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Stefan Hoffmann

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Anti-consumption as a means to save jobs

Stefan Hoffmann

*Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business Management and Economics,
Technical University of Dresden, Dresden, Germany*

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to explore how idiosyncratic motives drive participation in consumer boycotts and how the motives of different adopters (e.g. innovators, laggards) differ. The study seeks to describe how boycott motives are embedded in the fields of consumer resistance and anti-consumption.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper applies a mixed-method approach of qualitative and quantitative methods. Internet postings of 790 boycott supporters are analyzed by means of a content analysis. The relevance of different motives is examined via frequency analysis. Contingency analysis is applied to explore segment-specific motives.

Findings – Using the example of factory relocation, the study identifies several idiosyncratic motives that are contingent to the boycott cause. Additionally, it confirms that the motives of different adopters differ. Individuals who are personally affected or feel solidarity with those affected join the boycott relatively early whereas those who join later consider the pros and cons of the boycott more rationally.

Research limitations/implications – Further research should apply quantitative research methods to ensure the stability of the findings. The external validity needs to be tested for different boycott types.

Practical implications – Some consumers join boycotts because they feel solidarity with those affected by the actions of a company (resistance-boycotter), whereas others generally criticize the free-market economy and are generally prone to boycott any company (anti-consumption-boycotters). Companies need to ensure that both types of boycotters consider them socially responsible.

Originality/value – This study provides evidence that boycott motives are case-contingent. Additionally, this is the first study to demonstrate how motives for joining a boycott vary in the course of time.

Keywords Consumer boycott, Factory relocation, Corporate social responsibility, Content analysis, Mixed methods, Consumers, Motivation (psychology)

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction and background

Given the growing interdependence of the world's economies, more and more employees in high-waged industrialized countries are afraid of losing their jobs because multinational enterprises shift subsidiaries to low-wage countries. As national governments often have no control over these relocation decisions, non-governmental organizations try to fill the vacuum of control by calling out consumer boycotts. This type of political action is 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 market place” (Friedman, 1985, p. 97). A large number of consumers follow boycott calls to help control multinational enterprises, to retaliate or to vent their frustration (Hoffmann and Müller, 2009; Klein *et al.*, 2004, Shaw *et al.*, 2006). For example, 39 percent of German consumers agree that companies that reduce jobs,



despite making good profits, should be boycotted (Infratest-Dimap, 2006). The fifth wave of the World Values Survey (World Values Survey Association, 2009) shows that a substantial percentage of the population in industrialized countries have already taken part in boycotts for this or other reasons, for example:

- Sweden: 27.9 percent;
- Canada: 21.6 percent;
- US: 21.2 percent;
- Italy: 19.7 percent;
- UK: 17.2 percent;
- Australia: 16.7 percent;
- France: 13.7 percent; and
- Germany: 8.8 percent.

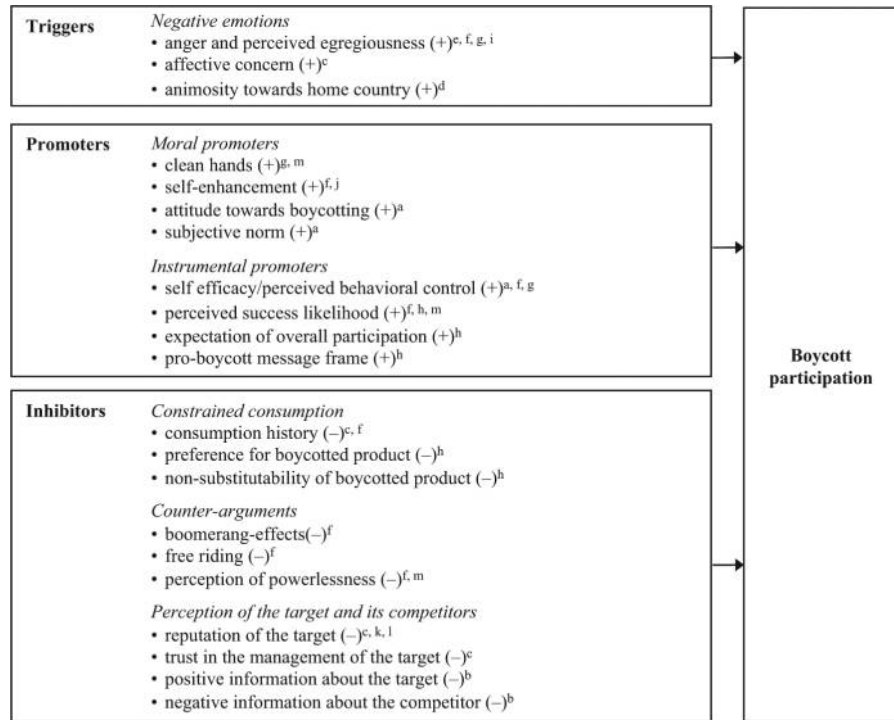
Since boycotts negatively affect the target company's reputation, sales, and stock price and since they are potentially effective to force change in corporate policy (Davidson *et al.*, 1995) the question of what motivates consumers to join boycotts is relevant from both a managerial and a societal perspective.

Boycotts can be considered a type of anti-consumption, which is a means of consumer resistance. The concepts of anti-consumption (Zavestoski, 2002; Lee *et al.*, 2009) and consumer resistance (Cherrier, 2009; Penaloza and Price, 1993; Roux, 2007) have several aspects in common. However, while anti-consumption is always expressed as the abstention from consumption in a certain domain, consumer resistance also comprises active consumption of specific goods (e.g. consumption of the goods of alternative producers or participation in co-ops). The phenomenon of consumer boycotts is a demonstrative example of the overlap of both concepts. It combines the voluntary reduction of one's own level of consumption regarding at least one domain or brand, which is a striking characteristic of anti-consumption, with the wish to oppose a dominant force, which is a central aspect of consumer resistance. Within Iyer and Muncy's (2009) typology of anti-consumers, boycotters can be ascribed to the market activists who reject specific brands rather than refraining from consumption in general for societal rather than personal reasons.

In the period from 1976 to 2009, thirteen articles have empirically analyzed the individual antecedents of boycott participation. To systematize these antecedents, we introduce a taxonomy of three distinct categories:

- (1) triggers;
- (2) promoters; and
- (3) inhibitors.

Triggers are variables that prompt the individual to consider participating in a boycott. Promoters encourage consumers to join, while inhibitors provide reasons not to take part (Figure 1). Only few studies investigate antecedents that can be assigned to the category triggers. These studies focus on negative emotions, such as anger or perceived egregiousness (Klein *et al.*, 2004; Nerb and Spada, 2001). Two types of promoters can be identified. One emphasizes the moral implications of boycott participation including the desire to act morally and the striving for self-enhancement



Notes: Relationship between the antecedent and the boycott participation: (+) positive; (-) negative. ^a Farah and Newman (2009); ^b Yuksel and Mryteza(2009); ^c Hoffmann and Müller (2009); ^d Ettenson and Klein (2005); ^e Tyran and Engelmann (2005); ^f Klein *et al.* (2004); ^g Klein *et al.* (2002); ^h Sen *et al.*(2001); ⁱ Nerb and Spada (2001); ^j Kozinets and Handelman (1998); ^k Belch and Belch (1987); ^l Miller and Sturdivant (1977); ^m Mahoney (1976)

Figure 1.
Empirical findings on the antecedents of boycott participation

(Klein *et al.*, 2004; Kozinets and Handelman, 1998). The second type concerns boycott effectiveness, which has been analyzed on the individual level (self-efficacy) as well as on a general level (perceived likelihood of success; Sen *et al.*, 2001). Several inhibitors have been discussed in literature. Since boycotting implies constraining one's previous patterns of consumption, the consumer is less likely to participate if he likes the product and if there are no adequate substitutes (Sen *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore, counter-arguments such as the perceptions of powerlessness impede participation (Klein *et al.*, 2004). The more consumers trust in the management, the less likely they are to boycott (Hoffmann and Müller, 2009).

Given that boycotts have different causes and different objectives (Friedman, 1999), scholars need to examine the idiosyncratic mechanisms of participation for each particular type of boycott (e.g. labor, religious, ecological boycotts). Earlier studies indicate that some motives are universal and some are specific for the type of boycott under consideration. For example, consumers consider the perceived efficacy and the possibility of free-riding with regard to different types of boycotts (e.g. due to animal experiments, price increases, or factory closures; Klein *et al.*, 2004; Sen *et al.*, 2001). It

seems that these antecedents are universal, whereas other drivers are case-specific. For boycotts due to factory closure, for instance, scholars have already ascertained idiosyncratic drivers, such as the danger of a boomerang effect or the reputation of the subsidiary to be closed, which are not transferable to other types of boycott (Hoffmann and Müller, 2009; Klein *et al.*, 2004). Presumably, participation in this type of boycott is also motivated by several additional factors neglected so far, such as solidarity with the dismissed co-workers and a negative attitude towards globalization. In contrast, participating in other types, is caused by other idiosyncratic drivers. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of boycott participation, this study highlights the importance of case-specific investigations. We show that sole reliance on boycott drivers that are derived from general boycott theories draws an incomplete picture of participation. We investigate whether idiosyncratic drivers of participation have been neglected because scholars based their investigations mainly on general theories of boycotting. We have chosen the example of boycotts due to factory relocations, because they are highly relevant from a practical point of view. In the industrialized countries the fear of becoming unemployed because jobs are exported drives many people to boycott in order to prevent or at least to protest against offshoring. After Nokia announced its planned relocation of the German subsidiary to Romania, 56 percent of German consumers intended to avoid purchasing Nokia mobile phones (Weber, 2008).

RQ1. Are there idiosyncratic antecedents of participation in a specific type of boycott (here: due to factory relocations) which are neglected when only general theories of boycotting are considered?

To increase the understanding of boycott participation, it is not only necessary to consider different types of boycotts separately, but also different types of boycott supporters. To date, drivers have only been analyzed in cross-lag designs, which did not take into account the dynamics of a boycott. Not all participants join at the same point in time. The idea of a boycott diffuses over a certain period of time through social networks. As boycotts are only influential if they reach a critical mass of followers, the question of how different consumers are motivated to join at different stages in time becomes relevant. While *RQ1* extends the assumption that boycott motivation can be explained by a limited set of general drivers (e.g. perceived efficacy) by the moderating variable of different types of boycotts, *RQ2* introduces the adopter type as another moderator. We ask whether general and idiosyncratic boycott drivers (as identified via *RQ1*) depend on the point-in-time when a consumer adopts the boycott idea. This investigation is based on Rogers' (2003) diffusion theory, which distinguishes different types of adopters. Each type (e.g. innovators, laggards) is characterized by specific traits and motives. For example, innovators and early adopters are more impulsive. They take less time than late adopters to decide whether or not they adopt an innovation. Transferring the adopter taxonomy to the investigation of boycott participation, we propose that the point in time when a consumer joins a boycott co-varies with his traits and his motives for joining. We assume that those who join first are more impulsive and more likely to draw independent decisions, whereas later adopters base their decision on rational considerations and the influence of others, who are important to them. Note that despite using the example of factory closings, the

analysis of the adoption process provides theoretical implications for all types of boycott and maybe even for all types of anti-consumption and consumer resistance.

RQ2. Do the motives for joining a boycott vary over time?

2. Design

2.1 *Objective of investigation*

To answer our research questions we investigated internet postings of participants in an online petition for a real boycott due to factory relocation. In 2006 a Swedish appliance manufacturer announced the closing of its German subsidiary and the shift of production to an Eastern European country. The management announced that more than 1,700 workers would lose their jobs. The labor union and a local non-governmental organization denounced the relocation as socially irresponsible. They organized a consumer boycott to influence the decision of the Swedish holding and, thus, to save the jobs. Due to wide media coverage, many German consumers were aware of the relocation and followed the boycott call.

2.2 *Sample*

The organizers of the boycott launched a web site supporting the goals of the boycott. A total of 790 consumers put their names on an online petition. In their postings they commented briefly on the behavior of the target company and on the boycott. As no guidelines on how to write the postings were provided, the postings reflect the petitioners' way of thinking in a non-reactive, unbiased way.

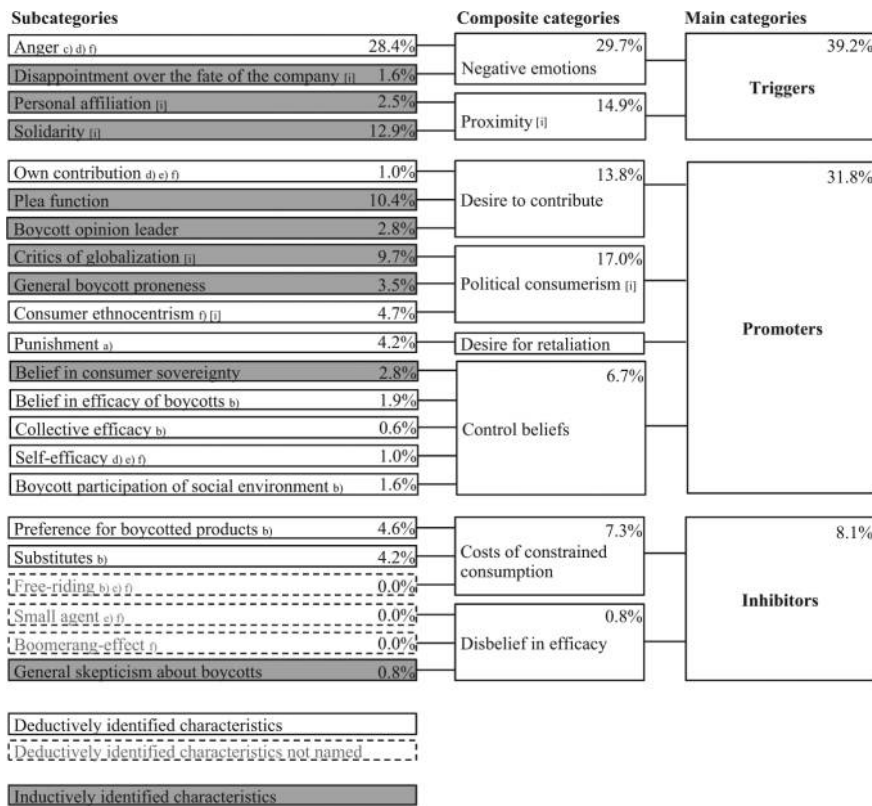
Biases due to multiple postings of petitionists could be ruled out by the inspection of the names. Moreover, the petitionists' sex could be concluded from the first name in 593 cases. Far more men (75.0 percent) than women (25.0 percent) participated. 357 of the petitionists published their age, which is 39.4 on average ($SD = 13.2$).

In accordance with Rogers' (2003) adopter taxonomy, we distinguished between innovators, early adopters, late adopters and laggards. Note that those who created the web site are not innovators, but initiators. Cut-offs for defining the adopter types are orientated towards the quartiles. In this way, we gained almost identical group sizes, which ensured that each group might consist of a reasonable number of mentions to run statistical tests. Those petitionists, who joined the boycott within the first four days after the initiators launched the web site, were categorized as innovators (24.1 percent). Early adopters are those who joined between day five and eight (26.2 percent), late adopters those joining up to the end of the second week (24.3 percent) and laggards those who joined even later (25.4 percent).

2.3 *Procedure of investigation*

To gain a deeper and wider understanding of idiosyncratic boycott drivers, this study applies an explorative mixed-methods approach of qualitative and quantitative research methods, which is a generalization design according to Srnka and Koeszegi's (2007) typology. It contributes to theory development by qualitative methods and to the generalization of the findings by quantitative methods. First, qualitative methods were used to identify characteristics of the research object. These characteristics were then transformed into quantitative data to run analysis with statistical methods.

Starting point was a scheme of 14 categories, which were deduced from general boycott theories and previous empirical findings (Figure 2). Four pretests were



Sources: a) Friedman (1999); b) Sen *et al.* (2001); c) Nerb and Spada (2001); d) Klein *et al.* (2002); e) John and Klein (2003); f) Klein *et al.* (2004) [i] Idiosyncratic or not applicable to every other type of boycott

Figure 2. Scheme of categories

conducted to validate and expand this scheme. In the first pretest, three coders with profound knowledge in marketing research analyzed 100 postings. They assigned the postings to the deductively derived categories. Based on the comments that do not fit the existing categories, new categories were inductively developed. Within the first pretest, the coders identified seven categories that have been neglected so far. In the second pretest, which was based on a new sample of 100 postings, two additional categories were found. As the third pretest with 100 postings revealed no new categories, all postings were categorized in a fourth pretest and the coding plan was refined a final time. The main study was conducted by three coders who were different from those of the pretests. They recategorized the whole set of 790 postings.

2.4 Intercoder reliability

To ensure that the findings are independent of the perspective of single researchers, we examined the intercoder reliability, applying the software PRAM 0.4.5. Due to the iterative refinement of the coding scheme, the intercoder reliability reflected a stepwise improvement of the coder agreement within the course of the four pretests. Because of

the well-prepared coding plan, the average intercoder reliability was very high in the main study (Lombard *et al.*, 2002): Krippendorff's Alpha = 0.87; Scott's Pipostmodern0.89; Cohen's Kappa postmodern0.87.

3. Findings

3.1 Category scheme and frequencies

A hierarchical category scheme was developed which comprises main categories, composite categories, and subcategories (Figure 2). Frequency analysis revealed that most petitionists mention the main categories triggers (39.2 percent) and promoters (31.8 percent). Only few petitionists refer to inhibitors (8.1 percent).

Triggers: This main category consists of two composite categories. Negative emotions are either disappointment over the fate of the subsidiary or anger. In the present case, the latter is caused by a sense of injustice, which develops because of mass dismissal and the profit striving of the company. Proximity, the second composite category, was inductively identified. It covers personal affiliation, which means that the petitioner himself, or members of his family, are directly affected by the factory closing. It also covers solidarity which arises if individuals consider those losing their jobs as members of their in-group because they belong to the same socio-ecological status or because they have a similar type of occupation. Consequently, the petitionists empathically feel an unpleasant state of activation, which motivates them to help those in need by boycotting (Stürmer *et al.*, 2006).

Promoters: We inductively identified several subcategories of the four promoters that have been disregarded in previous research. In the case of desire to contribute, for instance, petitionists want to support the boycott not only by changing their own purchasing behavior, but also by urging others to join. Moreover, our analysis revealed that political consumerism, which is the tendency to express one's political beliefs by means of purchasing behavior (Micheletti *et al.*, 2003), fosters boycott participation in three ways. First, many petitionists are generally skeptical about free-market economy and globalization. In face of national governments hardly being able to control multinational enterprises, the petitionists claim that consumers need to take control via their purchasing decision. This subcategory is a facet of consumer resistance (e.g. Cherrier, 2009; Penalzoza and Price, 1993) and it can be seen as an analogy to the construct of predatory globalization, which is a dimension of the construct politically motivated brand rejection (Sandikci and Ekici, 2009). Second, some petitionists tend to support more boycotts than only the present one. Those who utter boycott proneness are highly politically motivated consumers who actively search for companies that should be boycotted because of their irresponsible behavior. Third, many politically concerned consumers join the boycott for ethnocentric reasons. In addition to boycotting the multinational holding, they intend to buy only domestic products to support the economy of their home country.

Inhibitors: Some petitionists discuss whether boycotting would constrain their consumption patterns. Others state that they generally disbelieve in the efficacy of boycotts. No one refers to the small agent problem or the free-rider effect, which are widely discussed in boycott literature. Nonetheless, the findings do not imply that inhibitors are not relevant. Our data set consists only of consumers who agreed to join the boycott. This sample is inappropriate for identifying inhibitors. Further research should conduct explorative, qualitative studies with other consumer groups.

3.2 Motives of different adopters

A contingency analysis reveals that the point in time when a person joins a boycott is related to his motives for participating. A chi-squares-test demonstrates that differences between the four groups of adopters are statistically significant with regard to all three main categories. This finding is mirrored in several composite categories. Consumers who participate relatively early give only few reasons. Petitionists who join later mention far more reasons, such as negative emotions, desire to contribute, and political consumerism.

An analysis of a priori contrasts detects that laggards emphasize the costs of constrained consumption significantly more often than any other group (Table I). Obviously, they are tempted to boycott, but unwilling to abandon their preferred products. They come to a decision only after having thoroughly weighed the benefits of boycotting against the personal disadvantages.

Notably, findings are vice versa in case of proximity, which is mentioned most often by early adopters. Presumably, individuals who are personally affected or feel a strong degree of solidarity want to act immediately. They impulsively decide to join the boycott, whereas those not affiliated take more time to decide rationally whether or not to participate (Figure 3). Due to the more elaborate decision process, late adopters are aware of different arguments and they therefore describe more reasons in their online postings. Further research needs to scrutinize this *post-hoc* explanation.

4. Conclusions

This paper examines motives for joining boycotts by applying both a deductive and an inductive approach. Of 14 antecedents, which have been deductively derived, three are not replicated. On the other hand, we inductively identify nine new antecedents. Notably, these findings are based on internet postings which were not submitted for the sake of a research project. They are real statements from consumers in real life. Thus, all statements are highly relevant and salient for the petitionists.

	Global group differences			A priori contrasts		
	Chi ² (df = 3)	p	C	1 vs. 2/3/4	1/2 vs. 3/4	1/2/3 vs. 4
Triggers	24.48	0.000	0.18***	***	***	**
Negative emotions	23.15	0.000	0.17***	***	***	**
Proximity	26.38	0.000	0.18***	***		
Promoters	32.05	0.000	0.20***	**	***	***
Desire to contribute	24.39	0.000	0.18***	*	*	***
Political consumerism	17.63	0.001	0.15***		***	***
Desire for retaliation	7.04	0.70	0.09	—	—	—
Control beliefs	5.24	0.080	0.08	—	—	—
Inhibitors	13.24	0.004	0.13**	—	—	***
Costs of constrained consumption	16.14	0.001	0.14***	—	—	***
Disbelief in efficacy	0.64	0.887	0.03	—	—	—

Notes: Chi-squares-test. C=Pearson's C, contingency coefficient. * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$. A priori contrasts explore the overall statistically significant differences between the four adopter groups: 1 vs. 2/3/4=[innovators] vs. [early adopters, late adopters, laggards], 1/2 vs. 3/4=[innovators, early adopters] vs. [late adopters, laggards], 1/2/3 vs. 4=[innovators, early adopters, late adopters] vs. [laggards]

Table I.
Results of contingency analysis

With regard to *RQ1*, we found that some of the inductively identified influencing factors (e.g. critics of globalization, disappointment over the fate of the company) are only relevant for the type of boycott under consideration (indicated by [i] in Figure 2). Solidarity, for example, is irrelevant for some other types of boycotts (e.g. environmental boycotts). Hence, in addition to general boycott promoters (e.g. belief in efficacy of boycotts) and inhibitors (e.g. preference for boycotted products), scholars need to develop an understanding for the idiosyncratic motives for the boycott they consider.

Regarding *RQ2*, this study demonstrates for the first time that different consumer segments should be distinguished when analyzing boycott participation. The reasons for taking part in a boycott vary among different adopter types. Those who join late have first considered whether the benefits of boycotting outweigh the costs of personal privation, whereas those who join early have a higher level of proximity. The latter finding might be due to personal affiliation and, thus, early participation may be contingent on the context. Consumers who are early adopters in one boycott might be laggards in another boycott. Alternatively to this context-specific explanation, early adopters might differ in their personality from late adopters. They may be more empathetic in general and therefore they always feel more solidarity with those directly affected. Hence, they are always among the first to join any boycott. Further studies need to disentangle these opposing explanations of the higher level of proximity of early adopters. Moreover, scholars should consider whether early adopters actually draw the boycott decision more impulsively or whether they have thought about the issue before and, therefore, are able to decide more quickly.

This paper gives evidence that consumer boycotts are conceptually located in the overlap of anti-consumption and consumer resistance (Figure 4). Note that boycotts do not fill the overlap, because boycotts are collective actions. There are also some individual actions in the overlap. As in any form of anti-consumption, the voluntary restriction of one's own consumption behavior in a certain domain (Lee *et al.*, 2009) is the behavioral manifestation of the boycott. In accordance with the literature on consumer resistance, the main purpose of boycott participation is the consumer's wish to resist an opposing force (Roux, 2007). On a global scale, the content analysis shows that this aim of resistance stems from two sources. One group of boycotters criticizes consumption in general, which is a characteristic of anti-consumption (Cherrier, 2009; Zavestoski, 2002). Many of them reported general boycott proneness and some even rejected the free-market system in general (anti-consumption-boycotters). However, our study reveals that a general critical attitude towards the market is not the only reason

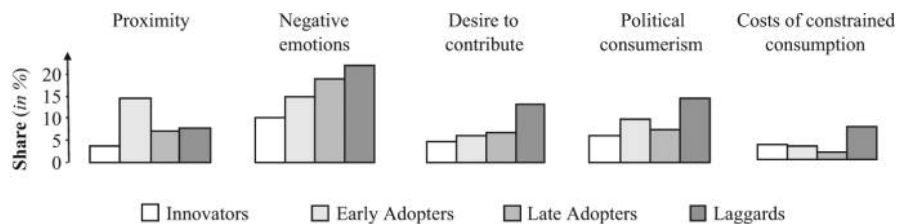


Figure 3.
Boycott motives of different types of adopters

Note: Only those composite categories with significant differences between the adopter types are displayed

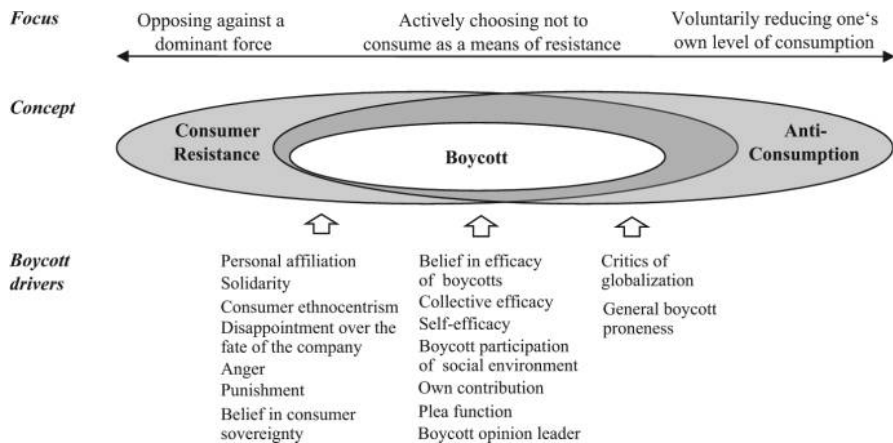


Figure 4. Boycott drivers in the overlap of consumer resistance and anti-consumption

for joining a specific boycott. Obviously, some consumers' participation was solely triggered by the specific situation. They were angry about the mass dismissals and felt solidarity with those dismissed. Individuals, who are generally not prone to boycott, will also join if these factors coincide with a boycott call. In this way, they are trying to resist the target company, which is the opposing aggressor (resistance-boycotter). To sum up, our study indicates that scholars have to look at personal traits and enduring attitudes as well as at motives triggered by specific situations, to gain a full understanding of boycott participation.

5. Limitations and further research

This study aimed at examining whether deductively derived approaches neglect idiosyncratic influencing factors of the boycott decision process. This objective is achieved, but the external validity of the findings is not yet established. Further research should replicate the finding by means of a quantitative study (i.e. examining the discriminant validity and the impact of the new categories). Our explorative approach is based on statements of petitionists, who voluntarily published on the internet that they joined the boycott. Note that although the participants explicitly joined the boycott petition some might have used this platform to express their protest without actually boycotting. The petitionists were not prompted to submit their statements, and no advice was given on how to comment on the action, which they deemed irresponsible. Therefore, the petitionists only named the triggers and promoters that were salient to themselves. Thus, all figures reported are underestimated rather than overrated. Additionally, as the statements were rather short, we could not derive information about the intensity of the different factors. Future studies should conduct intensity analysis rather than frequency analysis.

Finally, the findings should be replicated for consumers in other industrialized countries. Cultural values presumably influence how consumers react to the announcement of factory relocation. Germans have a long tradition of labor unions and they generally display a high degree of uncertainty avoidance. For that reason, they might feel threatened by the fact that companies are likely to transfer jobs to low-wage countries. Other societies might be less concerned about an uncertain future,

and better able to cope with the reduced threat of unemployment. Thus, they could be less likely to boycott multinational companies that shift subsidiaries to low-wage countries.

6. Managerial implications

Companies should be aware that different consumers join boycotts for different reasons. One group participates because of personal affiliations or because they feel solidarity with those affected (resisting-boycotters). These consumers would not join a boycott they are not related to. Another group of consumers is highly critical of free-market economy and globalization (anti-consumption-boycotters). These consumers want to join any boycott to use their purchasing power to educate companies they consider socially irresponsible. Companies should be well aware of the importance of acting in a socially responsible manner, in view of both types of potential boycott supporters. Moreover, they need to adjust their crisis management to the fact that consumers join the boycott for different reasons during the diffusion of the boycott.

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About the author

Dr Stefan Hoffmann is Research Assistant at the Department of Marketing of the Dresden University of Technology, Germany. His main research interests focus on international marketing and politically motivated consumer behavior (i.e. consumer boycotts). Stefan Hoffmann can be contacted at: ste-fan.hoffmann@tu-dresden.de

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