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Consumer Participation: Boycotting and Buycotting in Europe

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Abstract

Consumer participation, 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 movements studies. This paper argues that consumers express their identity through consumer participation, in the form of a pledge of allegiance to the goals of certain social movements. Cross-national data from the European Social Survey identifies boycotters and buycotters as being older, more educated, belonging to higher social classes; and they are also more commonly women than men. Analysis of separate countries, however, shows that consumer participation reflects existing patterns of participation more in some places than others. These findings therefore recommend an approach to consumer politics properly contextualised in social structures and socio-economic and cultural norms.

Consumer Participation: Boycotting and Buycotting in Europe

Introduction

Consumer participation is generally theorised as distinct from mainstream forms of political participation. These approaches characterise consumer politics as a minor part of debates concerning democracy, modernity and social change. Analysis that incorporates social movement theory and consumption studies allows for a more holistic understanding.

Consumer participation can be read as a way of participating that is critical – by which I mean conscientious and diligent – of specific targets, 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 consumer participation as the critical purchase or non-purchase of goods, boycotting and *buycotting*, respectively (a neologism 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. I refer to *consumer participation*, therefore, in cases where consumers' decisions are affected by consideration of the political or ethical implications of production or consumption.

The goals of this paper are three-fold. First, to conceptualise consumer participation as *participatory*, but with distinct social and cultural dimensions. Second, to explore variations in boycotting and buycotting in Europe by testing the relationship between individuals' social status and characteristics, and likelihood of participation, using the 2003 European Social Survey (ESS). Third, the paper briefly explores variation between five selected countries, concluding that cultural as well as socio-political factors lead to different relationships between participation and resources.

Background – Participation and Consumption

Consumption and Identity

Consumption has increasingly been identified as fundamental to contemporary formations of individual and collective identity, undermining traditional modes of social stratification in the process (Pakulski and Waters, 2006, Beck, 1992, Giddens, 1991). Boycotting and buycotting are expressions of an individual's political, ethical or environmental stance. Addressing the question of *which* people critically consume should therefore help establish how and to what extent civil society and participatory democratic processes might be reconstituted by the market's mediating role in reflexive identity production.

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). Rather, social determinants such as class, age, race, gender and education, play parts in any socio-cultural reworking of social identity alongside changes in consumption orientations. Despite consumption's increased importance for understanding identity and social status, it does not necessarily follow that it would displace every other relevant factor, even in a so-called 'consumer society'. Clarifying these relationships extends the value of considering demographic and socio-economic indicators already regularly used in predicting political participation, with respect to consumer participation.

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 largely define the population targeted by social and political organisations and the media, situating people in social networks and cultural contexts where participation is discouraged or facilitated. Corporations, institutions and social movement organisations all play roles in mobilising citizens to consume critically about issues on the global as well as the national and sub-national level. Social movement studies can thus contribute to an understanding of how people become mobilised, and 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 organisation* (SMO) not as a form of membership, but more as a kind of positioning on a continuum of involvement. This provides a useful basis for understanding certain types of movement structures. Individuals are situated according to their levels of resource input 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). SMO members or 'constituents' 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; someone who sympathises with certain social movement goals and contributes to securing them through modifying their consumption behaviour. Consumer participation also doubtlessly forms part of everyday life for many political activists, but it works very differently to high-profile activism: it is repetitively performed, demanding low levels of resources; and it is facilitated and encouraged through information distributed and publicised by SMOs (often through the media, see Keum et al., 2004). The extent to which consumer participation is successful is contingent on SMOs cutting information costs for large numbers of individuals, raising certain ethical and political agendas and specifying appropriate targets and generating contexts in which notions of ethical responsibility and participation are part of everyday consumption, for non-activists as well as for activists.

In other words, while it is possible to assess the impacts that peoples' resources have on their chances of being critical consumers, their effects are mediated by organisations, cultural contexts and social structures, themselves dependent on an individual's *occupational* identity as well as on networks formed through consumption. Some consumption is rendered normatively more or less acceptable, and consumption agendas with an ethical or political slant may become foregrounded.

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). Political trends across Western society have also complicated the relation between citizen participation and policy in a series of power shifts from governments to private business interests, particularly through deregulation and privatisation (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. The global financial crisis is only broadening the appeal and helping to legitimise these concerns. Consumer participation, in the form of boycotting and buycotting,

represents one way in which individuals attempt to influence outcomes based on explicitly economic, as well as political, forces.

Recent work on consumer participation 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). *Ethical consumption* stresses the moral subjectivity of the ‘politics’ of such consumption, the latter emphasises how *personal* concerns and motivations about product quality, for example, relate to broader *political* issues. I have opted to follow Teorell et al (2007), whose *consumer participation* requires less justification for its reticence in defining and designating the ethical and non-ethical; or the political and not-strictly-political.

Consumer Participation - Targets and Issues

It is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of what consumer participation involves, though it does make sense to outline the kind of substantive issues over which consumers are mobilised to boycott or buycott. Figure 1 roughly categorises these issues into three broad areas of concern, within which there appear some clear subdivisions, although the categories as such are porous and many of the issues relate to one another. The table also suggests typical boycott and buycott ‘targets’.

Figure 1: Issues and targets over which consumer participation 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 themselves</p>

Source: *author’s adaptation of typology from the Ethical Consumer Research Association. www.ethicalconsumer.org*

The existence of a specific social or economic target towards which consumer participation is directed is as important for consumer participation as it is for voting or contacting politicians.

However whereas most forms of participation aim to influence governments, consumer participation also challenges a range of actors and organisations outside the boundaries of state control. Such targets are either corporate – and may range in specificity from an entire industry to specific aspects of a product’s production, or they can also be organisations, governments or policy-makers working on a regional, national or international scale.

Mechanisms: integrity, self-expression, and participatory structures

Much influential analysis of boycotting and buycotting works on the basis of the ‘consumer vote’ model: consideration of the politics or ethics of a good or service stimulates consumers to contribute to increase sales (or abstain, Hirschman’s ‘exit’); change in business practice generally being the desired outcome (Follesdal 2004). However, the idea of the consumer ‘vote’ tends to caricature the way in which people conceive of the act of boycotting or buycotting and over-simplifies the processes by which they might achieve success.

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 certain others. In these cases often a target is loosely identified, but the emphasis is on the act and what it represents, socially and for the individual. Consumer participation becomes a question of securing and expressing a form of political or ethical identity, rather than a straightforwardly instrumental participation act.

The consumer vote model also underplays the extent to which consumers marshal evidence and knowledge for informing their consumption decisions, which means that ‘successful’ boycott or buycott action is poorly understood. Information about products usually stems from media sources, and it is often mediated and diffused further by social networks of individuals and organisations. 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 before consumers themselves actually act on the basis of their findings (Friedman 1999).

Definition

Critical consumer participation involves a consideration of the political or ethical implications of one or more episodes of production or of the perceived effects of a product or service’s consumption. As discussed earlier, discrepancies exist between different ‘ethical’ or moral frameworks, and the definition of the ‘political’ varies across and between academic disciplines and scholars. This study of consumer participation relies on critical consumers self-identifying, through responses to two survey items in the European Social Survey (ESS).

1

Who Participates?

Studies of civic and political participation show certain groups to be much more active than others, in part due to differential levels of real and symbolic capital (Parry et al., 1992, Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Understanding who participates, then, gives a sense of how important these factors are for consumer participation. It also pinpoints key commonalities and divergences with political participation, and identifies the kind of social phenomena that are relevant in further research on the topic. This series of testable hypotheses form the basis for this study’s empirical work.

People with higher levels of education are more likely to engage in consumer participation

Education is associated strongly with citizens' propensities to participate according to practically every empirical study carried out since the 1950s. More educated people have the knowledge and skills essential not just for participation, but for seeking the information necessary to contact elites, make informed voting choices, attend meetings and take part in demonstrations. Educated people are not only more likely to know how to seek such information, but they are also more likely to be part of social networks of other highly educated individuals targeted by political groups and organisations (e.g. Rosenstone and Hansen 1993: 134). Previous studies have also found education to have a very significant impact on the propensity of individuals to engage in consumer participation (Andersen and Tobiasen 2004; Stolle, Hooghe et al. 2005; Pattie et al. 2004).

Higher levels of consumer participation 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. It also promotes greater *attachment* to values, parties and groups. However, the impact of age is usually curvilinear: propensities to participate tend to peak at around 45-60, then taper off during retirement.

Women are as likely to engage in consumer participation as men

The historical and cultural reification of women's lack of opportunity perpetuated not just in the political sphere, but also in work and domestic life, erects various normative barriers to participation. Women are less likely to perceive themselves as efficacious, to perceive the males that 'represent' them as not representing their interests, and are also more likely to be discouraged by their peers from being politically engaged (Verba et al., 1997). However, consumer participation is not about establishment politics; there is neither social stigma nor the socio-cultural vestiges of a political system designed by, and for, men to contend with. In addition, women's traditional role as home-makers and their historic role in the successful organisation of consumer boycotts may counteract this type of trend (Friedman 1999).

Individuals from higher social classes are more likely to engage in consumer participation

Critics have claimed the value of social class as an effective explanatory system of social stratification has greatly diminished. However, empirical justification is limited: while class-based voting has dropped, with social cleavages apparently diminishing through improved levels of social mobility and an expansion of the middle classes, evidence that class still plays a fundamental role continues to surface in new studies explaining participation and civic engagement (Pattie et al., 2004, Li and Marsh, 2008).

Homemakers and students are more likely to engage in consumer participation

Studies of political consumerism and ethical consumption have previously found women to be more likely to be critical consumers than men, but few if any of these studies control for whether the women, simply in fulfilling traditional roles in shopping for households, might not be more likely to be critical consumers for this reason. Therefore this study will control for women and men whose main 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 consumer participation. Various studies have cited their involvement in everyday-type politics, (Li and Marsh, 2008, Stolle et al., 2005), interesting given that young people are regularly theorised as the archetypical hedonistic and niche-market consumers (Featherstone, 1991).

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

This study also controls for people who have never worked, but who are also neither homemakers nor students. For these that belong to no occupational class, Bauman's 'inadequate consumers', participation per se is unlikely, particularly in consumer politics (Bauman, 1998: 38). Thus employment status, or one's role in production processes, is hypothesised as likely to be important in deciding who does and does not critically consume.

Boycotting and Buycotting: Operationalising Consumer Participation

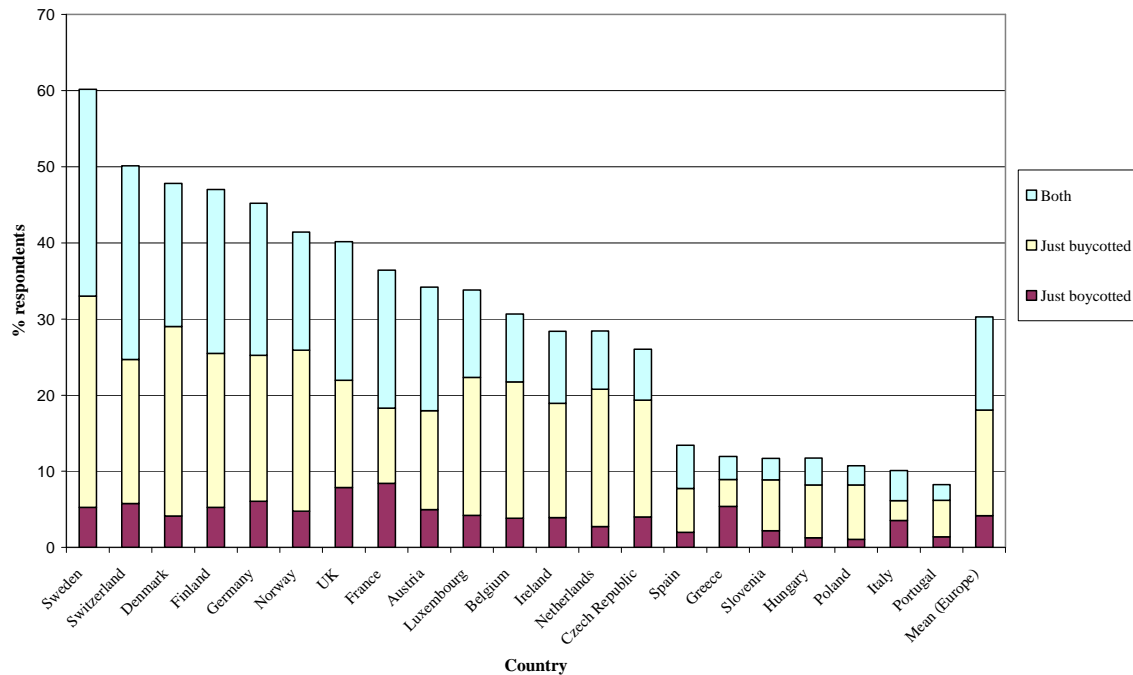
Boycotting and buycotting are both discrete acts of consumer participation, and yet they are mutually contingent. If the use-value or utility of a product is important, then it is difficult to view them as separate acts. For when one boycotts a product or service, this is rightly not taken to mean that one abstains from consuming at all, but that one may select an alternative product or service. Likewise, if an individual buycotts, she buycotts a product or service not solely for its perceived repercussions on the environment, other human beings and/or animals, but also because one wants or needs something *like* this product or service. Such scenarios implicitly describe both boycotting and buycotting at once (Friedman, 1999).

This functional perspective of consumption is, perhaps, somewhat simplistic. Consumption is performed for some 'reason' or 'reasons', according to a consumer, but such a reason might have little to do with the utility an individual will actually receive from the consumption of said product or service. There may be no ethical equivalent with a corresponding sign-value. The social processes involved in boycotting and buycotting are not identical, then, but it is not unreasonable to expect them to overlap to a significant degree. *This study operationalises consumer participation as respondents who have reported participating either in a boycott or buycott, or as having done both.*

Data

The European Social Survey is a cross-national biennial large-scale survey using 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, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK².

The dependent variable for this study is based upon two questions, one about boycotting and one about buycotting. Chart 1 displays some of the data that 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.

Chart 1: Percentages of citizens just boycotting, just buycotting, and those that do both

Source: *ESS Round 1, 2002-2003*. Note: each bar comprises the sum total consumer participation for each country, whereas the individual coloured fractions break this down into boycotting alone, buycotting alone and doing both.

Chart 1 shows that the percentage of people buycotting, in most countries, is substantially higher than the percentage of people who boycott. In addition, over two-thirds of people who boycott also buycott, and about half of those who buycott also report having boycotted (in the last 12 months). This high degree of overlap supports the theoretical linking of boycotting and buycotting for the dependent variable. Looking at the mean levels of participation, the chart also shows that just under a third of the total sample have engaged in some form of consumer participation; a notably large figure in the context of the other modes of civic or political participation tracked in the survey – compared to 26% of all respondents reporting having signed a petition in the last 12 months, 12% reporting having taken part in a demonstration and only 4% having worked in a political party or action group in the last 12 months (author's analysis).

Variation by country: focusing the study

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

In order to show this, I decided to investigate consumer participation in a small number of countries, in addition to the analysis of Europe as a whole. Three factors guided the selection of suitable cases: variation in percentage levels of consumer participation; ensuring a wide

range of different welfare regimes, socio-economic levels of development and regional locations; and sample sizes.

According to these considerations, five countries were chosen for further analysis. These included Sweden, which has the highest rate of consumer participation and can be representative of social democratic/Nordic welfare systems and the Scandinavian region; Greece as the southern European country with the highest sample size and the fifth lowest levels of consumer participation; Poland as representative of the Eastern-bloc new democracies (with a high sample size and third-to-lowest levels of consumer participation); and the UK and the Netherlands, which lie somewhere between the highest and lowest levels of consumer participation, have high sample sizes, and are representative of Anglo-Saxon/Liberal and central European/Bismarckian welfare regimes/regions respectively (Esping-Anderson, 1996, Bonoli, 1997, Ferrera, 1996).

Modelling Consumer Participation in Europe

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

Table 1 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 is whether or not respondents engage in consumer participation (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). Exploratory analysis with income as a further independent variable showed an average of 15% missing cases due to non-response, and despite statistically significant relationships between higher income brackets and consumer participation, this bracket of missing cases also had a statistically significant relationship with the dependent variable; so these models run without.³

**Table 1: Binary logistic regression:
Critical consumer vs non-critical consumer – pooled data**

	β	S.E.	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	38017		
Pseudo-R ²	0.0959		

Significance *** P < .001, ** P < .05, * P < .10. Source: ESS Round 1, 2002-2003. Hosmer and Lemeshow's Pseudo-R² = overall reduction in -2LL (chi2) divided by initial -2LL

The association of education with the probability of respondents engaging in critical consumer participation is consistent with the theoretical framing and hypotheses. The more years of full-time education that the respondent enjoys, the greater the likelihood of her engaging in consumer participation. Individuals with the mean level of around eleven years of full-time education are 1.6 times more likely to critically consume than individuals with just a basic level of education (eight years). Moreover, respondents with a university education (around sixteen years of education altogether) versus people with this average level of schooling (eleven years) are almost twice as likely to participate.

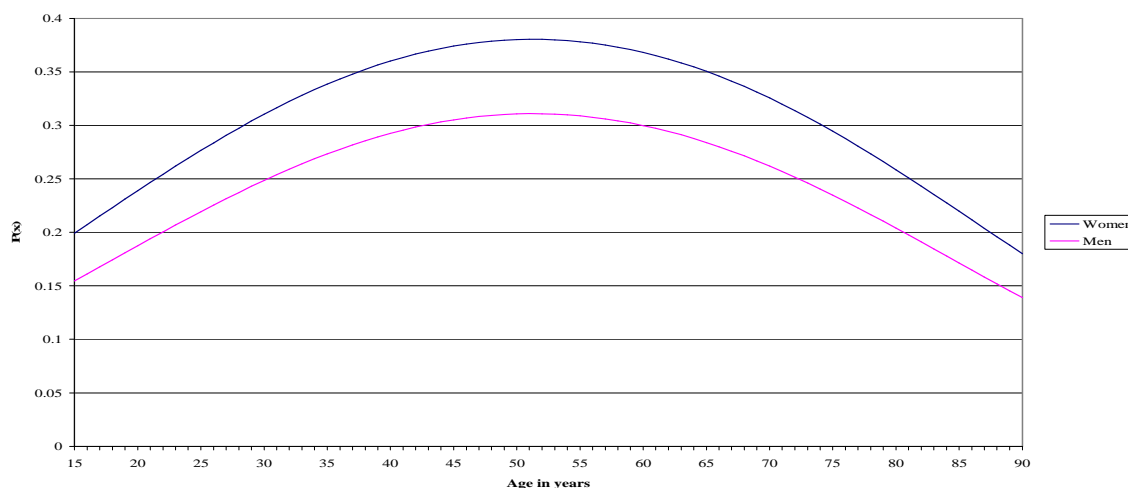
Social class and employment status also show consistently strong relationships with the response variable. Compared to the base category of working class respondents, an individual from the middle classes is 1.6 times more likely to participate, while the service classes and full-time students appear 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 consumer participation, 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.

Most surprisingly, perhaps, women are nearly 1.4 times more likely to critically consume than men. Stolle and colleagues' (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 controls for homemakers, whose domestic shopping responsibilities might somehow in themselves increase propensities for participation. In fact, contrary to this study’s hypotheses, full-time homemakers are around half as likely as the working-class base category to critically consume.

The relationship age has with participation is also affirmed by these data: people tend to be more civic-minded and politically active in mid- to older- age cohorts. However, it is difficult to evaluate the relationship of age and age squared together solely from coefficient values. Chart 2 therefore plots a series of predicted probabilities for individuals of different ages using the model. Reading off the graph, the maximum probability of an average European man or woman being a critical consumer peaks at around the age of 55, confirming that the likeliest ages for such protest do indeed arise during respondents’ middle age cohorts.⁴ Thus across Europe, consumer participation parallels political participation with respect to age.

Chart 2: Predicted probabilities that a respondent is a critical consumer, by age



Source: Data calculated from ESS Round 1 2002-2003. $P(x)$ stands for the probability of consumer participation occurring. All other variables except gender held constant: Class/employment relation: Intermediate class working, Education in years: 11.77.

Consumer Participation Across Europe

It has frequently been shown that mass cultural attitudes and structural factors as well as individual-level characteristics impact on levels of participation of any type (Kitschelt, 1986, Almond and Verba, 1963). Precursors studying consumer participation cross-nationally have neglected, or have been unable to generate country-by-country comparisons. Therefore this study now moves to examine individual countries and their relationship with these same socio-economic factors, to explore the extent to which the same relationships can be shown to hold.

Table 2 shows the results of fitting binary logistic regression models for the UK, Greece, Netherlands, Poland and Sweden. These models show considerable variation between countries with respect to the effects of social class. It has the biggest impact in the Netherlands, Poland and the UK. Here, individuals from both the intermediate and service classes are more likely to critically consume than their working-class counterparts – with the strongest effect in the Netherlands, where the intermediate and service classes are 1.8 and 2.1

times more likely to participate respectively. For Greece and Sweden the intermediate classes in Greece are 1.5 times more likely, and for Sweden the service classes are 1.8 times more likely, than their working class counterparts to participate; there is no significant relationship for other classes.

Students in the Netherlands, Greece, the UK and Poland also have a higher propensity to engage, consumer participation being between 1.7 times more likely in the UK, and 2.6 times more likely in the Netherlands, than the working classes. Never having worked in a paid job also decreases an individual's chances of being a critical consumer substantially in the UK and Greece. Only in Greece is there an association between homemaking and participation, these individuals being much less likely to critically consume than the reference category. It seems class position and employment relation, as a proxy measure of an individual's social status and level of resources, continues to be relevant, for the most part, to understanding consumer participation as well as 'mainstream' political participation.

**Table 2: Binary logistic regression:
Critical consumer vs non-critical consumer – individual countries**

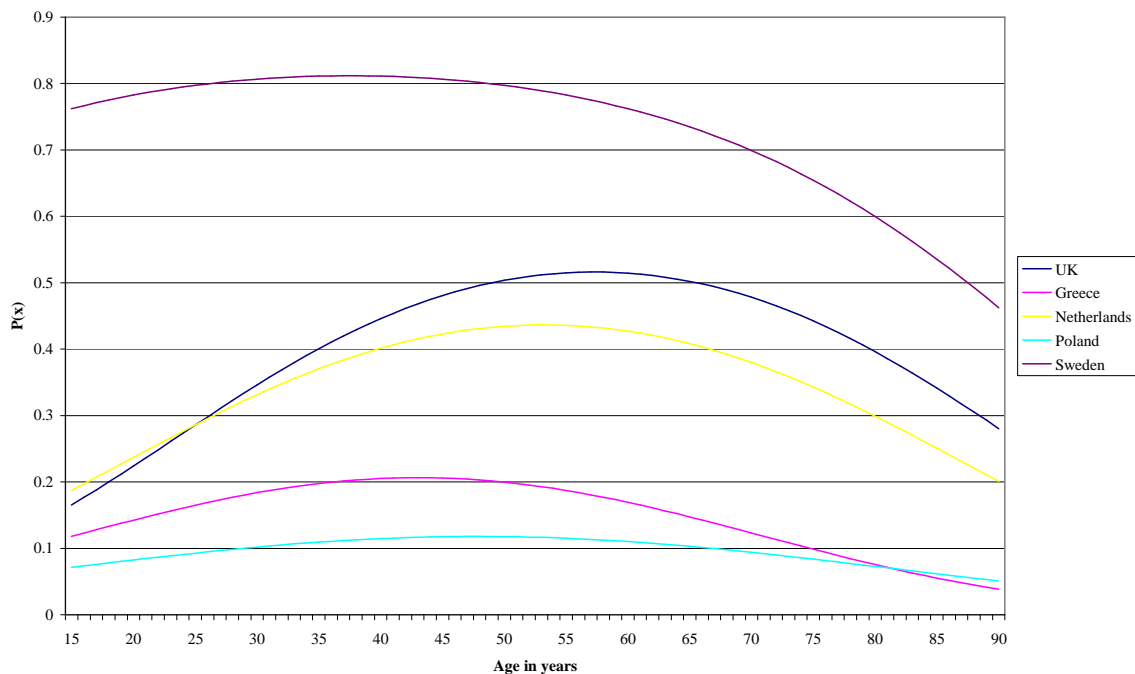
	United Kingdom		Greece		Netherlands		Poland		Sweden	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
<i>Age</i>	0.11***	0.01	0.07**	0.03	0.09***	0.02	0.05	0.03	0.04**	0.016
<i>Age</i> ²	-0.001***	0.00	-0.001**	0.00	-0.001***	0.00	-0.001	0.000	-0.001***	0.000
<i>Sex</i>										
Male (ref)										
Female	0.32**	0.10	0.52***	0.13	0.26**	0.10	0.31*	0.16	0.72***	0.104
Education in years	0.14***	0.02	0.12***	0.02	0.13***	0.02	0.23***	0.03	0.08***	0.019
<i>Social class/Employment relation</i>										
Working (ref)										
Intermediate	0.24*	0.13	0.42**	0.18	0.61***	0.18	0.45*	0.23	0.07	0.137
Service	0.65***	0.14	0.37	0.24	0.76***	0.18	0.77**	0.25	0.61***	0.151
Students	0.54*	0.26	0.59*	0.31	0.95***	0.28	0.68*	0.34	0.16	0.207
Full-time homemakers	-1.23	0.81	-1.44***	0.34	0.10	0.45	-0.86	1.11	-20.54	40192.97
Never had paid job	-1.53*	0.84	-1.73*	0.92	-0.05	0.58	-1.10	1.13	-0.74	0.698
<i>Constant</i>	-5.42***	0.47	-4.98***	0.67	-5.54***	0.55	-6.54***	0.78	-1.62***	0.438
<i>Model N</i>	2024		2494		2319		2065		1980	
<i>Pseudo-R</i> ²	0.0942		0.112		0.0770		0.144		0.0853	

Significance *** P < .001, ** P < .05, * P < .10. Source: ESS Round 1, 2002/2003. Hosmer and Lemeshow's Pseudo-R² = overall reduction in -2LL (chi²) divided by initial -2LL

Impressively, particularly for Greece and Poland where the women’s movement is more recent and shallowly entrenched, females are more likely to critically consume *across all countries*, as with the earlier Europe-wide analysis. The relation in Sweden, on the other hand, is most pronounced, where women are over twice as likely as men to participate; and in Greece, where they are well over one-and-a-half times more likely. The disproportionate number of women influential in the history of consumer politics and boycotts might help explain these disparities. Women were the primary exponents of groups such as the National Consumer League, for example, by and large because they were in a position as homemakers to take such a stance, but often also because such action predated full women’s suffrage and as a form of participation, consumer politics was totally egalitarian (Cohen, 1998, Friedman, 1999). Women’s own repertoires of contention, perhaps in part through their historical lack of access to other spheres of protest and political action, generated the cultural contexts necessary for understanding everyday social life and consumption as political. Further, the women’s movement’s recognition of the personal-as-political resembles a political outlook congruent with that of consumer participation. Finally, 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.

Age has a curvilinear relationship with the likelihood of critically consumer participation in all countries but Poland, where there is no statistical significance. Calculating predicted probabilities for a range of ages again better illustrates differences between the association of age with consumer participation. A hypothetical line is included for Poland.

Chart 3: Predicted probabilities that a respondent is a critical consumer, by age (country-level models)



Source: *ESS Round 1 2002/2003*. Variables held constant at mean for continuous variables, and modal or median (statistically significant) category for categorical variables. $P(x)$ stands for the probability of consumer participation occurring. **UK**: Female, 13 years of education, Intermediate class; **Greece**: Female, 10 years of education, Intermediate class; **Netherlands**: Female, 13 years of education, Service class; **Poland**: Female, 11 years of education, Intermediate class; **Sweden**: Female, 12 years of education, Service class.

The chart affirms what the disparities in coefficients suggest. Whereas in Sweden the chances of critically consuming are highest between the ages of 20 and 50, peaking at around the age of 37; peak ages are much higher in the UK and Netherlands, despite comparable levels of economic development. In the UK critical consumer participation is likeliest for an individual in their mid-fifties to sixties, who are around twice as likely to participate as people in their early twenties. This follows the trend of political participation more generally, indicating that in these countries a similar kind of person is involved as with normal political participation. In Greece the variation is smallest, but the trend has most in common with that of Sweden, in that younger individuals seem generally more likely to participate than older. Here the likeliest age for a hypothetical 'average' individual to critically consume is around 40-45. The fact that younger people are involved in consumer participation suggests that here the ethical or political consumer agenda is more attractive to young people, or is perhaps framed less in terms of political participation than expressive of identity. Accordingly, it may be that older people conceive of boycotting and buycotting more in terms of the 'consumer vote'.

There are also, finally, significant positive relationships between higher levels of education and consumer participation across all five nations. In Poland, an individual who has completed sixteen years of education as opposed to ten (let us say, basic schooling plus further education, versus basic schooling) is around five times more likely to participate (1.3 times more likely per extra year of education). Similarly in the UK, Greece the Netherlands and Sweden, each extra year of education means an individual is between 1.1 and 1.2 times more likely to engage in consumer participation.

In sum, the findings from this study suggest that the focus on symbolic resources has considerable power in explaining consumer participation across Europe. Looking at the 18 European countries combined, most hypotheses can be confirmed: individuals engaging in consumer participation tend to be older, better-educated, and they belong to a higher social class. Being female is also strongly associated, despite controlling for the possibility of respondents being full-time homemakers. A constellation of cultural and historical factors bring such a situation about: cultural associations between consumption and identity, the history of women's involvement in boycotts, and the de-institutionalised, non-centralised nature of consumer participation might all intersect in rendering consumer participation more normatively viable for women than men.

Conclusion

Class position, education and demographic characteristics all stratify contemporary experiences of consumer culture and the distribution of individuals in a society who are likely to participate in consumption politics. Implicitly, they also influence who is recognised by the facilitating institutions and organisations of a society as able to participate, augmenting the difference in propensity to consume critically. Critical consumer participation as a form of social action and expression overlaps and exceeds the limits of the conventional political sphere, however, mobilised as often by international and global issues of human and environmental rights as it is by local or national affairs. Its basis in everyday consumerism also means that it is bound up in questions of identity, the organisation and structures of protest groups, and cultural context.

In some ways consumer participation replicates the model of political participation, perhaps surprising in the light of studies about contemporary life in ‘consumer societies’. These results show that the infiltration of politics into new spheres of social life and the everyday that consumer participation represents does not entail that one should reject traditional systems of social classification, neither in analysis of consumer behaviour nor in political participation.

These results also demonstrate some key differences between consumer participation and patterns of participation in politics. Critical consumers in Sweden and in Greece are much younger than the kind of people typically associated with political participation, and women in each country, as well as in the 21 ESS countries as a whole, are substantially more likely than men to critically consume. Higher engagement by younger age cohorts supports the links made between politicised consumer orientations and identity, if one accepts that younger individuals are more likely to possess reflexive consumerist identities. In Sweden one could suggest that high civic participation overall means that younger people are more likely to engage in non-orthodox or ‘protest’ politics, or that social democratic welfare systems place a different emphasis on the function and politics of consumerism.

In Poland, and to a certain extent Greece, the women’s movement has made less ground in terms of establishing effective legislation to eliminate discrimination and increase state support for women and issues surrounding their employment and benefits, yet there is no sign of a substantial difference in impact. 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. Gendered cultural associations surrounding shopping as a social practice, however may help explain these disparities.

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 (that breeds distrust of food produced in certain countries, for instance) or the BSE epidemic, which has at different times provoked both the boycotting and buycotting of British beef. 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 consumer participation might be higher for some parts of a population than others.

Taken together, this study’s results suggest that demographics are just as important as social status and resources for engagement in this form of consumer politics. An array of social and cultural factors also come to play roles in facilitating and inhibiting consumer participation through and alongside individuals’ own demographic and socio-demographic characteristics, an issue this paper raises but cannot address. Specific histories of consumer politics and geo-political alliances and tensions create a web of further influences. In-depth case studies of consumer participation in individual countries assessed alongside these findings would shed further light on such matters, as indeed could expanded survey evidence gathered in the future.

¹ 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

² Response rates varied between 34% in Switzerland to 80% in Greece. Of the five countries selected for closer investigation, response rates were very respectable: Sweden, 69.5%; Britain, 55.5%; Netherlands, 67.9%; Greece, 80% and Poland, 73.2%. Sample sizes are designed to exceed 1500 in each case, but actually range in the 2002/2003 round – which is the dataset used for this study – between 1207 (Italy) and 2919 (Germany). Decisions over which countries to include in the analysis between countries, therefore, necessarily also took sample size into account. 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. Therefore results from these data, broadly speaking, can be taken as somewhat representative of the populations of these five countries, or of Europe as comprised by these 21 countries.

³ Class positions established using adaptations of syntax available through the ESS compilation of relevant studies (from Leiulfstrud, Bison et al. 2005).

⁴ Holding all other variables to be constant. The mean values of continuous variables were used, and the modal or median category for categorical variables. In this case the modal occupational class/employment relation was used, being working individuals in the intermediate class. NB: changes in the probability of participating produced by a change in the level of either age or education are largest when the probability of participation is close to 0.5 and smallest when this probability approaches 0 or 1.

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