

Chapter 84

Correlates of Political Consumption in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Using the marketplace as a site for political action with social change motives is referred as political consumption. Boycott, as a form of political consumption is an innovative way being used by citizens to directly express their attitudes, interests and concerns with the ultimate goal of influencing public affairs. This book chapter specifically examines the correlates of boycott as a form of political consumption in Africa using Wave 6 of the World Values Survey. Based on binary logistic regression, the correlates of boycott action are: level of education, gender, social class, media usage, gender equality, institutional confidence, social network, interest in politics, life satisfaction, seeing oneself as being part of world citizenship, seeing oneself as being embedded in local community, importance of doing something for the good of society, importance of traditions, and importance of riches or expensive things. These findings have implications for reaching out to boycotters.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the marketplace to influence social policy changes is referred to as political consumption. The growing tendency by citizens to use political consumption has been widely linked to the inability of conventional forms of political participation to deal effectively with public issues (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002; Halkier & Holm, 2004; Stolle, & Micheletti, 2013). Boycotts—punishing businesses for unfavorable behavior (Neilson, 2010, p. 214) and buycotts—the deliberate act of purchasing a product to support specific ethical, moral, or political concerns (Sandovici & Davis, 2010, p. 329) are considered as forms of political consumption. The phenomenon of political consumption has been widely studied in post-industrialized nations but not much has been written about such social change-oriented actions in developing countries (Adugu & Ampadu-Ameyaw, 2014). The objective of this book chapter is to explore the relationship between engagement in boycott action and attitudinal variables (such as life satisfaction,

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political interest, embeddedness in social network, etc.), Schwartz values and socio-demographics in the context of representative national survey data from Africa using Wave 6 of the World Values Survey.

CONSUMERS AS MARKET ACTORS

In general, consumption includes activities of buying goods, social relations connected to the provision, allocation and use of goods and services and can also be viewed as part of the social space in which people participate in creating and reproducing meanings about the occurrences of everyday life (Luckmann, 1989). Some scholars view consumption as a meaningful form of civic engagement (Scammell, 2000; Hertz, 2001). In an overview of consumption, Humphrey (1998, p. 7-8) identifies consumption as:

... a potential arena of personal empowerment, cultural subversion, and even political resistance...The 'consumer' was positioned as active, rather than passive, as the 'producer' of usages and meanings that the marketplace may not have assigned to a particular commodity or consumer space, and which potentially undermined or evaded consumerist ideologies.

Another comment which aptly illustrates the growing recognition of the potential power and agency of consumers is from Fiske's summation of 'cathedrals of consumption.' Fiske (1991, p.31) asserts:

... [t]he values of commodities can be transformed by the practices of their users, as can those of language, for as language can have no fixed reference point in a universal reality, neither can commodities have final values fixed in their materiality. The practices of the users of a system not only can exploit its potential, but can modify the system itself. In the practices of consumption the commodity system is exposed to the power of the consumer, for the power of the system is not just top-down, or center-outward, but always two-way, always a flux of conflicting power and resistances.

The above quotations convey a picture that consumers are market actors who have a wealth of power that they can use to demand changes. As market actors, they can force the market to respond to their concerns such as labor practices of companies, production and environmental practices. The role of consumption in shaping market change has led to an understanding of consumer values and concerns and how that might be motivating enlightened consumers to take responsibility to change the dynamics of the system from "what is" to what it "ought to be." In that regard, Halkier and Holm (2008, p.667) note that in the area of food policies, the individual consumer is increasingly called to take responsibility for various types of food issues, such as safety, environmental improvements and ethics—such concerns about food system risks may be prominent in motivating consumer engagement in consumption behavior to influence desired changes. By engaging in consumption as a means to seek changes, consumers take issue with "the means of production"—"those things that make it possible for people to acquire goods and services and for ...people to be controlled and exploited as consumers" (Ritzer 2001, p.110 in Neilson & Paxton, 2010, p. 7). In sum, the conscientious consumer can be considered as an actor with the power to change things (Bossy, 2014, p.188), through his/her consumptive decisions.

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