

Consumer Movements and Activism

As traditionally conceived, a consumer movement is a concerted effort by activists with a particular concern for a given social and political arrangement to mobilize the power of consumers' consumption practices into a collective effort to change the prevailing social order. However, 21st century social media fueled consumer activism is challenging this conceptualization. Today, movements and activism are everywhere and increasingly diverse, attracting followers from all walks of life. Consumer activism has become tightly entwined with some of the most consequential social change movements of our time. The #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements feature consumer activism targeting companies and their brands whose corporate practices do not align with demands for equity, diversity, and inclusion. Activism around climate change has given rise to 'everyday' activists such as Greta Thunberg who directly link our consumption practices with the declining health of our environment. Growing political polarization and shifts in political ideology further compound societal change pressures, with clear consequences for movements and activism. While consumer movements have traditionally aligned with progressive and liberal ideologies, today we are seeing consumer movements with more diverse political ideological backgrounds pressuring companies to align their brands with - or disavow - certain political interests. These ideological shifts and advances in social media technology fundamentally change the way consumer movements operate and the way consumer activists fight for change.

The purpose of this issue is to investigate how these shifts in the socio-political and technological landscape challenge our understanding of consumer movements and activism. Consumer movements are comprised of various components (e.g., ideologies, technologies, organizations, individuals, emotions, strategies, and tactics) calling for different levels of analysis. This issue seeks to draw on researchers from diverse theoretical and methodological backgrounds in order to explore the range of questions at each level of analysis. Research that draws from field data is especially encouraged, however given the dynamic nature of contemporary consumer movements and activism, all forms of research are welcome including conceptual papers. Each level of analysis introduces a range of research topics and questions. The following are some examples of these questions.

1) Understanding Individual Activism

Much can be made of the democratizing effects of social media that allows all individuals to be actively engaged as activists. However, this same technology has also been blamed for the rise of 'slactivists' - consumers who may pose as activists, but with no focused commitment to any given cause or social change. In addition, consumers are confronted with many conflated social issues.

- What are the different roles, activities, techniques, and narratives that individual consumer activists might engage in?
- Do consumer activists hold a particular vision and commitment for social change, or is such a vision even necessary for an individual to partake in a movement?
- How does a consumer's engagement with activism contribute to that consumer's identity?
- How might other social actors, such as companies, marketers, NGOs, technologies, and brands, play activist roles in shaping social change?
- How do individual consumers respond to a company's endorsement of movement goals, such as when companies signal their support for Gay Pride?
- With the ubiquity of online consumer activism, how do we recast our understanding of the concept of "activism" in the 21st century context?

2) Understanding the Collective Consumer Movement

With our traditional understanding of consumer movements, activist leaders are seen to mobilize resources (primarily people and their movement-related skills) into collective actions that target the social gatekeepers (companies, governments) that may be obstacles to desired social change. However, with so many individual consumers engaging in activism driven by a cacophony of social change issues and ideologies, it becomes harder to conceive of a cohesive collective movement driven by a shared vision of social change.

- What does a consumer movement organization and structure look like when all consumer activist participants have an equal voice?
- Social media and its many algorithms have recently become outrage amplifiers. How does such algorithmic culture-making influence movement mobilization?
- How do consumers develop a sense of identification or belonging to a movement? What novel pathways to movement participation now exist in an increasingly connected consumer culture?
- How does growing political polarization influence the mobilization and identity formation of consumer movements? S
- What kind of new resources—people-related or not—have movements successfully used in mobilization?
- How has digital connectivity influenced movement longevity, and the logic of movements sprouting from prior movements?

3) Understanding Paths to Social Change

Traditional social change theories are rooted in conflict-based paths to social change in which protagonists and antagonists push for change or defend the status quo. However, in a dynamic where all social actors – consumers, marketers and their brands, companies, governments – are immersed in multiple ideological issues and have at their disposal the same social media levers, there may be reason to consider alternative paths to social change.

- How do consumer movements negotiate or determine what constitutes change?
- What kinds of resistance do consumer movements now face, from whom, and how do movements cope with novel forms of resistance?
- Instead of deterministic theories of social change, how might we consider indeterminant paths?
- How do movements deal with success and setbacks?
- How do global consumer movements differ across societies? How does movement localization play out and what does this reveal about these local contexts as arenas for consumer activism?
- The rise of conservative, or even illiberal consumer movements raise the specter of different kinds of social change. Or do movements need to envision change at all?