

The Intention to Participate in the Boycott Movement among University Students

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Abstract

People engage in the boycott movement to show their deep disapproval of a company's or government's behaviour and regulations. Despite the rise in consumer boycotts, little attention has been given on the psychological and motivational factors that drive consumer boycott behaviour among university students in a multicultural and multi-ethnic religious society. In response to this gap, and with the support of an extended version of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this study investigates how attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, animosity and religious belief are related to the boycott intentions among the students in one university in Malaysia. This study utilized simple random sampling to select 265 respondents. The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's coefficient correlation, and multiple linear regression. Multiple regression analysis revealed that all of these variables are related to the boycott intentions among university students, with attitude being identified as the most significant factor influencing the boycott intention. The findings of the study provide a better understanding of why university students want to participate in a boycott against specific businesses. In addition, the study has suggested several positive implications for various groups, including businesses, consumers, as well as governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Keywords: Attitude, Boycott, Perceived Behavioral Control, Religious Belief, Subjective Norms

Introduction

Boycott movement arises when consumers stop buying particular products or brands because they question the company's moral standing (Lavorata, 2014). According to Horstia (2017), a boycott has more power when a significant number of people participate. A boycott is also necessary to preserve the consumer's interests when an organization's practices are believed to threaten the consumer's economic and social well-being (Muhamad et al., 2018). Yu et al. (2020) claimed that boycotts have illustrated the empowerment of powerless communities to improve their conditions in modern times. Yunus et al. (2020) emphasizes that the boycott can be classified into two approaches, which are primary boycott and secondary boycott. They

further explained that primary boycotts usually organize strikes toward the boycotting party, while secondary boycotts contain an encouragement for others to join in. Even though boycotters may not be able to gain personal benefits if the boycott movement is successful (Jae & Jeon, 2016), they join the movement to voice their unhappiness with the company's unethical or socially irresponsible activities (Braunsberger & Buckler, 2011). Consumer boycotts are undeniably becoming a topic that requires attention in today's world.

According to past experience, consumer boycott movements can have disastrous effects on the company being boycotted if it is not properly managed. Friedman and Paton (2021), reported that the famous fashion brand H&M was boycotted by citizens in China in 2020, after they released a statement expressing deep concerns over reports of forced labour in Xinjiang. Even though the statement was criticized later by the government of China and related authorities, the boycott still brought some consequences to H&M (Friedman & Paton, 2021). For instance, H&M faced removal from major Chinese e-commerce platforms such as Taobao and JD.com, resulting in a reported 28% decline in their sales following the incident (Wang, 2021).

The public in Malaysia was urged to boycott chicken consumption for a month in 2022 to combat the rising prices. This call to action was prompted by the long-standing issue of Malaysians being exploited by chicken price gougers (Babulal, 2022). By referring to the annual report of the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) in May 2022, the consumer price index (CPI) for chicken went up 13.4 per cent as compared to 7.5 per cent in April 2022, while the average price of chicken in May 2022 was RM 9.70 per kilogram if compared to RM 8.44 in May 2021. Hence, in order to demonstrate consumer power, the NGOs urged consumers to take action, ensuring that cartels and intermediaries would no longer exploit them (Babulal, 2022).

Consumers today are more transparent and vocal about their opinions and no longer hide their disapproval (Wang et al., 2021). The rise of social media has empowered individuals, enabling their messages to reach vast audiences and businesses (Lee, 2020). Additionally, with market expansion, consumers have become more informed and ethical in their purchasing decisions (Hamzah & Mustafa, 2018). As a result, awareness of consumer boycotts is increasing, and it is expected that the boycott movement will continue to grow in the coming years.

However, there is still a lack of empirical research in the field of boycott, particularly in Malaysia. Additionally, the intention toward boycott and the factors that motivate this intention among consumers remain unclear (Shim & Cho, 2022). The boycotting of products or brands by consumers without a clear reason can pose a serious challenge for marketers. Therefore, this research is crucial as it helps marketers gain insight into consumers' thoughts, enabling them to understand consumer behavior and avoid being targeted for boycotts.

Literature Review

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is an excellent theoretical model for predicting behavioural intentions (Ibrahim & Arshad, 2018). The aim of this research is to evaluate how three psychological and motivational components from the theory are related to boycott intention. These factors include attitude toward the boycott, subjective norms regarding the

boycott, and perceived behavioral control of the boycott. Scholars assert that a person is likely to have a strong intention to engage in a behavior when their attitude, subjective norm, and perceived control are all favorable (Ajzen, 1991; Arafat & Ibrahim, 2019). Despite previous research claiming that these factors are positively related to Malaysian consumers' intentions in various contexts, such as the purchase intention of halal cosmetic products (Haque et al., 2018), female intention to purchase online (Ramli et al., 2021), and the intention to use electric vehicles (Asadi et al., 2021), the TPB applications in examining boycott remains limited (Hassan et al., 2016) and warrants further investigation (Delistavrou, et al., 2020).

The first factor, people's attitude towards a certain behaviour depends on their beliefs about a particular behavior and the desirable or attainable outcomes it can bring about. In terms of consumer boycott, Kim et al (2022), explained consumer's attitude toward a boycott as a mental state that shows what the person thinks and feels, either positively or negatively about the boycott. Previous studies have found a significant relationship between attitude with boycotting behaviour (Hamzah & Mustafa, 2018; Chiu, 2016; Jae & Jeon, 2016; Farah & Newman, 2010), showing that attitude serves as a valuable indicator for understanding boycotting behaviour. Additionally, empirical evidence from prior research supports the significant role of attitude in influencing consumer boycott intentions.

The second factor, the subjective norm, consists of the individual's desire to conform to others' positive opinions of such behaviour. Subjective norm is a normative belief where the social pressure from people close in one's life strongly influences the decision to do or not to do something (Ajzen, 1991). Besides, Charsetad (2016), also claimed that close friends and family members can influence an individual's decision-making process by influencing their subjective norms. Past studies have proved that subjective norms are related to the intention to boycott consumer goods. For example, Abdul-Talib and Adnan (2017), found that Malaysian consumer's subjective norms are linked to their decision to boycott Israel-related products. People are more likely to boycott if they have close family or friends who favour boycotts or have taken part in them. Delistavrou et al (2020), also claimed that people usually will have a positive intention to join the boycott if they are socially pressured to do so.

Hebeshy (2018), defined perceived behavioral control as the representation of individuals' confidence in their ability to do the desired action. When it comes to boycott context, Hamzah and Mustafa (2018), define perceived behavioral control as the people's beliefs of their power to boycott relevant services and products. It is an individual's sense of controllability to engage in the boycott movement (Kim et al., 2022). Delistavrou et al. (2020) claimed that consumers who believe they hold control over their participation and believe it will be easy for them to participate in a boycott will intend to participate. Concerning previous studies, many scholars claimed that perceived behavioral control has a relationship to the boycott intention. For example, Merican et al (2022), found that a person's level of perceived behavioural control may enhance their intention to avoid purchasing single-use plastic at a given time. Hamzah and Mustafa (2018), stated that people are more likely to boycott if they feel like they have more control over what they buy. Kim et al (2022), Chiu (2016), and Farah and Newman (2010), then concluded that the stronger the perceived behavioral control of boycotts, the stronger the boycott intention.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable rise in consumer animosity between nations, particularly about Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Simultaneously, Malaysia, with its diverse religious landscape encompassing different religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, may witness the influence of religious beliefs on boycott intentions. Nevertheless, the empirical research connecting these factors to boycott intention remains limited (Salma, 2021; Muhamad et al., 2018). Notably, scholars such as Yu et al (2019), and Ishak and Sulaiman (2017) have emphasized the need for further studies on animosity and religious beliefs to better comprehend their association with boycotts.

Apart from these factors, other factors mentioned in previous studies can encourage people to boycott a specific brand or product. According to Ajzen (2020), the TPB is open to adding additional predictors after careful consideration and empirical investigation. Hence, to make the research more comprehensive, the Theory of Planned Behavior has been extended with two other factors suggested from previous studies: animosity and religious belief (Muhamad et al., 2018; Roswinanto & Suwanda, 2021; Ishak et al., 2018; Knabe, 2012).

Animosity is a strong dislike based on beliefs of military, political, or economic conflict between nations or peoples who compromised social norms (Barutcu et al., 2016). It might result in a ban on buying products from those countries (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2007). Salma and Aji (2022), claimed social pressure greatly influences consumer animosity, particularly in a culture where they share the same beliefs. Hence, a boycott is a way to show that they do not like a country or its policies (Ganideh & Elahee, 2018). Studies on consumer behaviour showed that animosity has a relationship with boycott intention (Verma, 2021; Salma, 2021; Yu et al., 2020). For example, Verma (2021), discovered through his research that animosity reduces the desire to make a purchase. Hence, consumer animosity generally significantly impacts the intention to participate in boycotts.

Individuals' faith in religion and commitment to live their lives following the principles of the religion are referred to as religious belief (Raggiotto et al., 2018). Roswinanto and Suwanda (2021) mentioned that those who put their religion into action demonstrate a strong religious belief. It helps to shape people's personalities, morals, social norms, and behaviours in some ways (Baazeem, 2020). Various scholars also stated that religiosity is a strong predictor of consumer behaviour (Memon et al., 2020; Bukhari et al., 2020; Agarwala et al., 2018; Dekhil et al., 2017; Khraim, 2010). The relationship between religious belief and boycott intention has been proved from the previous studies. One of the cases related to religiosity boycott that happened in Malaysia recently is the anti-French brand boycott call-to-action by Muslims worldwide, including the Malaysian Muslim (Salma & Aji, 2022). Muhamad et al. (2018) claimed that their study found that the influence of religion was successful in increasing consumers' trust in the viability of the religion-based boycott and inducing their intention to participate. Aprianto et al. (2021) then concluded that the more committed a person is to his religion, the more he will avoid the products that conflict with his religion.

It is generally accepted that a person's intention can be used to infer the motivational variables that impact an action, as well as the extent to which they are willing to try to do the behaviour or the amount of effort they would put out to do so (Ajzen, 1991). Besides, Morwitz and Munz (2021), also defined intention as the degree to which a person wants to do something. According to Ajzen (1991), as a general rule, the stronger the intention to engage in an action, the more likely it should be that the behaviour will actually be performed. A

person's intention, therefore, can be used as a prediction of their actions. Several studies have been examined consumer intention to boycott (Salma, 2021; Delistavrou et al., 2020; Muhamad et al., 2018; Jae & Jeon, 2016; Albrecht et al., 2013). It is the degree of willingness of a consumer to stop buying or using a product or service (Kim et al., 2022). However, Ishak et al (2017), mentioned that when a person has particular opinions regarding the importance of the boycott action, their intention to boycott may increase from mild to moderate or even greater levels. So, this study aims to identify what factors are related to the intention to boycott among university students.

The target population for this research will be current undergraduate students due to the lack of boycott-related studies, especially among Malaysian undergraduates. Nevertheless, the undergraduates are conversant with internet technology and the online world (Park et al., 2019). Social media or the internet could influence them in their decision-making. Apart from that, university students are more educated. They may have different opinions toward the boycott action as a consumer. Chiu (2016) stated that an increasing number of young people are participating in boycott activities due to growing consumer awareness.

Based on the review of previous studies, the following statements are proposed as the hypotheses for this study:

- H1.* There is a significant relationship between attitude and the boycott intention among university students.
- H2.* There is a significant relationship between subjective norm and the boycott intention among university students.
- H3.* There is a significant relationship between perceived behavior control and boycott intention among university students.
- H4.* There is a significant relationship between animosity and the boycott intention among university students.
- H5.* There is a significant relationship between religious belief and the boycott intention among university students.
- H6.* There is a dominant factor that can influence the boycott intention among university students.

Methodology

A quantitative cross-sectional design was utilised to examine the predictors of consumer boycott intention. The research was conducted at a public university in Selangor, the largest economy in Malaysia, which boasts a business-friendly environment and is home to numerous business organisations. Undergraduate students were selected as the survey respondents to represent consumers. Two undergraduate programs from four faculties were randomly chosen. Starting with the list of students obtained from the Student Information System, a random starting point was chosen, and every third person was selected as the respondent. About 265 respondents participated in this exploratory study.

Based on past studies, the questionnaire was developed as follows: Section A addressed the demographics of respondents. Section B comprised of attitude questions adopted from Abdul -Talib & Abdul-Latif (2015), and Granstrom (2014), while Section C inquired about subjective norm adopted from Granstrom (2014). Section D included items on

perceived behaviour control, adopted from Hebeshy (2018), and Knabe (2012), while Section E focused on animosity items adopted from (Barutcu et al., 2016). Furthermore, Section F comprised religious belief questions adopted from Bazeem (2019), and Newaz (2014). The final section, Section G, explored the intention towards the boycott movement with items adopted from Salma & Aji (2022), and Rashaduzzaman (2020). The five-point Likert Scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree is used in these sections where (1) represents strongly disagree with the statement and (5) represents strongly agrees with the statement.

The questionnaires were emailed to the students via an online Google form. Implementing an online Google form was intended to prevent the participation of unqualified individuals during the sampling process. The pilot test was conducted among 30 respondents before the data collection. The result where Cronbach Alpha was more than 0.7 for each variable shows that each item in the questionnaire is reliable for measuring the boycott intention among the respondents. Furthermore, the reliability test was conducted after the data was collected. As a result, the Cronbach Alpha is also higher than 0.7, showing that the data collected is valid and reliable to be analyzed in this study. The analyses that are needed for this study were generated by the SPSS database program.

The descriptive analysis provided a background on the respondents. The inferential data analysis involving Pearson correlation was used to determine the correlation between the independent variables and consumer intention to boycott, whereas the multiple linear regression analysis was employed to ascertain the influence of predictor variables on consumer intention to boycott.

Results

Demographic Background

The respondents in this study consist of 180 female respondents (67.9%) and 85 males (32.1%). Regarding the race of respondents, the Malay respondents comprise the majority of respondents (55.1%). Next, respondents currently studying for their third year degree have more actively participated in this study (28.3%). Concerning the faculty, the majority of the respondents in this study are from the School of Business and Economy, recorded at 53.2%, while the respondents from the Bachelor of Business Administration with Honours program are the largest group, comprising 35.5%.

Results of hypothesis testing

The Pearson Coefficient Correlation and Multiple Linear Regression analysis results support all six hypotheses in this study. The results are recorded in Table 1 below. The positive correlation value, r , indicates that when one variable increases, the other variable will also increase. At the same time, the p -value for each variable is smaller than 0.01, which is significant at the level of 0.01. Based on the findings, the r value for consumer attitude is 0.597, the highest among all the five variables (subjective norm=0.579; perceived behavioral control=0.530; animosity= 0.559; religious belief=0.476).

Table 1
Pearson Correlation Coefficient Analysis

Variables	r-value	p-value
Consumer Attitude	0.597	0.000
Subjective Norm	0.579	0.004
Perceived Behavioral Control	0.530	0.000
Animosity	0.559	0.000
Religious belief	0.476	0.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2 describes the multiple correlation coefficient, which evaluates the quality of prediction of the dependent variable. The r-square can be used to represent the variation in the dependent variable explained by the independent variable. The higher the r-square, the better the model fits. Based on the table, the r-square is equal to 0.527, which means that 52.70% of the variation in consumers' intention to participate in a boycott can be interpreted by the predictors, which are consumer attitude (CA), subjective norm (SN), perceived behavioral control (PBC), animosity (A), and religious belief (RB). However, the remaining 47.30% is uninterpreted in this research.

Table 2
Model Summary

Model	R	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.726a	0.527	0.518	2.337

Predictors: (Constant), CA, SN, PBC, A, RB

Multiple linear regression is used to determine the most dominant factor influencing the boycott intention among university students. As shown in Table 3, the Beta value for consumer attitude is 0.256, the highest among all the five variables (subjective norm=0.209; perceived behavioral control=0.138; animosity=0.234; religious belief=0.134). While each variable has a p-value lesser than 0.05, it indicates that all variables are significant. Hence, consumer attitude is the most dominant factor influencing the boycott intention among university students. Muhamad et al. (2018) stated that the consumers' intentions to boycott a brand or business are typically preceded by their positive attitude regarding the boycott. Florencio et al. (2019) also stated that an individual's attitude is one of the most crucial antecedents that can impact an individual's intention to adopt a particular behaviour.

Table 3

Results of Multiple Linear Regression

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	3.509	1.633		2.149	0.033
Attitude	0.289	0.064	0.256	4.529	0.000
Subjective Norm	0.140	0.048	0.170	2.886	0.004
Perceived Behavioral Control	0.152	0.045	0.178	3.384	0.000
Animosity	0.179	0.047	0.210	3.799	0.000
Religious Belief	0.127	0.048	0.134	2.650	0.009

a: Dependent Variable: Consumer Intention

Discussion

Boycott behavior can have a more significant impact than anticipated. Global corporations often appear uncertain and incompetent when faced with consumer boycotts (Kim & Kinoshita, 2023). Additionally, effective boycotts are essential for encouraging companies to act responsibly and ethically, promoting sustainable development (Delistavrou et al., 2020). The consumer actions that result in boycott behaviour have changed in recent years, becoming more varied and active in both offline and online situations (Jae & Jeon, 2016). For this existing research, this study aims to explore the factors that influence consumer boycott intentions. Since there is limited research on this topic, our study can fill the gaps in this area and offer valuable insights into how consumers decide to boycott.

Previous studies have proved that many factors influence an individual's intention to perform a specific action. In the context of boycotting, since it was initiated voluntarily, various factors can affect consumer boycott participation intention. Thus, this study includes five factors that are claimed to have a relationship with boycott intention. The Theory of Planned Behavior was also used in the study as it is the most prevalent theory to predict the intention of the respondents. Besides the three factors in the Theory of Planned Behavior, which are attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control, the two additional factors, animosity and religious belief, are extended into the theory. These factors acted as the independent variables in this study.

The findings of this study are consistently supported by the previous studies. For consumer attitude, Song (2020), explained that the consumer attitudes toward boycott participation and small business owners who participated in the boycott influenced their intentions to visit those shops positively. Additionally, Abdullah et al (2021), claimed that attitude is positively related to boycott participation. The same conclusion was reached by Hamzah and Mustafa (2018), in their study, which found that respondents were influenced by significant others or people they hold in high regard. Besides, the research on consumer boycott intentions conducted by Zhang et al (2017), also concluded that perceived behavioral

control had a good impact on desire, while desire had positive effects on consumer boycott intentions. Regarding animosity, Park and Yoon (2017), explained that bad emotions or feelings about a particular country are important in their purchase decisions towards foreign products, resulting in a decline in consumption. For religious belief, Muhamad et al. (2018) claimed that due to the increasing use of religious appeals in boycott campaigns and the rising Islamic conservatism among Muslim consumers, it appears reasonable to assume that religion plays a central role in motivating and encouraging group participation in boycotts.

The study gives us relevant knowledge about how the different factors can be related to the boycott intention. All five independent variables used in this study are proved to have a significant relationship with the intention towards boycott movement among university students. The result is supported by the Pearson Coefficient Correlation since the significant values of the correlation are smaller than 0.01 for each factor, indicating that the intention of boycott is related to various factors. Furthermore, the result derived from the multiple linear regression shows that the consumer attitude has the strongest correlation with the boycott intention due to its highest beta value.

Implication and Conclusion

The study's findings on consumers' boycott intentions enhance our understanding of the reasons behind consumer engagement in boycott behaviour. Firstly, the study's findings can help businesses better comprehend the factors that prompt consumers to boycott, enabling the development of effective solutions and the prevention of future boycotts. According to Kim et al (2022), managers at multinational corporations often find themselves perplexed by consumer boycott campaigns in foreign countries that they could not anticipate and had no involvement in. Therefore, by developing communications in response to the challenges, managers can undertake marketing interventions to lessen or eliminate potential adverse effects. It is crucial as the consumer boycott can have significant consequences for the economy in the form of a loss in sales and severe negative effects on the reputation of the company and its brand.

Notably, if a business is wrongly associated with events that prompted the boycott, such as employing child labour, charging unreasonable prices, or acting against religious beliefs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or boycott organizers can serve as effective channels to provide accurate information to the public. By understanding that consumer attitude is the most dominant factor influence the consumer boycott intention, the NGOs can organize a series of programs that can boost the attitude of consumers on boycotting intention. For example, the NGOs should advertise some of the successful cases of boycotting that change the behavior of a company from unethical to ethical. By doing so, it can enhance the belief of the consumers on the effectiveness of boycott, so that they can have the intention to participate in it.

Furthermore, the current study would give an idea of how consumers in Malaysia feel about the consumer boycott. Given the limited research on this topic in Malaysia, this study aims to serve as a foundation for other researchers to explore consumer boycotts, thereby contributing to the understanding of Malaysian consumers and markets in general. In this context, the results and proposed approach will provide future researchers with a useful framework for advancing their studies. Consequently, the awareness and understanding of

the consumer boycott movement can be enhanced among the consumers. If the majority of consumers in Malaysia are engaging in the behaviour of consumer boycotting, it will be easier to resist businesses that engage in unethical behaviour so it can lead to a healthier market and business activity in the society.

Besides, it has been demonstrated that the Theory of Planned Behaviour can be used to predict consumer boycott intentions. Attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control as the main variables in the theory have been tested are related to the boycott intention among university students with the attitude as the most dominant factors. Moreover, extending the Theory of Planned Behavior with two additional variables, animosity and religious belief, provides new insights into the factors influencing consumer boycott intentions. This is the first study of its kind to integrate these variables with the variables in Theory of Planned Behavior. Such insight is crucial for the society to have a better understanding of this issue. The formulation of the hypotheses from the research framework also gives an empirical basis for assessing academic principles.

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