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Analysis

Taking a Stand through Food Choices? Characteristics of Political Food Consumption and Consumers in Finland

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at food as a realm of political consumption by examining buycotting and boycotting of foods for ethical, political or environmental reasons in Finland. The results of an Internet-based survey ($N = 1021$) showed that around half of the respondents often or occasionally both buycotted and boycotted foods. Multinomial regression models indicated that women, the highly educated, the political left, those who donated for charity, those whose food choices were motivated by domestic origin and ethical food production, and those who trusted that consumption choices, institutional actors and the media can advance ethical food production and consumption, were most likely to be active in buycotting and boycotting. Buycotters/boycotters were very active in buying local food but less eager, for instance, to buy organic or Fair Trade products or to reduce the use of meat or milk. The article concludes by critically assessing the complex relationship between buycotting/boycotting and sustainable practices and suggesting that consumers may be more willing to transform their eating patterns if other societal actors, too, make an effort to influence ethical food consumption.

1. Introduction

Since consumption patterns related to housing, traffic, and food are significant sources of greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental problems (Nissinen et al., 2015), the debates on the role of consumption in advancing sustainability are now prominent both in everyday life, the media and various political strategies. In social and political studies since the late 1990s, practices that try to contribute to sustainable transitions have been termed as environmentally friendly, sustainable, ethical, concerned, responsible, or political, because they expand the focus from self-regarding preferences in consumption, such as price or safety, into wider societal concerns (e.g., Barnett et al., 2011; Boström et al., 2005; Micheletti, 2003; Sassatelli, 2014; Stolle and Micheletti, 2013). In her classic discussion on political consumerism, Micheletti (2003) referred to these different orientations as "private virtues" and "public virtues", thus making a conceptual difference between self-interest and altruism, but at the same time noting that in political consumption practices, these two virtues tend to be tied together.

Political consumption has been defined as consumers using the market to become politically active and as consumption that includes "social, cultural and animal-related concerns that go beyond the immediate self-interests of the individual consumer or household" (Klintman and Boström, 2006, 401). The phenomenon has been analysed from a variety of perspectives including also critical debates. First, political consumption has been interpreted as an increase of more personalized forms of political participation and citizen mobilization around economic justice, environmental protection, human rights and animal welfare (Bennett, 2012). In such discourses, political consumption is celebrated as an influential means for citizens to renew democracy and develop consciousness about the societal consequences of consumption (Willis and Schor, 2012), exert political pressure on governments and companies, make a difference at the level of everyday life, and become empowered through "individualized collective action" (Micheletti, 2003).

Second, it has been asked whether placing the responsibility for global sustainable transition on consumers is justified, or whether other measures at the level of the political system may be more legitimate and effective (e.g., Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007; Kjærnes, 2012). Researchers critical of the idea of political consumerism have noted that various complexities of everyday life and several competing social responsibilities and moral commitments, for instance within the family, may not be easily reconciled with making deliberate and sovereign market choices based on ethical considerations (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007). It is also evident that social, cultural and economic divisions such as those based on education and income, place of living, and

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interest in societal issues create unequal opportunities for people to take part in making ethical choices on the market (e.g., Carfagna et al., 2014; Ferrer-Fons and Fraile, 2014; Micheletti et al., 2012).

A third perspective on political consumerism is based on the notion that in the age of individualisation and erosion of traditional communities, participation in consumption patterns aiming at a more sustainable world may be a means for people to build new social ties, collective identities and a sense of belonging in "imagined communities" (Long, 2010; Anderson, 1983). In late modern societies, this takes place particularly through consumption practices and lifestyles (Giddens, 1991; see also Bildtgård, 2008). This approach asks whether political consumerism is primarily about individuals intentionally aiming at changing the market or whether it is better conceptualised as late modern identity building. In the latter, trendiness and pleasure pursuits may equal or even overtake sustainability concerns, as exemplified in the recent rise of veganism and the popularity of vegan products not only among vegans but omnivores and flexitarians, too (Jallinoja et al., 2018).

Political consumption in everyday purchase practices takes a variety of forms: products can be boycotted (avoided) to express political sentiment, or they can be "buycotted" (favoured) to show support to the values the product represents (Micheletti and Stolle, 2006). People may buy eco-labelled, organic, fair trade or animal-friendly products, or refrain from buying products that are seen as ethically problematic. While buycotting signifies conforming to making a difference through the market, boycotting may also represent a resistance to consumerist values through abstaining from buying. However, Neilson (2010) argues that buycotting requires more deliberation and effort than boycotting, and that the former can be seen as a "rewarding strategy" whereas the latter is better described as a "protest strategy." Copeland (2014) found that buycotting is associated with norms of "engaged" and boycotting with norms of "dutiful" citizenship. Since boycotters tend to be less trusting towards national (Koos, 2012) or political institutions (Copeland, 2014), boycotting may be more charged with political meaning than buycotting. In addition, political consumption relates not only to boycotting and buycotting, but also to discursive strategies and lifestyle politics (Micheletti and Stolle, 2012). Everyday practices may be characterized by all of these four forms: for instance, vegetarians buy vegetarian or vegan products (buycott), reject meat products (boycott), engage in discourses on vegetarianism/veganism, and try to change their lifestyles (see, e.g., de Rezende, 2014).

There is a strong tradition of analysing buycotting and boycotting as a general category (e.g., the European Social Survey 2002/2003, see Ferrer-Fons and Fraile, 2014; Neilson, 2010; Neilson and Paxton, 2010; Sandovici and Davis, 2010), rather than of particular product types. Although there is an ample body of research on ethical and sustainable food consumption, studies on buycotting and boycotting have not focused on food in particular. We chose to focus on food, in order to gain a more detailed picture of how buycotting and boycotting of food is associated with perceptions and practices relating to sustainable food choices. Eating, as many other spheres of consumption, is for a good part a routinised everyday phenomenon and changing these routines requires effort and a supporting social and cultural environment (Warde, 2016). Food and eating related choices are made multiple times each day at homes, grocery shops, school and workplace canteens, cafes and restaurants, and buying, preparing and eating food constitutes a substantial part of people's daily rhythms and time use (Holm et al., 2016; Pääkkönen and Hanifi, 2012). What is particularly characteristic of current food related discourses and practices is that food is a highly moralized sphere of consumption and a realm of "politico-ethical problematisation" (Sassatelli and Davolio, 2010, 226). Public discourses on food are loaded on the one hand with an ethos of free choice and enjoyment, and on the other hand with public policy efforts that encourage people to govern their eating in order to adopt healthier and more sustainable food consumption patterns (Gronow, 2015; Jallinoja et al., 2016a; Sassatelli, 2004).

In the present study we chose to focus on boycotting and buycotting of food, since we wanted to explore the daily purchasing practices, i.e., the mundane everyday activities that all consumers are faced with frequently. While focusing on boycotting and buycotting, we take into account Julie Guthman's (2008) suggestion that contemporary food activism intersects with neoliberal rationalities such as consumer choice, localism, and self-improvement. We aim to explore political consumption as "emerging in the current age of globalization, Internet communication, […] individualization and enhanced consumer choice" (Stolle and Micheletti, 2013, 202). Against this background, we analyse (a) to what extent Finnish consumers engage in buycotting and/or boycotting food products for ethical, political or environmental reasons, (b) how buycotting and boycotting are linked with food-related practices that are regarded as sustainable, and (c) how socio-economic backgrounds, political orientation, eating motivations, and in particular opinions and trust in various actors' power and influence in the sustainability of food production and consumption are associated with buycotting and boycotting. By examining a large number of potentially relevant determining factors of boycotting and buycotting we are able to assess their relative importance.

In the following sections, we first describe findings of earlier empirical studies on background factors of political consumption and then present our data and results. In the discussion and conclusion, we address the social stratification of political food consumption and the roles that consumers see for various societal actors in advancing sustainability. In particular, we critically assess the complex relationship between buycotting/boycotting and various food practices regarded as sustainable, and discuss the policy implications of the results.

2. Explaining Political Consumption

In Europe, there are variations between the countries as regards levels of political consumption: it is a much more common practice in the northern and western than in the southern and eastern parts. In the European Social Survey (ESS) 2002/2003 (see Ferrer-Fons and Fraile, 2014; Koos, 2012; Micheletti et al., 2012; Stolle and Micheletti, 2013), 23–33% of the respondents in the Nordic countries reported having boycotted a product and 44–55% having chosen a product for political, environmental or ethical reasons during the past year, whereas in Southern European countries the share for buycotting was 7–12% and for boycotting well below 10%. Finns, together with other Northern Europeans, Germans, and the Swiss, were among the most active political consumers in Europe: 42% of Finns reported having buycotted and 27% having boycotted (Ferrer-Fons and Fraile, 2014). Such country differences are hypothesized to relate to the level of political participation, economic development, market structures, availability of ethical products, institutionalisation of labelling schemes, and consumers' mobilization in alternative food movements (see, e.g., Koos, 2012; Stolle and Micheletti, 2013; Terragni and Kjærnes, 2005).

Although in surveys such as those above, questions on buycotting and boycotting have been operationalised into separate items, the differences in the social background factors explaining boycotting and buycotting have been found to be quite small (Koos, 2012; Sandovici and Davis, 2010). Consequently, in the analysis many studies have used a combined variable including both practices. Studies have shown that a number of socio-economic and other factors are associated with political consumption (operationalised as buycotting, boycotting or both). As shown below, in some cases the results have been inconsistent, probably due to factors related to varying national and cultural contexts and study settings.

Many studies have shown that *women* are more active political consumers than men (Carfagna et al., 2014; Koos, 2012; Micheletti et al., 2012; Neilson and Paxton, 2010; Sandovici and Davis, 2010; Strømsnes, 2005; Tobiasen, 2005), whereas others have reported no gender effect (Berlin, 2011; Echegaray, 2015).

Furthermore, earlier results indicate almost consistently that the