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When too many anti-consumption opportunities lead to anti-consumption of anti-consumption

Michael S. Lee

University of Auckland, msh.lee@auckland.ac.nz

Ulku Yuksel

Nguyen T. Thai

University of Wollongong, nthai@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

A petition is a document signed by numerous people, announcing a demand that requires a corporation or public entity to take an action to remedy a transgression via essential course of practices. Signing a petition to support a positive cause or a boycott call, as an upshot of a negative cause worth boycotting, may be less taxing for consumers than partaking in boycotts organized by boycott organizers. Thanks to the internet and social media, hundreds of thousands of online petitions are created worldwide each year with millions of signatures supporting various causes (Antonetti & Manika, 2017; Wright, 2016). This raises a question as to whether such increases in requests to boycott positively or negatively impact consumers' willingness to enact anti-consumption. This study explores the effect of choice overload on consumers signing a petition in support of a boycott call.

Keywords

opportunities, anti-consumption, many, lead, too, when

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Paper 15

When too many anti-consumption opportunities lead to anti-consumption of anti-consumption.

Michael SW Lee, Ulku Yuksel, Nguyen T Thai

A petition is a document signed by numerous people, announcing a demand that requires a corporation or public entity to take an action to remedy a transgression via essential course of practices. Signing a petition to support a positive cause or a boycott call, as an upshot of a negative cause worth boycotting, may be less taxing for consumers than partaking in boycotts organized by boycott organizers. Thanks to the internet and social media, hundreds of thousands of online petitions are created worldwide each year with millions of signatures supporting various causes (Antonetti & Manika, 2017; Wright, 2016). This raises a question as to whether such increases in requests to boycott positively or negatively impact consumers' willingness to enact anti-consumption. This study explores the effect of choice overload on consumers signing a petition in support of a boycott call.

Boycotts are mostly provisional acts of consumers departing from a relationship with an organization that has caused a disapproval due to a misconduct. Boycotts provide an assurance of re-building the relationship once some specified conditions have been met by the company (Hirschman, 1970). Boycott practice involves stopping or limiting consumption with the transgressing company (Friedman, 1999; Yuksel & Mryteza, 2009). Since the cost of boycotting is a predictor of participation (Sen, Gürhan-Canli, & Morwitz, 2001), asking customers to sign an online petition supporting a boycott is not only less costly for participants, but also important for two other reasons. First, it demonstrates their support for the cause, providing word-of-mouth about the boycott, which may increase overall participation. Second, as established by cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962), consumers who publicly announce support of a boycott will be more likely to participate in the actual boycott. In spite of the importance of signing e-petitions, boycott research has not yet introduced this outcome variable to boycott studies. This study introduces 'petition signing' as a new way to measure boycott likelihood and thus allow boycott scholars to benefit from the strength of this popular method of protest.

When consumers are exposed to many product or service options, they suffer from negative choice overload effects, resulting in regret, dissatisfaction and/or deferring of choice (Chernev, Böckenholt, & Goodman, 2015). This is because, when faced with more options, consumers need to make difficult trade-offs or comparisons among the alternatives that may all be equally attractive. Thus, a choice process involving more options is sometimes harder and more agonising, resulting in greater conflict, than a decision involving smaller choice sets (Xu, Jiang, & Dhar, 2013; Chernev et al., 2015). Likewise, people exposed to many important causes that are all asking for them to support a boycott may also feel overwhelmed, given most of these issues may seem similarly important and worth supporting. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that individuals presented with numerous significant causes and calls asking them to sign a petition may be reluctant to do so and end up not signing any of these petitions. In contrast, being exposed to a limited amount of causes that require support may enhance choice-making. Thus, we hypothesize that individuals exposed to many (few) boycott calls are less (more) likely to sign a petition to support a boycott.

A between-subjects experimental design was used to address the proposed hypothesis. The experiment was conducted online and the participants (181 females, 126 males, and 6 participants did not report this information) were recruited from Amazon M-Turk. By random assignment, 161 participants saw the boycott calls for three brands (i.e., small choice-set condition) and 152 participants saw the boycott calls for 15 brands (i.e., large choice-set condition). The use of three and 15 as representatives of small choice-sets and large choice-sets is consistent with previous studies in choice overload literature (Haynes, 2009).

Participants were first introduced to the general topic of the study, namely, boycotting. To ensure that all participants understood the term correctly, a definition of consumer boycotts was provided: “Boycotts are consumers’ reactions such as stopping buying or stopping using a company’s products or services because the company has done something wrong or unethical. As boycotts directly threaten sales and revenues, they are taken seriously by businesses. Any concerned group or individual can call a boycott.”

They were then told that they were about to see a list of calls for boycotts. They were made aware that the list was not in any particular order. More importantly, they were told that the boycott calls were solicited from their local newspaper. This information was aimed to increase participation’s motivation to take part in the study and to ensure that findings were not confounded with participants’ low motivation. The brands and their associated negative causes are selected from the current boycott calls from Ethical Consumer’s website (www.ethicalconsumer.org). For participants in the small choice-set condition, three brands were randomly and evenly selected from the list of 15 brands that participants in the large choice-set condition saw.

After reading the information about the brands and related negative causes in the assigned choice-set, participants were asked questions about their perceptions of the size of the assigned choice-set, support for a boycott call, and demographics information. To check whether the choice-set size manipulation was confirmed, participants were asked two questions (adapted from Hadar & Sood, 2014): “How much choice do you feel you were offered in terms of the number of brands and related causes?” (1 = not enough choices, 7 = a lot of choices), “When initially given the task to pick one brand or organization to boycott from the choice-set, what did you think about the choice-set size? (1 = I had too few options to choose from, 7 = I had too many options to choose from).

To measure participants’ support for boycott, a behavioural measure of signing the petition to support a boycott call was used. Specifically, after reading the information from the assigned list of brands to be boycotted, participants were presented an open-ended question: “If you agree to sign a petition against one of the brands/organizations that you just read, please write below “Yes” and explain in a sentence why. This will automatically be stored in the change.org website. If you are not willing to sign the petition, then skip this question.” If participants responded to the question by typing “Yes” and explaining the reason, their responses were coded as 1. If participants skipped this question, their responses were coded as 0.

Manipulation check questions ($r = .620$) confirmed the success of the choice-set size manipulation, such that participants in the large choice-set condition perceived their choice-set as larger than what participants in the small choice-set condition perceived ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.30$ vs. $M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.29$, $t = -14.075$, $p < .001$). To test the proposed hypothesis 1, a chi-square test was used. Results revealed that the number of participants choosing from the large choice-set condition who signed the petition (28.3%) was less than the number of

participants choosing from the small choice-set condition who signed the petition (39.8%, $\chi^2(1, n = 313) = 4.566, p = .033, \Phi = -.121$). Thus, our hypothesis was supported.

This study establishes that individuals who need to make a choice from many anti-consumption causes are less likely to sign a petition to support the boycott than individuals who need to make a choice from a small number of causes. Contributing to both boycott and choice overload literature, this study introduces the notion that being exposed to too many brands to sign a petition to support a boycott will actually decrease the likelihood of anti-consumption. This is the first study establishing that the number of alternatives asking for anti-consumption will influence consumers' decisions to support a cause or doing nothing. Indeed, given there are so many causes in the Internet and social media that ask customers to sign a petition, it is very important for boycott organizers or initiators of petitions to know whether the number of current calls will have an impact on their targets. Boycott organizers, therefore, should be selective in terms of choosing which brand they prioritize to be boycotted. A timeline that splits up different boycott campaigns to be promoted at different periods is recommended as it is less overwhelming and people are less likely to perceive themselves as "too" small to make a difference.

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