

Gen Zers: slacktivists or boycotters? An investigation of how teenagers engage in boycotting behaviors online and offline.

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Gen Zers: slacktivists or boycotters? An investigation of how teenagers engage in boycotting behaviors online and offline.

Abstract:

Gen Zers increasingly pay attention to social and environmental issues, taking a stand towards specific causes. However, costless acts of supports, such as joining a Facebook, page prevail on actual behaviors like boycotting as expressions of support for a social cause. The literature does not converge on the role of the social and psychological characteristics that stimulates teenagers toward boycotting. To fill this gap, we offer an empirical investigation of the individual psychological process, in which self-consistency plays a crucial role, leading Gen Zers to boycott a brand, depending on the social contexts, online vs. offline, that enact different motivational resources consistent to their individual well-being. Results show that Gen Zers are more likely to boycott in the online, willing to communicate their identity “here and now”. However, when experiencing psychological wellbeing, they are more likely to find congruence between their actual self and responsible behaviors in the offline context.

Keywords: boycott, wellbeing, Gen Z

Track: Social Responsibility & Ethics

1. Introduction

Contemporary teenagers are the world's digital natives and possess specific characteristics that make them part of a unique generation. The common perception is that they are increasingly paying attention to social and environmental issues, taking a stand towards specific causes, being characterized by their willingness to get involved with social and political initiatives. Gen Z represents a large share of the world population (Mondres, 2019), thus understanding its characteristics is critical to business success (Pichler, Kohli & Granitz, 2021). This is especially true in the age of "political consumerism", in which consumers may decide to boycott (or buycott) certain products or brands for political and ethical reasons (Stolle, Hooge and Micheletti, 2005). Although younger generations are reluctant to formal political participations, they are more interested in expressing their ideals through political consumerism (Kyroglou & Henn, 2017). In this sense, boycotting behaviors are expressions of support for a social cause, so that consumers punish brands for their negative and unethical behavior (Neilson, 2010). However, digital environments have opened new, less effortful, avenues to show support to a social cause. In particular, the dramatic increase in social media presence among social organizations (Furlow, 2011) has made it increasingly easy for consumers to engage in small, costless acts of support such as liking or joining a Facebook page (Kristofferson, White & Peloza, 2013). Engaging in these costless acts of support has become prevalent among consumers, so that academic literature has labelled this behavior as slacktivism, defined as a willingness to perform a costless act of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to spend significant effort to enact meaningful change (Davis, 2011).

Liking a post on a social or participating to an online debate does not necessarily translates into action (Morozov, 2009). In fact, the conditions for which Gen Zs might want to engage in actual behaviors are largely dependent on the context in which the actions are shaped (Kristofferson et al., 2014) as well as on individuals' intrinsic reasons (Stolle, Hooge and Micheletti, 2005). Nevertheless, the literature does converge on the role of the social and psychological characteristics that stimulates teenagers toward boycotting.

To fill this gap, we offer an empirical investigation of the individual psychological process, in which self-consistency plays a crucial role (Kristofferson, White and Peloza, 2014; Hoffmann and Müller, 2009), leading Gen Zs to boycott a brand, depending on the social contexts, online vs. offline, that enact different motivational resources consistent to their individual well-being (Kuanr, Pradhan, Lyngdoh and Lee, 2021).

In particular, in Study 1, we hypothesize a causal path whereby the effect of online vs offline context on boycotting intention is mediated by Individual Self Concept, Actual(Ideal) Self Congruence and Self Expression. In Study 2 we advance the role of subjective well-being as antecedent of the intention to boycott, positing that Gen Zs with higher levels of well-being are more likely to avoid brands that have transgressed moral or ethical norms (Friedman, 1999; Makarem & Jae, 2016; Kuanr, Pradhan, Lyngdoh and Lee, 2021) in a bid to find congruence between their Self and their behaviors. Therefore, in Study 2 we explore the same path by analyzing the impact of wellbeing, within the online and offline context, on boycotting intention. The Actual(Ideal) Self congruence allows us to analyze not only how Gen Z behave in an actual situation but also how they imagine to behave in an ideal situation.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Impression management and boycott intention

The social context in which individuals operate play a fundamental role in shaping behaviors due to the activation of impression management motives (Ashworth et al., 2005). Impression management refers to the individuals' tendency to present themselves in a positive light to others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). These concerns are usually activated in publicly observable settings (White & Pelozo, 2009) and may motivate individuals to strategically alter their behaviors to present themselves more positively (White & Dahl, 2007). Therefore, when behaviors are private and not observable, individuals are more focused on their self and their behaviors are less socially influenced. This is particularly relevant in the case of a positively viewed prosocial cause (Kristofferson, White and Pelozo, 2014), such as the boycotting behavior towards an unethical situation

In our context, we observe the psychological paths leading to boycotting behaviors in both the online and offline contexts, where social observability is differently salient. In particular, we categorize the online context as high in social observability while the opposite is true for the offline context. Therefore, we posit that, when in online contexts, teenagers feel more motivated to present themselves in a positive light to others as impression management tactics are activated. This means that, when they go online, they are more willing to embrace boycotting behaviors in order to show support for a cause or stand against a company's unethical behavior.

2.2 Self-consistency and boycott intention

Self-consistency theory suggests that to maintain cognitive consistency between attitudes and behaviors, individuals are motivated to engage in behaviors consistently with their views (Korman, 1970; Suh, 2002). The motivation for maintaining consistency influenced their attitudes and also accounted for their behavioral change. Literature suggests that consistency is a prerequisite condition of psychological well-being, which entails specific and concrete psychological experiences (Suh, 2002). Indeed, individuals' behavioral responses are strongly affected by the desire to maintain a consistent cognition toward their self-concept, to bring stability in people's lives, and to help in maintaining the control over perceptions of the self (Swann et al., 1992; Swann et al., 2012).

A few studies, exploring the role of emotions in consumer boycott behaviors, show that boycotts are a way for consumers to emotionally express themselves and to show the congruence between their self and their behavior (Hoffmann and Müller, 2009).

In this context, consumer boycotts are strongly linked to consumer well-being, which is defined as the cognitive and affective evaluation of one's life wherein one has more positive than negative feelings (Diener, 1999). Subjective well-being is a fundamental resource for pursuing meaningful goals as it can provide valuable energy (Diener, 1999), builds psychological and physical resources (Fredrickson, 2013) and constitutes an important motivational resource (Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). Higher levels of consumer well-being are associated with higher levels of satisfaction and life happiness of consumers, and welfare of the society (Sirgy, Lee, and Rahtz 2007). A boycott may occur when boycotters feel that their well-being or a third party's well-being is threatened by egregious behavior (Friedman 1999). Relatedly, higher levels of subjective well-being give individuals the affective and cognitive resources to engage in boycotting behaviors (Kuanr et al., 2021). Compared to Millennials, Gen Zers report higher rates of depression and anxiety (Stolzemberg et al., 2019), higher degree of loneliness (Twenge et al., 2019) and double rates of attempted suicides among students (Duffy et al., 2019). It is evident how this generation experiences lower levels of wellbeing compared to others. Therefore, it becomes relevant to analyze how Gen Zs' wellbeing influence boycotting behavior in both online and offline context.

3. Methodology

We gathered 426 questionnaires (48.1% female; 1.9% prefer not to say), randomly assigned to four scenarios (211 online, 215 offline). In the online context, we provide two scenarios related to online responsible behavior on social media and behaviors avoiding body shaming, whereas in the offline context the scenarios include separate collection behavior and

responsible buying behavior. After reading the randomly assigned scenario, respondents were asked to answer questions about the following variables:

- *individual self-concept* (Xie et al., 2015; 5 items, $\alpha=.88$): it involves interpersonal comparisons where one's sense of uniqueness and self-worth are derived from perceived similarities with and differences from other individuals. People with an individual self-concept will experience less other-focused emotions.
- *actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence* (Malär et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2019; 4 items, $\alpha=.95$). The actual self (i.e., the basis for actual self-congruence) describes how one perceives him/herself in the "here and now", while the ideal self describes the person whom one would like to be. The degree of matching between an individual's actual (ideal) concept and another's actual (ideal) concept is called actual (ideal) self-congruence (Huber et al., 2018).
- *Self-expression* (6 items, $\alpha=.93$): behaviors, specifically consumption, can also be used to self-signal information (Quattrone & Tversky, 1984). In the case of responsible behaviour, when people engage in observable prosocial behavior, they are seen positively by others and therefore enhance their reputation (Sexton & Sexton, 2014).
- *psychological well-being* (Ryff, 1989; 3 items, $\alpha=.85$) includes the assessment of how people evaluate their lives over longer periods of time.
- *boycotting intention* (adapted from White et al. 2011): (2 items: "I will ask my usual supermarket not to keep products that do not allow [responsible behavior]", "I will contact the manufacturer of these products to ask to make them [responsible behavior]"; $\alpha=.86$, inter-item correlation .76).

An exploratory factor analysis correctly displays 5 factors with 73.4% of variance explained (factor loadings: min=.514, max=.864). A confirmatory factor analysis displays an excellent fit ($\chi^2=548.62$ (df=196); NFI =.97, NNFI,CFI,IFI=.98; RMSEA=.064 ($p(\text{RMSEA}<.05)>.05$); SRMR=.057; GFI=.90; AGFI=.87).

Study 1: Given the duality between *Actual* and *Ideal Self Congruence*, we conducted two separate mediation analyses testing the different causal paths (Model 6; see Hayes 2018) from online vs. offline on the *Intention To Boycott* through *Individual Self-Concept*, *Ideal* (or *Actual*) *Self-Congruence* and the *Self-Expression*. The overall *Ideal model* resulted in a direct effect of online/offline on the Intention to boycott ($\beta=2.37^{***}$, $SE=.14$) as expected. The total

effect is significant (TE: .24, CI: .08 - .42) while there is no indirect effect (IE: -.001, CI: -.001 - .01). The *Actual model* provides a different picture. The direct effect of online/offline on the Intention to boycott ($\beta=2.33^{***}$, SE=.14) is significant as expected, as well as the total effect (TE: .28, CI: .11; -.46) and the indirect effect (IE: .01, CI: .002; .03). Figure 1 reports the full estimates graphically. Results indicate that teenagers are more likely to have a boycotting behavior in the online context in an actual situation without projecting their behavior in the future. They want to develop and to communicate their identity “here and now” rather than imagine their behavior in the future.

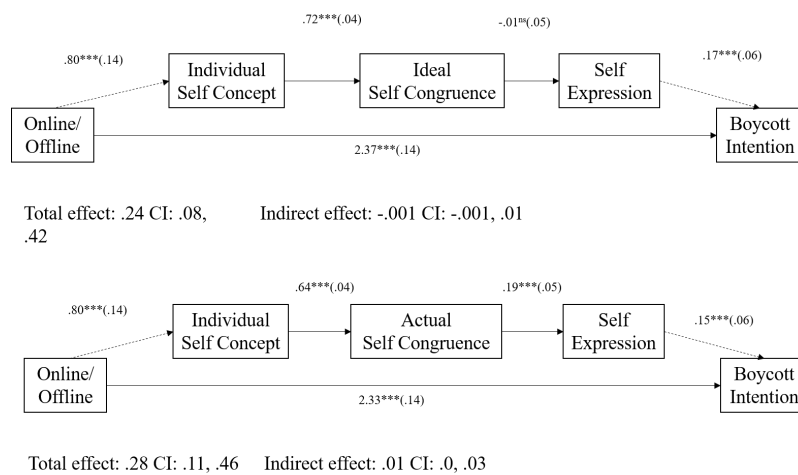


Figure 1: The *Ideal* and *Actual* mediation models of *Intention to Boycott*.

Study 2: To further investigate the process, we analyzed the effect of the *Psychological Wellbeing* on the mediation path within the two experimental groups (online vs. offline). Results are reported graphically in Figure 2 for *Ideal* model path and in Figure 3 for the *Actual* model path. The results obtained within the group of participants that received the online stimuli displayed only the total effect for the *Ideal* model (TE: .12, CI: .03 - .22; IE: .0 CI: -.003, .003) and for the *Actual* model displayed no effects (TE: .13, CI: .04 - .23; IE: .0, CI: -.003 - .002). Conversely, the results obtained within the group of participants that received the offline stimuli displayed no effect for the *Ideal* model (TE: .05, CI: -.02 - .12; IE: .004, CI: -.006 - .02) and mediation effects for the *Actual* model (TE: .05, CI: -.01 - .12, IE: .02, CI: .005 - .04). These results provide further evidence about how Gen Zers prefer to think about themselves, and act according to their self-concept, in actual situations. Moreover, it is interesting to note how psychological wellbeing stimulates teenagers’ evaluations of their self-concept in relation to responsible behaviors, both online and offline.

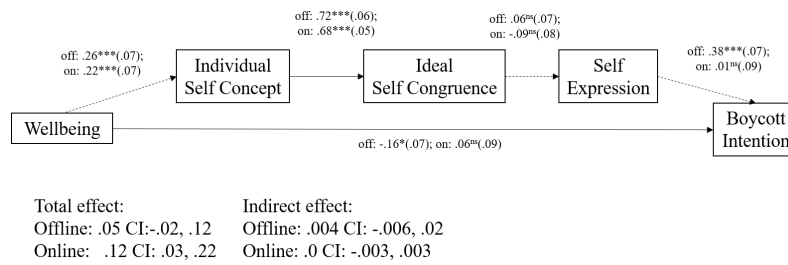


Figure 2: The *Ideal* mediation model of *Intention to Boycott* within experimental groups

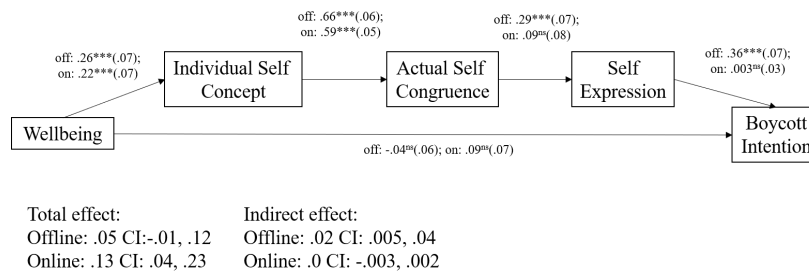


Figure 3: The *Actual* mediation model of *Intention to Boycott* within experimental groups

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study helps in analyzing the psychological path that lead Gen Zers to boycotting behavior in the online and offline context. We propose and found that while in highly social observable settings such as the online context the resolution of impression-management concerns becomes central, in low social observable settings, such as the offline context, the congruence between the individual self and the boycotting behavior becomes paramount.

In particular, our results show that Gen Zers are more likely to boycott in the online context in line with impression management theory (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). However, this happens in actual situations rather than in ideal ones, recognizing the willingness to develop and to communicate their identity “here and now” rather than projecting their behavior in the future. This is not surprising as Gen Zers grew up in a highly technological world, accelerating the changes in values from the preceding generation (i.e. Millennials) (Parker et al., 2019). Moreover, this access to technology has made Gen Zers more individualistic (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018) compared to Millennials. While Millennials feel more comfortable in engaging in groups boycotting behaviors, mostly for political reasons, Gen Zers value more their Individual Self Concept and Self-Congruence with responsible behaviors. Generation Z has experienced much disruption and social changes in very short time, from the political, social and technological point of view (Pichler, Kohli & Granitz,

2021). This highly dynamic world has probably made Gen Zers more focused on the actual moment they are living rather than imagining an ideal version of themselves living in an ideal world.

In Study 2, we found that wellbeing is a significant predictor of boycotting behaviors for the Actual model path. However, Study 2 gives us another interesting picture regarding the online/offline context. Indeed, psychological wellbeing was found to be a significant predictor of boycotting behavior in the offline context. This means that, when experiencing psychological wellbeing, Gen Zers are more likely to find congruence between their actual Self and responsible behaviors in the offline context, being more willing to express themselves and boycott irresponsible brands. This finding suggest that for Gen Zers who experience high levels of wellbeing, slackactivism is less likely to emerge. These preliminary findings shed light on the unexpressed potential of Gen Zers, for whom psychological wellbeing might be a way to escape from the online world – which has increased their anxiety and depression (Twenge, 2017) – and engage in socially responsible behaviors.

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