises when the consumer's ideological beliefs clash with certain brand values or associations, particularly when the consumer is concerned about the negative impact of a brand on society. Finally, this study highlights potential strategies that managers could implement to deal with brand avoidance.
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## 1. Introduction

Consumers often purchase brands for the many positive benefits they represent. Much research confirms the notion that consumers express themselves, and construct their identities/self-concepts through the brands they use (Aaker, 1999; Belk, 1988; Dolich, 1969; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Hogg, Cox, and Keeling, 2000; Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1989; Sirgy, 1982; Solomon, 1983). In contrast, less research focuses on the reverse notion, where consumers reject specific brands in order to avoid adding undesired meaning to their life, with the exception of a few studies (Banister and Hogg, 2004; Englis and

Soloman, 1997; Holt, 2002; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Muniz and Hamer, 2001; Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel, 2006).

Although traditional consumer research focuses predominately on the positive consumption of brands, interest in anti-consumption is growing, as seen in this special issue. Furthermore, within the domain of symbolic consumption, some researchers suggest that knowing what consumers do not want is just as valuable as knowing what they want (Banister and Hogg, 2004; Ogilvie, 1987; Patrick, MacInnis, and Folkes, 2002; Wilk, 1997). In the spirit of this special issue, this article explores the relationship between consumers, negative brand meanings and anti-consumption, and in doing so, provides some answers to the question: what motivates the anti-consumption of certain brands?

A wide variety of brand definitions exist. This article adopts the view that a brand is a multi-dimensional marketing tool that communicates a constellation of values (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). In contrast, marketing literature rarely mentions the concept of brand avoidance and provides no formal definition. Indeed, only two academic articles explicitly

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use the term brand avoidance (Oliva, Oliver, and MacMillan, 1992; Thompson, et al., 2006). In their study of dissatisfaction, Oliva et al. (1992) offer the concept of brand avoidance as the anti-thesis of brand loyalty, and use the term brand avoidance interchangeably with brand switching. Oliva et al. (1992) suggest that satisfaction leads to brand loyalty while dissatisfaction leads to brand avoidance/switching. Although brand switching and brand avoidance may appear similar, brand switching is a broad pattern of behavior that the American Marketing Association defines as the change from one brand to another (AMA, 2006); in contrast, brand avoidance focuses more specifically on the deliberate rejection of brands.

The second article that mentions brand avoidance is a recent exploration of anti-Starbucks discourse (Thompson et al., 2006). Their findings suggest that inauthentic brand meanings motivate consumers to avoid the Starbuck's brand. Yet, Thompson et al. (2006) do not provide an explicit definition of the term brand avoidance. Therefore this article defines brand avoidance as the incidents in which consumers deliberately choose to reject a brand. In relation to other pertinent concepts, the study of brand avoidance aims to understand why consumers place certain brands into their inept sets (Abougomaah, Schlater, and Gaidis, 1987; Narayana and Markin, 1975), and anti-choice constellations (Hogg, 1998; Hogg and Banister, 2001; Hogg and Michell, 1997), despite having the finance and ability to purchase and access these brands. Brand avoidance research only focuses on the active rejection of a brand, rather than the scenarios under which consumers have no choice. Therefore, this study does not explore the incidents where consumers do not purchase brands because they are too expensive, unavailable, or inaccessible, since avoidance owing to such reasons is intuitive and therefore does not advance knowledge in the area of anti-consumption.

Existing research in brand avoidance is uni-dimensional, focusing only on singular reasons for brand avoidance. However, brands are multi-dimensional constructs and, therefore, many different reasons could exist for avoiding one brand. Moreover, previous studies do not explicitly explore the boundaries of brand avoidance theory and ask what prevents brand avoidance from occurring and what conditions may stop its existence? To address these gaps, this article asks two research questions: Why do consumers avoid brands? And, what limits brand avoidance? Therefore, the two key contributions of this article are a multi-faceted understanding of brand avoidance, and recommendations for managing brand avoidance.

## 2. Literature review

This article reviews the extant anti-consumption literature because it is the over arching construct and because specific brand avoidance research is scarce. In particular, dissatisfaction, undesired self and self-concept incongruity, organizational disidentification, boycotting, and consumer resistance literatures are employed to inform this study's understanding of brand avoidance.

When consumers use a product or service they make a comparison between their initial expectations and the actual performance of the product or service, and thus, consumer expectations can either be confirmed or disconfirmed (Halstead, 1989). Confirmation is likely to result in satisfaction and occurs when consumer expectations of the product or service are equal to the experience. Disconfirmation occurs when consumer experiences are either above or below initial expectations and therefore can be positive or negative. Negative disconfirmation occurs when the consumer's experience with the product or service is below his or her expectations and is likely to result in dissatisfaction (Halstead, 1989; Oliver, 1980). Accordingly, it is reasonable to expect that negative disconfirmation may motivate some cases of brand avoidance.

The link between self-concept and symbolic consumption is not new (Levy, 1959). Of the many works in the area of self-concept, the undesired self (Ogilvie, 1987) is the psychological construct most relevant to brand avoidance. Research in the area of undesired self and image congruity suggest that people consume in ways that enhance or maintain their self-concepts, while simultaneously avoiding objects that could add undesired meaning to their lives, or objects they consider to be incongruent with their existing self-concept (Banister and Hogg, 2004; Dolich, 1969; Freitas, Kaiser, Chandler, Hall, Kim, and Hammidi, 1997; Graeff, 1997; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Heath and Scott, 1998; Hogg, et al., 2000; Kleine et al., 1993; Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1989; Patrick, et al., 2002; Sirgy, 1982). Similarly, organizational disidentification suggests that people distance themselves from organizations and/or boycott the products and services of companies, that they perceive to be incongruent with their own values (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002; Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). A brand is a constellation of values, thus, when a consumer perceives a brand/company to represent undesirable or incongruent values, he or she will be motivated to avoid that brand.

Boycotting is an area that appears to be synonymous with brand avoidance, however, subtle differences exist. In a boycott, consumers refrain from purchasing certain items owing to some form of ideological discontent with an organization or country (Friedman, 1985; Hirschman, 1970). However, boycotting builds from an implicit commitment, by the boycotter, to re-enter the relationship once certain conditions are met, such as a change of policy by the offending party (Hirschman, 1970). Though boycotting and brand avoidance are similar behaviors that may occur simultaneously, in brand avoidance there is no guarantee that the consumption relationship will resume in the future.

Consumer resistance literature is also relevant to this research. Consumer resistance concerns counter cultural attitudes and behaviors that question the current capitalistic system, reduce consumption and resist oppressive forces (Penaloza and Price, 1993). Resistance towards the marketing system is evident in both past and current phenomena; from the 18th century colonists (Witkowski, 1989) and the 1960's American Cultural Revolution (Holt, 2002), to the more recent anti-consumerism events such as Burning Man (Kozinets, 2002) and "buy nothing day". Occasionally, consumers aim their resistance at more specific targets, for example, culture jamming, adbusting and anti-globalization movements (Holt, 2002; Klein, 2000; Rumbo, 2002). More

commonly, less extreme forms of consumer resistance are apparent in the fragmentation of market segments into unique lifestyles and subcultures of consumption (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 2002; Rumbo, 2002). In some cases, individuals do not desire to stop or reduce consumption, but simply wish to attain their consumption goals through different methods, such as collective action (Herrmann, 1993). While unmet expectations may lead to dissatisfaction, thus motivating brand avoidance, paradoxically, in consumer resistance, it is the larger and more successful companies, which satisfy many consumers, that are the targets of avoidance (Holt, 2002; Klein, 2000; Rumbo, 2002).

Previous research takes a uni-dimensional approach to brand avoidance. However, as the literature review demonstrates, brand avoidance is a multi-faceted phenomenon and many reasons for brand avoidance likely exist. The remainder of the article explores this supposition.

## 3. Method

Since research in the specific area of brand avoidance is scarce, this study utilized a grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to gather and analyze qualitative data. The lead author conducted three in-depth sensitization interviews to enhance his theoretical sensitivity and to test the interviewing protocol. All three informants had brand avoidance experiences to share, suggesting that the average consumer can discuss the phenomenon of brand avoidance. Thus it was not necessary to recruit homogenous fringe groups such as consumer activists, voluntary simplifiers, or eco-feminists as previous studies on anti-consumption had done (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002; Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Thompson, et al., 2006).

Participants were self-selected as they responded to printed advertisements posted around a central city university campus. The advertisement asked if the potential informant "bought stuff" and stated that the researcher was interested in the opinions and behaviors of everyday consumers. This method of recruiting informants was justified, since the research required active consumers with a sound awareness of the range of brands available on the market. The assumption that participants recruited in this way would be familiar with brands was confirmed when the researcher asked each participant, at the beginning of each interview, to list suitable examples of typical brands, and none experienced difficulty. Table 1 displays the demographic details of the participants (although the recruiting procedure took place on campus, 11 of the 23 participants were non-students).

The first author conducted all in depth interviews in an office at the university campus. Each interview lasted one and a half to two hours. This professional and private environment encouraged the participants to share their personal brand avoidance stories, and also minimized the level of physical intrusion into the participants' private lives. After some initial rapport building and administrative formalities, the interviewer asked informants to list the brands that they avoided, if finance was not a consideration. The bulk of the interview consisted of the participants discussing the reasons behind their avoidance or describing the experiences that had led them to avoid certain brands. The interviewer also asked participants about the factors that limited their ability to reject the brands they wished to avoid, as well as the conditions that would halt their brand avoidance in the future.

This study used the grounded theory method of constant comparison to code the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This technique is similar to the iterative approaches used by previous

Table 1
Participant details

| Interview | Gender and age | Ethnicity | Qualification | Work | Income | Living circumstance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sensitization Int 1 CI | Female, 27 | European | Post Grad | Student | 15,001–20,000 | With partner |
| Sensitization Int 2 TS | Female, 22 | NZ | Tertiary | Student | 15,001–20,000 | With partner |
| Sensitization Int 3 KH | Female, 28 | NZ | Post Grad | Business | 40,001–50,000 | With unrelated people |
| Int1 LB | Female, 52 | European | Post Grad | Student | 15,001–20,000 | Single dwelling |
| Int2 SR | Female, 45 | NZ | Tertiary | Admin | 30,001–40,000 | With unrelated people |
| Int3 JJ | Female, 25 | European | Doctorate | Academic | 5001–10,000 | With unrelated people |
| Int4 AR | Male, 29 | European | Tertiary | Business | 50,001–70,000 | With partner |
| Int5 MS | Female, 46 | NZ | Secondary | Student | 40,001–50,000 | Other |
| Int6 KD | Female, 17 | NZ | Secondary | Student | 1–5000 | With immediate family |
| Int7 Cky | Female, 25 | Asian | Post Grad | Student | 30,001–40,000 | With immediate family |
| Int8 VC | Female, 19 | Asian | Tertiary | Student | 1–5000 | With immediate family |
| Int9 AP | Male, 30 | NZ | Tertiary | Technical | 70,001–100,000 | With unrelated people |
| Int10 KB | Female, 27 | NZ | Doctorate | Student | 10,001–15,000 | With unrelated people |
| Int11 KL | Male, 20 | Asian | Secondary | Student | 1–5000 | With immediate family |
| Int12 RH | Male, 26 | Other | Post Grad | Business | 30,001–40,000 | With immediate family |
| Int13 JH | Male, 29 | NZ | Tertiary | Recreation | 20,001–25,000 | With immediate family |
| Int14 VL | Female, 28 | Asian | Doctorate | Academic | 50,001–70,000 | With partner |
| Int15 DS | Male, 30 | European | Doctorate | Student | 15,001–20,000 | With unrelated people |
| Int16 MT | Male, 42 | Maori | Post Grad | Academic | 40,001–50,000 | Partner and children |
| Int17 SW | Male, 24 | NZ | Post Grad | Technical | 30,001–40,000 | With immediate family |
| Int18 SP | Male, 23 | Asian | Tertiary | Recreation | 25,001–30,000 | With unrelated people |
| Int19 MO | Female, 31 | Polynesian | Post Grad | Academic | 40,001–50,000 | With immediate family |
| Int20 JL | Male, 26 | Asian | Tertiary | Student | 1–5000 | With immediate family |

studies on anti-Starbucks discourse (Thompson and Arsel, 2004), and consumer activists (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). The lead author read the data for emergent themes, and constantly compared the coded incidents and categories with each other (both within and across participants), to ensure fit between data, sub-themes and higher order themes. Very similar themes were collapsed together into higher order themes (Spiggle, 1994), but the researcher was also mindful of maintaining a balance between complexity and parsimony (Dey, 1999; Whetten, 1989). The extant literature was also introduced during the coding process to further inform and support the emergent themes. After several iterations, and the use of three expert judges to ensure trustworthiness, the outcome is a conceptual framework that provides insights into why brands are avoided, and how brand avoidance may be mitigated.

## 4. Findings and discussion

Table 2 displays the three main categories of brand avoidance emerging from the qualitative data. In the first category (experiential avoidance), participants avoid brands owing to negative first hand experiences. These experiences typically involve unmet expectations. In the second category (identity avoidance), participants avoid brands that they perceive to be symbolically incompatible with their identity. Finally, the third category (moral avoidance) occurs when participants believe that certain brand management policies have a negative impact on society.

### 4.1. Experiential avoidance: unmet expectations

The qualitative data suggests that negative experiences are a salient reason for avoidance; brand consumption experiences that are negatively disconfirmed lead to dissatisfaction and subsequent avoidance of the brand. Literature in the area of dissatisfaction and failed consumption experiences help to inform the analysis of experiential avoidance (Bitner, 1992; Day

and Bodur, 1978; Folkes, 1984; Kelley, Hoffman, and Davis, 1993; Oliver, 1980; Swan and Combs, 1976). Basically, participants avoid brands that fail to meet their expectations. The comment below illustrates brand avoidance due to product failure:

> I just remember the first time I tried McDonald's... it was probably in '93 when I arrived in New Zealand, because they didn't have McDonald's in Croatia... I remember I expected more of it because, "Oh McDonald's, it's such a cool thing!" at least from where I come from... then it was really horrible when I tried. (Interviewer: Tell me the story of what happened) I was really surprised at the size of it... for my dad or for any bigger man it's like two bites, you can't really have a proper meal and the taste, it was tasteless. Texture-wise it just felt so artificial, the bun, so sweet and then that steak or whatever they put, the actual hamburger patty, just so artificial in every way... that really put me off. JJ Int 3 (Female, 25)

The participant describes how her mythic expectations of the Golden Arches were followed by the disappointing reality of a negative product experience. A negative disconfirmation, between what was expected by the consumer and what was delivered by the brand, motivates all instances of experiential avoidance, this concept was reflected in both product and service brands:

> Their staff weren't particularly nice in the Rodney Wayne [hairdressing chain] that I went to and they weren't very helpful... they didn't make any suggestions and they just kind of do their jobs but they weren't doing anything extra, and because of the type of work that I do, I know what the expectation is, when you go to people for customer service, you expect more from them, you expect more than the basic kind of stuff... I think maybe you feel valued... I guess it depends what your values are and to me it's important to treat people nicely. SR Int 2 (Female, 45)

The level of service provided by the staff representing the brand did not meet SR's expectation of service brands. She also mentioned her own values as another reason for brand avoidance, thereby re-emphasising the multi-dimensional nature of this construct.

Although consumers buy different products for different reasons, the most basic expectation is adequate performance. If a product fails to function/perform as expected, the consumer may re-construct the associated brand to signify a likelihood of an unmet expectation and may avoid the brand on future occasions:

> I wanted a cheap pair of soccer shoes once and I bought a pair there [The Warehouse, a discount retail chain] and they nearly destroyed my feet, so I definitely wouldn't buy shoes there again. JH Int 13 (Male, 29)

> I don't know the actual brand in particular, but it would be things like what I would buy at The Warehouse, I would typically avoid, purely because we've tried them before and

Table 2
Reasons for brand avoidance

| Main categories | Themes | Sub-themes |
|---|---|---|
| Experiential avoidance: Unmet expectations | Negative product/service experience | Poor performance |
| | | Hassle/inconvenience Store environment |
| Identity avoidance: symbolic incongruence | Undesired self | Negative reference groups Inauthenticity Deindividuation |
| Moral avoidance: ideological incompatibility | Consumer cynicism | Corporate irresponsibility/power imbalance |
| | Country of origin effects | Financial patriotism/preserving diversity |

they haven't lasted as long as probably one of the bigger named brands. MT Int 16 (Male, 42)

The excerpts also reveal a less intuitive feature of brand avoidance. The participants have no recollection of the actual product brands; instead, the retail brand is blamed for poor performance. Since The Warehouse typically advertises its retail brand, consumers rarely remember many of the product brands sold by the company. Therefore, when a consumer encounters a negative experience, the retail brand becomes the target of his or her unfavourable attitudes. However, because the brand is an evolving value constellation (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998), the product brand and the retail brand can, and do, become linked. Thus, negative associations of a retail brand, caused by product failure, may turn into an assumption that inferior retail brands tend to stock inferior product brands. This way of thinking positions the retail and product brand in a perpetual cycle of devaluation. The following quotations illustrate this halo or rub-off effect, where the inferiority of the product and retail brand has become intermingled:

I would avoid Transonic, I'm thinking the electrical brands that The Warehouse stock, I would avoid… I've bought the products and found it to be inferior to the more mainstream brands such as Sony or Phillips. MS Int 5 (Female, 46)

There's this brand from The Warehouse, it's called Dynamic… portable radios with CD players, I would definitely avoid it, because after buying it, the CD wouldn't spin properly... another one, I would avoid Cascade… they make general electric appliances, I bought a kettle and after two months of using it the heating element started to rust… both of them from The Warehouse. KL Int 11 (Male, 20)

Once again, poor performance formed the basis of these brand avoidance attitudes, however these participants are now able to recall the failed product brands, thus indicating a negative attitude towards, and subsequent avoidance of, the retail brand and the product brand.

Although conventional thought suggests that service recovery and/or warranties may overcome poor performance, the extra hassle involved in a failed consumption experience often compounds experiential avoidance of a brand:

When you've bought something and it breaks, you take it back to get some after sales service and they don't really give a sh*t about you, so you lose faith in that product and you don't buy it again…"Just take another one", "oh just bring it back", I can't be bothered with that. I don't have time for that nonsense... life's too short to muck around with mundane things like bloody toasters. MS Int 5 (Female, 46)

The participant expected a household appliance to function properly and reliably. Thus, a failed product not only disconfirmed her expectations but also added unnecessary complication to her life. In this instance, the brand is not only re-constructed to represent an unmet expectation but also signals, to this consumer, added inconvenience.

The final reason for experiential avoidance could be attributed to the unpleasant brand experiences within the brand's store environment:

McDonald's, unless it's a takeaway it's a fairly unpleasant place to eat, sort of quite cold and sterile, the same with KFC and they look quite dirty quite often, dodgy characters working behind the counter… you go in and everything's sort of plastic. You walk up, you order and you have to wait there for it and then you go and sit down, you get your little plastic tray and you don't know whether it's been cleaned, there are lots of little kids running around quite often and it doesn't really appeal to me when I'm eating. JH Int 13 (Male, 29)

Overall, unmet expectations are the main reason for the experiential avoidance of both product and service brands. Furthermore, the added hassle/inconvenience of a failed consumption experience and unpleasant store environment may also compound the brand avoidance incident.

### 4.2. Identity avoidance: symbolic incongruence

The second reason for brand avoidance is the inability of the brand to fulfil the individual's symbolic identity requirements. The concepts of undesired self and disidentification are prevalent throughout the theme of identity avoidance. In addition to consuming desirable brands, a consumer also maintains his or her self-concept by avoiding the brands perceived to be incongruent with their desired or actual self-concept (Englis and Soloman, 1995; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Hogg and Banister, 2001; Sirgy, 1982). Disidentification theory suggests that people may develop their self-concept by disidentifying with organizations that are perceived to be inconsistent with their own image and values (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002; Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). Specifically, a person may avoid a brand because it represents an undesired self, a negative reference group (Englis and Soloman, 1995; Hogg, 1998; Hogg and Michell, 1997), a lack of authenticity, or the loss of individuality. The basic premise is that consumers engage in brand avoidance because they do not want to be associated with what they perceive to be negative brand meanings or values:

We always laugh about it, but we would never buy cheap toilet paper, because that just says something, you just think if you walk into a bathroom and there's cheap toilet paper… it says something about you, how you portray yourself… I guess it's important because that's how you see yourself. I'm not cheap and nasty. I think it's a reflection of my childhood as well, because I had three brothers and one sister so we're quite a big family… I mean having the budget stuff and I want to get away from that… you leave all that behind. SR Int 2 (Female, 45)

This quotation is a salient example of the importance of symbolic anti-consumption and the participant's feelings of self worth, even with a product as mundane as toilet paper. In this instance, the participant chooses to disidentify with these brands

because she does not wish to portray herself as being "cheap and nasty". Additionally, by avoiding the connotations of being "budget", the participant is able to distance herself away from an undesired self of the past.

Within undesired self, participants also avoid brands that are associated with negative reference groups because those brands are symbolically incompatible with the individual's sense of self. Although avoidance of a negative reference group is similar to avoidance of undesired self, a subtle distinction does exist between the two concepts. While people's ideas of their undesired selves are normally concrete and specific, their perceptions of negative reference groups may be less accurate and more stereotypical in form (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001; Englis and Soloman, 1995). Thus, avoidance of negative reference groups may be based on generalizations of the typical brand user:

The people that you know only climbed very irregularly... they'll have the t-shirts and bagfuls of equipment which they never use... they're almost trying to pretend to be involved heavily in that sport ... it just seems strange and a little bit desperate ... the people who do it the most and tend to be better at it, don't actually own a lot of that stuff, and don't make a big effort to deck themselves out with all the equipment, or introduce themselves and in two seconds start talking about climbing... once you get past a stage you realize that the people who are beginners tend to be the ones who have all the gear... in their attempt to fit in by using all the grand stuff they actually stand out as not quite belonging. JH Int 13 (Male, 29)

A negative reference group perception motivates this participant's avoidance of mainstream climbing brands. However, another reason for identity avoidance also emerges as JH perceives the type of person that conspicuously consumes branded equipment as being inauthentic, an undesirable trait that he does not want to incorporate into his self-concept. Consequently, JH avoids being associated with the brand because of the negative/inauthentic identity exhibited by its stereotypical user.

The ability to attain, and maintain, associations of authenticity are difficult challenges for any brand (Thompson, et al., 2006). Ironically, for some brands, becoming too popular may be a disadvantage, since over-commercialization of a brand can lead to a loss of authenticity (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989; Beverland, 2006; Cohen, 1988; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002; Wheaton, 2000). The unique symbolism of a niche brand risks dilution when people outside its subculture use the brand in inauthentic ways, or when the brand is mass produced to meet mainstream demand (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Sporting brands are particularly prone to this dilemma, since non-hardcore or fringe members often use legitimate brands in an attempt to signify their participation in an activity (Wheaton, 2000). If many fringe members consume the brand conspicuously, this may change the brand image, resulting in the avoidance of the brand by its original consumers. As the brand loses the respect of its hard-core cliental, they may label the brand as ordinary or inauthentic. When other consumers realise that the brand promise is fake and

can no longer be used as a symbolic tool to add the desired meaning to their lives or identity, mainstream appeal may also be lost.

Though related, negative reference groups and inauthenticity can also motivate brand avoidance separately. The excerpt below illustrates the differences between the two sub-themes:

Although they may not be open as long as McDonald's, and not as convenient as McDonald's, there is just something about being able to go to the local fish and chip shop, have a chat with the guy, being relieved of the thought of seeing your food going along this process chain, being made up and basically slapped together. MT Int 16 (Male, 42)

In explaining why he avoids McDonald's, MT's perception of the brand's products is that they are over processed, artificial, and fake. Note that MT does not refer to a negative reference group; instead, he avoids the brand owing to perceptions of inauthenticity.

The final sub-theme in identity avoidance is deindividuation. In this sub-theme, participants avoid mainstream brands in order to prevent a loss of individuality and self-identity:

My sister bought some, she's had them for about two years and they are really great, so I don't think it's anything to do with the quality of them, it's just that every single person I know owns a pair of light blue Dickies... I don't see the point; I don't like wearing the same clothes that everyone else is wearing... I like to stand out. I think my sister is really into labels, she doesn't buy anything except for Amazon and I just look at her and her mates and they're all wearing exactly the same tops. They might be slightly variant but they're all Roxie tops or they've all got Billabong written on them somewhere... why be the same as everyone else when you can be different... She's 14. Which is fair enough, I'm sure that every single 14 year old wants to fit in with their peer group, but I think as you get older you sort of think "I don't need to be identical to the rest of my friends why not be a bit different?" You have your own self-confidence to create your own style rather than identifying with everyone else. KD Int 6 (Female, 17)

The participant states that it is not the functional quality of the brand that is a problem; rather, it is the symbolic meaning of being the same as everyone. KD believes that wearing branded clothing subsumes an individual's identity. Thus, instead of adding meaning through the use of brands, she suggests that the consumption of some brands may actually weaken and undermine individuality. As the number of people who wear a brand increases, the brand's ability as a tool to create a unique self-identity decreases. Since KD states that she likes to 'stand out' and dislikes the thought of being 'identical', she avoids the various brands that she construes as 'mainstream'.

Deindividuation avoidance occurs when brand consumption may lead to a loss of identity. In contrast, inauthenticity avoidance occurs when brands are perceived to be fake. Thus KD's avoidance is motivated by her desire to protect her sense of individuality rather than by the perception that the brands are inauthentic. Subtle differences also exist between deindividuation

and the sub-theme of negative reference group. In the former, a person avoids a brand to prevent a loss of their own individuality, while in the latter a person practises brand avoidance so that he or she does not gain the associations of a negative reference group.

Negative symbolic meanings that the brand represents to the individual and how those meanings are incongruent with his or her self-concept motivate identity avoidance. For some participants, certain brands may represent a negative reference group, a lack of authenticity, or a loss of individuality, since all are aspects of an individual's undesired self, such brands are avoided accordingly.

### 4.3. Moral avoidance: ideological incompatibility

Ideological incompatibility motivates the third type of brand avoidance, moral avoidance. According to Hodge and Kress (1993, p. 6), ideology is "a systematic body of ideas, organized from a particular point of view." More specifically, the term ideology is used to refer to political and socio-economic sets of beliefs. Consumption and marketing, for example, may be understood as part of a broader capitalist ideology based on notions of a free market economy, consumerism and individualism. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) argue that anti-consumption movements seek moral and ethical changes to consumerist ideology. This article draws upon their work to examine consumers' anti-consumption views and moral opposition to hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) brands.

The key elements of moral avoidance are the resistance of oppressive/dominating forces (anti-hegemony), a societal focus that extends beyond the needs of the individual, and the belief that it is a moral duty to avoid certain brands. For example, the following participant avoids Nike for its exploitation of non-western workers. He criticizes the company for its unacceptable use of the capitalist free market system. Although the free market is based on freedom of choice, this participant does not believe that the workers have been provided with any real opportunity to choose:

> You can't really say they had a choice. They were basically selected and taken to the factories [Nike]. As far as the relative payment goes, I can't believe someone is happy or better off working under those conditions and probably still only eating and living in conditions that they had before. I don't think they've really improved their lot. It's just now someone's come along and said "Work in this factory or you can't even have what you had"… I know we do look at it comparatively to the West… the people working in the factories are actually now being made subservient to a capital system, whereas their neighbours are probably still living that village life, it's not easy to compare the two… may be they're eating and living just as well in the village lifestyle than the workers. But again it goes back to the children and choice, and how we should really be educating them. DS Int 15 (Male, 30)

The quote illustrates the typical issue on which most consumer resistance literature has focused (Klein, 2000). However, in this study, two main moral avoidance themes emerge: consumer cynicism and country of origin effects.

Cynical consumers believe that self-interest alone motivates companies (Boush, Kim, Kahle, and Batra, 1993; Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001; Mohr, Eroglu, and Ellen, 1998) and therefore distrust the altruistic motives of corporations:

> Just look at petrol, electricity prices, I don't know what's going on, but one assumes that these companies do have a little chat in the toilets…I mean you go to a petrol station and try and find one with a different price, they're all the same price…I don't trust the media in general as far as I can throw them… the media are owned by private companies where "You scratch our back, I'll scratch yours"…There was a documentary made in England for example about the McLibel case, a one hour documentary and TVNZ [Television New Zealand] refused to screen it, and the only reason one can conclude is obviously because McDonald's does huge advertising with them. DS Int 15 (Male, 30)

The quotation above illustrates the participant's general distrust of corporations and the cynical beliefs he has regarding the collusion between large corporations and media organizations. McDonald's emerged, in this study, as the most irresponsible brand/corporation in terms of its behavior towards societal welfare:

> All they're out to do is make a buck; they don't really care about your health, the only reason they're bringing in salads is because they're losing their market… losing money because people are getting much more aware about their eating habits. They're not really doing it because they care about you. KB Int 10 (Female, 27)

This participant is cynical about McDonald's real motives; believing that the advent of healthier food is driven by the company's desire to offset diminishing profits rather than a real concern for consumer's well-being. The following participant also echoes KB's view:

> One of the things that does bother me especially with large icons like McDonald's is the whole promoting of health and well-being for children, yet they're one of the major causes of obesity… there is irony there, I hate that they use it as a marketing ploy. I absolutely despise the McDonald's Starship hospital… just the whole fact that "We're providing funds to support health and well-being, the Ronald McDonald's house, in return we expect you to come and buy our food", so it's really not giving people a choice… you're expected to buy, because we've just looked after your child, we paid for it, you owe us… what large multinational, international company is going to do things for nothing? There's no such thing as doing things for nothing. MT Int 16 (Male, 42)

The participant sees the exercise of corporate social responsibility as a manipulative marketing ploy, which is a paradoxical situation for organizations. Although consumers now demand social responsibility, they are also suspicious and cynical that such initiatives are motivated by public relations rather than altruistic objectives. Cynicism towards multinational companies is based on a belief that a corporation cannot be altruistic without expecting a return on investment. These negative feelings may be

fuelled, in part, by reports of corporate irresponsibility that are becoming more common because of the Internet and the ease by which negative corporate publicity may now be disseminated.

The imbalance of power between large multinational brands and the consumer is another reason motivating moral avoidance. Foucault (1980) conceptualized power/knowledge as both organized and hierarchical within the context of clusters of relationships: "The idea that there is either located at — or emanating from a given point — something which is a 'power' seems to me to be based on a misguided analysis...in reality power means relations, a more or less organized, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations" (Foucault, 1980, p. 198).

Foucault (1980) saw power and resistance as inextricably linked: where there is power there will be resistance. In this study, acts of brand avoidance and anti-hegemony are contextualized within a capitalist ideology by participants who argued for intervention to prevent multinational dominance:

I think left to itself, that's where capitalism would go eventually, you would basically just have a convergence of multinationals who would eventually rule overall. I think that's inevitable in a capitalist system, in the name of efficiency and economies of scale, you've got to eventually merge. So that's why you do need a little bit of intervention. DS Int 15 (Male, 30)

This is more or less post-modern behavior... becoming a chameleon, today I might buy hamburger, but tomorrow I'll be cooking Chinese... The so called consumers... become less disciplined, less predictable, the more you try to get [to] them the more difficult they are to get...so the brand policy is in trouble. LB Int 1 (Female, 52)

The preceding participant describes her method of resisting marketing efforts and the power struggle, or cat and mouse game, that exists in the post-modern marketing environment (Rumbo, 2002). Instead of behaving in a way that makes her easy to understand, and therefore, easy to target by marketers, one method of sabotaging marketing efforts and reclaiming power is to become less predictable in her consumption practices. Her anti-hegemonic behavior is analogous to creative resistance (Holt, 2002), which attempts to undermine marketing efforts and regain power.

Anti-consumption also builds from the associations that consumers have of the brand's country of origin (COO). The basic premise of COO is that knowledge of a product's origin influences consumers' attitudes and behaviors towards that product (Elliott and Cameron, 1994; Hong and Wyer, 1990; Kaynak, Kucukemiroglu, and Hyder, 2000). Occasionally, the perceived immorality of a country may also be associated with a brand. The following participant explains his anti-American sentiment:

It's not something I understand fully but I tend to try and steer away from things American...I don't like the thought of supporting American ideas and ideals and having money that I spend with American companies go to America... They do things like go and bomb the sh*t out of Iraq.

American people, and their culture, are very arrogant... their relation with the rest of the world, or at least as I've seen it, is one of dominance, and they do dominate economically and militarily... I guess I don't like the American brand. AP Int 9 (Male, 30)

Political ideology and anti-war sentiment is influencing some international consumers' perceptions of iconic American brands. Just as a country's strengths can become inextricably linked to a brand, so too can its perceived faults (Kaynak et al., 2000). Avoidance and boycotts of American brands are linked to configurations of anti-globalization, anti-war sentiment and resistance against their hegemonic market power and dominance. Some participants perceive American marketing, branding, and implicitly, capitalism, to be so hegemonic that this dominance has become a primary reason for resistance. The following quotation illustrates such political and cultural avoidance of McDonald's:

I don't like the politics behind it, and they are pushing it in every country, it's meant to be this symbol from America and it's so not healthy... McDonaldization ... I mean you go to a foreign country to learn their customs and their cuisine, and you find McDonald's, I mean that is so pathetic, sorry, I mean and it's so boring... you know the culture is getting homogenized and I much prefer cultural diversity and specific locality than this chain thing. JJ Int 3 (Female, 25)

Also related to COO is the sub-theme of 'financial patriotism'. Some consumers feel a patriotic connection with local brands that are part of the community. These participants buy locally as a mode of resisting global homogenization, preserving cultural diversity, and ensuring that the financial profits of their purchases will remain in their own country. Thus, a reason driving moral avoidance of certain brands is the alienation from, and lack of connection with, hegemonic multinational brands.

It's just a known identity, I prefer to support what I see, like if I go to [the] little kebab shop... you could tell that they were father and son or a family kind of business and I can see that that's who they are and that's what they're doing. Whereas McDonald's I just see some employee who's been there for three weeks and can't stand their job. I think it's just because they're out to make the big buck... it's faceless, whoever Ronald McDonald is, I've never actually met the guy, you know... they don't need my money whereas the little guy, like those guys at the kebab shop probably do. KB Int10 (Female, 27)

Similarly, another participant prefers local brands because of their perceived ability to support the local economy and community:

I think I'd rather support the little guy... support local and grow local... If you buy something from the guy that lives down the road, the profit he makes on that sale and that production is generally contained within your country and community and it's going to grow to the benefit of everyone

around you. Whereas a multinational takes the profit wherever it needs it I suppose and it's not guaranteed that it's going to stay in the same country... In the long run it improves the quality of life for people in my community. AP Int 9 (Male, 30)

Participants value their local community and are adamant that a strong local domestic economy provides both societal and individual benefits in terms of quality of life. This reasoning is related to the concept of consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp and Sharma, 1987); since multinational companies provide less guarantee that profits will remain in the local community, those brands are avoided by patriotic consumers.

Moral brand avoidance, in summary, is based on communitarian ideology that seeks to resist hegemony and participants are motivated to avoid certain brands because they believe it is their moral duty to redress power imbalances and preserve societal values.

### 4.4. Managing brand avoidance

The second contribution of this research is to provide insights that may help marketers in managing brand avoidance. From the in-depth interviews, several themes emerged that increase the understanding of how brand avoidance may be prevented or alleviated. Table 3 displays these themes.

Although participants assert their preference to avoid certain brands, barriers exist that make it difficult for some participants to carry out their intended brand avoidance behaviors. Overall, the authors identify four themes that play a role in the prevention of brand avoidance. First, the influence of other people on the consumer reduces the individual's ability to avoid a brand consistently:

I ended up having to go at Christmas time because the people I was travelling with wanted to go to McDonald's, but it's not my choice. SR Int 2 (Female, 45)

Second and third, a perceived lack of suitable alternatives and inertia (the cost of switching) are two other factors that prevent brand avoidance (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Hirsch-

Table 3
Preventing and alleviating brand avoidance

| Main categories | Themes | Sub-themes |
|---|---|---|
| Avoidance Barriers | Lack of alternatives | |
| | Inertia | |
| | Influence of others | |
| | Low product involvement | |
| Avoidance antidotes | Genuine adaptation | |
| | Value augmentation | Quality amplification |
| | | Cost attenuation |
| | Image adaptation | |
| | Sub-branding | |
| | Network formation | |
| | Sampling solution | |
| | Positive WOM | |
| Incurable avoidance | | |

man, 1970; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Panther and Farquhar, 2004; Zauberman, 2003).

Finally, the level of involvement that a consumer has with a product may influence and suppress a person's intention to avoid a brand:

I might still go in there to get something like a fish hook that I know will last, there's nothing too technical about it. I probably wouldn't buy a TV or a stereo from The Warehouse. SW Int 17 (Male, 24)

A perception of sameness may accompany low involvement with a product category (O'Cass, 2000; Zaichkowsky, 1985; 1986). When no perceivable difference exists across brands, the importance brands diminish, and therefore the need to avoid specific brands also seems to waiver. Although SW normally prefers to avoid The Warehouse retail brand, in this case, the company's wide range of product categories actually prevents brand avoidance from occurring consistently.

Even if a consumer is able to overcome the various avoidance barriers and carry out his or her brand avoidance preferences, several conditions (avoidance antidotes) may still alleviate brand avoidance. The first antidote involves a genuine adaptation of the brand, one that is initiated from the highest point within the company and permeates throughout the entire brand/organization. Such a strategy may alleviate brand avoidance that is motivated by corporate irresponsibility or consumer resistance philosophies; however, in spite of these efforts many consumers may remain cynical. Thus, such a drastic strategy may not be feasible for the firm.

Augmenting the value of a brand by either amplifying its perceived quality and/or attenuating its perceived costs might remedy brand avoidance attitudes owing to performance failures. Some participants indicate that even a superficial adaptation of the brand's image may be enough to convince them to re-select the brand.

If a firm wishes for their brand to remain unchanged, it might attempt to create a new set of associations to a sub-brand. The use of a furtive branding strategy (Laforet and Saunders, 1994), is particularly pertinent to brand avoidance. Since moral avoidance is largely based on the resistance of hegemonic brands, the use of furtive sub-brands gives some consumers the illusion that they are selecting a competing brand, when in fact both brands are owned by the same company (Laforet and Saunders 1994; 1999):

It's the taste and the fact that it's such a big company... If I drank fizzy drink I would rather L&P because I associate it with being made in, being a New Zealand company or whatever. Coke there must be some Coke made in New Zealand mustn't there? (Interviewer: L&P is a sub-brand of Coke.) Oh is it? So I naively just bought that anyway... really? Oh that sucks. KB Int 10 (Female, 27)

KB avoids Coke for two reasons. The first is an experiential reason; KB does not like the taste of the product. The second reason is based on moral avoidance, where Coke is resisted because of its perceived dominance. KB suggests

that if she was to consume a soft drink, she would select an underdog brand, one that she believes to be independent from Coke. However, in reality, L&P is one of the many brands that The Coca-Cola Company produces. Thus, by concealing, or not making obvious, the true origins of a sub-brand, companies may be able to bypass the avoidance attitudes and behavior of some consumers without changing the avoided brand. However, such a strategy may be risky at both a reputational and ethical level.

The formation of a network alleviates brand avoidance in two ways. First, a well-established network and strong relationships with other firms may act as safeguards against brand avoidance. As Srivastava et al. (2001, p. 784) state, "The best products do not necessarily win. The best-networked ones usually do." Establishing strong ties with other businesses may alleviate brand avoidance. In this study, some participants continue to purchase brands that they wish to avoid, owing to the ubiquity of the brand's business networks. For example, Coca Cola is an ingredient in many of the alcoholic drinks sold at bars and is therefore, very hard to avoid.

Second, being associated with a reputable network may also improve consumers' evaluations of a brand. For example, if lower-tier retailing brand is able to secure the rights to stock a high-tier product brand. However, even though the brand is able to remain unaltered in a network formation strategy, the company may lose some control of the brand as it enters a business network and establishes relationships with other brands/companies (Anderson, Håkansson, and Johanson, 1994). Furthermore, though the formation of a relationship with a more favorable brand might be a beneficial strategy for alleviating brand avoidance, the consequences of any spill-over or dilution effects (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Simonin and Ruth, 1998) from the avoided brand to the favorable brand needs to be considered.

Providing samples to consumers may allow them to re-experience the brand in a positive light, thereby countering prior negative experiences or situations where consumers have been avoiding brands because of unfamiliarity. However, whether the sample is evaluated positively or not, depends entirely on the consumer's interpretation of the consumption experience (Bawa and Shoemaker, 2004; Heiman, McWilliams and Zilberman, 2001); thus, the firm has little control of this strategy once the samples have been dispensed.

Lastly, conflicting information about an avoided brand from unbiased sources, or positive WOM, may persuade some individuals to reselect a brand. However, apart from ensuring that the brand delivers excellent service or product performance, the firm can do very little to control WOM. Even the generation of false/manufactured WOM, by stealth marketing, is ultimately controlled by consumers (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004).

If avoidance antidotes are successful in alleviating brand avoidance, the consumer might once again repurchase the brand. However, an interesting theme that emerged from the discourse surrounding avoidance antidotes was the concept of incurable avoidance. Despite the various strategies that a firm could implement in an attempt to stop brand avoidance, some

feelings of hatred towards the brand may simply be too intense to remedy:

> I think it would be very difficult, once you had a mindset of what that company or that brand stands for... some cosmetic company, just make one up called X and you know that they test on animal babies or something, you've got to demonstrate that they don't and that's very very difficult to do, it would be a very difficult job. It may not be possible to do that. VL Int 14 (Female, 28)

## 5. Conclusion, future research and limitations

This research uncovers a multitude of reasons for brand avoidance, from unmet expectations, to symbolic incongruity, to ideological incompatibility. A gap between customer expectations and brand performance motivates experiential brand avoidance. Participants avoid products and services that perform poorly, the extra inconvenience of rectifying failed purchases, and unpleasant store environments.

An incongruity between the symbolic meanings of a brand and the individual's sense of self motivates identity avoidance. Participants protect their identity by avoiding brands that represent their undesired self; in particular, they avoid brands that are associated with negative reference groups, inauthenticity, or a loss of individuality.

Ideological incompatibility and a critical view about the role of marketing in society drive moral avoidance. Unlike the previous avoidance categories, moral avoidance involves a societal focus that extends beyond the needs of the individual. Cynical participants reject the free market principles of unlimited multinational power and, instead, offer brand avoidance as a moral imperative. Two categories of brand avoidance emerge from the data: consumer cynicism and COO. Moral avoidance takes the form of transgressing and subverting marketing, boycotting iconic and hegemonic brands, and supporting local brands.

Although a well-managed brand is indeed a market-based asset (Srivastava, Shervani, and Fahey, 1998), brand avoidance can lead to negative brand equity and thus, brands have the potential to become market-based liabilities. For instance, a brand that experiences sustaining periods of brand avoidance may develop negative brand equity, since customers consistently react unfavorably to the brand (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). The brand then becomes a stigma, causing de-valuation for the firm as it represents a reduced return on investment. If the brand impedes rather than enhances the firm's value creating properties, reduces cash flow in certain domains, or at the very least, limits the company's ability to create and deliver value, then the brand could be considered a market-based liability.

In reality, the firm would probably discontinue such a brand or at least have it re-branded. However, before a brand accumulates high levels of negative brand equity, a state of flux exists between the positive branding efforts of the company and the negative branding that occurs in the marketplace. It is this state of flux that the firm must manage before a branding crisis develops. Thus, research on brand avoidance provides

marketing managers with a more balanced perspective of brand equity and, therefore, better knowledge to manage their brands.

Empirical validation of the emergent conceptual framework in the context of the wider population is one avenue for future research. The ability to understand which reasons for brand avoidance endure, which are least resistant to change, and which are more predictive of behavior, would add to the practical application and academic appreciation of brand avoidance.

Conceivably, brand loyalty may be caused by the consistent avoidance of other brands, rather than preference towards a single brand, thus brand loyalty may not be as prevalent as its academic coverage suggests. Therefore, future studies may wish to explore which attitude, brand loyalty or brand avoidance, is more predictive of consumers' actual purchasing behavior.

In contemporary marketing, brand equity can be conceptualised from various non-mutually exclusive perspectives: consumer, relational, financial, or network (Brodie, Glynn, and Van Durme, 2002). This study interviewed only end-consumers. Future studies may choose to investigate brand avoidance from other orientations such as the effect of brand avoidance on business to business relationships, co-branding alliances and networks. Additionally, an essential step in validating the notion of the brand as a market-based liability is to establish the financial existence of negative brand equity and to discern the extent of its impact on the firm.

By understanding what reasons contribute to brand avoidance and which factors restrict it, marketing managers have several options to ensure that their brands remain strong. Most of the reasons for brand avoidance are within reasonable control of the firm. Thus, the primary step in dealing with brand avoidance is to stop brand avoidance attitudes from developing in the first place. Failing that, managers may establish avoidance barriers to prevent, or implement avoidance antidotes to alleviate, brand avoidance. Finally, by knowing the reasons why consumers are avoiding other brands, managers may strategically position their own brands as attractive alternatives.

The findings of this exploration should be interpreted within its contextual confines. A number of participants perceive some brands as being incompatible with their values and subsequently avoid those brands. Although, this study provides a rich account of those participants' motivations for brand avoidance, its findings are not representative of the general consumer population. Furthermore, since brands are never created to please all segments (Gardner and Levy, 1955), this article is not recommending that companies should alter all avoided brands for the sake of pleasing a few consumers, particularly when they may not be part of the firm's original target market. Instead, by addressing the negative meanings of brands, the main contribution of this article is to provide practitioners and researchers with a more balanced perspective of brands and consumer behavior. In terms of managerial implications, knowledge and strategies concerning brand avoidance attitudes could be a substantial advantage one company may have over its competitors. From an academic perspective, by exploring brand avoidance, this study helps scholars progress towards a fuller understanding of anti-consumption.

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