

# Ethnocentric Consumer Resistance: British Consumers' Resistance to Cosmopolitanism in Domestic Brands

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# **Ethnocentric Consumer Resistance: British Consumers' Resistance to Cosmopolitanism in Domestic Brands**

## **Abstract**

Ethnocentrism, holding one's group above others, is on the rise, notably in the United Kingdom as exemplified by the newly implemented Brexit. Consequently, brands are on a collision course with many of their domestic customers in their overt advocacy of cosmopolitan values. This research draws on theories of power and resistance to explore how British ethnocentric consumers resist cosmopolitan discourses of domestic brands. Through depth interviews with eight British ethnocentric consumers, the findings reveal three core modes of ethnocentric consumer resistance towards domestic brands: articulating their power, contesting the ads, and unmasking the agents behind the brands. This research contributes to our understanding of consumer resistance by developing the concept of ethnocentric consumer resistance.

*Keywords: Resistance; Ethnocentrism, British consumers*

*Track: Consumer Behavior*

## 1. Introduction

*"Mega-businesses, who are selling the whole global system. [...]They aren't interested in the little people. They're just about their brand." (Naomi, 40s)*

Consumer resistance, the opposition to the structures of marketing and corporations (Penaloza & Price, 1993), is intrinsically bound up with power and ideology, both in the way that consumers practice it and in how the field is contested by researchers. The post-structuralist depiction of consumers as passive pawns has been robustly challenged by theorists who portray consumers as perpetual resisters and re-creators of corporations' power (Nepomuceno, Rohani & Grégoire, 2017). In Foucault's (1975/1990) tradition, consumers' relationship with power is central to their resistance strategies. In this paper, we investigate consumers' resistance strategies to corporate power in the case of ethnocentrism. This consumer disposition indicates the centrality of ethnicity in consumers' notions of ideal consumption (Shimp and Sharma, 1987). Given the prominent role of power in consumer ethnocentric behavior, ethnocentrism is an ideal subject for the Foucauldian consumer resistance lens. However, whilst related ideologies such as anti-multiculturalism (Ulver & Laurell, 2020) and nationalist anti-consumption (Varman & Belk, 2009) have had their consumer resistance strategies mapped out, in consumer ethnocentrism, most consumer research is limited to the in/out national group dichotomy made paradigmatic by Shimp and Sharma (1987). Yet as other studies have shown there are many features of consumer ethnocentrism that need not pertain to nation-states, such as ethnic in-group positivity, conservatism, and collectivist mindsets (Bizumic, 2019; Alsughayir, 2019). Thus, to expose some of the political and cultural discourses at play, we study consumer ethnocentrism when directed inwards towards a domestic brand. Specifically, we ask: How do British ethnocentric consumers resist 'British' brands that advocate cosmopolitan values? To answer this question, data was collected in the form of immersed engagement with online "Buy British" social media pages (Kozinets, 2019) and in-depth interviews with British ethnocentric consumers recruited on those pages. Inductive hermeneutic analysis of the interviews (Thompson, 1997) revealed three core modes of consumer resistance: articulating their power, contesting the episteme, and unmasking the agents of power. Our findings contribute by forging conceptual links between consumer ethnocentrism and resistance around discourses of power. We map out how ethnocentric consumers negotiate the countervailing tensions created by 'domestic' brands advocating cosmopolitanism. Finally, we shed light on the cultural dynamics at play following the aftermath of Brexit by looking specifically at British ethnocentric consumers.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Consumer Resistance

Consumer resistance is a form of agency in which consumers aim to withstand the structures of domination of marketing (Penaloza & Price, 1993). Roux (2007) outlines three criteria that must exist for consumer resistance to occur: a force must be exerted, the subject must perceive this force, the subject must try to cancel this force. This role of perception is critical as it encapsulates one of consumer resistance's key topics: subjective knowledge of the dominating force as well as of the self's capability to resist (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Seen through a Foucauldian lens, consumer resistance is an inevitable struggle between the external disciplinary power of brands and the empowered consumer practices of the self (Denegri-Knott, Shroeder & Zwick, 2006).

Since the 1980s, encouraged by Foucault's limelight, consumer resistance research has produced many models of behavior. Amongst these Friestad and Wright's (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model has been especially significant across the field. It has influenced those such as Valor, Diaz, and Merino (2016) in their model of consumer framing of antagonists, and those studying resistance strategies to advertising. Regardless of media or ideological context, the idea and discourse of power figures prominently in these models of resistance.

### 2.2 Consumer Ethnocentrism

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sumner (1906) posited a new sociological theory, ethnocentrism. He argued that people, to a greater or lesser extent, hold their group at the center of their world and rate everything in reference to that center. Ethnocentrism manifests in pride in the symbols of one's own group, and rejection of the symbols of other groups (Levine & Cambell, 1972). Consumer behavior researchers have found great value in ethnocentric-oriented analyses and have shown a significant relationship with purchase behavior. Shimp and Sharma's (1987) CETSCALE, which measures how far a consumer believes in a moral and economic obligation to avoid purchasing products from other nations or groups, formalized ethnocentrism for consumer behavior research. Studies using the CETSCALE have gained further momentum due to the resurgence of nationalist sentiments around the world following the 2008 global financial crisis (Tsai, Lee & Song, 2013). The focus of most of these has been on gauging how receptive one market will be on the introduction of a foreign product or brand (see Alsughayir, 2019). This has limited analysis of

the complex factors that inform consumer ethnocentrism, not least the subject's conceptions of threat and power.

Ethnocentrism is necessarily particular and dependent on ethnocultural context. Modern British nationalism combines the 'othering' of immigrants, perceived socioeconomic marginalization of indigenous Britons, and tensions between 'Britishness' and multicultural values (Bales, 2016). Its clearest expression was the 2016 Referendum to leave the European Union. Central to the British nationalistic disposition is consumer ethnocentrism, with the UK being a market for global goods and trade. Hearn (2017) observed that 'leavers' branded large businesses as organs of a global socioeconomic stratum from which they, and small businesses, are excluded. This is because these nationalists were not simply protesting against the EU but were exhibiting a provincial 'English rage' against London, globalization, and cosmopolitanism (Calhoun, 2017). This highlights the importance of understanding the nature of Britons' response to these threats, which Belk (2017) described as 'collective narcissism', from an ethnocentric consumer perspective.

Consumer ethnocentrism's association with consumer resistance has been in the study of how in-groups, usually a nation, react to threats from out-groups, usually foreign products. However, there are dynamic political and cultural discourses behind ethnocentrism that are not easily observed through this Manichean lens, not least that of power. Power, seen through the Foucauldian lens (how consumers conceive of, discuss and resist it), plays a central role in both consumer resistance and consumer ethnocentrism. As ethnocentrism continues to grow as a consumer disposition this oversight deserves to be addressed in research.

### 3. Methodology

This research looks at British ethnocentric consumers' resistance towards 'domestic' brands that promote cosmopolitanism through their advertising. Cosmopolitanism was chosen because its tenets, including cultural openness and pro-globalization, are antithetical to ethnocentrism (Yoon & Yaprak, 1996). To answer our research question, we conducted qualitative research in the form of engagement with the field of research and in-depth interviews using visual materials. First, to develop an understanding of the phenomenon, the first author spent time locating and immersing himself in social media pages and websites that support British ethnocentrism. Second, two of those Facebook pages, '*Buy British for Brexit*' and '*Buy British*', were used to locate informants (see Table 1).

Table 1. Informants' characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Marital Status	CET score
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Rebecca	F	70+	Retired	Married	3.8
Mary	F	50-60	Translator	Married	4.1
Naomi	F	40-50	Property manager	Single	4.2
Tom	M	50-60	Engineer	Married	3.7
Abigail	F	70+	Retired	Married	3.4
Lily	F	70+	Retired	Married	4.2
Andrew	M	50-60	Finance	Married	NA ( <i>Group admin</i> )
Pamela	F	40-50	Retired	Married	4.6

The interviews were semi-structured, took place over video call, and lasted between 45-65 minutes. After discussing how their ideology influenced their relationship with brands, respondents were shown adverts. The adverts, all from iconic British brands (i.e., Jigsaw, HSBC), were chosen for their unequivocally cosmopolitan messages and relevance to current cultural concerns. Advertising, designed to initiate emotional and social responses from consumers (Ulver & Laurell, 2020), was chosen to best explore ethnocentric consumers' discourses towards pro-cosmopolitan brands. Showing them British rather than foreign brands posed a paradox: the threat to their ideological identity is arising from a source which, economically, they should be inclined to support. This paradox fostered a deeper exploration of their ethnocentric rationales.

An inductive, hermeneutic approach was used to analyze the interviews, allowing the development of our findings (Thompson 1997). The data was coded after each interview to identify emergent themes (Spiggle, 1994). The findings are organized around the three core modes of resistance that emerged to form ethnocentric consumer resistance towards domestic brands: *Articulating Power*, *Contesting the Episteme*, and *Unmasking Agents of Power*. These are defined through a Foucauldian interpretation of power asymmetry, regimes of truth, and subject reflexivity (Foucault, 1966; 1975; 1980).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 *Contesting the Episteme*

*Contesting the episteme* is when the British ethnocentric consumers accused the brands of creating misleading historical and cultural knowledge about Britain. Our informants tended to contest these 'truths' delivered in the cosmopolitan ads by expressing their own facts, figures, and first-person experiences. Rebecca stresses that just because Jigsaw is speaking from a position of power, 'weight', it does not mean the message is accurate:

Well we weren't wearing 'potato sacks' before we joined the Common Market and we won't be wearing them afterwards. So that's rubbish. That's a specious argument. And they put it in there and you're supposed to think it has some weight behind it but it doesn't, it's rubbish.  
(Rebecca, 70s)

Rebecca invokes extra-message information, “*the Common Market*”, to show that there is another episteme of British culture that Jigsaw is rewriting through its cosmopolitan lens. Contesting information, as Aristotle claims in Rhetoric, is inevitable when passions are involved (Garver, 1978). By bringing into being a co-existing episteme, one built on an ethnocentric view of Britain, our informants challenged the cosmopolitan brands’ ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1980, p.108).

#### 4.2 Articulating Power

When our informants articulate their relationship with cosmopolitan brands as a power struggle and reflect on their own resistance capabilities, they are actively *articulating power*. We find their resistance capacities to be both financial and self-affirmatory. Global corporations’ financial power is central to ethnocentric consumers’ opposition to them (Hearn, 2017). Our informants described their personal wealth as a means to frustrate the financial goals of the brands. Mary remembers that:

[The HSBC ad] made me really, really cross. My husband and I withdrew a big load of money from the bank as a consequence and invested in a competitor. We have a big disposable income and HSBC have lost our custom now because of that advert. (Mary, 50s)

She does not consider her act of economic resistance performative or symbolic. She measures the tangible impact of HSBC losing her “big disposable income” and the profit a competitor bank will derive from her “big load of money”.

Self-affirmation theory describes how people reflect on their integrity and sense of self to feel secure when threatened by antagonistic values (Steele & Liu, 1983). In rationalizing and explaining their own attitudes and behaviors, our informants reinforced their ethnocentric beliefs against the threat from the cosmopolitan messages. Naomi described how her self-assurance and self-confidence empowers her to get others on side against cosmopolitan brands:

Those who are shouting loudest are making the most impact, and those who are standing looking bewildered are being pushed to one side. If the [the solution] is boycotting... companies. If we move together as a people – I watch the page growing, the numbers are growing as people get on board – and we need to make an impact. And we can do that by doing what we do best: We shop. (Naomi, 40s)

In describing those being “*pushed to one side*” Naomi positions herself atop a ‘hierarchy of resistance’ (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). This high self-regard has been associated with both self-affirmation and ethnocentrism (Fischer & Zeugner-Roth, 2016). In their discourses of power, it was not enough for our informants to explain their oppositional position of power against the brands. They also need to articulate their relative position of power compared to

other consumers.

#### 4.3 Unmasking agents of power

Our informants looked to identify and describe the individuals and groups responsible for the ads, in an attempt to *unmask the agent of power*. The agents behind the ads are not only remote, they are in some senses ‘foreign’ to the participants. Andrew characterized the type of managers attracted to these companies as London-based cosmopolitans:

In reality, they are a big global company headquartered in Canary Wharf. The management is there. Their business is on a global scale. If you look at the people who join those companies they are more pro-EU people so the individuals then project their corporate views and that comes out in the overall corporate image. (Andrew, 50s)

With these characterizations, British ethnocentric consumers integrate a social ‘othering’ of the agents of power with personal opposition to cosmopolitanism. That these agents are in control of large corporations rather than smaller local businesses was critical as their scale means, according to Tom, they also have political agency:

I guess they’re [Pimlico Plumbers] trying to influence politicians. They’re trying to influence the public who will then influence the politicians who are trying to arrange the divorce settlement. Why was it so advantageous that Pimlico plumbers stayed in [Europe]? That would be my question. (Tom, 50s)

Informants’ suspicion of the objectives of the agents not only animated their resistance, but also gave them license to direct their ethnocentric passions inward against domestic companies. One of the core modes of populist rhetoric is to attack the shadowy elite who is supposedly responsible for all of society’s ills (Mudde, 2004). For our informants, the managers of these brands were not just responsible for these cosmopolitan ads, but for greater misdeeds, commercial and sociopolitical power ambitions. In the language of persuasion knowledge roles, our informants identified themselves as the ‘target’, the company managers as the ‘agents’, and the spread of corporate cosmopolitanism as the ‘ulterior persuasion motive’ (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000).

### 5. Discussion and conclusions

This research contributes to the literature on consumer resistance by theorizing ethnocentric consumer resistance towards domestic brands. British ethnocentric consumers resist domestic brands’ cosmopolitan endeavors in three ways: Articulating Power, Contesting the Episteme, and Unmasking Agents of Power. These three strategies all engage with power in certain ways to resist the messages that threaten their ideology. These discourses are best understood through a Foucauldian lens which uses power to bridge the gap between consumer ethnocentrism and consumer resistance.



This paper adds to known models of consumer resistance, most notably Fransen et al.'s. (2015) ACE Typology and Friestad and Wright's (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM). Our findings contribute to this literature by exposing the role that power plays. For instance, the ACE Typology describes three tactics that consumers use to resist advertising, including avoidance. That the British ethnocentric consumers did not describe systematic avoidance of the ads is significant. This is evidence of their high self-regard as ethnocentric consumers feel they are insulated from persuasion attempts so do not need to avoid them. This points to a potential difference where ethnocentrism empowers consumers to willingly face antagonistic brands, consumers of other dispositions prefer to avoid them. Similarly, Friestad and Wright's (1994) describe how people use knowledge of the topic, persuasion tactic, and agent to cope with persuasion attempts. By unmasking the agents of power, our informants readily engaged in discourses around these knowledge systems. This reaffirms the Foucauldian principle of the interrelationship between knowledge and power: by "defining their adversaries" the ethnocentric consumers undermined the brands' power to persuade (Valor, Diaz & Merino, 2016).

Furthermore, we contribute to the literature on consumer resistance and ethnocentrism, which assigns ethnocentric consumer resistance only towards foreign brands (Kwak et al., 2006), by understanding British ethnocentric consumers' unmitigated animosity towards domestic companies. Our informants' instinct to identify the 'enemy within' (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), shows that in certain conditions ethnocentric consumers create out-groups not just of foreign corporations, but also of domestic organizations which do not share their ethnocentric set of meanings, goals, and symbols.

This research also has strong managerial contributions. British ethnocentric consumers are prone to characterize cosmopolitan brand managers as clandestine and elitist. If managers humanize the 'advocate' this populist distrust could be minimized. Further, we advance that managers should anticipate British ethnocentric consumers' trying to turn peers' opinions against their cosmopolitan brands. If companies are aiming for 'controversy advertising' then this social power could be fostered by brands to increase the reach and awareness of the campaign.

We call for various future avenues to be explored. First, the ad materials only covered three themes (global trade, immigration, and supranational organizations). Many other cosmopolitan issues could provoke different resistance strategies that would prove important to research, including refugees and international aid. Thirdly, the findings are based on a relatively small sample sourced from social network groups. This limited the range of

ethnocentric consumer dispositions, as all participants were highly rather than moderately ethnocentric. Thus, further research should be conducted on larger scales to develop a model of consumer ethnocentric resistance. Finally, more research beyond the traditional in/out-group dichotomy of ethnocentric consumer research should be instigated, especially where the complexities and paradoxes of multinational brands and sociopolitical messaging are concerned.

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