

Consumer Experiences and Market Resistance: An Extension of Resistance Theories

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Consumer scholars have “yet to develop an integrated theoretical perspective of the phenomenon that considers the many and varied ways in which resistance of the marketplace and its offerings impacts consumer behavior” (Fournier 1998 p.89). Penaloza and Price provide (1993) a conceptual overview as a basis to understand consumer resistance. While we may never be able to understand consumer resistance to *all* aspects of the marketplace, perhaps we may work towards tackling this issue by striving to understand consumer’s resistance to certain “markets” in their unique contexts. For instance, one may consider holiday markets.

Marketed holidays (e.g., Christmas, Valentine’s Day, Halloween) represent one type of market that is in part resisted by consumers. Holiday festivities are a key aspect of contemporary consumer culture, yet scholars have not devoted research to understanding consumers’ resistance of traditional holiday markets. Valentine’s Day is an event charged with consumer meaning (Close and Zinkhan 2006) and it is an interesting context to study consumer resistance because it is the holiday for love—typically one of the most desired, involved, and uplifting human experiences.

Thus, we seek to advance understanding of consumers’ resistance manifest in the Valentine’s Day market. Our objectives include:

1. to introduce a definition of “market resistance”,
2. to understand and explain consumer experiences that are associated with resistance to a market and its related events,
3. to show what consumers are moving towards via their acts of resistance.

To address the objectives, we use multiple methods. We focus on describing a category of experiences that are associated with resistance and creation of new traditions. The article is organized as follows. First, we conceptually define terms and introduce relevant areas of resistance theories. Second, we discuss the analytical methods, data analysis, and theme development. Then, we present findings and interpretation of meaning. To clarify the processes, we deploy constructs based in resistance theory. We ultimately discuss limitations, implications, and avenues for future research.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT AND RESISTANCE THEORIES

In general, resistance entails an opposing or retarding force (Dobscha 1998). Resistance is the:

counter-hegemonic social attitudes, behaviors, and actions that aim at weakening classifications among social categories and that are directed against the dominant power and against those who exercise it, with the purpose of redistributing equality (Fernandes 1988 p.174).

Here, we define *market resistance* as *an opposition to traditions in the marketplace, with the purpose of creating new behaviors*. Market resistance is not a “non-behavior”; it entails purposive behavior to re-create the traditions manifest in the marketplace. Our definition has some key advantages. Past definitions from psychology apply to resistance to one particular message, or “persuasive attack,” (e.g., Tormala and Petty 2002) within a short period. We focus on resistance to a *lifetime* of messages, promotions, marketplace activities, and consumers’ built-up associations. Second, our focus is on behaviors—specifically alternative-consumption behaviors, for example, consumer rebellion behaviors as described by Dobscha (1998) or consumer activism behaviors as described by Kozinets, Robert and Handelman (2004). In contrast to our proposed definition, past definitions focus on affective or cognitive components of resistance.

In the literature, resistance theories include two key areas that apply to the objectives of this study: 1) ambivalence and 2) avoidance. In resistance theory, ambivalence refers to a consumer’s

neutral attitude about change (Arkowitz 2002). As Valentine’s market-based activities and “events” (e.g., card exchange, romantic dinners) have become a holiday tradition, the ambivalent consumer may be less likely to participate in such traditional activities and events.

Other consumers may purposefully avoid the holiday and the associated traditions. Avoidance of unpleasant feelings is another aspect of resistance (Perls et al. 1951). For some people, this holiday may trigger negative memories or feelings of inadequacy or loneliness. While some people reconstruct memories (Braun-LaTour and LaTour 2005), others may try to avoid unpleasant feelings and avoid the marketplace completely on the holiday. Resistance theorists agree that while consumers act ambivalent or avoid the holiday exchange, they often have a purpose of doing so. We revisit these aspects of resistance after describing the methods and findings.

METHODS

We employ synergistic methods spanning several years. Table 1 summarizes the methods, sample sizes, informants, period, and research focus.

Table 1: Multiple Methods

Method	Informants	Time	Focus
Diaries [D]* (n=149)	-Males & Females; 18-67 -Single, Dating, Married	2002- 2005	Resistance/enjoyment factor, cultural rituals, gender roles, ambivalence
E-Diaries [E]** (n=47)	-Posters to e-diaries & boards during Valentine’s Day -Males & Females -Single, Dating, Married	2000- 2005	Naturalistic consumer thought of holiday meaning and resistance
Group Interviews [G] (n=6)	-Females; 18-22 -Dating	2003	Rituals, traditions, purchases, meanings behind purchases and non purchases

*denoted by [D]; ** web posting date, sources: diaryland, opendiary, mydeardiary.com, my-diary.org, diarist.net

Sampling and Procedure

We recruited consumers in various relationship stages to participate in the study. We did not specify sexual orientation, although most were in a heterosexual relationship. Many informants

were recruited through advertisements in the city newspaper and were paid \$30. Others participated as part of an extra credit class assignment.

One hundred forty-nine consumers in various relationship situations, professions, and geographic backgrounds wrote diary entries about their experiences and any resistance surrounding this holiday and the related marketplace activities. To complement the offline diaries, we collected e-diary entries/postings about the holiday for rich, less-censored sentiments. To incorporate group interactions, we conducted group interviews with females in romantic relationships because this is more of a female-oriented holiday. Females (half in a dating relationship under six months and half in a relationship of six months or more) discussed their experiences and resistance points with the female moderator for ninety minutes as a female author took notes and reviewed body language.

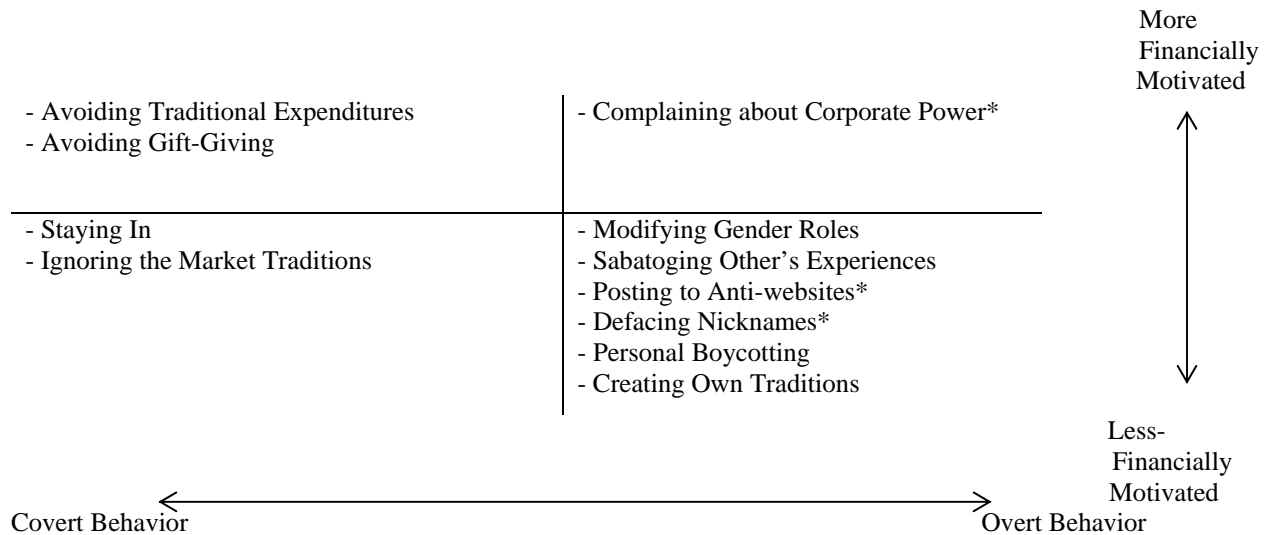
Data Analysis and Theme Development

We iteratively analyzed the data based on the objectives, theories, and themes identified in the literature. Via axial, open, and selective coding, we grouped similar findings and observations into categories of meaning. This contributed towards revealing emergent patterns (Wolcott 1990). Authors reviewed each other's data interpretations until saturation. In the process, many new themes became apparent; however, we focus on findings of consumer resistance. We used suggested approaches (Spiggle 1994) to increase validity and reliability. Multiple methods were employed in order to depict a holistic understanding as suggested by Creswell (1998). We triangulated the data in quest of a full phenomenological understanding (Moustakas 1994).

FINDINGS: CONSUMER EXPERIENCES AND MARKET RESISTANCE

We find that a segment of consumers challenge the norms of the holiday market due to financial reasons as well as non-financial reasons. Some resistant behaviors are overt, and others are more covert. The less-financially motivated, more overt resistant behaviors tend to be more creative. These consumers creatively resist traditions of the holiday and create new rituals. Creative resistant consumers rename the holiday as “Singles Awareness Day,” or “Maximized Profit Day.” They spread negative experiences via (electronic) word-of-mouth. More extreme examples include boycotting marketers or creating defaming/satiric websites; however such cases are not the norm and may be more deeply-rooted. Some examples are shown in Figure 1.

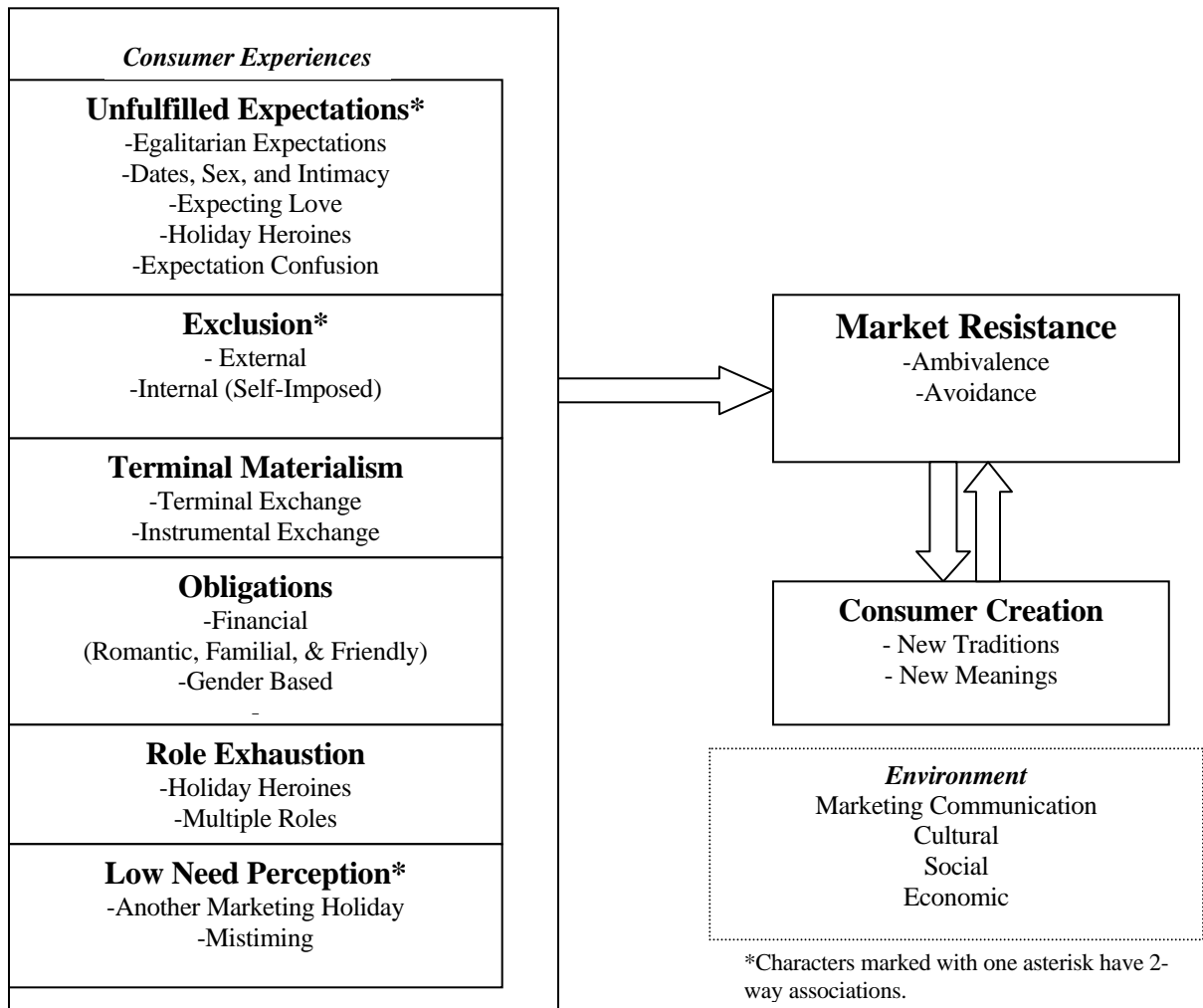
Figure 1: Market Resistance Behaviors



* These entries represent negative word-of-mouth behaviors.

Key consumer experiences associated with market resistance are unfulfilled expectations, exclusion, terminal materialism, obligations, role exhaustion, and low need perception for the holiday (Figure 2). Note that three of the consumer experiences appear to influence market resistance and in turn are influenced by market resistance. The framework is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Consumer Experiences Associated with Market Resistance



Unfulfilled Expectations

A primary reason that Valentine’s Day seems to breed market resistance is that many people have high expectations that often go unrealized. Many do not verbalize these expectations, as they are internal and build from a lifetime of Valentine’s experiences. Consumers often do not know or are unclear about what they expect, or what others expect from them. Unfulfilled expectations of Valentine’s Days often begin with childhood, as the rituals develop along with the person.

Egalitarian Expectations. Informants reference childhood as a time that primes expectations for this holiday. In grade school, rituals of card, candy, and exchange of affection are often egalitarian; everyone expects involvement. Valentine exchange is for every child at school. Such early behaviors seem to prime expectations for a lifetime of being recognized.

Dates, Sex, and Intimacy. Informants have expectations surrounding dates, sex, and intimacy. Some expect the evening will entail sex. Although some novice daters appear to have little clue about what their date expects [G]¹, most males in a dating relationship of six months or longer know what is expected of them [S]. Furthermore, males expect to “be expected to” spend first. Sex and food are two things males mention with their expectations for Valentine’s. This food is not always the characteristic food of Valentine’s Day (e.g., chocolate) or even the more expensive steak or seafood dinners. Sometimes it is simple as sex and pizza (in that order).

Reactions to unfulfilled expectations sometimes affect third parties who otherwise may have had a delightful day, such as in the case of this resistant woman’s roommate:

I did not have a Valentine today. My roommate did though. When she was out having dinner with her lover, I ate all her candies and cut up all her flowers. When she got home and saw what I did, she was so angry with me! I told her to not be so uptight... the situation was actually hilariously funny. If someone bought me a box of candy or flowers, this never would have happened.... Even the cheap-o brand chocolates that say "I choo-choo-choose you!" would have been great. Now I am fat and alone. Maybe I'll fall down the stairs. Great. [F, 2-14-2003, E]

This woman expects something, even a “cheap-o” box of chocolates. Chocolate is embedded with meanings of sensuality (Belk and Costa 1999) and here, with self-loathing and expectations of loneliness. A more common expectation, however, is for recognition, intimacy, and love.

Expecting Love. Some expect love during this season, and are disappointed if they do not experience or share love. Consumers equate love with the purpose of this holiday. Moreover, they expect to see unavoidable signs of it everywhere:

¹ [G] indicates a finding from the group interviews; [S] survey; [D] diary; [E] electronic diary.

The purpose of Valentine's Day is to tell your loved ones that you love them. Everywhere you go everything is red and all about Valentine's Day. You can't get away from it. But I had to work, so I then heated up leftovers and studied. [F, 22, Dating, D]

Love between friends—especially females—is a large part of this holiday. Consumers do not limit their expectations to romantic love. Philosophical contexts of romantic exchange, as during Valentine's Day, link to love's psychological significance. Various theorists address love. Freud claims that falling in love is a substitute for personal achievement. One may not excel in his or her career, but he or she still may succeed in the love department. Flowers and other visible exchanges on Valentine's Day announce this success. A competing idea is that falling in love is an attempt to obtain qualities that one lacks (Reik 1944). Valentine's Day is a socially acceptable time to pursue a lover. In some ways, this pursuit is to complete the self.

Holiday Heroines. Valentine's Day caters to females—the “heroines of the holiday.” Many females share expectations for an extraordinary day. One woman describes her lavish evening:

I went to dinner with my husband. We also went to a movie. We took in some dancing at the restaurant. I received roses on Valentine's Day. [F, 44, Married, D]

She contributes her night out to making her expectations clear to her husband. Without “instructions,” some informants are confused about what is expected from them.

Expectation Confusion. Confusion surrounds whom to recognize for this holiday. Some wonder if there is an expectation to give to family members, friends, or colleagues. One woman sees her bosses' disappointment each year, so she took the role of her husband:

I gave a rose to my manager. Her husband of ten years had never given her anything (for Valentine's Day)! [F, 24, Single, D]

Sometimes expectations are high from years past. As a result, the behaviors become more extravagant every year. However, fanciness peaks, and the couple adapts to a low-key version of the holiday with acts of voluntary simplicity. Such consumers still recognize the holiday, yet they

do not buy the traditional goods associated with the mainstream Valentine's market. They exclude themselves from such culturally constructed normative behavior.

Exclusion

Exclusion is an experience that appears to influence market resistance and, at times, is influenced by market resistance. Exclusion is traditionally associated with power loss (Skvoretz and Willer 1993). Much extant knowledge of exclusion assumes that the person does not choose to be excluded. Although some informants exclude themselves from mainstream behavior (i.e., internal exclusion), many informants also cite instances of perceived (external) exclusionary forces. In this way, exclusion may be a confidence-reducing, negative force.

External Exclusion. Some informants feel excluded from activities and events (e.g., dinner packages; vacations). In considering Valentine's Day as an event, some feel uninvited. Relationship status often serves as a basis of this "invitation." Many describe it as a market for couples' only. One male suggests to re-name it Singles' Awareness Day. A single woman writes how Hallmark reminds her that she feels left out during the holiday seasons:

Well it's been almost 2 months since Christmas, and us single folks are finally recovering from the psychological damage making it through the holiday season does to us. So as I am almost fully recuperated myself, I would like to extend a warm thanks to Hallmark, the official sponsor of Valentine's Day, for reminding me that without a significant other, how truly worthless my life is. [F, Single, 2-14-04, E]

One woman, although in a dating relationship, feels excluded nonetheless:

I could not see him (her boyfriend) on Valentine's Day and I was constantly reminded of that. [F, 22, Dating, D]

In these cases, retailers, other couples, and marketed holiday events are externalities that appear to stimulate exclusion from the marketplace. Singles, separated individuals, and those in non-traditional relationships feel excluded and often, in turn, exclude themselves from this holiday.

Internal Exclusion. Self-imposed, internal, exclusion may be gratifying, empowering experience. Still considering the holiday activities as an invitation-only event, some do not want to be invited. In these cases, exclusion is welcomed. For example, some are relieved after hearing denial of dinner reservations on this night or that the store is out of red roses. Many informants do not imply that their excluded state is set in stone. Some end their diary entries with future-oriented statements (e.g., “next year I will be out for a romantic dinner”). Just as relationships are dynamic, so is the quantity and quality of gift exchange each year.

Terminal Materialism

Many informants exchange gifts because it is “the thing to do,” or because the holiday is about “going to dinner and exchanging gifts.” Gift exchange becomes a means without an end. Instead, the things exchanged have become the focus for what is meant as an intimate holiday. One male highlights misdirected materialism as a source of resistance:

Guys are pursued to make romance happen through tangible items. [M, 23, Dating, D]

Terminal Exchange. Materialism theories provide guidance for understanding resistance to the traditional Valentine’s Day market. Materialism is the importance a person attaches to material possessions and the belief that certain possessions are a main source of happiness (Belk 2001). Terminal materialism is consumption for the mere sake of consumption (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981), elements of which are apparent during Valentine’s Day. We present the concept of “terminal gift exchange” to describe exchange that is without a deeper meaning.

I don't like the cheap chocolate, teddy bears, etc. And my boyfriend doesn't like the flowers... especially for specific occasions such as Valentines. Even though it doesn't make me want to buy any of the traditional Valentines products... it does get me excited before hand when I see decorations. [F, 22, Dating, D]

For some, lavish nights out and “stuff” become a fixation. A common feeling is that the time together and shared experiences are much more valuable and desired, yet downplayed.

Instrumental Exchange. Valentine's has distinct gift exchange traditions (e.g., red roses, jewelry, cards), some of which bring enjoyment and further relationships. Informants in more established relationships note that exchange should represent meaningful human emotions.

You always hear stories from men who missed the mark on the gift and give the woman an exercise tape while she gives him sand gathered from the beach where they first said 'I love you.' [M, 44, Married, D]

In this case, otherwise little valued items (e.g., some sand) become cherished items. Known as instrumental materialism, possession of things serves goals that are independent of greed, and these goals are associated with forming bonds or links with other human beings (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Thus, gifts serve as vehicles to bring people together. Resistance may breed however, with feelings of obligation (e.g., to give such gifts).

Obligations

Most informants feel obligated to some extent for this holiday. Most obligations are financial, with the majority of the burden going to the male. Males who are dating especially feel obligated.

Males *have to* take the girls out to eat and give them presents. [M, 22, Dating, S]

Often the obligation is towards meeting the partner's expectations:

Males are expected to give their partner gifts because they don't want to get in trouble—instead of because they want to or because they love the person. Women love the idea of romance so they usually have high expectations and give good gifts to their partner in return. [F, 23, Dating, D]

Females do not feel as obligated to purchase a gift for their partner, and they do not feel as much pressure as males (Otnes et al. 1994). Women feel more obligations to buy for friends and family.

Males are robots, always doing the same thing. Females hate Valentine's Day because of their male partner. It is geared toward females because that's what advertisers want us to see. [F, 21, Single, D]

Obligation appears to be associated with negative attitudes towards marketing and retailing. The consumer may feel subordinate (i.e., has less power than the marketer or retailer) as he or she is

in a perceived state of purchase “necessity” stemming from obligatory feelings. This state seems quick and intense, partially due to the last-minute purchases common to the season. Negative attitudes may form towards the holiday and associated marketers and retailers, other consumers, and an internal desire to carryout multiple roles.

Role Exhaustion

Gender roles govern Valentine’s Day. Where Superbowl Sunday is a “man’s day,” this is the female day. Some males feel uncomfortable stepping out of their masculine norm:

It's not very masculine. There are ways of marketing "love" without making us feel like pansies. Most companies can't figure it out though. [M, 23, Dating, D]

Females are the heroines of this holiday, where males enact roles that often recognize the female.

Holiday Heroines. Some note the gender roles in terms of who does the “wooing”:

The male role is to sweep the female off of her feet. The female role is to be swept away.... Males should be the ones to show how sweet they can be because of romance’s history. [M, Dating, D]

Wooing sometimes places pressure on the male:

Males play the role of somebody that cares about their significant other on this day. I feel that a lot of pressure is put on men to plan an acceptable Valentine’s Day. [F, 41, Married, D]

Traditionally, the male is the giver, yet we see a move towards the females gaining a giving role.

Multiple Roles. Some consumers serve multiple roles, which exhaust them. For example, some women recognize their significant other, mother, friends, sisters, colleagues, and neighbors. Other women strive to fulfill the sexy and the practical role:

How many women buy something other than a sexy outfit for their husbands? I bought my boyfriend something practical— a back scrubber and guitar tuner. [F, 21, Dating, D]

Women who are interested in taking the relationship from girlfriend to wife seem especially concerned with fulfilling sensual and practical roles. They appear to show that they are fun and

sexy; yet, someone who would also make a good partner and mother in the future. For some, this is a good chance to show the ability to enact multiple roles. Others see no need for the holiday.

Low Need Perception

Another Marketing Holiday. Some informants do not want to set aside one particular day for love--feelings they can express on a day of their choosing. This is an example of a kind of avoidance, in that consumers avoid celebrating the holiday on February 14th. At the same time, there is a creation process as consumers identify a new time for celebration. Others feel that the holiday is “wholly unnecessary” or not needed to maintain a healthy relationship.

I personally do not make a big deal out of Valentine’s Day. I know the traditions involved, and I have participated in some in the past, but at this point of my life, it’s just another day. My husband and I just make it a point to spend some time together and eat dinner at the dining room table, instead of at the breakfast bar or in front of the television. I don’t need anything fancy from him, because, honestly, I like a 3 Musketeer’s bar more than a box of expensive chocolates, and my husband brings home flowers at least once a month. [F, 38, Married, D]

Mistiming. Love... Now! Some consumers resist commands of *when* to show their love, not the concept of the holiday itself. People feel that they should not reserve love for this day. It is rare that someone makes a connection with why February 14th is specifically “the day” for romance.

I don’t necessarily disapprove of the holiday, but I don’t see why I should suddenly feel more or less romantically inclined on a certain day just because the general public, with eager support from retailers, has decided that this day should be celebrated in a certain way. [M, 33, Single, D]

Such individuals do not like having an external source dictate when to exhibit affection. However, some may “put up” with the holiday because of the perception that women enjoy it.

DISCUSSION: RESISTANCE THEORY AND CONSUMER CREATION

Our research shows that consumers resist and re-create. Based on resistance theory, we introduce a definition of market resistance, which is seen when a consumer does not engage in

culturally established or ritualized marketplace behaviors. Some consumers are ambivalent to and other consumers resist traditional activities and the pre-packaged solutions that business has developed. Situational and socio-cultural factors facilitate and moderate this evolving behavior (Figure 2). We find that the day arouses strong attitudes that appear to trigger behavioral resistance. The process may be partially explained by struggles with business, society, culture, marketing communication, economic and other environments.

The findings help to extend two key areas of resistance theory—ambivalence and avoidance.

Extending Resistance Theory

Ambivalence. Here, ambivalence refers to uncertainty or indecisiveness as to which course to follow. In the literature, resistance entails a feeling of ambivalence about change (Arkowitz 2002), and ambivalence often includes coexisting opposing attitudes. However, in this context, we find consumers are certain about which course to follow. Furthermore, they are often either pro-change or anti-change. The two polarities often do not coexist within a person. That is, with little ambivalence, people have strong opinions (e.g., for or against partaking in Valentine’s Day traditions) and are highly involved (e.g., with the holiday memories).

Avoidance. Research states that resistance entails avoidance of unpleasant feelings (Perls et al. 1951). We find that consumers who report unpleasant feelings or experiences associated with Valentine’s Day avoid the holiday traditions in the formal marketplace. However, facilitated by the growth of electronic environments, we see counter-trends emerging. Using new communication media, consumers who avoid the traditional marketplace often find new “places” to share negative feelings. Thus, we revive the works of Perls et al. (1951) into the digital age by making the distinction that consumers do not avoid their negative feelings completely. Instead, they often

create new (e.g., electronic) channels for the negative feelings that are less apparent in the traditional marketplace.

Considering the nomological framework as a whole, we clarify the role of consumer creation with market resistance. Along with acts of market resistance, consumers create new traditions, meanings, rituals, and trends. While some informants are passionate to maintain traditions, many are *changing or re-creating* traditions. Informants commonly welcome a change in tradition and serve as change-agents. Often, advocates seek to bring sincere romance to a day that many feel that has become overtly commercial and expensive. Advocacy to create new holiday rituals and traditions are based on motivations that are financial and non-financial.

Limitations and Avenues to Extend this Study

This framework serves as a base for scholars to continue theoretical development. Given our research design, we focus on one U.S. consumer holiday. We encourage cross-cultural extensions—especially considering the emerging international status of holiday markets and related events. On a broader scale, more insight is needed in the areas of the resistance to the globalization of holiday markets and events.

Few researchers have focused on what motivates people to resistance markets at different stages of life. For instance, while we found financially-based motivations for resistance behaviors, children likely would not recognize the financial component. Our findings suggest that resistance against traditional holiday behaviors build from memories and years of experiences beginning in elementary school. Valentine's Day begins as an egalitarian holiday with gender-neutral exchanges of cards and gifts. How does all of this change by the adult years, which focus attention on the female? Behaviors and potential resistance drivers learned at an early age evolve over the course of a lifetime and merit further study.

Further, other antecedents to resistance behaviors are thought to stem from the broader marketing communication environment during unique markets and events. For instance, perhaps advertising seen after experiences (such as during Valentine's Day and its related events) may alter a person's memory of the experiences (Braun-LaTour and LaTour 2005), and in turn, impact one's market resistance behaviors. Future studies should recognize and depict how these marketing communications and message timing issues interplay with a consumer's resistance.

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