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Profiling European Consumers That Engage in Boycotting

Fernando Mata¹, Nuno Baptista^{2,3,4}, Maria Dos-Santos^{2,5} and Natacha Jesus-Silva^{6,7,8}

¹CISAS – Centre for Research and Development in Agri-food Systems and Sustainability, Instituto Politécnico de Viana do Castelo, Portugal

²Escola Superior de Comunicação Social, Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa, Portugal

³NECE – Research Center for Business Sciences, Convento de Sto. António, Covilhã, Portugal

⁴Comegi – Centro de Investigação em Organizações, Mercados e Gestão Industrial, Lisboa, Portugal

⁵Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Centro de Estudos sobre a Mudança Socioeconómica e o Território (DINÂMIA'CET), Lisboa, Portugal

⁶Universidade Portucalense Infante D. Henrique, Porto, Portugal

⁷REMIT - Research on Economics, Management and Information Technologies

⁸IJP – Instituto Jurídico Portucalense

fernandomata@ipvc.pt

nbaptista@escs.ipl.pt

msantos@escs.ipl.pt

natachajsilva@upt.pt

Abstract: Boycott involves abstention from buying specific products or brands for political, ethical, or ecological reasons. Boycott is usually framed as an expression of political consumerism and has been on the rise. Companies that suffer a boycott may endure severe consequences including long-term damaged brand image and harmed reputation. However, there is still an incomplete picture of the socio-political and demographic profile of boycotters. Most characterizations of political consumers are based on research that combines boycotters and buycotters under a single construct of political consumers, and yet these consumers are driven by different motivations. The objective of this exploratory study is to provide a general characterization of European political consumers that engage in boycotting. The data used was collected between the 25th of May, 2022 and the 18th of September, 2022, and was retrieved from the 10th edition (2022) of the European Social Survey. The study employs binary logistic regression to assess the association between boycotting and various potential factors listed in extant literature. Results indicate that boycotting behaviour is affected by age and other life-cycle variables, gender, education, institutional trust, the degree of satisfaction with the political system and the government, the level of trust in information and communication technology, reported self-happiness and self-general health perceptions. In general, the parameters of the models suggest that European consumers that engage in boycotting behaviour tend to be female, young, well-educated, trust on national political institutions and make intensive use of digital media. The conclusions of the empirical study are discussed and interpreted in light of current theories of consumer behaviour that highlight the post-modern, fragmented and globalized characteristics of current western societies. The results of this study enrich the literature on consumer boycotts and confirm the predicting power of various socio-demographic, psychological and attitudinal variables. Avenues for future research are identified together with consideration of the study limitations.

Keywords: Political consumerism, Anti-consumption, Boycotting, Europe, European social survey

1. Introduction

Anti-consumption behaviour has received a fair amount of scholarly attention. The term spans across a wide variety of manifestations, including boycotting, brand avoidance, ethical consuming, voluntary simplification, brand rejection, consumer resistance, consumer rebellion and retaliating (Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010; Chatzidakis & Lee, 2012; Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2016). Consumers define their self-identity and their social references through what they choose to consume and also what they choose not to consume (Sandikci & Ekici, 2009). Distastes and dislikes manifest the undesired self, or a facet of the negative self that the consumer may be afraid of becoming (Hogg and Banister, 2001). According to Chatzidakis and Lee (2012), with overconsumption becoming the norm in Western societies, acts of consumption no longer possess the same unique symbolic value. In this context, acts against consumption, against the norms, are now understood to be powerful symbolic acts through which consumers may better express themselves.

This research focus on a specific form of anti-consumption manifestation that is consumer boycott and which involves voluntary abstention from buying specific products for political, ethical, or ecological reasons (Ferrer-Fons and Fraile, 2014). Consumer boycotts are usually framed under political consumerism, a concept that alludes to consumers recurring to market transactions as an instrument of protesting or rewarding desirable institutional behaviours (Koos, 2012; Gotlieb & Cheema, 2017). Targeted companies that suffer a boycott may

endure severe consequences that go beyond immediate reduced sales and profits, and include long-term implications on brand image and harmed reputation (Rim et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021).

Although available data indicates that boycotts are becoming more prevalent (Seyfi et al., 2021; Tuominen et al., 2022) there is still an incomplete picture of the socio-political and demographic profile of boycotters (Endres & Panagopoulos, 2017; Schwalb et al., 2022). As noted by Kelm and Dohle (2018), most characterizations of political consumers are based on research that combines boycotters and buycotters under a single construct of political consumers, and yet these consumers are driven by different motivations - while boycotts aim to punish the organization, buycotts aim to reward the targeted organization. These factors highlight the importance of researching separately each nature of political consumption manifestation. This study addresses this research gap, by researching the characteristics of European consumers that engage in boycotting behaviour. To attain this objective, the study resorted to data provided by the European Social Survey (ESS ERIC, 2022a; ESS ERIC, 2022b) covering twenty-five European countries.

The article is organized as follows: the next section contextualizes boycotts within the anti-consumption and political consumerism literature. The following section outlines the methodological procedures. The main body of the article presents and discusses the study's results. The final section offers conclusions, points the limitations of the study and identifies some avenues for future research.

2. Background

Contrary to the tendency verified in traditional political activities such as voting or participating in a political party, this century is characterized by alternative forms of political activity (Baptista and Rodrigues, 2018). This development has been related with globalization and the widespread use of information and communication technologies, which have triggered lifestyle politics and a sense of moral obligation (Acik, 2013). Political consumerism is generally understood as a form of political activity beyond the traditional manifestations, in which consumers use their purchasing power to attain political-related objectives (Koos, 2012). The concept of political consumerism is traditionally employed in reference to the boycott or buycott of products or services undertaken by consumers (Ferrer-Fons and Fraile, 2014).

Previous research indicates that political consumers tend to be prevalently female, young, well-educated and intensive users of digital media technologies (Kelm & Dohle, 2018; Grasso & Smith, 2022; Schwalb et al., 2022). However, most characterizations of political consumers are based on research that combines boycotters and buycotters under a single group of political consumers (Schwalb et al., 2022). The motivations of boycotters and buycotters are significantly different, while buycotting aims to reward the targeted organization, boycotting, which is the focus of this research, refers to actions intended to punish the organization. As such, it is important to characterize separately each group of political consumers. Furthermore, a dualistic approach to study anti-consumption, in which dominance/resistance models oppose consumption to anti-consumption is not suitable to understand the complex nature of the phenomenon in stake. As stressed by (Chatzidakis and Lee, 2012) the assumption that the "reasons against" are always the logical opposite of the "reasons for" is conceptually erroneous.

3. Materials and Methods

The data used in this study was collected between the 25th of May, 2022 and the 18th of September, 2022, and was retrieved from the European Social Survey (ESS ERIC, 2022a) [dataset]. The European Social Survey (ESS) is a cross-national survey, that in its 10th edition (2022) covered several European countries. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews, however due to the COVID-19 pandemic some interviews were done via web or videoconference. The survey covers several aspects of the Europeans life, including social conditions and indicators, social behaviour and attitudes, general health and well-being, political behaviour and attitudes, political ideology, minorities, cultural and national identity, media, equality, inequality and social exclusion, language and linguistics, religion and values, family life and marriage (ESS ERIC, 2022b). The represented universe in the sample includes persons aged 15 and over resident within private households, regardless of their nationality, citizenship, language or legal status, in the following countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Greece, Croatia, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Sweden, Slovenia, and Slovakia. The survey contains a total of 18.060 entries.

With the aim of studying consumerism in the Europe, we have selected specific variables from the ESS. The surveyed individuals were asked several questions including a particular question of interest for this study and

herein used as independent variable: “Have you boycotted certain products in the last 12 months?”. As independent variables we have selected questions related with demography, individual perception of the society and its policies, and exposure to internet and/or mobile communication systems. These variables were selected based on extant literature that profiles political consumers (Kelm & Dohle, 2018; Grasso & Smith, 2022; Schwalb et al., 2022). The following were used as independent variables:

- Demographic: age, gender, marital status, years in education, and household size;
- Individual perception of the society and its policies: trust in others, trust in the legal system, trust in scientists, satisfaction with the state of the economy, satisfaction with the government, satisfaction with the democratic system, satisfaction with the state of the education system, satisfaction with the state of the health services;
- Wellbeing: happiness, subjective general health;
- Online behaviour and individual perception of information and communication technology: time spent on the internet and individual perception about personal privacy and misinformation in online/mobile communications.

Due to the dichotomic nature of the dependent variable (Yes, No) we have used logistic models to explain it. The statistical package use was the IBM Corp.® SPSS® Statistics, Armonk, NY, USA. Version: 28.0.1.1 (15). The analysis was performed via the general linear model routine, using the binomial option and selecting the logit link.

4. Results and Discussion

Extant research indicates that political consumers are mostly female, young, well-educated and affluent and are intensive users of digital media technologies (Kelm & Dohle, 2018; Grasso & Smith, 2022; Schwalb et al., 2022). To confirm the validity of such general characterization we tested demographic variables and variables that reflect boycotters’ trust in public institutions as well as the level of satisfaction with the government and perceptions of online and mobile communications. The model obtained is summarised in Table 1.

The parameters of the model indicate that the probability of boycotting is lower in males than females. The gender gap is theoretically supported by previous literature indicating that in general females tend to engage more frequently in political consumption due to traditional woman roles in provisioning (Yates, 2011; Koos, 2012). Results also indicate that the probability of boycotting decreases as age increases. The reduced prevalence of boycotting in older publics has been attributed to life-cycle and generational effects (Acik, 2013). Life-cycle effects are reconfirmed by this study’s results indicating that the probability of boycotting decreases as the household member numbers increases. It was found that the probability of consumers engaging in boycotting activities is lower in widows or if the civil partner has died, followed by legally separated, none of the stated or single, legally divorced or civil union dissolved, legally married, and legally registered civil union. The influence of digital communication on younger generations also seems to play a key role in explaining the prevalence of boycotting in younger publics. The internet provides improved access to information allowing political consumers to quickly disseminate information about boycotts and persuade peers to participate (Seyfi et al., 2021).

Table 1: Adjustment of the Independent Variables to the Dependent Variable “Have you Boycotted Certain Products in the Last 12 Months?” The Logistic Models Fit Use “Yes” As Response and “No” As Reference. The Akaike’s Information Criterion for the Degree of Adjustment of the Models Is Given, Together with the Intercept and the Parameter. Gender and Legal Marital Status are Used as Factors and all the Others are Used as Covariates

AIC	Independent variable	Intercept	β
1812	Number of people living in the household***	No	-0.716***
345	Years of full-time education completed***	-4.001***	0.150***
531	Age***	-1.431***	-0.010***
3147	Gender***	No	
	Male		-1.7***

AIC	Independent variable	Intercept	β
	Female		-1.65***
3145	Legal Marital Status***	No	
	Legally married		-1.451**
	Legally registered civil union		-0.069 NS
	Legally separated		-1.998**
	Legally divorced or civil union dissolved		-1.588***
	Widowed or civil partner died		-2.202***
	None of the above or single		-1.663***
4078	§Time/day spent paying attention to news about politics & current affairs? ***	No	-0.017***
3120	§Time/day spent on internet (any device) (work or personal)***	-2.002***	0.0013**
157	‡Most people try to take advantage of you, or try to be fair***	-2.651***	0.126***
126	†Trust in the legal system***	-2.328***	0.078***
152	†Trust in scientists***	-2.793***	0.095***
115	†How satisfied with present state of the economy in the country***	-2.112***	0.038***
133	†How satisfied with the national government***	-2.074***	0.033***
166	†How satisfied with the way the democracy works in the country***	-2.222***	0.059***
166	†How happy are you***	-2.722***	0.107***
1723	¥State of the education in the country nowadays***	No	-0.299***
137	¥State of the health services in the country nowadays***	-2.285***	0.078***
53	Subjective general health***	-1.678***	-1.678***
179	Online/mobile communication makes work and personal life interrupt each other***	-2.555***	0.107***
104	Online/mobile communication exposes people to misinformation	-3.252***	0.189***
120	Online/mobile communication undermines personal privacy	-2.613***	0.112***
Notes: *p>0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001; §Time unit is minutes; ‡0-10 scale, from “0” try to take advantage to “10” try to be fair; †0-10 scale, from “0” completely no to “10” completely yes; †0-10 scale, from “0” completely dissatisfied to “10” completely satisfied; ¥0-10 scale, from “0” very bad to “10” very good; 0-5 scale from “0” very good to “5” very bad;			

The model confirms that the probability of boycotting increases as the years of full-time education increase. This finding is consistent with the literature of critical consumption. Yates (2011) found that individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to critically consume. Verba and Nie's (1972) socio-economic status model offers a possible theoretical explanation for this result by suggesting that high levels of scholar education provide political consumers with the information, knowledge, and the capacities to interpret complex social issues, thus enabling them to be involved in politics. Individuals from higher socio-economic status are equally more likely to have the resources and interest to be involved (Acik, 2013). However, our study indicates that the probability of European consumers engage in boycotting decreases with the time spent paying attention to politics and current affairs. This result suggests that people may engage in extreme forms of political consumerism, such as boycotting, without proper information about the issues in stake. because of peer and group pressures.

The link between institutional trust and political consumerism is not clear: some research indicates that political consumption is positively associated with institutional trust (Stolle and Hooghe, 2004) and other studies conclude the inverse, that institutional distrust motivates political consumers (Aish et al., 2013). Our findings suggest that the probability of boycotting increases with the level of institutional trust, since it was found a positive relationship between past boycotting behaviour and consumers’ trust in the legal system as well as trust in science. This result was further explored by testing the satisfaction of boycotters with the

government. Results confirm that the probability of boycotting increases with consumers' satisfaction towards the government, the state of the democracy, the state of the health system and the state of the economy.

The data indicates that the probability of boycotting increases with the time spent on the internet and that is also positively affected by adverse perceptions about information and communication technology, including the notions that mobile communications and internet makes work and personal life interrupt each other, expose people to misinformation and undermine personal privacy. Mobile communications and the internet have increased consumers' awareness about boycott initiatives by allowing consumers to interact with like-minded individuals, consequently affecting the size of boycott initiatives and their effectiveness (Tuominen et al., 2022). Online social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, online communities in Reddit, WhatsApp and other digital platforms, are making consumers more aware of their agency and active role as political consumers and constitute sources of information for consumers to learn about the boycott plans (Seyfi et al., 2021). On the other side, some of these digital platforms are also becoming the target of boycott actions. In recent years some big-tech companies have been accused of misuse of users' personal data, cancellation of services with minimal justification, interference in political life, programmed obsolescence of products, and the use of legal (although morally questionable) mechanisms to pay reduced taxes outside the countries of origin. For example, Facebook has repeatedly come under consumers' boycott due to misinformation on its platform as well as the way it handles information related to political issues (He et al., 2021; Bright et al., 2022).

The study's results indicate that the probability of boycotting decreases with increased self-general health perception. Anti-consumption, at the individual level, is not necessarily the result of purposeful acts of altruism, ideological protest or the outward expression of countercultural sentiments (Nixon and Gabriel, 2016). Some consumers may oppose consumption of certain products for their personal well-being (e.g. unhealthy food). In addition, results also indicate that the probability of boycotting increases with declared self-happiness. The actual motives of boycotting are unlikely to divide themselves very precisely between a continuum of altruistic and egoistic motives. Previous research indicates that some practices of anti-consumption are motivated by individuals prioritizing their self-interests (Black and Cherrier, 2010). For example, voluntary simplifiers tend to adopt anti-consumption driven primarily by objectives of happiness and living the "good-life", and reject consumption of products or services that do not correspond to their projected lifestyle and self-concept (Craig-Lees, 2006). Consumers that reveal a concern for societal goods, such as sustainability, may also be motivated by self-interests. Studying anti-consumption practices, motivations and values within attempts to live a more sustainable lifestyle, Black & Cherrier (2010) empirically found that anti-consumption for sustainability is affected by the subjectivity of the consumer, due to consumers' multiple identities and conflicting values, and a focus on personal needs, including the need to secure a better world for their descendants, to save money and improve health conditions. Hence, these authors concluded that, contrary to the general notion that sustainability will be associated to socially-aware consumers, that are prepared to sacrifice personal pleasure for communal well-being, sustainability does not require sacrificing personal pleasure. In addition, and as highlighted by Soper (2007) we should not overlook the extent to which anti-consumption behaviour is also motivated by an interest in acquiring status and distinction rather than altruistic concerns for collective well-being.

By what was presented so far it can be tempting to dismiss all boycott manifestations as ultimately individualistic and egocentric. However, for some consumers, boycott decisions may indeed be an expression of altruistic principles. Soper (2007) alerts to the fact that in some genuinely altruistic motives underlying anti-consumption, the elements of self-pleasuring and self-happiness often extends to, and include, as a condition, an interest in the pleasures and well-being of others. For example, Iyer and Muncy's (2009) characterization of global impact consumers and market activists consists in individuals to whom their boycott decision is mostly motivated by societal concerns.

It is also possible to question the extent to which boycott, in the current post-modern, fragmented and globalized society, really reflects a disposition towards social ethos. Consumers' contact point with society has shifted from its once solid-modern and genuine community footings, based on shared identities expressed through consumption, to its present "liquid" and unstable simulacra of community (Colling et al., 2017). Drawing on Bauman's (2001) thesis on liquid modernity, Binkley (2008) proposed a theory of liquid consumption in which anti-consumption practices shape personal identities by mediating the conflicted demands for individual autonomy and collective belonging, and by highlighting consumer freedom from the structures imposed by social bonds, without completely abandoning the consumer to the risks and anxieties of solitary ventures. In the context of liquid modernity boycotting becomes a practice of "liquid consumption", in

which the tensions between freedom and security, or individual autonomy and group solidarity are increasingly disembodied from any binding social context. As expressed by Binkley (2008, p. 611) “ for the liquid consumer, the elimination, or liquification of goods (in contrast to their solidifying accumulation), provides a much needed sense of personal mobility, changeability and fluidity”.

According to Zukin et al. (2006) people engaged in consumer activism such as boycotting overwhelmingly understand it as an individual activity rather than as part of an organized effort. Earl and Copeland (2016) studied the distinction between self-directed and organizationally-directed finding that three distinct macro-social changes explain current preferences for self-directed political consumption: i) shifts toward movement societies, meaning that social movements became so embedded in contemporary society that these movements, and the tactics they use, are now commonplace and institutionalized; ii) lifestyle politics, meaning increasing levels of self-directed political activity as citizens embed politics in their daily life and do not require organizational cues or recruitment in order to take politics into their everyday lives and iii) changing citizen norms, specifically the rising of entrepreneurial values, that imply a decline in associational life and a move away from traditional models of citizenship and political engagement towards self-organization. These changes are facilitated by the development of digital media, allowing individuals to access countless opportunities to act entrepreneurially, unbinding the accessible supply of opportunities from organizations and traditional providers.

5. Conclusions

This research set out to characterize the profile of European political consumers that engage in boycotting actions. The parameters of the models suggest that European political consumers tend to be female, young and well-educated. European boycotters also tend to trust on national political institutions and make intensive use of digital media. However, and despite European boycotters’ consumption of digital media technologies, it was found that these consumers have negative perceptions about digital media. The study also revealed that boycotting may be affected by self-centred reasons and not societal concerns, including subjective perceptions of health and happiness. The results of this exploratory study enrich the literature on consumer boycotts and confirm the predicting power of various socio-demographic, psychological and attitudinal variables. The present research is not without some theoretical and methodological limitations, which suggest the need for future research. First, we tested the general sample of boycotters without taking in consideration the specific characteristics of these consumers in each country. This limitation should be overcome by future cross-sectional studies, comparing the profile of boycotters in different countries. Second, the definition of the independent variables was supported on the literature, however, it is possible that some relevant explanatory variables are missing from the model. Third, given the nature of this study, causality relationships cannot be proven, although extant literature has hinted the explanatory power of the selected variables.

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