Joining The Boycott? Effects Of Stimulus-Induced Negative Affect And Ethical Evaluation On Boycott Intentions

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In recent years, governments have come under pressure from their own citizens (e.g., Arab Spring or Occupy movement). Citizen protest movements and initiatives today target not only governments and states but multinational corporations and other entities. Consumer boycotts represent the most common type of citizen resistance and they can seriously damage corporate reputation and the bottom line. The Shell boycott and the Nestlé boycott illustrate such initiatives. Yet many boycott campaigns go unrecognized by the public and do not attain their goals. Hence the question arises, “What factors determine whether a call for boycott is successful?”.

Several papers investigate the topic of consumer boycotts as well as boycotting behavior and effectiveness. Sen et al. (2001), Klein et al. (2004), and Ettenson/Klein (2005) have, until now, published the most widely accepted theory-driven papers on consumer boycotting behavior. However, those studies do not consider essential aspects of individual inclination of joining consumer protest movement (e.g., consumer boycotts). According to Fridja (1986) and other researchers, emotions are an important driver of behavior, but Ettenson/Klein’s (2005) paper is the only one to consider emotional determinants of boycotting behavior, namely consumer animosity. Moreover, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, no study analyzes how individual appraisals of alleged unethical corporate conduct affect consumer boycott inclinations. Very few papers investigate the interplay between affective and cognitive constructs within the context of boycotting behavior. Klein et al. (2004) consider a construct called perceived egregiousness that comprises affective as well as cognitive elements within this context. Lindenmeier et al.’s (2012) study reveals that negative affect and disconfirmation of moral norms lead to consumer outrage and willingness to join boycotts. Grappi et al. (2013) explore consumer responses to irresponsible corporate behavior, including boycotting behavior and the role of moral emotions. But more research investigating the interaction of affective and cognitive determinants of consumer boycotting behavior is needed.

Our study uses a mediation model approach as the conceptual basis. We assume that consumers experience an initial affective reaction when confronted with calls for a boycott. In line with the social intuitionist model (Haidt, 2001 or Green/Haidt, 2002) this kind of affective appraisal of unethical corporate conduct takes place spontaneously, with no or minimal cognitive control. We assume that two channels exist through which spontaneously-generated negative affects impact consumer boycott inclinations: First, and according to the standard theory of emotions (e.g., Fridja, 1986), negative affect may directly affect willingness to join a boycott: Stimulus-induced negative affect (IV) à Boycott inclination (DV). Second, and confirming the cognitive mediation model (e.g., Eveland, 2001), stimulus-induced negative affect results in higher levels of activation, which may increase the individual motivation to process information. In line with this idea, we assume that negative affect is mediated by consumers’ ethical evaluation of alleged unethical corporate behavior: Stimulus-induced negative affect (IV) à Ethical evaluation (MV) à Boycott inclination (DV).

Against the background of our conceptual considerations, based on a quota sample of German citizens, and based on structural equations modeling as well as mediation analysis, our paper examines these research questions:
1. Do negative affect and ethical evaluation influence consumer inclinations to participate in consumer boycotts?
2. Does ethical evaluation mediate the effect of negative affect on the inclination to participate in consumer boycotts?
3. Do gender and preference for ethical products influence consumers’ decision-making process of whether to boycott?