The Heat Up / Cool Down-Model of Boycotting

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Many consumer boycott companies deemed socially irresponsible but stop boycotting after a while. This paper analyzes this phenomenon, suggesting a “heat-up”- and a “cool-down”-phase. Study 1 analyzes antecedents in the heat-up-phase. Study 2 investigates reactions in media. Study 3 explores forces underlying changes in boycott motivation, focusing on subjective costs.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the last decades, consumers have joined boycotts with increasing frequency to exert economic pressure on corporations they deem to act irresponsibly. Over the last years, the marketing literature has provided valuable insights into consumers’ boycott motivation (e.g., Klein, Smith, and John 2004; Sen, Gurhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001), mainly drawing from theories of social psychology and economic models (e.g., theories of fairness and reciprocity). Scholars have identified promoters that drive consumers to join boycotts, such as self-enhancement, as well as inhibitors that prevent consumers from boycotting, such as a lack of substitutes, inconvenience, disbelief in boycott efficacy (Hoffmann 2011; Sen, Gurhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001). Notwithstanding, to date only few studies analyzed the temporal dimension and the longitudinal dynamics of boycott participation. None of these studies examined possible changes in motivational determinants or perceived egregiousness leading to changes in boycott participation over time.

To fill this gap, the present paper reports three mixed-methods studies that jointly explore the intrapersonal processes thought to be responsible for a decrease in boycott participation. We suggest that in a “heat up”-phase, the agenda setting of the media firstly raises broad awareness of the boycott trigger which increases egregiousness. However, during a “cool down”-phase many consumer fall back to their consumption habits and stop boycotting due to high subjective costs. Yet, it is necessary to distinguish different consumer segments that follow different dynamics of egregiousness and boycotted behavior. The paper makes at least three contributions to the literature on unethical firm behavior and consumer boycotts.

First, this paper tackles the triggers, promoters and inhibitors of boycott participation in the heat up-phase. We content analyzed internet postings related to the documentary on the commentary site of an online newspaper. The article in the news-website was published on February 13th 2013 and describes the documentary which was released on the same day. A total of 612 readers published postings related to the article in the commentary-section. Our results suggest that participation costs play a pivotal role when it comes to a decision for or against a boycott. In some cases consumers’ decision to boycott the company was justified by the low costs which are associated with alternatives. On the other side, the majority of expressed inhibitors were expected participation costs as well, such as the distance to the next electronic retailer and the narrow assortment of alternative retailers.

Second, the paper explores the reactions and dynamics of media and society after the egregiousness act. According to the agenda setting theory (McCombs et al. 1977), the media influences the direct proportion to the emphasis placed on news, e.g. about the egregious behavior of a company. Therefore, when the proportion of this case in the media changes through other news, consumers shift their perception on other topics. Initial and often massive reporting about an irresponsible corporate act raises egregiousness fast and intensively. However, consumers’ frustration cool down during the course of time as media coverage decreases. Hence, we expect that the perceived egregiousness corrodes over time. Therefore, we investigated the dynamic effects of the media coverage over time through comparing the media coverage of an irresponsible corporate act to the brand index over time as indicators for the dynamics of perceived egregiousness. We used google news to find and analyze 134 news articles which were related to the triggering TV documentary, starting with the publishing date, February 13th, till June 1st by means of a content analysis. We applied a frequency analysis to examine the valence of the articles (positive/neutral or negative). Our results provide evidence that the media coverage of this topic de-creases and thus drives a shift of consumers’ perception towards other news. Perceived egregiousness is considered as the main driver for boycott intention corrodes over time.

Third, we identified groups of consumers who differ in their perceived egregiousness and boycott behavior over time. While we expect that a decrease in perceived egregiousness will foster a lower boycott participation, we posit that this decrease may not apply uniformly to all consumers. Despite media coverage and the responsible act of the company, some consumers may not change their consumption pattern over time. We name this type of consumer the ignoramus. We further consider two types of consumers who both quit boycotting over time but vary in their underlying levels of egregiousness. First, forgetters display changing level of egregiousness and also alter their boycott participation over time, whereas forsakers remain on a stable level of high egregiousness, but change their boycott participation. In the following, we discuss how inhibitors (esp. subjective costs of boycotting) affect these three groups of consumers differently. Five months after the triggering TV documentary was broadcasted, we conducted a study in which we asked 305 participants to indicate their current egregiousness and participation and to retrospectively evaluate both constructs five months before. Our results suggest that the impacts of promoters and of inhibitors vary across different boycotter groups. Ignoramus are more likely to rely on the reputation of the boycotted company. Forgetters emphasize their boycott-related subjective costs and hence differ from Forsakers. They wish to join the boycott but recognize that subjective costs (e.g., greater mental effort for seeking new alternatives) are higher than personal rewards (e.g., boosting or maintaining self-esteem by responding to social pressure). Thus, they re-vert to purchase products of the initially boycotted company even though they still have a high level of perceived egregiousness.

REFERENCES