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## Journal of Business Research



## Exploring consumer boycott intelligence using a socio-cognitive approach

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## ABSTRACT

Despite a worldwide growth in the number of boycott campaigns, the results of studies are inconclusive as the motives behind individual participation are still largely ignored. Drawing on a socio-cognitive theory, the theory of planned behavior, this research investigates whether the direct variables of attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control, help predict consumers' boycott intention. Conducted in Lebanon, this work employs a survey design administered to a randomized systematic sample of 500 Muslim and Christian consumers. The sample is split into two sub-samples reflecting the main religious groups in the Middle-East. Results show that although the Muslim participants appear more prone to participate in the boycott, still attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control are all significant predictors of intentions in both communities with the attitudinal component carrying the most weight. This application of a social psychology theory to the consumers' passive resistance to purchasing yielded significant contributions at the theoretical, empirical, and managerial levels.

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## 1. Introduction

Consumer behavior advances knowledge and models the processes that consumers use in purchasing decisions. Boycotting decisions are increasingly used by consumers as an economic voting means against companies (and countries) judged to be unethical. Friedman (1999, p. 4) describes a boycott as, "the attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases". In some circumstances, pressure groups urge consumers not to buy specific products or the products of a particular country to pressure the latter to adopt ethical practices in its policy and behavior.

Research relating to boycotts is of practical importance due to its potential repercussions on corporate performance. Research shows that boycotts do occur and are often successful (Friedman, 1999). Studies suggest that boycotts are effective in that the mere pronouncement of a boycott can have negative effects on an organization's share price pushing it to take either reactive defense strategies or corrective actions (Davidson et al., 1995; Pruitt and Friedman, 1986).

When consumers boycott a company, its sales, income, cash flows, and consequently stock price, may decrease. In their study examining market responses to boycott announcements between 1970 and 1980, Pruitt and Friedman (1986) report significant negative returns for 21 targeted companies immediately prior to announcements of the boycott. Similarly, the work of Pruitt et al. (1988) employ a time-series

methodology to assess the impact of boycott announcements to demonstrate that boycotts lead to economically and statistically significant losses in the stock price of target companies. Davidson et al. (1995) confirm these findings in examining 40 boycott announcements between 1969 and 1991 reporting significant negative reactions of the share price.

Boycott participation is not only a collective effort for behavior change, but also a complex expression of each participant's individuality. One's need for outrage expression, for self-esteem maintenance, or even enhancement can motivate boycott participation (Brewer and Brown, 1998). Participating in a boycott called for by a group which one identifies with also helps to preserve one's sense of belonging (Sen et al., 2001). In addition to perceived social pressure, one's sense of moral obligation can be a significant boycotting motivator. According to Blasi and Oresick's (1985) analysis of self-consistency, morally responsible action is an expression of this sense of identity. When a person has a commitment to a set of values, that person's identity becomes at stake if the behavior is inconsistent with such values. A false evaluation of the exact relationship between one's participation and the target's behavior can occur (John and Klein, 2003). This attitude can be due to an exaggerated assessment of one's impact, i.e. perceived effectiveness, or to the belief that one's actions will cause others to behave similarly, i.e. illusion of control.

Several noteworthy factors may restrain one's incentive to boycott. These factors are mainly the costs associated with the consumer's dependence, preference, and/or loyalty to the boycotted product (John and Klein, 2003), as well as the unavailability in the marketplace of affordable substitutes (Sen et al., 2001). The small-agent and free-rider effects (Hardin, 1968; Olson, 1965) can limit one's motivation to participate. Some people may consider that they would reap the

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benefits of a boycott whether they participate or not and thus may be motivated to free ride upon the actions of others. A number of consumers may also think that they are relatively small in comparison to the market, and hence their actions are unlikely to have an impact. Led by the thrill of victory, some people may like to be part of a successful boycott in which case both the free rider and the small-agent effects disappear. The perception that boycott campaigns may have negative outcomes, such as increased unemployment, may deter one's participation (Klein et al., 2004).

Ethical purchase behavior involves buying from companies and nations whose behaviors are deemed ethical and refraining from purchasing from those whose practices are judged to be unethical. Though viewable by some to be “the most deliberate form of ethical purchase behavior” (Smith, 1987), boycotts seldom feature in the business ethics literature (Brinkmann, 2002).

## 2. Theoretical framework

Although boycotting increasingly attracts attention in contemporary consumer research (e.g., Peñaloza and Price, 1992), existing research at the consumer level is driven by narrow theoretical frameworks with many studies adopting financial frameworks (Friedman, 1985). These studies investigate the effects of boycott campaigns on the sales and share price figures of targeted companies. Prior work overlooks the underlying motives and cognitive processes behind consumers' boycotting. This gap in the literature has prompted many scholars to call for sounder theoretical frameworks, methods, and empirical investigations in boycotting research (see Klein et al., 2002, 2004; Kozinets and Handelman, 1998; Sen et al., 2001).

The methods that earlier case studies use have weaknesses for their reliance on convenience and student-based samples, for example, see Klein et al. (2004). Much of this research is conducted in western contexts. Although boycotts take place in a variety of international markets, the present study focuses on the Middle East. The researchers consider this area of the world most suitable due to the strong feelings that consumers display against American products. In this region where the cultural mix and the social and religious beliefs are arguably most influential, research seems most needed.

Acknowledging the paucity of theoretically driven research, this paper extends a social psychology approach to understand the factors affecting the Lebanese consumers' intentions to boycott American products as a sign of protest against the US policy in the Middle East. Arab citizens exercise numerous boycotts of American products (Al-Zobaidy, 2002; Raid, 2002) in response to the perceptions held by consumers sympathetic to Pan-Arab causes that the United States airs on the side of Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians (Carter, 2006), and because of its actions in Iraq, and overall foreign policy in the region.

With the intention of complementing the literature in the area of consumer boycott behavior, the present study uses the theory of planned behavior (TPB, Ajzen, 1991). Expectancy value models are popular in applied social psychology, with the theory of reasoned action (TRA, Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) cited until the late 1980s as being the most widely used model. This cognitive behavioral model posits a causal link between attitude and subjective norms on the one hand and the behavioral intention construct. The TPB stems from the theory of reasoned action, and proposes that intentions are the direct antecedents of behavior, and are predicted by attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (PBC). The theory proposes that a) individuals are more likely to carry out a particular behavior if they believe that the behavior will lead to specific desirable outcomes; b) if the people whose views they value think they should carry out the behavior, and, c) if they consider that they have the needed resources and opportunities to do so.

The addition of the PBC construct in the TPB improves the predictive capabilities of the earlier model, particularly for behaviors

that are not under volitional control. According to Ajzen and Madden (1986), the perceived ease or difficulty of performing a behavior reflects beliefs about the presence of internal and external factors that may further or impede the performance of a behavior. Another tenet of the TPB is that concepts external to the theory, such as personality traits, influence behavior indirectly through attitude, subjective norm, and PBC (Ajzen, 1991). This justifies the futility of including in the research instrument items related to individual attributes.

Some scholars criticize the TPB for its reliance on self-reports in the determination of the respondents' intention and actual behavior. Critics of self-report data consider this subjective and unreliable. Studies indicate that people with more positive attitudes tend to report more positive actions than they actually perform, and vice-versa (Ross et al., 1983). Nonetheless, Schifter and Ajzen (1985) argue that the TPB helps to overcome the self-report issue, as it addresses behaviors that occur without a person's volitional control. The added PBC component demonstrates that intention is influenced both by how difficult the task is perceived to be, and whether the person expects to successfully complete the behavior. Ajzen and Fishbein (2004) respond to Ogden's (2003) contention that self-reported behavior is contaminated by self-reported cognitions by explaining that this is “an empirical question” (p. 432). The bias, which results from self-reports, is often due to some respondents exaggerating their performance of socially desirable behaviors. Although this exaggeration may magnify the correlations between cognitions and behavior, the fact that such biases may invalidate the model seems to be overstated (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2004).

### 2.1. Hypotheses development

The TPB provides a parsimonious account of both informational and motivational influences on behavior. Intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence a behavior. The stronger the intention to engage in a behavior, the more likely is its performance. The TPB assumes that “the more favorable the attitude and subjective norms with respect to a behavior, and the greater the perceived behavioral control, the stronger should be an individual's intention to perform the behavior under consideration” (Ajzen, 1991). The present study investigates whether or not the direct measures of attitude, subjective norm and PBC can help predict consumers' boycotting intention.

**H1.** A positive relationship exists between attitudes towards and the intention to participate in the boycott.

**H2.** A positive relationship exists between subjective norms and the intention to participate in the boycott.

**H3.** A positive relationship exists between PBC and the intention to participate in the boycott.

The relative weight of attitude, subjective norm, and PBC in the prediction of intention varies across behaviors and situations (Ajzen, 1991). In some instances, only attitudes have an impact on intentions, in others, attitudes and PBC are sufficient to account for intentions, while sometimes all three predictors may make independent contributions. These weights may differ across participants depending on their religious affiliations.

**H4.** Attitude has a similar weight on the prediction of boycotting intention for Muslim and Christian respondents.

**H5.** Subjective norm has a similar weight on the prediction of boycotting intention for Muslim and Christian respondents.

**H6.** PBC has a similar weight on the prediction of boycotting intention for Muslim and Christian respondents.

### 3. Method

The use of the TPB model determines the methodological directions and empiricist orientation of the study. The research design bears in mind that boycott participation is an emotional expression of a consumer's attitude. The study focuses on measuring consumers' learned reasoning and beliefs concerning the U.S. policy in the Middle East translated into the cognitive action of participating in the boycott. The two main religious groups, Muslims and Christians, form the unit of analysis. Religion has traditionally been of overriding importance in defining the Lebanese population, the adherence of its citizens to the local political groups, as well as their recognition of their Arab identity. Given the social, religious, and political distribution of the Lebanese community, the study includes the expectation that significant differences in the participation intention rate between these two sub-groups are based on both their religious and social beliefs.

#### 3.1. Sample and research design

Past research built around the TPB investigates university students or similar groups using convenience samples. Little research focuses on samples drawn from the general population (Armitage and Christian, 2003). In this work, authors' knowledge of the region presents a significant advantage making it possible to adopt a multi-stage sampling technique. The country is stratified along the five local conglomerates—covering the various geographical zones of Southern Lebanon, Beqaa, Greater Beirut, Mount-Lebanon and Northern Lebanon. The authors adopt a social group theorist approach to conglomerate stratification based on the knowledge that Lebanese people of a same religion typically cluster by geographic zones. A systematic sampling based on the fixed-lines telephone directory is used to compile contact numbers. The number of lines in each conglomerate is computed in proportion to the corresponding number of residents, with one respondent sampled from each household based on the age criteria.

#### 3.2. Construction of the instrument

The measurement of the study concepts involves the adaptation of existing TPB scales to the current research subject and setting. The questionnaire is constructed based on Ajzen guidelines for TPB-based instrument development (2000). The design of the instrument allows for the measurement of the direct constructs included in the TPB framework, consisting of attitudes, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control.

Initial concerns over the ability of the instrument to measure the constructs, and in line with Spector's (1992) recommendations for construct validation, the following steps are used to arrive at the appropriate selection of constructs and scales. The study compiles a list of all described boycotting motives by scanning the academic and non-academic literature, including articles in local newspapers and magazines. A similar procedure is followed to search for available scales used in studies applying the TPB. A thorough analysis is conducted to evaluate the relevance of these scales to the present

**Table 1**

Total variance explained and percentage of variance by varimax rotation.

Component	Eigenvalue	% of variance	Cumulative %	Communalities extraction
ATT 1	5.454	90.892	90.892	0.925
ATT 2	0.212	3.527	94.419	0.906
ATT 3	0.114	1.897	96.317	0.942
ATT 4	0.098	1.633	97.95	0.865
ATT 5	0.065	1.08	99.03	0.923
ATT 6	0.058	0.97	100	0.893

**Table 2**

Response rate per conglomerate and cross tabulation between conglomerates of residence and boycotting status.

		Beirut	Mount Lebanon	Northern Lebanon	Bekaa	Southern Lebanon
Response rate		77.77%	61.81%	64.94%	81.69%	85.57%
Boycotting status	Never boycotted	28.60%	65.40%	33.60%	29.30%	29.21%
	Boycotted in the past	40.80%	22%	40.70%	36.20%	38.20%
	Still boycotting	30.60%	12.60%	25.70%	34.50%	32.59%

study. In the case of a hypothetical concept like attitude, validity cannot be tested directly and all measures are therefore necessarily inferential. The authors rely significantly on their judgment to assess whether the instrument successfully captures the respondents' relevant attitudes.

The scale for attitude toward boycotting is adapted from that of the attitude toward the act that Ajzen and Driver (1992) use. Six of the original 12 bipolar adjective items considered pertinent in the present context are chosen based on the interviews at the exploratory stage. Following the recommendations of Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), attitudes toward participating in the boycott are assessed by asking the respondents to evaluate this behavior using the following stem: "My participation in the boycott against American companies would be/is". The assessment is based on three bipolar adjectives, reflecting an instrumental dimension and, measured on a seven-point semantic-differential scale with the following endpoints: "useless–useful, not beneficial–beneficial, and unfair–fair", and three similarly-constructed items reflecting a moral dimension with "bad–good, unreasonable–reasonable, and undesirable–desirable."

Ajzen (2000) proposes counterbalancing positive and negative endpoints to minimize the risk of response set. However, a number of scholars argue that this approach could be counterproductive (McCull et al., 2001). Accordingly, and after piloting the questionnaire, the various adjectives were balanced coherently across the questions. Attitude is the average of the six items. Internal consistency for this measure produces a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .93 ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ).

Research suggests that people's consumption decisions are strongly influenced by their reference groups (Childers and Rao, 1992). Consumer boycotting behavior may be similarly influenced. The subjective norm is operationalized to reflect perceptions of pressure arising from influential persons in the consumer's social life and a tendency to comply with this pressure (Norman and Smith, 1995; Terry and O'Leary, 1995). Important here is whether the influential people, such as parents, close friends, colleagues, religious leaders and members of the community at large, approve or disapprove of one's boycott participation. Individual subjective norms vary with the behavior under consideration and across situations depending on the saliency of the referents.

Following the guidelines of Ajzen and Madden (1986), the study uses two items to assess subjective norm. Participants are asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following two items: "Most people who are important to me think that I should boycott American companies" and "Most people who are important to me, did/do actually participate in the boycott". Responses are scored on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale, and a single measure is obtained by averaging the responses on the two scales. The first scale has an injunctive quality, which often causes responses to have low variability because important others are generally perceived to approve of desirable behaviors and disapprove of undesirable ones (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). The second item captures descriptive social norms, i.e. whether important others do themselves perform the behavior. Cronbach alpha coefficient for these two items is .92 ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ).

In line with the seminal work of Ajzen and Madden (1986), the direct measure of PBC is obtained by summing up two ratings.

**Table 3**  
Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of the direct TPB variables.

Variables	Sample (n = 500)				Muslims (n = 231)				Christians (n = 269)			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Correlations	1-ATT	–			–				–			
	2-SN	0.844	–		0.757	–			0.839	–		
	3-PBC	0.881	0.801	–	0.799	0.729	–		0.883	0.790	–	
	4-INT	0.918	0.859	0.902	–	0.867	0.821	0.859	–	0.914	0.847	0.893
Mean	4.63	3.59	4.83	4.14	5.61	4.73	5.72	5.27	3.79	2.6	4.07	3.18
SD	2.01	1.63	2.00	2.35	1.43	1.08	1.58	1.84	2.06	1.37	2.00	2.31

Note: ATT = attitude, SN = subjective norms, PBC = perceived behavioral control, INT = intentions. All correlations are significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

Participants are asked to disagree or agree with two statements: “If I want I can refrain from buying American products” and “I have total control over whether I do or do not boycott American products.” As such, respondents rate their capacity to refrain from buying the products and the likelihood of their having absolute control over the decision. PBC is the average of these items. A Cronbach alpha coefficient of .74 is obtained for this scale ( $M = 4.84, SD = 2.00$ ).

For the assessment of behavioral intention, two 7-point (strongly disagree–strongly agree) semantic-differential items are designed to elicit respondents’ intentions to participate or to continue participating in the boycott. The questionnaire items are as follows: “I intend to start/keep on boycotting American products” and “I will try to start/keep on boycotting American products”. The summed response of the two items serves as the measure of intention. The inter-item correlation for the intention measure is .90 ( $M = 4.14, SD = 2.35$ ).

The survey also includes standard demographic questions such as age, gender, religious affiliation, educational qualifications, and residence conglomerate.

3.3. Instrument pre-test

The questionnaire is translated into Arabic, through a five-step process, including forward and blind back-translation, to ensure comprehensibility, acceptability, relevance, and completeness (see Brislin, 1986; Fowler, 1993). The construction of two versions (Arabic and English) made it possible to target the preferred language of the Lebanese respondents. A subsequent pilot study, conducted with a convenience sample of 131 undergraduate and postgraduate university students and staff members from four Lebanese universities, tested for item validity and construct reliability. Pre-testing resulted in minor corrections of the research instrument. Data gathering consisted of face-to-face interviews carried out across the various regions of the country, by a team of both male and female researchers in order to conform to local social and religious principles.

3.4. Reliability computations

Three measures of internal consistency among the items are computed in order to check for the reliability of all the direct measures of the questionnaire. The first step computes the corrected item-total correlations indicating the correlations between each item and the total score from the questionnaire. Items that fail to correlate with the overall score from the scale are dropped. At the second stage, computing the Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha$ ) scores measures the overall reliability of the scale. Commonly, if the inter-item correlations are high, then there is evidence that the items are measuring the same underlying construct. Although a value of .8 is seen as an acceptable value for alpha, Kline (1999) has noted that a cut-off point of .7 is acceptable.

A measure is calculated to indicate the change in Cronbach’s alpha that occurs following the deletion of each item on the subscales. Where item deletion causes a substantial increase in alpha then that item is dropped to improve reliability. The reliability of all scales used in the pre-

test proved to be adequate. Cronbach’s alphas exceeding .75 were obtained for each of the aforementioned scales. The Cronbach alpha coefficients for internal reliability of the attitude, subjective norm, and PBC items, were:  $\alpha_{ATT} = .93, \alpha_{SN} = .92, \alpha_{PBC} = .74$  and  $\alpha_{Intentions} = .90$ . Only one item from the PBC scale warranted exclusion in the light of high-corrected item-total correlations.

3.5. Factor analysis

Since the attitudinal scales used in this research are largely exploratory in nature, the scales are factor analyzed to produce simplified measures which reflect the underlying dimensions (Churchill, 1991). Hair et al. (1998) suggest that if the objective of the factor analysis is to uncover the smallest number of factors which account for the largest amount of variance in the variable, then the principal components analysis (PCA) extraction technique is most appropriate. Accordingly, a PCA was undertaken to identify the underlying dimensions present in the attitudinal data. Examination of the data revealed a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy of .926, with a significant Bartlett’s test of sphericity ( $p = .00$ ). These measures indicate that the data is suitable for factoring. When a component’s eigenvalue is greater than 1 and the percentage of variance is greater than 6.7%, the component is retained for factor extraction (Kaiser, 1958). The lower cut-off for interpreting factor loading is set at .30 ( $\alpha = .05; power = .80$ ) (Hair et al., 1998).

Since this research is built around hierarchical regression analysis, a varimax orthogonal rotation has been selected to produce uncorrelated orthogonal factors (Hair et al., 1998). The rotated factor analysis of the six attitudinal items yields a one-factor solution (see Table 1), which accounts for 90.89% of the variance. The structure of the scale, where all the attitudinal questions load substantially on only one component, suggests that the questionnaire is well designed against the theoretical structure of the TPB model.

3.6. Response rate

Of the 750 contacts selected for survey through landline phone numbers, 500 Lebanese consumers aged 16 years and above, completed the questionnaire. Respondents were assured anonymity and confidentiality. The sample consisted of 258 males and 242 females. Forty-six percent were Muslims and fifty-four were

**Table 4**  
Cross-tabulation between religious affiliation and boycotting status.

		Arab boycotting status			Total
		Never boycotted	Boycotted in the past	Still boycotting	
Religion	Muslim (n Muslims = 231)	23.38%	42.42%	34.20%	46.2%
	Christian (n Christians = 269)	61.71%	24.16%	14.13%	53.8%
Total (n = 500)		220	163	117	23.4%
Percentage		44.00%	32.60%	23.40%	100.0%

**Table 5**  
Multiple hierarchical regressions for the whole sample and for Muslim versus Christian subcategories.

		N = 500				Muslims (n = 231)				Christians (n = 269)			
		B	SE	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	B	SE	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	B	SE	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>
Step 1	ATT	0.67	0.031	0.670***	0.867	0.631	0.048	0.574***	0.815	0.663	0.041	0.688***	0.857
	SN	0.294	0.031	0.294***		0.458	0.052	0.387***		0.316	0.05	0.269***	
Step 2	ATT	0.411	0.035	0.411***	0.895	0.4	0.051	0.363***	0.858	0.418	0.05	0.435***	0.882
	SN	0.222	0.028	0.222***		0.333	0.048	0.282***		0.25	0.046	0.213***	
	PBC	0.362	0.032	0.362***		0.358	0.043	0.363***		0.335	0.045	0.341***	

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; <sup>a</sup> $p < .1$ , ATT = attitude, SN = subjective norms, PBC = perceived behavioral control.

Christians. The data collection reveals significant differences in response rates among the conglomerates, which can be explained based on two essentials (see Table 2). First, people living in areas that were under Israeli forces' occupation prior to the year 2000, chiefly Southern Lebanon, were keener to complete the questionnaire. Secondly, the conglomerates, where the population consists of a large Muslim community, showed significantly higher response rates possibly due to the religious implications of the boycott.

**4. Results**

*4.1. Descriptive statistics*

Table 3 presents descriptive analyses, including means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations between all the TPB variables. The sample is first treated as one, and then analyzed separately for Muslim and Christian participants. All the relationships between the three direct measures of the TPB, namely attitude, subjective norm, PBC, and intentions are high and statistically significant ( $r \geq .85$ ,  $p < .001$ ), thus demonstrating very strong relationships. For the overall sample, intentions to boycott are positively related to all independent variables.

Analysis of the means reflects an overall more positive attitude towards boycotting among the Muslim participants (Mean<sub>ATT-Muslims</sub> = 5.61, and Mean<sub>ATT-Christians</sub> = 3.79,  $p < .001$ ). The mean of the subjective norms measure is also higher for Muslim than for Christian participants (Mean<sub>SN-Muslims</sub> = 4.73, and Mean<sub>SN-Christians</sub> = 2.6,  $p < .01$ ). Frequency analysis demonstrates that 76.6% of the Muslim segment have boycotted at some point, or still are boycotting US products. Only half of the Christian segment display similar tendencies. In terms of PBC, Muslim participants differ from Christian ones with a statistically higher mean (Mean<sub>PBC-Muslims</sub> = 5.72, and Mean<sub>PBC-Christians</sub> = 4.07,  $p < .001$ ). This result

reflects a higher perceived control over the participation decision among Muslim respondents. Mean figures (see Table 3) also demonstrate the variation of behavioral intentions between the Muslim and Christian samples (Mean<sub>INT-Muslims</sub> = 5.27, and Mean<sub>INT-Christians</sub> = 3.18,  $p < .001$ ).

The standard deviations for all four measures reveal differences between Christian and Muslim subgroups. Smaller standard deviations for Muslims suggest that this group is accurately described by the data, with lower variability between answers. Correlations between intentions and each of the TPB direct variables are slightly higher for Christians. Nonetheless, all the relationships produce particularly high values ( $r \geq .82$ ).

Table 2 presents an analysis of the relationship between the respondents' area of residence and boycotting status. The results reveal that the highest percentage of participation is in Bekaa area (34.5%), with slightly fewer in the Southern area of the country (32.59%) and Beirut (30.6%).

Table 4 illustrates differences between the two religious subgroups in terms of past participation in the boycott. Only 23.38% of the Muslims surveyed have never boycotted, whereby 61.71% of the Christians affirm never to have done so.

The presumption that attitudes and the perceived social pressure jointly shape people's intentions guide the subsequent analysis. This built robustly on the meta-analyses performed by Sheppard et al. (1988) who found the mean correlation between intentions and the attitudes and subjective norm components to be .66. Subsequent work revealed that the augmentation of the TRA with the PBC measure frequently contributes to the prediction of intentions and behavior.

*4.2. Hierarchical regression analyses*

A series of hierarchical regression analyses are first used to test the contributions of attitude and subjective norms to behavioral

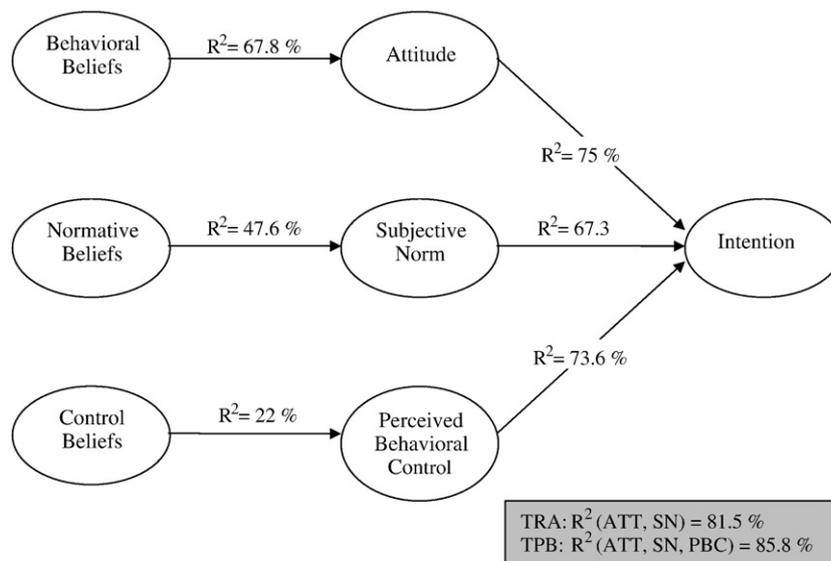


Fig. 1. The application of the TPB model to the study of boycotting behavior among Muslim participants (n = 231).

intentions. This is followed by an examination of the PBC component to gauge the predictive ability of the TPB model. These stepped analyses allow the assessment of the sufficiency of each of these two models. Theoretically, if the TRA is sufficient, the addition of the PBC measure will not lead to a significant increase in the amount of the explained variance.

Table 5 shows that although attitudes and subjective norms, combined together to represent the TRA, are able to explain 86.7% of the variance in boycott intention, the addition of PBC in step 2 allows the TPB model to explain 89.5% of this variance ( $R^2 = .895, p < .001$ ). Thus, all the three components of the model emerge as significant independent predictors for the sample as a whole. The beta weights of these variables show that although attitude ( $\beta_{ATT} = .411, p < .001$ ) and PBC ( $\beta_{PBC} = .362; p < .001$ ) considerably influence intention, subjective norm affects intentions only to a limited extent ( $\beta_{SN} = .222; p < .001$ ). The addition of PBC improves only slightly the predictive power of the TRA model, adding 2.8% to the amount of variance explained in intention. Regression analyses and the positive Pearson coefficients between the model direct variables (see Table 3) hold significant positive relationships with boycott intentions, thus supporting H1, H2, and H3.

This innovative application of the TPB performs hierarchical regression analyses for each of the two religious subgroups. Stepped regression analyses are repeated separately for Muslim and Christian participants. The results indicate that while the TPB is able to explain 85.8% of the variance in boycott intention for the Muslim sub-sample, ( $p < .001$ ), it explains a greater amount of the variance for the Christian one ( $R^2 = .882, p < .001$ ). In both cases, attitudes, subjective norms and PBC all appear to be significant independent predictors of intentions (Figs. 1 and 2).

The non-standard regression coefficients of the TPB variables for the two subgroups reveal no significant differences in the contributions to the prediction of intentions except for subjective norms. The respective regression coefficients for the Muslim sub-sample are .40, .33 and .35 ( $p < .001$ ), showing that, in addition to the moderate effect of attitudes, the perceived expectations of others and the perceived control over that choice also affect consumers' boycott decision. For the Christian sub-group, the respective regression coefficients of attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC are .41, .25, and .33 ( $p < .001$ ).

The results of boycott intentions reveal that the standardized betas for the subjective norms are slightly lower for Christian than for Muslim respondents ( $\beta_{SN \text{ CHRISTIANS}} = .213, \beta_{SN \text{ MUSLIMS}} = .282$ , both

significant at  $p < .001$ ). The results demonstrate the relevance of the various independent variables affecting the prediction of intention in the TPB for both subgroups, and thus confirmed the last three hypotheses: H4, H5 and H6.

5. Conclusions

This research investigates whether or not the direct measures of attitudes, subjective norms and PBC can help predict consumers' boycotting intention. Analyses show the contributions of attitudes and social norms to behavioral intentions in order to assess the usefulness of the TRA in this context. An important part of this analysis examines the inclusion of the PBC in the first model testing its predictive ability.

Muslim and Christian intentions to boycott are overall positively related to all the independent variables. Particularly relevant for strategic marketing, our analysis demonstrates a more positive attitude towards boycotting among the Muslims. Subjective norms are also higher for Muslim than for Christian respondents.

There is a greater perception among Muslim respondents that important people around them are keen for them to participate, which strengthens their resolve to boycott. This is primarily explained by the fact that the Lebanese areas facing most of the confrontations on the Lebanese–Israeli borders are inhabited by Muslim communities. There is culturally a stronger feeling of sympathy for the Palestinian cause within the Muslim subgroup. Finally, the strongest activists advocating boycott participation are Muslim religious figures. Results support this with a high proportion of the Muslim segment reporting involvement in boycotting US products. Indeed, Muslim responses to PBC-related items reflect a higher perceived control over their participation decisions and a significantly more positive behavioral intention than the Christian participants. Muslim and Christian respondents differ significantly in terms of their intentions or continued actions.

The residence conglomerate clearly influences the percentage of respondents who participate in the boycott. This is evident from the Bekaa area, Southern Lebanon, and Beirut city data sets. These areas count the largest numbers of Muslim citizens most affected by the confrontations with Israel from 1975 till mid-90s, and who live, or used to live, on the Israeli border before migrating to the capital. This presents a valuable insight and explains boycott participation in these districts.

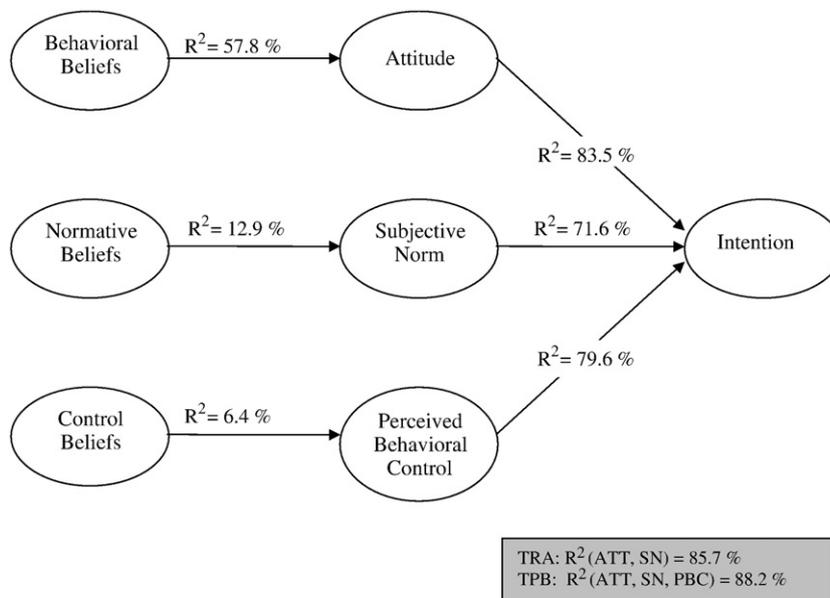


Fig. 2. The application of the TPB model to the study of boycotting behavior among Christian participants ( $n = 269$ ).

The claimed past participation rate in the boycott differs notably between the two religious sub-groups. This is not surprising as religious calls for boycotting are more recurrent and decisive among the Muslim communities (see [Al Qaradawi, 2007](#); [Al Sistani, 2002](#); [Cox, 2002](#); [Khamenei, 2002](#)). Such calls from Christian priests are quasi-inexistent except for a few sporadic Sunday sermons in the Christian Orthodox Church. Given the equivocal view of the Arab identity of this group, addresses such as these are absent in the local western Maronite church to which the majority of the Lebanese Christian community adheres ([Maalouf, 1998](#)).

The religious orientations of consumers are not the only factors shaping their decision to boycott. Their political inclinations seem to affect their participation decision as well. This is especially the case when boycott campaigns are promoted by the Arab Nationalist and Lebanese Communist Parties known for their historical contempt for American foreign policies. Since the creation of the Republic in 1943 the Lebanese have disagreed over the identity of the state. Muslims are inclined towards a close association with Greater Syria and the Arab World; whereas Christians, particularly the Maronites, opt to link Lebanon culturally and politically to the Western World. This division in identity and beliefs within the Lebanese society affects the composition of groups participating in the boycott as a support for the Arab cause and a sign of rejection of American interventions.

Anecdotal evidence captured during the face-to-face surveys illustrates that many respondents, especially among those in the Shiites Muslim subgroup, object to the interventions of the US government in the region and its stance towards the Arab–Israeli conflict. Conversely, a number of mostly Christian respondents show little intention to boycott, if at all. The reasons given by this group surround the global nature of the problems influencing the Arab World, which they consider to be of no interest to them. Only around a third of the Christian respondents report boycotting activity, and most of these belong to local political parties known for their Arab nationalistic stances.

The results imply five groupings within the Christian and Muslim sub-groups. A majority of Christians do not boycott as not necessarily opposing the American policy or caring about the campaign, or being unwilling to give up favorite brands. A second Christian minority group claims either to have boycotted in the past or to be currently boycotting. This latter group is probably motivated by strong communist or nationalistic beliefs.

Three distinct Muslim groups exist. The first does not boycott apparently due to a lack of religious commitment. A second group, similar in characteristics to the former Christian one, possesses either communist or nationalistic orientations towards the boycott. The final group, demonstrating actual participation, clearly holds strong religious beliefs.

This paper successfully tests the idea that the influence of attitudes on behavior is mediated through behavioral intentions. The TRA goes further than the inclusion of intention as a mediator of the attitude–behavior relationship, arguing that attitudes and subjective norms jointly shape people's behavioral intentions. Meta-analyses ([Armitage and Conner, 2001](#); [Sheppard et al., 1988](#)) strongly supports these linkages and augments the TRA with the PBC measure to significantly contribute to the prediction of intentions and behavior.

In the present study all three components of the model emerge as significant independent predictors for the entire sample. Of greatest interest is the finding that attitudes are a stronger predictor of intention than subjective norm. Such knowledge is consistent with most TPB research (e.g., [Bentler and Speckart, 1979](#)) and relates to the fact that attitudes tap into one's own attitude toward the act, whereas the subjective norm deals with the more remote concept of a one's perceptions of what significant others think and do ([Vallerand et al., 1992](#)). Accordingly, subjective norms seem to affect boycotting intentions only to a limited extent, and in the addition of the PBC variable improves only slightly the predictive power of the model.

Two factors clarify this result. Firstly, the initial model explains intentions to a great extent. Also, respondents may consider that boycotting is under their personal control. As such, the effect of PBC on the level of explained variance in intention is limited. Still the results indicate that the TPB is a better predictor of intentions than the TRA, and hence the boycott decision is clearly not under full volitional control. The results for the entire sample provide general support for the fact that attitudes, subjective norm, and PBC all held significant positive relationships with boycotting intentions.

The results of the sample based on religious affiliation indicate that the TPB predicts boycotting intentions for both Muslim and Christian groups, the latter to a greater extent. In both cases, attitudes, subjective norm, and PBC are all significant predictors of intentions. No significant differences in the contributions to the prediction of intentions are reported except minimally for subjective norm.

This innovative application of the TPB on Muslim versus Christian subgroups is a departure from past research and comparative analyses based on intenders and non-intenders. The TPB literature argues that attitudes, subjective norm, and PBC contributions to the prediction of intentions differ among groups. For example, [Trafimow and Finlay's \(1996\)](#) within-subjects analyses across 30 different behaviors conclude that people differ in the relative weights they place on attitudes and subjective norms. Also of relevance are the observations of [Conner and Heywood-Everett \(1998\)](#) and [Abrams et al. \(1998\)](#). Past research suggests that subjective norms play a more significant role in shaping peoples' intentions in collectivist cultures.

These findings are helpful in explaining the higher contribution of subjective norms in the prediction boycott intention among Muslim respondents. In fact, Muslims' social and cultural beliefs promote closer and stronger relational ties among family relatives, and the surrounding Muslim community than other religious groups in the country.

Members who strongly identify with a group appear to have stronger intentions to align with group normative behavior. As [Terry and Hogg \(1996\)](#) assert, the strength of identification with a reference group moderates the impact of norms on intentions. The better the organization of a community the more likely its members would adopt the norms of that community. The findings for boycott intentions and the slightly lower subjective norm result for Christian respondents support this conclusion. These results suggest the presence of a more cohesive structure in the Lebanese Muslim community.

[Dickinson and Carsky \(2005\)](#) express the view that people who boycott articulate a belief that they hold sovereignty in the marketplace. In a similar vein, the present study demonstrates that although the participants act individually, they consider themselves to be part of a larger collective group of consumers all voting in the same way. Consumers' believe that their actions apply pressure on US companies, and perhaps on the US government itself. The respondents, and especially the Muslim group, believe that the need to act is essential and express this via responsible consumption choices. These respondents wish not only to express their anger, but also to apply their religious values in order to impact the lives of other people.

### 5.1. Managerial implications

Understanding why consumers choose to boycott is an important issue for managerial formulation of strategies that attempt to address such behavior. Despite the importance of understanding the antecedents of this behavior, with few exceptions, most of the related literature lacks a theoretical dimension. In light of how little is known about the motives behind consumer boycotting, the results of this paper demonstrate how the TPB can advance the understanding of such behaviors. The present study sets the ground for management to develop optimal strategic responses to counter consumer boycott

intentions and reduce the impact of campaigns on company operations and revenues.

Indeed, international news abounds with examples of companies which find themselves placed at the centre of a geopolitical, religious and commercial turmoil. This emphasizes the importance of embedding strong ethical values within organizational strategic frameworks to help guard against boycott campaigns. To discourage consumers from participating, businesses need to understand the mechanisms behind the boycott decision-making process. Since the TPB provides one of the most influential accounts of behavior in social psychology, it potentially has much to offer for the development of appropriate counteractive measures for intention and behavior change.

The findings of this study are significant for American companies operating in Lebanon and other countries of the Arab World that wish to address the consequences of boycotting. In light of the recurrent hostilities in the region, and the risk of subsequent boycotts arising from heated revivals, companies must build solid counteractive plans of action to reduce further damage to their sales and reputation. Some of these strategic measures include (a) de-emphasizing the country-of-origin aspect of the company, (b) repositioning brands so they appear local by forming joint-ventures with local companies, or (c) addressing directly the source of the hostility (Ettenson et al., 2006).

Information and persuasion are the most suitable bases for companies to design change interventions. Such interventions can transmit information about the non-political orientation of the target company and its revulsion of the violence that targets civilians. Messages may allude to the overt risk for companies operating locally and the fact that they employ a large number of local citizens.

Information countering the motives that encourage the public to boycott can occur through the company's use of persuasive communication means, including written messages via mass media channels and the sponsorship of community events such as: open forums, infomercials, and talk shows in universities and public conferences. As Elliot et al. (2005) argue, the persuasive message is likely to be at its most powerful when (a) arguments appear credible, (b) the delivery of the arguments is repeated, and (c) the audience is enthusiastic to reflect on the argument (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). The statements that appear in the literature on attitude change (e.g., Cacioppo and Petty, 1985) stress that the greater the intensity of the counter-boycott message the more likely it is to have an effect on consumers' intentions and behavior.

Businesses can use the results of this study to identify the TPB components to target. The results demonstrate that although attitude, subjective norm, and PBC are all significant predictors of intentions, the attitudinal component carries the most weight. Therefore, it would appear more effective to focus on this attitudinal component using suitable marketing discourse and targeting the group of consumers that matters most to the management of beleaguered companies. Interventions are most likely to yield successful results among those consumers who hold ambivalent attitudes toward their boycotting as these attitudes tend to be less resistant to change than non-ambivalent ones (Armitage and Conner, 1998). Given the significant relationship between PBC and intentions, strategies for changing perceptions of control over the boycotting behavior are of greater value. In some circumstances, it is perhaps beneficial to promote the idea that the boycotted product has no perfect substitute in a market. In conclusion, the best way to help companies manage and minimize the damages that boycotting causes is to increase the knowledge of the variables underlying consumers' boycotting intentions. The impact of the PBC construct on a consumer boycott decision across different product categories is a promising avenue for further research.

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