Why we hop on the Boycotting Bandwagon: Consumer Motivation to Participate in Brand
Boycotts on Facebook

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*Background and Hypotheses.* Despite a long history dating back to the 14th century
(Klein, Smith, & John, 2004), the modern landscape of consumer boycotting has rapidly changed
due to social media (SM), which has enabled anti-brand communication to be disseminated to
exponentially more consumers (McGriff, 2012). In particular, social networking sites (SNSs)
such as Facebook have emerged as prominent platforms for virtual brand boycott campaigns.
Although brands have responded to the challenges and opportunities posed by SNSs, negative
online brand communication has received less attention, and there is a significant gap in research
concerning brand boycotts and SM (Albrecht, Campbell, Heinrich, & Lammel, 2013; McGriff,
2012). This study extends traditional consumer boycotting literature to SNSs. Others' boycott
participation may induce heightened perceptions of boycott success (Albrecht et al., 2013) or
social pressure (Klein et al., 2004) to also participate. Research has also linked boycott
participation to scope for self-enhancement (Klein et al., 2004). Further, Sundar (2008) proposes
that cues in virtual environments act as bandwagon heuristics to signal popularity or credibility.
Thus, it is expected that the greater the number of likes on the brand boycott Facebook page, the
greater consumers' boycott participation intentions (H1a) and the greater the scope for self-
enhancement (H1b). In addition, greater boycott issue importance (Albrecht et al., 2013) will
lead to greater boycott participation intentions (H2a) and greater scope for self-enhancement
(H2b). Finally, given the social nature of Facebook, scope for self-enhancement will mediate the
effect of the number of likes (H3a) and issue importance (H3b) on boycott intentions.

*Method.* This study used a 2 (number of likes: low vs. high) x 4 (brand boycott scenarios:
Chick-fil-A, anti-gay rights; Burger King, pro-gay rights; Gap, sweatshop labor; Walmart, low
employee wages) between-subjects experimental design. Four, instead of one, brand boycott
scenarios were used for stimulus sampling purposes. Facebook newsfeeds on the four brand
boycott Facebook pages were captured from a smartphone screen. Each newsfeed image was
further manipulated using Photoshop to operationalize the *number of likes* (low = *23 likes*, high =
*256,415 likes*), resulting in a total of eight stimuli. The experiment was conducted online with a
convenience sample of 173 Southeastern university students. In the experimental website,
participants first reviewed the brand boycott Facebook newsfeed image, randomly assigned to
them among the eight stimuli. Boycott participation intention was measured using two items
developed by the researchers and 16 items adapted from a Facebook activity scale. Measures for
scope for self-enhancement (4 items) and boycott issue importance (4 items) were adapted from
existing scales to fit the study context. Two manipulation check items were also developed.

*Results.* The manipulation check revealed that the number of likes manipulation went
unnoticed by 80 participants; therefore, these cases were treated as a control group in the

subsequent analyses (*control* = 80, *high* = 50, *low* = 45). Confirmatory factor analysis revealed a two-factor structure (active vs. passive) for boycott participation intentions. Following significant results from multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with issue importance as a covariate, follow-up univariate ANCOVAs revealed that the number of likes had a significant effect on scope for self-enhancement and active boycott participation intentions (both at $p < .05$) but no significant effect on passive boycott participation intentions ($p = .68$). Post hoc pairwise comparisons revealed a significant difference in scope for self-enhancement scores between the low ($M = 1.74$) and high ($M = 2.08$) likes conditions ($p < .05$), while no significant difference was found for active boycott participation intentions ($p = .15$). Therefore, only H1b was supported. ANCOVA results also suggested issue importance had a significant effect on scope for self-enhancement, active boycott participation, and passive boycott participation intentions (all at $p < .001$). Following a median split by issue importance, post hoc comparisons revealed that those in the high (vs. low) issue importance group had greater means for all dependent variables. Thus, H2a and H2b were supported. Further, results from another series of MANCOVA and ANCOVAs with scope for self-enhancement as another covariate, instead of a dependent variable, revealed that scope for self-enhancement had a direct positive effect on active and passive boycott participation intentions (both at $p < 0.00$). Further, with scope for self-enhancement as a covariate, the effects of the number of likes and issue importance on active boycott participation intentions became non-significant ($p = .23$ and $p = .48$, respectively), indicating the mediating role of scope for self-enhancement for these effects. These results partially support H3a and H3b for active intentions.

*Discussion.* This study extends the literature regarding brand boycotting motivations to the SNS domain. Overall, the results are fairly supportive of the hypotheses and highlight the significance of scope for self-enhancement as a primary mechanism motivating boycott participation within SNSs. The majority of the activities comprising active boycott participation intentions are conspicuous activities more susceptible to scope for self-enhancement, whereas the passive activities are less prone to bandwagon effects. Future research is needed to explore these varying degrees of virtual boycott participation. Further, there is a need to better understand the effect of brand-related constructs such as brand loyalty or brand image. Finally, the effectiveness of the mediation strategies used by boycotted brands within SNSs warrants future investigation.

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