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Exploring why consumers engage in boycotts: toward a unified model

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It has become commonplace for consumers to judge companies against social responsibility criteria. Along with such judgments, many consumers are also taking up action, often using the Internet to virally spread their views. Such consumer-led campaigns can put at risk years of investments in branding. For firms understanding what drives consumers to engage in boycotts is key to minimizing exposure to such viral risk. To date, the academic literature has offered disparate and disconnected findings with respect to boycott participation. In this research paper, we review relevant literature, confirm its appropriateness using a series of in-depth interviews, and use our findings to identify key antecedents to consumer participation in boycotts. We then test our proposed model through an empirical study, thus revealing key drivers of consumers' intention to participate in such boycotts. Our results offer insight into factors that companies can manage so as to prevent consumers from participating in boycotts.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's marketplace, consumers increasingly expect companies to act in an environmentally and ethically responsible manner (Klein *et al.*, 2004). If companies do not act in a socially responsible way, they risk becoming the target of consumer resistance behavior (Klein *et al.*, 2002). This can be through either public or private calls to punish the respective company by refusing to buy its brands (Hoffmann and Müller, 2009). When such activities are actively organized and collectively encouraged, the behavior is termed a boycott (Kozinets and Handelman, 1998). Consumer boycotts are increasingly important for marketing decision making as they have become a pervading and effective instrument to express consumer discontent with a

company and its business practices (Sen *et al.*, 2001; Klein *et al.*, 2004; Tyran and Engelmann, 2005). The results of a poll of 15,500 consumers in 17 countries emphasize the relevance of consumer boycotts. It was found that more than a third of consumers worldwide have boycotted at least one brand (GMI Poll, 2005). Such activities also appear on the rise, with the level of boycotts in the UK in 2007 reported to have increased by 15% in the food and drink sector and 20% in the clothing sector (Ethical Consumer Research Association, 2008). In 2011, clothing boycotts increased again by nearly 40% in the UK from 2008 onwards (Ethical Consumer Research Association, 2011). As we move to an ever more connected world, action on the part of a few consumers can quickly spread virally, thus inspiring others to join in support of their cause. The Internet and other modern means of communication have considerably contributed to this development by expanding the communication reach of consumers calling for boycott campaigns (McGriff, 2012). It is thus imperative for firms and practitioners to understand

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why consumers engage in organized boycotts, so that boycotts can adequately be countered before they risk viral propagation. Unfortunately, little academic research cohesively addresses this area.

Despite the consequences of boycotts to companies and their brands, 'marketing has paid relatively little attention to consumer boycott motivations' (Braunsberger and Buckler, 2011, p. 96). Within the boycott literature (Klein *et al.*, 2004; Ettenson and Klein, 2005; Hoffmann and Müller, 2009; Braunsberger and Buckler, 2011), researchers have been called upon to further clarify why consumers engage or do not engage in boycotts. A comprehensive understanding of the full range of boycott antecedents remains uncharted. Moreover, the empirical investigation of the role of a consumer's commitment to a brand as a mechanism to counter the potential negative effects of boycotts has been initially addressed only recently (McGriff, 2012). The current study continues this research call by providing an explication of the antecedents to consumer intention to participate in a boycott and by examining, in particular, the role of brand commitment in this research context. In doing so, we draw on results of prior research as well as insights gained through our own exploratory study. Our research has important implications for reducing the threat of boycotts being spread virally in our constantly connected world.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

We begin by clarifying key terms. A consumer boycott can be defined as 'an attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace' (Friedman, 1985, p. 97). Although it is true that the operationalization of a boycott lies in refusing to purchase a particular purchase, the implications of a boycott can be much broader. In many cases, such refusal represents the manifestation of a symbolic break in relations between a consumer and a firm. Sen *et al.* (2001) provided additional insight by further distinguishing between two types of boycotts: economic boycotts intend to change the unfair marketing practices of companies (e.g., unfair price increases), whereas social or ethical control boycotts try to force the target companies toward specific ethical or socially responsible behaviors (e.g., responsible employment and/or manufacturing practices). The focus of this research paper is on the latter, social or ethical control boycotts.

Although limited, there is a range of research literature related to consumer boycotts. Some research has tangentially examined how firms can respond once a boycott begins (Spar and Mure, 2003; Eesley and Lenox, 2006). There are conceptual papers that give historical overviews of actual boycotts and/or describe selected case studies of actual boycotts (Friedman, 1985; Smith, 1987; Braunsberger and Buckler, 2011), propose different classifications of boycotts (Gelb, 1995), and categorize boycotts as part of consumer resistance (Fournier, 1998). Additional conceptual papers point out strategies companies can resort to in order to protect themselves against boycotts (Garrett, 1986) or use insights from game theory to display and explain the effects of a boycott and/or the factors that promote consumers' tendency to participate in a boycott (John and Klein, 2003; Innes, 2006). Empirical studies also exist and focus on the characteristics of people participating in a boycott (Mahoney, 1976), on the economic effects boycotts can have on companies (Miller and Sturdivant, 1977; Koku *et al.*, 1997), or on a consumer's motivations to participate in a boycott (Kozinets and Handelman, 1998; Sen *et al.*, 2001; Klein *et al.*, 2002, 2004; Ettenson and Klein, 2005). Across these studies, several antecedents to boycott participation were identified. These include the perceived success likelihood of a boycott, a consumer's susceptibility to normative influences, the costs associated with the boycott such as availability of substitutes or preference for boycotted products (Sen *et al.*, 2001), instrumental and clean hand motivations (Kozinets and Handelman, 1998; Klein *et al.*, 2002), expressive motivations (Ettenson and Klein, 2005), the desire for social change (Kozinets and Handelman, 1998), self-enhancement, and the perceived egregiousness of the company's actions (Klein *et al.*, 2002, 2004). Major research in this area refers to either a cost-benefit approach (Sen *et al.*, 2001) or to socio-psychological theories (Kozinets and Handelman, 1998) to substantiate their hypotheses. Building on these results, we distil and synthesize these antecedents into common root causes. We begin by discussing the role involvement plays in boycott participation.

Involvement can be defined as 'a person's relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values and interests' (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 342). It describes the psychological state of motivation, arousal, or excitement evoked by an object, whereby the individual level of importance of that object is reflected (Bloch, 1982). In the context of boycotts, involvement implies that a boycott topic represents an exciting and therefore motivating issue for consumers. Such consumers, for instance, may have a positive attitude

toward an issue such as environmental protection, which leads to a considerably stronger willingness to participate in corresponding campaigns as compared with consumers who are completely unconcerned about the topic. We argue that the more a consumer's involvement with an issue rises, the stronger their willingness to act in its support. We thus hypothesize the following:

H₁: The higher a consumer's involvement with the cause of a boycott, the higher his or her intention to participate in a boycott.

We next turn to examining the role of commitment. Commitment is regarded as a behavioral pattern individuals cling to, even if alternative or competing behavioral possibilities exist (Lee and Zeiss, 1980). Strictly speaking, Kiesler (1971) described it as an individual's pledge or bind to a behavioral act.

Brand commitment refers to the dispositions a consumer shows toward a particular brand and reflects a consumer's 'emotional and psychological attachment to a brand' (Beatty and Kahle, 1988, p. 4). It is not to be confounded with product involvement that reflects the personal relevance of a whole product class (Grossbart *et al.*, 1987). Similar to being pledged to a particular course of action, brand commitment is related to brand choice in that the consumer is tied to a particular behavioral act that, for instance, consists of constantly buying or consuming a certain brand out of attachment (Lastovicka and Gardner, 1979; Gill *et al.*, 1988). The main effect of commitment is to make consumer behavior more resistant to change by fixing brand choice in the minds of consumers (Traylor, 1983). Or, put differently, brand commitment implies brand loyalty' (Traylor, 1981, p. 52).

With respect to boycotts, increased loyalty to a particular brand should increase the psychological 'cost' of engaging in a boycott. This suggests that consumers committed to a particular brand will be less likely to partake in boycotts. Prior work supports this idea, finding that committed consumers reject information attacking their position (Pallak *et al.*, 1972).

Applied to our study, a consumer who feels strongly committed to a particular brand will adjust his or her behavior in a consistent way with his or her commitment; that is, he or she will not participate in a boycott of that brand. We thus formulate the following hypothesis:

H₂: The higher a consumer's commitment to a brand to be boycotted, the lower his or her intention to participate in the boycott.

We next turn to examine how calls to boycott can vary. The term source credibility refers to a communicator's positive characteristics affecting the acceptance of a message by the receiver (Ohanian, 1990). The source credibility model emerged from a study by Hovland *et al.* (1953) in which they identified two factors that lead to the perceived credibility of a communicator: expertise and trustworthiness. Expertise is defined in different ways in the literature. It can be understood as authority (McCroskey, 1966), competence (Whitehead, 1968), or qualification (Berlo *et al.*, 1969). Within marketing, expertise refers to the receiver's perception that the communicator holds knowledge in a given area (Ohanian, 1991). Trustworthiness, on the other hand, refers to the honesty and believability of the source and reflects the receiver's belief that opinions and statements of the source concerning certain topics are unbiased and can therefore be trusted (Gotlieb and Sarel, 1991). Both expertise and trustworthiness 'are important to conceptualizing credibility' (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2000, p. 43) and prior research has found that credible sources influence consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2000).

Applied to boycotts, it can be assumed that a call to participate in a boycott that is perceived as credible—both in terms of expertise and trustworthiness—will lead to higher consumer willingness to participate. Hence,

H3a: The higher the credibility of the call to participate in a boycott, the higher a consumer's intention to participate in the boycott.

Whether a consumer regards a boycott as likely to be successful also depends on the communications he or she is exposed to (Sen *et al.*, 2001). In the literature, credible sources have been found to have an effect on the persuasiveness of the communication message (Ohanian, 1990). If credible sources indicate the possible success of the boycott, it can be assumed that a call to participate in such a boycott will lead to a higher perceived success likelihood of the boycott by that consumer. Thus, we propose the following:

H3b: The higher the credibility of a call to participate in a boycott, the higher the perceived success likelihood of the boycott.

Consumers generally believe that a larger number of people are able to achieve more than a single person (John and Klein, 2003). This is called the 'strength in numbers' phenomenon (Sen *et al.*, 2001). This means that a large number of people boycotting are more likely to have an effect on the respective company and lead to change than a

single boycotting consumer. Thus, the success of a boycott will be perceived as higher if more people are perceived as participating in the boycott. Hence,

H4: The higher the perceived participation of others in a boycott, the higher the perceived success likelihood of the boycott.

People generally have a tendency to be actively engaged in successful events as they enjoy being the member of a successful group (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Such behavior, for instance, can be clearly observed in sports. Here, successful teams tend to have more fans than less successful ones (Cialdini *et al.*, 1976). Therefore, if a consumer thinks that a boycott will be successful, he or she will be more willing to participate in that boycott. This suggests the latter behavioral possibility is likely to outweigh the former. Thus, we propose the following:

H5: The higher the perceived success likelihood of a boycott, the higher a consumer's intention to participate in the boycott.

Moreover, we assume that the general intention of a consumer to participate in a boycott influences his or her actual willingness to refuse to buy brands of the company to be boycotted. We thus put forth the following hypothesis:

H6: The higher a consumer's intention to participate in a boycott, the more he or she is willing to refuse to buy brands of the company to be boycotted.

Having crafted hypotheses, we now turn to both qualitatively and quantitatively exploring the appropriateness of our proposed hypotheses. In the literature on boycotts, a qualitative approach in combination with a quantitative approach is considered an appropriate means of studying consumer boycotts (Friedman, 1999). We first detail the results of a qualitatively series of interviews with consumers to better understand their decisions and thoughts concerning boycotts. Then we move to a quantitative study in which we statistically test our model using the results of a consumer survey. To enhance readability, we discuss the methodology and results of each study in turn.

STUDY 1: QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION

Methodology and sample

The objective of Study 1 was to gain a better and more nuanced understanding of the research topic. We thus turned to qualitative research and

conducted several in-depth interviews (Hair *et al.*, 2006) designed to illuminate the subject area. The results of these phenomenological interviews were used to explore how individual findings in prior research interrelate. We spoke with 12 respondents between 25 and 58 years old about their involvement and sentiments related to consumer boycotts. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. A screening question was employed to ensure that each participant had engaged in at least one boycott within the last year. Each interviewee participated in exchange for a small payment and was recruited through convenience sampling. The interviews were conducted by all members of the research team. To enhance collation of the interviews and reduce any interviewer-specific bias, we used a semi-structured set of research questions (Funches *et al.*, 2009; Matanda and Ewing, 2012). Data from this phenomenological study were open coded and thematically analyzed by the research team, following established guidelines for qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Maxwell, 2005).

Results

At the onset of each interview, subjects were asked how they would describe a boycott. The following answer illustrates the consumers' understanding of the term boycott: '[. . .], a boycott is an organized public act of resisting various objects, like a product or a company' (Anna, 40 years). Most respondents associated a boycott with the punishing of a company by consumers whose value system was infringed upon through expression of an aversion to objects due to inappropriate behaviors or activities. In their view, a whole range of entities—including brands, products, services, shops, manufacturers, countries, trends, certain behaviors, persons, and political parties and elections—could all be boycotted.

We further wanted to reveal the objectives that can be achieved by boycotting. In the first place, the desire to change something and the desire to call attention to problems in society were mentioned. Furthermore, respondents stated that a rethinking within society could be initiated by boycotting. Another goal of boycotting was to put pressure on a boycott target through economic harm in order to make the target refrain from future breaches. Finally, a desire to express one's feelings about the egregiousness of a breach of rules was stated. Some examples of comments that illustrate these objectives are as follows: '[. . .] to make the public aware of bad things and to express one views and feelings

about these bad things' (Sophia, 25 years). '[...] to create attention for an important topic' (Marco, 38 years). '[...] to stop the unwanted action of the opposite party by putting public pressure on them and harm them' (Stefan, 35 years).

According to our respondents, one reason why consumers participate in a boycott is the perceived relevance of the cause of a boycott. The following example illustrates this factor: '[...] if this is really an important issue for me, then I would definitely boycott' (Klaus, 58 years). If consumers feel involved with an issue, they are more willing to participate in related action. Involvement with a boycott issue is triggered when the issue is in clear conflict with consumers' personal values and moral standards, or when consumers strongly identify with the underlying objectives of the boycott. Furthermore, consumers are more likely to participate in a boycott if they perceive the media coverage of the issue to be trustworthy, sincere, and credible. This includes the media through which a message is received as well; they wish to receive pieces of evidence and facts from media they can trust. Other factors mentioned by respondents that promote participation in a boycott are the perceived success likelihood of the boycott, the existence of substitutes for the boycotted product and/or brand, and the participation of other people. According to our respondents, one is more willing to participate if one personally knows other participants or if publicly known people (e.g., politicians and sportsmen) participate in the initial stage of a boycott.

To obtain a more comprehensive idea of consumers' motivations to participate in a boycott, we also asked our respondents about the reasons why consumers do not participate in a boycott. Here, they mentioned a lack of interest in the boycott topic and laziness toward making a difference. For example, '[...] why should I boycott and invest my time, if I do not care for the issue or if others do it anyway' (Christina, 26 years). They also were reluctant to join a boycott with a low chance of success or if media coverage related to the boycott appeared biased. Interestingly, the majority of our respondents expressed that they would not participate in a boycott if the brands of the boycotted company held great significance to them. Such consumers felt emotionally committed to the respective brand. One comment was '[...] if this product is so important to me and if I really love it, then I would not boycott' (Eva, 39 years).

We also inquired as to how consumers would boycott a product. Most respondents would simply refuse to buy brands of the respective company. Some would also engage in negative word-of-mouth. For

example, one respondent said '(...) I would use the internet and social media channels to express my opinions and to reach others' (Sophia, 25 years). A minority expressed desire to petition or organize information stands in order to shed light upon the socially irresponsible behaviors of companies.

Finally, we asked respondents about the conditions in which they would buy and consume a boycotted brand again. They said that they would buy again if the company publicly apologized for having acted in a socially irresponsible way and exhibited credible changes in its business practices. Others paraphrased this thought by saying that they would buy a brand again if the boycott cause was eliminated or if they did not find any alternative to it. Interestingly, they also referred to the fact that time is a great healer. After a period, consumers simply forget about the irresponsible acts of a company. '[...] at some time, people just do not remember any more what happened' (Karin, 55 years).

The results of our qualitative study lend support for our hypotheses. When consumers consider taking part in a boycott, they are particularly sensitive to the perceived success likelihood of the boycott and the perceived participation of others in the boycott. We also gained support for our hypotheses that consumer involvement with the cause of a boycott and the credibility of the source of a boycott call were influences on a consumer's intention to participate. Likewise, a consumer's commitment to the brand to be boycotted reduced his or her intention to participate in a boycott. Having found initial support for our hypotheses, we now turn to testing them within a combined quantitative model.

STUDY 2: QUANTITATIVE INVESTIGATION

Methodology and sample

Whereas Study 1's purpose lay in exploring the interrelationships of concepts identified within the literature, Study 2 was designed to empirically test the proposed hypotheses. This testing was operationalized through the simultaneous estimation of multiple dependence relationships (Hair *et al.*, 2010). An online survey was conducted to provide the data necessary for model construction (e.g., Hoffmann and Müller, 2009; Farah and Newman, 2010; for survey research in the boycott context). Participants were first asked to read a concocted newspaper article describing a boycott call against a well-known, global soft drink company. A well-known brand was employed as the use of an existing brand has been shown to make

boycott decisions more realistic (Yuksel and Mryteza, 2009). In this newspaper article, which was specifically written for the purpose of the current study, the company was accused of infringing upon environmental protection policies in India, consistent with our earlier focus on social or ethical control boycotts (Sen *et al.*, 2001). After reading the article, respondents were asked to answer questions related to the model constructs. Participants were randomly selected from a panel by a market research firm in order to match the population. A total of 243 usable questionnaires were obtained, representing a 12.1% response rate. The average age of respondents was 27.6 years, with the youngest being 17 years and the oldest being 62 years. Gender distribution was fairly equal with 48.1% female and 51.9% male respondents. Save for a slight bias toward younger consumers, our sample loosely matched the general population.

Analysis and results of the measurement models

Constructs are typically evaluated through a number of reliability and validity criteria, which can be divided into first- and second-level parameters (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988). Criteria of the first level follow early methods derived from psychometrics (Churchill, 1979). These include exploratory factor analysis, item-to-total correlations, and Cronbach's alpha (α). The most prominent method of second level measures is confirmatory factor analysis, which was also applied in this case. Model parameters were estimated with the help of confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL (Diamantopoulos and Siguaw, 2000). The reliability and validity of the measurement models were assessed through global and local

goodness of fit (Bagozzi and Baumgartner, 1994). Because of moderate violations of normality of the data, we applied the Satorra–Bentler adjustment for non-normality (Satorra and Bentler, 1994).

We drew on existing scales wherever possible (Table 1). All items were measured on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. As Table 1 shows, all scales exhibit acceptable values, which implies high precision of the measurements used. Tests for discriminant validity of the study constructs revealed no concerns (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

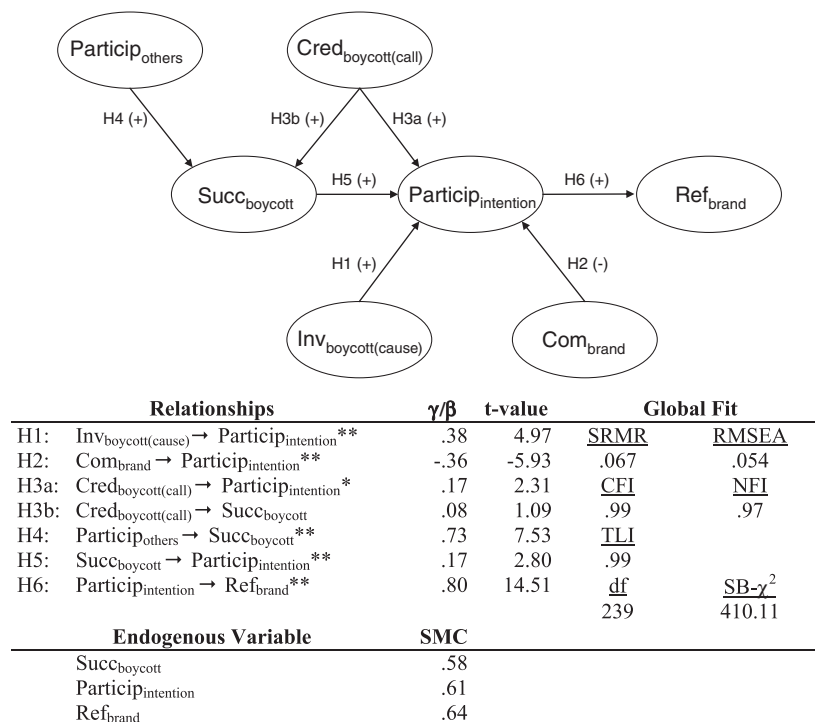
Analysis and results of the structural equation model

To test the proposed relationships stated in hypotheses H1 to H6, we performed structural equation modeling with LISREL using maximum likelihood estimation corrected for non-normality (Satorra and Bentler, 1994). The model (Figure 1) shows an excellent fit with all global fit criteria met: $SB-\chi^2 = 410.11$, $df = 239$, $RMSEA = 0.054$, $SRMR = 0.067$, $NFI = 0.97$, $TLI = 0.99$, and $CFI = 0.99$. This allows the interpretation of the following results.

Consumer involvement with the cause of a boycott strongly influences his or her intention to participate in the boycott ($\gamma = 0.38$, H1). As anticipated, there is a negative effect of consumer commitment to the brand to be boycotted on his or her intention to participate in the boycott ($\gamma = -0.36$, H2). The credibility of a call to participate in a boycott also shows a positive relationship with a consumer's intention to participate in the boycott ($\gamma = 0.17$, H3a). However, the credibility of the call to

Table 1 Constructs employed in understanding boycott participation

Construct	Source(s) based on	Item #	Cronbach's α	Factor loadings	Explained variance
Involvement with a boycott cause: $Inv_{\text{boycott(cause)}}$	Srinivasan and Ratchford, 1991; Sen <i>et al.</i> , 2001	5	0.93	0.83–0.92	0.79
Commitment to the brand to be boycotted: Com_{brand}	Lastovicka and Gardner, 1979	3	0.85	0.88–0.89	0.78
Credibility of a call to participate in a boycott: $Cred_{\text{boycott(call)}}$	Beltramini and Evans, 1985; Ohanian, 1990	4	0.94	0.91–0.94	0.86
Perceived participation of others in a boycott: $Particip_{\text{others}}$	own development	2	0.67	0.87–0.87	0.75
Perceived success likelihood of a boycott: $Succ_{\text{boycott}}$	Sen <i>et al.</i> , 2001	4	0.90	0.87–0.91	0.78
Intention to participate in a boycott: $Particip_{\text{intention}}$	Machleit <i>et al.</i> , 1993; Sen <i>et al.</i> , 2001	3	0.87	0.88–0.91	0.80
Refusal to buy brands of a company to be boycotted: Ref_{brand}	Gill <i>et al.</i> , 1988; Spears and Singh, 2004	3	0.92	0.92–0.95	0.87



NOTE. γ/β = path coefficients; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; RMSEA = Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; NFI = Normed Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; df = degrees of freedom; SB- χ^2 = Satorra-Bentler adjusted χ^2 ; SMC = Squared Multiple Correlation (comparable to R^2 in regression analysis).
 * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$

Figure 1 Conceptual model and results of the test of causal relationships

participate in a boycott does not significantly influence the perceived success likelihood of the boycott (H3b). Therefore, we did not find support for H3b. The perceived success likelihood of a boycott is strongly influenced by the perceived participation of others in the boycott ($\gamma = 0.73$, H4) and also influences a consumer's intention to participate in a boycott ($\beta = 0.17$, H5) that, in turn, has an effect on consumer refusal to buy brands of the company to be boycotted ($\beta = 0.80$, H6). Our model can explain 61% of the variance of a consumer's intention to participate in the boycott, 64% of the variance in a consumer's refusal to buy brands of the company to be boycotted, and 58% of the variance in the perceived success likelihood of a boycott. Having presented the results of our study, we now interpret their significance more broadly.

DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

In today's marketplace, consumers have a great interest in the ethical behavior of companies. Firms

now recognize that the achievement of their goals is dependent on consumers consenting to their business practices (Eesley and Lenox, 2006). If they do not act in a socially responsible way, they will risk being the target of consumer boycotts, many of which are being accelerated through use of the Internet (Earl and Kimport, 2009). This can lead to severe economic consequences through a loss in sales or to severe damage of corporate reputation and brand image. From a firm's point of view, it is important to understand the drivers of boycott participation so as to take appropriate countermeasures. By further exploring antecedents to boycott participation in a unified manner, we hope to shed light on this area.

Our findings reveal several drivers of consumer boycott participation. The credibility of a call to participate in a boycott as well as consumer involvement in a boycott's underlying cause influences a consumer's intention to participate in a boycott. Firms should therefore pay close attention to calls that gain broad media coverage and feature with credible information sources. The Internet is increasingly a source of such information. The perceived

participation of others has a strong effect on the perceived success likelihood of a boycott which, in turn, affects intention to participate in the boycott. For firms, calls that go viral using social media are particularly of concern as that medium allows consumers to immediately gauge participation through 'view' or 'like' statistics.

Managers can also be more proactive in trying to prevent a boycott cause from spreading virally. One option might include press releases to counterbalance the media activities of boycott organizers. As well, our study's results show that consumer commitment to the brand to be boycotted negatively influences consumer intention to participate in a boycott. Therefore, a strong brand image that leads to highly committed customers might be a protective barrier to boycott calls. Brand managers should thus invest in campaigns that intend to make consumers feel passionate about their brands. Although consumer boycotts are a growing concern, further understanding of their operation will help managers address them.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study is subject to limitations because of its design and chosen analysis. The questions that were chosen to be asked in the in-depth interviews, the manner in which they were asked, and the resulting coding are all subject to individual interpretation. Although standard safeguards were employed—such as having multiple interviewers and coders—it is still possible that some bias remains in our data collection and analysis. Likewise, the convenience sample we employed may not accurately represent the wider population.

Our quantitative study is also subject to limitations. Although efforts to reduce any potential bias were used, it is possible that the sample is not an accurate representation of the wider population. Common methods variance might also exist within the data set—something future researchers may wish to explore. In terms of results, although it is true that empirical work can be objectively assessed through statistical tests, the underlying choices made in forming a model ultimately affect these tests. It is possible that a yet to be discovered construct is missing from the model or that a better model exists. For this reason, we encourage future work in the boycott area. The choice of an existing brand in our scenario may also have influenced results. Finally, we recognize that consumers in different cultures might respond differently under the same circumstances.

Future research might also focus on examining further strategies for companies to effectively

respond to boycotts, especially in an online context. We hope this initial model provides fertile ground for such exploration. Another potential avenue lies in examining the techniques consumer-organizers use online to recruit fellow supporters. An understanding of these mechanisms would give firms additional insight. Finally, conducting a meta-analysis to develop a comprehensive overview of antecedents to and consequences of boycott participation would be of high relevance for both managers and researchers dealing with boycott issues.

CONCLUSION

The current research explores why consumers engage in boycotts, providing insight on consumer activities that in many cases go viral literally overnight. We respond to research calls to unveil consumers' motivations to take part in a boycott and to investigate the role of brand commitment as a mechanism to counter-boycott campaigns. On the basis of a literature review, we put forth hypotheses concerning consumer boycott participation. We first use qualitative interviews, the results of which lend support for our hypotheses, which were then tested within a survey design. In our unified model, we find that a consumer's involvement in a boycott cause, as opposed to either the perceived success likelihood of the boycott or the credibility of the call to participate in a boycott, is the most important driver of his or her intention to participate. Moreover, we present empirical evidence that a consumer's brand commitment negatively influences consumer intention to participate in a boycott. Thus, brand managers interested in countering boycotts—and their potential to spread online virally—should invest in brand image campaigns that make consumers feel passionate about their brands. Boycotts, it would seem, are best countered with a strong offense.

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