

How and why a geopolitical conflict motivates political consumption

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Abstract

Political consumerism can be defined as consumer choice of producers and products based on political or ethical considerations, or both (Micheletti & Stolle, 2004). Because of political reasons and the motivation to demonstrate these, consumers may either deliberately avoid the consumption of certain products (boycott) or seek consumption (buycott) (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). For example, some people may limit their energy use, use public transportation, or opt for a vegetarian diet (de Moor, 2017). With the outbreak of the Ukraine war, many people in Germany were willing to restrict their energy consumption (e.g., Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt, 2022). This can also be seen as politically motivated consumption and a boycott of Russian gas. The main goal of this research is to clarify what motivates consumers to engage in politically and/or ethically motivated consumption. We aim to understand whether boycott or buycott motives elicit stronger product preferences. Research on morality often focuses on the negative side of morality (punishment), whereas the positive side (praise) is understudied (Bartels et al., 2015). Thus, consumers can either buycott an ethically correct product, driven by moral praise or boycott a morally questionable product, avoiding punishment. We aim to identify, which of both moral motives (achieving praise or avoiding punishment) is stronger in motivating political consumption. In addition, what consumption pattern emerges when both motives are presented jointly? This knowledge will add to the existing knowledge on political consumerism as well as shed light on how approaching ethical motivations can promote desirable consumer choices. In two studies, we examined whether ethical motives play a role in energy-saving behavior intentions. Participants (US and DE samples) indicated their intention to engage in energy-saving and investment behavior intentions within the next 12 months. We found a significant positive main effect of the ethical motive importance on intentions to engage in energy-saving and investment behavior. The ethical motive was significantly higher in Germany compared to the US, leading to the assumption that proximity to the geopolitical conflict increased “moral” motives. In a follow-up study, we established the effectiveness of presenting a negatively framed ethical decision signpost to promote efficient gas option choices. Decision signposts can activate and direct consumers toward a decision that aligns with their personal goals that best achieves the activated objective (Ungemach et al., 2018). Using a discrete choice experiment, we found that a negative “moral” signpost (disclosing Russia as a country of origin) increased choice of the efficient gas option. In addition, Psycho-social affect - the concern about the social signal of opting for Russian products to others – moderated the effectiveness of the signpost. In this study, we investigated whether the presence (vs. absence) of a positive and/or negative ethical signpost increases preference for the healthier option. Specifically, a country-of-origin

attribute acted as a positive (Ukraine), negative (Russia), or neutral (Hungary) signpost. When neither positive nor negative signposts were present, we displayed a region (Eastern Europe) instead of the specific countries. For our online experiment, we recruited US participants (N=602) through Prolific who received a flat fee for their participation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (positive signpost: present vs. absent) x 2 (negative signpost: present vs. absent) x 8 (choice set) mixed design, where the type of signpost varied between subjects and the eight choice problems within subjects. For each choice set, participants had to indicate their preference for the healthier option. The options differed with regard to their healthiness (oleic acid content in %), price (\$/fl oz) and origin (region vs. specific country). The healthier option was always the non-Russian option and our indicator of politically motivated consumption. We also measured Moral Identity, Psychosocial Affect (a measure capturing the concern of the signal of one's consumption on others) and demographics (age and gender). In a generalized linear mixed-effects model, we found a significant main effect of the negative ethical signpost on preferences for the healthier option ($p < 0.001$, $z = 4.98$) but not for the positive signpost ($p = 0.62$, $z = -0.49$). The interaction between both signposts was not significant ($p = 0.15$, $z = 1.46$). Psycho-social affect significantly moderated the relationship between the negative signpost and preferences ($p < 0.001$, $z = 7.46$). Thus, the effect of the negative signpost increased for consumers who were more concerned with the expected impressions their consumption will have on others. Moral Identity did not moderate the relationship between the negative signpost and preferences ($p = 0.54$, $z = -0.59$). The robustness of the results was confirmed by regression analyses using choice proportions. We conclude that a negative ethical signpost motivated consumers to boycott a product, whereas a positive ethical signpost did not motivate consumers to boycott. In addition, jointly presenting a negative and positive signpost does not amplify the effect of the negative signpost. In this experiment, we have replicated our previous results on the effectiveness of presenting an ethical decision signpost to promote desirable (sustainable and healthy) consumer choices. We also identified the amplifying effect of Psycho-social Affect, highlighting the importance of consumer's concerns about the social signal of opting for ethically questionable products in motivating boycott behavior. In addition, we found that a negative ethical signpost motivates boycott behavior while a positive signpost does not motivate boycott behavior. Thus, our results add to existing knowledge about political motivations in consumer decisions. Specifically, we suggest that consumers react more strongly to negative signposts, avoiding possibly unfavorable moral judgments of others. However, positive signposts do not elicit a symmetrical motivation to boycott, achieving favorable moral judgments of others. To our knowledge, we are the first to examine ethical signposts in political consumerism, how they guide consumer decisions and under which conditions the signpost effect promotes desirable consumer choices.

Subject Areas: *Consumer Behaviour, Decision-Making*

Track: Social Responsibility & Ethics