What motivates consumers to participate in boycotts: Lessons from the ongoing Canadian seafood boycott

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A B S T R A C T
Despite the tremendous growth in consumer boycotts, marketing has paid relatively little attention to consumer boycott motivations. Addressing this deficiency, this study uses netnography to investigate boycott motivations and perceived boycott participation costs by analyzing consumer comments submitted to an online boycott petition. The results show that boycott pledgees explicitly express their desire for the target to abolish its egregious behavior, their anger about the behavior in question, and their desire for punitive actions. Signatories also pledge participation for moral reasons and identify with the cause reflected by the boycott. Boycott motivations also include the belief that consumers have the power to impact the boycott target’s bottom line and/or behavior as well as the belief that the boycott will succeed in forcing the target to cease its egregious behavior. Signatories, however, rarely refer to the costs of boycott participation.

1. Introduction

A boycott occurs “when a number of people abstain from purchase of a product, at the same time, as a result of the same egregious act or behavior, but not necessarily for the same reasons” (John and Klein, 2003, p. 1198). This egregious behavior can either directly impact the wellbeing of the boycotter or cause harm or injustice to a third party (Friedman, 1999). Thus, consumers participate in boycotts to express severe dissatisfaction with a company or country’s actions and/or policies (Shaw et al., 2006). Recent boycotts seem to focus on establishing “political or social/ethical control” over the boycott target and on trying to force the target to change or abandon behaviors that are deemed to be unethical or socially irresponsible (Sen et al., 2001, p. 400).

Although there has been increased interest in consumer boycotts (Cronie and Ewing, 2009; Lee et al., 2009), “the factors that motivate individual boycott decisions remain largely unexplored” (Hoffmann and Müller, 2009, p. 239). Here, motivation is defined as “the desire or want that energizes and directs goal-directed behavior” (McNair-Connolly et al., 2009, p. 26). This lack of research is unfortunate because the number of boycotts and the number of consumers participating in them has been increasing (Sen et al., 2001) from 18% in 1992 (Miller et al., 1992) to almost 67% in 2005 (Glickman, 2005) in the U.S. alone. This increase is partially attributed to the widespread adoption of the Internet which has become an inexpensive and quick way of educating millions of consumers about boycotts (Glickman, 2005) and has helped to facilitate the pervasiveness and power of boycotts (Yuksel and Mryteza, 2009). Although over 40% of Fortune 50 companies may be boycott targets at any given time (John and Klein, 2003), marketing managers and policy makers often have little understanding of consumer protest behavior in general, and boycott motivations specifically (Yuksel and Mryteza, 2009).

Consequently, the main purpose of this investigation is to study consumer boycott motivations by exploring consumer intent to participate in an ongoing boycott as well as the perceived costs of boycotting. Empirical research focusing on consumer boycott motivations generally utilizes consumer surveys or laboratory experiments (Hoffmann and Müller, 2009; Sen et al., 2001), whereas only one study to date uses a qualitative technique (Kozinets and Handelman, 1998). Since examination of boycotts should place “more reliance on qualitative research methods”... “to supplement the survey methods already in use” (Friedman, 1999, p. 31), one of the major contributions of this research is that it provides—to date—the most comprehensive examination of consumer boycott motivations that utilizes a qualitative approach. The boycott chosen for this investigation, the Canadian Seafood Boycott, began on March 29, 2005, the first day of the spring seal hunt that year. This boycott was called to force a permanent end to the Canadian seal hunt. The Canadian fisheries are the primary boycott target because seal hunters are generally fishermen—90% of whom live in Newfoundland—who hunt seals to earn off-season income. The boycott petition, however, is directed at the Canadian Government because it regulates the hunt and has the power to end it (Harpseals.org, 2007).

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2. Success of consumer boycotts

According to the business press, boycotts are often successful in forcing the boycott target to change an egregious behavior. This perception is probably due to a number of high-profile boycotts that have led to “spectacular successes for relatively powerless groups” (Klein et al., 2004, p. 92), such as the Montgomery bus boycotts, the 1965–70 California grape boycott (Friedman, 1999), and the boycott of Shell, which had a participation rate of only 6%, but prevented the company from sinking at sea its Brent Spar oil platform (Clower and Harrison, 2005). Although the literature appears replete with success stories, determining the impact of a boycott is difficult, partly because few targets publicly admit that their revenues and profits have been adversely affected (John and Klein, 2003). An exception is the case of Danish dairy giant Arla Foods which became a target of widespread boycotts in the Muslim world approximately six months after a Danish newspaper printed a series of caricatures depicting the prophet Muhammad. Arla Foods’ annual sales were reduced from $430 million to practically zero in just a few days (Ettensohn et al., 2006). This might be the reason why 33% to 50% of companies targeted by a boycott adjust their behaviors when facing a boycott threat or launch (Davidson et al., 1995; Friedman, 1985).

3. Consumer boycott motivations

3.1. Instrumental boycott motivations

Friedman (1999) theorizes that one of the major boycott motivations is the instrumental motivation of desiring to force the boycott target to change or discontinue the egregious behavior. Consequently, we examine whether individuals who pledge boycott participation will, without being prompted to specifically address certain boycott motivations, explicitly discuss this desire to effect social change.

The widespread adoption of information and communication technologies has made information much more available and empowered consumers to hold companies accountable for their egregious acts and/or force organizations to change their behavior. This development has led to an increase in consumer sovereignty (Klein et al., 2004), “the power of consumers to determine, from among the offerings of producers of goods and services, what goods and services are and will be produced and capitalized” (Shaw et al., 2006, p. 1052). We investigate whether boycott pledgees seem aware of their sovereignty and believe that they can yield considerable power over organizations. The purpose is to explore whether consumers are confident that they—as individuals—have the power to make a noticeable impact that is likely to aid in forcing the desired change. This motivation is related to “high perceived efficacy,” defined by Sen et al. (2001, p. 402)) as a consumer's belief that each boycotter can, by him/herself, “make a difference to the boycott's outcome,” and less contingent on the belief of whether other consumers are likely to join the boycott.

Sen et al. (2001) find that consumers who believe that a boycott is likely to succeed in forcing the boycott target to change its egregious behavior are more likely to participate in that boycott. This belief may be influenced—in addition to perceived efficacy—by consumer expectation of overall boycott participation. Thus, we investigate whether boycott pledgees appear motivated to participate in a boycott because they believe that it will succeed in forcing the boycott target to change or discontinue an egregious behavior and why they hold this belief.

3.2. Noninstrumental boycott motivations

Noninstrumental motivations may not only be independent from the desire to change the boycott target's behavior, they can also be the manifestation of an “individual act,” independent from the desire to have others participate (John and Klein, 2003, p. 1203). Consumers might participate in a boycott simply to express their anger about the egregious behavior (Friedman, 1999). Anger can be a more powerful boycott motivation than the belief that a boycott can coerce the target to change its policies and behaviors (Ettensohn and Klein, 2005) as demonstrated by the Muslim boycott of Danish companies. Thus, we investigate whether boycott participation can be the result of expressive motivations.

Consumers may also be motivated to participate in a boycott because they wish to punish the boycott target for having committed an irreversible act (Friedman, 1999). Klein et al. (1998, p. 90), who study the impact of consumer animosity toward a foreign country on products manufactured in that country, find that consumers tend to shun products from countries that have “engaged in military, political, or economic acts that a consumer finds both grievous and difficult to forgive.” Hence, we explore whether boycott participation seems to be provoked by punitive motivations.

Klein et al. (2004) find that consumers boycott because of a desire for self-enhancement, which is driven by a multitude of psychosocial variables. Boycott participation can enhance social self-esteem because it allows boycotters to identify with the social group that fights the egregious behavior or the cause that prompted the boycott (i.e., stopping cruelty to animals). Accordingly, we examine whether boycott pledgees seem driven by a desire to boost social self-esteem.

Personal self-esteem, another psychosocial variable, can be enhanced because boycott participation allows an individual to view him/herself as a moral person. This is important if consumers believe that “certain brand management policies have a negative impact on society” (Lee et al., 2009, p. 172). The need to perceive oneself as a moral person is likely to lead consumers to believe that it is their moral duty and personal responsibility to disassociate from the boycott target and that participating in the boycott is the right thing to do (Shaw et al., 2006). Thus, we probe whether boycott pledgees seem motivated by a desire to increase personal self-esteem.

A psychosocial variable that negatively impacts self-enhancement is the feeling of guilt (Klein et al., 2004), the “negative emotion which results from a consumer decision that violates one's values or norms” (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994, p. 33). To avoid this feeling, consumers are motivated to refuse purchasing the boycott target's products, even if the target cannot change the egregious act (John and Klein, 2003). Hence, we examine whether boycott pledgees seem motivated by a desire to avoid feeling guilt.

3.3. Costs of boycotting

It has been found that there are costs associated with boycotting that impact consumer willingness to participate. The higher a potential boycotter considers these costs to be, the less likely s/he is to participate (Klein et al., 2004). Consumers seem more likely to participate in a boycott if the targeted product has satisfactory substitutes (Sen et al., 2001). Another cost that might be of relevance is the perception of how difficult it will be to identify the targeted product and its substitutes. Here the country-of-origin labeling legislation that was introduced in the U.S. in 2004 might act to minimize this cost. Consequently, we investigate whether boycott pledgees appear more likely to participate in boycotts if they believe that there are satisfactory substitutes available for the targeted product and/or that it is fairly easy to identify the targeted product and its substitutes.

4. The Canadian seafood boycott

4.1. Commercial sealing in Canada

Five nations allow the hunt of seals for commercial purposes, namely Norway, Russia, Greenland, Namibia, and Canada; all of these hunts have been controversial (PACE, 2006). Although several seal
species are hunted in Canada, the Northwest Atlantic harp seal is the major target of the annual seal hunt (Fisheries and Aquaculture Management, 2002). Though harp and hooded seals in Canada can be commercially hunted from November 15 to May 15, the majority of sealing normally begins in early March and extends to May 15. It is this spring season—generally referred to as the Canadian Seal Hunt—that attracts the most attention. The total allowable catch was 335,000 for 2006, 270,000 for 2007, and 275,000 in 2008 (CBC News, 2008).

4.2. The first seal war

The “official” beginning of the anti-sealing movement can be traced to 1964, when the production company Artek, commissioned by the Quebec Government and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, produced a film that focused on the seal hunt. The film, Les Phoques (The Seals), included “a scene in which a seal is skinned alive and its carcass left flailing on the ice” (Canadian Geographic, 2000). As the film made its way across Europe and the U.S., public outcry was immense and brought anti-hunt expeditions to the ice. The anti-sealing movement kept growing, and the European Community (EC) banned the import of whitecoat (harp seal pup) and blueback (hooded seal pup) pelts in 1983. This led to a collapse of the seal pelt market, and the Canadian Government restricted the hunting of seal pups in 1987 (Canadian Geographic, 2000). Hence, whitecoats and bluebacks can no longer be hunted until they begin moulting (i.e., shedding), which begins at ages 10 to 14 days for whitecoats, and 15 to 16 months for bluebacks (Fisheries and Aquaculture Management, 2002). This measure reduced sealing, but it never completely stopped.

4.3. The second/current seal war

Although Canadian Fisheries Minister Brian Tobin announced the revival of the seal hunt on December 18, 1995 (International Marine Mammal Association, 1995), and significant government subsidies were used to rebuild the industry (Canadian Institute for Business and the Environment, 2001), the seal war did not heat up again until the early 2000s. Since then it has led Canadian politicians to charge governments, NGOs, celebrities, and consumers who oppose the seal hunt of being ignorant and uninformed (CBC News, 2006; CBC News, 2007).

Considering that marketing theory and practice generally focus on satisfying consumer needs and wants, such harsh reactions by government officials to U.S. consumers—one of Canada’s most important target markets—are puzzling and counterproductive, especially since sealing contributes very little to the value of the Newfoundland fishery (CBC News, 2008; DFO, 2007). The value of the hunt has been estimated at 0.06% to 0.09% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of Newfoundland (DFO, 2007; Southey, 1997). Even in 2006, when harp seal pelts brought a record price of $104 CAD each, the product (GDP) of Newfoundland (DFO, 2007; Southey, 1997). Even in 2006, when harp seal pelts brought a record price of $104 CAD each, the product (GDP) of Newfoundland (DFO, 2007; Southey, 1997). Even in 2006, when harp seal pelts brought a record price of $104 CAD each, the product (GDP) of Newfoundland (DFO, 2007; Southey, 1997).

5. Methods

5.1. Research methodology

Netnography, the online equivalent of ethnography, was used in securing and analyzing the data for this study. Netnography is based on the premise that consumers are increasingly turning to online communities to gain access to information that is viewed as more objective than information dispensed by corporations (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography can also lead to more timely information than other qualitative techniques, be conducted entirely unobtrusively, and give insights into actual behaviors in natural settings. Further, the process of data collection is cheaper, shortened, and simplified. Since it focuses on the behavior/act—rather than the individual—as the ultimate unit of analysis, the lack of social and demographic cues often associated with online data should not impede trustworthiness (i.e., validity) (Kozinets, 2002). Since its inception by Robert Kozinets in 1998, netnography has increasingly been used in studies ranging from the exploration of cross-cultural ambivalence on brides-to-be through the analysis of postings on intercultural electronic message boards (Nelson and Ottes, 2005) to the identification of new product ideas through the absorption of the knowledge and creativity found in online communities (Jawecki and Fuller, 2009).

5.2. Description of the dataset

The textual discourse of the present research is the outcome of an online petition posted on a virtual community that was frequented by over seven million consumers interested in ethical and social issues, including those relating to animal welfare and rights. The petition was posted by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and showed a picture of a sealer poised to club a juvenile harp seal as the seal looked up at him. It informed that of the 325,000 seals killed during the 2006 seal hunt, most were “as young as 12 days of age.” It stated that more than 440,000 consumers had joined the boycott to date, and that snow crab exports to the U.S. had declined by $350 million CAD since the beginning of the boycott. It asked consumers to pledge participation in the Canadian Seafood Boycott. Posted online on March 22, 2007, it reached its stated goal of 50,000 valid signatures on May 20, 2007.

Although signatories have to be registered users of the virtual community to sign any of the petitions, they can specify whether they want a petition to publicly display their names. Signatories were asked to declare their country and state of origin, and also to add a message to the Canadian Government explaining why they were pledging to use their buying power to end the seal hunt. By the time the goal of 50,000 valid signatures was reached, individuals from 112 countries had signed the petition. To help streamline the data analysis, we focused on the messages generated by U.S. consumers. Of the 50,000 consumers, 46,228 originated from the U.S, and 17,525 of these were left by consumers who chose to remain anonymous; 15,478 by consumers to pledge participation in the Canadian Seafood Boycott. Posted online on March 22, 2007, it reached its stated goal of 50,000 valid signatures on May 20, 2007.

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Although the HSUS did not ask consumers to provide demographic data, some of the comments show that signatories come from varied age groups, educational and professional backgrounds. There are a
number of signatories who identify themselves as members of the clergy, Ph.D.s, MDs, and DVMs. Others report that they own or manage companies and no longer buy Canadian supplies; some are in the travel business and steer clients away from vacations in Canada; and some are teachers and college professors who have committed to educating their students about the seal hunt.

5.3. Data analysis

The data were coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti, Version 5.2. A random sample of 1200 of the 17,496 boycott pledges generated by U.S. consumers was used for the data analysis. One of the goals of the analysis was to use content analysis to identify key word(s) that represent a certain boycott motivation. For example, signatory 1 expressed “disgust.” Since the word “disgust” is commonly used to communicate repulsion, outrage, and distress (http://www.merriam-webster.com/), it was categorized as signifying an expressive boycott motivation and all pledges within the dataset that displayed the word were categorized accordingly. Following this method, we carefully read each of the 1200 statements to search for words that commonly signify this type of boycott motivation. We followed this process for all ten of the previously identified boycott motivations. Thus, we spent six very intensive weeks reading each of the 1200 messages several times and iteratively analyzed all messages for expected (and evolving) themes (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004) while tallying frequencies and percentages for all ten boycott motivations (see Table 1). Here we used the iterative process of qualitative data analysis as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), which has frequently been used when analyzing nongraphic data (Kozinets and Handelman, 1998; Nelson and Ottos 2005).

Do individuals explicitly state that they are motivated to participate in boycotts because they desire to force the boycott target to change or discontinue an egregious behavior? A total of 842 of the 1200 (70.17%) consumers do ask explicitly for an end to the seal hunt. Some signatories focus solely on this desire, such as signatory 671 (female), who maintains: “Stop the killing of these seals!” Other signatories disclose additional boycott motivations. Signatory 32 (male), for example, exclaims: “I will NEVER purchase anything from Canada again ... I will convince my friends to also boycott all Canadian products until the murders of innocent lives is stopped.”

Are individuals motivated to participate in boycotts because they believe that they—as individuals—have the power to make a noticeable impact that is likely to force the boycott target to change or discontinue an egregious behavior? Only one of the signatories states that she does not believe that her participation will make any difference, although it does not stop her from joining (signatory 165, end of this section); whereas 365 (29.67%) of the 1200 signatories voice the belief that they have the economic power to impact the boycott target’s revenue and/or actions. Signatory 614 (female) refers to the economic power she believes to wield: “I am an American consumer and by that I have a purchasing power that is both feared and wanted by other countries as well as my own ... I will boycott all Canadian products...”

Are individuals motivated to participate in boycotts because they believe that a boycott will succeed in forcing the boycott target to change or discontinue an egregious behavior? Of the 1200 signatories, 225 (18.75%) clearly express the belief that the boycott will be successful. Signatory 297 (female) trusts in the power of the many to make a difference: “As long as you continue the barbaric practice of slaughtering seals, I will never purchase seafood from Canada, nor will I ever visit your country. You’re probably of the opinion that one person cannot make a difference. However, there are [a lot] more people that agree with me than agree with you, so eventually you will feel the effects of your brutality...”

Are individuals motivated to participate in boycotts because they wish to express their anger about a boycott target’s egregious behavior? Of the 1200 signatories, 675 (56.25%) voice their anger. Signatory 1172 (female) exclaims: “I am more than angry about the slaughter of these babies after gathering petitions in the 1970s to end this brutal practice. This must end once and for all. I will not buy seafood from Canada and plan to encourage everyone I know to do the same.”

Are individuals motivated to participate in boycotts because they wish to punish the boycott target for having engaged in irreversible, egregious behavior? Of the 1200 signatories, 263 (21.92%) want to penalize the Canadian Government and/or fishermen. Signatory 433 (female) appears to be so angry that she wants to punish the Canadian economy: “The Canadian govt. needs to stop these barbaric killers. Is there anything else we can boycott from there and let them know it is because of the seal killing? I would be willing to cut off buying everything imported from there to accomplish that. [Let’s] hit them back where it will hurt them, instead of the poor innocent babies they are allowing to be slaughtered. The blood on their hands needs to be shown to the whole world. To hell with just a seafood boycott, boycott Canada, period!!!”

Are individuals motivated to participate in boycotts because they want to end the seal hunt? Of the 1200 signatories, 842 (70.17%) address this issue. Signatory 165 (female) states: “I’m not sure I really understand the point. There are enough animals already being killed that we eat every day, why the seal? And signatory (1181, female) maintains: “I rather not buy Canadian sea food then sit back and watch innocent seals die.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Want to end the seal hunt</td>
<td>842</td>
<td>70.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe they have the power to force an end to seal hunt</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>29.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe that the boycott will force an end to the seal hunt</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>18.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wish to express their anger</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>56.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wish to punish the boycott target</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>21.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance social self-esteem through identification with the cause</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>44.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance personal self-esteem by viewing themselves as moral persons</td>
<td>854</td>
<td>71.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid feeling of guilt that would be associated with purchase of targeted product</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe that the targeted product has satisfactory substitutes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe that targeted products and substitutes are easy to identify</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Are individuals more likely to participate in boycotts if they believe that there are satisfactory substitutes available for the product targeted by a boycott and/or that it is fairly easy to identify the product targeted by a boycott as well as its substitutes? The five signatories (0.42%) who express concerns about product substitutes address both issues simultaneously, and it seems they are more concerned with letting the Canadian Government know that they would rather eat no seafood at all than accidentally eat Canadian seafood. Signatory 432 (female) states: “This is sickening to even imagine. I don’t really eat red meat or chicken but I have always loved seafood. From now on though, I vow to make sure what I am eating does not come from Canada. If they can’t tell me where it’s from, I won’t eat buy it. These creatures do not deserve this. It is not whether they can reason (although I think they can), but whether they can suffer.”

6. Discussion and implications

The results of the present research show that consumers who pledge boycott participation do so because they wish the boycott target to discontinue its egregious behavior or policy (70.17%). Further, a fairly high number of signatories (29.67%) inform the boycott target that their individual purchasing power will eventually impact the target’s financial bottom line and/or behavior. Shaw et al. (2006) discover a similar attitude and find that consumers have come to view their purchasing power as a vote for or against a specific organization based on its ethical/political behavior. Consumers seem to believe that it is their responsibility to use their dollar votes to enforce desirable ethical behavior, and many apparently consider these dollar votes more effective than votes in political elections. Consumers feel that they are empowered and can influence the actions of domestic and foreign organizations in the marketplace.

Also, 18.75% of the pledgees have no doubt that boycott participation is high and that the collective action of many like-minded individuals will force the boycott target to abandon the egregious behavior. This aligns to Klein et al.’s (2004) findings which show that the greater the number of individuals a consumer believes to participate in a boycott, the more likely the consumer is to boycott as well and the more likely s/he is to think that s/he will be able to make a difference. Our results expand Klein et al.’s (2004) findings by illustrating why consumers may feel that way. Many of the signatories plan to forward the boycott petition to all of their e-mail contacts. Pledgees apparently believe that this snowball-alert system will result in informing large numbers of like-minded consumers about the boycott, substantially increase participation, and ultimately force the target to change the egregious behavior. Pledgees thus display trust and reliance in cyberactivism, which suggests that Fang et al.’s findings (2009) concerning web survey participation might transfer to consumer reaction to online boycott petitions. It seems that consumers who trust the sponsor of an online boycott petition are likely to respond positively to the petition. Online trust is based on consumer awareness of the organization and consumer perception of the organization’s reputation (Yoon, 2002). When the HSUS posted the petition it had about ten million members—or one in every 30 persons—and was thus the largest NGO focusing on animal welfare in the U.S. (HSUS, 2007). Many of the pledgees were likely aware of the HSUS and thought highly of its reputation. Thus, trust beliefs in the HSUS could have shaped behavioral intentions, which then may have driven use behavior (see Klein, 2007).

The results also show that many pledgees (56.25%) are motivated to participate in this boycott because they wish to vent their anger. The resulting degree of hostility displayed toward the seal hunters, the Canadian Government, and Canada itself, is high. Many of the pledgees expressing their anger state explicitly that they would not consider buying any Canadian products or even visit Canada until the country abolishes the seal hunt. This finding resonates with Ettensohn and Klein’s (2005) results which show that consumer animosity toward a specific country is a predictor of willingness to buy that country’s products. Even for those consumers who are only mildly angry, animosity still predicts product preferences (Klein, 2002). Of interest to boycott targets and policy makers is that consumers who boycott because they are angry about a country’s behavior and policies do not necessarily denigrate the quality of that country’s products (Klein et al., 1998), but that those who remain angry even after the egregious policy has been cancelled have a tendency to belittle product quality and remain unlikely to purchase (Ettensohn and Klein, 2005).

The results further show that 21.92% of the pledgees wish to punish the boycott target for having committed the egregious behavior, and that for many, expressive and punitive motivations go hand-in-hand. For these signatories a seafood boycott is not enough; they wish to penalize the country’s overall economy by extending the boycott to other industries and the country itself. Some even name what other Canadian products they used to enjoy and/or considered pertinent to their health, such as hockey gear and games, clothing, and medications. However, they have now moved these items from their shopping to their boycott list. Our findings thus contrast with previous research which shows that consumers are less likely to participate in a boycott if participation results in a sufficiently large sacrifice (Klein et al., 2004). Prior work, however, has aimed to establish the relationship between perceived costs and boycotting by comparing behaviors of non-boycotters and boycotters whereas the current study focuses on consumers who have pledged boycott participation. Apparently, the angrier individuals get about the egregious behavior, the more involved they become in the boycott, and the more they are willing to sacrifice. It almost seems as if this willingness to make a greater sacrifice enhances the value of the public boycott pledge to themselves and others.

A majority (71.16%) of pledgees are motivated to participate in the boycott because it allows viewing ourselves as moral individuals who are doing the right thing, thereby boosting their personal self-esteem. Consumers are sending a clear message to the boycott target, namely that they feel the need to distance themselves from the target’s egregious behavior by refusing to purchase the products sold by the offending industry, or even the whole country. Anything less would be perceived as supporting the behavior in question, in this case the seal hunt. Also, the moral issue at stake—the prevention of cruelty to and the welfare/rights of animals—is one that many signatories explicitly identify with (44.08%) and the pursuit of which further allows pledgees to experience an increase in their social self-esteem. Considering that concern for the welfare and/or rights of animals has been moving more into the mainstream (Zwerdling, 2007), this is an issue companies can expect more and more consumers to tackle. As a case in point, Singer (2006) finds that millions of consumers in Europe and the U.S. are allowing their interest to boycott targets and policy makers is that consumers who
light that pledgees view the benefits of boycott participation as so powerful that no mention is made of any possible sacrifices; nor do the vast majority of boycott pledgees consider any potential costs. The findings of our qualitative study—while in line with Kozinets and Handleman’s (1998) qualitative study—contrast expectations and findings of quantitative studies that have addressed the cost of boycotting. For example, Klein et al. (2004) find that the cost of constrained consumption negatively impacts boycott participation. And Sen et al. (2001, p. 411) show that consumers consider costs of boycott participation, both in terms of intrinsic product preferences and substitutability, and are less likely to boycott if perceived costs are high. The latter, however, admit that they “assumed that the boycott decision is largely a rational rather than an emotional one,” whereas our findings show that this particular social-issue boycott appears to be a very emotional one, which could be why consumers ignore cost issues. It could also be that quantitative research is too structured to allow boycott participants to address the full range of emotions they experience, and that qualitative research is needed to more fully research and understand emotional issues that motivate boycott participation.

The results also show that consumers who pledge boycott participation can be driven by different boycott motivations and might boycott for a multitude of reasons. Some of the pledgees express their desire for the egregious act to end, while others verbalize their anger and/or wish to punish the target. Likewise, many consumers desire an end to the egregious behavior and also communicate their belief that they will be able to make a difference in the target’s bottom line and/or behavior. This result supports Ettenson and Klein (2005) who find that consumers who participate in a boycott express their anger and believe that they will bring about an end to an egregious behavior by displaying that anger.

The research design as well as the above discussion illustrate that the present research offers a number of major contributions. First, it is one of the few qualitative studies that investigate consumer boycott motivations. Using netnography has allowed unobtrusive data collection in an environment that is natural for consumers who choose to participate in virtual communities. This has made it possible to investigate boycott motivations as they were actually experienced by consumers, and thus has aided in discovering that the cost of boycotting does not seem to impact consumers as they decide to participate in such an emotionally laden boycott as the Canadian Seafood Boycott, a finding that can be considered a second major contribution of the present study. A third major contribution of this study is that the research design and data analyses have allowed determining to what extent consumer boycott participation is driven by specific boycott motivations (see Table 1). To date, empirical research has focused on identifying consumer boycott motivations, but the present study is the first that has identified the prevalence of each.

7. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although studying actual boycott pledges collected in an unobtrusive manner has its advantages (i.e., dealing with genuine consumer emotions, reactions, and intentions in a natural setting rather than having to elicit and manipulate moral outrage in an artificial environment), it also has its disadvantages. For example, pledges could not be prompted to directly express attitudes and beliefs concerning the boycott motivations of interest. However, the current study takes prior work one step further by investigating whether boycott motivations established through experimental or survey research hold when intentions are unobtrusively observed.

Further, since our study focuses on one specific boycott, its generalizability needs to be addressed. Pledgees seem to feel very strongly about the boycott cause, and future research should investigate whether consumers are likely to feel this strongly about cruelty to animals in general, or whether these strong feelings are restricted to certain species of animals. Future research should also examine whether these strong feelings of hostility are common in boycotts that are designed to improve the lives of the “seemingly powerless” (Friedman, 1999, p. 225), such as children, the elderly, certain minorities, and animals. Additionally, future research should examine whether boycott motivations are likely to change the longer a boycott lasts.

References


