

A Consumer Behavior Musing: Could the Use of Consumer Boycotts and/or Buycotts Encourage Businesses to Better Use CSR in Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic?

Cassandra D. Wells
Morehouse College

This paper poses the possibility of consumer boycotts and buycotts as tools to move corporations to implement corporate social responsibility (CSR) that better serves their workers and the communities of the consumers who buy their products during this Covid-19 pandemic. Multiple definitions of CSR are given and critiqued in terms of how CSR implementation stands up to the needs of company stakeholders who are not stock. Boycotts and buycotts as consumer behavior tools are defined and discussed along with examples of each and the corporate actions that brought them into being. How consumers can best activate and affect companies' CSR by using social media and voicing their disapproval (via boycotts) and approval (via buycotts) of how companies exercise their CSR is also discussed.

Keywords: buycott, boycott, consumer boycott, consumer buycott, corporate social responsibility, CSR, Covid-19 pandemic, consumer behavior

INTRODUCTION

In the first quarter of 2020, the United States of America found itself in the beginning of a COVID-19 pandemic. While it had experienced pandemics before, America was caught off-guard. Americans had not experienced a pandemic in their lifetime that required as many personal and professional sacrifices as those required by the COVID-19 pandemic. They thought the pandemic would be over in a few months. They were wrong. Sacrifices such as staying home, wearing masks if you went outside, working from home, and homeschooling their children began. Over time, businesses were asked to close for a while to help stop the spread of the pandemic. Some large and small businesses could not come back from their pandemic closures. Other businesses were able to reopen and with government and community help; limited offerings; and laying off workers, the businesses persevered and made it through the first year of the pandemic. However, economists estimated at least 100,000 small businesses closed in the first 2 months of the pandemic (MacMillan et al., 2020). Despite the sacrifices they made during the pandemic, many large and small businesses also made profits by the end of 2020.

This musing, a calm, lengthy, intent consideration (Vocabulary.com, n.d.), was inspired by an online Washington Post article by MacMillan, et al. (2020). The article spoke of how America's biggest companies were flourishing during the pandemic and putting thousands of people out of work. The companies were sharing their billions in profit with their shareholders while most of them were cutting workers during the pandemic. While many of the companies said they had planned the layoffs before the pandemic; had given millions of dollars in PPE and other pandemic related investment; and some made pledges not to lay off

workers but did it anyway (Macmillan et al., 2020), the companies mainly were concerned with maximizing shareholder value. They weren't very concerned with helping to stabilize the communities in which they did business. The article stimulated musings on what consumers could do, besides get a vaccination, to better help themselves and their communities physically and economically survive the Covid-19 pandemic. This musing also asks if those corporations that made enormous profits, owe more than they have already given in pandemic relief to their workers and the consumers who contributed to their enormous profits? Should they be doing more to help the communities they operate in and, if they should, how can consumers help them see that they should be doing more?

During the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the largest US corporations made enormous profits. According to MacMillan et al. (2020), the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the largest US corporations gave their enormous profits back to their shareholders. MacMillan et al. (2020) reported that 45 of the 50 largest US companies turned a profit since March 2020. Of course, shareholders are one of a corporation's most important stakeholder groups. However, the profits that are given back to shareholders come from the dollars spent by the corporation's consumers and the wages of the employees it lays off. According to MacMillan et al. (2020), "A majority of the firms cut staff and gave the bulk of profits to shareholders". Meanwhile, Covid-19 has caused many small businesses to close their doors for good as they could not compete with larger, national competition. The chain-reaction effect of this is that workers of these small businesses are also out of work along with those laid off to make more profits by the larger, national competitors. All of these laid off workers are consumers of products who will have to limit their consumption because of the loss of their income or buying power. The author ponders how ethical it is for corporations to earn great profits on the backs of consumers and workers and not do more to support those stakeholders in their time of need.

In his article on lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, Stewart (2021) opined that "Anything that affects consumer behavior and market performance is within the domain of marketing, and marketing brings a unique perspective to the study of these phenomena" (p. 98). This musing brings a unique consumer behavior perspective. It suggests boycotts and buycotts as consumer behavior tools to use to get corporations that have fared exceptionally well during the pandemic, to be ethical leaders and step up their corporate social responsibility (CSR) by sharing more of their enormous profits with their workers and the communities of the consumers who buy their products.

Historically, consumer boycotts and buycotts have been used as a strategy to influence corporate social action (Aung, Wang, and Zhang, 2021; Friedman, 1996). This paper ponders their use to move corporations to put more emphasis on doing the right thing for the communities in which they operate. The top 50 US corporations have given minimal support (individually, millions of dollars) to the fight against the spread of the pandemic (to showcase their corporate social responsibility) while they have given billions of dollars back to their shareholders and cut thousands of workers from their employ (MacMillan et al., 2020). Consumers voicing their disapproval (via boycotts) and approval (via buycotts) of how companies exercise their CSR, might affect how companies operate their CSR initiatives. CSR is defined along with its role in a pandemic era; boycotts and buycotts as consumer actions are defined and discussed; and a short history of some infamous boycotts and buycotts and the corporate actions that began and ended them are also included in this musing. Finally, possible consumer motivations preventing boycotts and buycotts from being effective are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Corporate Social Responsibility

Should the small percentages of their 2020 profits U.S. companies paid to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) and more; and paid to charities working to help during the Covid-19 pandemic, be considered a sufficient CSR response to the pandemic by these companies? Should their workers and consumer communities not expect more Covid-19 support from the companies? What role should consumer stakeholders and employee stakeholders expect CSR to play in the Covid-19 pandemic?

Thomas Jones helps put this CSR question in perspective. In 1980, Jones entered the CSR discussion with an interesting perspective. First, he defined CSR as "...the notion that corporations have an obligation to constituent groups in society other than stockholders and beyond that prescribed by law and union contract" (p. 59-60). He considered two facets of this definition as critical. "First, the obligation must be voluntarily adopted; behavior influenced by the coercive forces of law or union contract is not voluntary" (Jones, 1980, p. 60). Boycotts by consumers do not fall under his union or forces of law rubric. "Second, the obligation is a broad one, extending beyond the traditional duty to shareholders to other societal groups such as customers, employees, suppliers, and neighboring communities" (Jones, 1980, p. 60). Jones' definition of CSR and his elaboration on that definition is in alignment with the focus of this musing, which considers what seems to be a dereliction by highly profitable corporations to their obligations to their consumer and employee stakeholder groups. The corporations are neglecting their ethical responsibility to those beyond their stockholders. During a pandemic they should give more back than they are to their societal constituents, the communities in which they do business. Their neglect of their ethical responsibility wreaks hardship and stress on those constituents.

In 1983, Carroll elaborated on his four-part definition of CSR. According to Carroll (1999):

CSR involves the conduct of a business so that it is economically profitable, law abiding, ethical and socially supportive. To be socially responsible... then means that profitability and obedience to the law are foremost conditions to discussing the firm's ethics and the extent to which it supports the society in which it exists with contributions of money, time and talent. Thus, CSR is composed of four parts: economic, legal, ethical and voluntary or philanthropic (p. 287).

The implementation of CSR during a pandemic could touch each of Carroll's four parts. We are not questioning if any business has the right to be economically profitable during a pandemic. Nor are we questioning if a business acted illegally during the pandemic. We are questioning whether the voluntary or philanthropic efforts of businesses were ethical given the enormous profits made by many of the largest businesses in America. We are also questioning if smaller businesses were ethical in laying off workers and offering scaled back products and services during the pandemic. Of course, any business has to determine the best way to remain afloat during a crisis like a pandemic. But, with the fiscal help given by the government and others in the communities where the businesses were located, some businesses did not respond ethically regarding their employees and customer stakeholders. The Covid-19 pandemic era was an opportune time for all businesses to show their employee and customer stakeholders how much they were valued. This could have been shown by businesses deciding to survive on less profit or growth, and instead, maintaining employees and serving more customers or doing more to support their customer's communities during the pandemic crisis.

Boycotts and Buycotts

Consumer boycotts and buycotts have been used for a long time by consumers as instruments to voice their disapproval or approval of a company's actions. Garrett (1987) referred to *Black's Law Dictionary* for his definition of boycotts as "a concerted refusal to do business with a particular person or business in order to obtain concessions or express displeasure" (p. 46-47). Boycotts have been documented back to 494 BC when Roman plebs rejected how they were being treated and left Rome *en masse* (Salas, Shanahan, & Gonzalez, 2019).

Consumer buycotts are the opposite of consumer boycotts. Buycotts are used by consumer activists as an "attempt to induce shoppers to buy the products or services of selected companies in order to reward them for behavior consistent with the goals of the activists" (Friedman, 1996, 439). Castellano (2018) defines buycotts as actions that involve, "actively buying products that respect certain values or ethics in order to generate a movement towards fairer production processes, both from an environmental and human point of view" (p. 2).

Consumer boycotts have an aim to punish companies for wrongs they have done while consumer buycotts have an aim to reward companies for the good they have done (Aung, Wang, and Zhang, 2021; Bandura, 1969).

...Weber Shandwick and KRC Research surveyed consumers in the US and the UK to explore the motivations behind consumer activism. The research, Battle of the Wallets: The Changing Landscape of Consumer Activism, investigates the motivations behind boycotters and those who show support for companies by intentionally buying from them ("BUYcotters").

The research finds that the BUYcott movement is growing and expected to outpace boycotts. Eight in 10 consumer activists in the US and UK (83 percent) agree it is more important than ever to support companies that do the right thing by BUYcoting (Weber Shandrick, 2018, (p. 1).

Previous Boycotts and Buycotts

A U.S. boycott of French wine due to the French opposition of the Iraq war decreased the volume of French wine sold by 13% over the first six months after the Iraq war commenced (Tomlin, 2019). In 2011 Delta Airlines was successfully boycotted for charging extra bag fees for troops returning from Afghanistan. As a result, they discontinued the extra fees (Tomlin, 2019).

The Nestlé boycott that began July 4, 1977, helped define how to successfully reconcile CSR implementation with human rights and commercial interests (Post, 1985). "The boycott was organized because of Nestlé's alleged marketing abuses in promoting and selling infant formula products in less developed nations. ...The Nestlé boycott has had a major impact on the interpretation of corporate accountability and the reconciliation of human rights and commercial interests" (Post, 1985, p. 113). "To some activists, it was a campaign against the power and influence of multinational business corporations" (Post, 1985, p. 113).

"The infant formula controversy and the ensuing Nestlé boycott are also noteworthy for the precedents they have established in the area of corporate accountability. The development of an international code of marketing created a framework in which corporate responsibility could be defined and evaluated. Nestlé's various approaches to dealing with the boycott provide instructive lessons in "issue management" and public affairs. The establishment of the Nestlé Infant Formula Audit Commission is an experiment in corporate accountability procedure and practice" (Post, 1985, p. 115).

Chick-fil-A was boycotted and buycotted in 2012 when it was made public that a senior member of its leadership opposed same sex marriage (Salas et al, 2019; McGregor, 2018). As a response to the boycott, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee made a call for conservatives to support the chain with a 'Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day' buycott which resulted in long lines and record-setting sales (McGregor, 2018). Chick-fil-A sustained virtually no losses from various boycotts but, decided to change "...its charitable giving approach in 2020 — and says, in an oblique way, that it will no longer donate to such organizations....The Chick-fil-A Foundation will instead take "a more focused giving approach." (Del Valle, 2019, p. 2). The American Customer Satisfaction Index released its list of best fast-food restaurants, and Chick-fil-A took the top title for the seventh straight year (Mendoza, 2021). Depending on who you are, the Chick-fil-A boycott might not have been deemed successful as it did not impact the company too financially. It has impeded its growth some as their requests to locate new stores in some potential locations were turned down because of the same-sex marriage stance of their founder. But, you may consider it a win because they have stated they will change their giving approach. Overall, they are still number one in the fast-food industry.

With the aim of becoming better, more aware, and conscious consumers, boycotts help citizens make mindful, sustainable decisions about their purchases (Castellano, 2018). Some causes that have been supported by mindful consumer boycotts include buying products that are produced under fair trade agreements or where the welfare of workers and animals has been guaranteed. For example, cosmetics that were not tested on animals, goods that are non-GMO, or clothing/products that were not made with sweatshop labor (Castellano, 2018).

HOW CONSUMERS CAN ACTIVATE TO AFFECT CHANGE

Boycotts and buycotts are two tools suggested as possible change agents for consumers who want companies to practice better CSR during the Covid-19 pandemic. Could the use of boycotts and buycotts have the same transformative effects as the Nestlé boycott on how communities live through pandemics? If consumers and workers use boycotts and buycotts of companies during the Covid-19 pandemic, could they affect the way companies respond to future pandemics and national catastrophes? What are some of the issues that might help consumers successfully boycott or buycott companies they deem as underperforming on or, stepping up to, their obligations during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Aung, Wang, and Zhang. (2021) wrote that boycotts are frequently practiced in the marketplace as a way to punish businesses that are performing unfavorable behaviors through the use of anti-consumption. They go on to note that boycotts are collective actions by consumers and are a part of a structured organization. Boycotts are a contrast to buycotts which consumers can easily incorporate into their daily activities (Aung, Wang, and Zhang, 2021). U.S. workers at Kellogg went on strike and spurred a consumer boycott in support of the strike for not cutting workers' wages or vacation pay; not sending their jobs to Mexico; and not having to work 80-hour work weeks continuously during the pandemic while executives received bonuses (Zhang, 2021). International Kellogg workers supported the strike by not working and consumers were asked to boycott by not buying Kellogg's products. U.S. President, Joe Biden condemned Kellogg's treatment of its workers and its threat to break the union by hiring permanent workers to replace those striking (Clark, 2021).

U.S. Senator, Bernie Sanders called for support of the boycott (Zhang, 2021). According to Sanders: "When Kellogg's employees worked 7-days a week during the pandemic to feed America they were called 'heroes'... Today, despite big profits, the company is trying to break their strike by bringing in permanent replacements and sending 275 jobs to Mexico. Let's stand with the workers" (Zhang, p. 5).

This type of egregious behavior by companies is why consumers need to 'activate' and get more concerned with how companies operate and serve their external and internal stakeholders. Kellogg workers are mothers, daughters, fathers, and brothers. They are homeowners or want to be homeowners. They are fellow consumers and fellow neighbors. Weber Shandwick (2018) and KRC conducted research using 2000 boycotters and buycotters (aka consumer activists) in 2017 and found that American consumers expect and want CEO's to take stands on issues important to society. Approximately 60% of the buycotters and boycotters in their study said they would have a more favorable opinion of the CEOs who spoke out on hotly debated topics (Weber Shandwick).

Understanding where corporations stand on issues important to society would help consumers make decisions on which companies to patronize. If consumers are politically and socially aware they might choose to use buycotts to support those companies that have values similar to theirs. The Weber Shandwick (2018) & KRC research found that "...buycotters are significantly more likely than boycotters to be inspired to take action by company or brand values, product/or service quality, actions companies or brands take, and treatment of customers and employees".

For those who do not see themselves as a boycotter because they don't like the idea of punishing companies and wreaking havoc on their employees, the buycott is the softer alternative. If the goal is to get companies to have better CSR initiatives for the communities they do business in, then, a motivated consumer could buycott by buying from a competitor of the company that needs to make better CSR decisions. Buycotting is preferred by millennials and Gen Zers who are more active in consumer activism and who think more can be accomplished by showing support of companies doing good by buying from

them rather than by boycotting those not doing good (Weber Shandwick, 2018). However, if consumers are comfortable with confrontation and wish to punish a company for its poor implementation of CSR, boycotting and social media should be used to move the company to a better implementation of CSR.

Social media is a key part of the success of any boycott or buycott as it helps to reach more people with the purpose and status of the boycott or buycott. The enlarged platform of social media gives consumer activists a broader reach and helps them put added spotlight on companies that are not doing right by their employees or consumer communities and, also on those who are doing right by those constituents. Many researchers have mentioned that to be successful, consumer activists need to affect a corporation's reputation positively, if a buycott, or negatively, if a boycott (Weber Shandwick, 2018; Castellano, 2018). Financial impact is not seen as important as the impact to a corporation's reputation when it comes to affecting change. Social media is an excellent tool to reach the masses and inform them of, and solicit support for, a consumer activism mission.

Everyone can be a consumer activist or practice political consumerism if they heed the advice of Pope Benedict XVI. The Pope reminded Catholics to buy consciously. He taught that the act of consumption was always a moral act and that Catholics had a specific responsibility shared with the firm from whom they purchase products. The Pope also reminded his flock to go beyond considering the economic cost of a transaction but to also consider if the transaction was truly good for society (Salas, Shanahan, and Gonzalez, 2019). If consumers remember what the Pope said about each transaction needing to be good for society and, determine if the companies they are buying from, are doing good by society in their production; the way they treat their workers; and the way they participate in the communities that buy from them; and then only buy from those who are doing good, then, they would be practicing consumer activism.

Vitell (2015) says that CSR is difficult for a company to successfully implement without help from their consumers. He defines a CSR-focused company as "...one that *proactively* offers *social benefits* or *public service*, and *voluntarily* minimizes practices that harm society, regardless of any legal requirements" (Vitell 2015, p. 767). His definition is close to what the Pope asked us to remember when determining who to buy from. Vitell (2015) also said that "In "exchange" for this behavior, it anticipates the approval and support of customers" (p. 767). Vitell's definition of a CSR-focused company asks that consumers just let them know that their CSR efforts are appreciated by buying from them. A truly CSR-focused company would also prefer to hear of any constructive critical information that consumers would like to share to make their CSR more appropriate for served stakeholders.

The 1977 Nestlé infant formula controversy resulted in a successful boycott of the company that is also noteworthy for the precedent established in corporate accountability (Post, 1985). After 6.5 years the boycott was ended when Nestlé agreed to comply with virtually each detail of the World Health Organization Infant Formula Sales Code. The new code included four points designed to curb aggressive sales tactics in third world countries (Hilts, 1984). The Nestlé boycott is included here to show that one of the largest companies in the world could be boycotted successfully. Society was made safer and Nestlé Nestlé was made better by the boycott and the consumer activism that brought it about.

CONCLUSION

This paper is a 'musing', a calm, lengthy, intent consideration (Vocabulary.com, n.d.) of two tools consumers have at their disposal to help improve their social and economic conditions during the Covid 19 pandemic in the United States. Covid-19 has become more contagious (the more contagious Omicron variant is rampaging through the U.S. at this writing), will probably be with us for the long-term, and worker shortages are immense for those businesses that are open. Would banding behind these businesses with buycotts help keep them open? Would boycotting companies that posted enormous profits but cut workers, move those businesses to bring workers back?

Of course, there are many issues associated with the operating decisions businesses make during a pandemic. Many of the issues are beyond a company's control. The 'great resignation' has workers quitting their jobs by the millions to follow their dreams (Kelly, 2021). There are issues with the supply-chain and with workers being out sick with Covid-19. These issues have caused some businesses to close altogether

and for some that remain open, have limited hours of operation and diminished the need for full-time work forces. The results of these issues are the same as companies having poor CSR, less service to customers.

But, in another musing, do these issues prevent service companies from paying a wage that would incent employees to come back to work or induce new employees to start work? Why do so many fast-food places have long drive-through lines or are online ordering only, even if you use the drive-through? Would increasing worker pay, get more workers? Do customers need to boycott the limited services they are getting from businesses that are open but have been blaming Covid-19 as the reason for the lessened services for months? Are companies making money while giving less service to their customers because customers are willing to 'settle' because they don't know their power? Will 2022 be another year of enormous profits for large companies, large rewards for their stockholders, and turmoil for their employees and consumers? Or will consumers activate in the manner in which they are most comfortable, by using boycotts and/or boycotts, along with social media, to motivate corporate change for better social and economic environments in their pandemic future?

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