

The Mystique of Macro-Boycotting Behaviour: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

In spite of the aim of the World Trade Organization and other international organizations to foster international trade and development by lessening protectionism agendas worldwide, there has been a rise in consumer boycotting behaviour at a macro level involving campaigns directed against foreign products from countries embroiled in conflicts in international relations, rather than against products from individual companies perceived to have engaged in a domestic egregious act. While campaigning at this level is becoming a more effective tool for consumer protest, as it negatively affects both the boycotted countries' macroeconomics and companies' micro-competitiveness, consumer motivations to participate in macro-level boycotts has so far been overlooked in the boycotting literature. This paper examines consumers' behavioural intentions to participate in macro-boycotting campaigns within the context of an Arab country, which has recently witnessed a number of campaigns of this nature. Using the theory of planned behaviour the findings of an exploratory qualitative study of Egyptian consumers offer insights into the motives and barriers to individual macro-boycott participation. Findings are discussed together with managerial implications.

Keywords

Boycotting, Consumer Behaviour, International Marketing, Country of Origin, Egypt

Introduction

Nowadays consumers are becoming increasingly aware of their ability to take action against questionable corporate practices by organising a boycott of a company's products and changing their consumption patterns accordingly. According to *Black's Law Dictionary* (1983:98, cited in Garrett (1987:46-47), a boycott is a “*concerted refusal to do business with a particular person or business in order to obtain concessions or to express displeasure with certain acts or practice of person or business.*” Essentially the decision to participate in boycotting campaigns against companies and their products is triggered by their involvement in what is perceived by individuals to be an “Egregious Act” (John & Klein, 2003; Friedman, 1999; Smith, 1990). For example, there have been recent boycotts of Nike and Gap products over their alleged use of sweatshop labour (Dickson, 2005).

The world is also witnessing an increase in another type of boycotting campaign, which involves the boycotting of all products of a particular Country of Origin (COO) due to a perceived religious, political, diplomatic or even military domestic “Egregious Act”. These macro-boycotting campaigns are intensifying in number¹ and effect. For example, following the long-standing Arab economic boycott of Israel (Fershtman & Gandal, 1998), consumers in Arab countries have participated in campaigns against products of American or British origin in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, against Danish products sparked off by the publication of cartoon caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in a tabloid newspaper (Absoag, 2009) and against Dutch products in response to the release of an anti-Islam film “Fitna” (Abdullab, 2008). Elsewhere France's lack of support for the war in Iraq caused many US consumers to boycott French products (Chavis & Leslie, 2009), whereas exactly forty years earlier British consumers were urged to reject South African products to show their opposition to the apartheid regime (Gurney, 1999). This emerging phenomenon of macro-

¹ See the number of Internet sites promoting boycott campaigns on different search engines (see for example; www.arabo.com; www.google.com)

boycotting is becoming a more effective tool for consumer protest, as it negatively affects both the boycotted countries' macroeconomics and companies' micro-competitiveness. Nevertheless consumer motivations to participate in campaigns at this level have so far been overlooked in the boycotting literature. This paper reports on the findings of the first phase of a multiple-phase empirical study which aims to examine the motives and barriers to individual macro-boycott participation. This phase was conducted within the context of an Arab country, Egypt, which has recently witnessed a number of campaigns of this nature. The paper is organized as follows: it starts by reviewing the boycotting literature and the justification for using the theory of planned behaviour to explore the factors affecting macro-boycott participation. This is followed by a description of the methodology used. Findings are discussed, conclusions are drawn and a future research agenda is highlighted.

Theoretical Background

The practice of boycotting had been mainly introduced in the literature as a reaction to some perceived egregious act or conduct by a company (John & Klein, 2003). Klein, *et al.* (2004) undertook a comprehensive review of prior work on boycott participation, most of which is theoretically rather than empirically based. By examining the decision to boycott from a cost-benefit perspective and drawing from the supporting literature, they proposed a conceptualisation of motivations for boycott participation and subjected it to empirical testing in a quantitative study of a boycott of a firm in which only a minority of consumers took part despite the perceived egregiousness of the firm's actions. They identified four predictors of boycott participation: the desire to make a difference, scope for self-enhancement, counterarguments and constrained consumption, with the relationship between perceived egregiousness and boycott participation being moderated by self-enhancement and constrained consumption. Two of these predictors relate to the benefits of boycotting. First,

the desire to make a difference, which refers to a consumer's belief in the appropriateness and effectiveness of boycotting behaviour in bringing about corporate change (Kozinets & Handelman, 1998; Friedman, 1999) and reflects the instrumental motivation of "perceived efficacy" discussed by Sen, *et al.* (2001: 402) by doing one's part to change the firm's behaviour. Next is scope for self-enhancement, whereby the motivation for boycott participation is seen as an opportunity to boost or maintain social and personal self-esteem. Kozinets and Handelman's (1998: 477/478) netnography of boycotters uncovered boycotting not simply as a communal but also a personal act and as a vehicle for morally transforming behaviour likened to "a hygienically cleansing process" that ensured purchases were made "free from guilt" (see also Smith, 1990). Boycott participation also presents a social dilemma when tensions arise between an individual's social and personal interests, and social pressures to participate are felt (Sen *et al.*, 2001; Garrett, 1987). The remaining predictors highlight costs associated with boycotting which discourage participation. Counterarguments arise from perceptions that boycotts could potentially cause more harm than good (Schwartz, 1977) or that they are subject to small-agent problems, based on the belief amongst potential boycotters that their individual actions would be imperceptible to the company being targeted, and free-rider problems, where they believe they can free ride on the boycotting efforts of others (John & Klein, 2003). Another cost is constrained consumption of boycotted products, which affects boycott participation, particularly when product preference is high and no substitutes are available (John & Klein, 2003).

While Klein, *et al.*'s (2004) review of the boycotting literature highlights a range of different consumer motivations to boycott, it is clear that prior work has largely focused on boycotts directed at companies (i.e. micro-boycotting), and with the exception of Klein, *et al.* (1998) has overlooked motivations to take part in boycotts of products from a particular country due to perceived egregious conduct of a religious, political, diplomatic or even

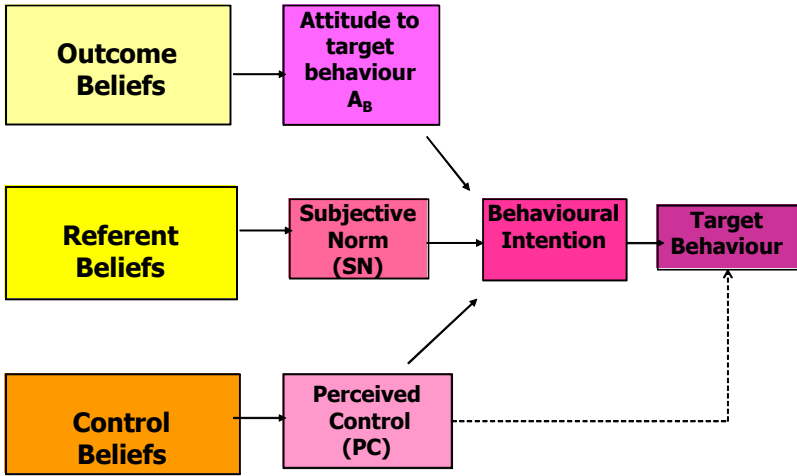
military nature (i.e. macro-boycotting). It had been widely recognized and accepted that the country of origin (COO) is an important dimension in buying decisions on buyer perceptions and evaluations (Srinivasan & Jain, 2003). Special attention has been paid to issues like the impact of COO on national competitiveness in global markets, whether it works as an aid or barrier to the product evaluation, and its relative importance for the purchasing decision (see for example: Al-Sulaiti & Baker, 1998; Akaah & Yaprak, 1993; Han, 1989). However the relationship between COO and boycotting has not yet been investigated.

Although the concept of COO has been traditionally referred to as the effect of the country where the corporate headquarters of the company marketing the product or brand is located (Johansson *et al.*, 1985), Heslop, *et al.* (2008:356) notes that work on country image effects takes a broader perspective to include “attitudes toward products made in or otherwise associated with (manufactured in, manufactured by a company with head office in, assembled in, designed in, ingredients from) a country.” In the case of macro-boycotting consumers deliberately ignore all information about the product and focus on their beliefs about the association between the product and its COO. However unlike the concept of “consumer ethnocentrism” introduced by Shimp and Sharma (1987:280) to refer to “the beliefs held by American consumers about the appropriateness, indeed morality, of purchasing foreign made products”, macro-boycotting is not concerned with reactions by consumers to buying foreign products because of the impact on the domestic economy, rather it focuses on the role which animosity plays in COO effects. Animosity was first defined by Klein, *et al.* (1998:90) as “the remnants of antipathy related to previous or ongoing military, political, or economic events”, and has led to work on the effects of animosity towards countries and how such beliefs impact on product purchases from these countries (Amine *et al.*, 2005; Ettenson & Klein, 2005).

Since the purpose of this paper is to examine the motives and barriers to individual macro-boycott participation, it is proposed that the belief-driven Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

developed by Ajzen (1991) serves as a useful theoretical framework for exploring the relationship between attitudes towards boycott participation and consumer behaviour. According to this theory, which is an extension of the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), behaviour can be predicted by behavioural intention, which in turn is determined by attitude toward the target behaviour (A_B), subjective norm (SN) and perceived control (PC). Figure 1 below shows that these three determinants are based on three different types of consumer beliefs. First an individual's attitude towards performing the target behaviour (A_B) is based on *outcome* beliefs and evaluations (i.e. that the behaviour leads to gains and losses). Second subjective norm (SN) considers the social aspects of attitude formation in terms of *referent* beliefs about whether others think the individual should perform the target behaviour and their motivation to comply with them. Third perceived control (PC) relates to *control* beliefs, which reflect how easy or difficult it is for an individual to perform the behaviour. Not only does PC have an influence on behavioural intention, it can also directly influence behaviour.

Figure 1 Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)



Source: M Fishbein and I Ajzen (1975), p.48.

According to this theory three different types of beliefs (i.e. outcome beliefs, referent beliefs and control beliefs) jointly determine an individual's intention to perform a target behaviour, which in turn determines behaviour. Thus an individual's attitude towards performing the target behaviour (i.e macro-boycotting) is based on their beliefs that this behaviour leads to certain outcomes such as the instrumental desire to make a difference or its scope for self-enhancement. Referent beliefs address the social dilemma of boycott participation as they relate to 'subjective norms' founded on beliefs about whether others think the individual should perform the target behaviour and their motivation to comply with them. Control beliefs are concerned the notion of 'perceived control' which directly impact both behavioural intention and behaviour, and reflect how easy or difficult it is for an individual to perform the behaviour. In the case of boycotting perceived control would reflect the individual's evaluation of issues such as free riding and constrained consumption.

Method

In order to get a better understanding of consumers' motives and barriers towards participation in macro-boycotting campaigns a qualitative research methodology was employed with the research method and procedures following recommendations for theory development in marketing (Zaltman *et al.*, 1982; Deshpande, 1983) so that a conceptual framework for macro-boycotting could be developed. This study was conducted in two stages: in-depth interviews followed by focus groups for better interpretation and confirmation, which is recommended for exploratory research and enables a large volume of information to be captured and allows for clarification (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). While in-depth interviews can enable participants to give a detailed discussion of the complex engagement in macro-boycotting campaigns (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991) and are more like

“a conversation with a purpose” (Burgess, 1984:102), additional valuable insights can be sought from the focus groups, which minimise intervention from researchers and maximise interaction between participants, thus permitting opportunities for further elaboration and explanations (McDaniel & Gates, 1999). The combination of both methods complements each other as indicated by Kitzininger (1994:112) “people do not operate in a social vacuum, knowing what is (and is not) expressed in a group context may be as important as knowing what is expressed in a confidential, one-to-one interview.”

Since it was important to have the views of both active boycotters (AB) and non-boycotters (NB) in a macro-boycotting campaign, a purposive sample was selected through a snowballing technique from an initial pool of participants identified and interviewed by the authors (Churchill, 1999). In the first stage, a total of eighty-nine in-depth interviews were conducted with fifty-eight active boycotters (AB) and thirty-one non-boycotters (NB) lasting between 20 and 30 minutes. This number was based on the theoretical sampling process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Seale, 1999) and the point when theoretical saturation had been reached (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In the second stage, two focus group discussions were held each lasting around one hour with AB and NB to further discuss the findings of the previous stage. In terms of the resulting sample composition, the age range of participants was between 18 and 68 years old, which is representative of the main participants in any boycotting campaign. As for gender, 53 of the participants were males and 36 were females. Although the sample could be considered biased towards males, this could be justified based on the fact that Arab countries are more masculine societies, where men dominate most of the decisions (Hofstede, 1981). Finally, income levels ranged from less than LE 3000/month to more than LE 200,000/month.

Results

After analysing the in-depth interviews using open coding where line-by-line analysis was conducted (Sandelowski, 1995), a range of themes emerged as a result of data deconstruction (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and were further explored in the focus group discussions. Using the TPB framework the themes were then framed in terms of the outcome, referent and control beliefs that can affect the probability of participation in macro-boycotting behaviour. These findings are now presented and supported with some quotations from active boycotters (AB) and non-boycotters (NB).

Before considering the different types of consumer beliefs, it was evident that macro-boycotting campaigns are mainly triggered by what is perceived by consumers as a “Country of Origin Egregious Act”, which arouses animosity towards the country in question (Klein *et al.*, 2004; Amine *et al.*, 2005; Ettenson and Klein, 2005). As one interviewee explained: “*I did not use to have a negative attitude against USA or the UK but their decisions and actions during the last years made me decide to boycott their products*” (Ahmed - AB, 22 years, male). This view was shared by most interviewees and none of them referred to any specific brand as the main reason for participating in macro-boycotting campaigns.

Outcome Beliefs

An individual’s attitude towards performing the target behaviour (A_B) depends on *outcome* beliefs and evaluations of this behaviour leading to gains and losses. In the case of macro-boycotting, this concerns their beliefs that it leads to certain outcomes such as the instrumental desire to make a difference, which is one of the predictors of micro-boycotting identified by Klein *et al.* (2004).

Boycott efficiency: analogous to micro-boycotting campaigns the expected efficiency of the campaign is a major determinant in individuals’ decisions to participate in the campaign (John

& Klein, 2003). It might work as a motive for participation, when efficiency is expected, and at the same time it might work as a barrier when inefficiency is expected. An interviewee (Huda - NB, 36 years, and female) explained that *“If I have confidence that such a campaign will force the country to change its actions or at least will sound worldwide I'll join it for sure, as it will be worth joining”*.

Do my part: this was another important motive which finds support in the micro-boycotting literature (Friedman, 1999). One interviewee states (Ali –AB, 25 years, male) *“I cannot support Iraqis and Palestinians any other way, so at least this makes me feel I do a little thing for them”*. This motive gains higher importance, especially in situations where individuals feel they are helpless and that the political regimes in their own country are not doing their part.

Create national substitutes: Although not supported in the literature, a good majority of interviewees argued that macro-boycotting can lead to the creation of a local substitute as one interviewee (Mahmood – AB, -42 years, male) pointed out *“we should utilize this chance and use it to help in creating and strengthening local substitutes for these imported products, to minimize our dependence on these foreign countries, which do not care about us. So we should care about ourselves”*. Such a motive to participate in a macro-boycotting campaign implies a sense of national commitment and a way for defending the country against the drawbacks of globalisation.

So far outcome beliefs have been addressed in terms of *gains*, however arguments against boycott participation also considered *losses* arising from boycott-induced harm, free riding, small agency and the company's reaction.

Boycott-induced harm: Support was found for Klein, *et al's*. (2004) argument that a potential boycotter might suppress participation because it is perceived to have negative outcomes such as a rise in unemployment. One interviewee (Morad – NB, 33 years, male) indicated that

“some of the American and British products are introduced by Egyptians and most of the investments are Egyptian and the royalty fees they are paying are very limited, so we are going to hurt ourselves by this boycotting”. Another issue concerns *mode of market entry* for the company in question. It is argued that using direct or indirect exporting will influence the level of boycotting participation as the relationship between the product and its COO varies in terms of clarity to boycotters. However for other contractual modes of entry like licensing, franchising and joint venture (Cateora & Graham, 2005) the likelihood of boycott participation will lessen as the relationship between the product and the COO will not be so clear, and might result in inducing harm to innocent people not targeted by the boycotting campaign. One of the interviewees (Mansoor – AB, 50 years, male) said that *“McDonalds is an Egyptian franchiser and we should not boycott it, but something like the American fruit or ABC (famous brand) T-shirts are exported products, and we can boycott them”*).

Free ride: it is well documented in the literature that the higher number of participants in the boycotting campaigns has a dual impact on its efficiency of the campaign (John and Klein, 2003). On the one hand, this will encourage others to join as one Interviewee (Wafaa – AB, 19 years, female) explained that *“I feel more motivated as I see more and more people join the boycott”*. However, at the same time, this may make others think that the campaign is going to succeed anyhow regardless of their participation, and as a consequence serves as a barrier to playing any part in it. Another interviewee (Mohammed – NB, 34 years, male) mentioned that *“I’m not the one who will make the boycott work or fail”*.

Small agent: the feeling that individual boycotting participation will not play any role in changing the “Egregious Act” of the country also works as a barrier for joining the boycotting campaign. That was supported in the literature (Klein *et al.* 2004) and also in our findings. One interviewee (Aiman – NB, 54 years, male) explained that *“I do not think that the US economy will be affected by my or the whole Egyptian boycotting, but we are more like*

shooting our own foot". Nevertheless a counterargument was put forward by another interviewee (Rami – AB, 21 years, male) declaring that *"Being so small and neglected by other nations should motivate us to join the effort to show them that we can act"*.

Company's reaction: In macro-boycotting campaigns, where the boycotting behaviour is mainly directed against the COO of the company in question, individual reactions of companies might result in easing the severity of boycotting but do not end it by itself (Abosag, 2009). We found evidence of a company's reaction counting as one of the barriers to boycott participation. One interviewee (Adel – AB, 41 years, male) explained that *"when McDonalds advertised that it donates one Egyptian Pound from the price of each meal to the relief missions in Palestine and Iraq, this made me think twice about my boycotting behaviour"*.

Referent beliefs

Referent beliefs address the social dilemma of boycott participation as it relates to 'subjective norms' founded on beliefs about whether others think the individual should perform the target behaviour and their motivation to comply with them.

Self-peace and Guilt: one of the most mentioned motives to participate in a boycotting campaign was to enjoy self-peace and avoid the guilt feeling for not supporting what is perceived as justice (Kozinets & Handelman, 1998; Sen *et al.* 2001). An interviewee (Seham - AB, 28 years, female) argued that *"Participating in such a campaign makes me feel that I'm not contributing to my Muslim brothers' soreness"*.

Being seen by others: Smith (1990) introduced the concept of "Clean Hands" by emphasising the idea that boycotters believe that they are under moral obligation to keep away from the boycotted products. One interviewee (Nadia – AB, 22 years, female) emphasised this idea when she mentioned *"Even if I were going to break my boycotting for a little while, I would*

try to cover it up as it makes me feel deeply diffident to be seen buying and consuming these products”.

Pressure from others: Social pressure is widely acknowledged in the literature as a motive for boycott participation (Rea, 1974). Attention has been paid to expectations about the number of participants (Sen *et al.* 2001) and efficiency of the campaign (Smith, 1990). Nowadays with the widespread usage of the internet, mobile-phones’ SMS, and ‘chat-rooms’ boycott organisers can deliver their message quickly to a bigger audience, However it was clear from most of the interviews and focus group discussions that the perceived credibility and integrity of those who promote and participate in boycotting campaign is critical. One boycotter (Jamal – AB, 22 years, male) explained that *“one of the main reasons for me to participate in this campaign was that most of those who I trust in their judgement and way of thinking joined this campaign, which made me decide to join without a lot of thinking”*. Thus the perceived credibility of the organiser of macro-boycotting campaigns can be a motive or a barrier to participating in such as campaign. However we also found that the pressure of family members, especially the children, acts as a barrier for boycotting and forces some individuals to buy the boycotted products. One interviewee (Amel – AB, 31 years, female) emphasised that *“It is very difficult for me to convince my 7 year old son and 6 year old daughter not to buy [Happy Meal] because we should boycott!!! They cannot understand such things”*.

Control Beliefs

Control beliefs are concerned the notion of ‘perceived control’ which directly impact both behavioural intention and behaviour, and reflect how easy or difficult it is for an individual to perform the macro-boycotting behaviour. John & Klein (2003) observed that high product preference or lack of availability of substitutes are available (John & Klein, 2003) could result in the constrained consumption of boycotted products.

Loyalty: loyalty to the product restrains boycotting participation as this is one of the direct costs of boycotting (i.e. foregoing preferred goods) (Klein *et al.*, 2004). This was supported by this study as one interviewee (Faraj – NB, 39 years, male) who indicated that *“it is very difficult for me to boycott what I used to drink for 25 years of my life”*. This variable clearly works as a barrier for boycott participation.

Substitutes availability: while this variable is not discussed in the literature as a barrier to boycotting, this may be because the literature was developed in western countries, where substitutes are always available and most probably with the same level of quality. However, within the economic context of less developed countries (LDC), the substitutes’ availability is a major concern for boycotters. One of the interviewees (Shahad – NB, 28 years, female) mentioned that *“I’m willing to sacrifice and have lower quality in order to boycott but I’m not willing to stop using such a product category for the rest of my life. Boycotting will be far easier if we have similar substitutes”*. So this variable works mainly as a barrier that restricts an individual’s willingness to boycott.

Political conditions: although this variable is not discussed in the literature, it was found to have influence on participation in macro-boycotting. One interviewee (Sultan-AB, 27 years, male) said *“I feel that I’m free, and I can make a difference here, so I participate in such boycotting campaign, so this make me feel relieved because in the elections I do not participate because I know the results in advance, and there is no role for me and my participation does not count”*. So individuals might be motivated to participate in macro-boycotting when they believe that the current political system does not give them enough freedom to play their part in society.

Discussion, Conclusions and Future Agenda

The aim of this paper is to examine the motives and barriers to individual macro-boycott participation. The belief-driven Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) developed by Ajzen (1991) was used as a useful theoretical framework for exploring the relationship between attitudes towards boycott participation and consumer behaviour. Using the TPB framework the themes were then organised in terms of the outcome, referent and control beliefs that can affect the probability of participation in macro-boycotting behaviour. Under outcome beliefs, this study identified seven beliefs that lead to certain motives and barriers to macro-boycotting such as boycott efficiency, do my part, create national substitutes, boycott-induced harm, free ride, small agent, and company's reaction. Motives identified under referent beliefs include self-peace and guilt, being seen by others, and pressure from others. Control beliefs were identified as loyalty, substitutes availability, and political conditions. While some of these motives and barriers were identified in the literature on micro-boycotting, this study identified new ones at the macro-boycotting level. This includes create national substitutes, company reaction, substitutes availability, and political conditions.

The authors argue that these new variables have significant importance to our understanding about macro-boycotting. These new variables show that the traditional tactics and strategies used to combat micro-boycotting campaigns will not work on their own at the macro-boycotting level. The impact of macro-boycotting campaigns on companies can be more severe and long lasting compared to micro-boycotting as found in our field study and demonstrated by the case of Danish Arla Foods in the Middle East (Abosag, 2009), which still has not been able to recover its market share since the boycott started in 2006. The deeply held religious and national commitments can extend the animosities making macro-boycotting more persistent and harmful. Thus, managers cannot focus on the company-related boycotts without addressing wider issues that may trigger the macro-boycott and may be beyond the company's control to influence. However, as our findings show, companies can ease the

impact from macro-boycotting campaigns using different sets of tactics related to the new variables identified above. Such tactics that can reduce the harm of macro-boycotting should start by distancing the company and its products from the source of the macro-boycotting. This could include modifying aspects related to a brand such as putting less emphasis on the “made in” aspect, re-localising the brand to appear more local, participating in local projects and appearing to be more socially responsible as was the case with McDonalds in Egypt, etc. Macro-boycotting can indeed help the creation of local substitutes of products that are considerate towards the Egyptian consumers such as Mecca-Cola. Without macro-boycotting Mecca-Cola would have not been successful across the Middle East.

Finally, this study, like most others, attempts to develop conceptual frameworks needing further investigation, validation, and being country-specific, although a counter argument could be raised about the similarity of such behaviour in other Arab countries due to the similarity between these countries with respect to cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1981). These results have served to highlight the macro-boycotting drives in the Egyptian market, but similar studies are necessary to assess the extent to which this framework could be generalised across other countries. That is why this research represents the first stage of a multiple-stage research project to investigate and validate the macro-boycotting in other countries as well.

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