

Phygital Politics: The Intersection of Political Influence and Consumer Behavior

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ABSTRACT

We are in an age where taking a political stance as a business is increasingly observed and contested. This thesis explores how consumers react to corporate political stances and engage with boycotts across digital and offline realms, conceptualized as phygital politics. Through a qualitative research design combining narrative and thematic analysis, this study explores how individuals construct and narrate their participation in boycotts, and how identity, motivation, and perceived authenticity shape these engagements. The Social Identity Theory (SIT), guided the findings, revealing five core themes: consumer boycott typologies, motivational and emotional drivers, perceptions of brand activism, phygital participation dynamics, and storytelling as a tool for identity and meaning making. Participants were labeled as initiators, late adopters, or armchair boycotters, each reflecting different levels of moral conviction, social pressure, and performativity. The study found a feedback loop between online mobilization and offline behavior, showing how digital visibility often catalyzes real-world consumption changes and vice versa. Motivations are shown to evolve over time, flowing between ethical commitments, group belonging, identity signaling, and practical trade-offs. The effectiveness of boycotts, as perceived by consumers, is linked to brand authenticity and emotional resonance, rather than purely rational calculations. Overall, the act of boycotting is found to be not only a political act but a narrative one where consumers negotiate values, express identity, and assert belonging in a media-saturated, polarized marketplace. This research adds to the literature on political consumerism by combining digital activism and offline behavior, offering theoretical insights and practical implications for brands navigating sociopolitical discourse in the digital era. However, the study is limited by its small, Western-centric sample and reliance on self-reported data, which may not fully capture actual boycotting behavior. Additionally, the focus on digital activism risks overshadowing offline, community-based forms of resistance, potentially narrowing the scope of the findings.

Keywords: Phygital Politics, Consumer Activism, Boycotts, Narrative Analysis, Social Identity Theory.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Political discourses have made their way into every facet of society, so much so, that businesses are no longer seen as neutral entities. We see that corporations are taking stands on political issues and even incorporate them as part of their branding strategies. While taking a side may resonate with certain groups of consumers leading to increasing sales, it also risks alienating others, which can have detrimental consequences for a company. In recent years, various instances have shown the implications that come from taking a stance. Organized boycotts and online activism, to name a few, are movements that challenge the traditional boundaries of consumer-business interactions.

To buy or not to buy? Many everyday consumers are asking themselves this behavioral question considering recent boycotts. Recent examples include boycotts targeting companies like Starbucks, Coca-Cola, and Nestlé for their perceived stances on the Israel-Palestine conflict, leading to significant public backlash and revenue declines (Lucas, 2024, para. 6). Similarly, companies such as Target and Bud Light faced widespread boycotts due to their partnerships with LGBTQ+ influencers and merchandise, sparking intense political debates between Democrats and Republicans in the United States. These boycotts have become a powerful form of consumer activism, giving individuals a voice, by holding businesses accountable for their political actions or inactions.

Some boycotts, such as the one in South Africa during the anti-apartheid movement, have taken place at the national level and later inspired the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS) movement (Dis:orient, 2023, para. 2). However, a boycott on the magnitude of the current boycott against products from Israel has never been seen before. This can be attributed to phygital politics, the blending of physical and digital realms in political and social engagement (Majeed and Abushbak, 2024, p.2). In today's interconnected world, political discourse is no longer confined to traditional spaces but thrives on digital platforms where opinions can be amplified globally within seconds (Kelm and Dohle, 2018, p.1526). The digital space enables consumers to organize coordinated actions, with far-reaching consequences. Simultaneously, the physical act of boycotting becomes a tangible expression of digital solidarity and shared values. Phygital politics thus creates a dynamic feedback loop, where digital advocacy influences real-world behavior, and real-world actions further fuel online discourse (Kelm & Dohle, 2018). This

cycle is shaped by evolving narratives, stories told by different actors at different points in the boycott's lifecycle, from its initiation to its peak and eventual aftermath.

Since narratives do not exist in isolation but adapt to their context, the way individuals and collectives engage in boycotts is deeply influenced by how the story unfolds. Some actors emerge as trendsetters, shaping the initial narrative, while others become late adopters, engaging only after the boycott reaches mainstream visibility. Others remain armchair boycotters, participating in digital discourse but without translating it into physical action. These evolving narratives, influenced by media representations and individual storytelling, reinforce the feedback loop at the heart of phygital politics.

1.1 Research Question

To develop a better understanding of boycott motivations, this thesis sets out to answer the following research question: *How do consumers narrate, construct, and participate in political boycotts in a phygital environment, and what factors shape their engagement and meaning?* To gain a deeper understanding, three sub-questions will also be examined:

1. To what extent does a feedback loop between digital activism and offline consumer behavior reinforce boycotting actions?
2. How do consumer motivations shift through the phases of a phygital boycott?
3. How do consumers perceive the effectiveness of boycotts in influencing business practices?

Because narratives do not exist in isolation but are shaped by the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they are told, this thesis uses narrative analysis to capture how individuals make sense of and participate in boycotts within evolving phygital environments. By recognizing that consumer stories are formed in dialogue with their surroundings, the chosen method allows for a deeper understanding of how meaning and motivation shift over time. With an integration of narrative analysis and a thematic examination of boycott motivations, this study aims to trace how stories of activism develop, shift, and ultimately shape consumer behavior. By addressing these questions, the research will contribute to both academic knowledge and practical insights into consumer activism and corporate strategy.

This being said, the thesis first discusses research on the evolution of boycotts, digital activism, consumer activism and the motivations behind the action. Additionally, it explains the

methodology used to gather and analyze the data. Followed by the key topics that emerged from the data analysis which are presented in the findings section. Finally, the thesis considers the primary contributions and ramifications for brands in the discussion and conclusion.

1.2 Academic and Social Relevance

Although consumer activism and anti-brand behavior have been widely studied (Klein et al., 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004), there's still limited research on how people respond when brands themselves take a stand on political or social issues (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). We know a lot about why consumers push back against companies, but we know much less about the reactions that occur when corporations voluntarily insert themselves into political discourse. This is particularly significant in the context of the current media landscape, where reactions can be amplified instantaneously online (Albrecht, 2013; Guimond, 2019).

This thesis helps fill that gap by looking at how consumers react to brand activism, specifically when it plays out across both online and offline spaces, termed as “phygital” environments. While there's been growing interest in digital activism, the voices of everyday consumers, including their motivations, doubts, and emotional experiences, have not been explored in enough depth. This study brings those voices forward.

By using in-depth interviews, this research captures how people navigate the tension between what they believe, how they want to be seen, and what they actually do when it comes to political boycotts. It also explores how stories, identities, and social pressures shape consumer decisions in ways that aren't always straightforward.

From a practical perspective, these insights matter and are highly relevant for businesses. Brands today are expected to speak up on major issues, but doing so comes with real risks. Specifically, the expectations for brands to speak out on sociopolitical issues are particularly strong in industries targeting younger, socially conscious consumers, such as the fashion and beauty industries (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020, p.465). This visibility comes with strong risks. For example, the companies Bud Light and Goya Foods have experienced public backlash, boycotts, and seen declines in sales after engaging with political discourse (Dalakas et al., 2023, p.5). In some cases, this damage can extend beyond short-term financial losses and affect the long-term trust in a brand.

The findings in this thesis can therefore assist marketers, communication strategists, and corporate leaders to understand what makes brand activism resonate as authentic versus what consumers dismiss as opportunistic or performative. By looking into the interpretations and emotional responses of everyday consumers, the research offers a deeper view into the act of political branding and its impact on trust and loyalty among consumers.

In short, this research highlights why consumer activism today can't be understood without looking at the blend of social media, driving emotions and identity from both individual and corporate perspective. It offers new ways of thinking about boycotts, not just as political acts, but as personal stories that reflect who people are and what they stand for.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review lays the conceptual and historical foundation for understanding consumer boycotts within contemporary phygital environments: where digital and offline behaviors are intertwined. Given the novelty of this hybrid mode of activism, this section also contributes directly to the theoretical framework by synthesizing insights from existing scholarship that inform the use of Social Identity Theory in this study. In doing so, it provides both empirical context and theoretical support for the analysis of how consumers engage with political branding and boycott participation in media-saturated settings. The following section gives a summary of relevant literature on the subjects of Boycotts, Consumer Activism, Phygital Activism, Social Identity Theory and Corporate Political Engagement.

2.1 The Evolution of Boycotts

For centuries, boycotts have been a method used to pressure organizations into changing their policies or practices, whether it be for economic, political, or social reasons (Klein et al., 2004, p.106). According to Chihabi & Buur (2024, p.3), historical boycotts have often emerged in response to socio-political injustices. The Montgomery Bus Boycott can be used as an early example, a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement. Rosa Parks' sparked the movement after being arrested since she refused to give up her seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama. Similarly, another instance, the Tallahassee Bus Boycott of 1956, followed the same strategy, protesting against racial segregation on public transportation, showing how collective action could challenge systemic injustices. The campaign lasted eight months and contributed to the civil rights movement in the United States.

Boycotts allow the individual, through consumer activism, to have influence over corporate behavior (Friedman, 1991, p.149). It is also argued that the effectiveness of a boycott depends on its perceived legitimacy and the moral intensity of the issue at stake (Klein et al., 2004, p.93). Boycotters can be labeled based on their levels of commitment within a movement. For instance, initiators are the individuals that launch and actively promote boycotts, while early adopters are those who quickly join the movement due to strong alignment with the cause. On the other hand, late adopters are participants who join after observing widespread support or media attention, and armchair boycotters are those who support a boycott in principle but do not actively change their consumption habits. These categories align with Kozinets and Handelman's

(2004, p.692) argument that consumer activism varies in intensity, since some individuals are deeply engaged in campaigns while others take more of a passive approach.

Today's digital landscape has changed the nature of boycotts and evolved beyond traditional economic pressure into a hybrid of physical and digital activism, coined by Chris Weil (2007) as "phygital" boycotts. Unlike historical boycotts, which relied on word of mouth and pamphlets, modern boycotts rely on social media, online petitions, and viral trends to take their reach to a higher level. According to Majeed and Abushbak (2024, p.4), digital activism allows for the rapid spread of boycott movements, increasing their visibility and potential for impact. Similarly, Kelm and Dohle (2018,p.1540) point out that online platforms give consumers the ability to coordinate and share large-scale collective action, putting pressure on corporations and making it easier to hold them accountable.

The boycotts this study focuses on is this phygital shift, where consumer activism is shaped by both digital interactions and offline action. Social Media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok allow users to organize and exert pressure on companies more rapidly and globally than ever before, for this reason, digital media plays a critical role in modern boycott movements.

2.2 Corporate Political Stances & Consumer Reactions

Marketplaces have become more than economic entities since taking part in polarized political and social discourses has become much more common. To respond to external pressures or to differentiate themselves in the market to increase sales, companies take a risk by aligning with certain consumer values (Korschun et al., 2019, p.3). Currently, the United States is experiencing increasing polarization in the political environment due to the recent election of President Donald Trump. After Trump's election, political and cultural divisions became more prominent in the country, fueling a surge in consumer activism. In this climate, it has become difficult for American based companies to avoid political entanglement, since silence can also be interpreted as complicity and any perceived alignment can trigger a boycott from one side of the ideological spectrum or the other.

Corporate political activism can take place in different ways, like endorsing social movements or opposing controversial policies. However, taking a political stand is not always voluntary, some companies are forced into political discourse due to consumer and social

pressures. This aligns with the idea of reactive activism, where companies respond to external events or backlash, rather than proactively defining their political identity (Chang, 2015, p.453). For instance, brands like Starbucks and Google have made statements supporting racial justice movements after facing consumer demand for corporate accountability. An example is Disney's silence towards Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill. The company's lack of action led to employee walkouts and public backlash. The CEO later publicly opposed the bill leaving many to doubt the intentions believing it was an attempt to salvage the company's reputation. In this line, Long et al., (2024, p.295) suggest that corporate activism is often a strategic move rather than purely ethical, as brands selectively engage in causes that resonate with their key demographics.

Companies can also choose to engage in political discourse to strengthen brand loyalty among like-minded consumers, knowing the risk of alienating those with opposing views. For example, research by Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020, p.467) shows that when brands align with progressive causes, they tend to gain support from younger, socially conscious consumers while facing backlash from conservative groups.

However, the success of such strategies is heavily influenced on the nature of the brand, product category and the degree to which activism is perceived as intrinsic to the company's mission. For example, Patagonia's has a strong environmental stance which has enhanced consumer trust and loyalty since its activism is seen as authentic and integrated in its founding values and operations (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 6; McKinney & Benson, 2013, p. 78). The company is rooted in sustainable outdoor gear making Patagonia a well-positioned company in an era of environmental urgency.

In contrast, in 2019 Gillette's introduced a campaign addressing toxic masculinity which received mixed reactions. In the U.S., it sparked widespread backlash from some male consumers who perceived it as accusatory or patronizing. This mishap led to boycotts and social media outrage (Topping et al., 2019, p. 1). Gillette's campaign highlights the challenges of messaging in everyday product categories, even personal hygiene, where consumers often prioritize price and habit over ethical signaling (Hoek et al., 2012, p.784). In the context of Gillette, activism in branding can come off as opportunistic if not supported by long-standing commitments.

These examples show that political engagement is a double-edged sword for companies. While it can deepen emotional loyalty among aligned consumers like we see with Patagonia, it

can also incite backlash, especially when there is a mismatch between brand identity and sociopolitical messaging (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 7). Whether such efforts lead to consumer boycotts depends not only on the stance taken, but also on the brand's credibility, values and the expectations of its consumer base.

2.3 Social Media's Role in Corporate Political Engagement

The way in which companies engage with politics has been completely reshaped by social media with how brands communicate, how consumers respond, and how activism is performed. In contrast to traditional media, that offers delayed and unidirectional messaging, social media platforms like X, Instagram, and TikTok create an immediate, bidirectional interaction between the public and corporations. These instant interactions allow consumers to voice feedback and mobilize collective action in real-time (Kelly-Herard, 2021, p.2). It also intensifies scrutiny, since companies are not only judged by what they say but also by how quickly they say it and how authentically it is perceived.

Dalakas et al. (2023, p.2) note that in today's fast-paced environment, brands are pressured more than ever before to speak out on sociopolitical issues, often with limited time to strategize. Silence itself can be interpreted as complicity, particularly when a brand has historically aligned with progressive messaging. In this context, neutrality is not a safe option but may be seen as a form of passive endorsement, pushing corporations into politically charged terrain regardless of intent.

Social media's algorithmic structure amplifies the stakes. Hashtags like #boycott or #cancelculture, are at the center for rapid mobilization, where a single controversial statement or perceived misstep can lead to global backlash. These digital movements are often started through viral outrage, where emotions are contagious and spreads through likes, shares, and retweets, creating an echo chamber that increases reputational risks (Papacharissi, 2015). Movements such as #GrabYourWallet and #BoycottStarbucks show how consumers use social media not only to express disapproval but to coordinate action at scale.

However, as Borah et al. (2022, p.3) emphasize, the rise of digital activism has also brought the phenomenon of performative wokeness, where companies will make a political statement simply to align with trending agenda, often without implementing meaningful policy changes or ethical reforms. This form of performative activism can backfire when consumers

perceive it as disingenuous or opportunistic. For instance, Pepsi's 2017 ad campaign featuring Kendall Jenner, which used the aesthetics of a protest movements without engaging in the context, showed the reputational damage that can come from inauthentic messaging.

Importantly, social media does not only raise the stakes for what companies say but it also broadens who holds them accountable. Influencers, activist groups, and even everyday users can start or sustain boycott movements through viral content. This has shifted the power dynamic between brands and consumers, creating what some scholars refer to as “networked accountability” (Poell & van Dijck, 2015), where reputational capital is constantly negotiated in real-time, across dispersed and decentralized publics.

The pressure to appear morally aligned and politically engaged has also blurred the line between brand and political identity. For many brands, especially the ones targeting younger, progressive audiences, corporate values are now seen as inseparable from political values (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). Yet, this alignment must be maintained through consistent actions across time and platforms. Failure to follow through, such as by supporting a movement during Pride Month but donating to anti-LGBTQ+ politicians, often leads to consumer backlash and loss of trust.

Finally, social media is facilitating what scholars call phygital activism, a blend of digital and offline engagement, where consumer mobilization online often translates into boycotts, protests, or purchasing shifts offline (Majeed & Abushbak, 2024). In this way, online discourse becomes a precursor and predictor of market behavior, making hashtags an economic pressure point. The convergence of digital signaling and real-world action reinforces the importance of authenticity and narrative coherence in brand communication.

Overall, social media is a powerful tool and a dangerous arena for corporate political engagement. It allows brands to foster a community and amplify their values, but it also opens them up to intensified scrutiny and rapid backlash. The visibility and permanence of digital content mean that inconsistency, inaction, or insincerity are not easily forgiven. For this reason, authenticity and long-term commitment are not only ethical imperatives but strategic necessities. Brands must recognize that in a media-saturated environment, political engagement is not only a marketing tool, but it is a high-stakes identity performance.

2.4 *Motivations for boycotts*

Consumer boycotts arise from diverse motivations, ranging from ethical concerns and political opposition to personal identity expression and collective activism. Traditional boycott research categorizes motivations into instrumental, expressive, and identity-driven factors (Klein et al., 2004, p.94). More recently, Dalakas et al. (2023, p.2) provide a nuanced framework, identifying pro-boycott and anti-boycott consumer profiles, revealing that social media boycotts are not just about ethical outrage but also about group identity, self-enhancement, and retaliation.

One key motivation behind boycotts is instrumental: the desire to seek change. Boycotts are often employed as a strategic tool to pressure corporations into altering policies or stances (Friedman, 1991, p.153). Consumers engaging in instrumental boycotts believe their actions can lead to tangible corporate changes, whether in labor practices, environmental policies, or political affiliations. Dalakas et al. (2023, p.3) reinforce this by showing how pro-boycott consumers use social media as a platform to mobilize for change, often outlining clear demands and offering alternatives to boycotted brands.

Moral motivation, centered on seeking justice and accountability, is another critical driver. When consumers perceive a brand's actions as ethically unacceptable, it can stem a boycott from a moral standpoint (Sen et al., 2001, p.30). An example of this is the movements like the Nestlé boycott over unethical water privatization or the Goya Foods boycott following its CEO's endorsement of Trump, where activists viewed participation as a moral duty (Dalakas et al., 2023, p.8). Moral signaling is heightened in the social media-driven nature of modern boycotts, since consumers are able to publicly align themselves with ethical causes (Borah et al., 2022, p.3).

Identity-based motivations also play a significant role. Looking at the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), consumers are more likely to align their purchasing behaviors with in-group values instead of brands associated with out-groups. Dalakas et al. (2023, p.9) identify "brand defenders" who reject boycotts not because they disagree with the issue but because the boycott threatens their social identity. This highlights how brand loyalty can become intertwined with broader group affiliations.

Finally, emotional motivations, particularly feelings of retaliation and outrage, drive many boycott initiations. Consumers may choose to engage in boycotts as an emotional response to perceived corporate betrayal (Braunsberger & Buckler, 2011, p.98). In their research, Dalakas

et al. (2023, p.9) identify profiles such as "The Outraged" and "The Threat-Maker," whose participation is moved from a place of anger and a desire to see the brand suffer. These emotions are often amplified on social media platforms, creating rapid escalations of boycott movements and intensifying public backlash against targeted companies.

Together, these motivations reveal that contemporary boycotts are not merely isolated acts of protest, but complex expressions of consumer power, identity, and emotion, amplified by the reach and immediacy of social media.

2.5 Social Identity Theory & Consumer Activism

Social Identity Theory (SIT) can be used for understanding the underlying motivations behind consumer boycott participation, especially in phygital environments where social affiliation, emotion, and visibility intertwine. Developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), the theory argues that individuals their self-concept from how they perceive their membership in social groups. This is termed as “in-groups,” and the identification with those groups simultaneously leads to distancing from “out-groups” (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). When applied to political consumerism, SIT provides valuable insight into why individuals might engage in boycotts not only for instrumental outcomes, but to affirm belonging and distinguish themselves morally and socially (Hogg, 2016, p.5).

Rather than being rational, isolated decisions, boycotts can be understood as socially situated acts. In this light, consumer activism becomes a performance of values, especially visible in digital contexts, where signaling group allegiance and moral conviction can be just as important as economic impact (Braunsberger & Buckler, 2011, p.98). Research has shown that consumers are more likely to engage in boycotts when a brand violates the values of their perceived in-group or aligns with an out-group they oppose (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Palacios-Florencio et al., 2021, p.11). These group dynamics are further heightened on social media, where public expression becomes part of the identity work consumers do, sometimes sincerely, sometimes strategically.

Importantly, SIT helps explain three central mechanisms driving boycott engagement. First, in-group/out-group positioning is essential: brands are read as either aligned or misaligned with the consumer's identity, shaping emotional responses and behaviors accordingly. Second, moral identity reinforcement plays a key role. Participating in a boycott allows individuals to

affirm their ethical positioning and cultivate a public-facing narrative of justice, activism, or awareness, particularly potent in media-saturated spaces like Instagram or TikTok. Third, the concept of collective efficacy, the belief that “we” can create change through coordinated action, bolsters participation (Hoffmann et al., 2018, p.169). Movements like #GrabYourWallet or the boycott of companies tied to political regimes gain traction precisely because they frame action as both individual and collective empowerment.

However, while SIT offers a compelling explanation of why people join boycotts, scholars also note that identity-driven activism may not lead to sustained behavioral change. Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020, p. 467) argue that many forms of participation, particularly in digital contexts, can amount to symbolic or performative signaling rather than long-term shifts in consumption. This is especially relevant in phygital activism, where the boundary between action and appearance is blurred. Consumers may participate in boycotts for the sake of moral consistency or social image but return to previous habits when the emotional or social intensity subsides.

Moreover, SIT helps make sense of the internal contradiction’s consumers express, such as those revealed in this study, between identity and convenience, or belief and behavior. These tensions, often rationalized in interviews, underscore how boycott engagement is not static but dynamic, fluctuating across time, social pressures, and personal reflection.

In sum, SIT provides a robust theoretical lens for understanding how political boycotts reactions to brand behavior are not simply but also expressions of social identity. It helps illuminate the performative, affective, and symbolic dimensions of consumer activism, particularly in phygital spaces where individuals are constantly navigating the pressures of group alignment, visibility, and moral coherence.

2.6 Theoretical Gaps & Contributions of This Study

The rise of social media has transformed boycott participation, yet much of the existing research still treats online activism separately from offline consumer behavior. While studies have examined digital activism’s role in mobilizing boycotts (Gurrieri et al., 2021, p.8), few have qualitatively analyzed how individuals navigate both online and offline actions in phygital spaces. This gap suggests a need for in-depth narrative accounts that explore how digital discourse translates into real-world consumer choices.

Boycott literature often categorizes participants based on economic, moral, or social motivations (Klein et al., 2004, p.93), but these classifications rarely capture the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes of boycotters. Narrative studies on political consumerism (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020, p.465) indicate that personal stories shape engagement, yet boycotting research remains largely devoid of first-person perspectives. Understanding how individuals interpret and justify their participation can provide a richer, more nuanced view of why and how boycotts gain traction in a digital era. By employing qualitative narrative analysis, this study addresses these gaps by:

1. Examining how consumers experience and interpret phygital boycotts through personal storytelling. By focusing on narrative structure and identity framing, this study reveals how boycotting becomes an emotionally charged and socially performed act.
2. Bridging the disconnect between digital activism and offline consumer behavior. It shows how digital discourse (e.g., hashtags, infographics, influencer campaigns) not only triggers offline behavioral shifts but is also reinforced by them in a feedback loop, making phygital engagement a continuous, cyclical process.
3. Providing a deeper understanding of the role of political influence in consumer decision-making, beyond existing economic and psychological frameworks. Rather than viewing boycotts purely as rational or moral economic actions, this research foregrounds how political context shape's identity construction, peer alignment, and emotional resonance. In a time when brand activism increasingly intersects with cultural polarization, understanding how consumers perceive, internalize, and react to political cues is vital. This thesis highlights that political meaning is not just absorbed, but actively negotiated, through storytelling. It also illustrates how this meaning-making unfolds across time and platforms, offering a more holistic view of consumer agency and vulnerability in sociopolitical markets.

Through these contributions, this research aims to offers a theoretical shift: from viewing political consumerism as a static response to brand behavior, to understanding it as an evolving identity practice mediated by digital culture and group belonging.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is used as the primary theoretical lens given that it draws upon consumers perceptions and behaviors on businesses taking political stances. Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, SIT explores the role of social categorization, identification, and comparison in shaping individual attitudes and behaviors (Hogg, 2016, p.3). In the phygital realm, this framework becomes especially relevant since influences occur in both physical and digital spaces.

3.1 Social Identity Theory in the Context of Boycotts

A significant part of our self-concept is derived from our membership in social groups, SIT argues (Hogg, 2016, p.4). Shared political views or cultural affiliations are some of the aspects that can form these groups. When a business chooses to take a political position, they are influencing how consumers perceive them by inevitably aligning with or alienating different social groups. For instance, recently Bud Light experienced a boycott in the USA for hiring a transgender influencer to be the face of their campaign. The LGBTQ+ inclusivity the company displayed, resonates with identity-based group dynamics, where individuals align their purchasing behaviors with their in-group's values while opposing out-group perspectives.

Dalakas et al. (2023, p.11) further express that boycotts are not purely rational but are also deeply rooted in identity-based motivations. Their research identifies pro-boycott and anti-boycott consumer profiles, showing that participation in boycotts is often driven by self-enhancement, moral signaling, and emotional expression. From an SIT perspective, not only are boycotters expressing dissatisfaction with a brand, but they are also reinforcing their group identity and showing their allegiance to a specific ideological stance. In the same way, anti-boycotters actively oppose boycotts not always because they support the company, but because they see the boycott as a threat to their own group's values (Dalakas et al., 2023, p.7).

3.2 Relevance of Social Identity Theory

Other theories could be applied to the study of boycotts; however, SIT has unique advantages that make it the most suitable framework for this research. Take the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as an example, which focuses on individual decision-making, considers attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control as predictors of behavior (Ajzen,

1991, p.2). While TPB is known for its ability to explain individual actions, it falls short when looking into the collective and identity-driven nature of boycotts. Boycotts are more about collective action and the social signaling of identity and less about isolated decision-making. Since TPB does not explicitly account for intergroup dynamics or the role of social categorization, it is less suited for capturing the nuanced, group-oriented motivations underlying boycotts.

Similarly, Corporate Social Responsibility frameworks, while insightful in understanding consumer responses to ethical business practices, tend to focus on the organization's strategies rather than the consumer's social and identity-driven behavior. These frameworks also lack the theoretical depth to explore how consumer activism emerges from group dynamics, particularly in the context of polarizing political stances.

SIT, in contrast, directly addresses the role of group belonging and intergroup comparisons, making it particularly well-suited for analyzing boycotts in both physical and digital contexts. Its emphasis on social categorization, identification, and comparison allows for a deeper understanding of how phygital interactions influence consumer activism.

3.3 Empirical Evidence Supporting SIT

Previous research supports the applicability of SIT to consumer activism. In a study conducted by Ishak et al. (2018, p.22), it was shown that individuals are more likely to engage in boycotts when they identify strongly with a group advocating for or against a brand. Additionally, research on online activism demonstrates how social media fosters collective identity formation, which can mobilize consumers to act in both digital and physical spaces (Lüders et al., 2022, p.2). These findings highlight the significance of social categorization and comparison in driving boycott behaviors, particularly in phygital contexts where digital engagement translates into real-world impact.

3.4 Research Model

To interpret the data based on SIT, the study will explore how consumers categorize themselves in relation to a business' political stance (Social Categorization). Based on Dalakas et al., (2023, p.3) consumers alignment of their self-concept with brands that match their ingroup values and reject those perceived as outgroup entities (Social Identification) will be explored.

Lastly, how consumers compare their group to others, influencing their perceptions of the brand and their likelihood to participate in the boycott (Social Comparison) will be analyzed.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This thesis is grounded primarily in a constructivist paradigm with a narrative-interpretivist orientation and a light critical lens that considers power, identity politics, and media discourse. This chapter will outline the qualitative approach used, the rationale behind the sampling strategy, the data collection procedures, and the analytical techniques used. Each component of the research design and methodology is intended to explore the motivations, roles, and identities individuals take on in phygital boycotts.

4.1 Research Paradigm

The worldview underpinning this research is primarily constructivist, grounded in the idea that reality is socially constructed and meaning is co-produced through interaction and interpretation (Burns et al., 2022). Individuals interpret and respond to corporate political stances not as passive recipients, but as active meaning-makers whose judgments are shaped by their social identities and cultural affiliations. These meanings are inherently fluid, emotionally charged, and context dependent.

The study also adopts a narrative-interpretivist orientation, focusing on how consumers create personal and collective stories to make sense of their boycott behavior. Through the lens of narrative analysis, participants' accounts are treated not only as reports of behavior, but as performative acts of identity construction, shaped by memory, emotion, and social signaling.

This ontological and epistemological stance justifies the use of qualitative, interpretive methods, particularly the combination of narrative and thematic analysis, to explore how individuals construct and communicate meaning as they navigate boycotts in hybrid online-offline (phygital) spaces.

4.2 Qualitative Methodology and Rationale

Qualitative research, specifically Narrative Analysis, is the best approach to the research as it allows for an in-depth examination of participants lived experiences and motivations. This methodology also aligns with SIT as it enables a deeper exploration of how consumers frame their boycott participation within their identity. Narrative Analysis goes beyond what participants do and instead focuses on how they construct meaning through the stories they tell. Drawing on theoretical foundations from scholars like Riessman (2008) and Polkinghorne (1995), narrative

analysis treats personal accounts not just as data but as meaning-making devices, emphasizing the sequencing, emotional framing, and identity positioning embedded within participants' storytelling. This method reveals the internal logic participants use to explain their decisions, such as turning points, moral dilemmas, and contradictions. Moreover, the Narrative Analysis will be supplemented by a Thematic Analysis. This combination allows for a holistic understanding of boycott movements by identifying both the unique narrative trajectories of individuals and the recurring patterns across different cases. Thematic Analysis helps categorize key themes that emerge in different boycotts. For example, we can look at different roles of participation such as Trendsetters, meaning early adopters who initiate and shape the boycott narrative (Margetts et al., 2013, p.288). Late adopters, who are those who join once the movement gains traction, often due to social media virality (Rogers, 1962, p.248). Finally armchair boycotters, who passively support and engage symbolically (e.g., through hashtags) but do not change their consumption behaviors (Dalakas et al., 2023, p.5). Together, these analytical lenses make it possible to uncover not only *what* people do during boycotts, but *how* and *why* they make sense of those actions in the form of personal and collective stories.

For a nuanced and theory-informed interpretation of the data, the study uses a blended coding approach that integrates both deductive and inductive strategies. This hybrid model is well-suited for research aiming to balance theoretical grounding with openness to participants' lived experiences (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The deductive side is informed by existing theoretical frameworks, primarily SIT and Dalakas et al.'s (2023) typology of boycott motivations. These frameworks give a structured path through which participants' narratives can be interpreted, and it allows the researcher to identify whether and how specific identity mechanisms (such as group affiliation or in-group/out-group dynamics) influence boycott participation. The use of the established concepts will help ensure that the analysis is in alignment with scholarly discourse and facilitates the organization of the data in a theoretically meaningful way.

At the same time, themes arise organically from the data, and the researcher should remain open to them, rather than imposing preconceived categories. This is important since the study is exploratory and phygital boycotts are complex, influenced by a wide range of personal and contextual factors. Inductive coding enables the ability for the discovery of novel patterns, motivations, or social behaviors that existing models may not capture.

Combined, this approach offers the best of both worlds: the analytical structure of deductive coding paired with the richness of inductive discovery. Additionally, it supports a more holistic interpretation of the data, since it recognizes that participants may express motivations or behaviors that align with or even contradict theoretical expectations. Having flexibility in the methodology strengthens the study's capacity to create insights that are both academically rigorous and deeply grounded in participant experience.

4.3 *Sampling Strategy and Data Collection*

A purposive sampling strategy is used, which is appropriate for qualitative research that aims to gather in-depth insights from individuals with meaningful experiences related to the phenomenon of phygital boycotts. Inclusion criteria was used to recruit participants: they must be aged 18 or above (for legal consent of participation), have awareness and/or have participated in at least one boycott within the past three years, and demonstrate engagement in phygital activism. Finally, participants needed to show willingness and ability to reflect well on their motivations, view, and experiences related to boycott activities.

Diversity of gender and political orientation was sought to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives and identities. The sample size comprises 17 participants, with diverse social and economic backgrounds. These participants were recruited through multiple different channels, such as social media platforms Instagram, Twitter/X, and WhatsApp groups. Moreover, snowball sampling, where existing participants referred others within their networks who met the inclusion criteria, was used. In the same way, personal networking ensured accessibility to individuals fitting the defined participant profile.

Primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes to one hour, allowing flexibility depending on the depth and richness of the data collected. This range is consistent with narrative and thematic analysis methodologies and is expected to achieve data saturation. The interviews will take place online, to guarantee accessibility and diversity in the sample. The interviews will be guided by a semi-structured format designed to explore participants' thoughts, and motivations regarding phygital boycotts. The interview guide is developed to capture the key aspects of SIT and will also feature elements of Dalakas et al.'s (2023) framework on boycotting motivations. This creates a structured yet adaptive approach for understanding different roles individuals play in boycotts.

Creating a comfortable environment is essential for each interview to unfold naturally, to allow the conversation to emerge organically based on the interviewee's perspectives. It is important that each participant has the freedom to emphasize different aspects of the topic, as their focus could reveal unique insights that had not been anticipated. While the interview will be guided to ensure it stays on track and avoid irrelevant tangents, it is recognized that the interviewee's choice of what to prioritize or exclude can be profoundly meaningful. Therefore, flexibility and adaptability will be maintained throughout the interview process.

4.4 *Ethical Considerations*

Prior to participating interviewees received an information sheet, which outlined the purpose and objectives of the study. It explained that participation would involve a 45 to 60-minute recorded interview and emphasized their right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. The voluntary nature of participation was highlighted, assuring that there would be no negative consequences for refusing or withdrawing. The document also described how confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained, including the use of pseudonyms and restricted access to data. It detailed how the data would be securely stored and managed. Consent was obtained by returning a signed digital form via email ahead of the scheduled session.

Interview recordings were stored on a password-protected laptop. Only the researcher and thesis advisor had access to the raw data. All identifiable data will be deleted five years after the completion of the study, following university guidelines. Transcripts were anonymized immediately after transcription.

4.5 *Data Analysis Method*

During the interviews, audio recording devices will be employed to guarantee the data's accuracy. Following transcription, these recordings will be subjected to thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a flexible approach like theme analysis requires a systematic and unambiguous explanation of the researcher's approach in order to do an effective analysis. To guarantee that the analysis is up to par, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method is therefore followed. These six steps were selected to ensure that the process is transparent and manageable while also honoring the

inherent flexibility of theme analysis. Each of the six steps is described in detail in the paragraph that follows, along with an example of how they are used to boycotting behaviors.

Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize the importance of data immersion as the first step in thematic analysis, encouraging researchers to engage deeply with the context and content of their data. As a socially engaged individual and frequent user of platforms like Instagram and TikTok, I am regularly exposed to digital activism and boycott-related discourse. This positionality allowed for a level of familiarity with the language, and visual culture surrounding phygital activism. While this prior engagement enriched my understanding of the field, it also required a conscious effort to bracket my own assumptions during the research process. To further deepen my immersion while maintaining critical distance, I actively reviewed current boycott movements through academic literature and monitored real-time digital discourse while recruiting participants. This dual approach of being both embedded in the environment and analytically distanced, helped me remain attentive to participants' unique narratives while recognizing where my interpretations could be shaped by personal experience.

The next three stages focus on the coding process. Initial codes are created in the second stage of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An initial coding round is carried out using the coding system shown in Table 1. Every fragment that doesn't fit into one of the preset codes is examined and assigned a new code. Sorting the codes into more general topics and examining the connections between them constitute the third step. While this did not involve formal axial coding in the grounded theory sense, connections between codes were examined in terms of relationships, sequence, and contextual overlap. The preliminary topics developed in the third step are examined and improved upon in the fourth step. This is accomplished by first determining whether the excerpts from each theme are consistent with the suggested theme and then confirming that the themes accurately reflect the range of the data.

Following the completion of the coding, the final themes are identified and explained in the fifth phase, making sure they are consistent and not overly complex. The analysis's findings are presented in the final section of Braun and Clarke's (2006) handbook. Four main themes emerged from the dataset following the analysis: Boycott Behavior Typologies; Consumer Motivations and Justifications; Brand Political Expression and Impact; Phygital Participation in Boycotts; Narrative Functions and Emotional Framing.

4.6 *Role of Narrative Analysis*

While Thematic Analysis structured the analytic process, Narrative Analysis played a distinct interpretive role in understanding how participants framed their experiences. Stories were examined for the structure (e.g., pre-boycott dilemmas, peak action, aftermath reflections), function (e.g., justifying behavior, signaling group belonging, managing contradiction), and voice and identity (e.g., use of "we" language, emotional tone, in-group positioning).

Narrative became both an analytical tool and a theme in its own right, as participants consistently used storytelling to construct meaning around their boycott engagement. This dual lens allowed for a richer interpretation of not only what participants did, but how they made sense of their actions in digital and offline contexts.

4.7 *Sensitizing Concepts*

As outlined in the previous sections, this study uses a blend of thematic and narrative analysis, integrating both deductive and inductive coding. Sensitizing concepts played a central role in this study by offering a flexible but theoretically informed lens through which the narratives were analyzed. These concepts, drawn primarily from Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Dalakas et al.'s (2023) boycott motivation typology, helped guide the initial phases of coding without imposing rigid analytical categories. Rather than functioning as deductive hypotheses, sensitizing concepts served as interpretive signposts—highlighting themes such as in-group identification, identity dissonance, moral motivation, and performative signaling.

For example, *identity dissonance* emerged early in the analysis as a key sensitizing concept that helped capture the tension between consumers' digital advocacy and their real-life purchasing behavior. Initially applied to categorize moments of contradiction, this concept evolved through inductive engagement with the data to encompass narrative strategies of rationalization, ambivalence, and even emotional fatigue. Similarly, *in-group identification* was not only observed through verbal affirmations (e.g., "we boycotters") but also through digital practices like reposting, hash tagging, and aligning with activist influencers—suggesting that identity is performed as much as it is professed.

As the analysis progressed, new dimensions emerged within the original concepts. For instance, *identity and image motivation* began to overlap with concepts of self-branding and social comparison, particularly in participants who admitted to activism influenced by peer

perception rather than personal conviction. This reflexive expansion demonstrates the value of sensitizing concepts as tools that adapt in response to the data, rather than constrain it. The following table outlines the sensitizing concepts and initial codes used to scaffold the thematic coding process.

Table 1 - Initial Coding Scheme

Concepts	Sub-Concepts	Description
Boycott Motivation	Moral Motivation	Participation driven by a sense of ethical duty or personal values (e.g., justice, human rights, animal welfare).
	Ideological Motivation	Alignment with broader political or social ideologies (e.g., anti-capitalism, environmentalism, feminism).
	Identity and Image Motivation	Motivations tied to self-presentation, peer perception, or signaling status within a social group.
Identity	In-Group Identification	Expressions of belonging to a cause, community, or brand-aligned movement (e.g., “we boycotters,” “feminist consumers”).
	Out-Group Identification	Juxtaposition of one's group against an opposing stance (e.g., pro-boycott vs. brand loyalists or apolitical consumers).
	Identity Reinforcement	Narratives that confirm pre-existing values, beliefs, or group memberships through boycott actions.
	Identity Dissonance	Accounts of internal conflict, hesitation, or disconnection between one’s self-image and their consumer actions.
Boycott Behavior Typologies	Trendsetters	Individuals initiating or amplifying boycott discourse; early adopters and movement leaders.
	Late Adopters	Participants who join after a boycott gains visibility, often through social media exposure or peer influence.
	Armchair Boycotters	Passive participants who symbolically engage (e.g., liking posts, using hashtags) but do not alter consumption behavior.

Narrative Structure	Pre-Boycott Reflection	Descriptions of the conditions, dilemmas, or triggers that prompted consideration of a boycott.
	Peak Participation	Accounts of the participant's most active phase, including how and why they acted online and/or offline.
	Aftermath-Outcome	Reflections on the long-term impact of the boycott on their beliefs, habits, or social identity.

These concepts shape the analytical backbone for answering the research question and sub-questions. The blended approach gives a flexibility and the emergence of unanticipated themes, such as emotional ambivalence, performativity fatigue, or evolving definitions of activism. In doing so, the study avoids theoretical tunnel vision and remains sensitive to how participants themselves construct meaning within the phygital boycott landscape.

5. FINDINGS

In addition to the 13 initial codes generated from the theoretical framework, the thematic analysis of the sixteen interviews on phygital boycott motivations produced 85 data-driven open codes. The interview dataset reveals a rich variety of personal narratives, digital behaviors, and ethical reflections surrounding consumer activism in hybrid online–offline spaces. Participants described not only their motivations for engaging in boycotts but also the contradictions, tensions, and evolving self-perceptions shaped by both digital influence and real-world habits.

The sample consisted of 17 participants with diverse characteristics in terms of age (20–39), gender, education level and employment status. These details are summarized in Appendix A, providing important context for understanding the different perspectives represented in the narratives.

From the analysis, five primary themes emerged: Boycott Behavior Typologies, Consumer Motivations and Justifications, Brand Political Expression and Impact, Phygital Participation in Boycotts and Narrative Functions and Emotional Framing. These themes reflect how participants negotiate ethical consumption in a media-saturated environment. Table 4.1 summarizes the five themes and their associated sub-themes, while Appendix C presents the full coding tree along with illustrative open codes. The findings are interpreted through the lens of the theoretical framework, particularly focusing on the narratives of contemporary consumer boycotts.

Table 2 – Overview of Results

Themes and Definitions	Sub-Themes
1. Boycott Behavior Typologies Categorizes consumers based on the nature, timing, and intensity of their engagement in boycott actions.	Initiators (active agents of change)
	Late adopters (reactive supporters)
	Armchair boycotters (passive participants)
2. Consumer Motivations and Justifications Refers to the personal, ethical, social, or practical reasons individuals provide to explain their engagement	Ethical/political alignment
	Identity and image management

or non-engagement in boycotts.	Practical considerations
<p>3. Brand Political Expression and Impact</p> <p>Encompasses consumer perceptions of and reactions to a brand’s political or social stance, including implications for trust and loyalty.</p>	Corporate authenticity perceptions
	Consumer trust and loyalty
	Political risk and commercial impact
<p>4. Phygital Participation in Boycotts</p> <p>Describes consumer engagement in boycotts that spans both digital and physical environments.</p>	Online mobilization
	Offline action and spillover
<p>5. Narrative Functions and Emotional Framing</p> <p>Captures the ways individuals use storytelling and emotional language to construct, communicate, and make sense of their boycott-related experiences.</p>	Personal storytelling and meaning making
	Conflict and contradiction
	Collective identity and storytelling

5.1 Theme 1: Boycott Behavior Typologies

The *Boycott Behavior Typologies* is the first of five themes because it offers a foundational lens through which the rest of the findings can be interpreted. Understanding the nature, timing, and intensity of consumer engagement provides a baseline for interpreting motivations, perceptions, and narratives in subsequent themes. The analysis highlights three typologies: Initiators, Late Adopters, and Armchair Boycotters. This typology aligns with Dalakas et al.’s (2023) identification of pro-boycott and anti-boycott consumer profiles, showing how different degrees of social identity and emotional expression shape consumers’ entry points into activism. Each one shows a different approach to boycotting, whether it be identity, positioning, levels of commitment, or phygital behavior. Interpreted through the lens of SIT and Narrative Analysis, allowing us to understand how boycotting stories are molded through identity and group belonging in both the digital and offline spheres.

5.1.1 *Initiators: Active Agents of Change*

Initiators are the first to take action in a boycott, both online and offline. Their narratives can be characterized by a strong desire for ethical responsibility and leadership within their peer groups. Out of the 17 participants, five clearly expressed behaviors consistent with this proactive typology. For example, one participant emphasized:

At the end of the day, I choose to boycott a brand or a product if a company is unethical and going against my beliefs. I'm usually the first one in my group to post about it. I read up on it and if I feel strongly, I share resources and links so others can join.

The participant notes that their own participation does not suffice, and by sharing content the goal is for others to join the movement. Moreover, someone who is characterized as an early adopter normally frames their participation in a boycott as urgent and personally significant. Some participants claimed to act as soon as they learn of a company speaking out on a topic that does not align with their values, a participant stated:

There's a lot of different topics that would make me not want to shop from a brand. If I learn that a brand supports something I morally disagree with, I feel responsible to act. Silence is complicity, you know?

Identity reinforcement, one of the SIT concepts, aligns with the accounts of the participants. They publicly show in-group values, for example through justice and accountability, reaffirming their group membership. A performative dimension is also present in their narratives, in which storytelling is used to emphasize their role as moral leaders, displaying an alignment with communities that engage in activism. One participant mentioned:

I always post about topics I believe in. It's not just about me not buying from the companies I boycott, but it's about getting others to see it too, like showing that we care and we're not staying silent.

Through narrative analysis we see that initiators normally build turning points in their stories, highlighting the transformation from a passive consumer to an ethical actor, when sharing moments where awareness catalyzes action.

5.1.2 Late Adopters: Reactive Supporters

Late Adopters join boycott movements after they become popular and gain visibility this is usually through social media, peer influence, or a viral discourse. Their choice to engage is less likely to be driven by internal moral urgency and more by social factors and collective momentum. As one participant put it:

For instance, with the BLM movement, I honestly, didn't know much about the boycott going on until I saw it on Instagram like 10 times. It got me curious and after researching and talking to my friends I joined in by posting about it.

Another participant explained a similar motivation, stating that they “saw everyone posting about it” and “didn’t want to be the only one not taking part in the movement.” These narratives display social identification, a SIT process where individuals have behaviors that align with belonging to a valued group. Moreover, these accounts, give a new perspective to modern boycotting initiatives. While in the past collective activism was spread through word of mouth, flyers, and other physical methods, social media has brought a whole new approach to activism. Not only has the audience increased, but this method of information spreading can generate a feeling of “fear of missing out” which leads to late adopters joining the movement once it has taken over their feed. In this case, boycott participation turns to be more of a means of maintaining relational harmony and shared social values, rather than a deeply internalized ethical stance. The storytelling structure revolves around discovery and belonging, where the participant's identity is shaped through observation and absorption of dominant group norms, especially within platforms like Instagram and TikTok. While for some, engagement at this stage involves personal research and direct alignment with one’s ideology, for other’s it does not involve a complete habitual change. In the following section the Armchair Boycotters will explore this.

5.1.3 Armchair Boycotters: Passive Participants

Armchair Boycotters take on a symbolic approach, supporting a boycott by sharing posts and hashtags, without following through with significant change in behavior. Their stories often involve emotional ambivalence or a conscious acknowledgment of their limited engagement. We see this through one participant who stated, “I agree with the message, but I’m not radical. I feel

weird going all in, it's just not me.” While another participant admitted to their occasional slip ups:

I say I don't buy from Primark, and I have posted some infographics about the damage the company causes uh, but then like, I have recently bought one or two things from there out of pure convenience. Like it hurt me to do it, but like, a candle and some random, like a room freshener thing.

From a theoretical perspective, these participants show identity dissonance, a key concept in SIT that arises when one's actions do not fully align with group values. These individuals display a struggle with maintaining group belonging and keeping personal comfort and habits. Their narratives are often characterized with justifications, such as minimizing their role (“I'm not radical”) or emphasizing practical constraints. Narrative Analysis also shows that Armchair Boycotters rely heavily on emotionally charged but fragmented stories, they will show support but fall short of a full behavioral and habitual change. This section showed the tension between resembling to care and not fully committing, which is a different approach to activism where identity is more of an appearance than an action.

Boycott participation, whether it be as an Initiators, Late Adopters, or Armchair Boycotter, often serves a common function of fostering a sense of community. Initiators aim to mobilize others and expand the movement, Late Adopters are motivated by a desire to align with their peers, and Armchair Boycotters seek inclusion without direct involvement. Ultimately, as suggested by SIT, the underlying driver across these roles is the human need for belonging and group affiliation.

5.2 Theme 2: Consumer Motivations and Justifications

The second theme explored, analyses the diverse reasons participants gave for engaging (or choosing not to engage) in boycotts. The preponderance of social responsibility motivation is demonstrated by the participants' support for others, assisting others, raising awareness of social issues, and contributing to society. On the other hand, participants claim that their primary motivations for joining activist groups on digital platforms are to stay current, find enjoyment, and connect with others. Echoing Dalakas et al. (2023), participants' motivations ranged from moral signaling and group identity affirmation to retaliatory outrage, underscoring the complex

interplay of ethical, emotional, and identity-driven factors.

5.2.1 Ethical/Political Alignment

Most participants justified their involvement in boycotts because of their strong ethical concerns or political ideologies. Their narratives positioned boycotts as a form of collective action, rooted in justice, human rights, or alignment with global causes. For example, one participant who had strong opinions on the Israel-Palestine conflict, notes:

I've actively boycotted McDonald's in the past year because of their involvement with providing funds, I guess, to the IDF. When I saw the brand was funding military operations, I felt gross. I couldn't keep giving them my money since it just kinda felt wrong. And the reason behind it was, I do have to say like I was following the news a lot and still am with the situation in Israel and Palestine.

Another topic that various participants pointed out, had to do with concerns toward fast-fashion brands, for environmental and social reasons. One participant explained their stance, stating that they were “completely against companies tied to child labor,” which led them to “stop buying from Shein and like fast, fast fashion in that sense.”

These statements show the SIT dimension of moral identity signaling, where actions can reflect one’s alignment with in-group moral values. The boycott becomes a way of displaying a collective ethical identity, especially in the digital sphere where these values are amplified through re-posting, liking, sharing etc.

When exploring the narrative standpoint, the experience of these boycotters often follows a moral awakening arc, where a moment of confrontation (for example: discovering a brand’s misconduct) follows with a decisive moral action. This process not only helps participants manage internal dissonance but also leads to a socially legitimate explanation for their behavior. They are also able to position themselves as ethically aware and politically engaged actors, which for some is a motivation in itself.

5.2.2 Identity and Image Management

For other participants, motivations involved wanting to maintain or create a reputation focused on a positive perception of them from others and how they perceive themselves within

activist spaces. For instance, some admitted to feeling social pressure or the need to present a consistent identity online. One participant stated:

I also have to say, I did feel a bit of social pressure. Like I do think at the time that everyone was looking down on people who were shopping from or eating from places like McDonald's.

This statement aligns with the research of Borah et al. (2022, p.3) emphasizing that digital activism has also led to "performative wokeness". To explore this dynamic further, each participant was asked whether they believed social media activism is performative or leading to meaningful change, one participant's response stated:

It's weird, regarding the BLM movement, I didn't necessarily want to post on Instagram, but I also know that when you post that stuff, people see you as a good person. It's a bit of both. Also, I know a lot of businesses did it just to save their butts out here because a lot of people were getting ransacked, which I understand.

These statements from both participants express the SIT's concept of social comparison: where individuals want to maintain favorable group positioning by aligning their actions with group norms (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Participating in a boycott (or being seen to) is less about internal conviction and more about preserving or enhancing social standing within a value-based in-group.

In a narrative standpoint, these participants usually frame their accounts around performance and perception, where self-presentation and personal branding are the most important part of their story building. The way they reason their participation shows the tension between authentic commitment and the strategic aspect of identity. This becomes even more relevant in highly visible online environments like Instagram, where activism is often public, performative and for all your network to see and judge.

5.2.3 Practical Considerations

Lastly in this section, some participants based their boycotting behavior on convenience, habit, or feasibility. Even if their ideology aligned with a boycott movement, practical concerns often came in between their participation. One participant noted the following practical concern:

To be quite honest, a lot of the time it just comes down to what is cheapest, which doesn't always go to like what's the most ethical, and usually it's like pretty much the opposite of that.

Along the same line, another participant stated:

I care, but sometimes it's too much effort. So, it's like, I think people when they're boycotting things, they should be like, okay, don't buy from this brand. But like, here's an alternative, because that's helpful as a consumer too.

When exploring SIT, these statements show the identity dissonance component of the theory. There is an internal conflict within the participants experience between group values and individual constraints (financial, logistical, emotional). These participants do not fully align with the expectations of the in-group, instead they end up in a middle ground by rationalizing selective participation.

The stories of these participants are often characterized by contradictions and rationalizations. While they articulate strong ethical ideals, they simultaneously recount behaviors that fall short of these values, such as continuing to shop from boycotted brands due to convenience or habit. Rather than dismissing these inconsistencies, participants actively work to explain them, using narrative strategies that justify their actions within broader social, emotional, or practical contexts. This form of storytelling is not simply defensive instead it plays a crucial role in constructing and sustaining a phygital identity, one that navigates the tension between online signaling and offline behavior. These consumers negotiate a dual performance: appearing aligned with activist causes in digital spaces while struggling with the demands of ethical consumption in their material lives. The contradictions become part of their identity narrative, allowing them to present themselves as “conscious consumers” even as they acknowledge imperfect engagement. This reflects a key feature of phygital activism, where identity is not fixed but continuously managed across platforms and contexts, shaped by both moral aspiration and everyday compromise.

Overall, motivations of phygital boycotts depend on each consumer and are rarely stable. These motivations and justifications represent evolving narratives of many layers including ethical commitment, social belonging, and practical trade-offs. Theoretical framing through SIT

shows how these motivations serve identity functions, whether through reinforcement, alignment, or negotiation. Moreover, Narrative Analysis has brought to light the emotional and moral storytelling consumers use to make their actions socially and personally meaningful.

5.3 Theme 3: Brand Political Expression and Impact

The third theme of Brand Political Expression and Impact explores how consumers perceive and their response to brands that take a political or social stance. Throughout the analysis, participants' narratives have revealed that when brands display a political expression it is not only a background condition, but also the central catalyst for boycott engagement. As Dalakas et al. (2023) point out, perceived authenticity is central to consumer evaluations of brand activism, with performative or opportunistic stances often triggering skepticism and boycott behaviors. The participants' responses are organized into three dimensions that overlap: Corporate Authenticity Perceptions, Consumer Trust and Loyalty, and Political Risk and Commercial Impact. Through the lens of SIT and Narrative Analysis, we explore how participants' reactions are grouped by identity alignment, in-group loyalty, and moral storytelling.

5.3.1 Corporate Authenticity Perceptions

In the interviews, participants consistently emphasized the importance of perceived sincerity in brand activism. Authenticity was used as a threshold for trust, brands that were inconsistent or appeared to be opportunistic were quickly labeled as untrustworthy and targeted for boycotts. When asked about a company's online involvement with a movement, one participant described their skepticism, explaining that "if it's just a one-time post to hop on a trend, I'm out. I need to see that the company actually cares and is not doing it only cause it's viral." Another participant echoed this sentiment, underscoring the significance of timing and consistency, stating that "people were mad, and they made changes, but they released a statement after being called out, not before... which to me, that says everything."

This quote aligns with the idea of reactive activism previously mentioned, where companies respond to external events or backlash, rather than proactively defining their political identity (Chang, 2015, p.453). When analyzing from an SIT perspective, these comments can be associated to ingroup boundary maintenance, which is when participants make a distinction

between brands that align with core group values and those that are seen as performative outsiders. In this case, authenticity becomes the core of group legitimacy: brands are judged not just on what they say, but when and how they say it. When a company takes a political expression that is delayed or perceived as reactive, it goes against the consumer's expectations based on their morals and breaks identification with the brand.

Looking from a narrative standpoint, participants create a morality tale, where brands take the role of either trustworthy allies or deceitful opportunists. The narrative framing is normally emotionally driven, with morals in mind, and often retrospective. Participants tend to revisit specific brand actions through a lens of ethical storytelling in order to justify their boycott initiative.

5.3.2 Consumer Trust and Loyalty

The interviews showed that consumers' emotional attachment to brands was quite fragile, especially when it had to do with politically charged situations. Participants highlighted moments when brand actions either solidified trust or lead to a feeling of betrayal. One participant shared how a brand's inaction led to a shift in perception, recalling that they "used to eat there so often, especially on nights out," but now they "just can't unsee their silence," adding that "it ruined it" for them. In contrast, another participant expressed a deepened sense of loyalty when a brand took a clear position, stating that "when they took a stand even though it was risky, that gained my respect. I actually became more loyal after that."

These comments can be associated to the SIT's principle of social identification, since brands become part of the consumer's extended identity. When a brand shares the consumer's values, loyalty is created or strengthened. However, when it deviates, loyalty is bound to collapse. With this being said, boycotting is not simply a rejection from an economic standpoint, it is an act of identity protection, withdrawing from self-association.

Through Narrative Analysis we can see that these stories are often followed with betrayal and redemption arcs. Brands are morphed into society, giving a role in a relationship with the consumer. Moreover, silence is read as complicity, thus, transparency becomes a moral virtue. The language used by the above-mentioned participants ("I can't unsee", "gained my respect") shows a deep emotional feeling, implying that trust is not just about the quality of the product quality, but it is also about the compatibility of ideologies.

5.3.3 *Political Risk and Commercial Impact*

An aspect that appeared often in the analysis, is participants voiced awareness of strategic dimension that comes with brand activism. Some saw political engagement as sincere, while others viewed it as a calculated marketing move. One participant stated:

I also don't support that Starbucks is trying to save their butts by saying that they are for human rights. They're trying to play both sides, and that never works. You end up pleasing no one, and it's hard to trust a company like that.

While the participant does not see neutrality as beneficial to a company, another interviewee believes taking a side is also risky:

For example, the Bud Light company, they did a certain can design that was pretty political and they lost a lot of their following, a lot of the people that supported them, they lost because they decided to take a stance on a certain situation that they didn't necessarily have to. I think they hoped to gain loyalty from younger audiences, but they clearly misread their main customers. I think it's awesome that they did, but they didn't necessarily have to, and I don't think it's the smartest idea because of the wide range of people that do drink their product and that goes for everybody.

The awareness the participants display shows their shifting role from consumer to political evaluator. Through SIT, we understand this as intergroup comparison, where consumers judge whether a brand's political expression aligns with their in-group, or if it falls into the out-group for commercial benefit. These perceptions are important for companies to understand since they heavily influence boycott decisions.

Narratively, the participants' accounts lean towards strategic framing. Participants take from controversies in the public and online discourse to create their stories about brand motives, business risks, and the impact on society. The language used is mostly critical, and emotionally detached, which shows the consumers who see through corporate tactics and claims power by being loyal or rejecting a company.

Overall, this theme of Brand Political Expression and Impact revealed that consumers respond to brand activism in a way that is deeply mixed with identity, emotion, and storytelling. SIT helps understand why the perception of authenticity and alignment with a company's value are non-negotiable for maintaining brand-consumer solidarity. As stated by Klein et al. (2004) the perceived legitimacy and ethical comparison of corporate behavior are of utmost importance to consumer responses, shaping trust and influencing whether political stances trigger brand loyalty or rejection. Narrative Analysis shows how consumers make sense of these interactions through emotional plots that attach a brand's role in a larger moral and political drama. For participants, a brand's political position is not only communication, but also an oath of group membership that either creates loyalty or promotes resistance.

5.4 Theme 4: Phygital Participation in Boycotts

The fourth theme focuses on how participants interact with boycotts through both digital activism and real-world actions, what this study terms “phygital” participation. The findings have shown that today's activism is not strictly reliant on one domain but flows through online mobilization and offline consumer behavior fluidly. Through the SIT, we can say that these hybrid actions are shaped by identity dynamics, and performed through narrative structures helping participants create coherence across both spheres. Moreover, Dalakas et al. (2023) emphasize the fluid transition between online advocacy and offline action, reinforcing the idea of a phygital feedback loop where social identity and digital signaling amplify real-world consumer behavior. Two main sub-themes emerged: Online Mobilization and Offline Action and Spillover.

5.4.1 Online Mobilization

Most participants described social media as the first point of contact and arena for their boycott knowledge and participation. Digital platforms provided the space for awareness-building and emotional expression. As one participant shared:

I normally see about boycotts first on TikTok, and my feed becomes a bunch of videos explaining what the brand did, and I started sharing them too. But I just think on TikTok, like once when something blows up, like, more people are like, these are the brands you shouldn't buy, like in the current state of the world.

Others emphasized the viral pressure to participate:

There was this chain on Instagram stories, everyone was reposting it. Not gonna lie, it felt like, if you didn't say something, you were part of the problem.

These behaviors could be related to SIT's in-group visibility mechanism, where consumers signal group alliance by pairing their content online with their collective values. Their badge of belonging can be given only after they share posts or use hashtags. As we saw earlier with the Armchair Boycotters, even for those not deeply invested in the boycott's goals, participating online affirms identity within a community.

Narrative Analysis reveals these stories are framed around collective digital awakening which is when participants discover and amplify injustice via social media. The information that is rapidly diffused fosters a sense of urgency and solidarity. While some participants told their stories of online actions as genuinely informative, others confessed to the performative aspect, with one participant noting:

I shared some of the boycott guides, reshared posts and signed some petitions. I added the "Free Palestine" banner to my bio for a while. But if I'm being honest, Sometimes I wonder if I'm just reposting to feel like I've done something. Cause it's hard to make real change.

This contradiction shows how online mobilization happens on various levels, which invited both moral signaling and offers a space for emotional processing. Social media becomes a performative stage where individuals can create a narrative of themselves as caring, informed, and ethically aligned, even when offline actions are nonexistent. These gestures like reposting content or using boycott-related hashtags, serve as low-effort yet symbolically rich acts of participation. They allow users to feel connected to a collective cause while having control of their public identity. In this way, digital actions become a form of identity work, where the act of appearing engaged can be just as important (if not more so) than actual engagement. For many participants, this self-narration reflects a tension between genuine concern and social pressure, meaning that in today's media landscape, activism is not only about what one does but also about how one is perceived doing it.

5.4.2 *Offline Action and Spillover*

In each interview, participants also described the ways that digital boycott narratives translated into offline behavioral changes such as altering their shopping routines, initiating conversations, or participating in protests. One participant explained:

I stopped buying from fast fashion and told my friends why. But also, I didn't want to be a hypocrite, so if I posted it, I had to act on it, by not buying from those companies and choosing second hand as much as possible.

Another described the spillover effect:

At work, we had a whole discussion about whether we should switch suppliers because of the boycott. I brought it up after seeing posts online, others also already knew about it.

These examples point to more than just individual action, they point to the potential for bottom-up influence within organizational settings, where informal consumer-driven conversations can shape institutional decision-making. This echoes past cases such as the Scandic Hotels boycott in the 2000s, where employee activism and public pressure led to genuine changes in procurement and corporate social responsibility practices, even in traditionally apolitical sectors (Egels-Zandén, 2007).

These accounts reflect SIT's social categorization and enforcement, where offline behaviors are meant to affirm internalized group identity and keep one's moral self-concept. Since online participation equates to membership, then offline action signals the performance of internalized identity. For many, it is essential to be consistent with the digital and real-world actions to avoid accusations of being hypocritical and dissonance.

Narratively, these accounts are structured as commitment arcs, where consumers shift from online awareness of the topic to a deliberate behavioral alignment. Offline actions are often framed as a test of one's integrity, with various participants describing sense of guilt when their real-life habits did not match their advocacy online:

It's easy to post something, but it's harder to change your daily life. I feel bad when I realize I still have stuff from brands that are not really ethical in my house.

This is an internal conflict that reinforces the emotional and moral aspect of phygital boycott participation. Interviewees use storytelling to justify inconsistencies and also to process the pressures that come with being a politically conscious consumer in both the visible and invisible aspects.

Overall, phygital participation connects the dots amongst digital expression and offline action, creating a dynamic feedback loop that makes consumer engagement even stronger. The hybrid digital-physical activism accounted aligns with Klein et al.'s (2004) assertion that modern boycotts increasingly depend on visibility and group mobilization to keep and increase consumer commitment. Through SIT, we see how individuals use both digital and in-person spaces to affirm group membership, signal shared values, and resolve identity dissonance. Narrative Analysis shows how stories of action in this modern-day consumer activist environment are used to navigate this hybrid terrain.

5.5 Theme 5: Narrative Functions and Emotional Framing

The final theme dives into the role of narrative and emotion in shaping the way consumers make sense of their boycott experiences. Participants not only engage in current boycotts, but they also told stories about them where they gave meaning, identity, and moral positioning through language. The participants told emotionally loaded narratives, framed around current conflicts, contradictions, and belonging. In line with Dalakas et al. (2023), this study finds that consumers construct these boycott narratives to reinforce group membership, cope with dissonance, and solidify moral identity. Three main sub-themes emerged: Personal Storytelling and Meaning-Making, Conflict and Contradiction, and Collective Identity and Storytelling. The findings revealed how narrative is not just an exploration into reflection, but a tool for identity construction and social positioning.

5.5.1 Personal Storytelling and Meaning-Making

Throughout the data, many personal histories, cultural influences, or defining moments of moral awareness appeared amongst participants, contextualizing their boycott participations. These stories were the anchor to their activism. One participant shared:

There is one company that I've actually never purchased from in my life, I grew up in a house where we weren't ever allowed to purchase from them. And that's Tommy Hilfiger. And I've never bought anything from there. I know that it's rooted in anti-Semitism. There used to be talk of the whole company standing for anti-Semitism and like, being very anti-Jews.

Another participant, mentioned their family as a motive to boycott:

I guess, like within the US, I take more of an approach of like, if they support the president right now, and they're like, doing things anti-immigration that affect me and like the people around me, then like, I don't want to buy from them, because clearly, like they're against me and my family, you know?

These are emotionally charged narratives that reflect Social Identity Theory's concept of identity reinforcement, where participation in a boycott becomes a way to express and protect core group values. However, they also reveal participants actively exercising personal agency by refusing to allow their deeply held values (such as anti-racism, religious tolerance, or pro-immigrant stances) to be diminished by brand affiliations. In these moments, boycotting becomes not just a reactive gesture, but a deliberate assertion of self-authorship, grounded in personal ethics.

At the same time, the data suggest that not all participants express this form of agency equally. While some take a stance decisively through boycott actions, others grapple with inconsistencies, ambivalence, or constraints (e.g., convenience, access, cost). This highlights that agency exists on a spectrum, shaped by individual context and emotional readiness. For some, storytelling becomes a mechanism to work through those contradictions, a way of acknowledging imperfection while still locating themselves within broader activist narratives.

These findings emphasize that storytelling in the boycott context is more than reflection, it is a form of resistance, a declaration of identity, and for some, an exercise in holding onto non-negotiable values in the face of political pressures.

5.5.2 *Conflict and Contradiction*

Another topic that came up through participants recollections, are the emotionally complex internal tensions of guilt, doubt, or ambivalence about their actions or inaction. These moments of contradiction were not hidden, rather, they were a part of how the participants processed and justified their behavior:

I say I boycott, but then I catch myself shopping there. I guess it makes me seem like a fraud, honestly. And even though I am trying to stay away from it, you do fall into the trends, and you are human at the end of the day, and you want to buy some things that other people are wearing.

Another participant stated:

It doesn't really make sense to boycott everything... Sometimes I just get overwhelmed. There's too many causes, too many brands to keep track of.

Both accounts as a reflection of identity dissonance, where individuals have a hard time aligning their self-image with their behavior. These moments, in SIT terms, indicate a disconnect between in-group expectations and personal realities. Rather than resolve the dissonance, participants use storytelling to contain it, to acknowledge it, explain it, and manage its emotional consequences. These confessional stories that include self-criticism, revealing a desire not just to be seen as morally consistent, but to also feel at peace with imperfection. The ability to hold space for contradiction becomes part of the participant's activist identity. Thematic and narrative analyses suggest that these tensions are often justified through rationalizations such as "I'm not perfect, but I try," or "It's about doing what you can." This echoes Goffman's (1959) notion of facework, the efforts individuals make to present themselves as morally coherent in front of an imagined audience, particularly in the performative arena of social media.

Furthermore, participants often framed these contradictions not as failures, but as reflections of the complexity of ethical consumption in a capitalist system. Rather than discrediting their engagement, these admissions humanize their activism, revealing that identity-driven boycotts are rarely binary acts of resistance or compliance. Instead, they are emotionally charged, socially contingent practices shaped by ambivalence, compromise, and evolving self-perceptions. These

findings complicate traditional narratives of boycott participation and underscore the need to view consumer activism not as a static moral stance, but as a fluid, interpretive process.

5.5.3 *Collective Identity and Storytelling*

Finally, many participants used “we” language to frame their boycott actions as part of a larger collective, referencing shared memes, or recalling moments that went viral that united communities. This way of framing showed belonging and solidarity:

Also, like my friends that are more, I guess, socially aware of these issues. We also all stopped buying at the same time which felt like we were really doing something together.

Another participant noted:

It was like a movement. My whole feed was full of it. We were sharing the same posts. I don't think everyone had the same intentions but at least it felt like the community was coming together.

The accounts of these participants highlight ingroup bonding and social categorization which are core components of SIT. The boycott is not only a tool for opposing out-groups such as unethical brands, but also for reinforcing shared identity with a value that aligns with the community. These narratives are characterized by collective energy, often following a nostalgic tone, pointing to moments when digital activism felt hopeful, unified, or even joyful. Participants frame the boycott not just as an individual resistance, but as participation in a larger moral project. The use of memes, hashtags, and viral posts end up creating a shared language, creating an emotional spark for group belonging and mutual recognition.

Overall, this theme closes the themes in an all-encompassing way, in the concept map provided in Appendix D. Showing that boycotting is as much an emotional and narrative act as it is a political or economic one. Participants leverage storytelling to position themselves within moral trajectories, justifying inconsistencies, and affirming belonging to a group. Through SIT we understand how these stories maintain their identity through group alignment, while Narrative Analysis allows us to see the symbolic and emotional aspects of how participants mean-make in the phygital boycott landscape.

5.6 Summary and Sub-Research Questions

This thesis looked into how consumers narrate, build, and participate in boycotts within online and off-line environments, using a hybrid Narrative and Thematic Analysis grounded in SIT. The findings revealed five major themes, each with complex layers of identity expression, emotional meaning-making, and role differentiation across digital and offline actions. The themes Boycott Behavior Typologies, Consumer Motivations and Justifications, Brand Political Expression and Impact, Phygital Participation in Boycotts, and Narrative Functions and Emotional Framing were explored. In combination, these themes gave meaningful insight into how consumers act in boycotts not just as rational actors, but as social beings dealing with political belonging, moral conflict, and performative expectations in our hyperconnected world. Below a synthesis is conducted on how the findings answer each sub-research question:

5.6.1 *To what extent does a feedback loop between digital activism and offline consumer behavior reinforce boycotting actions?*

The findings have strongly supported the presence of a phygital feedback loop, where online engagement, especially through Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, act as a trigger and amplifier for offline behavior. In *Theme 4: Phygital Participation in Boycotts*, we explored how participants described viral content and peer influence on digital platforms as encouraging them to alter their real-world consumption habits. For some, posting about boycott content online became a device of commitment, pushing them to "walk the talk" offline.

On the other hand, offline actions (e.g., avoiding stores, discussing with peers) often encouraged further digital sharing, completing the feedback loop. Social media has been integrated into our everyday lives, especially when looking at the generation interviewed (between 20 - 39 years old), making the feedback loop even more likely. Social media platforms act as emotional echo chambers, where participants receive validation for their actions and are constantly exposed to other boycott narratives, intensifying their commitment to the cause (Guimond, 2019, p.17). This loop was not automatic, however, *armchair boycotters* demonstrated that the cycle could stall when symbolic posts online, fail to translate into actual behavioral change.

Overall, the digital and offline feedback loop reinforces boycotting actions most effectively when identity alignment and perceived accountability are high. This highlights the cyclical and identity-driven nature of phygital activism.

5.6.2 How do consumer motivations shift through the phases of a phygital boycott?

The motivations of consumer proved to be dynamic and evolving across different phases of engagement and roles within the boycott. As detailed in Theme 1 and Theme 2, Initiators began with strong ethical or political convictions, recalling their participation as an extension of deeply held beliefs and social values. On the other hand, Late Adopters, joined when the boycott gained mainstream visibility, driven by the idea of belonging to the social group or maintaining a positive reputation. Over time, some of these participants claimed to have a growing internalization of boycott values and shifted from performative to more authentic engagement. However, Theme 5 showcased that these motivations are often fluid and emotionally charged. Some felt guilty or skeptical causing some participants to disengage or reevaluate their stance and participation. Others deepened their commitment after witnessing real-world changes or aligning with a broader community narrative.

To conclude, motivations are not fixed but change with the boycott's popularity, peer influence, and emotional impact. Shifts usually are narratively constructed in order to preserve a coherent self-image for the idea of maintaining social identity and digital visibility.

5.6.3 How do consumers perceive the effectiveness of boycotts in influencing business practices?

Consumers perceptions of the effectiveness of boycotts was somewhat undecided and closely tied to a brands authenticity and one's identity alignment, as explored in Theme 3: Brand Political Expression and Impact. Participants explained that there is a greater belief in the impact of collective action when brands appeared vulnerable to reputational damage and public backlash. Some participants referred to cases where companies changed their policies after sustained boycotts, framing them as evidence of consumer power.

However, other participants questioned whether these changes were substantial or only symbolic. There were concerns about “performative wokeness” and strategic positioning leading

some participants to feel discouraged by some corporate responses. This skepticism did not always keep participation at bay, but it influenced how meaningful the action felt. Ultimately, effectiveness is viewed through a moral lens, when they threaten brand legitimacy or invite authentic change boycotts are seen as powerful, but their symbolic or strategic nature often led to skepticism. Still, most participants viewed the act of boycotting as a statement of values, regardless of the outcomes.

In conclusion, the findings point that boycotts in phygital contexts are deeply interwoven with narrative sense-making and emotional positioning. They are not static protest but ever-evolving initiatives that are shaped by social media dynamics, in-group belonging, and consumer-brand storytelling. Consumers do not only act, but they also narrate and reinterpret their activism in ways that mirror broader social and political movements.

6. CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis we explored how consumers narrate and participate in political boycotts within a phygital environment, where digital and offline actions are deeply intertwined. Through qualitative methodology combining Narrative Analysis and Thematic Analysis, the study looked into five main themes that showed the complexity of modern-day boycott engagement: Boycott Behavior Typologies, Consumer Motivations and Justifications, Brand Political Expression and Impact, Phygital Participation in Boycotts, and Narrative Functions and Emotional Framing.

The findings highlighted boycotting as not simply a behavioral decision but as a form of identity work, emotional expression, and narrative construction from both an individual and collective standpoint. Participation takes place within a feedback loop of digital engagement and real-world behavior, characterized with perceptions of authenticity, group belonging, and personal moral codes.

6.1 *Practical Implications*

For brands navigating sociopolitical discourse, the findings offer several actionable insights.

First, consumers notice the timing, tone, and consistency of a brand's political messaging. Thus, superficial engagement or a delayed statement often are perceived as performative, which can lead to a distrust and backlash from consumers. In an era where transparency is expected, brands must ensure that their activist stances are not only visible but also rooted in genuine corporate values. These values should be consistently reflected in long-term actions, internal practices, and stakeholder relationships. Authenticity is no longer optional; it is a strategic imperative for maintaining credibility.

Second, boycotts are not solely rational decisions driven by information; they are deeply emotional and symbolic acts tied to identity. Consumers engage in boycotts to express who they are, what they stand for, and which communities they belong to. When a brand's actions are seen as politically or ethically misaligned, this can trigger feelings of betrayal, particularly if consumers once saw that brand as part of their in-group. Strategic communication, therefore, must move beyond surface-level messaging and engage with the social identities, values, and concerns of the target audience. However, this approach is inherently risky. Speaking out can

alienate certain customer segments, while staying silent can be viewed as complicit. Navigating this tension requires thoughtful risk assessment and preparedness. A dedicated risk management team is essential, not only to handle backlash but to proactively map potential responses and protect brand integrity across diverse publics.

Lastly, social media works as both a battleground and a stage. Consumers are not only getting their information on these platforms, but they are emotionally activated and narratively empowered. Brands that do not take into account the emotional narrative climate risk not reading the room. Participating in trending hashtags is not enough, brands must anticipate and respond to the deeper stories and emotional movements driving consumer engagement. Effective engagement requires not just visibility, but resonance. Brands that succeed in this space are those that listen before speaking, respond with empathy, and align their messaging with the lived experiences and values of their communities.

To summarize, nowadays it is close to impossible for brands to escape from engaging in sociopolitical discourse. Thus, companies must prioritize authenticity, as consumers are quick to detect performative or delayed responses. Boycotts are deeply tied to identity, so political misalignment can feel like betrayal. Strategic communication should be sensitive to audience values, while recognizing the risks of both action and inaction. On social media, emotional narratives shape consumer engagement, making it essential for brands to move beyond trend-based participation and engage meaningfully with the cultural and emotional context driving online activism.

6.2 *Limitations & Future Research Directions*

This study offers valuable insights into the phygital dynamics of consumer boycotting. However, some limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the sample size was relatively small and limited in geographical scope. All participants are based in Western contexts, predominantly in the United States. While participants responded to questions with global issues (e.g., the Israel-Palestine conflict, fast fashion ethics), their framing often reflected nationalized perspectives and values. Despite the transnational nature of many boycott themes, there was little evidence of globally shared identification across societies, even among participants from similar Western democracies. Although the theme is international, the study does not meet the criteria of a truly cross-cultural

analysis, and future research could benefit from having samples from across multiple continents and political systems to examine how cultural, economic, or ideological differences shape boycott engagement and identity construction.

Second, the study relied heavily on self-reported data collected through semi-structured interviews. Although participants were initially recruited based on their self-identification as active boycotters, several interviewees had moments of realization during the conversation where they admitted they were perhaps not as active or consistent in their boycotting behavior as they had initially portrayed. This highlights a key tension between perceived and actual engagement, and it raises questions about performative identity and self-perception in digital activism. Such discrepancies emphasize the need to account for gaps between intention and action in future research.

Third, the study primarily looked into digitally influenced forms of activism, which has the risks of overshadowing more traditional, community-based, or analog forms of boycott engagement. While the phygital approach captures the idea of modern consumer behavior through its hybrid nature, it is important to acknowledge that some forms of resistance remain offline, invisible to algorithms, or rooted in collective memory and local organizing. Moreover, the role of social media platforms themselves, particularly algorithmic curation, virality logic, and influencer amplification, may significantly shape who sees what, and when. These platform-specific dynamics could reinforce echo chambers or prioritize surface-level content over sustained engagement.

These limitations could be addressed through future research in longitudinal designs that track participants' boycott engagement over time, offering a more dynamic understanding of behavioral consistency, dropout, or intensification. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparative studies could illuminate how cultural norms and digital infrastructures shape both the motivations and expressions of consumer boycotting globally. Such investigations would not only broaden the scope of the current findings but also deepen our understanding of how phygital politics manifests across diverse contexts.

6.3 *Final Reflections*

This thesis explored how consumers create and narrate their engagement in social and political boycotts in phygital spaces. The research has revealed that boycotting is not only about purchasing decisions or rejecting brands... it is about narrative belonging, the emotional and symbolic construction of identity, and the desire to position oneself within a morally coherent community. We uncovered that boycotting is a construct of social meaning-making: a practice through which people can express, negotiate, and sometimes protect deeply held values in the face of public and corporate discourse.

A key takeaway is that participants did not act in isolation. Their stories developed against the backdrop of shared memes, peer dynamics, political climates, and platform logics. Through their narratives, they constructed not only a moral "self," but also a sense of collective "we" one that aligned with justice and perceived ethical consistency. For this reason, boycotting became a symbolic act of self- and group-definition, often performed within a social media infrastructure that amplified visibility and public accountability.

Yet, the thesis also uncovered tension: the gap between values and behavior, the performance of activism versus its substance, and the burden of navigating too many causes in an algorithmically saturated environment. For many, there was not full agency and participation was somewhat complicated, a spectrum ranging from assertive refusal to quiet contradiction. This complexity reinforces that phygital activism is not just a mode of protest but a reflection of the social structures and digital ecosystems through which modern identity is formed.

At a broader level, this research contributes to understanding how consumer activism operates as an individual expression and also as a cultural construct shaped by societal polarization and identity politics. The phygital boycott is not just a strategy, but it is a social artifact that encodes the hopes and belonging needs of a generation trying to live ethically in a world where consumption and values are tightly entangled.

In that sense, boycotting today is not just about what we reject, it is about what kind of world we are trying to build through the stories we tell, the actions we share, and the groups we claim to belong to.

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APPENDIX

A. Overview of Interviewees

Participant	Age	Gender	Highest Level of Education	Stage in Life
I.C.	26	Female	Bachelor Degree	Employed Full Time (Loyalty Communications Specialist)
L.B.	25	Female	Bachelor Degree	Self-Employed Instagram/YouTube micro-influencer
S.S.	23	Female	Bachelor Degree	Student - Employed Part-Time (Classroom Teacher)
R.S.	22	Female	Bachelor Degree	Student
H.G.	22	Female	Bachelor Degree	Employed Part Time (Restaurant Server)
J.C.	23	Female	Master Degree	Student
C.Z.	23	Female	Master Degree	Student - Employed Part-Time (Young Talent Expert)
A.V.	23	Female	Double Master Degree	Student - Intern Part-Time (Marketing Intern)
R.T.	23	Male	Bachelor Degree	Student - Independent worker (Second-Hand clothing reseller)
J.S.	24	Male	Bachelor Degree	Employed Full-Time (Business Development Manager)
L.G.	39	Female	Master Degree	Employed Full-Time (strategy, digital marketing)
H.T.	30	Female	Master Degree	Employed Full-Time (key account manager)
P.G.	23	Female	Bachelor Degree	Student
M.T.	20	Male	High School Diploma	Employed Full-Time (Restaurant Manager)
A.G.	30	Female	Master Degree	Employed Full-Time (Key Account Manager)

K.K.	26	Female	Master Degree	Employed Full-Time (Communications for a non-profit)
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B. Interview Guide

Theme 1: Introduction & Warm-Up

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself (age, stage in life, education level)?
2. How would you describe your general approach to consumption? (e.g., brand loyalty, ethical considerations, spontaneous purchases, etc.)
3. How would you describe a consumer boycott?

Theme 2: Motivations and Triggers for Boycotting

4. What factors influence your decision to boycott a brand or product? (e.g., ethical concerns, political beliefs, social movements)
5. Have you participated in a consumer boycott in the last year? What was the main reason behind your participation?
6. How did you first learn about the boycott? (e.g., social media, news, word of mouth)
7. Were there any specific events, campaigns, or influencers that persuaded you to join?
 - a. Come up w prompt
8. Have you felt compelled to increase boycotting action?

Theme 3: Online vs. Offline Boycotting Behavior

8. Did your participation in the boycott involve online engagement? (e.g., sharing posts, signing petitions, using hashtags)
9. Did you take any offline actions related to the boycott (e.g., protesting, changing shopping habits, convincing others to join)?
10. How do you perceive the role of social media in modern boycotts? Do you think it makes them more effective? Why or why not?
11. Do you believe boycotts today are more performative (for social validation) or impactful (leading to real change)? Why?

Theme 4: Consumer Perception

12. Do you think companies should take political stances, or should they remain neutral? Why?

13. Have you ever stopped boycotting a brand and what did that entail? What made you change your mind?
14. Do you think boycotts create long-term change, or do they fade after media attention dies down?

Theme 5: Closing Reflections

15. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with boycotts?
16. Do you have any final thoughts on the relationship between consumer activism and political influence?

C. Code List

Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes
1. Boycott Behavior Typologies (<i>deductive + inductive</i>)	Initiators (Active Agents of Change)	Moral urgency
		Desire for collective action
		Research-driven activism
		First to post/share boycott content
		Leading by example
		Activists
		Proactive monitoring of brand ethics
		Anti-capitalist undercurrent
	Late Adopters (Reactive Supporters)	Influence by peers/social media
		Bandwagon
		Joining for visibility
		Curiosity-driven engagement

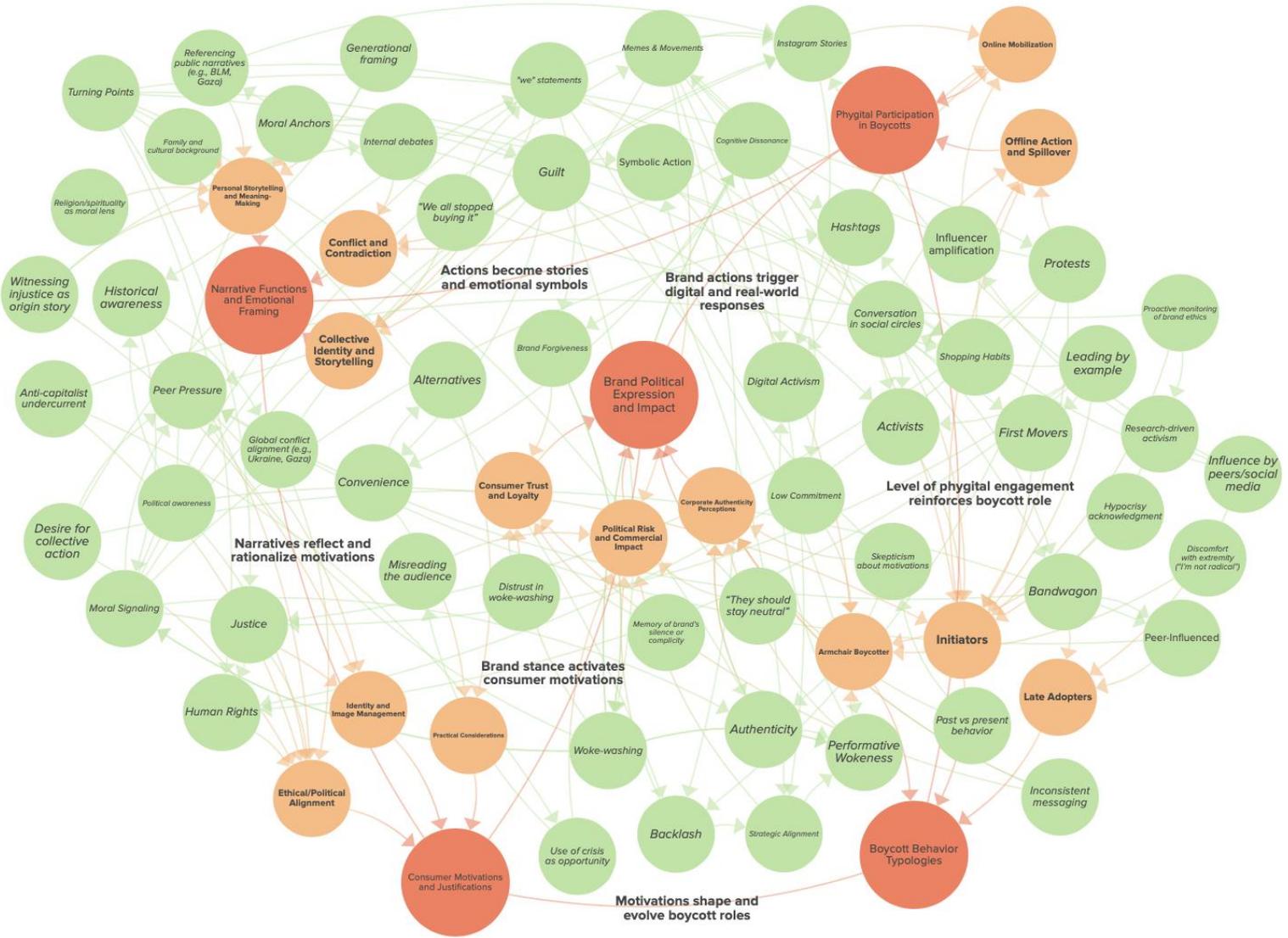
		Peer-Influenced
		Reluctant support
	Armchair Boycotters (Passive Participants)	Performative support
		Hypocrisy acknowledgment
		Discomfort with extremity (“I’m not radical”)
		Minimal behavioral change
		Low Commitment
		Symbolic Action
	Disengaged after peak moment	
2. Consumer Motivations and Justifications (<i>inductive + deductive</i>)	Ethical/Political Alignment	Human Rights
		Political awareness
		Global conflict alignment (ex. Ukraine, Gaza)
		Personal values vs brand values
		Justice
		Historical awareness (colonial links etc.)
	Identity and Image Management	Social media self-branding
		Group belonging
		Peer Pressure
		Fear of judgment

		Moral Signaling
		“Looking like a good person”
	Practical Considerations	Brand alternatives available
		Convenience
		Habit vs intention
Alternatives		
3. Brand Political Expression and Impact <i>(deductive)</i>	Corporate Authenticity Perceptions	“It feels genuine” vs “They’re jumping on a trend”
		Long-term commitment signals
		Performative Wokeness
		Authenticity
		Inconsistent messaging
		Past vs present behavior
		Skepticism about motivations
	Consumer Trust and Loyalty	“They gained my respect”
		Woke-washing
		Red lines “I would never buy again”
		Brand forgiveness
		Memory of brand’s silence or complicity
	Political Risk and	“They should stay neutral”

	Commercial Impact	Polarization backlash
		Use of crisis as opportunity
		Short-term loss vs long-term gain
		Backlash
		Strategic Alignment
		Financial motivations disguised as ethics
		Misreading the audience
4. Phygital Participation in Boycotts (<i>inductive</i>)	Online Mobilization	Hashtag movements
		Sharing boycott rationale
		Influencer amplification
		Virality pressure
		Instagram story chain-posting
	Offline Action and Spillover	Avoiding stores/products
		Conversation in social circles
		Involvement in protests/petitions
		Peer accountability in real life
		Shopping habits
		Ethical consumer routines

5. Narrative Functions and Emotional Framing	Personal Storytelling and Meaning-Making	Moral anchors
		Turning point moments
		Family and cultural background
		Witnessing injustice as origin story
		Religion/spirituality as moral lens
		Emotion-laden vocabulary (proud, disgusted etc.)
	Conflict and Contradiction	Guilt
		Frustration with complexity
		Cognitive Dissonance
		Internal debates
		Rationalization strategies
	Collective Identity and Storytelling	“We all stopped buying it”
		“We” Statements
		Movement belonging
		Generational framing
		Memes as shared emotional shorthand
		Referencing public narratives (BLM, Gaza, etc.)

D. Concept Map - Phygital Boycott Engagement



E. AI Declaration Form

Use of Generative AI Tools in Course Assignments

Student Information

Name: Carolina Schillinger

Student ID: 554340

Course Name: Master Thesis

Instructor Name: Annet Toornstra
Assignment Title: Phygital Politics
Date: 26 June 2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot)
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL)
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Name of the AI Tool(s) or Framework(s) Used], in the process of creating parts or components of my course assignment. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of the assignment.

Extent of AI Usage

I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the assignment were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from

I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: Carolina Schillinger
Date of Signature: 27 June 2025