Non-participation in Anti-consumption: Consumer Reluctance to Boycott
Ulku Yuksel

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Ulku Yuksel

Abstract
How society affects public welfare and businesses via boycotts has become increasingly important in a connected world. Yet, research on the topic remains scant and focuses mostly on why consumers boycott. This study moves beyond motivations of why consumers participate in boycotts, and examines instead, why individuals are not willing to boycott. This is important because the accounts for non-participation may not be the exact opposite of the reasons to participate. Informants’ reasons for not boycotting were classified into three broad themes: “out of sight, out of mind,” “urge for freedom and self-defence,” and “counter-arguments – scepticism or accounts.” The hermeneutic analysis provides a framework for understanding boycott failures.

Keywords
boycott failure, global ethical conduct, social movements, collective actions, macromarketing.

Introduction
Societies often require their members to modify their behavior in ways that improve public well-being (Carman 1992). Institutions that have an impact on public policy use many ways to achieve the desired behavioral change in a given community, such as public behavior modification campaigns (Carman 1992). It is important to understand the way society affects corporate behavior via consumer protests (Ettenson and Klein 2005; Olson 1965) as collective actions are becoming an increasingly important phenomenon in an ever more connected world, especially from a macromarketing perspective (Gao 2012; Köse 2007; Witkowski 2006).

Macromarketing examines relationships among markets, marketing, and society. Consumer movements such as boycotts fall into the domain of macromarketing (Gopaldas 2008; Lee, Fernandez, and Hymen 2009; Witkowski 2006), partly due to their effects on society’s well-being (Witkowski 1989). Studies of (unfair) marketing practices and society’s well-being (Redmond 2005; Shapiro, Tadajewski, and Shultz 2009) have mostly focused on the social consequences of conducting business (Nason 1989; Witkowski 2008), ethically and socially responsible marketing (Ferrell and Ferrell 2008; Hill, Felice, and Ainscough 2007; Laczniak and Murphy 2006), and market-oriented global social movements (Wilkinson 2007). This study relates to these themes, but takes an under-investigated angle to understand 1) the underlying dynamics of a decision of non-participation in a boycott, and 2) the remedies to overcome consumers’ reluctance to boycott corporations conducting unfair business practices.

To date, most boycott-specific research has focused on why consumers participate in boycotts, even though the reasons for not participating may be no less important to understanding some aspects of anti-consumption and its implications for public policy. Hence, the present study moves beyond the question of why people boycott and instead explores why some individuals do not participate in boycotts. Exploring rationales as to why individuals do not participate in boycotts is important because reasons for non-participation are not necessarily the exact opposite of the motivations to boycott (Chazidakis and Lee 2013).

Specifically, the study explores consumer opposition to boycott requests by boycott-organizers and how non-participants justify their attitudes and decisions. The research contributes to the boycott literature by drawing on new theories to conceptualize an up-to-date boycott framework and to explain the likelihood of boycott failure to boycott-agents. The findings elucidate why consumers may not boycott and how they account for this decision. To the best of the author’s knowledge, only one published study has referred to motivations not to boycott (Klein, Smith, and John 2004). However, that study focused on why people boycott and their motivations for doing so and then implied that people without these reasons might be more likely to not participate in boycotts. Yet, the motives for not boycotting may not be the direct opposite of those for

1 The University of Sydney Business School, Sydney, Australia

Corresponding Author:

Email: ulku.yuksel@sydney.edu.au
boycotting (Chazidakis and Lee 2013). Therefore, the present study focuses directly on why people do not boycott and their motivations behind this decision, some of which may be considered as accounts for non-participation. This study extends previous research on boycotts by providing new theoretical frameworks (e.g., distance, reactance, persuasion knowledge, and accounts) for why consumers may choose not to participate in a boycott.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. First, definitions and conceptualizations of boycotts are provided. Then the exploratory and descriptive nature of the methodology is explained. Next, detailed findings and samples of verbatim transcripts are presented, followed by interpretations of several themes emerged from informants’ decisions on not participating in boycotts. Finally, a discussion and conclusion section presents the theoretical and contextual implications of the current findings, limitations, and suggestions for further research for scholars in consumer behavior, social marketing, and macromarketing.

What Are Boycotts?

Boycotts have existed for many years as a means for consumers to express their disapproval of a company’s products or corporate behavior (Zack 1991) and to punish businesses for unfavorable behavior (Neilson 2010). Boycotts are defined as temporary acts of exiting a relationship with an organization owing to some form of dissatisfaction, accompanied by a promise to re-enter the relationship once certain conditions have been met, such as a change in policy by the offending party (Hirschman 1970). As such, boycotts are actions that refer to stopping, modifying, or foregoing consumption, in which people refuse to purchase and/or use a brand that they had been using, and, were it not for the circumstances precipitating the boycott, would continue to use.

Boycotts are typically triggered by an environmental, social, ethical, or political rationale (Dolan 2002; Yuksel and Myrteza 2009; Zack 1991) and relate to choices that often reflect a concern for the “general good” (Shaw 2007). Thus, boycotts are society’s collective reactions (Shapiro, Tadajewski, and Shultz 2009) to corporate practices that are perceived as unfair or unethical. This conceptualization opens an important venue in which to focus on the relationship between macromarketing and consumer boycotts, because, when effective, the market works as a pull factor for securing a communal issue (i.e., human rights; Micheletti and Stolle 2007). “Political consumerism” will happen in the form of a boycott when consumers being asked to boycott intentionally use their aim to modify objectionable practices in the marketplace as basis for (not) purchasing (Micheletti and Stolle 2007).

Collective actions (Miller and Sturdivant 1977) and social movements are planned, collective attempts to engender a transformation (Buechler 2000; Gabriel and Lang 1995), oftentimes around consumption and marketing (Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Boycotts are a form of social movements such as protest movements or political demonstrations (Koku 2011). As a social phenomenon, boycotts necessitate a substantially “concerted group effort” (Koku 2011, p. 84) in order to prove successful. Although social boycotts serve as an intended group-tool used with the aim of mobilizing people in a society, unlike most strikes, for example, they have no enforced participation obligation. Yet, ample participation is fundamental to the success of a boycott action. Studying individual motivations to boycott is pivotal because the juxtaposition of individual decision-making sets off the communal success of such social movements.

As in boycotts, the goal of consumer movements is to change the principles or practices of targeted businesses or governments, and persuade as many individuals as possible to rebel (Friedman 1999a; Rao 1998; Witkowski 1989). As such, today’s activists tend to turn to the worldwide web as a way to inform the masses easily and cheaply (Ward and Ostrom 2006). Once initiated, a boycott “in one city may mobilize interest in other cities and lead to diffusion of consumer leagues in a social movement-like process” (Rao, Morrill, and Zald 2000, p. 244). Thus, consumer boycotts are inherently collective actions and social movements (John and Klein 2003), as well as social dilemmas (Sen, Gurhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001). Members of social groups face a trade-off between maximizing their own immediate utility and sacrificing their short-term utility in the hope of collectively achieving a goal (Yuksel and Myrteza 2009) that will maximize the long-term utility of the society, if achieved.

Boycott behavior can be split into two basic types according to the expectations of the boycotters participating: instrumental (i.e., influential and active) and non-instrumental (i.e., expressive and punitive) (Smith 1990). Instrumental boycotts represent tactics to influence and improve the unfavorable behavior of corporations and aim to change their actions. Non-instrumental boycotts, on the other hand, serve as expressions of emotions (Sandlin and Callahan 2009), such as anger or outrage at the acts of the marketer without any expectations of improvement (Micheletti 2007). In general, ethically concerned consumers view multi-national companies as adversaries (Kozinets and Handelman 1998) and express their concerns by boycotting. In this sense, their purchases can be viewed as “votes” in the marketplace (Schwarzkopf 2011; Shaw 2007). At times, consumers also view other consumers as adversaries (Kozinets and Handelman 1998). These considerations may shed light on the social dynamics of failed consumer activism.

Other dynamics that underlie a boycott nonparticipation decision include: 1) the perceived egregiousness of the unethical action; 2) the cost of constrained consumption relating to the volume and importance of consumption to the boycotter; 3) perceived unlikelihood of success engendered by anticipated boycott participation by others — i.e. low expectations of overall participation generating a sense of ineffectiveness (John and Klein 2003); 4) credibility of the boycott call or the organizer (Sen, Gurhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001); and finally, 5) counterarguments that inhibit boycotting. Counterarguments include perceived personal incapability (efficacy), addressing
People may decide to boycott as an approach strategy when such expressive motivation is driven by positive associations and increased positive self-view, termed a “clean hands” motivation (Smith 1990). At times, members of societies obey the group’s expectations as an avoidance strategy from negative self-perceptions: guilt or cognitive dissonance (Klein, Smith, and John 2004) engendered by (not) boycotting (Festinger 1957) and protesting (Lemire 2002; Sussman 2000). Boycotts as an avoidance strategy serve to limit or cease negative associations. Such an avoidance motivation represents the conceptual opposite of clean hands motivation, called “dirty hands” (John and Klein 2003). Both types of motivation enhance one’s sense of aligning with the group norm, and self esteem and help avoid the dissonance (Klein, Smith, and John 2004) that would be generated by not participating.

### Table 1. Profile of Informants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Informant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Self-confessed commitment to the brand</th>
<th>Self-confessed commitment to competing brand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Architect</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>James</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Builder</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Salesperson</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Shop</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Chong</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“small agent,” “free-rider,” and “social loafing” issues (Blais 2001; Latane, Williams, and Harkins 1979; Weimann 1994), especially when there is little or no motivation for a group member to participate (John and Klein 2003). Consumers may use some of these counterarguments as an excuse (Eckhardt, Belk, and Devinney 2010) or justification strategy (Ger and Belk 1999) to rationalize a non-participation decision perceived as improper.

Social contract theory (Hampton 1980) informs people, who come together through a mutual consent to form a society, agree to abide by implicit norms. Accordingly, boycott participants represent members of a society being attacked and, thus, would feel enforced to pull together to secure the communal interest. Yet, society’s collective interest and individual self-interest may conflict. As such, personal bases for any utility gain or loss from boycott participation (Friedman 1991, 1999a) may play a role in decision-making.

Previous literature on collective actions has associated boycotting with pro-social behavior and altruism (Paek and Nelson 2009). People may boycott a firm simply if they believe it harms other people, for example, to protest dangerous working conditions in a factory (John and Klein 2003). This is the basis of the boycott call case used in this study. Through boycotting, people extend altruistic sentiments to others (Neilson 2010) to facilitate a utilitarian social welfare function, whilst feeling good about themselves. In this case, the decision falls into the scope of enhancing self-esteem (Fein and Spencer 1997) that relates to a desire to make a difference. For people who endorse empathy, boycotting reflects a concern for the “general good” and may serve as a means of enhancing self-concept.

In social contract groups, which constitute a given society, pursuing a boycott call request of the group verifies that the participant obeys the group norms and cares about others in doing the right thing (John and Klein 2003). Group members would experience the social dynamics of being swept up in the spirit of group action in which acting within the group norm is the required behavior. Consequently, participating in a boycott may facilitate enhanced feelings of good conscience or moral superiority.

The responses of individuals to a real-world boycott of Coca-Cola (see http://killercoke.org/) were analyzed. The boycott campaign, detailed in the procedure, relates to Coke’s misconducts in Columbia and is still ongoing. The exploratory study is based on qualitative data obtained from interviews (Kvale 1983) to obtain a “first-person description” (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989, p. 138) that emphasized the “domain-specific” perceptions of participants in an industrialized city in Australia. Given that the success of a boycott depends on the juxtaposition of each individual’s decision, the initial understanding of the phenomenon at an individual level is essential. Informants were identified through a network of colleagues, friends, and students; deliberately chosen to offer a cross-section of a Coke-drinking society. After reviewing the transcribed texts of 10 interviews, a strong pattern of repetition and recycling of ideas was observed, suggesting that saturation was reached and no new information would be revealed in further interviews (Belk 1992, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln 2005; McCracken 1988; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Thompson 1996).

The interviews took place either at the homes of the informants or at the work place of the interviewer (i.e., university campus). The main criterion for the selection of informants for an in-depth interview was the informant’s declaration of “not being willing to participate” in the boycott, after they were made aware of it, discussed in the procedure. This precaution, as a way to establish a boundary condition, was the central prerequisite for the study’s scope (see Table 1). This is because the aim of the study was not a comparison of boycotters versus non-boycotters, as many previous studies have already investigated boycotters’ motivations (e.g., see Klein, Smith, and John 2004). Second, all informants had declared that they had bought and consumed at least two servings (cans or bottles) of Coke within the two weeks preceding the interview date. The amount of product consumed was considered to be a more objective selection criterion to generate a detrimental cost to the informants, rather than subjective, self-confessed brand loyalty, given actual boycott calls are directed to all consumers regardless of their loyalty levels. Third, none of the selected
informants had a previous theoretical understanding of boycotting practices. Finally, all informants had indicated that they were willing to share their personal views with the interviewer (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989).

The purpose of the interviews was to acquire descriptive details of informants’ perceptions of a phenomenon involving a boycott request for a very well-known brand with a strong brand image, as detailed in the procedure. Previous literature has emphasized the benefits of integrating prior knowledge and experience into the design (Arora and Huber 2001) and context (Allenby, Arora, and Ginter 1995) of a study. Hence, for the tested boycott decision to be genuine and realistic, Coke was chosen (see also Ger and Belk 1996). In addition, anti-Coke movements have been the focus of previous research (Yuksel and Belk 2009). It is a real brand that nearly everyone will drink at one time or another in his or her lifetime (Yuksel and Myrtleza 2009).

Focus on an international boycott served the following purposes. First, with the ever-increasing use of online technology, international boycotts are now much easier to successfully initiate and maintain (Sen, Gurhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001). Second, large-scale national and international boycotts are far more common than local ones and receive widespread media coverage (Friedman 1999b). Third, they require long-term commitments by the boycotters as they may extend for an extended period of time compared to a local boycott that is normally considered a one-time affair designed to correct a single wrong. Fourth, they predominantly involve well-known businesses or brand names, which makes it easier for the potential boycotters to relate to the product in question (Ferguson 1997). Finally, local boycotts are mostly narrow and restricted in their scope, effect, and amount of participants required. Most organized boycotts today are focused on permanently modifying buying habits, often as part of a larger political program that entails an extended obligation, such as the recent international “Boycott Apple” call (2012) to protest the Foxconn human right issues occurring in China.

Interviews started with questions targeting informants’ purchase and consumption of Coke and general questions about their knowledge and perceptions of boycotts (McCranken 1988). Then informants were presented with an article (and web-link) that calls for boycotting Coke due to labor-related misconducts in South America. As most international boycott calls originate elsewhere in the world, this wide-spread Boycott Coke call was employed. The article outlined the specified domain (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989) of the context and described a real event (http://killercoke.org/), similar to many others that can be found on numerous websites. The article was about Coke and human rights and explained in detail how “union workers in Columbia who bottle Coke products are kidnapped, tortured, and murdered” and accused the “Coca-Cola Company” of “looking the other way as plant managers encourage paramilitaries to destroy unions.” At the end of the article, the informants read the following request: “The Local Committee Against Coke asks you to Boycott Coke.” Finally, informants were asked whether they would comply with the call to boycott Coke and then to describe their thoughts regarding the boycott request.

Throughout the data-gathering process, tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and reviewed systematically to facilitate the focus of subsequent interviews (Schouten 1991). Interview data were analyzed for common themes across informants for further categorization, based on the assumption that some themes of conceptions of boycott behavior may emerge from the perceptions of non-participants (Thompson 1997). Then, the transcripts were read multiple times to identify the most significant and frequent themes for classification (Giorgi 1997). Hermeneutic analysis was conducted by a close reading of verbatim transcripts (Dilthey 1977) and the iterative interpretation process (Thompson 1996). Reading transcripts multiple times helped to develop a holistic understanding of informant narratives, which was further enhanced by more reading, documenting, and systematizing. Key phrases and patterns of meaning were noted for further analysis. Following this, the author developed thematic categories and identified holistic relationships among the meanings and categories that the informants used to describe their views and non-participation decision.

Findings

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

I personally think that the problem is too far away to worry about, and what the committee is doing is too far-fetched. Sure, boycotting may disrupt earnings for Coke to some extent... but it would not make a big deal for the company. What can we do... here in Sydney... when they are there?... It had to be organized over there... I believe that the organizers of the event are pursuing their own personal targets rather than helping the Columbian workers. ... I think my boycotting Coke will not help the workers at all (Donald).

The preceding excerpt reflects Donald’s thoughts about boycotting Coke. He perceives the committee’s request as unrealistic (“far-fetched”) and embellished because the problem occurs somewhere “faraway” (What can we do... here in Sydney... when they are there?). His response appears to represent detachment and irrelevance with regard to his perception of the location, nature, and cause of the boycott call. Distance reduces the gravity of a communication (Sen, Gurhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001). This is because, if a request is perceived as not being directly related to a person called for boycott, attributable to perceived distance with regard to location (physical) and/or culture (social), then the content may not be sound enough to encourage that person to boycott. Research on consumption policies echoes that “the temporal and spatial distance from any potentially harmful effects makes cause-based attribution difficult” (Reisch 2004, p. 32). Yet, the informant may possibly have used perceived distance as an excuse to justify a decision that did not feel right, with or without intent (Eckhardt, Belk, and Devinney 2010).
The tone of Donald’s comments also indicates mistrust toward the source as he questions whether organizers would have a different agenda than assisting workers (…organizers … are pursuing their own personal targets rather than helping the … workers). Given the legitimacy of the international boycott call was verified by widespread evidence (media coverage and articles on this specific call), his account for not joining the protest on the grounds of mistrust hints at an excuse. People may feel obliged to offer explanations for questionable behavior, consciously or unconsciously (Ger and Belk 1999), to lessen condemnation.

Also, if the content of the cause seems unrelated to an individual (e.g., “an organizational issue” [Chris], “whole issue is related to the corporation” [Elizabeth]), people may feel no need to participate in a boycott. Ger and Belk (1999) conceptualize such justifications as accounts for behaviors inconsistent with beliefs. Chris professed to care about the issue but justified his decision by transmitting the responsibility to another institution. He says he shouldn’t be held liable because the case is the responsibility of the organization. Eckhardt, Belk, and Devinney (2010) classify such rationalizations to explain inconsistencies as “institutional dependency” (p. 431).

Indeed, in the present study, non-participants emphasized that the human rights violations were happening too “far away” (in Columbia) as a pretext of their non-participation decision. Hence, the physical distance of the issue at hand made the request for a boycott, from their point of view, irrelevant. The unfavorable incidents seemed “too far away to worry about;” thus, the call for boycott appeared to be “too far-fetched” (Donald) and generated a sense of detachment because “those human rights violations are happening far away from our [their] country” (Chong) and “it only happens in Columbia” and, therefore, “is clearly [related] with people running the Columbian plant” (Paul).

Moreover, to some, the problem seems to be too small in the big picture, as “Columbia is just one of the Coke manufacturing areas” (James), indicating another form of detachment and irrelevance for two reasons. First, Coke is perceived as a company that is “too large” (Sarah) and the “incidents in one plant” (Chris) only are too minor to bother with and Coke is too big to change. James, along with others, perceived the incidents in one plant to be too small to worry about, and considered himself too small in the system to make a change. As supported in the boycott literature, awareness of a small agent problem in boycott behavior (Klein, Smith, and John 2004) reduces the perceived efficacy of boycotting (Sen, Gurhan-Canli, and Morewitz 2001), thus, reducing boycott participation.

Additionally, the incident itself was “not related to the product quality.” Therefore, “nothing is wrong with drinking Coke” as it is a “managerial problem” and has “really nothing to do with drinking Coke” (Jack). Jack is attributing the workers’ problems to the management. External attribution occurs when people (e.g., Jack) attribute causes to situational factors (Weiner 1986), perhaps to avoid a challenge (of boycotting). The motivational aspect of people making sense of events is based on their motives to find a cause and their knowledge of the situation. As a result, people may associate events with some predicted or self-assigned causes or concerns (“managerial”) that are not necessarily correct. Attribution errors happen when consumers evaluate or attempt to employ rationales for some actions (Heider 1958), such as when purchasing unethical products or making brand attributions to decisions (Valor 2008). When making attributions, people may go beyond the information given and make inferences about themselves and others, as well as about the surroundings of the event. The second consideration informants displayed (i.e., irrelevance to oneself) proves that they did attribute the cause to an external factor, did not feel direct empathy for the union workers in Columbia, and, in fact, did not relate to the negative incidents. Thus, they decided not to boycott.

Second, the incidents were perceived as not being directly related to the informants, attributable to a sense of lack of proximity, because the issue was “happening in Columbia” (James). In order to boycott, consumers must be concerned with the issue, have an understanding of and sympathy for the cause, and feel a connection with the issue (Smith 1990). Informants presented lack of proximity as an antecedent of their decision not to boycott. Irrelevance can be interpreted in two ways: in terms of physical distance, which then also causes a social distance (Kim, Zhang, and Li 2008) in the form of “no empathy” by non-participants, and in terms of the scope of the misconduct. That is, in the present study, because the boycott information, which asked informants to withhold consumption, was related to the corporation itself, not product quality, it did not directly concern the informants. Thus, the whole story was irrelevant to them, and a call for boycott made no sense.

Literature on cause-related marketing elaborates what happens when a brand is attached to a “good” cause (e.g., donation, charity) not related to the product itself. Here, firms contribute a specified amount to a designated cause on behalf of the consumer each time they purchase the brand. Cause-claims firms make in their advertisements have proven to have a very powerful effect on brand attitudes (Berger, Cunningham, and Kozinets 1999; Strahilevitz 1995). The more the cause-claim relates to the brand (cause-fit), the more influential the advertisements become on positive brand attitudes. The same cause-fit effect may also be necessary for the link between the cause of boycott calls and the boycotted product. If a direct connection exists between the nature of the boycott call and the targeted product (Coke), then the boycott campaign might work better.

The notion of irrelevance may have emerged as a means of removing dissonance (Klein, Smith, and John 2004). Donald, for instance, said that “his commitment to Coke” is the same as to Pepsi. However, when both are available he prefers “buying Coke rather than Pepsi.” All interviewees said that they favor Coke over Pepsi (without the interviewer mentioning the brand name Pepsi) regardless of whether or not they perceived themselves as loyal to the Coke brand, or bought two servings of Coke recently, and would not boycott Coke.

Not surprisingly, people may be disinterested in a dreadful event if they feel a physical (or social) distance between the ill-fortuned people involved in the tragedy and themselves. For
Donald, the problem was “too far away” to be of assistance; thus, he was not interested in trying to help. He believed that a solution could not be effective over such a distance. With regard to offering any help to disaster-prone people, he emphasized the importance of distance versus proximity for him to provide any support. His rationale can be conceptualized as social distance. In view of Donald’s comments, along with those of others, physical distance generates social distance to some extent, affecting behavior (Stuart and Dabbs 1970). Accordingly, informants were not convinced and did not follow the request to act, because it was happening “far away.” Such an attitude indicates that people may not relate to others who are different or far removed from them (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954).

The distance perception may be conceptualized within an in-group out-group framework, in which people relate to others who are similar to them (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954) and who belong to their social in-group. According to social identity theory, individuals associate themselves with their in-group members due to similarity such as demographics. For people living in Sydney, Columbian workers may fall into an out-group, a social category to which an individual does not identify (Tajfel 1970, 1982). Informants described their not-belonging to the group by “...far away to worry about. ...What can we do... here in Sydney... when they are there?...It had to be organized over there...” In-group membership is linked with in-group favoritism, meaning that under particular circumstances individuals will favor and have affinity for in-group members over out-group members. They distinguish between these groups when evaluating out-group members, attempting to relate to others, and allocating resources (Aronson, Wilson, and Akert 2009). Thus, in the present study, the out-group status of the Columbian workers may have caused informants not to participate in the boycott.

In-groups are referred to in more specific, concrete terms, viewed positively, and given preferential treatment, indicating the presence of an in-group bias. This is because, one builds his/her self-esteem by fitting-in with others, and the in-group is a reminder of that belonging. Conversely, out-group people are described in abstract terms, are “depersonified” (Maass, Ceccarelli, and Rudin 1996), perceived more negatively, given less attention, and sometimes even treated as inferior, signaling the existence of an out-group bias (Tajfel et al. 1971). Thus, it is not unreasonable to expect informants from Sydney to be more helpful toward their immediate groups than other groups from different societies.

These findings and their theoretical interpretations support the importance of content as an underlying motivation for boycotting (Klein, Smith, and John 2004). Indeed, in the present study, a communication perceived as “far-flung” did not prompt a motivation for boycotting. Yet, the importance of the message is not only content- or context-specific per se. The communication style and language used in the message, as to receiving an instruction and call for doing something, may create a reaction in some, which leads to the second theme: urge for freedom and self-defense.

### Urge for Freedom and Self-defense

Some informants simply decided not to participate and embraced a neo-liberal approach to consumption, that is, freedom to make consumption choices. This heightened awareness and need for freedom may be engendered by a request “to do something.” Some informants perceived the message as pushy, telling them what to do, and perhaps perceived the request as blocking their freedom of consumption choices. Also, perceptions of being judged, being held responsible for negative events, or being driven toward feelings of self-reproach might have augmented the negative reception of the message and the source (Brehm and Brehm 1981). The following excerpt indicates how Richard felt when asked to boycott Coke:

Coke is one of my favorite soft drinks. In fact, it is my favorite soft drink... hence I am not going to stop consuming it... I mean... just because the committee asks me to do so. I can understand their plight, with reference to the tragic occurrences in Columbia; however, I enjoy the beverage and don’t feel I am hurting anyone directly and personally by purchasing a can of Coke. I think the committee is trying to make me feel guilty about the occurrences in Columbia because I consume a beverage whose manufacturers were involved in the incident. I may be to blame for not helping them but... then... I don’t think that is right because I personally had nothing to do with the incident (Richard).

Richard, along with some other informants, became somewhat frustrated and reacted negatively to the boycott call and might have perceived the call as too assertive and a threat to their personal freedom. This was an emotive reaction toward perceived force, which may result in strengthening or adopting just the opposite or holding a contrary belief. When people sense that their personal decision-making ability is being restricted, they may feel resentment and think that an ethical line was crossed. Typically, individuals do not want someone else to make personal decisions for them, as this threatens their sense of self, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

People just got their right to choose what they drink, even when they know that’s not healthy, or harmful to them...like smoking. Neither any person nor an organization can stop people to buy unless they realize the problem themselves. I think...this campaign won’t work... (Chong).

Both Richard and Chong seemed to react to the request negatively and perceive it as too demanding (e.g., “just because the committee asks me to do so...”). Richard also believed that the committee was trying to make him feel guilt-ridden if he did not follow their instructions. Chong also felt that his freedom was being threatened (e.g., “People just got their right to choose...”). Richard suggested that he should not be blamed or considered selfish or at fault, just because he is drinking a soft drink that he enjoys. Does this mean that Richard might have experienced some cognitive dissonance, created by a probable non-pro-social attitude (Klein, Smith, and John 2004), which
made him feel somewhat in the wrong? Or is this just a reflex to being forced to do something?

People may react emotionally to perceived pressure that may even cause them to reinforce or implement an opposing idea or course of action. Emotion has played such an important role in the creation of the hegemony of consumerist ideology. Therefore, when fighting against consumerist ideologies and global corporate control, a clear understanding of the role of emotions in consumer resistance is vital (Sandlin and Callahan 2009). The notion of emotional reactance addresses individuals’ responses to coercion. A perception of a loss of a freedom encourages people to restore that freedom (Brehm and Brehm 1981). Hence, a restriction may create attractiveness toward the prohibited object, as well as anger and resistance in the receiver (Brehm 1972). Such reactance could also theoretically shape one’s boycotting decision. Hitherto not included in boycott literature, reactance could harm positive perceptions of a message (Sen, Gurhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001). That is, if the message appears to be invasive or officious, then one may exert resistance to avoid feeling forced into doing something. In this case, the request would not prompt boycotting behavior.

Another aspect of reactance, in the form of an emotional response, is observed with regard to the attachment of the informant with the object (Coke) in question. Objects are not merely tangible items, satisfying physical needs; they are also a reflection of our past experiences (Cherrier 2009a). They reveal our connections with others, our life course, memories of the past, and expectations of the future (Belk 1988). Objects and their use add to our extended self, socially and emotionally (Belk 1988; Tian and Belk 2005) and remind us of our unique self, as they connect us with our identity (Cherrier 2009b). The loss of them may mean a detachment from social upbringing (Cherrier and Murray 2007). Hence, to some individuals, a request to boycott an object could, in effect, represent a request to terminate a relationship with “the good old times” (Jill) that are remembered with joy, “a friend from our past” whom we liked, and happy “memories” (Elizabeth). In response, an individual may resist and challenge the request, because it threatens one’s historical self, which is part of one’s extended self (Belk 1988).

Losing a piece of an extended self is undesirable, as it “diminishes the [overall] sense of self” (p. 139) or is perceived as a “direct aggression at this person” (p. 143). Indeed, in the present study, Coke reminded some of the non-participants of their “childhood” (Elizabeth) and helped them to recall their youth, as described below.

Coca-cola is a huge, multinational company. The social influence and potential affection are deeply buried in the culture and society for a long period. Most of us are grown with Coke . . . it is almost like a friend from our past. It was a treat . . . given . . . back then . . . We have many memories about Coke of our childhood or university life. It is a part of our life, so it’s not easy to boycott Coke . . . for some people . . . (Elizabeth).

Elizabeth’s reluctance to boycott Coke may be interpreted as a concern (due to the rejection of a past self) or as an attachment to a historical self. Belk (1988) describes this as the partial “annihilation” of an important self. He further explains, people “avoid facing the forced breakup” of their self-extension objects because disposal of them would create a “nostalgic regret,” as the items are “associated with pleasant memories of one’s past” (p. 143). Thus, the benefits of a possible pro-social behavior might have appeared less important than the loss of an earlier time period in one’s past identity-formation process.

We used to drink Coke all the time in parties when we were teenagers. It was always barbecue and Coke and the chats and laughter with my friends. Although I do not drink Coke much . . . now . . . we didn’t have cans back then. I guess it would be a shame to forget about these times (Jill).

Jill’s reluctance and reactions to the request to boycott Coke, relate to the threat of losing a happy former self (Belk 1988), supporting the notion that objects are not simply concrete items for one’s physical needs; they represent a manifestation of our past experiences (Cherrier 2009b) and our sense of self. The Coke boycott call, in this instance, may not have been perceived as a sacrifice of a brand but, subconsciously, of a past self (Belk 1988). Thus, this challenge made the informants react and defend their sense of selves in order to protect their extended-selves.

OK we can buy for example, Pepsi, instead . . . but what about Pepsi? It is another huge and complex company; they may have also many issues beyond our predictions. So, just simply boycotting Coke is not feasible . . . (Elizabeth).

Elizabeth may be defending her identity by blaming “Pepsi” and reacting with a prophecy of Pepsi also “having many issues beyond our predictions” to express her attitude (not boycotting), which may have simultaneously made her feel guilty (Klein, Smith, and John 2004). Ger and Belk (1999) state that such generalizations and explanations for questionable inactions may serve to avoid internal feelings of guilt, external sanctions, insincerity, and disapproval. If people’s professed ideal beliefs diverge from their actual behavior, they need to make sense of this incongruity. This, they do through the use of various accounts, rationales, excuses, justifications, and generalizations (Eckhardt, Belk, and Devinney 2010). These made-up strategies to account for inaction take the form of justifications and excuses. Justifications are accounts that accept responsibility for the unapproved action, but make the act appear acceptable via the use of some reasoning techniques such as generalizations. In contrast, excuses reject full responsibility.

In summary, a request that induces perceptions of restricted freedom or a sense of detachment from self-identification may create an urge to resist the request in order to protect one’s self. Self-defense can be viewed as a pre-emptive action, taken in the belief of an instant threat and perceived provocation and entails a negative reaction to the perpetrator of an attack. Some
people may feel that their persona is endangered when they feel that they are forced to do something; thus, they engage in resistance attitudes (i.e., reactance). Indeed, perceived restriction affects consumer choices, and consumers may react against an invasion of their personal space, by making different and unique choices (Levav and Zhu 2009). At times, when a communication evokes a threat to one’s freedom to make one’s own decisions, it may encourage and intensify the attractiveness of the forbidden or limited item. This reactive approach is a motivational state, aroused when real or perceived personal freedoms are threatened, reduced, or eliminated (Woller, Buboltz and Loveland 2007).

“People should be free in choosing their actions” (Sarah). This call for boycott is viewed as “too pushy” (James) and “invasive” (Jack), and such “constrictions” (Richard) generate “anger” (Chong) and resistance in the receiver. Therefore, a direction given in the boycott request (Klein, Smith, and John 2004), perceived as restriction, engenders attractiveness toward the banned object or idea (so that they decide not to boycott), as the restriction causes the receiver to react in precisely the reverse way to whatever was originally suggested. These manifestations may have caused the informants in the present study to employ counterarguments, some facilitated by justifications, to defend and feel good about themselves.

Counterarguments – Skepticism or Accounts

Some informants sounded skeptical about the boycott movement. They blamed others and used a variety of counterarguments to avoid participation though it was not clear whether they were really sincere in their mistrust or used it as an excuse. The use of generalization or other reasoning strategies has been echoed as a typology of accounts when they are used as a justification strategy of a (socially) unsuitable inaction (Eckhardt, Belk, and Devinney 2010).

I am a Coke drinker and never buy Pepsi instead but still I do not consider myself as committed to Coke. It is an emotive argument but, given the inherent instability and violent environment, because this is the perception, of Columbia, I’d be more inclined to read more detail. Is there a proof of Coca-Cola’s involvement at the head office level? Is this reported situation at Coke indicative of all large businesses in Columbia? Is a ban in Australia more likely to damage local businesses…bottlers, distributors, for example…than it is to influence a genuine change in Columbia? (Chris)

Informants who balked at the Committee Against Coke’s request to boycott Coke might have been worried that they would be punishing Coke wrongly, if the evidence of wrongdoing were fabricated (Friestad and Wright 1994). Donald, for example, demonstrated distrust toward the boycott organization and suspected other personal gains out of boycotting. Richard considered himself as a committed Coke consumer and was suspicious toward the boycott request. Donald was “not sure this story is a real story” and Richard wanted “to read some more information with supporting documents and facts prior to making a decision” to see “if this has really happened.” Chris required additional information on the effects of the boycott on his ingroups (“Is a ban in Australia more likely to damage local businesses…bottlers, distributors, for example?”). Counterarguments, as noted in early boycott literature (Klein, Smith, and John 2004), sometimes engender a skeptical approach. Jack, for example, thinks that:

Maybe the same case is also applicable for Pepsi although there is no report on it…You know…because Coke and Pepsi are so clearly alike in every aspect…So, I will boycott either both Coke and Pepsi or none.

Paul said that he was “not sure whether the whole story is true.” Jill’s statement also corroborates his viewpoint because she “initially” was “a little bit doubtful about the truthfulness of the article” and hadn’t “actually heard a great deal about this issue” herself “other than the article presented here today;” so, she thought that “the request to stop buying Coke is a little bit unjustified as the evidence supporting the claim is not very comprehensive” and wanted “proof!” The way Jill reveals this “issue” is as if she should be and wasn’t aware of the boycott until she read the boycott article. Like all informants, she also was informed of the boycott when the article was presented to her, before she was asked for her participation decision.

Other informants also displayed some skepticism. For example, James needed to “have another look at the issue” as “it seems unbelievable in today’s civilized society that workers are still tortured…” and Chris said that:

These actions are not only violating the workers’ rights but also the human rights. But, at this point in time, they are only unsubstantiated allegations. Details are needed and confirmation from independent sources…would go a long way to achieve public support.

Sarah was also doubtful, “a call for boycotting is valid should the information be correct,” if she, indeed, was sincere in her doubts and did not employ this account as an excuse. Skepticism is an approach for accepting, rejecting, or suspending judgment on new information that requires the new information to be well supported by argument or evidence. Friestad and Wright’s (1994) “persuasion knowledge” presumes that people’s prior knowledge on persuasion tactics used by agents become active and consequential in persuasion episodes, causing people to be skeptical about claims. Union and other social movement organizers may sometimes falsely accuse their targets of wrongs, in order to build political support for their cause (Ward and Ostrom 2006). As such, some informants in the present study who decided not to participate in the boycott requested by the Committee Against Coke might have been concerned that they would be penalizing Coke without true reason, if the evidence of offence were fabricated.
Discussion and Implications

The results have implications for scholars, non-profit boycott-organizers, macromarketers, and consumers. This study addresses two interrelated schools of thought. The first, relates to boycott research and its role in consumer behavior. Although organizing boycotts is widespread in the everyday life of boycott-agents and consumer activists, researchers’ interest in this topic remains scant and focuses mostly on why consumers boycott. Thus, this study has moved beyond the rationale of why consumers participate in boycotts and examined how they account for their decision of non-participation. Given the society is the amalgamation of each actor making up the community, an initial understanding of the phenomenon at an individual level is important and is then aggregated to make sense of the non-participation phenomenon.

The second school of thought conveys a societal marketing concern and investigates the role of society on the conducts of businesses (Witkowski 2008). This role is navigating and restricting consumption choices via a boycott call within a dominant culture of consumption to address stakeholders’ (society’s) long-term interests.

Implications for Boycott Scholars and for Anti-consumption Research

This study draws on theories new to boycott literature and re-conceptualizes the boycotting framework. Attribution, distance, reactance, accounts and the persuasion knowledge were discussed, in an attempt to shed light on the likelihood of an individual deciding against boycotting. The results disseminate non-participants’ experiences to elucidate how non-participants of boycott calls reflect their attitudes, and position their identity in a non-pro-social behavioral context.

The themes that emerged from informants’ experiences and views as to their non-participation decision may be interpreted as (1) irrelevance, perceived physical, and social distance which may be understood as accounts for inaction (Eckhardt, Belk, and Devinney 2010); (2) reactance and perceived threat to one’s sense of freedom (including a concern for rejection of a historical self (Belk 1988); and (3) counterarguments (Friestad and Wright 1994) or accounts (Eckhardt, Belk, and Devinney 2010), resulting in negative attributions such as skepticism (Pruitt and Hoffer 1989). These theoretical implications have already been illuminated in detail in the related “themes” of findings and boycott literature sections.

Implications for Macromarketers

The march toward global integration of economies enhanced the role multinational corporations (MNC) play in world economies. The relationship between business practices of corporations operating internationally and ethical work conditions affect society. The potential role of macromarketing systems (Witkowski 1989, 2008) to improve firms’ international business conducts, via boycotts (Ettenson et al. 2006), can be viewed as the role of a social change agent (Pan, Zinkhan, and Sheng 2007; Sirgy, Samli, and Meadow 1982).

The analysis illuminates the antecedents of consumers’ non-participation decisions which may be utilized by: 1) societies’ boycott-organizers that were not successful in their calls and 2) organizations, operating in macro-environments that face serious boycott threats. Many micro-players of macro systems, such as Coke, Pepsi, McDonalds, Nestle, and Shell, have been the targets of boycotts that centered on their supposedly inappropriate policies (Garrett 1987). Much like boycott-targeted corporations, social agents of societies, such as boycott-organizers who call for boycotts, should establish their strategies based on an appraisal of the effectiveness of their boycott calls. Thus, success factors for boycott-organizers that desire to improve welfare of stakeholders in societies are worth being investigated in detail to prevent failure. These success factors for boycott-organizers start with understanding the individual components of society whose aggregated decision makes up the communal decision. Investigating dynamics that play a role in individuals’ non-participation in a boycott served as an initial step in this capacity.

Below are the implications as to how the findings of this study on individuals’ oppositions to boycotts may translate to how societies’ micro-organizations, which collectively make up the macromarketing systems, may or should react and operate in similar circumstances. In order to be effective in getting community members’ positive attention, societies’ boycott-agents should emphasize the following factors when communicating with their members:

First, they need to make clear the relevance of the cause of a boycott call to their members. The cause should be related to all stakeholders’ self-agenda. A key insight for a boycott-organizer is that motivational themes for boycotts need to be presented as general and ethical contexts that every member of a society may encounter through different incidences anywhere in the world sometime in their life.

Perceived distance is supported in the literature in various domains including sociology, consumer behavior, organizational behavior, strategy, international business and macromarketing. Stuart and Dabbs (1970) assert that the more people are physically distant from a location, the less they may sense empathy to others. This concept relates to ethical conduct of MNCs in the system that employ separate “code of ethics” when they operate internationally (Laczniak and Kennedy 2011) in distant geographies. In view of that, physical distance created personal distance as an antecedent of out-group bias that then affected the non-participation decision in this study. Hence, a call to boycott events that are happening far away did not prompt our informants to participate.

As a remedy, similarities should be drawn between the people (informants in Australia) being asked to boycott and those who would benefit directly from it (workers in South America). One way of doing this is emphasizing that we all are human beings, we all deserve fair working conditions, and supporting those being harmed (i.e., Columbian workers) by the inappropriate policies (of Coke) is each world-citizen’s ethical mission. This
serves to set off ethical concerns and self-relevance linkages with other members of other societies and calls for “political responsibility for the global and more individualized world” (Micheletti and Follesdal 2007, p. 169).

Distance generates a sense of detachment which then influences people’s involvement with other people, ideas, products, events, and structures, in which the closer the physical and social distance the more effective the influence and vice versa. Thus, the cause of the boycott call should not be perceived as distant and remote or unrelated (dissimilar) to the people being asked to boycott. While global boycott-organizers use different messages to encourage participation, they should make sure that the content relates to people asked for the boycott. Hence, a message that is perceived as “far-flung” may not generate a motivation for boycotting; informants may sense a form of detachment from the incident. A globalized world-citizen consumer concept (Cohen 2004) may contribute to global boycott organizers’ provisions. This is because, through the lens of political consumerism, consumers are important “active holders of responsibility for global welfare” (Micheletti and Follesdal 2007, 167) “and the human rights of distant others” (p. 168).

Second, boycott-organizers may best achieve their aims by encouraging self-enhancement perceptions of society members through boycotting. With subtlety, organizers could inculcate participation as an ethical mission expected from all citizens for public good, while failure to participation as a transgression, generating feelings of guilt in the non-participant (Klein, Smith, and John 2004). Social contract elucidates this notion: all world-citizen are within our group, you are expected to act upon. A similar phenomenon spawned the 1960s and 1970s American social movements of citizen-consumers, which aimed to hold businesses and governments to higher moral standards (Cohen 2004). Consumers as citizens provoked important grassroots, democratic actions, and civil right movements.

Third, public utility from behavior modification should be emphasized. The effect of marketing systems on altruistic motivation may be highlighted by the impact of a minor amount of private disutility on the major public good (Carman 1992). If we all fight strongly against unfair conditions of businesses (Coke), their frequency will decrease, because Coke and others will be proactive in stopping misdeed before it reaches global audiences. That will affect all world-citizens, as other institutions will also take their lesson through the Coke example, which can be achieved by simply not buying the soft drink. Organizers should convince consumers that all the stakeholders in the society would be better off if the boycott is successful, using fact-based arguments about the importance of involvement and emphasizing that each consumer’s participation will matter. This is because non-participants tend to predict the unlikelihood of success of boycotting without sound statistical information on the possibility of success. They base their decision solely on their own low expectancy of overall participation (Sen, Gurhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001) and the small-agent problem, perceiving themselves as being too small and insignificant to make a change (John and Klein 2003). Recall, for example, Sarah’s perception of Coke as “too large” (as a company).

Fourth, boycott-organizers requests should not be communicated as commands, but as ethical citizenship missions to prevent any negative reactions from consumers to avoid reactance. Boycott-organizers should pro-actively prepare rebuttals to boycott-induced skepticism ahead of time. Proactive disclaimers would have reduced Coke informants’ potential doubts on the veracity of the misconducts in Columbia, especially if they used them as an account for their non-participation. As such, getting the media to pay attention to the boycott call and the issue at stake would have made the boycott (Coke) more plausible, as strong source effects from various organizations would increase credibility, awareness, and social pressure for participation. More print and visual media coverage would have substantiated the boycott cause. An early initiative, rather than a retroactive defense, would bolster the case and reduce possible concerns of informants in advance.

Finally, organizers should announce the ease of participation, the convenience of similar proxies, and emphasize that the minor support required will lead to a major public good (Klein, Smith, and John 2004).

Conclusion and Further Research

The informants have provided reasons for not boycotting. Some of these rationales seem rather like insincere accounts for inaction (Eckhardt, Belk, and Devinney 2010). The broad themes that emerged from informants’ interviews are classified as, “out of sight, out of mind,” “urge for freedom and self-defence,” and “counterarguments—scepticism or accounts.” The hermeneutic analysis provides a background for understanding boycott failures.

An investigation into why people do not boycott and how they rationalize their non-participation decision is considered worthwhile as a way to establish boundary conditions for the boycotting phenomenon. As such, the conception of informants’ declaration of their unwillingness to participate reflects a specific boundary stimulus, manifesting as an intrinsic value. The need to explore antecedents of a boycott failure suggested the conduct of an exploratory study. Further studies may use the new variables that emerged from this study, including distance, out-group, reactance, and persuasion knowledge effects, to measure the likelihood of consumers not participating in a boycott, which may cause the boycott to fail.

Many studies portray anti-consumption as beneficial to society, the environment, or the individuals. Yet, the present study shows a strong desire of non-participation in anti-consumption. Most of the non-participants used rationalization strategies to account for their inaction decision (Ger and Belk 1999). Exploration of some tactics to overcome participants’ use of accounts for their non-participation to avoid responsibility is examined in this research. Investigation of superior strategies to be used by organizers that signal the urgency and importance of participation in social movements, however, awaits further research. This study looked at the non-participation phenomenon at the individual level as an initial attempt to understand the dynamics of an anti-consumption (boycotting) decision.
Further research should look into how boycott organizers should design and implement strategies to overcome the non-participation phenomenon.

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**Author Biography**

Ulku Yuksel is a Senior Lecturer of Marketing at The University of Sydney Business School. She made the move to an academic career after a 13-year-long professional career in the international services sector. Her research applies consumer marketing concepts in various contexts: culture; decision-making under risk, uncertainty, and stress; and boycott behavior.