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ABSTRACT

Social media use enables information consumption and exchange as well as group ties that can facilitate participation in boycott and *buycott* campaigns. Social media also provide low-threshold activities that serve as a stepping stone towards more intense forms of cause-oriented participation. This paper uses original survey data (n = 1,539) collected in 2019. Reading political information, posting political information on social media, and following social and leisure groups increase the likelihood of boycotting and *buycotting*. Changing profile pictures doubles the odds of participating in political consumerism. Overall, citizens use symbolic low-effort activities on social media to mobilize their peers to participate in political consumerism but, in the end, they also mobilize themselves toward more intense forms of participation.

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Social media; social networks; political consumerism; activism

Introduction

Boycotting and *buycotting* are distinctive forms of civic participation because these activities are a type of lifestyle politics in which people use their individual consumer choices to express their support for political causes, such as environmental protection, fair trade, or ethical treatment of humans and animals (Bennett, 1998; Hooghe & Goubin, 2020). While these activities are politically motivated, governments may not be the direct target of these organized campaigns. Instead, the target may be companies, such as Amazon or Nestlé (Bostrom, 2019), with consumers trying to influence business practices and express their political values. More contemporary boycotts are directed towards countries, as represented by #BoycottIsrael and the series of boycotts aimed at China related to human rights and the COVID-19 pandemic. In these cases, political consumerism is another tool in people's repertoire to influence global political processes. People can use their alternative consumption to pressure governments to change laws; governments may also respond by supporting public campaigns to raise awareness and facilitate product labeling and certification (de Moor & Balsiger, 2019).

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Social media use supports these new forms of civic participation (Boulianne, 2015). As mentioned, political consumerism is a distinct form of civic participation. I focus on two activities: avoiding the purchase of products or services because of the company's social and political views (boycotting) and intentionally purchasing products or services because of the company's social and political views (*buycotting*). The bulk of the research focuses on the role of online information in political consumerism, leaving unanswered questions about the role of social networks and groups on social media. This paper addresses these gaps using original survey data from Canada (n = 1,539) to examine the role of social media use in political consumerism. I find that various types of social media uses increase the likelihood of participating in political consumerism, but changing one's profile picture in support of a cause doubles the odds of participation in political consumerism, illustrating how low-effort activities can lead to participation in more intense civic and political activities.

Social media information

People can learn about boycott or *buycott* campaigns online by reading online news sources, seeing others post about the campaigns, or Googling ethical consumption practices. Several studies examine the effects of online news on political consumerism, but the effect sizes are small (less than .07 on a 0–1 standardized scale) and many coefficients do not reach statistical significance (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Copeland & Feezell, 2017; Kelm & Dohle, 2018). Using data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP 2004), Zhang (2015) finds that people who read news online are more likely to engage in boycotts, but the effect is small. Even within the United States, studies do not find strong and consistent effects (cf., Earl et al., 2017; Shah et al., 2007).

Another line of research suggests that information should be distinguished by how it arrives to citizens, i.e., *active versus passive* forms of information acquisition. This distinction has taken shape around the idea of 'news finds me' (NFM), where information acquisition is a passive activity in that people expect important information to reach them via social media (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). This passive practice compromises the surveillance function of citizenship, which requires continued engagement with media to follow public affairs and become informed (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). This type of information acquisition may have dire effects on political knowledge (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

'News finds me' is linked to social media use, as is incidental or accidental exposure (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). Citizens can be accidentally exposed to civic and political content through their friends and family. This type of information acquisition is believed to help expose political content to those who are not interested in politics but could be enticed to engage when presented with this new information through their social networks. My first research hypothesis is as follows:

> H1: reading political information on social media positively relates to political consumerism.

Political expression on social media

Gotlieb and Cheema (2017) examine information uses of digital media and find stronger effects on political consumerism when the measure is creating and posting political

content compared to searching for and reading political information. Existing research supports these findings, as other studies note the use of digital media for political expression increases participation in political consumerism (Gotlieb et al., 2015; Shah et al., 2009). Endres and Panagopoulos (2017) examine social media use for politics, including reading, commenting, posting, and forwarding political content. They find a small positive effect for both boycotting and *buycotting* in their models. When citizens share or post political information on social media, we expect stronger outcomes on political knowledge and participation compared to merely scrolling through one's news feed or timeline. The reason is that this activity entails more active information processing – people are expected to think through the content of a post before they repost it. In addition, they might read it and comment on it as part of reposting it to their social media accounts, which further facilitates information processing. This theory builds on the cognitive elaboration model, which posits that discussion of political content is a key mechanism through which messages become absorbed (Kim et al., 2019).

Beyond information processing, posting political information may have a strategic motivation. Penney (2017) describes the motivation for sharing/liking/commenting on political information in terms of trying to persuade one's peers. Penney (2017, p. 28) writes, 'the citizen marketer refers to peer-to-peer media-spreading activity that is motivated by an interest in promoting one's political opinions and agenda to one's peers' (2017, p. 28). These citizens become social influencers who like, comment, and share information on social media sites with the goal of persuading their networks or influencing their peers' opinions; they engage in the selective forwarding of content as part of advancing their own interests (Penney, 2017).

I extend the idea further. These persuasive activities also lead to one's own engagement in cause-oriented activities. When trying to influence others, these citizens mobilize themselves to become involved in the political cause. In other words, this online political expression propels citizens towards more intense cause-oriented activism. Penney's work focuses on the US context with over 100 interviews. Indeed, these empirical studies (Endres & Panagopoulos, 2017; Gotlieb et al., 2015; Gotlieb & Cheema, 2017; Shah et al., 2009) focus on the United States, raising questions about whether the theories are relevant in other contexts. My second hypothesis is as follows:

H2: sharing political information on social media positively relates to political consumerism.

Social media low-effort activities

Surveys of people who change their profile pictures reveal that the motivation is to raise awareness of the cause, which are often oriented toward social justice, such as marriage equality (Chapman & Coffé, 2016). This activity is an entry point for additional engagement as opposed to a substitute for more impactful ways to participate. Social media offer low-threshold stepping stones towards increased participation in more intensive activities. People can change their profile pictures to show support for a cause, then continue this activism in more resource-intense ways such as *buycotting*. Many studies show these low-effort online activities are highly correlated with subsequent offline political participation (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020).

Changing profile pictures is part of people's repertoires for political expression, similar to campaign buttons, lawn signs, t-shirts, bumper stickers, and the Make America Great

Again ball caps (Penney, 2017). Changing profile pictures is a method of showing support for a cause; political consumerism is also a way to support different causes. This social media activity may serve as a gateway and is part of a larger set of activities related to political expression. Therefore, my third hypothesis is as follows:

> H3: Changing one's profile picture on social media to support a social cause positively relates to political consumerism.

Social groups on social media

Organizational memberships increase the number of people we know; the more people that we know, the more likely we will be asked to participate. In the context of political consumerism, being in an organization and knowing more people will increase the chance that you are asked to support a boycott or *buycott* campaign (Gundelach, 2020; Solt, 2015). Social networking sites facilitate the creation and joining of civic and political groups (Hampton et al., 2011; Tang & Lee, 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2009). These digital ties may replace the traditional, membership-based ties that were common in the late twentieth century (Putnam, 2000). These online groups may increase the likelihood of seeing a call to action/call to participation.

These online groups may also facilitate the processes outlined in relation to other hypotheses. These online groups can increase exposure to information about ethical consumption and political consumerism (H1), as they re-circulate content to their members/followers (H2). Thus, social groups can also reinforce the mobilization process described in relation to low-effort to high-effort activism by encouraging more intense engagement (H3). Yet, the mobilization potential of these online social groups remains largely under-researched. As such, my last hypothesis is:

> H4: following a social or leisure group on social media positively relates to political consumerism.

Data and methods

This paper uses survey data gathered in 2019. The sample is based on an online panel with quotas in place to ensure representation of the population (sex, age). The survey was administered by Lightspeed Kantar Group to 1,539 people from Canada. The data and replication files are available: https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.17056304.v1.

Dependent variables

The dependent variables are boycotting and *buycotting*. Boycotting is measured with the following question: 'During the past 12 months, how often have you refused to buy, or boycotted, a certain product or service because of the social or political values of the company that provides it?' *Buycotting* is measured with the following question: 'During the past 12 months, how often have you bought a certain product or service because of the social or political values of the company that provides it?' I offered relative frequency categories (never, rarely, from time to time, and often), but recoded these variables into binaries because of the abnormal distribution.

Social media variables

I asked a series of questions about social media activities in the past 12 months. These activities included the frequency with which respondents: 'Read political or campaign information' (H1); 'Shared or posted political or campaign information' (H2); and 'Changed [their] profile picture to support a social cause or in response to a current event' (H3). I offered relative frequency categories: never, rarely, from time to time, and often. To ease the interpretation of logistic regression coefficients, I created dummy variables to reflect whether they did the activity (0 = never, 1 = rarely, from time to time, often).

I asked whether users followed a number of different social groups on social media (H4). These groups included: leisure groups, such as a cultural, hobby, or sports group; environmental groups; charity groups; and groups that help or rescue animals. The number of groups was counted, but the resulting distribution was highly skewed, so I dichotomized the variable into whether they follow any social groups (0 = no groups, 1 = at least one group). Descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 1.

Control variables

Reflecting on a recent meta-analysis on political consumerism, I account for sex, age, education, left-wing ideology, and political interest (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020). To ease the interpretation of logistic regression coefficients, I dichotomized all of these variables. For sex, females are coded as 1 (males as 0). For age, I introduced a series of age groups, then used seniors (aged 65 years or more) as the comparison group. For left-wing ideology, I used an 11-point scale and coded the four extreme left categories as 'left-wing' ideology; people who gave other answers, responded 'don't know,' or 'neither left nor right' are coded as zero. For political interest, I coded those with no or little interest as zero; those reporting to be fairly or very interested were coded as one.

Results

For the first hypothesis (H1), those who read political information on social media are more likely to boycott (ExpB = 1.516) and *buycott* (ExpB = 1.856). For the second

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Range	
Females	0,1	53.34%
Education	0,1	57.57%
18–24 years	0,1	8.71%
25–34 years	0,1	16.76%
35–44 years	0,1	17.02%
45–54 years	0,1	17.22%
55–64 years	0,1	16.63%
65 years or more (Reference group)	0,1	23.66%
Left-wing ideology	0,1	21.20%
Political Interest	0,1	57.96%
Follow groups on social media	0,1	40.16%
Read political or campaign information on social media	0,1	69.53%
Shared or posted political or campaign information on social media	0,1	39.53%
Change social media profile pictures for a cause	0,1	30.54%
Boycotting	0,1	53.15%
Buycotting	0,1	54.26%

Table 2. Logistic regression of boycotting and buycotting.

	Boycotting				*Buycotting*			
	b	SE	ExpB	*p*-value	b	SE	ExpB	*p*-value
Females	0.131	0.129	1.140	.309	0.124	0.130	1.132	.338
Education	0.278	0.130	1.320	.033	0.365	0.131	1.441	.005
18–24 years	0.356	0.285	1.427	.211	0.494	0.284	1.638	.082
25–34 years	−0.036	0.212	0.965	.865	0.301	0.214	1.351	.159
35–44 years	−0.180	0.207	0.835	.385	0.105	0.208	1.111	.612
45–54 years	−0.059	0.194	0.943	.760	0.119	0.194	1.126	.539
55–64 years	0.002	0.194	1.002	.990	0.169	0.194	1.184	.386
Left-wing ideology	0.554	0.160	1.740	.001	0.340	0.159	1.405	.033
Political interest	0.624	0.137	1.867	<.001	0.727	0.138	2.068	<.001
Read political or campaign information on social media (H1)	0.416	0.156	1.516	.008	0.618	0.156	1.856	<.001
Shared or posted political or campaign information on social media (H2)	0.590	0.160	1.804	<.001	0.308	0.161	1.361	.055
Change social media profile pictures for a cause (H3)	0.671	0.168	1.956	<.001	0.814	0.170	2.257	<.001
Follow groups on social media (H4)	0.557	0.137	1.745	<.001	0.461	0.138	1.585	.001
Sample size	n = 1,290				n = 1,290			
Model fit	Cox & Snell r-squared: 0.176				Cox & Snell r-squared: 0.181			

Males, no postsecondary degree, aged 65 years or more and right-wing/moderates/no ideological preferences are reference groups for the series of dummy variables listed above.

hypothesis (H2), those who post political information on social media are more likely to boycott (ExpB = 1.804) and *buycott* (ExpB = 1.361). For the third hypothesis (H3), those who change their profile pictures are twice as likely to boycott (ExpB = 1.956) and *buycott* (ExpB = 2.257). For the last hypothesis (H4), those who follow any social group on social media are more likely to boycott (ExpB = 1.745) and *buycott* (ExpB = 1.585).

Age and gender do not predict political consumerism. Education positively correlates with political consumerism. Left-wing ideology positively correlates with political consumerism. Being politically interested doubles the odds of engaging in political consumerism Table 2.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper considers a comprehensive set of social media uses and their connection to political consumerism. The findings support the idea that people are self-mobilizing to participate in political consumerism. Penney (2017) uses the concept of 'The Citizen Marketer,' linking it to the citizen consumer. His argument is that people forward content and change their profile pictures to influence their peers' opinions; their motivation is political influence. I extend this further. Forwarding content is not just about influencing opinions but about encouraging others to participate in political consumerism. These attempts at persuasion result in an escalation of one's own participation. Prior studies of online political expression and political consumerism focused on the United States (Endres & Panagopoulos, 2017; Gotlieb & Cheema, 2017; Gotlieb et al., 2015;

Shah et al., 2009), whereas my results show the findings and related theory extend beyond this context.

Changing social media profile pictures is often dismissed as a low-effort activity with little consequence. Yet, this activity offers an opportunity for a citizen to express their support for specific causes (Chapman & Coffé, 2016). Political consumerism is similar in that the practice offers an opportunity to support specific causes, including support for animal rights, environmental protection, and fair trade practices.

Existing research suggests the relationship between online news and political consumerism is weak (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Copeland & Feezell, 2017; Earl et al., 2017; Kelm & Dohle, 2018; Zhang, 2015), but this line of research did not consider the distinctiveness of information distributed through social media. Socially mediated information is distinctive in terms of accidental exposure, i.e., reaching those who may not be interested by having friends and family share the information. These distinctive features offer larger effects of information on social media, as opposed to information distributed on websites and other online sources.

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Notes on contributor

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