Exploring the Factors Affecting Consumer Boycott Behavior in Taiwan: Food Oil Incidents and the Resulting Crisis of Brand Trust

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ABSTRACT

A consumer boycott is an important issue that is related to consumer rights as well as economic development. In 2014, a number of food safety incidents involving unscrupulous vendors in Taiwan raised people's concerns about food sources and created hostility toward the vendors responsible for the problem. In one particularly egregious case, a well-known brand company had repeatedly ignored the health of consumers, which led to a public scandal about its tainted cooking oil. As a result, many consumers – including a sizable number of young people – resisted buying its branded goods. This study sought to identify the motivations of young people involved in this boycott. Based on a literature review, the author designed a research framework and formulated a set of hypotheses. The author then conducted a questionnaire survey using a sample of 233 young people from two universities in Taipei. Statistical analysis of the results showed that brand distrust, boycott attitude, and perceived control have significant, direct effects on consumer boycott behavior. The study found that the two most important factors leading to a boycott attitude are perceived risk and perceived deception. Based on the findings, the paper offers suggestions and recommendations.

Keywords: Consumer behavior, boycott, food safety, brand trust
1. INTRODUCTION

Today's advanced communications technology makes it possible for an item of information to spread almost instantaneously via the Internet, television, and social media. When anything detrimental to consumers occurs, therefore, it is immediately known to consumers, who are swift to criticize the situation. Consumer criticism is most severe when government cannot solve the problem immediately or will not punish the perpetrators. In this situation, consumers will spontaneously boycott products, commodities, or policies they consider unreasonable.

One of the issues of increasing concern to consumers is food safety. A study by IBM, for example, showed that, among Chinese consumers, safety and quality are the primary drivers in the decision-making process relating to food [Blissett and Harreld, 2008]. Another study – a Deloitte survey – has shown that Americans are now more concerned about the food they eat than they were five years ago [Scott-Thomas, 2011].

In Taiwan, which calls itself a gourmet’s paradise, the situation is no different. Over the last few years, Taiwan has made many efforts to improve and ensure food safety and thus acquire the trust of consumers worldwide. Taiwan's well-known brands have been regarded as their own assurance of product quality. Recently, however, a number of unfortunate and unfavorable food safety incidents have occurred in Taiwan. Most often, these involved unscrupulous vendors who, for their own interests or profits, used illegal and poor-quality raw materials for food manufacturing, with little or no regard for consumer health.

In September 2014, the government identified a serious food safety problem involving the adulteration of edible oil with "recycled waste oil" and "animal feed oil." More than a thousand businesses were affected, which meant the possible contamination of a huge segment of the food market. A well-known Group with many famous brands was found to be one of the main perpetrators in this tainted
cooking oil scandal. This Group has been condemned by the public. Its downstream manufacturers and sellers have been deeply troubled because of credit impairment and because of return and refund issues. This scandal could also affect Taiwan's competitiveness [EIU, 2014].

The Group continued to ignore the interests of consumers, and, despite government penalties, did not show any major improvement. As a result, consumers have become more and more angry, and have even participated in boycott activities against the Group's branded goods in order to spur government action and to ensure that related incidents will not continue to occur. The activities of a brand boycott have never happened before in Taiwan. Nowadays, however, with the increase in consumer awareness, not only is such behavior occurring, but also more and more young people are involving themselves in boycotting activities.

This study uses the issue of food safety and the crisis of brand trust in Taiwan as a basis for investigating the factors affecting consumer boycotts. The study uses a sample of college students in Taipei. This study will explore the college students' perceptions regarding consumer boycott. The implication of the results will be further discussed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the literature pertaining to consumer boycotts, brand trust/distrust, boycott attitude, subjective norms, perceived control, and consumer rights awareness.

2.1. Consumer Boycott

The Oxford Dictionary defines the verb *boycott* as: “to withdraw from commercial or social relations with (a country, organization, or person) as a punishment or protest, which may refuse to buy or handle (goods) as a punishment or protest, or refuse to cooperate with or participate in (a policy or event).” Friedman [1985] defines the term *consumer boycott* “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.” Consumers who opt to boycott unsafe products do so as an expression of disapproval and protest.

2.2. Brand Trust/Distrust

Consumers usually buy products with a brand name they trust. Ordinarily, they are not aware of the sources of the product’s raw materials, but rather trust the brand or the government to ensure the safety of the product. Such has been the case traditionally. The situation changes when some manufacturers take advantage of information asymmetry between manufacturers and consumers to engage in unethical or unsafe behavior. In the absence of good corporate governance, some manufacturers seek to reduce costs at the expense of consumers' health by using poor-quality or harmful materials to manufacture products. These kinds of commercial fraud often make consumers suffer without knowing it. Consumers who are aware of the facts distrust these companies and their affiliated brands.

Morgan and Hunt [1994] define trust as confidence in the reliability and integrity of an exchange partner. Brand trust involves the credibility, integrity, and benevolence that a consumer attributes to the brand. Clark [2009] reveals that brands failing to earn or maintain trust will inevitably find themselves out of favor. Bhaduri [2011] indicates that trust/distrust affects consumers' purchase intention. Van Motman [2012] points out that trust starts with respect, responsibility, and transparency. Once the vendor's behavior is found to deceive consumers, it will follow that consumers seriously distrust these vendors and the affiliated brands. Kang and Hustvedt [2014] also consider that consumer perceptions of transparency and social responsibility help to build trust between consumers and corporations. Building brand trust takes time, but its collapse can be instantaneous.
2.3. Boycott Attitude

*Boycott attitude* refers to the opinions and feelings that a consumer has regarding boycott activities. Boycott attitude can be driven by perceived deception, animosity/emotional factors, altruism/record straight, and perceived risk.

- **Perceived Deception.** According to Newell, Goldsmith, and Banzhaf [1998], higher levels of perceived deception are associated with lower levels of perceived corporate credibility. Morgan and Hunt [1994] indicate that consistency and honesty are two of the most important elements contributing to the trustworthiness of a company and its brand. When consumers perceive the fraud or deception of a company, they opt to distrust the company as well as its affiliated brands, and their attitudes also tend to boycott its goods or services.

- **Animosity/Emotional Factors.** Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer [1999] discuss the role of emotions in marketing. Maher and Mady [2010] indicate that animosity has an impact on the willingness to buy and that animosity consists of three emotional descriptors: anger, contempt, and umbrage. Boycotts by consumers can be an approach to punishing a company’s action or expressing their anger or hostility against a company’s goods, which influences their buying behaviors.

- **Altruism/Record Straight.** Some people’s boycott may be based on altruism, such as justice for disadvantaged groups, progress for society, fight for consumer rights, or boycotting participation for momentum increase, which help to change [Batson, Ahmad and Tsang, 2002; Asproudis, 2011].

- **Perceived Risk.** Yeung and Yee [2002] find that consumer risk perception plays an important role during periods of food safety concern. Consumer risk perception will affect the attitude toward buying or not-buying. Rampl, Eberhardt, Schütte, and Kenning [2012] consider that, in food retailing, risk-taking behavior can be viewed as purchasing uncertain
food products during a food crisis. Similarly, consumers perceive that risk continuously exists and increases. In that case, consumers distrust the companies that are responsible for the contamination disasters in the food supply chain. As a result, the perceived risk helps enhance the attitude of boycotting. In the case of Taiwan, consumers deeply feel that they are in a crisis if unethical incidents involving food oil continue to occur and cannot be controlled effectively and efficiently. Consumers think that, if they do not resist, related problems will persist into the future; meanwhile, these problems will affect their health and life quality. The harm caused by such unsafe products might not be recovered in the future. Therefore, perceived risk should have an impact on the decision to boycott.

2.4. Subjective Norm

A boycott can be a collective activity as well as an individual act of resistance. An activity of boycott through the marketplace and the media becomes a collective refusal to purchase goods or services from a certain company and its distributors when the company’s business practices are deemed unfair [Friedman, 1999; Cissé-Depardon and N’Goala, 2009]. The collective refusal is related to the communities involved by consumers themselves, in which case they are connected and influenced by one another, especially by their significant others. In the today’s Internet age, social networking is very powerful; therefore, this phenomenon is more evident than ever.

Fishbein and Ajzen [1975] posit the theory of rational behavior, noting that the intention of a person's behavior is related to the social influence of others, called subjective norm. Subjective norm explains a person's perceived social pressure while performing a certain behavior. In their study, Maher and Mady [2010] find that subjective norm, together with animosity and anticipated emotions, has a significant impact on buying or boycotting. Klein, Smith, and John [2004]
view the statement, “My friends/family encourage me to boycott,” as a self-enhancement motivation for boycott participation.

2.5. Perceived Control

Klein, Smith and John [2002] view the perception “participating in the boycott helped put pressure on the company to change” as an instrumental motivation for boycott participation. Beliefs in boycotting to promote change will moderate the relationship between egregiousness and the boycott decision [Klein, Smith, and John, 2004]. If consumers believe they can cause change, they will participate in a boycott action and overcome possible obstacles [Thelen and Shapiro, 2012].

2.6. Consumer Rights Awareness and Other Factors

Some consumers decide whether to buy or boycott in terms of corporate ethics and social responsibility, which is regarded as socially responsible consumer behavior [Paek and Nelson, 2009]. The importance of food safety issues also affects consumer boycott behavior. Consumers having experienced the use of related contaminated goods become victims, which fact might also enhance their attitudes toward boycott.

3. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This section presents the research framework developed for this study, including the hypotheses that were formulated, and discusses the research methodology used.

3.1. Research Framework

By the definition of consumer boycott, once consumers refuse to buy the branded goods, their rate of use would decrease. It can be posited, therefore, that a consumer boycott decreases the actual use rate for the product, expressed as Hypothesis 1:

**H1**: The greater the consumer boycott, the less the actual use rate.
Based on the theory of planned behavior [Ajzen, 1991], the current study considers that boycott attitude, subjective norm, and perceived control could positively affect consumer boycott. Meanwhile, as long as a vendor fails to maintain brand trust, the consumers would have no confidence in purchasing its goods. Consumers do not trust the brand anymore and might further resist buying its goods [Ekici, 2004; Clark, 2009; Bhaduri, 2011]. It can be said, therefore, that brand distrust – together with boycott attitude, subjective norm, and perceived control – leads to consumer boycott. The hypotheses can be stated as follows:

H2a: The more brand distrust, the more consumer boycott.
H2b: The more boycott attitude, the more consumer boycott.
H2c: The more subjective norm, the more consumer boycott.
H2d: The more perceived control, the more consumer boycott.

Once consumers feel that they are being deceived by a vendor, their attitude toward buying the vendor’s goods becomes negative and they resist buying the goods [Román, 2010; Chaouachi and Rached, 2012]. In terms of perceived risk, consumers deem that, if the disadvantage to them persists, the harm to them would be greater in the future [Yeung and Yee, 2002]. The vendor's immoral behavior causes consumer anger, contempt, and umbrage, all of which enhance their attitude toward boycotting the vendor’s branded goods [Maher and Mady, 2010]. People who want to fight for justice, society, and consumer rights have a stronger attitude toward boycott [Asproudis, 2011]. It can be said, therefore, that perceived deception, perceived risk, emotional factor; and record straight should positively influence boycott attitude. The hypotheses can be stated as follows:

H3a: The more perceived deception, the more boycott attitude.
H3b: The more perceived risk, the more boycott attitude.
H3c: The more emotional factor, the more boycott attitude.
H3d: The more record straight, the more boycott attitude.
Integrity is one of the most important components of brand trust. Deception collapses integrity. When an unscrupulous vendor secretly harms the interests of consumers and consumers become aware of the fact, they feel deceived and no longer trust the vendor’s brands [Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Shaw, 1997; Newell, Goldsmith and Banzhaf, 1998; Van Motman, 2012]. It can be said, therefore, that perceived deception also enhances brand distrust. The hypothesis can be stated:

H4: The more perceived deception, the more brand distrust.

3.2. Research Methodology

This study reviewed the literature on the subject of boycotts, including reports pertaining to the food oil incidents in Taiwan. The research framework was constructed based on the planned behavior theory and was complemented by boycott and trust/distrust theories. This study followed the survey process in order to ensure reliability and validity. The questionnaire, which was anonymous, consisted of two parts: one designed to obtain non-personally identifiable demographic data, and the second designed to obtain the respondent’s perceptions about consumer boycott. The study used a 5-point Likert scale format to measure consumer perceptions, ranging from 1 (signifying “strongly disagree”) to 5 (signifying “strongly agree”). Reliability analysis was applied to study the properties of the measurement scales and the items that compose the scales. Multivariate statistical analysis was applied to examine the relationships among these factors and the behavior of boycotting.

The research subjects were selected with convenience sampling from one university in Taipei and one university of science and technology in New Taipei City, Taiwan. The sample of 223 consisted of students from seven selected classes in four major departments at these two universities, including:

141 students from marketing and logistics management
13 students from information management
49 students from social psychology
20 students from business administration and finance
Of the 233 respondents, 174 were day-time students, 49 were night-school students, and 80.4% had a part-time job. Teachers helped collect the completed questionnaires from students in their respective classes, resulting in a collection rate of 100%. Of the 223 respondents, 37.7% were male and 62.3% female.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The data analysis revealed that the entire scale reliability was high (Cronbach's alpha=0.955). All construct reliabilities were above 0.8 (consumer boycott=0.921; brand distrust=0.933; boycott attitude=0.919; emotional factor=0.930; record straight=0.896; perceived deception=0.890; perceived risk=0.947; subjective norm=0.864; perceived control=0.935).

Regression analysis was used to examine the research framework and hypotheses tests. The results are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1
Results of Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Adjusted R Sq.</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.295</td>
<td>93.723</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Actual Use Rate</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>3.805</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>-0.546</td>
<td>-9.681</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Consumer boycott</td>
<td>-0.525</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>-0.546</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.703</td>
<td>131.030</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Consumer Boycott</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>0.168</td>
<td>0.188</td>
<td>0.893</td>
<td>0.373</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brand Distrust</td>
<td>0.400</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>0.376</td>
<td>6.575</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boycott Attitude</td>
<td>0.456</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td>0.468</td>
<td>7.248</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Subjective Norm</td>
<td>-0.032</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>-0.030</td>
<td>0.611</td>
<td>0.542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived Control</td>
<td>0.107</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>0.109</td>
<td>2.201</td>
<td>0.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.527</td>
<td>62.446</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Boycott Attitude</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>-0.298</td>
<td>0.279</td>
<td>-1.071</td>
<td>0.285</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived Deception</td>
<td>0.295</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>0.241</td>
<td>3.707</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived Risk</td>
<td>0.405</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td>0.380</td>
<td>6.423</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional Factor</td>
<td>0.099</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>1.314</td>
<td>0.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Record Straight</td>
<td>0.210</td>
<td>0.081</td>
<td>0.172</td>
<td>2.578</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.434</td>
<td>169.886</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Brand Distrust</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>0.978</td>
<td>0.241</td>
<td>4.050</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived Deception</td>
<td>0.742</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.661</td>
<td>13.034</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results of the hypotheses tests, summarized as Table 2, show that a consumer boycott decreases the actual use rate and that the main factors affecting consumer boycott behavior are brand distrust, boycott attitude, and perceived control. The findings also show that boycott attitude is significantly affected by perceived deception, perceived risk, and record straight. Perceived deception enhances boycott attitude and brand distrust, both of which induce people to participate in a consumer boycott.
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Table 2
Results of Hypotheses Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Supported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1 Consumer Boycott→Actual Use Rate</td>
<td>-0.546</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2a Brand Distrust→Consumer Boycott</td>
<td>0.376</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2b Boycott Attitude→Consumer Boycott</td>
<td>0.468</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2c Subjective Norm→Consumer Boycott</td>
<td>-0.030</td>
<td>0.542</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2d Perceived Control→Consumer Boycott</td>
<td>0.109</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3a Perceived Deception→Boycott Attitude</td>
<td>0.241</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3b Perceived Risk→Boycott Attitude</td>
<td>0.380</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3c Emotional Factor→Boycott Attitude</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>0.190</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3d Record Straight→Boycott Attitude</td>
<td>0.172</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4 Perceived Deception→Brand Distrust</td>
<td>0.661</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * p <0.05; ** p <0.01; *** p < 0.001

Two variables in Table 2 are not significant. One is subjective norm, and the other is emotional factor. These are discussed separately in the following paragraphs.

According to correlation analysis, the correlation of subjective norm and consumer boycott is 0.484, which is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This coefficient, however, is less than that of the other variables in model 2. In addition, subjective norm is also highly related with boycott attitude and perceived control, separately. One of the reasons that the coefficient for subjective norm in model 2 is not significant is that young people today have more autonomy. Although other people’s boycott affects their own attitude and control, other factors are relatively more influential; namely, boycott attitude, perceived control, and brand distrust.

According to the regression analysis for model 3 – together with perceived deception, perceived risk, and record straight – the variable emotional factor is not significant. The main reason is that emotional factor is highly related with these three variables. Perceived deception would lead to anger. Perceived risk is usually
accompanied with anxiety. In addition, record straight is also related to emotional expressions such as fighting for consumer rights. Although emotional factor is significantly related with boycott attitude in the correlation analysis, its correlation coefficient (0.533) is less than that of the three variables’ (0.595, 0.645, and 0.591, respectively).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study of consumer boycott behavior focuses on the issue of food safety, which involves not only consumer health issues but also consumer rights. It differs from previous studies by suggesting other important factors that affect boycott behavior, such as perceived deception, perceived risk, and record straight. Moreover, it proposes a relationship among brand trust/distrust, consumer boycott, and actual use rate.

A company’s egregious behaviors provoke protests. When the government is unable to immediately terminate the company's behaviors and prevent similar incidents, people will sometimes self-initiate boycott activities against the company. These activities can function not only as a means, an instrument, or a form of punishment to promote the change of related units, but also as a way of allowing people, including the victims themselves, to express their discontent as consumers. Through these activities, people hope to express personal opinions, and/or collectively gather momentum for themselves as well as vulnerable consumers.

This study indicates the relationship of the key constructs relating to the boycott of a company’s products in Taiwan because of its involvement in unsafe food oil incidents, which triggered a crisis of brand trust. The study results show that brand distrust, boycott attitude, and perceived control significantly and positively influence consumer boycott. The results also show that perceived deception, perceived risk, and record straight significantly and positively influenced boycott attitude. Relatively speaking, the most influential factor led to
boycott attitude was perceived risk, followed by perceived deception. However, according to path analysis, the most influential path is:

“perceived deception → brand distrust → consumer boycott (0.661 * 0.376 = 0.249),”

followed by:

“perceived risk → boycott attitude → consumer boycott (0.38 * 0.468 = 0.178).”

The current study has several managerial implications. First, seriously maintaining trust is the key to sustainability. Dishonesty, deception, or inconsistency leads to brand distrust. Eroding and ignoring the interests of consumers will ultimately cause consumers to protest and to boycott corporate goods and services. Brand distrust and consumer boycott lead to a decrease in actual use rate and, as a result, move the corporation toward collapse. Sometimes, weak managerial capabilities also cause mission-performance inconsistency, which makes the company and its affiliated brands unreliable.

Second, in terms of the food they eat, making consumers feel safe is very important. Sustainability must be fully implemented. Doing so requires that the corporation assume social responsibility, enhance traceability, and implement risk management at the beginning of and throughout the entire product life cycle.

Third, it is important to recognize that government plays an important role in food safety issues. Its efforts should be directed toward developing strict regulations and implementing policies and regulations that ensure consumer rights, social justice, and environmental sustainability. These efforts should occur not only at the time of the incident, but also on a daily basis.

With regard to further study, it is suggested that future research take the cultural factor into consideration. In the current study, emotional factor did not significantly affect boycott attitude, possibly because of the Taiwanese national culture in which people tend to be more conservative and thus have a less obvious
or less aggressive attitude toward boycotting. Another suggestion is that future studies compare perceptions between different groups, such as the younger and the older generation. It would also be beneficial to consider the impact of different eating or buying habits on boycotting.

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