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Proposition of the relational boycott

Proposition of
the relational
boycott

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to identify, in the context of virtual social networks (VSNs), other types of boycott which have not yet been addressed in the literature. We relate the boycott(s) emerged on the VSNs with those found in the literature (economic, religious, of minorities, ecological and labor boycott), and verify the motivation that must be unique to such context.

Design/methodology/approach – Grounded theory was used in triangulation with netnography (interacting with 183 customers), non-participant observation (68 postings/47 complaints, from 2009 to 2012) and in-depth interview (15 consumers).

Findings – A new classification of boycott was proposed, which emerged on the basis of company service quality, named “relational boycott”, which can generate additional acts of repudiation, such as interaction, unity of the group and encouragement of third parties.

Research limitations/implications – The model of relational boycott proposed was not empirically tested, but insights for future test are provided.

Practical implications – A model of how the relational boycott is structured is provided, being a deliberate, primary act of the consumer resulting from the management problems of a company generating backlash actions.

Social implications – Since boycott represents a mechanism of protesting, it is a way that consumers pressure companies to provide better services and products, which may improve consumer’s wellbeing in the long range.

Originality/value – A new type of boycott emerges in the research, named relational boycott, structured in a model that can be tested empirically.

Keywords Netnography, Backlash, Boycott

Paper type Research paper

Resumo

Propósito/objectivo – A literatura discute cinco tipos de boicote (económico, religioso, de minorias, ecológico e laboral), mas cremos que outros tipos de boicote se podem intensificar no contexto das redes sociais virtuais. O objectivo é identificar algum(s) tipo(s), relacionando-o(s) com os já descritos na literatura. e.

Metodologia – Se *Grounded theory* na triangulação com netnografia (interagindo com 183 clientes), observação não-participante (68 postings/47 queixas, de 2009 a 2012) e entrevistas profundas (15 consumidores).

Resultados – Propõe-se uma nova classificação de boicote, que emergiu com base na qualidade de serviço da empresa, chamada “boicote relacional”, que pode gerar actos adicionais de repúdio, tais como interacção, unidade do grupo e encorajamento de terceiros.



Limitações/implicações – O modelo de boicote relacional proposto não foi testado empiricamente, mas são fornecidas pistas para testes futuros.

Implicações práticas – É fornecido um modelo de como um boicote relacional se estrutura, como acto primário e deliberado do consumidor, resultando dos problemas de gestão duma empresa que origina repercussões.

Implicações sociais – Como um boicote representa um mecanismo de protesto, é uma forma de pressão dos consumidores para que as empresas forneçam melhores serviços e produtos, e assim possam melhorar o bem-estar dos consumidores no longo-prazo.

Originalidade/valor – Um novo tipo de boicote emerge deste estudo, chamado boicote relacional, estruturado num modelo que pode ser testado empiricamente.

Palavras-chave Netnografia, Folga, Boicote

Tipo de artigo Artigo de investigação

Resumen

Objetivo – La literatura discute cinco tipos de boicot (boicot económico, religioso, de minorías, ecológico y laboral), sin embargo proponemos que otro(s) tipo(s) of boicot pueden intensificarse por el contexto de las redes sociales virtuales (RSVs). El objetivo es identificar este tipo(s) y relacionarlo(s) con aquellos ya descritos en la literatura.

Diseño/metodología/aproximación – Empleamos teoría en la triangulación con netnografía (interactuando con 183 clientes), observación de no participantes (68 postings/47 quejas, desde 2009 hasta 2013) y entrevista en profundidad (15 clientes).

Resultados – Se propone una nueva clasificación de boicot, surgido de la calidad del servicio de la empresa, y que se denomina “boicot relacional”, que puede generar actos adicionales de repudiación, tales como interacción, unidad de grupo y apoyo a terceras partes.

Limitaciones/implicaciones – El modelo de boicot relacional que se propone no se contrasta empíricamente, pero se proporcionar ideas para el contraste futuro.

Implicaciones prácticas – Se proporciona un modelo sobre cómo se estructura el boicot relacional, siendo este un acto deliberado y primario del consumidor que resulta de los problemas de gestión de la empresa y que da lugar a respuestas negativas.

Implicaciones sociales – Dado que el boicot es una acción de protesta, es una forma de queja de los consumidores a la empresa para que ofrezca mejores servicios y productos, y puede mejorar el bienestar del consumidor en el largo plazo.

Originalidad/valor – La investigación muestra una nueva forma de boicot, boicot relacional, el cual se estructura en un modelo que puede ser contrastado empíricamente.

Palabras clave Netnografía, Reacción, Boicot

Tipo de artículo Artículo de investigación

Introduction

Transformations in how consumer perceive and interpret activities of companies reveal a phenomenon still little investigated in marketing: the consumer boycott, defined as an act of repudiation by which the consumer ceases to buy a product or a service from a company (Klein *et al.*, 2004). Although consumer boycott has been incorporated into the discussion of consumer behavior studies over recent years (Hoffman, 2013; Albrecht *et al.*, 2013), the term was used for the first time in the 1880, to designate a retaliation organized by small tradesmen who were negotiating with a large American rancher, Mr Charles Boycott. The term boycott has been used since that moment when the group of small tradespeople realized that they could retaliate against the rancher by ceasing to buy his products because of his unreasonable demands (Soule, 2009).

Boycott may represent a rich field for study in the area of consumer behavior mainly because the role consumers have today in virtual social networks (VSNs) when co-creating value for companies (Kozinets and Haldelman, 1998). Such networks are important *locus* for the analysis of political manifestations, acts of repudiation (either by consumers or citizens) and boycotts. In Brazil there are some evidences that those manifestations have gained importance through this *locus*, such as:

- the repudiation by minorities, artists and intellectuals against a federal deputy for his presidency of the Human Rights Commission of the Brazilian Congress (Baptista, 2013); and
- the boycott directed at the Arezzo company because of using animals' skins in its collection in 2011/2012 (Cruz, 2012).

Although studies in the field of Sociology may, in the coming years, demonstrate the reasons why consumers and citizens become more involved through VSNs (McGriff, 2012), it seems that the online environment is seen by Brazilians as an important space for interaction when their individual motivations converge to the same collective interest. The boycott as an act whereby the consumer ceases to buy a product or a service from a company, because she does not agree with actions, decisions or strategies adopted by that company (Soule, 2009; Friedman, 1999, Cruz *et al.*, 2012) may have several motivations, ranging from economic issues to ideological ones.

Friedman (1999) and Koku (2011) discuss five types of empirically verified types of boycott: economic, religious, of minorities, ecological and the labor boycott. Each of them has a specific motivation for the consumer and will be discussed next. However, it may be supposed that other types of boycott exist in the analysis of the virtual environment, so this study aims to identify, based on VSNs, other types of boycott which have not yet been addressed in the literature. In such case, we also intend to: relate the boycotts emerged on the VSNs with those found in the literature, and verify the existence of some motivation that must be unique to the environment of social networks. The article is structured as follows: next we discuss the types of boycott found in the international literature, then we present the methodological approach for this study, followed by the main results, conclusions, limitations and suggestions for future research, with implications for transformative consumer research (TCR).

Theory

Whereas boycott is an act whereby the consumer ceases to buy, backlash is an act of repudiation and rupture of the relationship of a group (citizens or consumers) with an organization on the basis of a context contrary to the expectations and motivations of that group (Klein *et al.*, 2004, Friedman, 1999; Koku, 2011). Thus the boycott is contained within the context of the backlash, since boycott is an act of repudiation related to buying. Backlash also contains other manifestations not related to the act of consumer purchase, such as videos posted on VSNs spreading negative information about an organization or the manifestations of a group of activists fighting for a cause. Thus, backlash may include different manifestations, with different actors or means of communication, whereas the boycott involves only the consumer and the organization, rather than other actors.

Table I presents the types of boycott identified within the Brazilian context in the first decade and the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century on the

Table I.
Examples of recent
boycotts in Brazil

Type	Characteristics	Examples in Brazil
Economic boycott	Consumers cease to buy a product or service because they do not agree with micro or macro economic variables (e.g., price monopoly)	BR (gas distributor) in the city of Natal – abusive prices, in 2013
Religious boycott	Historically, religious groups try to dominate their faithful by means of their ideologies and beliefs. The boycott is a means whereby these groups attain their objectives. Examples include boycotts of films, soap operas or advertisements with inappropriate content for their members	Du Loren (lingerie brand) advertising with a semi-naked model in the Vatican in 2010
Minorities' boycott	These are actions undertaken by minority groups who have specific or circumstantial objectives as compared with the mainstream society or in favor of groups in a situation of vulnerability (e.g. context of racial or homosexual segregation)	Mc Donalds (fast food chain) during World Cup 2014
Ecological boycott	Is undertaken as from the moment when consumers realize that a company is acting in such a way as to harm or abuse the environment. Generally consumers are influenced by NGOs which act in the favor of the preservation of the planet	Arezzo (women's footwear) Pelemania Collection, in 2011
Labor boycott	Occurs when the consumer ceases to buy from a company because the working conditions of the employees are considered of semi-slavery or to infringe human rights	Zara (apparel retail store) in 2011

basis of Friedman's (1999) and Koku's (2011) classification. What may be seen from Table I is that boycott is an action which seems to be effective in the context of the Brazilian consumers, being of both economic and ideological nature (ecological, religious, of minorities and the labor boycott).

The economic boycott occurs when the consumer ceases to buy a product because she understands that there exists a disloyal relationship of consumption and that the company exaggerates in its use of economic power on the consumer. This relationship may be constructed on the basis of market characteristics such as the monopolistic activity of a company or of variables related to the supply and demand of products to the consumer (Friedman, 1999). In Brazil, there are two examples of this kind of boycott:

- (1) the case of BR gas stations (charging abusive prices in 2013 in the city of Natal) exemplifies both the boycott and the backlash; and
- (2) the case of a boycott by students in a secondary school in the city of São Paulo on the consumption of cheese-bread that had sudden price increases, making it possible to associate this kind of boycott with the power of the VSNs among Brazilian adolescents (Cruz, 2013).

The religious boycott occurs when the action of a company contradicts the religious values and beliefs of a group of consumer. For example, after the fall of 35 per cent in the consumption of a factory of dairy products in Bahrain (Asia), the directors changed the name of the company after the boycott brought against it by domestic consumers. The justification for the boycott was that the company had exhibited illustrations on its products which were disrespectful to Islam (Dairy Industries, 2006). In Brazil, Du Loren (a lingerie producer) was criticized by the Catholic Church indirectly after publishing an advertisement showing a semi-naked model in St Peter's Square (Vatican) and lost its market leadership after consumer boycott (Gastaldo, 2004). In 2012 the soap-opera "Salve Jorge" (Goes, 2012) suffered boycott by evangelical television viewers who considered Saint George to be a Catholic and Umbanda saint, whose worship was perceived as an affront to their orthodox protestant values.

The third type of boycott is that of minorities and occurs when a group marginalized by the society is disrespected or not taken into account by a company. Examples of this kind of boycott are those undertaken by Afro-descendants and homosexuals. In the USA, for example, the American companies Target and Best Buy made donations to the campaign of a candidate to the position of governor of the state of Minnesota, who was publicly against gay marriage. Various online campaigns (petitions and viral videos) resulted, instigating the boycott against those companies (Christopher, 2010; Hartman, 2012). In Brazil, a fast-food chain, McDonald's, suffered boycott by some consumers in the state of Bahia due to the fact that their contract with FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) did not allow the traditional *baianas* to remain in the surroundings of the World Cup stadium selling *acarajés* (traditional regional food) during the matches of the Confederations Cup in 2013 or the World Cup in 2014.

The fourth type of boycott is ecological and occurs when a company disrespects or abuses issues related to the environment. Cruz (2012) reported on how the Brazilian footwear company Arezzo was affronted on the VSNs with the boycott of consumers and the virtual manifestations of activists. After using animal skins in its Pelemania collection in 2011, the company had to publicly redeem itself on its official VSN Facebook page and withdraw the collection from all its stores in Brazil, after some customers

threatened that they would stop buying any product from the company. Environmental activists also pressured the company to protest about the product collection.

Finally, labor boycott occurs when the consumer discovers that the working conditions of the employees are those of semi-slavery or slavery, or when a company disrespects clauses related to human rights (Friedman, 1999). Literature shows many cases of boycotts associated to bad labor conditions (Doepke and Zilibotti, 2009; Basu *et al.*, 2006). In Brazil the case of the multinational apparel retail store Zara is an example of such boycott: some consumers stopped buying from the company after news about its suppliers hiring workers from Bolivia and Peru in a semi-slave labor condition.

These are the types of boycott found in the literature with recent examples occurred in Brazil. Next, we present the methodological approach which guided the research from the choice of the overall method of investigation and the process for data collection, categorization and analysis.

Method

To verify the types of boycott that may emerge from the VSNs we decided for using grounded theory in triangulation with netnography, non-participant observation and in-depth interview. Grounded theory is a scientific method in which a researcher goes to the field without the formulation of preconceived hypotheses and uses the systematized analysis of the field data for the investigation to arrive at a new concept or theory (Goulding, 2001). Table II shows how grounded theory was applied in this study, according to Vergara (2005).

While netnography assumes the interaction of the researcher in the virtual environment (Kozinets, 1998, 2006), non-participant observation simply analyzes at a distance the phenomenon which is occurring or which has occurred (Cruz, 2012). Table III presents the steps proposed by Kozinets (2006) for netnography studies and the actions we took in this study.

Data collection

Data were collected in three moments, concerning two companies:

- (1) the official page of a furniture store chain (Company A) for the netnography;
- (2) on the VSN Orkut (www.orkut.com) and the blog ReclameAqui (www.reclameaqui.com.br) for the non-participant observation; and
- (3) with 15 consumers in the real environment to verify the emergence of boycott motivation.

Company A arose naturally in the empirical verification, i.e. when we verified that on the official page of Company A many customers presented their complaints and said that they would stop buying because of the delays, defective products and the difficulty of communicating with the company, it was found that this might be a type of boycott not yet analyzed in the literature (Friedman, 1999; Koku, 2011). Company B (appliance store chain) was chosen on the basis of a document from the Consumer Defence (PROCON-SP) which listed the firms with the highest number of consumer complaints in 2011. Table IV presents the codification of the data.

For the netnography we spent 25 days (April-May 2012) interacting with 183 customers on the VSN Facebook (www.facebook.com), in different postings, without their awareness that one of the authors of this article was collecting data (actually this author was also unhappy with the company due to the delay for the delivery of a product

Steps for the grounded theory ^a	Action	Method of data collection
The group which will be the object of study is selected	Official web page of a furniture manufacturer and retail chain (company A) on the VSN Facebook Access to VSN Orkut and to the blog ReclameAqui (for consumer complaints) in the analysis of a home appliance retail chain (company B)	Netnography and non-participant observation
The subjects for the primary collection of data are selected	Interaction took place basically with boycotting consumers of company A and the analysis of consumers' decisions to boycott B on Orkut and ReclameAqui	
The field work is begun by means of the undertaking of interaction and observation		
The data related to interaction are registered in field notes	Elaboration of the field notes	
Additional data from other sources are collected	Netnography brought out the importance of analyzing the boycott behavior before the purchase	In-depth interview with customers who have already boycotted
Concepts emerging from the data are identified	The concepts which emerged were: boycott, backlash, delay in delivery, managerial inefficiency, administration of relationship with customer, leading to three categories: delays in delivery and defective products; inefficient attendance; and interaction, unity and encouragement of third parties	Codification and categorization—steps of the grounded theory
The relationships between the categories are identified	Presentation of the conceptual model of Relational Boycott (Figure 3)	
Refinement and identification of the central category	Central category – relational boycott	
The problem which led to the investigation is recovered	The relational boycott exists – type of boycott not previously identified in the literature	
Validation of the theory by checking the results with those interviewed	Verification with consumers of the offline environment of the results found during grounded theory	In-depth interview with customers who have already boycotted
The theory generated is compared with existing theories	Relational boycott differs from the termination of the relationship by being accompanied by other acts of repudiation	Steps of the grounded theory
The conclusion is formulated	Presentation of the concept of relational boycott	

Source: ^a Based on Vergara (2005)

Step	Action (Kozinets, 2006)	Action (this research)
1	Have the objectives of the research clear	Identified boycott information from consumers on VSNs in the search for other types of boycott
2	Identify virtual forums (blogs and VSNs)	Orkut, Facebook, Twitter and blogs listed as potential online platforms. The motivations in various communities were identified as being those already found in the literature, though the consumers of two companies presented boycott behavior related to frustrating experiences with the companies
3	Choice of the virtual environment(s) for the data collection	Facebook, Orkut and the blog ReclameAqui
4	Choice of virtual communities	Fun page of company A
5	Insertion of the researcher(s) in the virtual environment(s)	Entry into the fun pages with no need of permission from an administrator of the pages (public content)
6	Choice or creation of a topic named "Boycott"	Interaction and registration of the topics related to boycotts on the basis of information related to the dissatisfaction of the customer with the company in a consumer relationship
7	Preparation of the field notes	End of data collection and of field notes (thus forming the field diary)
8	Closing of the field diary by means of field notes	Search for main categories to codify elements found in the data collection process
9	Reading, codification and interpretation of the data of the field diary	

Table III.
Steps of the
netnography in the
investigation

Source: Based on Kozinets (2006)

he had bought). Of these 183 customers, 47 showed indignation with the relationship established between the parts (customer and company). During the data collection process, 823 comments were analyzed, 363 of which were commentaries repudiating the company (boycott or backlash). It was found that the peaks of interaction of the customers occurred before 9am and after 7pm. In the non-participant observation the *locus* of investigation and data collection was the VSN Orkut and the web site ReclameAqui. With no interaction between the researcher and users, 68 postings (from 2009 to 2012) on the Orkut and 47 complaints from ReclameAqui were analyzed. For Orkut it was not possible to ascertain the exact date of the posting since in some cases the profiles of the customers were cancelled by virtue of the migration of the users to Facebook. In the in-depth interview, 15 consumers gave their motives for deciding not to buy and motives they would consider important in the after-sale phase for their decision to boycott the company, considering a relationship with the company.

Table V presents the sub-categories and their frequencies which gave rise to the categories in Table IV. Considering frequencies in Table V, subcategories do not appear individually in the consumers' comments and sometimes three or four categories appear in the same comment among the 477 analyzed both for companies A and B.

Results

Based on the results which emerged from the grounded theory, we propose a new classification of boycott which emerged on the basis of three categories concerning service quality:

Examples of consumers testimonials	Type of consumer repudiation			Emergent concepts	Category
	BO	BA	BB		
Each time there is a new lamentation, a new excuse and a request for a new deadline, ... I don't want excuses, just my money back. A retail store of such size should have a minimum respect for the consumers ... never again do I want to experience such disrespect!	×			"Never again" leading to boycott; disrespect; there's no solution for the problems; delays; failure to respect deadlines; attempts to communicate; new delays; deception at delay as the motive for the boycott	Inefficient attendance
Disillusioned with company A which did not deliver my product ... I was left on the telephone the whole day and they only attended to me at nearly 4pm ... Today I phoned and got into the chat room to confirm the delivery and they said that it was scheduled for the 19th ... this after sale service is absurd ... too disillusioned to buy from this company again		×			
I'd like to know how many schedules are necessary to guarantee the delivery of my product, so I cannot lose my entire day next time, if "next time will happen"					
<i>"Don't buy at the company B's website, the attendance is really precarious, there is no even a phone number available for consumers to call ..."</i>			×	<i>Delay in delivery, consumer treated like a fool; inefficient communication. Attempts at contact, frustration, defective products</i>	<i>Delay in delivery and defective products</i>
<i>I bought a cabinet, and after several postponements the product was delivered with missing pieces. After this, company A never again!</i>	×				

(continued)

Proposition of the relational boycott

Table IV.
Codification and categorization of the results

Table IV.

Examples of consumers testimonials	Type of consumer reputation			Emergent concepts	Category
	BO	BA	BB		
<i>What a shame, Company A! I bought over the internet, I scheduled the delivery for today and I spent the whole day waiting and you haven't come and now you want to fix another day? Do you think your customer is a fool?</i>		×			
You are right Bruna! We must get together and show that we're not fools! We must claim our rights! I don't feel alone in the world, problems with delivery are standard practice with Company A. My delay is getting on for 15 days already ... Never again shall I buy from you! We must get together! We must continue to do what we're doing: complain here in the place where they advertise products and services! I see that there are other people in the same situation as me with delays in delivery! Let's record a video and post it on the Youtube. I'm not going to buy there again and I'm going to tell all the people I know not to buy there		×	×	Union among consumers; consumers as clowns; rights and duties; boycott; delays; protests; union of consumers; retaliations	Interaction, unity of the group and encouragement of third parties

Notes: BO = boycott; BA = backlash; BB = simultaneously boycott and other manifestations of backlash

Sub-category	Frequency	Category
Cease to buy/boycott	279 times	Category pulverized among the remaining
Indignation with attendance	187 times	Inefficient attendance
Frustrated attempts at communication	294 times	
Disrespect with the consumer (channel of communication)	219 times	
Defective products	169 times	Delay in delivery and defective products
Delays in delivery	307 times	
Disrespect with the consumer (delays and defects)	227 times	
Union among consumers	134 times	Interaction, unity of the group and encouragement of third parties
Encouragement of third parties	216 times	
The consumer is fool	89 times	
Preparation of videos, images or blogs of retaliation	39 times	
Case in the Special Court as retaliation	46 times	

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Table V.
Subcategories
ascertained in the
netnography and in
the non-participant
observation

- (1) inefficient attendance;
- (2) delays in delivery and defective products; and
- (3) interaction, unity of the group and encouragement of third parties.

We named this kind of boycott as “relational boycott”. For the first two categories we divided into evidences of the boycott in the pre and after sale. The third category is related to backlash in the concept of relational boycott. The names presented below are fictitious and none of the comments has been modified with the objective of being faithful to the content presented by the consumer.

Evidences of the boycott in the after-sale phase

It's a shame! I bought an LCD TV at Company B, and I was cheated, it's already a month since I bought it and I haven't received the TV yet, I paid 1,799.00 and I tried to speak with the customer service, but the phone number doesn't work [...]. now if you ring them on the sales phone they quickly pick up the phone [...] this shit of Company B never again. (anonymous user of Orkut).

The motivations for the relational boycott in the after-sales can be constructed by virtue of inefficient service or of delays in delivery and defective products. The above text, using bad language, gives evidence of repudiation on the part of the consumer of the company B and emphasizes the decision of not buying again from that company. This passage evidences the boycott after the relationship of purchase. The following passage brings out, on the basis of netnography, the interaction of one of the authors (named Author) with the group of customers, on the basis of a commentary by consumer Samara:

Samara: Complaints to company B have not been lacking lately! I bought a cabinet for my daughter's bedroom and after postponing the delivery, fixing it and not coming, the piece was delivered without the base, that meant more delay. And they show an intolerable arrogance in dealing with the customer!!! After this, *Company A never again!* [...] My cousin bought a similar cabinet and the hinge of one of the doors didn't work. A man with a notebook and no

tools went to her house yesterday to get the obvious conclusion and only after three days will she have the right to telephone to schedule the day for the repair. Good luck to us!

Author: Hi Samara! I'm in the same situation because I bought a cabinet for my bathroom and after 15 days they hadn't come to install the product. After this, do you intend to buy more products from company A?

Samara: Hi Author, certainly not. *Never again will I buy from company A!* I'm not fool. I think you should do the same because it's a total disrespect to the customers!

Consumer Samara also commented on the question of the delivery of defective products – another situation discovered in the construction of the concept of relational boycott. Beyond the delay in the delivery of the products, there also occurs the delivery of defective products. The passages of the consumers Livia and Graça report the delivery in installments of the parts of the products, as well as the absence of attendance in the after sales service:

Company A doesn't have the minimum respect for the consumers. More than a month ago I bought a dining room suite and the shop has been delivering in pieces, in installments. I tried to contact the 0,800, Chat-room, e-mail and I went personally to the store in the shopping mall uselessly [...] Don't acquire products from that store unless you receive them direct from the shop, don't trust the delivery date, and for the after-sale department, it just doesn't exist [...] (Livia).

Dissatisfied doesn't describe what I'm feeling! as well as delivering defective furniture and taking three months to solve the problem [...] the employee who came to my house made the situation worse!!! What a deception! Don't buy (from them), it's not worth the stress! (Graça).

Evidences of the boycott in the pre-sale phase

I went to the Company A store and asked the salesperson to help me, I wanted to buy a wardrobe, a kitchen trolley, a bedside locker, a red acrylic chair. (He said he'd be right back.) I sat on the bench and waited for more than half an hour. A salesgirl appeared (just finishing a sale to another customer), I called her three times but she paid no attention (she was less than a yard away from me). The salesman who had said he'd be right back appeared and sat down beside me, finishing a sale. He didn't look at me either, and didn't ask me if I needed help. Thirty minutes there waiting. I'm going to buy these products at another shop and will send the bill to the management of Company A (Elines).

Elines' text emphasized the importance of sounding out in the real situation the possibility of the existence of the Relational Boycott at a moment before the sale, because as seen in the passage above Elines, as she was not attended to with a minimum of cordiality or courtesy, opted for not buying, choosing another shop and leaving her complaint on the official page of the company on Facebook. The 15 interviews with consumers in the real situation brought out that the boycott can occur before a purchase is made, and the motivations generally relate to the poor attendance of a salesperson – lack of cordiality, courtesy or technical knowledge of a product/service. The two passages below bring out these motives for the boycott at a point prior to the intended sale:

I give up buying when I'm poorly attended to! I hate to come to a shop and the salesman doesn't do his job – which is to approach the customer and at least offer to render the service! I have often bought a dearer product because of the attendance offered and rendered by the

salesperson! I give up buying when I'm not attended to courteously or with proper attention!
(José)

I went into an apparel shop and had a look at some pieces expecting the salesperson to come up to me. The salesman didn't pay me the minimum attention and that's why I felt fed up with life and left the shop. I was in the habit of buying there but now I'll not go back there to shop again!
(Luíza).

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Backlash and the concept of relational boycott

The relational boycott emerged here occurs in the after-sale when a customer discovers that the company does not offer the attention regarding the problems which arise from a purchase, or in the pre-sale when she feels a lack of attention, respect, cordiality or technical knowledge of the product or service from employees or those who represent the company. Thus, the relational boycott is a punishment administered by means of a manifestation of individual repudiation on the part of a customer as a way of positioning herself with regard to a relationship (or attempt at a relationship) established between herself and the company.

Both in the pre-sale as in the after-sale, the literature discusses the termination of a relationship. For example, [Beloucif et al. \(2005\)](#) discovered, within the company's search for new customers, that in the pre-sale phase a letter sent to the customers or personal contacts can help in the construction of a future relationship. On the other hand, when a customer seeks the relationship (whether it be at the recommendation of other customers or as a result of need), the first contact is essential for a later relationship to materialize. The later effects of this initial relationship can lead to a purchase which will bring out the importance of the relationship for both customer and company. In the case of relational boycott, the act of ceasing to buy may occur either in the after-sale or in the pre-sale, but this characteristic does not by itself differentiate the relational boycott from the termination of a relationship. [Halinen \(1995\)](#), for example, considers in his definition of relationship the moment prior to the establishment of a concrete relationship, i.e. the initial process of the approximation of the parts (company and customer) is also considered a part of a relationship. Thus, the customer's search for a product or a service, for example, could be associated with the initial phase of a relationship (which can have positive or negative effects for the parts).

Thus, what differentiates the relational boycott from the termination of a relationship is the backlash – a characteristic found in the consumers' discourses in this study. That is to say, the relational boycott generally may be associated with other acts of repudiation such as activism, the spreading of negative information about a company and the encouragement of third parties. This last characteristic is here evidenced which contributes to the differentiation of the concept of relational boycott from that of the termination of a relationship. The following passage extracted from the interaction of one of the authors with customers who boycotted the company, emphasizes the category interaction, unity of the group and encouragement of third parties in the construction of the concept of relational boycott on the basis of the grounded theory:

Ivete: What a shame for company A, I bought over the internet and scheduled the delivery for today, I waited the whole day and you didn't come and now I have to schedule another day? Don't you think the consumer is a clown?

Camilla: Hi Ivete. Yes, that's what they think! But it is really they who are the clowns, because that behavior is a joke! The same thing happened to me – and worse: even before my piece of furniture was delivered, already paid for - I must say, I didn't succeed in talking with them [...] They also asked me for the data by Twitter, but they *never* made contact!!! They don't give a damn [...] They invest in publicity but they give no importance to talking face to face with dissatisfied customers! I'm never going to buy there again and I'm going to tell everyone I know not to buy there!

Bruna: I've already made it clear in other posts that I'm not going to buy again from Company A!

Ivete: That's it, Bruna! We must get together and show that we're not clowns! Otherwise, we must dress up as clowns and claim our rights!

Author 1: If anyone wishes to file a claim for damages, count me in because we're within our rights as consumers!

Bruna: That's what I'm going to do, I'm going to take Company A to the courts.

The primary decision is, therefore, deliberate on the part of the customer, consisting of the act of the consumer in ceasing to buy by reason of the poor quality of the service delivered (pre- and after-sale), of delay in delivery and defective products, or both, in the after-sale, for example (as Figure 1 indicates). In the former situation, the relational boycott can generate additional acts of repudiation, such as interaction, unity of the group and encouragement of third parties. In the opposite sense, the relational boycott can be a reflection of the category interaction, unity of the group and encouragement of third parties, i.e. before deciding on the boycott the customers ascertain whether there are other customers in a similar situation, interact with them, feel united by the same frustration and individually or collectively disseminate negative information about a company. Figure presents a proposed conceptual model of the relational boycott, in which bad experiences in the purchase process provided by the company (in a context of backlash), such as inefficient attendance and delay in delivery and defective products, stimulate interaction, unity of the group and encouragement of consumers to carry out the relational boycott.

The first two characteristics analyzed are the customer interaction and unity of the group. Customers who decide to share information and feelings on the fun page of the companies experience similar situations of frustration. In the case of Company A, all the passages extracted below show that the interaction between customers exists and is

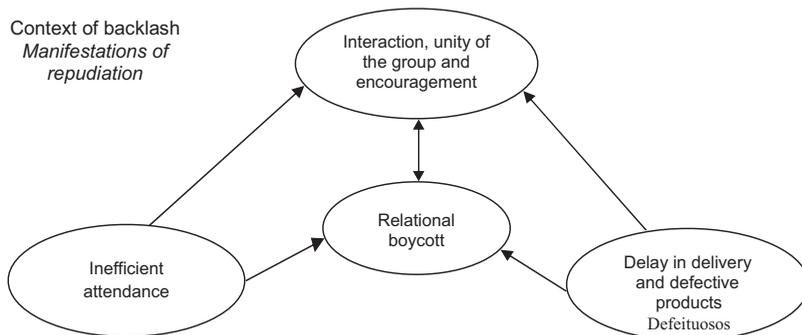


Figure 1.
Proposed conceptual model of the relational boycott

effective in the sense of leading to the exchange of negative experiences with regard to the company, which consequently results in the second characteristic found in the relational boycott: the unity of the group:

Author 1: [...] I've phoned 17 times, sent two emails, I've wasted hours of my precious time trying to solve this problem. You have sent me standard messages which you've sent to all the others.

Alexandre: Well, wonderful, Author 1! I don't feel alone in the world, problems with delivery are standard practice with Company A. My delay is of 15 days too [...] Company A excels itself with each new chapter. The delivery scheduled for today extrapolated the time I'd requested, so I shall be punished by the condominium administration. Beyond that, the product I bought came with scratches. Never again will I buy from company A!

Paulo: We must get together! We've got to continue to do what we're doing: complain here in the place where they promote products and services! I see that there are other people in the same situation as me with late delivery! Let's record a video and post in on Youtube. Let's dress up as clowns because that's what we fell like with Company A. I'm not buying anymore there and I'm going to tell everyone I know not to buy there.

Another characteristic present in the context of the relational boycott is the encouragement of third parties (present consumers, or potential consumers and customers). Beyond not agreeing, uniting forces and seeking a solution to their problems, the consumers who boycott because of a frustrating experience with a company end up by giving incentives to others to adopt the same action as themselves. When they are interested in the image of a product advertised by the company, two female consumers express their wish to have it and then another consumer (Steven) tells them the experience he had with the company and how frustrated he is with the company:

Pâmela: I want everything from there [...] hahaha – referring to a complete kitchen and a wine cellar.

Luiza: I want one – referring to a wine cellar which was being sold and commented on by Pâmela.

Steven: Just be careful that they don't deliver on time and you lose your day waiting for them! Their delivery service is shameful!

It may be seen, on the basis of the data presented in this qualitative study, that backlash is part of the concept of the relational boycott emerged here, and therefore differentiates this latter from the concept of the termination of a relationship. Relational boycott incorporates a consumer's previous or later experiences of a company, this being the kind of boycott generally accompanied by manifestations of a consumer's repudiation – especially when the consumer uses the VSNs to express her decision or intention to boycott a company. The VSNs also help consumers to unite in groups (by virtue of the fact that they have the same frustrations relating to the company) and to multiply to third parties their negative experiences, as a way of encouraging other customers. Although VSNs may facilitate relational boycotts, they may not occur only through VSNs, since they are a result of individual decisions. Individuals can use the VSNs to make their backlash actions in more effective ones. The fact that consumers decide to stop buying due to bad experiences

in the purchase process is not conditioned by the use of VSNs, but certainly they facilitate the interaction among annoyed consumers.

Final remarks

The activism of the consumers shows to be an important characteristic in the classification of the relational boycott in the taxonomy of boycotts – a characteristic which distinguishes the relational boycott from the termination of relationships in customer relationship management theory. In [Figure 1](#) we present how the relational boycott is structured, being a deliberate, primary act of the consumer resulting from the management problems of a company (poor service quality: delays in delivery, defective products and inefficient attendance) generating backlash actions such as interaction, unity of the group and encouragement of third parties. Generally, the relational boycott is structured within a context of backlash. Considering the consumers' manifestations of repudiation *vis-à-vis* companies' positions, actions or strategies, the backlash in the context of the relational boycott (mainly in the analysis of the encouragement given by consumers to other consumers or potential consumers) strengthens [Packer's \(2011\)](#) argument when he considers that the consumer not only receives information, but also re-disseminates it among peers.

The relational boycott is an individual expression and its authenticity and legitimacy arise because it is a consumer manifestation, without the interference of activists (such as is seen in other types of boycott). In social boycotts or those of minorities, religious or ecological, for example, the action of the activists may influence consumers who might not have access to information, thus creating the possibility of greater visibility on the media. In a management perspective, relational boycott rises concern about how cautious companies must be about the complete purchase process. As our results indicate, VSNs may be a rich medium for consumers to disseminate their frustrations with a company, impacting the company's image and reputation. VSNs may also fuel other kinds of boycott, such as economic, religious, of minorities, ecological and labor boycott. Future research should consider the impact of VSNs on speeding and intensifying such kinds of boycott, investigating which ones are more prone to be influenced in online environment, what are the drives for that and what situations in which boycott occurs are more favorable to be fueled in an online environment as opposed to an offline setting.

Additional suggestions for future research include:

- the model we proposed in [Figure 1](#) can be tested empirically in future research, probably in a structural equation model;
- attempts are needed to develop measurements for consumer's intention to undertake a relational boycott; and
- investigate how the categories which have arisen during this study may be related to a testable model to undertake a relational boycott.

The concept of labor boycott should be broadened to social boycott, when variables or situations related to corporative social responsibility (CSR) are taken into consideration on the basis of the stakeholder theory. The concept of the labor boycott presented by [Friedman \(1999\)](#) only takes working conditions and human rights into consideration, whereas the concept of social boycott incorporates a

context of CSR such as corruption, organizational climate and impact on society. Future research should also identify in which type of boycott (economic, of minorities, religious, ecological, social and relational) the consumer would present the greatest intention to boycott.

Our study presents some limitations, which are method specific:

- analyzing data from VSNs Facebook and Orkut only may arise concerns about selectivity bias; and
- using netnography as a research method limit our analysis to only online interaction, so consumer behavior is verified only virtually.

The mediation of the computer makes it impossible for expressions and gestures to be collected by the researcher.

This study may be important for the field of consumer behavior for several reasons, as follows:

- the boycott theme is still little studied in the consumer behavior literature, despite its being extremely relevant and contemporary;
- the relational boycott emerged in our field study is coherent to the definition of boycott in the consumer behavior literature and makes evident the importance or VSNs, of the social media and service quality; and
- presents a new type of boycott that represents a contribution to the theory on anti-consumption and TCR.

TCR is defined as academic, theory-based research that examines individual and group-level problems and opportunities related to consumption, with the goal of improving consumer well-being (Ozanne *et al.*, 2013). Since boycott represents a mechanism of protesting, it is a way that consumers pressure companies to provide better services and products, which may improve consumer's wellbeing in the long range.

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