

CRITICAL CONSUMPTION

Boycotting and buycotting in Europe

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ABSTRACT: Critical consumption, the purchase or boycott of goods for political, ethical or environmental reasons, is regularly characterised as an example of ‘new politics’ or ‘new’ political participation. However, such analysis often neglects work from the sociology of consumption and social movement studies. This paper argues that consumers express their identity through critical consumption, in the form of a pledge of allegiance to the goals of certain social movements. Cross-national data from the European Social Survey identifies critical consumers as belonging to higher class positions and being generally older, highly educated, and more often women than men. Separating analysis of boycotting from that of buycotting, the positive purchase of goods for ethical or political reasons, suggests that buycotting is more resource-dependent and individualistic than boycotting. Substantial differences are found between the impact of people’s resources in different countries, particularly between Northern and Central European countries and their Southern and Eastern counterparts. The findings thus recommend an approach to consumer politics that remains sensitive to social structural contexts between countries and different forms of consumer participation.

Key words: critical consumption; social movements; Europe; new participation; political consumers; cross-national

1. Introduction

Critical consumption is generally described as a ‘new’ form of political participation, and its relationship with other forms of extra-parliamentary politics has been frequently explored. Influential approaches tend to view consumer politics as simply part of a debate concerning democracy, modernity and social change (see Inglehart 1997; Norris 2002). Analysis that incorporates the sociology of consumption and social movement studies, meanwhile, provides a wider understanding of the act and its broader relevance for collective action and consumer cultural paradigms.

Critical consumption can be read as a way of participating that renders consumption behaviour conscientious and diligent, over a multitude of political and ethical agendas. Consumption refers to any appropriation of goods or services through their purchase, use and disposal, while this paper operationalises critical consumption as the critical non-purchase or purchase of goods, boycotting and 'buycotting', respectively (a rather cosy term coined by Friedman (1996)). Boycotting refers to abstaining from buying, whereas buycotting refers to intentionally purchasing a product on the grounds of political, ethical or environmental motivations. Buycotts can respond to boycotts, form part of a campaign in their own right, or respond to specifically marketed 'ethical' goods. Critical consumption, therefore, refers to cases where consideration of the implications of a product or service's production or consumption result in a consumer decision to boycott or buycott.

The goals of this paper are three-fold. First, to conceptualise critical consumption as participatory, but with distinct social and cultural dimensions. Second, to explore variations in critical consumption by testing the relationship between individuals' social status and their likelihood of participating using the 2003 European Social Survey (ESS). Third, the paper explores variation between boycotting and buycotting across different countries, arguing that the inconsistency of variables in predicting different kinds of critical consumption, coupled with prior research into its classification among other participation forms, calls for comparative analysis of a qualitative nature to better understand its patterns and its politics.

2. Background – participation and consumption

2.1. Consumption and identity

Consumption has increasingly been identified as fundamental to contemporary formations of individual and collective identity, undermining traditional modes of social stratification (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Pakulski and Waters 1996). Boycotting and buycotting, as a particularly self-conscious form of consumption are, in this way, expressions of an individual's political, ethical or environmental stance. Addressing the question of *which* people are 'critical consumers' provides a foundation for understanding politicised identities and relationships between consumption, participation and civil society.

The notion that traditional indicators of social status and differentiation such as social class are becoming obsolescent has been repeatedly challenged, from inside as well as outside of the consumption paradigm

(e.g., Warde 1992: 26). It seems more likely that class, among other social determinants such as age, gender and education, plays a part in any socio-cultural reworking of society and social identity alongside, as well as through, changes in consumption orientations. Considering demographic and socio-economic indicators already regularly used in predicting *political* participation with respect to critical consumption contributes towards a clarification of these relationships. Some work has probed this question for individual countries, but not on a cross-national basis (closest to exceptions being Stolle *et al.* 2005; Gallego 2007). This study aims to investigate the same question with a large number of European countries, and separate analysis of boycotting and buycotting, to pave the way for more detailed sociological examination of the production of critical consumers.

2.2. Structure and resources

In studies of political participation, resources in the form of economic, cultural and social capital are commonly shown to increase the propensity of an individual to participate. They also define the population targeted by social and political organisations and the media, situating people in social networks and cultural contexts whereby participation is discouraged or facilitated. Social movement studies expands on and abstracts this somewhat individualistic causal relation between protest and symbolic capital, through discussion of the role that resources and the social structures of collective action play in such a process.

McCarthy and Zald (1977) theorise participation in a social movement not as a form of membership, but more as a kind of positioning on a continuum of involvement, where involvement is a contribution or exchange of resources. This provides a useful basis for understanding certain types of movement structures. Individuals may be situated according to resources contributed and the responsibility they have for distributing, organising or mobilising the resources of others. Resources are defined as comprising such diverse elements such as 'legitimacy, money, facilities, and labor' (1220), but could be applied more liberally still, to factors such as time and commitment. Social movement members can be motivated by personal interests or simply by sympathetic interest in a social movement's goals, 'conscience constituents'. Those who do not contribute significant resources to the organisation itself but sympathise with the goals are described as 'conscience adherents'.

The critical consumer can be theorised as a conscience adherent to a movement or number of movements, someone who sympathises with certain social movement goals and contributes towards them through

modifying their consumption behaviour. As a form of engagement with a social movement, critical consumption requires relatively low resources in terms of time and social commitment. Consistently applied, however, ethical provisioning such as fair trade may literally cost more than alternatives, meaning boycotting may be more dependent on its socio-political contexts than personal resources, in contrast to boycotting (Renard 2003).

Critical consumption works very differently to the high-profile activism usually studied by social movement scholars: it is repetitively performed, demands low levels of resources, and it is facilitated through information published and distributed by movements (often through other media, see Keum *et al.* 2004; Berry and McEachern 2005). The extent to which critical consumption is successful is contingent on social movements raising certain ethical-political agendas, specifying appropriate targets and promoting notions of ethical responsibility and participation, for non-activists as well as for activists. Companies themselves may also employ critical consumer discourses in order to market certain products and lifestyles (Vogel 2005).

In other words, while it is possible to assess the impacts that people's positions in the social order have on their chances of being critical consumers, these effects are mediated by a series of politicised organisations and cultural contexts, in which some forms of consumption are rendered more normatively acceptable than others. The expression of identity through critical consumption, moreover, is subject to the opportunities and constraints offered by these contexts, operating through and alongside people's own resources or socio-demographic characteristics.

2.3. Politics and participation

Political science previously understood consumer politics as a phenomenon dealt with by the market, but fundamental global economic restructuring has blurred the boundaries between this and more institutionalised politics (Hirschman 1970; Harrison *et al.* 2005). The relation between citizen participation and policy has also changed across much of Europe, with deregulation and privatisation constituting power shifts from governments to private business interests (Harrison *et al.* 2005: 56). This means that dissatisfaction has increasingly been directed towards economic processes and actors, and that much of the potential for social change is seen to lie in some restructuring of business and economic practices, particularly since the global financial crisis. Governments, businesses and social movement organisations themselves have been recognised as vital in producing new consumer roles (Trentmann 2006). These *citizen-consumers* are cast as the leading protagonists in the promotion of ethically and environmentally

'sustainable' consumption, in a deflection of responsibility from producers and retailers onto the individual (Sassatelli 2006; Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007: 479–80). This stems not only from strategic business leaders but is also supported in government environmental policy, rallying cries of certain social movement organisations and occasionally overblown academic work on 'new' participation and politics.

Recent work on critical consumption has differed in the terms used to refer to boycotting and buycotting actions. The more prominent include *ethical consumption* (Harrison *et al.* 2005) and *political consumerism* (Micheletti 2003; Stolle *et al.* 2005), while *sustainable consumption*, more linked with policy, has also increased in usage (e.g., Spaargaren 2003). Many authors, however, struggle over definitions of the 'political', and the concept typically lends itself to an orthodox political science approach, while the subjective and ambiguous 'ethics' or 'sustainability' of consumerism underplays the subjectivity of individuals' beliefs and values. This study elects to use *critical consumption*, a term which expresses substantive neutrality over the kind of issues motivating it, yet retains the emphasis of deliberation or 'critical' agency on the part of the consumer (Sassatelli 2006). Consumption is 'critical', then, when it involves consideration of the political or ethical implications of one or more episodes of the production, or of the perceived effects of the consumption, of any product or service. When these concerns play out through abstinence it is a 'boycott'; when buying occurs as its result, it is a 'buycott'.

3. Critical consumption – targets and issues

The kind of substantive issues and targets towards which consumers are mobilised to boycott or buycott are numerous, due to the complex chains of relationships between producers and consumers. Teorell *et al.* (2007: 341) provide an interesting taxonomy for classifying critical consumption as participation, and have also used factor analysis to compare it alongside other participation forms (see also Norris 2002; Pattie *et al.* 2004). Few authors have discussed the ethical-political basis for engagement, however, meaning it is easy to lose sight of what critical consumers are critical *about*. Table 1 roughly categorises these issues into three broad areas of concern, 'People', 'Environment' and 'Politics' (defined here as issues over which state political actors are seen to hold most responsibility), within which there appear some heuristically useful subdivisions. Categories are porous in that targets may infringe ethical frameworks on a number of dimensions, and consumption acts may accordingly be motivated by more than one issue.

The existence of a specific social or economic target towards which critical consumption is directed is important for critical consumption as it is for

TABLE 1. Issues and targets over which critical consumption mobilises

<i>People</i>	<i>Environment</i>	<i>Politics</i>
<p>Human rights issues Targets: may involve whole regimes, or corporations involved in human rights abuses or the sanctioning/exploitation of such practices</p>	<p>Issues regarding habitats: impact of consumption on particular environments, both natural and man-made Targets: companies or authorities, from local to national or multi-national in scope</p>	<p>Political activity: corporate sponsorship of certain political parties, political lobbying and membership of lobby groups; also the actions/ethos of particular governments with respect to 'people' issues Targets: companies, political parties, institutions of governance</p>
<p>Work rights: child labour, working conditions, freedom to unionise, minimum wage, etc Targets: usually specific companies</p>	<p>Use/misuse of scarce resources Targets: companies, sometimes industries as a whole</p>	<p>Arms: involvement in production, marketing, trade and testing; legal and illegal Targets: companies and governments, sometimes host governments</p>
<p>Trading issues: whether producers are paid 'fairly' with respect to retail prices Targets: usually specific companies</p>	<p>Animal rights: animal testing, over-intensive farming, use/misuse of animals for food, ingredients or clothes Targets: sometimes industries as a whole, sometimes specific companies</p>	<p>Marketing issues: social (ir)responsibility in marketing goods/services Targets: usually companies or state legislators</p>

Source: Author's adaptation of typology from the Ethical Consumer Research Association (www.ethicalconsumer.org).

voting or contacting politicians (Teorell *et al.* 2007). However whereas most forms of participation aim to influence governments, critical consumption also challenges a range of actors and organisations outside the boundaries of state control. Such targets are often corporate, and may range in specificity from an entire industry to specific aspects of a product's production. They can also be organisations, governments or policy-makers working on a regional, national or international scale.

Agendas and targets are suggested by governments, media, social movement organisations and their publications, as well as the private sector (Berry and McEachern 2005: 69). For boycotting, the agenda and target is often explicitly named by the private sector or a labelling scheme, providing short-cuts for critical consumers. On the other hand, *additional* marshalling of information may be required (to overcome the distrust common to both boycotting and buying) in order to engage in positive buying behaviour (Kjaernes *et al.* 2007).

3.1. Mechanisms: integrity, self-expression, and participatory structures

Much analysis of political consumerism works with some version of the 'consumer vote' model. Consideration of the politics or ethics of a good or service stimulates consumers to contribute in order to increase sales (or abstain, Hirschman's 'exit'); change in business practice generally being the desired outcome (Micheletti 2003: 3; Dickenson and Carsky 2005; Shaw *et al.* 2006; Teorell *et al.* 2007). These approaches tend towards simplifying how people conceive of the act of boycotting or buycotting and the processes by which they might achieve success (Follesdal 2004; Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007).

Boycotting, for instance, is often seen by consumers not simply as an attempt to influence a company, government or practice, but as a way of disassociating oneself from acts, policies, regimes or socio-political acts which one considers to be unsavoury (Clavin and Lewis 2005). Accounts position such consumption as an expression of values (boycotting becomes about mutual respect or fundamental rights) or, similarly, a matter of integrity: the wish to be the *kind of person* that endorses a set of norms and behaviours and rejects others (Follesdal 2004). Critical consumption becomes a question of securing and expressing a form of political or ethical identity. The expression of this identity may be more conducive in buycotting, where there is often a discursively explicit, material expression of values in the form of packaging and labels such as Fair Trade, though little work engages with this question empirically.

Discussions of critical consumption also regularly underplay the extent to which consumers marshal evidence and knowledge for informing their consumption decisions. Brand image and PR for the modern corporation is taken so seriously that media interest *in itself* and/or contact by consumer groups or an SMO may trigger policy change even before consumers actually act on their basis (Friedman 1999). For this reason, the mechanisms of achieving success, as well as the experiences of boycotting and buycotting, are poorly understood with the metaphor of the consumer vote.

4. Boycotting and buycotting: operationalising critical consumption

Boycotting and buycotting are discrete acts of critical consumption, and yet they are mutually contingent. In fact, if the use-value or utility of a product is important, then it is difficult to view them as separate acts. For when one boycotts a product or service, this is rightly not taken to mean that one abstains from consuming at all, but that one may select an alternative product or service. Equally, a choice to buycott could be

understood as including a rejection or boycott of the non-ethical alternative. This interdependence helps to explain the traditional pairing of boycotting and buycotting in much analysis of consumer politics.

This perspective, nevertheless, works with a conception of consumer behaviour that is overly functionalist. Consumption may occur for some 'reason' or 'reasons', according to a consumer, but the utility an individual will actually receive from the act of consumption may be entirely different. In other words, there may be no 'ethical' equivalent – with a corresponding sign-value – that carries the same socio-cultural message. Accordingly, this study first operationalises critical consumption as respondents who have reported participating either in a boycott or buycott, or as having done both, and then moves to look at boycotting and buycotting separately. This separation, it is hypothesised, may reveal that the higher actual costs in purchasing ethical alternatives to goods or services, coupled with a more explicit process of self-identification with particular ethics, may stratify buycotting to a greater extent than boycotting.

5. Who participates?

Studies of civic and political participation show individuals with higher levels of resources and symbolic capital to be much more active than others. This relationship is therefore useful for understanding how participation takes place, and how disparities in engagement reinforce social inequalities. There are clear difficulties in measuring resources on a large scale, particularly those such as levels of commitment and free time. However, even the effects of basic socio-demographics such as age, gender, social class and education on boycotting and buycotting have only been addressed in a handful of studies, few of which provide a perspective beyond the national picture. The following hypotheses identify these gaps and provide a programme of research for this study and beyond.

5.1. People with higher levels of education are more likely to critically consume

Education is associated strongly with people's propensities to participate according to practically every empirical study carried out since the 1950s. Those working on political consumerism have found positive relationships with likelihoods of boycotting across 18 European countries, and on critical/political consumerism in Denmark (Andersen and Tobiasen 2004; Gallegho 2007). This relationship is likely to hold for buycotting, despite

explicit presentation of ethical agendas and targets on some products and through certain labelling schemes which may render participation easier.

5.2. Critical consumption may be associated with older ages

Age is another factor shown ubiquitously to have an impact on levels of civic and political participation. Experience brings social contacts, greater knowledge and skills, all of which translate into effective resources for participation. Evidence from Denmark shows critical consumers generally following this trend, whereas cross-national research on boycotting suggests that the relationship is inconsistent across nations (Gallego 2007). Prior studies of more than one country have tended to neglect buycotting behaviour altogether.

5.3. Women are more likely to engage in critical consumption than men

In contrast to men's traditional dominance of participation forms, previous studies have shown women to be more active in consumer politics than men, from the successful organisation of consumer boycotts and forming of consumer associations, to the findings of more recent studies (Friedman 1999; Stolle *et al.* 2005). What existing cross-national research there is shows this feature to be largely confined to Nordic countries, however – which complicates any explanation based simply on citing traditional female roles in provisioning (Micheletti 2003; Gallego 2007).

5.4. Individuals from higher social classes are more likely to engage in critical consumption

Critics have claimed that the value of class as an effective explanatory system of social stratification has greatly diminished, with consumption- rather than production-based identities now characterising social distinction. Gallego (2007) finds its impact to be statistically insignificant in predicting boycotters from most European countries, implying greater egalitarianism. If class is irrelevant for predicting critical consumption, then this supports the argument that consumption identities evade class distinction altogether. It is hypothesised here that using a simple three-category class measure to ensure that there are sufficient cases within each

category (due to substantial differences in the proportions of people in each social class across countries), may contradict these findings.

5.5. Homemakers and students are more likely to engage in critical consumption

Studies of political consumerism and ethical consumption have previously found women to be more likely to be critical consumers than men, but these studies do not generally control for whether women in full-time roles as home-makers are more likely to be critical consumers *for this reason*. Therefore this study will control for women and men whose occupational status is unclear and main recent 'activity' is recorded as housework and/or looking after their children, to find out whether simply in shopping for the household, individuals become critical consumers. In this study students, too, will be investigated with respect to critical consumption. Various studies have cited their involvement in everyday-type politics (Stolle *et al.* 2005; Li and Marsh 2008), especially interesting given that young people are regularly theorised as the archetypically hedonistic and niche-market consumers (Featherstone 1991).

5.6. People who have never worked in a paid job are less likely to participate

This study also controls for people whose employment relation is such that they have never worked, but who are also neither homemakers nor students. These people who belong to no occupational class are said to correspond to the underclass, Bauman's 'inadequate consumers', for whom participation of any form, let alone consumer politics, is least likely (1998: 38).

5.7. The relationships between these variables will differ between boycotting and buycotting

Economic costs for boycotting, the deliberate purchase of goods or services for its perceived benefits, ought technically to be lower for those of boycotting, which technically involves no consumption at all (Friedman 1996; Renard 2003). Resource levels thus may impact more on buycotting. Identity processes may also be mobilised to a greater extent through the

acquisition of goods or services that already display explicit values or ethics, as with buycotting. This may mean that socio-economic indicators of status and higher resources may show a greater consistency in predicting buycotting behaviour than boycotting.

5.8. Data

The European Social Survey is a cross-national biennial large-scale survey that uses multistage clustered random sampling for the majority of nations covered. In the 2002–2003 round, there was a question for buycotting as well as boycotting (the latter is a regular feature). The 21 European countries covered in this round were Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.¹

The dependent variable for this study is based upon two questions, one about boycotting and one about buycotting.² Figure 1 displays some of the data that simply combining these questions elides, by showing how many individuals boycott, how many buycott, and how many do both. Because it breaks down the population by country, it also shows the general trends across different regions and levels of economic development.

Figure 1 reveals the percentage of people buycotting, in most countries, to be substantially higher than the percentage of people who boycott. However, over two-thirds of people who boycott also buycott, and about half of those who buycott also report having boycotted. Looking at the mean levels of participation, the chart also shows that just under a third of

1. Response rates varied between 34 percent in Switzerland to 80 percent in Greece. Apart from Switzerland, all countries had response rates of over 40 percent (Jowell and the Central Co-ordinating Team 2004). Sample sizes are designed to exceed 1,500 in each case, but actual range in the 2002/2003 round – which is the dataset used for this study – varied between 1,207 (Italy) and 2,919 (Germany). All data was weighted for analysis – with design weights used to correct for design error in the probability of selection, and population size weights applied for the analysis of pooled data. Results from these data, broadly speaking, can be taken as representative of the populations of these countries, and of Europe as comprised by these 21 surveyed countries.
2. ESS question wording: *There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?*
 - *Boycotted certain products*
 - *Deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons*

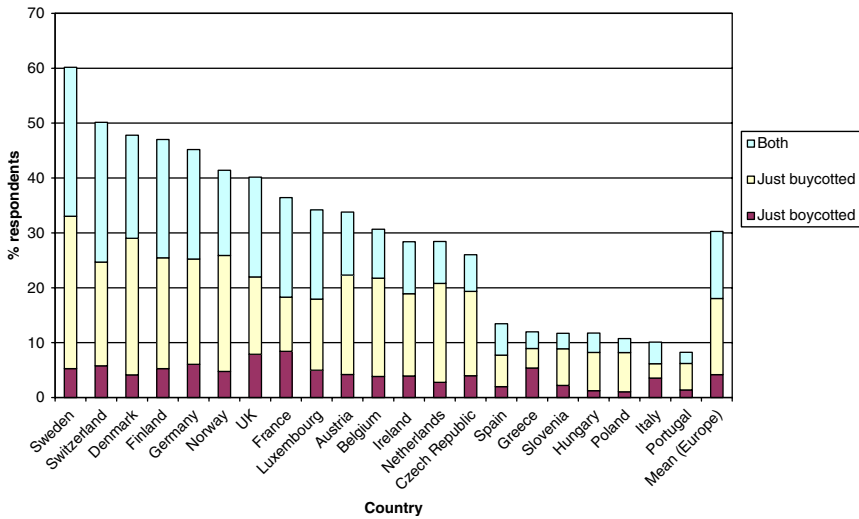


Figure 1. Percentages of citizens *just* boycotting, *just* buycotted, and those that do both.

Source: ESS Round 1, 2002–2003.

Note: Each bar comprises the sum total critical consumption for each country, whereas the individual coloured fractions break this down into boycotting alone, buycotted alone and doing both.

the total sample have engaged in some form of critical consumption; interesting in the context of the other modes of civic or political participation tracked in the survey – 26 percent of all respondents reporting having signed a petition in the last 12 months, 12 percent reporting having taken part in a demonstration and only 4 percent having worked in a political party or action group in the last 12 months (author’s analysis; for more generalised cross-national analysis of other participation forms using different data see Deth *et al.* 2007).

Comparing across countries, there is a striking disparity between the seven countries in which levels of critical consumption are lowest, and the remaining 14. The former are composed entirely of former Eastern bloc and ‘southern’ European countries, and both these regions are theorised as having markedly different welfare regimes from corporatist, liberal or Nordic systems in the relevant literature (Esping-Anderson 1996; Bonoli 1997). This suggests strongly that analysis of all 21 countries together makes little sense on its own; the variation in levels of participation suggests that there are significant differences in the social and cultural contexts for critical consumption from country to country.

In order to show this, boycotting and buycotting are analysed across all surveyed European countries, in addition to the analysis of critical consumption in Europe as a whole.

6. Modelling critical consumption in Europe

Multivariate analysis provides a means for identifying the associations that different demographic and socio-demographic variables might have with levels of critical consumption. It is hypothesised that these variables influence propensities to consume critically – albeit through a matrix of social processes and structures which interact in bringing about the necessary norms and cultural contexts for participation.

Table 2 summarises a binary logistic regression of 21 European countries surveyed; using age, age squared, education, gender and social class for independent variables. The dependent variable initially is whether or not respondents engage in critical consumption (through either or both of boycotting or buycotting). This model uses a standard EGP (Erikson-Goldthorpe) 12-category schema collapsed into three main classes: working, intermediate and service class, with separate categories for students, homemakers and people who have never worked a paid job (not covered by the occupational class coding schema).³

The association of education with critical consumption is consistent with the theoretical framing and hypotheses. The more years of full-time education enjoyed, the greater the likelihood of somebody engaging in critical consumption. Individuals with the mean level of around 11 years of full-time education are fully 1.6 times more likely to critically consume than individuals with just a basic level of education (8 years). Moreover, respondents with a university education (around 16 years of education altogether) versus people with this average 11 years of schooling are almost twice as likely to participate.

3. Class positions established using adaptations of syntax available through the ESS compilation of relevant studies (from Leiulfsrud *et al.* 2005). Exploratory analysis with income as a further independent variable showed an average of over 15 percent missing cases due to non-response. There was little or no explanatory value added to the models, and though statistically significant relationships were found between the odd higher income brackets and critical consumption in a few countries, this bracket of missing cases also had a statistically significant relationship with the dependent variable, meaning that missing value substitution distorts the analysis. This problem, in addition to the fact that three countries lack any data at all for income, means these models have been run without.

TABLE 2. Binary logistic regression: critical consumer vs. non-critical consumer – pooled data

	β	SE	Exp (β)
Age	0.07***	0.01	1.07
Age squared	-0.001***	0.00	1.00
Sex			
Male (ref)			
Female	0.31***	0.03	1.36
Education in years	0.12***	0.00	1.13
Social class/employment relation			
Working class (ref)			
Intermediate class	0.47***	0.04	1.60
Service class	0.79***	0.04	2.20
Students	0.82***	0.06	2.27
Full-time homemakers	-0.79***	0.10	0.45
Never had paid job	-0.56***	0.10	0.57
Constant	-4.46***	0.12	0.01
N	38,017		
Nagelkerke R ²	0.157		

Significance *** $P < 0.001$, ** $P < 0.05$, * $P < 0.10$. Source: ESS Round 1, 2002–2003. Countries: UK, Greece, The Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal and Slovenia.

Social class and employment status also show consistently strong relationships with the response variable. Compared to the base category of working class respondents, an individual from the middle classes is 1.6 times more likely to participate, while the service classes and full-time students appear well over twice as likely to engage. Individuals who have never worked a paid job, in contrast, are about half as likely as working class respondents to participate. This finding supports the hypothesis that critical consumption, like political participation, is more common for individuals in higher class positions. It implies that expressive consumption *per se* may be itself subject to influence by people's occupational identities, and affirms that the notion of consumption subsuming traditional modalities of social positioning is overly simplistic.

Interestingly, for Europe as a whole, women are nearly 1.4 times more likely to critically consume than men. Stolle *et al.*'s (2005) research of college students and findings from Goul Andersen and Tobiasen's (2004) study of Denmark show similar results, which defy conventional patterns of political participation. This study also tests whether full-time homemakers' domestic shopping responsibilities might increase propensities for participation. In fact, contrary to this study's hypothesis, but perhaps emphasising the importance of resources for participation, full-time

homemakers are considerably less likely than the working-class base category to critically consume.

Finally, the relationship age typically has with participation is also affirmed: people tend to be more civic-minded and politically active in mid- to older-age cohorts, and the pattern is replicated for critical consumption.

7. Critical consumption across Europe

It has frequently been shown that mass cultural attitudes and structural factors as well as individual-level characteristics impact on levels of political participation (Almond and Verba 1963; Kitschelt 1986). Precursors studying critical consumption have neglected, or have been unable to generate, representative cross-national comparisons. They have also tended to analyse boycotting and buycotting together as a dependent variable, as above. This study now moves to examine individual countries and the relationships between boycotting and buycotting in each with these same socio-economic factors. Accordingly, the dependent variable is split into two: firstly whether or not respondents have boycotted a product in the last 12 months; and secondly whether or not they have *buycotted* a product. Tables 3 and 4 show the results of fitting binary logistic regression models for the UK, Greece, The Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal and Slovenia; all 21 of the European countries covered in the survey. Sample sizes and R^2 s have also been included for reference.

The impact of increased education on both boycotting and buycotting has a relatively uniform positive impact and is statistically significant across all countries but Italy. Its impact varies between countries, with individuals between 1.1 and 1.3 times more likely to participate for every extra year of full-time education that they enjoy. Excluding Italy, more years of education produce a stronger effect on the probability of an individual buycotting than boycotting in all countries excepting Ireland, Norway and Slovenia.

Older ages are also associated with higher propensities to participate in the majority of countries surveyed. Exceptions to this rule with respect to buycotting are mainly Eastern Bloc and Southern European countries, with older ages in Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Slovenia and Finland making no difference to an individual's likelihood of participating. Boycotters are also more likely to be older people, with the exceptions of Eastern European Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia and, once again, Finland.

TABLE 3. Binary logistic regression: boycotters vs. non-boycotters – individual countries

Country	UK	Greece	N'Lands	Poland	Sweden	Austria	Belgium	Sw'land	Czech	Germany	Denmark
Age	0.12***	0.09**	0.05*	0.00	0.06**	0.05**	0.09**	0.11***	0.03	0.07***	0.09***
Age ²	− 0.001***	− 0.001**	− 0.001**	0.000	− 0.001***	− 0.001**	− 0.001**	− 0.001***	0.000	− 0.001***	− 0.001***
Sex											
Male (ref)											
Female	0.19*	0.52***	0.37**	− 0.19	0.37***	− 0.10	0.01	0.38***	− 0.16	0.21**	0.32**
Education in years	0.11***	0.10***	0.10***	0.22***	0.06**	0.12***	0.11***	0.08***	0.11**	0.09***	0.10***
Social class/Employment relation											
Working (ref)											
Intermediate	0.21	0.36*	1.20***	− 0.36	− 0.05	0.56**	0.10	0.37**	0.75**	0.68***	0.20
Service	0.36**	0.37	1.26***	0.50	0.22	0.72***	0.83***	0.52**	0.87**	0.72***	0.24
Students	0.81**	0.57	1.20**	− 0.51	0.30	1.25***	0.92*	0.57*	1.00**	1.19***	0.72**
Full-time homemakers	− 1.16	− 1.75***	0.01	− 17.63	− 19.53	0.14	− 0.02	0.51	− 18.81	0.27	− 19.54
Never had paid job	− 0.99	− 1.35	0.83	− 17.24	− 1.05	0.32	0.94*	0.40	0.39	− 0.20	− 19.11
Model N	2,023	2,496	2,318	2,068	1,979	2,116	1,725	1,975	1,257	2,826	1,462
Nagelkerke R ²	0.103	0.121	0.077	0.148	0.066	0.081	0.090	0.089	0.085	0.095	0.081

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Country	Spain	Finland	France	Hungary	Ireland	Italy	Lux'berg	Norway	Portugal	Slovenia
Age	0.08*	0.00	0.07**	0.07	0.10***	0.25***	0.07**	0.05**	0.18**	0.04
Age ²	-0.001**	0.00	-0.001**	-0.001	-0.001***	-0.003***	-0.001**	-0.001**	-0.002**	0.000
Sex										
Male (ref)										
Female	-0.05	0.38***	-0.10	0.11	-0.05	0.50**	-0.40**	0.23*	0.31	-0.30
Education in years	0.07**	0.11***	0.13***	0.17***	0.10***	0.04	0.09***	0.14***	0.10**	0.11**
Social class/Employment relation										
Working (ref)										
Intermediate	0.43	0.15	0.25	-0.08	0.55**	0.47	0.14	0.07	0.55	-0.37
Service	0.78**	0.44**	0.78***	-0.33	0.73**	1.11**	0.20	0.25	0.31	0.11
Students	1.13***	0.20	1.08***	0.06	0.91**	1.33**	0.62*	0.44	1.72**	0.12
Full-time homemakers	-0.30	0.45	-1.78*	-17.77	-0.91	-0.03	-1.11	0.14	-17.13	-17.86
Never had paid job	-18.18	0.78	-0.08	-17.39	-18.14	-0.01	0.97**	0.23	-16.77	-0.90
Model N	1,527	1,984	1,462	1,642	1,900	1,147	1,386	1,814	1,480	1,470
Nagelkerke R ²	0.127	0.112	0.163	0.070	0.099	0.115	0.074	0.092	0.098	0.051

Significance *** $P < 0.001$, ** $P < 0.05$, * $P < 0.10$. Unstandardised logistic regression coefficients.

Source: ESS Round 1, 2002/2003.

TABLE 4. Binary logistic regression: boycotters vs. non-boycotters – individual countries

Country	UK	Greece	N'Lands	Poland	Sweden	Austria	Belgium	Sw'land	Czech R	Germany	Denmark
Age	0.11***	0.06	0.09***	0.06*	0.04**	0.05**	0.05**	0.11***	0.06*	0.09***	0.08***
Age ²	−0.001***	−0.001**	−0.001***	−0.001*	−0.001***	−0.001**	−0.001**	−0.001***	−0.001**	−0.001***	−0.001***
<i>Sex</i>											
Male (ref)											
Female	0.47***	0.54**	0.32**	0.40**	0.72***	0.29**	0.38**	0.41***	0.50***	0.58***	0.44***
<i>Education in years</i>	0.14***	0.14***	0.14***	0.24***	0.08***	0.16***	0.15***	0.10***	0.13***	0.12***	0.14***
<i>Social class/Employment relation</i>											
Working (ref)											
Intermediate	0.34**	0.63**	0.53**	0.67**	0.15	0.50**	0.42**	0.52***	0.44**	0.16	0.37**
Service	0.81***	0.57*	0.72***	0.85**	0.67***	0.52**	0.81***	0.96***	0.37	0.43***	0.62***
Students	0.73**	0.49	0.94**	0.92**	0.29	1.12***	0.92***	0.59**	0.58	0.88***	0.91***
Full-time homemakers	−0.86	−1.04**	0.19	−0.60	−20.23	0.38	0.61	0.56	−1.03	0.13	−20.36
Never had paid job	−2.21	−17.76	−0.50	−0.78	−0.43	−1.39	0.60*	1.16**	−0.25	−0.53	−1.31
Model N	2,027	2,510	2,320	2,066	1,981	2,112	1,726	1,975	1,250	2,824	1,463
Nagelkerke R ²	0.180	0.166	0.131	0.196	0.155	0.125	0.150	0.151	0.133	0.122	0.169

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Country	Spain	Finland	France	Hungary	Ireland	Italy	Lux'berg	Norway	Portugal	Slovenia
Age	0.11**	0.00	0.06**	-0.01	0.08***	0.15**	0.09***	0.05**	0.05	0.03
Age ²	-0.001***	0.000	-0.001**	0.000	-0.001***	-0.002**	-0.001**	-0.010**	-0.001	-0.001
Sex										
Male (ref)										
Female	-0.03	0.72***	0.18	0.27	0.07	0.41	0.02	0.45***	0.33	0.19
Education in years	0.09***	0.13***	0.10***	0.17***	0.09***	0.06**	0.12***	0.11***	0.12***	0.10**
Social class/Employment relation										
Working (ref)										
Intermediate	0.61**	0.46***	0.55**	0.01	0.67***	0.42	0.68***	0.54**	0.58	0.49*
Service	0.60*	0.54***	1.04***	0.29	1.05***	0.67	0.65**	0.86***	1.16**	0.66**
Students	0.46	0.25	0.65**	0.60*	0.78**	0.06	0.85**	0.84***	1.38**	0.55
Full-time homemakers	-0.09	0.51	-0.35	-1.00	-0.51	-18.41	-0.41	-0.40	-1.15	0.25
Never had paid job	0.16	-0.50	-0.47	-18.18	-0.76	-1.07	0.18	1.68**	-0.61	-0.21
Model N	1,529	1,985	1,461	1,641	1,896	1,146	1,382	1,812	1,479	1,466
Nagelkerke R ²	0.146	0.186	0.140	0.180	0.133	0.118	0.138	0.147	0.156	0.084

Significance *** $P < 0.001$, ** $P < 0.05$, * $P < 0.10$. Unstandardised logistic regression coefficients.

Source: ESS Round 1, 2002/2003.

These models show considerable variation between boycotters and buycotters with respect to the effects of social class. Only boycotters in six countries, predominately from Central Europe: Austria, The Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany, with the addition of Ireland and the Czech Republic, have consistent relationships with the membership of a higher social class. In stark contrast, 15 out of 21 countries show positive impacts of higher class positions on *buycotting*, with Sweden, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Portugal the only exceptions. Students in a majority of countries are also more likely to participate in both boycotting and buycotting, while being a full-time home-maker and never having worked seem to have negligible impact, though the low numbers of these individuals in each sample may help explain these results.

While a number of studies have shown women's engagement with consumer politics to exceed that of men's, the differences between the impact shown by Tables 3 and 4 calls for closer qualitative analysis of the reasons behind their levels of engagement. Only in around half of the countries are women more likely than men to be boycotters – including all the Scandinavian countries and The Netherlands, UK, Switzerland, Germany and Italy, amongst others, that have appeared in prior research on consumer politics and influenced theory accordingly (Micheletti 2003; Stolle *et al.* 2005). Buycotting, meanwhile, is associated with being female in 13 out of 21 countries, with five of the eight exceptions being Southern or Eastern European.

Overall, the greater explanatory value of the model for buycotting is clear. R^2 s for buycotting explain a higher proportion of the variance in every country but France and Greece. The model explained, for the average country, 10 percent of the variation in boycotting and 15 percent of the variation for buycotting.

8. Discussion

These findings imply that the typical favouring of Northern and Western European countries in analysis of consumption introduces biases which impact on general theories about consumer politics and participation. While they reinforce some findings about the impact of class, gender, education and older ages, these data show more cross-national differences than one might expect. They also support the case for separate analysis of boycotting and buycotting as participatory socio-political acts.

Resources such as education and higher class positions affect buycotting behaviour to a greater extent than they do boycotting. Their greater explanatory power for buycotting behaviour across nearly all countries suggests that social structural and organisational contexts such as

movements and the media are proportionally more important for boycotting. As theorised above, the way in which information is provisioned differently for buycotting may make such an act more individualistic in nature, with boycotting behaviour being affected more by conscience adherence to social movement goals (Harrison 2005).

Table 2 showed a consistency in the relationship between higher class positions and propensities to critically consume, but Tables 3 and 4 showed that the persistence of this pattern was only partial. Class seems to have much less impact on boycotting than it does on buycotting, in terms of the numbers of countries showing this positive relationship. Higher economic costs of ethical shopping (buycotting) could help to explain these differences. Class is far from irrelevant to critical consumption, but seems bound up in the formation and expression of politicised consumer identities. The high participation by students, whose identities are theorised as more fluid and consumption-oriented, supports this idea, despite their usually low participation in surveyed political acts.

Following prior studies into critical consumption, education was shown to be the key variable in predicting participation, but the disparities between Tables 3 and 4 suggests considerably different social processes are taking place for boycotting and buycotting. Education's impact is greater for buycotting, despite the fact that information guiding such decisions is often more straightforward where product labelling and marketing are used by companies to specify political-ethical agendas. It may be that both boycotting and buycotting involve a degree of distrust over production and consumption processes, and that in order to boycott one needs to overcome this distrust to arbitrate over what products *are* compatible with one's ethical orientation. Higher levels of education might render access to this information and its comprehension easier, and it may be that this extra education is even more important for making the complicated choices that involve positive choices, rather than abstention, during consumption (Kjaernes *et al.* 2007: 6–7). Micheletti's concept of 'individualistic collective action' may be applied better, therefore, to specifically buycotting rather than critical consumption per se and it is possible, further, that self-identity processes may be mobilised to a greater degree due to this individualisation (Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Micheletti 2003).

Previous work has found women's role in critical consumption to indicate a level of egalitarianism that other forms of participation traditionally lack (Micheletti 2003). Pre-dating full suffrage in many contexts, boycotts and consumer action groups were used disproportionately by women; indeed, boycotts have been used by minorities to assert their rights over a series of issues historically (Cohen 1998; Strasser *et al.* 1998; Friedman 1999). This study controls for the possibility of

individuals being full-time home-makers, however, and the manifold lack of any positive impact shows this cannot account for these differences. Women's own repertoires of contention, perhaps in part through their historical lack of access to other spheres of protest and political action, may generate the cultural contexts necessary for understanding everyday social life and consumption as political (Strasser *et al.* 1998). Contemporary cultural differences in the association between shopping and self-identity for men and women could also play a central role in rendering certain norms more powerful cultural arguments for women than men (Falk and Campbell 1997: Chapter 7). Such reasoning may explain higher propensities for women in most countries to engage in boycotting, though it is the exception rather than the rule for boycotters of most countries.

The curvilinear relationship age is found to have with other participation forms was replicated in this study, with the exceptions of some Southern and Eastern European countries, where there was no statistically significant effect. Southern and Eastern European countries were also found to have markedly lower levels of critical consumption to the other countries in the survey. While grouping these countries according to region and welfare state makes sense, further studies would have to take account of political history and the sociology of consumption in different countries, among other considerations. Other studies, for example, have found simple measures such as age of democracy and GNP to impact positively on propensities to politically participate. With less experience or infrastructure of civic processes in former dictatorships and USSR countries, it is possible that the older people in these European countries do not enjoy the kind of experience that tends to offer more skills and opportunities to participate than younger people.

9. Conclusion

Class position, education and demographic characteristics stratify contemporary experiences of consumer culture, and the distribution of individuals in a society who are likely to participate in consumption politics. The persistence of these variables, however, is only partial. Boycotting and boycotting as social processes overlap and exceed the limits of the conventional political sphere, evidenced by the differences in explanatory power of the models across nearly all countries. Their basis in everyday consumerism also means these findings implicate questions of identity, the organisation and structures of protest groups, and cultural context.

The impacts of class, education and older ages on propensities to boycott replicate the typical model of political participation, perhaps

surprising in the light of studies emphasising experiences in 'consumer societies'. The disproportional presence of women buycotters in many countries, however, flags up a distinctive gendering of consumer behaviour even in its political form. These expressions of politicised consumer identity, if buycotting can be read as such, are highly stratified by resources, reaffirming the relevance of social status indicators for consumption and participation alike. The infiltration of politics into new spheres of social life and the everyday that critical consumption represents should not, therefore, entail a wholesale rejection of traditional systems of social classification.

These results also demonstrated some key differences between boycotting and buycotting, additional to the differences with political participation forms noted in other studies (Norris 2002; Pattie *et al.* 2004; Micheletti *et al.* 2004; Teorell *et al.* 2007). These data reinforce previous research showing greater involvement by women than men, but show that this trend is confined to certain countries, and applies much less to boycotting. Habitual practices and traditional roles of women in family provisioning might render buycotting, to a greater extent than boycotting, more politically accessible for women than for men. Qualitative research would be necessary to disentangle the various factors and circumstances that must coincide to bring about more participation by women than men, but the most conservative suggestion, that it is linked to women's traditional role as homemakers, is rebutted by these data.

It is also likely that high-profile boycotting and buycotting campaigns account for a large proportion of respondents who have participated in each case. Certain historical and political relationships between nations and differing social and ethical agendas mean that more of the general public would have mobilised in some countries than in others in response to the French nuclear testing in Muraroa during the early 1990s, for example. Equally, buycotting behaviour can also be attributed to nationalistic sentiment during times where there is an appropriate agenda to do so brought about by issues such as genetic modification, or the BSE epidemic; which has at different times provoked both the boycotting and buycotting of British beef (Kjaernes *et al.* 2007). This kind of factor, alongside practical issues such as the quality of food labelling and existence of recognised eco-labels, create prosaic but equally important reasons for why critical consumption might be higher for some parts of a population than others. Again, the greater explanatory power of the models for buycotting suggest that these kinds of contexts – temporary, issue-based and permanent alike – are more important comparatively for boycotting, since individual-level characteristics explain less of the variance for this form of participation for (practically) all countries surveyed.

Taken together, this study's results suggest that demographics and social status play a part in explaining consumer politics, but more so for boycotting than boycotting. An array of social and cultural factors also facilitate and inhibit critical consumption through and alongside individuals' own demographic and socio-demographic characteristics, possibly even more so for boycotting than boycotting. Specific histories of consumer politics and geo-political alliances and tensions create a web of further influences. In-depth cross-national studies of boycotting and boycotting assessed alongside these findings would shed further light on such matters, as indeed could expanded survey evidence gathered in the future.

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