Exploring how the individual consumer may resist toward foreign products: a qualitative research

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Abstract:
The aim of this paper is to explore the ways by which Tunisian consumers may resist toward foreign products. The results obtained by inductive thematic analysis of 14 in-depth interviews present a new classification of consumer resistant behaviors within three main categories according to logical similarities between extracted themes and codes: basic, escalatory & compensatory groups. Two major types of relations were found between the three extracted themes in either progressive or synchronic associations. Results were discussed and future implications were assessed.

Keywords: consumer resistance, foreign products, interviews, thematic analysis.
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i. Introduction:

While traditional consumer studies primarily deal with consumers positive attitudes and behaviors toward products and brands, attention to negative responses, such as resistance, avoidance and anti-consumption, is growing (Lee & al., 2009) due to market conditions (Kaynak & Ekşi, 2013).

Recently, these negative reactions gain more attention by cross-national marketers. Having many features that simply did not exist in the first three quarters of the twentieth century, today's global consumer is a very different creature than consumers about three decades ago (Samli, 2012). Thus, to explore what consumers think of, and how they react to, products coming from different countries is supposed to allow companies to develop an appropriate marketing strategy (Spillan & al, 2007).

At this level, knowing whether the “foreignness” of a product will affect consumers’ preferences in different countries is one of the oldest concerns of international marketers (Schooler, 1965-1971). This concern is primarily caused by the complexity of international business environment, as much as by the risks associated with the cross-border commercial activities. Also, this concern is related with the expectation of consumers’ negative responses, such as consumer resistance, which conceptualization is a growing field of research (Roux, 2005).

Therefore, in order to explore how consumers may resist toward foreign products (?), the aim of this paper is to explore the forms of consumer resistance to foreign products in local markets at its individual level.

ii. Literature review:

As mentioned by Garcia-Bardidia & al (2011), recent studies attempt to define a broader scope of reactions against consumption using the concept of anti-consumption (Lee & al., 2009; Zavetoski, 2002), which includes less active and visible actions (Hogg & al., 2009) occurring within the system (Cherrier & Murray, 2007). In this context of negative responses, anti-consumption may target overall consumption or specific products as a means of achieving societal or personal goals (Iyer & Muncy, 2009). However, in some cases, resistance is expressed by consumers as acts of anti-consumption (Lee & al. 2011) and the way anti-consumption discourses may help constructing consumer resistant identities (Cherrier, 2009).

Among others, consumer resistance has been defined as "the way individuals and groups practice a strategy of appropriation in response to structures of domination" (Post, 1992, p. 1; in Penaloza & Price, 1993), as “an opposing or retarding force; it concerns activities that exert oneself so as to counteract or defeat” (Webster's Dictionary; in Fournier, 1998), as a "motivational state that drives consumer to oppose merchant practices, logics or discourses considered dissonant" (Roux, 2007), or as “a force of adaptation following an internal, sustainable or situational, conflict reactivated or caused by incongruent or dissonant information susceptible to generate an attitudinal or behavioral response in opposition” (Dandouau, 2010).

However, the most accurate characterization of the consumer resistance is based on its nature in terms of being a behavioral response executed by a psychological internal process, where consumer resistance arises from conflict between the characteristics of the stimulus and consumer’s prior representations (Ram & Sheth, 1989).
In general, the term “resistance” contains the idea of an opposition that is expressed passively (do not give up, do not deteriorate, bear) or actively (in the fight, the struggle, the revolt) (Roux, 2007). With reformist or radical goals, consumer resistance features individual or collective action, directed at altering either the marketing mix or the meaning of products (Penaloza & Price, 1993).

In effect, literature review shows some classifications of consumer resistance depending on the way a resistant action is exerted by consumer. Hirschman (1970) put his typology of consumer resistance between voice and exit. In Voice, consumers express their dissatisfaction directly to management or to some other authority to which management is subordinate or through general protest addressed to anyone who cares to listen, while in Exit consumers stop buying the firm’s products or some members leave the organization.

Also, Penaloza & Price (1993) presented four dimensions of consumer resistance: organizational axis (individual / collective), goals axis (reformist / radical), tactics (actions directed at altering the marketing mix / actions directed at altering the meaning of products), and, a fourth dimension recognizes the importance of the consumer’s relationship to marketing institutions and agents. In addition, basing on Hirschman (1970) dimension, Herrman (1993) added two more dimensions to those of Penaloza & Price (1993): A tactical dimension (exit / no exit) and expression dimension (voice / no voice).

A second approach, presented by Fournier (1998), conceptualizes resistance as an intensity continuum of consumer responses to firms: avoidance behaviors, minimization behaviors (Coping Strategies and Downsizing), and active rebellion (Complaining, Dropping Out & Boycotting). In the same conception of continuity, Ritson & Dobscha (1999) have considered the resistance as a variable form of participation and involvement in the market, so they analyze the boycotts, the refusal to purchase or diversion of certain products as a minimum expression against-power, who find a real achievement in a systematic rejection of the system of consumption.

Furthermore, in order to reduce internal tension (Roux, 2007), or to counteract, foil or defeat maneuvers considered as oppressive (Fournier, 1998), targeting Organizations and/or consumption (Roux, 2007), through Hero or Project identity (Cherrier, 2009), consumers adopt political actions or boycotts (Holt, 2002; Klein, 2000; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004), minimizing consumption behaviors (Dobscha, 1998), avoiding specific brands or products (Fournier, 1998), or postponing, rejecting, or even pro-opposing the adoption or the consumption of certain types of products (Kleijnen & al, 2009).

On the other hand, at the international level, previous studies that addressed the issue of consumer resistance can be divided into two principal currents: the first one deals with consumer resistance in terms of being a consumer choices (or preferences) between domestic and foreign products (Han, 1990; Granzin & Olsen, 1998; Russell & Russell, 2006; Russell & al, 2011), while the second one was addressed to specific forms of consumer resistance (Boycott : Smith & Li, 2010; Al-Hyari & al., 2012 - anti-branding : Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009; Kaynak & Eksi, 2013).

Actually, the majority of previous studies relied on literature to identify the resistant behaviors stemming their roots from psychology. This fact raises the need for a new identification based on a qualitative investigation in new environments.

### iii. Research method:

Given the need for more detailed insights into the behavioral resistant reactions toward foreign products, a qualitative in-depth interviews study was conducted. Actually, the in-depth interview method was suitable to our research due to its ability of exploring and identifying the individual deep-rooted feelings, motivations and attitudes (Crawford, 1997).
Thus, a semi-structured guide was designed (see appendix), tested and finally administered to (14) Tunisian consumers: women & men, between the age of 20 and 60 years. A Purposive sample of (10) interviews, based on guidelines of (Neuman, 2010), was selected due to an initial analysis aimed to detect if the interviewee had at least one tendency to resist toward foreign products. This technique allowed the choosing of those who had relevant information to tell regarding the study subject. Thus, the purpose of the research was achieved by specifying the information rich cases that can be studied in depth (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

Table (1) – characteristics of purposive sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Martial status</th>
<th>Profession</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>PhD student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Int_2</td>
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<td>single</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Insurance employee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Int_4</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Married with 2 children</td>
<td>College Lecturer</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Int_6</td>
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<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Int_10</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Married with 3 children</td>
<td>Assistant doctor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further, the sample was determined by the satisfaction threshold by which no extra new information was delivered by interviewees. Also, an investigator triangulation method (Denzin, 1978) was applied to ensure the quality of collected data, with an inductive thematic analysis based on the guidelines of Braun & Clarke (2006). In addition, Probes, based on Gorden (1992), were used by both investigators to get more detailed answers. Thus, the set of data was collected, between May and September 2015, through written notes and audio tape recording of all interviews that lasted between 25 and 65 minutes.

At the analysis level, following the inductive thematic analysis guidelines of Braun & Clarke (2006), authors were first familiarized with data by reading and re-reading. Then, the coding process started by generating pithy labels for important features of the data of relevance to the (broad) research question guiding the analysis before searching for themes by coding the codes to identify similarity in the data. Themes were then reviewed by checking that they ‘work’ in relation to both the coded extracts and the full data-set in a phase that leads to defining and naming the themes before writing up the final report.

Actually, this technique affords us the opportunity to observe the individual sense-making of individuals with regard to products foreignness-based resistance decisions in order to develop our theory at the psychological level of individual consumers, a level which has been the object of fewer researches than more collective phenomena such as boycotts (Roux, 2007).

Finally, it worth noting that interviews were conducted in Arabic (Tunisian accent), and due to the absence of qualitative analysis software supporting Arabic language, data transcripts were analyzed manually.

iv. Results:

Taking in consideration the aim of this research to identify the forms of consumer resistance toward foreign products, the results of inductive thematic analysis based on the six steps of Braun & Clarke (2006) presented a primary thematic map addressing the forms of consumer resistance toward foreign products. According to emergent relations between themes and codes, a final thematic map was developed, as in figure (1), in which three main types of consumer resistance to foreign products were identified: basic, escalatory and compensatory forms.

Figure (1) : final thematic map, (see appendix)

The extraction of these themes from data started when the researcher noted the existence of logical similarities in the form of behavior described by the consumer in response to the
foreign product. In effect, the forms of consumer resistance toward foreign products are:

1) **Basic resistant forms:**

First group of consumer resistant behaviors toward foreign products emerged during data analysis in the shape of closed-end forms. This means that behaviors related to this group describe mainly a non-consumption theme without any developed attitudes toward more aggressive situations, where consumers either stop or refrain from purchasing the foreign products. Thus, avoidance, reject and individual boycott, were identified as three basic forms of consumer resistance.

- **Avoidance:**
  The first extracted form of resistance was avoidance. The extraction of this sub-theme was mainly evoked by a combination of fear & anxiety feelings described by interviewees along with “avoiding”, “staying away” and “keeping distance” terms used by consumers to express a kind of expected-risk related behaviors.
  “I feel concerned about counterfeits ... as much as possible, I prefer to stay away from buying Chinese products, because they are imitations and their components may lead to severe consumption consequences ...”, a 59 years old insurance employee says. Thus, driven by a desire to keep a safe distance, interviewees expressed such behaviors toward counterfeit imitated products (mainly from China), products from countries disrespecting quality standards (such as African countries), and toward unknown products or products from unknown origins, as well as toward products expected to change their consumption traditions or which may imply negative social, cultural or even health-related consequences.
  “Any foreign product that may require a change in my consumption traditions scares me and I better keep away ... All I know is that I'm happy with who I am and I'm afraid that the required change would be inconvenient or harmful”, a 23 years old, female, student says.

- **Reject:**
  Using terms of “do not accept”, “refuse” and “unacceptable” along with negative emotions such as antipathy or with certain expressions of religiosity, some interviewees described their refuse to purchase certain foreign products. Reasons underlying such behavior were mainly associated by interviewees with their principles or with the products’ country of origin, due to either religious or political motivations.
  “I hate Israel due to its crimes ... when you hate a country you feel the same toward its products ... therefore I refuse to purchase products made-in Israel ... if I found one I'll leave it aside. Even if it was a high quality product I won’t accept to buy it”. A 36 years old PhD student says. Actually, data shows that products made-in Israel were the most rejected products in the Tunisian market. Also, “Non-Halal” products were found to be the target of such behaviors by consumers in such Muslim society.
  “Ingredients play an important role. I clearly refuse to buy products made with alcohol or pork fat, because they are harm to health and also the consumption of such products is religiously forbidden”. A 48 university lecturer, male, says.

- **Boycott:**
  Unlike consumers' tendencies to reject the consumption of foreign products based on their permanent attitudes, some consumers addressed the stop-of-consumption issue. In this case, consumers decided at a specific point of time to stop buying certain foreign products which they purchased before. This expression of individual boycott emerged along with dissatisfaction, disappointment and even antipathy emotions.
« One day I bought an expensive foreign product which was supposed to have a high quality, but I found it didn’t. Therefore I won’t buy it again. When a product fails to satisfy my need I stop purchasing it forever”. __ A 38 years old assistant doctor says. It worth noting that dissatisfaction was mainly related to consumer’s negative experience with the product itself while antipathy was linked mainly with emergent negative attitudes toward the country of origin. “I no longer buy Danish products. Danish newspapers have offended Profit Muhammad. Thus, boycott is necessary for punishing that group.”. __ A 48 university lecturer, male, says. Actually, consumers relied on terms such as “stopped buying”, “not to repeat the purchase”, “no longer buying” and “boycotting” to describe this form of resistance. Moreover, data shows that Denmark is the most targeted country of origin by individual consumer boycott in Tunisia due to religious motivations.

Subsequently, these findings are consistent with the findings of Cho & Cheon (2004, p: 91) who described the behavioral avoidance as a “consumer avoidance actions other than lack of attendance”. In addition, our findings support the conceptualization of reject as an “active decision not to purchase the product” (Kleijnen et al, 2009). Also, these results are consistent with Cissé-Depardon (2006) definition of boycott as a "special response in the context of the theory of dissatisfaction as an element located on the high level of the resistance hierarchy", and our findings support the claim of Thebault & Ralambondrainy (2008) that boycott is not only a collective expression, but rather is an individual expression of resistance offers cognitive and affective dimensions.

2) Escalatory resistant forms:

During the analysis process, a tendency among some consumers to move forward in resisting has emerged. In this case, consumer resistance appeared to be more pro-active than in the basic one. Some consumers developed their attitudes and reactions, not only to void or reject or even boycott, but also to act against the consumption of certain foreign products.

We labeled this pattern of tendencies as “escalatory resistant forms” because of their intensity and strength, and due to their behavioral outcomes that does not stop at refraining from consumption, but rather evolve to include two main dimensions: libeling and confrontation. Also, anger and hatred were the main emotions associated with escalatory resistant forms.

- Libeling:
By using terms such as “exposing” the product, “warning”, “advising” or “telling others” not to buy it, consumers tried either to affect the reputation of the product or its manufacturer or to advice other consumers not to have such negative experiment. “If I had to buy a foreign product and it failed to satisfy my needs I would be very angry and I’ll libel it to make others refrain from buying such product .... I tell my friends that it didn't work fine and that it wasn't compatible with standards ... I also tell them that this company doesn't respect consumers”. A 22 years old, male, student says.

Thus, this type of behavior was notably driven by dissatisfaction. Furthermore, a sense of social or familial responsibility was clearly present in interviewees’ descriptions. “I would speak to others, especially to my family and to my friends, telling, convincing and sharing my experience with them, warning & advising to protect them from what may happen when consuming such foreign
product.” __ a 37 assistant doctor, male, says.

Actually, data shows that it’s a kind of negative word of mouth targeting the product or what it represents and based generally on a negative experience evoking an emotional disappointment.

- Confrontation:

In this strongest form of consumer resistance, consumers expressed more proactive reactions such as “opposing”, “complaining” or even “blaming”. Religious faith and health protection motivation were the main factors contributing in the launch of such proactive resistant behaviors.

“When a foreign product contradicts with Islamic values I feel anger and I try to oppose it vehemently due to my religious beliefs. Many times I complained to a consumer protection authority about certain foreign drinks which claimed not to contain alcohol but it did as I saw on Youtube”. A 24 years old engineer says.

Consumers adopting such behaviors look like having a high sense of moral duty according to their beliefs. This sense emerged in some cases along with the feeling of pain evoked by the religious affiliation when consumer feel threatened as a member in a “targeted society”.

"When I come across a product made in USA or UK in the market I feel the pain and with a rise in adrenaline level. I blame people who brought it to the local market or those who allowed its importation from countries that hate Muslims in general. I go tell them that they do support the wars of those countries' on Islam even indirectly.” __ a 59 years old insurance employee, male, says.

Subsequently, it worth noting that this theme is somewhat consistent with the expression dimension of Herrman (1993) as well as with the Voice classification of Hirschman (1970) where consumers may choose to express their dissatisfaction in a way addressed to anyone who cares to listen. Furthermore, these findings support the existence of more pro-active attitudes characterized by intensity and aggressivity which could be found at the extreme point on the continuum of Fournier (1998) under the active rebellion level.

3) Compensatory resistant forms:

A third theme emerged during data analysis didn’t actually appear independently from previous ones, but rather as a complementary theme where consumers try to repair the situation of unsatisfied need. Thus, the main underlying motivation behind these behaviors is a permanent state of psychological tension caused by the continued lack of satisfying the principal need.

As described by interviewees, consumers usually “look for”, “search” and “turn to” alternatives in order to restore the psychological balance and gain satisfaction. Therefore, a “compensatory resistant forms” label was assigned to this theme.

“I refuse to buy some foreign products for either political or religious reasons (....). In such situation, I look for alternatives”. __ a 24 female student says.

Also, it worth noting that, in this case, consumers generally have two main choices: domestic or foreign alternatives.

When I refuse the consumption of foreign products made in a certain country such as Israel, USA or Denmark, I turn to alternatives, either to those from another country or to a domestic made one which I hope to find.

"When I find a product from a country which industrial norms are unknown well, let's say Brazil as an example, I do not buy it because I’m not ready to take such risk with unknown products’ origins.. In this case, I do not exhaust myself looking for more information about it, because domestic or even other foreign products exist so I immediately turn to one of that alternatives.” __ A 38 years old assistant doctor says.
v. Discussion:

The aim of this paper was to explore the ways by which consumers may resist toward foreign products. The results obtained by inductive thematic analysis of 14 in-depth interviews present a new classification of consumer resistant behaviors within three main categories according to logical similarities between extracted themes and codes: basic, escalatory & compensatory groups. The analysis shows that those groups are not independent of each other. A progressive relation can be clearly found between basic and escalatory resistant forms especially when consumers decide to move forward. On the other hand, an integrative synchronic relation exists between compensatory forms and both basic and escalatory forms.

Figure (2): Consumer Resistant Behaviors toward foreign products, (see appendix)

Moreover, it was clear that each resistant tendency was enhanced by a negative emotional psychic energy stemmed from feelings of fear, anxiety, disappointment, antipathy, anger, pain or even of dissatisfaction permanent status. The expected intensity of each resistant behavior is supposed to be associated with the strength of the psychic charge of established negative emotion. Anxiety leads to avoidance, while pain leads to complaining and blaming.

In effect, these findings suggest several future paths of research, both on a investigation level and the types of applications it could produce. First of all, more exploration of consumer resistance toward foreign products is required. Not only at the behavioral dimension but also further research on resistance antecedents and the relations between factors underlying consumer resistance and their behavioral consequences is expected to present an integrative theory. Moreover, any empirical research on consumer resistance, especially toward foreign products, should rely on factors stemmed from the research population environment respecting the international marketing first base of cultural differences.

On the other hand, our findings provide marketers with a new understanding corresponding to the nature by which the process of consumer resistance may occur. Previous research on consumer resistance shows somewhat a kind of independent relations between resistant behaviors with no clear interferences, while our research shed the light on the existence of two types of relations between those behaviors, as described above. Thus, Marketers can take such relations in consideration when they develop their international marketing strategies trying to overcome consumers' resistance.

Marketers should know that individual consumer resistance may occur at a silent level before proactive. In this basic phase, companies need to quickly pay attention to consumers’ reactions and to improve their situation according to the reasons underlying such behaviors. The proactive phase needs to be treated carefully by the development of innovative communicating solutions in order to absorb consumer negative emotions which appeared to be the energy of resistant tendencies. However, developing alternatives to resisted foreign products may improve opportunities in the Tunisian markets.

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Appendix :

Figure (1) : final thematic map
Figure (2): Consumer Resistant Behaviors toward foreign products

In-depth Interview guide:

1. What does foreignness in general mean to you? And what about products’ foreignness?
   - What are the factors that determine product’s foreignness in the market?
   - Does the product’s made-in information affect your tendency to purchase or not to purchase a foreign product? How?

2. Please, tell me about your attitude toward foreign countries:
   - What is your classification of such countries?
   - What’s your attitude toward the consumption of products made-in such countries?

3. Explain to me please your opinion about the existence of foreign products in Tunisian markets.
   - What is the difference between domestic & foreign products?
   - For you, what are the advantages or disadvantages of trading foreign products in Tunisian markets?

4. Tell me about your experience with foreign products.
   - Which category of foreign products you prefer or don’t prefer to purchase? Why?
     - How do you behave toward foreign products?