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Boycotting vs. Canceling: Exploring Consumer Activism Against Corporations

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of The
Weissman School of Arts and Science
Baruch College, The City University of New York
In partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

In
CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

By
Erica Buchman

Graduate Student's Name

May 23, 2023

Date

Under the guidance and approval of the committee,
and approved by all its members, this project has been accepted in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in
Corporate Communication.

This project also has been presented at colloquium to departmental
colleagues and faculty.

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May 23, 2023

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Boycotting vs. Canceling:
Exploring Consumer Activism Against Corporations

By Erica Buchman

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to establish the difference between boycotting and canceling a corporation and what compels consumers to act. Consumer activism attempts to hold companies to account when a line, be it arbitrary or rational, is crossed, and these attempts are not always successful. However, when enough social pressure is exerted on a company via boycotting, depending on the wrongful act committed, accountability and change can be possible. I want to determine what some of the factors are that could compel customers to engage in consumer activism or boycott against a corporation and whether a corporation that has been “canceled” can redeem themselves in the eyes of the public. I posed two research questions and used five interview prompts to collect oral histories from five anonymous individuals about their exposure to and opinions on boycotting and cancel culture. The data analysis in this paper is qualitative and is designed so that the responses of the participants are natural and unstructured, creating a broad conversation around these two concepts. My research found that, despite some overlap in concept, cancel culture is more extreme than boycotting in that it attempts to silence corporate entities and remove them entirely from society, while the goal of boycotting is to enact change within a company’s practices.

Introduction

Everyone has opinions. With the advent of social media and the rise of Twitter in the last decade and a half, everyone now has the opportunity to publicly share their opinions on a scale never before seen in our society. We find like-minded people on social media with whom we are able to share similar opinions on everything from politics to religious beliefs to moral codes. We live and work within the boundaries of our own respective moral codes differentiating between

what is right and what is wrong and act accordingly. We may show ourselves lenience if and when we divert from our own moral compass, but if we see or hear of another person or entity acting in a way that we perceive to be wrong or immoral, we are more likely to take punitive action. This research paper introduces and explores two commonly seen forms of protests: cancelation and boycotts, both expressions of consumer activism.

Cancel culture is defined as the practice or tendency to withdraw one's support for someone (such as a celebrity) or something (such as a company) publicly and especially on social media (Merriam-Webster, 2023). This can range from simply publicly addressing the situation online to raise awareness to outright protests, especially if the entity being canceled is a company or corporation. Protesting is an important aspect of our culture's zeitgeist. It can help enact positive social change, give a voice to the voiceless or marginalized, and correct seemingly unjust business practices.

One enduring practice of protest is the boycott. For hundreds of years, consumers have collectively organized to withhold commercial or financial support of a product or company as a means of punishment. Through boycotts, people challenge companies to change objectionable or undesirable business practices by tarnishing their reputation or bottom lines (Copeland, 2014). In more recent years, there has been a conflation of boycotting and cancel culture. Boycotting is no longer considered a standalone act in and of itself against a corporate entity, but rather falls under the larger umbrellas of cancel culture and social pressure campaigns. Consumers are quicker to express a desire to "cancel" a company than they are to boycott it, even if their intention is the same (Saldanha, Mulye & Rahman, 2022). With the ubiquitousness of online shopping and the sheer size of online retailers today, traditional boycotts are no longer as prevalent or effective as they once were. However, there still remains the desire to act once a

wrongdoing has been identified. As a result, social pressure campaigns have essentially taken the place of boycotts in today's digital age.

Why do people boycott and can the target of said boycott be redeemed? These are two questions I explore in my thesis. It is not merely an examination of consumer activism—activism taken by consumers through participating in the market (Lightfoot, 2019)—against corporations, but what the catalyst is that compels people to act against these behemoths. Cancel culture has received criticism across the ideological spectrum for its unforgiving nature and ineffectiveness, while boycotts are usually not corrupt when they aim to influence economic rather than personal, moral, or ideological behavior (Altman, 2021). Once a company has been decried for its practices, can anything be done to improve their standing in the eyes of the public? This is what I investigate within my thesis in an effort to determine if there are additional objectives to these acts of protest beyond public shaming and vilification.

My thesis explores themes and provocations associated with boycotting and cancel culture followed by consumer motivation. First, a literature review will explore existing definitions of boycotting and cancel culture, which consumers are more likely to participate in protests, and examples of corporate failures that in turn ignited protests, a topic that emerged during interviews with informants. Then I used the oral history process and narrative interview data to identify some shared themes from the interviews. Lastly, I discuss how my research ultimately responded to my research questions and conclude my thesis.

Literature Review

This literature review draws on peer reviewed, scholarly articles published about boycotting, buycotting, and cancel culture. I conducted the review using keywords including, 'boycott,

cancel culture, social pressure, Twitter campaign, consumerism, protest, divestment, corporate accountability, call out culture.’ This selection of terms blanketed the scope of my research since each of the terms encompasses a different aspect of the umbrella theme of cancel culture. These terms are also varied enough to identify outlier research adjacent to these topics. I reviewed 32 published works and found that boycotting is primarily motivated by corporate failures and marginalization, whereas offensive statements or actions made by a person or brand drive cancel culture. Buycotting was a term that also came up frequently alongside boycotting, primarily in academic texts. While boycotting is punishment oriented, buycotting is more strongly associated with engaged citizenship norms because it is reward oriented and has more features in common with civic engagement (Copeland, 2014).

Boycotting, Buycotting, and Cancel Culture Definitions

Research provided several definitions of the terms ‘boycott’ and ‘cancel culture,’ treating them as separate entities. Boycotting, a concept that has existed for hundreds of years, is defined by Gardberg & Newburry as, “a social action where individuals withhold resources to punish a firm for actions or policies perceived as illegitimate or socially irresponsible and to influence corporate strategy” (Gardberg & Newburry, 2009 p. 322). Organized boycotts, divestitures, and buycotts are social movements involving secondary stakeholders who try to influence corporate behavior despite their inability to legitimately participate in organization change. Boycotts are punishment oriented, while buycotts are reward oriented. Boycotts urge consumers to withdraw their support from specific companies to punish them for poor business practices, but buycotts encourage consumers to patronize companies for desirable behavior. (Copeland, 2013). Another study more simplistically defines consumer boycotts as an attempt by one or more parties to

achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace (Makarem, 2016). The efficacy of boycotts against corporations often yields mixed results. Several studies have found that boycott movements result in significant stock price drops and influence change in company policies (Makarem, 2016), while others argue that the targets of protest resulted in stock price increase after a boycott threat or announcement due to a *buycott* of the same corporation in which consumers sought to seek consumption rather than avoid it. Buycotting is the practice of intentionally purchasing products in order to support a company (Kam & Deichert, 2019). Individuals with more comprehensive knowledge about a firm may be less likely to penalize a firm for its negative attributes, such as organized boycotts, because they also recognize its positive attributes. For example, individuals may discount an environmental boycott if they believe that the firm sells quality products and treats employees well (Gardberg & Newburry, 2009).

Cancel culture is a more recent concept which has ingratiated itself into American culture and can have a wider focus than traditional boycotting. Apart from businesses or corporations, cancel culture can apply to entire industries (#Hollywood, #finedining, etc.) or individual people, both public and private citizens (#kevinspacey, #AmyCooperIsARacist, etc.). It is broadly defined as involving a group of individuals calling for the withdrawal of support from a given entity (e.g., individual, organization, company) as consequence for questionable and/or controversial words or actions. To 'cancel' someone resembles a 'cultural boycott' that intends to demand accountability and prevent future harm. While cancel culture has many negative connotations, it is rooted in the belief that actions have consequences, and the group is more powerful than the individual (Kelter, 2021). Though similar in theory to boycotting, cancel culture goes beyond traditional boycotts or discontinuing purchase of products to include online

public shaming of the person or brand. This shaming comprises collective shunning via social media platforms of the concerned party, followed by discontinued purchases and overall withdrawal of support and loyalty. The temporary consequence of cancellation is online public rebuke and shame, but the more permanent and persistent outcomes are loss of revenue, canceled contracts, tarnished reputations and damage to the established brand positioning (Saldanha, Mulye & Rahman, 2022).

Most Likely Participants of Consumer Protests

Protests can be a way of reclaiming or asserting power amongst groups of consumers who might otherwise lack power and resources or require the influence of the collective to have their voices be heard (Little, 2014). Those who are without influence and would be more inclined to engage in demonstrations against a corporation are often members of marginalized groups. Marginalization is actualized by “instability, expendability, lack of power, and an absence of full integration with centralized decision-making” (Gardberg & Newburry, 2009 p. 319). It is an absence of power or control over resources. Types include, but are not limited to, economic, political, social, and cultural marginalization, each with a lack of resources. Marginalized group members possess fewer available influence tactics than elite group members do, and therefore are more likely to perceive boycotting as a viable action. An examination of this was explored in a July 2020 op-ed in *The Washington Post* by Allyson Brantley in which Goya Foods was at the center of a public backlash when its president, Bob Unanue, stood in the White House Rose Garden and praised President Trump as an “incredible builder” (Brantley, 2020). Swift action was then taken by activists, politicians, and celebrities—many of whom were Latino—who all condemned the company and Unanue on social media. Hashtags #Goyaway, #BoycottGoya and

#GoyaGottaGo began trending on Twitter (Brantley, 2020). However, this did not explicitly translate into tangible harm toward Goya, as their sales increased by 22% on net as a result (Liaukonyte, Tuchman & Zhu, 2022). In this particular instance, boycotting triumphed over boycotting, but in the short-run, boycott/buycott movements by construction tend to have asymmetric effects for small- and medium-sized brands: buycott movements have an unbounded potential upside since anyone can participate, whereas boycott movements are constrained in that only existing customers can *effectively* boycott and the effect can only be as large as the brand's baseline level of sales (Liaukonyte, Tuchman & Zhu, 2022).

Corporate Failures as a Motivator

The role of the corporation has evolved significantly over the course of the Twentieth and Twenty-First centuries. No longer permissible for companies to merely exist as for-profit bodies that go about their business with no regard for social change, corporations must now consider their impact on the world as a whole compared to just their local community. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was coined in 1953 by the American economist Howard Bowen when he published *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*. Bowen identified the great power of corporations and recognized that their actions had a tangible impact on society (Schoff, 2023). CSR has become an integral part of doing business and is increasingly driving consumer choice. Within the context of the firm-consumer relationship, CSR is often described as relating to the social contract between business and the society in which it operates, and this contract is the common understanding of the duties and obligations between institutions and people or more specifically a company's obligations to consumers (Russell, Russell & Honea, 2014, p.760).

Russell et al (2014) explored corporate failures as they relate to CSR and the public's response. In 2009, Whole Foods made a voluntary commitment to support the Non-GMO project, which focused on preserving and building the non-GMO food supply, educating consumers, and providing verified non-GMO product choices. However, in 2011 when Whole Foods supported the coexistence of organics with genetically modified crops, it began to receive criticism for not adhering to its stated standards. Due to growing complaints about not meeting its commitments in March 2013, Whole Foods set a deadline that all products in its US and Canadian stores must be labeled to indicate whether they contain GMOs by 2018 (Russell et al, 2014). However, the consumer penalization, as well as the corporate response, varies based on the consumer composition of a firm. Consumers committed to a particular standard or cause are more likely than less committed consumers to view the violation of a social mandate severely and penalize the violator more intensely.

The above studies help distinguish boycotting and cancel culture. Exploring the demographics and motivations of consumers most likely to act against a company via boycotting and cancel culture provided a background for empirically researching the possible differences. The background was used to develop the oral history process. While conducting research for my literature review, I felt that the research did not provide a satisfactory way of defining these terms. Scholarly definitions are provided, but the gap in research here is to provide definitions of boycotting and cancel culture from the perspective of experts with firsthand experience of consumer protests. Developing a better understanding of consumer perception of these concepts allows corporations to better understand their consumers and develop a more transparent relationship. The literature review helped to define two more detailed research questions to guide the empirical data gathering in oral history interviews.

Research Questions

RQ 1: How efficacious are boycotts or cancelations of a company?

RQ 2: How can a corporation that has been boycotted or canceled redeem themselves in the eyes of consumers?

Research Methods: Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

Determining my research method was the most intuitive part of my research—I collected oral histories in narrative interviews, which I then analyzed qualitatively. Conducting a survey would not allow for participants to account for the gray area that often accompanies the debate on the merit of boycotts and cancel culture, and neither would semi-structured, standardized interviews offer intuition and emic meanings to the extent of oral histories, which permitted informants to not only share their personal experience with the subject matter, but also incorporate their interpretations on histories, evolution, and contexts of consumer activism, and protests labelled ‘boycotts’ and ‘cancel culture.’ As I followed a narrative interviewing technique, involving only a few guiding and clarifying questions by myself, the informants were able to provide their own interpretations in their own words. I limited my sessions to thirty minutes of nearly free flowing narratives with five subjects with varied expertise on the topic, guided by only minimal prompts. The oral histories were conducted over Google Meets, with Otter.ai recording audio and providing real-time transcription. Afterwards, I used the transcripts of the oral accounts to support my notes of themes from the respondent narratives. The

transcriptions were auto generated, and minimal data cleanup was necessary due to muffled speech.

I chose five participants because two and half hours of conversation focused on the varied forces behind boycotts and the perceived differentiation between boycotts and cancel culture would be a sufficient amount of data to analyze and arrive at conclusions. I will refer to each interview participant as Informants 1-5. Informant 1 (I1) is a postdoctoral researcher, focusing on trolling victimology. Informant 2 (I2) is a Professor of Communication who has published research on the dimensions of cancel culture. Informant 3 (I3) is the Head of Global Reputation Risk and Public Affairs at a renowned public relations agency. Informant 4 (I4) is the Chief of Staff of Global Reputation Risk at the same agency. Informant 5 (I5) is the Managing Supervisor of Crisis Communication at another well-known public relations agency. I noted that “the data for a qualitative study most often are notes jotted down in the field or during an interview—from which the original comments, observations, and feelings are reconstructed—or text transcribed from (Schutt, 2018, p. 326).” I, as the administrator of these oral histories, prompted informants to share how they defined cancel culture and boycotting in their own words, to share their thoughts on its efficacy based on experiences where they had been involved as subject, advisor or researcher, and their opinions whether a path to redemption was open to companies once they had ignited public vitriol. Examples of the prompts I used included: what does cancel culture mean to you, what do you think various instances of consumer activism have in common with each other? could you share your thoughts about what might drive people to action against a company, share your thoughts about forgiveness or redemption once a company has been deemed canceled, your thinking/experiences of the difference between boycotting and canceling a corporation or company and whether one is more effective than the other? I also incorporated

key terms in my prompts throughout the oral histories, including boycott, cancel culture, social pressure, protest, divestment, corporate accountability, to encourage narrating about these topics.

Data Analysis

When analyzing the data I focused on definitions, examples and explanations provided by informants. I noted that all informants had strong opinions on what they felt each of these concepts entailed, no respondent struggled with expressing examples of any concept. In the following, I will provide excerpts/quotes from the discussion with the informants around different topics.

1. Understandings of Cancel Culture

“I look at it as a phenomenon that exists when the public becomes the judge, jury, and executioner so to speak. Cancel culture is originally a grassroots movement, or it comes from the grassroots movement coming from typically a minority community center and on social media.” –I1

“I think it's a lot of ways trying to mute or silence someone that doesn't agree with your opinion. You know if something is morally wrong, or racially wrong, there are things that are we just we can agree and define as wrong, and society shows sometimes people are outed for something maybe it's a sexual act or something that does become validated. But what troubled me is many times people when

someone disagrees with them, they believe that person should frankly no longer exist.”—I2

2. Commonalities of Various Instances of Consumer Activism

“There's an idea of anger and the desire to punish, a desire for power and justice to be given at the consumer level. What I see is as a common theme between various social movements is that they start with someone being ticked off. That spreads and the desire to punish is then assuming you get enough people to actually get angry and it actually begins with social movement.”—I3

“In my mind, they are all rather organic, through social media, some take off and some don't. It's a tool to hurt another business and on a consumer front. For instance, there was a sort of a cancelation if you went to work for any of the fossil fuel companies. You go work for, say, Chevron and people were trying to destroy your career, but how far do you go within the realm of something that's still legal? When you're threatening people to even take work or an ancillary account with that business, that's a far reach.”—I2

3. Reasons for People to Take Action Against a Company

Prior to undertaking the oral histories, I had been under the assumption that emotion was the primary catalyst that led consumers to move against a corporation. However, my informants offered varying opinions on what could lead to grassroots activism.

“All the evidence that I've seen so far as an academic and as a person is, sadly, that it comes from anger, someone always has to get ticked off for the actual change to happen.”—I1

“It comes from a desire to confirm, to want to be identified with this movement. Nowadays, we're all piling on and, frankly, anybody at any location on a smartphone can become part of that narrative. You might take risk then of getting canceled yourself, but it's pretty easy to pile on, whatever the big conforming group is.”—I4

Informant #4's observation that protesting can stem from a desire to conform within a larger group struck a particular chord, as it enabled me to view organized protests in a new light. The individual's desire to be part of a movement bigger than themselves can be a greater call to action than objectionable behavior exhibited by a company or brand, regardless of the behavior in question.

“It really has to do with the organization's own values and mission. If there is a sort of societal issue or social issue that naturally goes against some of their core values, then I think stakeholders, and consumers are going to expect to see some change.”—I5

4. Thoughts About Forgiveness or Redemption

A common thread amongst the histories provided is the public's reluctance towards forgiveness. Informant #1 noted that it is easier to forgive a single person rather than a corporate identity. Moreover, other participants were of the opinion that society is not interested in allowing companies to redeem themselves because it relinquishes a sense of control that the consumer possesses. Companies can attempt to view the protests from the consumer's perspective in a show of contrition, but unless they address the heart of the issue, it will only serve as a band-aid remedy.

“It's easier to forgive a person than it is to forgive an entity. Forgiveness toward a company requires an admission of guilt, which is very rare, especially if you're talking about major corporations. And it also requires a visible action toward change. These things are not common. And I think that is part of the reason why it's so hard for a company to redeem themselves.”—I1

“People don't want to forgive. Forgiveness is no longer in the narrative. It's sort of seek and destroy. It seems to be that way because until we can come together and have an open discussion without being attacked. I don't think you're going to get to the point of expecting much forgiveness.”—I2

“We've become a society of entitled zealots who believe that whether or not they have the education, understanding and background to decide something they have the right as a citizen, as a consumer as anything to force a company into doing

something that they want them to do. It doesn't matter if the company ultimately bows down to pressure and accepts the demands of the public. The public isn't interested in forgiving corporations. They just want the companies to be beholden to them.”—I3

“In order for a company to really truly redeem themselves, they should show that they are committed to addressing the concerns of their consumers and stakeholders that have boycotted, and really try to understand what the core issue is at the heart of the boycott, because a lot of the time, companies will try to address the symptoms of the boycott versus actually addressing the core issue that people are taking to.”—I5

5. Distinguishing Boycotts and Cancellations

Based on the informants narrating in this research it seems that definitions of boycotting and canceling are similar in nature, with cancelation stemming from boycotts, but being ultimately more severe in its objective. Their efficacy, however, is debatable depending on whom was asked. Informant #4 (who works in crisis PR) was adamant that boycotts and cancellations do not work unless the company stock price is negatively impacted, while Informant #2 (an academic) stipulated that if a brand or individual is turned into a social pariah as a result of cancel culture, then protestors have in fact achieved their goal.

“I believe that canceling is a modern evolution of the boycott. Boycotts are primarily about punishing a company by refusing to purchase their products. That

is definitely part of canceling too, but I think canceling goes further by attempting to remove the company or person's voice from public discourse. Canceling is about silencing, while boycotts are typically about effecting change. That said, they are very similar, and I wouldn't doubt that canceling flows from the tradition of boycotting. Because of this, I don't think one is more effective than the other; canceling is just the way we punish companies now that we have easier access to them via social media.”—I1

“Boycotting might represent more of a public act against a brand, corporation, or institution. A boycott might be individualistic, or an attempt is made to have others join in and refrain from purchasing. Attempting to cancel the same brand, corporation, or institution would be the act of intending to put those entities out of business. To assure they can no longer compete in the marketplace or participate publicly in society. Defining the construct of "effective" would be based on what is intended. Is it about consumers making specific choices on product and purchase, or is effective assuring the organization no longer exists? In an age of social media and groupthink, cancel culture carries more social identity. So in that sense, canceling might be more effective. It has the potential for a greater ‘call to action.’”—I2

“Canceling and boycotting a company are essentially the same thing and they’ve never been proven to work. I think they’re interchangeable terms. Canceling an individual, we know, works. Especially if you’re in the public eye. But effectively

impacting the stock price of a company to the point where change happens?

Definitely not.”—I4

“I think cancel culture is a way to describe the underlying societal norm, like to cancel something is more of like a movement or more of just like an action to boycott. I feel like it's a little bit more specific and a little bit more long lasting in a sense, like cancel culture, I feel like it's also very quick, it's really hard to predict when something or someone is going to be canceled in a minute. I think boycotts tend to kind of bubble up over time. There's a lot more work that goes on behind the scenes to get there. I think boycotts can be effective I think it depending on the boycott. Maybe not immediately, but they can be effective in gaining attention and making people notice when something is wrong.”—I5

Boycotts, Buycotts & Cancel Culture: Examples of Distinctions

Below I discuss two commonalities that emerged during data analysis: brands and anger as a driving catalyst for consumer activism. Interviews were unstructured and guided with only minimal prompts to provide informants ample opportunity to speak freely. The informants were not prompted with the below but rather, the examples emerged organically during the interviews while the informants were connecting brands with boycotts and cancel culture in their interpretations. The quotes selected below provide rich insight into the data.

Brands

Each respondent provided an example of a brand that stands out in regard to positive or negative practices of boycotting and cancel culture. While not included in my research questions, in each interview this topic also presented itself naturally. Informants wanted to discuss examples. The results were varied, and each respondent had a different company in mind, as well as differing reasons for why each company resonated with consumers. Some instances were due to gender and sexual politics (e.g., M&Ms and Chick-fil-A), while others focused on environmentalism (e.g., Nestle). Boycotting versus buycotting was also indirectly mentioned during the oral histories, where informants mused aloud that certain protests would in fact encourage people to patronize certain brands *because* they were controversial. Respondent #3, for example, was quick to observe that despite the fact that Chick-fil-A's CEO was openly outspoken against gay marriage, it did not ultimately harm their bottom line because more people liked Chick-fil-A's food more than they disliked the CEO's opinions.

“A lot of people have tried to boycott Chick-fil-A due to their CEO's stance on gay marriage but every time I drive by there's three blocks of cars lined up to go in there. And sometimes I think it empowers these businesses because remember, we're factionalized and some people that might speak against a Chick-fil-A that might empower or galvanize somebody else who believes in some of the standards or beliefs of a Chick-fil-A or a Hobby Lobby.”—I3

Informant #3 made an excellent point that part of what makes it so hard for companies to achieve rehabilitation in the public eye is the knowledge that unpopular policies or actions taken by corporations required the involvement and cooperation from multiple people in positions of

power. It is unusual for a single employee to possess the authority and logistical savviness to successfully carry out unsavory or illegal business practices; multiples parties are usually called for and the complicit behavior of those participating enforces a perception of willful wrongdoing.

“I think a person is seen as more redeemable because in order for a company to screw up more than one person has to have agreed to that decision. If you have a company that has committed atrocities worldwide when it comes to water, for example. Let’s look at Nestle. So Nestle has committed environmental atrocities all around the world. And it's going to be really hard to forgive Nestle or for Nestle to redeem themselves, because so many people had to agree that they should steal water from other people. So many people had to agree to that decision.”—I2

Informant #1’s description of consumer reaction to Hasbro’s attempt to license D&D merchandise was a classic example of consumers successfully employing boycotting tactics as a means of protest against an unfavorable business practice, as defined by Gardberg & Newburry.

“The gaming community has had one very huge boycott that was extremely successful recently. The Dungeons and Dragons community recently was in an uproar because the content for Dungeons and Dragons has always been in the public domain. So things like 20-sided dice, known as a D20 in D&D parlance [a necessary tool to in order to play the game], or selling Dungeons and Dragons-themed products have been in the public domain, so you can imagine millions of

Etsy shops that make D&D merchandise have been able to do so without any legal ramifications. This is because the Wizards of the Coast which was the company that owned the intellectual property for D&D, made it that way. Hasbro has since purchased Wizards of the Coast and they were talking about making D&D a licensed product, ultimately backtracking and saying it's no longer in the public domain; players would then have to give a portion of their profits to Hasbro. The D&D community revolted immediately by completely destroying all of their subscriptions to Hasbro and D&D products, anything that required money. There was a massive stock price decrease to the point where Hasbro very quickly backpedaled and said D&D is going to remain in the public domain. They were like, 'oh no, it's just something we were only discussing. Just kidding. Please come back with your subscription money.' This was actually a successful boycott that actually got the company to go back on what they were saying and keep a beloved intellectual property in the public domain.”—11

Reiterating the power that a decreased stock price has on a company's actions (as demonstrated above), Informant #4 stated several times throughout our session that he does not believe boycotts are an effective way to impact a company's actions unless there is evidence of financial harm. Otherwise, public outcry against a company carries almost no weight regardless of where the outcry originates from.

“Boycotts from an economic standpoint have never been proven to work. For example, hard right-wing people are calling for a boycott of M&Ms, because they

changed how the green M&M looks. If a boycott is getting spewed from, like, the loudest talking mouth in the country, like Tucker Carlson, that would be pretty bad. But the situation at hand is like, what does a boycott of M&Ms even mean? It doesn't really mean anything. It's just selective outrage. Maybe there's like a tiny, tiny, tiny subset of people that won't buy M&Ms, but it's not really that big of a deal.”—I4

Anger as a Common Catalyst for Consumer Activism

Another theme I discovered during the data analysis stage was that when consumers felt particularly angry at a corporation or social injustice, it spurred online activity and motivate the public to turn against the entity du jour. Three out of five informants mentioned anger or unrest as the catalyst for consumer activism. This insight occurred organically during oral histories; I did not prompt any informants with questioning focused on any one specific instance of boycotts or cancelations.

“An ad agency I do quite a bit of work with became very public on a very polarized social cause. And that same company is very big about recruiting young people and their whole thing is, ‘we are here to help you self-actualize. We are here to help you embrace and live out your personal passions.’ So by taking that stance, they validated one faction and broke the hearts of the others. I think there's a deeper anger inside of people. There's an unrest, there's something unfulfilled, that they have to become part of a lot of this because it doesn't seem human. It's

not to be human and natural to what we become. But maybe that's just the culture we're in.”—I2

“Almost always, whenever I see a social movement, whether it's something like Black Lives Matter, or whether it's in response to the revelation that Ellen DeGeneres is a jerk to her staff, there's always an element of frustration or anger that sparks these movements, someone has to get angry, and usually a lot of people get angry. And that is kind of the motivation for these social movements.”—I1

“The George Floyd issue with DEI was more just shining a light on something that was pretty universal that needed to be addressed. I think they're similar in that sense. They're obviously different, because #MeToo, is an examination of people actively violating sexual harassment policies and targeting vulnerable people, whereas I think the DEI issue was more of people being overlooked, it was a little bit more subtle, difficult to pin down, that like an allegation of sexual harassment. So I think those are like similar instances in which you have people that are lighting that fuse.”—I4

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the overarching research questions: how efficacious are boycotts or cancelations of a company and how can a corporation that has been boycotted or canceled redeem themselves in the eyes of consumers? This research study reveals consumer perception

about current boycotts and cancelations of popular brands and provides an analysis of what consumers associate with boycotts and cancel culture. Utilizing this data to better understand consumer motivations presents an opportunity for companies to increase their self-awareness regarding the public's perceptions and interpretations of their actions to better avoid boycotts and potential cancelations.

The results surprised me since my starting point was that the expert informants likely would not offer to distinguish the two concepts, when in fact four out of five informants had clearly defined examples of boycotts and cancel culture in their mind. The definitions provided by informants for both boycotts and cancel culture closely matched the research provided in the literature review. Examination of the oral histories further elucidated that the public is not prone to forgiveness once a company has crossed an arbitrary line and upset the status quo through questionable business practices.

In light of this data of experts' interpretations, cancel culture is viewed less favorably than boycotts by consumers. Boycotting is perceived as a form of protest against an injustice, while cancel culture is viewed as a more extreme, punitive measure. These findings support what was discussed in the literature review section.

The theme of anger echoes the research discussed in the literature review. Consumers are conscious of the fact that anger is a key motivator in the call to action, and informants in this study highlights the role it plays within boycotts and cancelation attempts. Although informants noted that collective anger is more powerful than the individuals, informants still did state that this particular emotion is essential.

The outcome of this research brings attention to a gap in the field of consumer perception. The gap is speaking directly to consumers about their understanding of the difference

between boycotts and cancel culture. Developing a better understanding of consumer perception of these concepts will allow companies to respond accordingly when faced with public backlash. Companies will better align social and environmental initiatives with their core company values and effect positive social change.

Limitations noted in this study include the small number of informants from whom I collected oral histories. However, this study provides the foundation to continue exploring the topic with a larger population data. Had the number of informants been higher and the interview times longer, there would be more data available for analysis to draw conclusions. Data coding hundreds of pages of interview transcriptions can be overwhelming and difficult for one researcher to handle alone. These two factors were my strongest limitations.

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