

Boycott Phenomenon from Multiple Societal Perspectives

Aliya Waheedah Ahmad Lutfi, Abdul Hafiz Ab Rahman, Noviatin Syarifuddin, Sarina Yusoff

Centre for Research in Development, Social and Environment, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the phenomenon of boycotts from various social perspectives, focusing on the conceptual framework that explains this collective action as a form of protest or punishment within society. The study introduces and elaborates on the definition and classification of boycotts, including boycotts by the public, authorities and international bodies. Additionally, the article explores direct and indirect approaches to boycotts, as well as the instrumental and expressive goals of boycotts within different social contexts. Through conceptual analysis, the article highlights the role of social media as a catalyst for boycott movements in Malaysia. The article also emphasizes the importance of a deeper understanding of boycott dynamics and how these concepts can be applied in further research on boycott effectiveness and recovery strategies for affected entities.

Keywords: boycott, influence, society, behavior, culture

INTRODUCTION

Boycotts, fundamentally, represent a collective decision by certain groups to refrain from purchasing particular products, goods, or services as a way of expressing disapproval. Often confused with embargoes—which refer to prohibitions on exports aimed at enforcing a boycott (Forno, 2013)—boycotts have become an active movement among activists opposing perceived injustices or policy misalignments. The boycott landscape includes various dimensions, such as types of boycotts (community-led, government-enforced, or international), approaches (direct or indirect) and intended goals.

According to Yunus (2012), the pressure exerted on the targeted entity increases as community members intensify their participation in boycott activities. Government-led boycotts include sanctions and resolutions that prevent transactions with targeted entities. At the international level, boycotts involve coalitions of countries executing joint resolutions, such as those passed by the United Nations (Yunus, 2020).

The Phenomenon of Boycotts

As previously mentioned, the term "boycott" was introduced following opposition to an estate agent named Charles Cunningham Boycott. Consequently, the term "boycott" spread widely in various languages, such as "boicot" by the Spanish, "boicotear" by the Portuguese, "boikottirovat" in Russian and "boycottage" and "boycott" by the French (Ferron, 2016).

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a boycott is defined as a refusal to purchase products or participate in similar activities to express dissatisfaction. Additionally, Merriam-Webster defines it as a refusal to engage or communicate with (individuals, companies, organizations, etc.) often to express dissatisfaction or resist certain situations (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Boycotts have long served as a means of protest. Over the years, consumers have found collective ways to withhold commercial and financial support for products or companies as a form of punishment (Buchman, 2023). Through boycotts, the public challenges companies to alter questionable business practices or methods by damaging their reputation or affecting their profits (Copeland, 2014). Two main characteristics are essential in understanding the concept of boycotts: the role of

individual consumers as subjects and the purpose and goals of the boycott.

According to Yilmaz and Alhumoud (2017), boycotts can also be viewed as a form of social punishment when individuals or groups cease support for entities responsible for misconduct. Boycotts can be seen as a social call aimed at influencing change by applying economic pressure (Gardberg & Newburry, 2010). These varied opinions illustrate the complexity of defining boycotts. Understanding boycotts in the context of consumer behavior is crucial for executing them with appropriate methods and objectives. Boycotts can be implemented directly or indirectly, depending on the consumers' choices. Thus, the actions and activities undertaken by consumers and the products or goods selected for boycott are important topics to discuss.

Boycotts, as a movement, have multiple interpretations based on the actions and goals of participating individuals or consumer groups. Examining boycotts from various perspectives is essential to understand the underlying motivations.

Boycotts from the Perspective of Society

Boycotts from a societal perspective provide a clearer avenue for consumers to participate in boycott activities without involving major entities. Such boycotts often occur when a social issue within a community prompts collective action, using boycott as a form of pressure on the targeted parties. Moreover, boycotts in society may also arise due to social issues, motivating solidarity in defense of human rights. For example, some boycotts serve as moral protests against wars in certain Middle Eastern countries. According to Kamaludeen (2016), Muslim consumers who participate in boycotts usually hope to achieve two main objectives. First, they hold an optimistic view that their collective boycott will economically impact their target and compel it to acknowledge the grievances raised, opening opportunities for dialogue. Even if unsuccessful, boycotting consumers often refrain from purchasing the targeted products, avoiding complicity in activities that violate Muslim principles (Kamaludeen, 2016). This dynamic is evident when consumers, for example, request "no Coca-Cola, only Pepsi" when ordering drinks in restaurants owned by Muslims. However, it is worth noting that boycotting business owners may not necessarily oppose Westernization or globalization. As demonstrated in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) case, the motivation behind Muslim-led boycotts is not solely economic impact but also a combination of Islamic and humanitarian rights issues (Kamaludeen, 2016).

Authority-Led Boycotts

According to Yunus et al. (2020), authority-led boycotts are typically instigated by governing bodies, such as governments or international organizations, issuing resolutions to restrict transactions with boycotted entities. Authorities often initiate boycotts formally, whether in times of peace or emergency, as exemplified by the Arab nations' boycott of Israel. On December 2, 1945, the Arab League issued an official declaration prohibiting trade with Jewish products in Arab countries. Arab institutions, traders, organizations, agents, and individuals were advised to avoid doing business with or disseminating any Jewish products (Feiler, 1998, in Yunus et al., 2020). Such authority-led boycotts involve direct action imposed by government bodies on their citizens.

Another example of government-led boycotts includes the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics following the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. The United States led this movement under the banner of solidarity with the Afghan people. Ironically, the U.S. would later engage in similar actions against Afghanistan. As a result, the Malaysian football team, which had qualified for the Olympics, had to withdraw following the Malaysian government and Olympic Committee's decision to boycott the event. Malaysia was among several nations that boycotted the 1980 Olympics (Malaysiakini, 2019).

International Boycotts

According to Yunus (2020), international boycotts involve coalitions of countries globally, often determined by joint resolutions, such as those from the United Nations. These boycotts are more complex due to the involvement of multiple stakeholders and require significant time and resources to enforce. Boycotts within communities, often motivated by a response to actions by certain communities or entities, are easier to

implement.

For instance, the ongoing massacres in Gaza have compelled various parties to act against the atrocities. In 2023, Malaysia's Prime Minister imposed a ban on all Israeli-flagged cargo ships from entering and docking at Malaysian ports. Ships bound for Israel were also prohibited from loading cargo in ports across Southeast Asia. This directive took effect immediately. Malaysia, as a country without diplomatic ties with Israel, was committed to this action (Al Jazeera, 2023).

Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary International Boycotts

International boycotts can be categorized into primary, secondary, and tertiary (Yener, 2014). In other words, consumer boycotts can take the form of primary, secondary and tertiary boycotts. A primary boycott involves a union and its members discouraging consumers from purchasing products from a company they previously worked for (Merriam-Webster, 2024). This could occur, for example, if a group of employees protests and boycotts a company due to unfair treatment. Alternatively, wholesalers may boycott products from suppliers who have laid off employees *en masse*.

Secondary boycotts, as defined by Merriam-Webster (2024), occur when one party influences another, with no direct issue between them, to boycott a third party that is the actual target. This typically involves persuading others to boycott a company with which they have no direct problem. Examples of secondary boycotts include actions to boycott companies collaborating with boycotted companies. Additionally, there is the tertiary approach, where a party boycotts an entity not directly involved with the boycotted party (Tate & Lake 2011, in Yunus, 2020).

Direct and Indirect Approaches to Boycotts

Typically, two approaches to boycotts exist: direct and indirect. Direct boycotts involve direct actions between the boycotters and the targeted party (Yunus, 2020). Direct boycotts allow consumers to question the policies of a company directly, with the company's management having direct control over policy changes. In contrast, indirect boycotts occur when the boycotters influence other consumers to join the boycott against the targeted party (Yunus, 2020). In indirect boycotts, the targeted company is often made a scapegoat, attracting public scrutiny for its actions. In such cases, consumers express their social activism by avoiding products from companies associated with the issue (Ettenson & Klein, 2005).

Foundations of Boycotts

Boycotts are generally based on two primary foundations: marketing policy boycotts and social or political boycotts. Marketing policy boycotts aim to compel the target to alter its marketing policies, such as by reducing prices. Social or political boycotts, on the other hand, press the target to adopt ethical or socially responsible behaviors (Sen, Gürhan-Canlı & Morwitz, 2001). These two forms of boycotts illustrate distinct purposes, where one is driven by economic incentives and the other by ethical principles.

Social media and other technologies have significantly increased the frequency of boycotts. Friedman (1982) noted that boycotts became increasingly common over time, a trend that has accelerated with the rise of social media. In marketing policy boycotts, the aim is to pressure the target by challenging its marketing strategy, compelling it to adjust policies or strategies to reduce harm. Both the boycotters and the targeted entity need to understand why certain boycott campaigns succeed while others fail to achieve their objectives (Garrett, 1987). Additionally, political and social boycotts emphasize ethical responsibility, encouraging companies to behave responsibly within their communities.

Boycott Goals: Instrumental & Expressive

Friedman's research identifies two primary goals in boycotts. The first is instrumental, or goal-oriented, boycotts that aim to change problematic policies within the target. This approach typically has clear and measurable objectives, such as forcing price reductions on certain products (Ettenson & Klein, 2005). The

second type of boycott goal, also identified by Friedman, is expressive. Expressive boycotts are characterized by vague or general objectives and are often motivated by a desire to express dissatisfaction rather than achieve specific changes (Ettenson & Klein, 2005). Expressive boycotts are typically more generalized forms of protest, focused on safeguarding consumers from potential risks related to health and safety or advocating for minority rights (Cissé-Depardon & N'Goala, 2009).

Challenges in Understanding Boycott Objectives and Goals

Consumers today operate in a global economy frequently exposed to social conflicts and international issues, including political conflicts (e.g., Russia-Ukraine war), cultural/religious tensions (e.g., Israel-Palestine, India-Pakistan) and trade restrictions (e.g., South Korea-Japan in 2019). Hostility toward foreign nations is a key concept in understanding consumer behavior, as it often leads to negative reactions in international trade (Kim et al., 2022). Research indicates that consumer hostility fuels voluntary actions, as consumers deliberately avoid buying or distributing products from targeted countries or companies, contributing to the larger goal of protest (Kim et al., 2022b).

Boycotting is an individual consumer right, but every boycott organizer or campaign leader should clarify the objectives and anticipated outcomes of the boycott. Currently, many Malaysians still struggle to align with the objectives and goals of boycotts without diminishing other consumers who do not participate. Consumers who understand the broader goals and expected outcomes of boycotts will recognize the significance of humanitarian impacts, including efforts to end cruelty, injustice, and oppression against minorities.

Types of Boycotts

This section discusses the types of products, goods, and brands targeted in boycotts, often due to actions perceived as violations of human rights, military funding, environmental damage, or human oppression. Organizations like the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement actively promote information on the types of products, goods and companies that should be boycotted to achieve the campaign's goals. As widely known, the BDS movement is an international initiative campaigning globally. According to the BDS Movement (2024) website, they advocate targeted boycotts due to their proven effectiveness in past cases, such as the Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa. The movement emphasizes strategic focus on a small selection of companies to maximize the impact of its campaigns. Additionally, they prioritize companies with clear roles in supporting violence, hoping to increase the campaign's chances of success.

List of Targeted Brands by the BDS Movement

The BDS Movement identifies certain companies for full consumer boycotts, including sports brands like PUMA, which sponsors the Israel Football Association and illegal teams based in Palestinian territories. Another example is HP (Hewlett Packard), a technology company supplying computers to the Israeli military and managing Israeli police data centers. BDS also advocates for the full boycott of companies like AXA, a French multinational insurer, which invested \$6 million in four Israeli banks financing illegal settlements (BDS Malaysia, 2021).

Divestment Targets

The BDS Movement calls on governments, institutions, and investors to refrain from purchases, contracts, and investments with companies that supply military equipment and banks supporting such ventures. Companies in this category include HD Hyundai (South Korea), Volvo (Sweden), Chevron and Caltex (United States), all implicated in profiting from continued oppression. For example, Chevron earns billions from Mediterranean oil production, strengthening Israel's military efforts and apartheid regime. Chevron also exacerbates the climate crisis and the siege on Gaza, undermining Palestinians' rights to natural resources.

Chevron has thousands of gas stations worldwide under the Chevron, Caltex, and Texaco brands. In Malaysia, Caltex operates numerous stations across the country. Other companies, like HD Hyundai, Volvo and CAT (United States), supply machinery used in ethnic cleansing, forcing Palestinian displacement through

destruction of homes, farms and businesses. This includes building illegal settlements on occupied land, a war crime under international law.

Pressure Targets

The BDS Movement also engages in ongoing pressure campaigns against targeted companies, utilizing methods like lobbying, peaceful protests, and social media advocacy. The goal is to reduce the customer base of these companies, affecting their market share and overall profitability. Airbnb (United States), a leading home rental platform, failed to remove listings on illegally seized Palestinian lands in Jerusalem and other areas, making it a pressure target. Other companies in the same industry, such as Booking.com (Netherlands) and Expedia (United States), benefit similarly from illegally occupied properties. A notable example involves Google employees protesting the company's involvement in supplying technology to Israel's apartheid government. BDS has also targeted Google, demanding an end to these contracts.

Organic Boycott Targets

The BDS Movement also supports grassroots boycotts against companies like McDonald's, Burger King, Papa John's and Pizza Hut for their ties to apartheid in Israel. These boycotts originate locally rather than from BDS itself. BDS encourages these organic boycotts, noting that some companies openly support Israel's apartheid system and have contributed aid to its military.

After McDonald's Malaysia filed a RM6 million defamation suit against Malaysian activists in solidarity with Palestine, BDS intensified its boycott efforts against McDonald's until the parent company ceases its association with Israel. Eventually, McDonald's Malaysia withdrew the suit following discussions with BDS Malaysia. Nonetheless, public backlash persisted, sparking conflicts within Malaysian society and spreading the cancel culture phenomenon, leading to internal conflicts in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the underlying complexities of the boycott phenomenon, highlighting its multifaceted perspectives, types and approaches within Malaysian society. Boycotts emerge from diverse social segments, ranging from community groups to authoritative bodies capable of launching campaigns. Boycotts act as economic weapons aimed at addressing global injustices. This paper emphasizes various aspects of boycotting, such as common strategies used by activists and the types of products and goods that frequently become boycott targets. Policymakers and researchers should deepen their understanding of boycott effectiveness and explore ways for affected entities to rebuild their markets following prolonged boycotts. Additionally, the paper examines how social media fosters boycott behaviors, particularly among youth, who actively engage in social media-driven boycotts.

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