

# Strong Reciprocity in Consumer Boycotts

Tobias Hahn<sup>1</sup> · Noël Albert<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** Boycotts are among the most frequent forms of consumer expression against unethical or egregious acts by firms. Most current research explains consumers' decisions to participate in a boycott using a universal cost-benefit model that mixes instrumental and expressive motives. To date, no conceptual framework accounts for the distinct behavioral motives for boycotting though. This article focuses on motivational heterogeneity among consumers. By distinguishing two stable behavioral models—a self-regarding type and a strongly reciprocal type—we introduce the notion of strong reciprocity to the boycott literature. We argue that the presence of strongly reciprocal consumers can enhance boycott success. First, in interactions with the target firm, strongly reciprocal consumers perceive higher levels of egregiousness and are more willing to engage in boycotting behavior, even in unfavorable strategic conditions, which provides a stable basis for boycotting. Second, in interactions with self-regarding consumers, strongly reciprocal consumers are willing to sanction those others, according to whether they participate in the boycott, which increases overall participation in and the likelihood of success of a consumer boycott. These findings have implications for further research, as well as for firms, nongovernmental organizations, and boycotters.

**Keywords** Consumer boycotts · Strong reciprocity · Behavioral motives · Motivational heterogeneity

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✉ Tobias Hahn  
tobias.hahn@kedgebs.com

Noël Albert  
noel.albert@kedgebs.com

<sup>1</sup> KEDGE Business School, Domaine de Luminy – BP 921,  
13288 Marseille Cedex 9, France

Consumer boycotts are one of the most important means through which consumers can induce ethical practices by firms. The “Ethical Consumer”<sup>1</sup> website listed about 60 active boycotts in 2014. Because they are beset with small agent and free-rider problems, consumer boycotts constitute collective action problems (John and Klein 2003) and social dilemma situations (Sen et al. 2001) where boycott success largely depends on the degree of cooperation among boycotters (Delacote 2009). Scholars accordingly have devoted considerable attention to why consumers engage in boycotts (Albrecht et al. 2013; Friedman 1985; Garrett 1987; Hoffmann and Müller 2009; John and Klein 2003; Klein et al. 2004; Kozinets and Handelman 2004).

A dominant explanation suggests that consumers participate in boycotts if the private benefits of doing so are greater than the associated private costs (Albrecht et al. 2013; Braunsberger and Buckler 2011; Freestone and McGoldrick 2008; Garrett 1987; Hutter and Hoffmann 2013; John and Klein 2003; Klein et al. 2002, 2004; Sen et al. 2001). Yet the free-rider and small agent problems make “boycotting...a costly act that cannot rationally be expected to yield an instrumental benefit” (John and Klein 2003, p. 1197), such that it can be characterized as prosocial behavior (Klein et al. 2004) and not fully explained by self-regarding motives. Few studies acknowledge the existence of consumers who boycott irrespective of the expected personal benefits (Tyran and Engelmann 2005), even though these consumers “exert significant influence on individual cooperative behavior” (Sen et al. 2001, p. 401) and thus on boycott success. Because the role of consumers who do not base their boycott decision on cost-benefit considerations has been largely ignored in previous research, we lack an

<sup>1</sup> See [www.ethicalconsumer.org](http://www.ethicalconsumer.org).

understanding of (1) the reasons why some consumers boycott, even if private costs are higher than private benefits, (2) the relationships of these consumers with and influence on other boycotters and the target firm, and (3) the conditions in which such consumer behaviors might increase the effectiveness of consumer boycotts.

To address these questions, we turn to empirical findings from experimental economics and social psychology (Bowles and Gintis 2000; Kuhlman and Wimberley 1976; Liebrand 1984; Liebrand et al. 1986) and introduce the notion of strong reciprocity to the boycott literature. Specifically, we suggest an analytical separation of two behavioral types of consumers: a self-regarding type, driven by the maximization of private utility (Fehr and Gintis 2007), and a strongly reciprocal type, motivated by a desire to reciprocate the (un)fair behavior of others, even if doing so entails net costs (Bolton and Ockenfels 2000; Fehr and Gächter 1998, 2000b; Fehr and Schmidt 2000b; Gintis 2000b). In analyzing the interplay of self-regarding and strongly reciprocal actors in two distinct interactions (consumer-target firm and consumer-consumer), we argue that strongly reciprocal consumers have a dual effect on the success of consumer boycotts. First, they alleviate small agent problems by creating a robust stock of boycotting behavior, in that they are willing to boycott even in unfavorable strategic conditions. Second, they alleviate free-rider problems because of their willingness to reward cooperation among consumers and punish free-riding consumers.

By introducing the notion of strong reciprocity to consumer behavior, we contribute to the literature on consumer boycotts and help explicate the role and effects of heterogeneous behavioral motives among boycotting consumers. Due to their willingness to impose sanctions, even at a net cost to themselves, strongly reciprocal consumers can shift the economic incentives of the target firm and self-regarding consumers in favor of successful boycotts. We offer testable propositions for why, how, and in which conditions strong reciprocators influence the success of consumer boycotts. Our argument has far-reaching implications for the behavior and strategies of consumers, firms, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in boycott situations.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: We briefly review the dominant cost-benefit approach to boycotts and then introduce the distinction between self-regarding and strongly reciprocal behaviors as delineated in social psychology and experimental economics. In turn, we analyze the effects of the presence of strongly reciprocal consumers in boycott situations. Before concluding, we discuss opportunities for further research as well as the key theoretical and practical implications that emerge from our line of argument.

## The Cost-Benefit Approach to Boycott Participation

Boycotts are “a means by which consumers can influence business practices by refraining from purchase from firms that fail to behave in ‘socially responsible’ ways” (John and Klein 2003, p. 1201). Boycotting means that consumers deliberately stop consuming the target firm’s products and services in response to its perceived undesirable behavior. The cost of this forgone consumption represents a sacrifice, and not all consumers have the willingness or means to bear such costs. Therefore, most research on consumer boycotts explains boycott participation with a cost-benefit approach. The higher the benefits, the more likely it is that a consumer will participate in a boycott; conversely, the higher the costs, the higher a consumer’s willingness must be to make the sacrifice (Hutter and Hoffmann 2013; John and Klein 2003; Klein et al. 2004; Sen et al. 2001). The cost-benefit approach also assumes that consumer boycotts are triggered by perceptions of an egregious act by the target firm (Hoffmann and Müller 2009; Klein et al. 2002, 2004), reflected in a consumer’s “belief that a firm has engaged in conduct that is strikingly wrong and that has negative and possibly harmful consequences” (Klein et al. 2004, p. 96). Perceived egregiousness as a trigger of consumer boycotts helps create a distinction between economic boycotts, which occur when consumers perceive unfair marketing practices or prices, and social boycotts, in which consumers judge the actions of the target firm according to their effects on third parties, such as employees, suppliers, animals, nature, or society at large (Friedman 1999).

The cost-benefit approach has been applied in two types of studies in prior boycott literature. First, it underlies conceptual models that explain individual consumers’ decisions to boycott. In these models, a consumer’s participation in a boycott is conceptualized as either a social dilemma (Sen et al. 2001) or helping behavior (Klein et al. 2004). In both cases, the consumer’s engagement with the boycott results from a calculation of the private costs and benefits of participating. Individual consumers face a social dilemma, in that they must choose between the private benefits of consumption (i.e., continue consuming a desirable good) and the collective benefits of a successful boycott (i.e., ending the contested behavior of the target firm). Boycotting also has been regarded as prosocial behavior, such that individuals calculate the private costs and benefits associated with helping (Klein et al. 2004). Second, the cost-benefit approach appears in studies that identify various factors that influence an individual consumer’s decision to participate in a boycott. Notable factors include the credibility of the call for a boycott (Albrecht

et al. 2013; Cissé-Depardon and N'Goala 2009; Garrett 1987), overall participation (Sen et al. 2001), the presence of free riders (John and Klein 2003), social pressure (Garrett 1987; Sen et al. 2001), and the perceived likelihood of the boycott's success (Mahoney 1976; Sen et al. 2001). These factors can increase or decrease the private costs or benefits of consumers, so they likely influence their decisions to participate in a boycott or not.

The cost-benefit approach also reveals that boycotting is beset with small agent and free-rider problems. A single consumer's decision to boycott is not only costly to the consumer but also limited in its impact on the target firm (Hoffmann and Müller 2009; Tyran and Engelmann 2005). Because of this so-called small agent problem, the effect of boycotting by a single individual consumer is marginal, and therefore "boycotts require widespread participation to be effective" (Klein et al. 2004, p. 98). Yet widespread participation requires cooperation among boycotters, so the small agent problem in turn increases consumers' incentives to free ride on others' participation (Hoffmann and Müller 2009; John and Klein 2003; Sen et al. 2001; Tyran and Engelmann 2005), because "the certain costs each of them incurs from withholding consumption are likely to outweigh the uncertain utility obtained through boycotting" (Sen et al. 2001, p. 400). Free riders can benefit from the success of a boycott without having incurred the costs of participating (John and Klein 2003). Overall, both small agent problems and free-rider problems limit consumers' willingness to participate in a boycott and thereby induce collective action problems.

Most applications of the cost-benefit approach to consumer boycotts consider tangible and intangible costs of boycotting (Albrecht et al. 2013; Deng 2012; Ettenson and Klein 2005; Freestone and McGoldrick 2008; Garrett 1987; Hutter and Hoffmann 2013; Klein et al. 2004; Sen et al. 2001). Consumers with a strong emotional attachment to a product are less likely to boycott. This effect of an emotional attachment has been found to increase in the absence of substitutes for the boycotted product (Sen et al. 2001). Similarly, high consumption volumes of a targeted product in the consumer's purchase history or a strong brand relationship increase the costs of boycotting (Albrecht et al. 2013; Cissé-Depardon and N'Goala 2009; Klein et al. 2004; Sen et al. 2001).

With regard to the benefits that consumers can derive from participating in a boycott, prior literature distinguishes between instrumental and expressive benefits. Instrumental benefits capture the utility that consumers gain from achieving the boycott's objectives in terms of the extrinsic utility that accrues once the boycott succeeds in ending the target firm's contested behavior. Expressive benefits instead capture the intrinsic utility that consumers gain from participating in a boycott, which gives them an

opportunity to live an emotional experience, express their values, or display anger toward the contested practices of the target firm (Ettenson and Klein 2005; John and Klein 2003; Klein et al. 2004; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Tyran and Engelmann 2005). The dominant cost-benefit model of boycotting (Klein et al. 2004) uses a broad notion of utility that includes both instrumental and expressive benefits, but some scholars argue that expressive benefits should be separated in these cost-benefit considerations (Cissé-Depardon and N'Goala 2009; Harrison et al. 2005; Mahoney 1976; Tyran and Engelmann 2005). For example, Albrecht et al. (2013, p. 181) distinguish two perspectives in the boycott literature that "refer to either a cost-benefit approach...or to socio-psychological theories." Consumers driven by expressive motives (John and Klein 2003) decide to boycott for emotional reasons, such as anger (Ettenson and Klein 2005) or guilt (Freestone and McGoldrick 2008) or to express moral values (Kozinets and Handelman 1998). From an expressive benefit perspective, boycotting is not primarily a collective phenomenon but is mainly an individual act (Cissé-Depardon and N'Goala 2009), so even if they have no impact on the target firms, boycotters perceive personal satisfaction from their behavior (Freestone and McGoldrick 2008; Kozinets and Handelman 1998). Boycotting behavior when "the personal importance of the boycott issue is likely to ensure participation even if the costs of withholding consumption of the boycotted product are high" (Sen et al. 2001, p. 400) is characterized by a strong sense of responsibility, beyond self-interest (Varney 2002). Expressive benefits thus may increase willingness to engage in boycotts, despite the presence of low benefits and high costs (Cissé-Depardon and N'Goala 2009). Tyran and Engelmann (2005) offer empirical support for this challenge to the cost-benefit approach and show that a substantial fraction of consumers boycott even if they cannot expect any material benefits from doing so and despite the presence of free riders, "indicating that boycotts are to some extent called for expressive reasons" (p. 13).

Although boycott literature acknowledges that consumer participation in boycotts can be driven by instrumental and expressive benefits, it continues to rely mostly on a cost-benefit approach to conceptualize boycotting behavior. Mixing instrumental and expressive benefits under the umbrella of an all-encompassing cost-benefit approach means though that these studies cannot distinguish different motivational forces for boycotting behavior nor can they capture the interaction between boycotting driven by instrumental benefits and boycotting for expressive reasons (Sen et al. 2001). The role and influence of consumers whose participation is not primarily based on cost-benefit considerations thus have been systematically underestimated in boycott studies, and the mechanisms for their

influence, as well as the conditions in which their influence may be particularly effective, are not well understood.

We address this gap by exploring the effects of the coexistence of different behavioral types among boycotting consumers more systematically. Rather than assuming that boycotting is always based on private utility maximization and cost-benefit considerations, we distinguish different behavioral motives underlying consumers' decision to participate in a boycott. We identify self-regarding consumers versus strongly reciprocal consumers and highlight the influence of strong reciprocators on boycott effectiveness.

## Heterogeneity of Behavioral Motives

While the literature on boycotts is dominated by cost-benefit-oriented models that mix instrumental and expressive benefits (Klein et al. 2004), research in behavioral economics and social psychology suggest that different types of actors, with distinct behavioral motives, coexist. According to most empirical studies in social psychology, most actors are motivated by either self-regarding or reciprocal motives (Kuhlman and Wimberley 1976; Liebrand 1984; Liebrand et al. 1986). These motivational types coexist and represent stable behavioral patterns (Bowles and Gintis 2000). Empirical evidence from various game theory experiments shows that self-regarding people are motivated by the maximization of their private utility, so others' situations or conditions have an effect only insofar as they directly influence the person's own situation (Fehr and Gintis 2007). Self-regarding actors weigh expected private costs against expected private benefits for different alternatives and use that information to make choices (Arrow 1959; Scott 2000). In contrast, reciprocators account for others' situations, and their behavior is driven by the perceived fairness of payoffs to both themselves and others.

### Strong Reciprocity as a Behavioral Motive

In the past decade, following strong empirical evidence from game theoretical experiments, reciprocity has been established as a behavioral model (Bolton and Ockenfels 2000; Fehr and Falk 2002; Fehr and Gächter 1998; Fehr and Schmidt 2000b; Gintis 2000a, b). Empirical findings suggest that between 40 and 60 % of people are motivated not by self-interest but rather by reciprocity (Fehr and Gächter 1998). Reciprocal behavior has been defined as "an in-kind response to beneficial or harmful acts" (Fehr and Gächter 2000b, p. 160), so reciprocal actors reward those that they perceive as acting fairly (positive reciprocity) and punish those that they perceive as acting

unfairly (negative reciprocity) (Sethi and Somanathan 2003; Sugden 1984). While prior literature distinguishes between different types of reciprocal behavior, we focus on strong reciprocity herein.<sup>2</sup> Strongly reciprocal actors are willing to sanction the perceived (un)fairness of others, using punishments (negative sanctions) or rewards (positive sanctions), even if doing so decreases their payoffs and entails additional net costs for them. Strong reciprocators continue to engage in costly reciprocal behavior, even when they cannot expect any future benefits from doing so (Fehr et al. 2002; Fehr and Gächter 2000b; Gintis 2000b). Accordingly, strong reciprocity is defined as the "willingness to sacrifice resources for rewarding fair and punishing unfair behavior even if this is costly and provides neither present nor future material rewards for the reciprocator" (Fehr et al. 2002, p. 2).

Strong reciprocators issue punishments not just when they believe they are being treated unfairly (strong *direct* reciprocity), but also when the unfair behavior affects a third party, even if there is no interaction or interest between the reciprocator and this third party (strong *indirect* reciprocity) (Dufwenberg et al. 2001; Engelmann and Fischbacher 2009; Fehr and Fischbacher 2004). Even if they are not affected themselves, strongly reciprocal actors are willing to implement costly negative sanctions in response to unfair behavior on behalf of a third party that has been treated unfairly. In support of indirect reciprocity, Fehr and Fischbacher (2004) demonstrate, using so-called third-party punishment games in completely anonymous conditions with no future interaction, that strong reciprocators dedicate some of their resources to punish players who are noncooperative toward a third party. This willingness to implement costly punishments, even if the strong reciprocators are not affected by the noncooperative behavior themselves, illustrates how strong reciprocity differs from self-regarding motives; it represents a behavioral motive in itself. Strong reciprocators punish unfair behavior for the sake of enforcing fair behavior.

Reciprocal behavior in general is triggered by actors' perceptions of the fairness of others' behavior. The model of strong reciprocity thus refers to different fairness norms, such as those for distributional fairness, intentional fairness, or procedural fairness. Norms for distributional fairness judge the fairness of a transaction on the basis of the material outcome of a situation (Bolton and Ockenfels 2000; Fehr and Schmidt 1999). The behavior of others is perceived as fair if it contributes to the achievement of a

<sup>2</sup> In this context, it is important to distinguish strong reciprocity from weak reciprocity (sometimes also referred to as reciprocal altruism). Weak reciprocity ultimately reverts to self-regarding motives, because actors punish unfair behavior only as long as they expect future private benefits that outweigh the cost of punishing (Axelrod 1984; Bowles and Gintis 2000; Trivers 1971).

final distribution that is considered fair. In addition to their own outcomes, strong reciprocators also take into account the outcomes that accrue to third parties. Intentional fairness norms instead define fairness judgments according to the perceived behavioral intentions of others (Falk et al. 2003; McCabe et al. 2003). Reciprocal actors form beliefs about the intentions underlying others' actions, based on the set of decision alternatives available to those others (Levine 1998; Rabin 1993). Finally, reciprocal actors who focus on procedural fairness norms base fairness judgments on the methods that others use to plan and implement their actions (Bolton et al. 2005).

Overall, strong reciprocity has been identified as a stable pattern that motivates the behavior of a substantial fraction of people across different cultural contexts (Costa-Gomes and Zauner 2001; Hayashi et al. 1999; Henrich et al. 2001) in different strategic settings (Güth and van Damme 1998; Hoffman et al. 1996; Sethi and Somanathan 2003) and even in high-stake conditions (Cameron 1999; Slonim and Roth 1998). Behavioral motives based on strong reciprocity thus stand in stark contrast with self-regarding behavior. Self-regarding actors will not implement costly sanctions on others if they cannot expect a net positive benefit from doing so (Bowles and Gintis 2000). In contrast with self-regarding behavior, strongly reciprocal behavior is other-regarding in that it takes into account the situation of others. However, strong reciprocity is not selfless but rather combines self-regarding and other-regarding elements. Reciprocal actors have a strong aversion to situations that exploit their friendly behavior (Bolton et al. 2000; Fehr and Gächter 2000a). Unlike altruistic behavior, which is purely other-regarding, unconditional kindness toward others, strong reciprocity can be characterized as conditional (un)friendliness (Bowles and Gintis 2000), driven by fairness with a self-serving element (Bolton and Ockenfels 2008; Fischbacher et al. 2001). Therefore, unlike self-regarding actors who are motivated by maximizing their private utility, strong reciprocators take others into account, but not in a completely selfless manner. For example, the willingness of strong reciprocators to impose costly sanctions is limited, in that they seek to avoid situations that would leave them worse off than others (Kagel and Wolfe 2001; Knez and Camerer 1995).

### The Role of Strong Reciprocity in Enforcing Social Norms

Allowing for heterogeneous behavioral motives has far-reaching implications for the enforcement of social norms in collective action situations such as consumer boycotts. Social norms are informal rules that “specify what actions are regarded by a set of persons as proper or correct, or improper or incorrect” (Coleman 1990, p. 242). Social

norms typically regulate situations with externalities that are not covered by transferable rights. They define socially desirable behavior, which often diverges from the interests of self-regarding individuals, who do not internalize the collective benefits that accrue from social norms. In social dilemma and collective action situations, social norms for cooperation come in conflict with the individual incentives of self-regarding actors not to cooperate and to free ride instead on the contributions of others (Ostrom 1990, 2000). Consequently, when there are only self-regarding actors, social norms for cooperation will not be followed.

The situation changes as soon as strongly reciprocal actors enter and begin to interact with self-regarding actors. Reciprocal sanctions can translate social norms and socially desirable behavior into economic incentives for self-regarding actors so that it becomes economically rational for them to adhere to social norms (Fehr and Gächter 2000b). This effect is illustrated in empirical findings from ultimatum games. In an anonymous, one-shot interaction, one player makes an offer to split a given sum with another player. The second player can respond by accepting or rejecting the offer. In the former case, the sum is split in the suggested manner, and in the latter case, neither player receives any payoff. If only self-regarding actors were present, even minimal offers would be accepted by respondents, because any payoff is preferred over no payoff; thus, there is no incentive to make generous offers. However, empirical evidence shows that many respondents behave strongly reciprocally, reject unequal offers, and punish offers they perceive as unfair, even though doing so forces them to forgo their own payoff (Camerer and Thaler 1995; Güth et al. 1982). The presence of strong reciprocators and their willingness to punish unfair offers also is anticipated by many self-regarding players, who then offer to split the sum equally. That is, the threat of negative sanctions by strong reciprocators makes it rational for self-regarding actors to issue fair offers to avoid the sanctions and the associated loss of their share. The threat of punishment by strong reciprocators suffices to alter the incentives for self-regarding actors in favor of the socially desirable behavior defined by social norms (Camerer and Fehr 2002; Sobel 2001).

A similar effect arises in public good experiments, in which anonymous participants choose freely how much to contribute to the supply of a public good. From a collective viewpoint, it is optimal if all participants cooperate, but self-regarding players have an incentive not to cooperate and to free ride on others' contributions (Olson 1965). If all players were self-regarding, no one would contribute to the supply of the public good. Empirical evidence shows instead that in both one-shot games and early rounds of repeated games, players contribute about half their resources on average to the public good (Fehr and Gächter

2000a, 2002). This tendency can be explained by the presence of strong reciprocators who, following their reciprocal preferences, start games with cooperative behavior. However, if there is no option to punish noncooperative players, strong reciprocators cease to cooperate to avoid being exploited. Thus, in later rounds of repeated games, without the option of sanctioning, no players (self-regarding or strongly reciprocal) cooperate (Fehr and Schmidt 1999). If given the option, strong reciprocators implement costly sanctions to punish noncooperative players, even in one-shot interactions or the last round of repeated games (Fehr and Gächter 2000a; Ostrom et al. 1992). Self-regarding players never punish, because doing so is costly and does not offer any future benefits. However, the willingness of strongly reciprocal players to punish is sufficient to shift the incentive structure of self-regarding players toward cooperation as soon as it is more favorable to cooperate and avoid punishment for noncooperation. The presence of strong reciprocators thus can enforce cooperation by self-regarding actors to supply a public good (Fehr and Gächter 2000a, 2002; Fehr and Gintis 2007; Ostrom 2000).

Overall, through their willingness to implement costly punishments of unfair behavior, strong reciprocators can change incentives in such a way that it becomes rational for self-regarding actors to behave in socially desirable ways (Kahneman et al. 1986). We argue accordingly that the presence of consumers who are motivated by strong reciprocity can explain the effectiveness of boycotts with regard to the enforcement of both socially desirable behaviors by boycotted firms and cooperation among boycotters with different motives.

### The Role of Strong Reciprocity in Consumer Boycotts

In social psychology and behavioral economics, it is widely accepted that heterogeneous motives of individual behavior coexist, yet strong reciprocity rarely appears as a potential motive for consumer behavior (Chan and Li 2010; Degli Antoni and Sacconi 2013; Kritikos and Bolle 2004). Recently, heterogeneous motives have been proposed as microfoundations for stakeholder theory (Bridoux and Stoelhorst 2014), and reciprocal motives of stakeholders have been used to explain firm performance (Bosse et al. 2009), the implementation of normative stakeholder demands for pro-social firm behavior (Hahn 2004, 2005, 2015), stakeholder behavior (Wasieliski and Hayibor 2009), stakeholder management (Fassin 2012), corporate governance (Sacconi 2007), and employees' contributions to the collective creation of value (Bridoux et al. 2011). We suggest that allowing for heterogeneous behavioral motives

among consumers, as a specific group of stakeholders, and considering strong reciprocity as a prevailing motivation for a considerable fraction of consumers can lead to a better understanding of the effectiveness of consumer boycotts. More precisely, we argue that the interaction of self-regarding and strongly reciprocal consumers plays a crucial role, because strong reciprocity should have important effects on the incentives of self-regarding actors and thus on the effectiveness of boycotts.

At its core, any boycott is based on the decisions of individual consumers to withhold consumption, or not, following a perceived egregious act by a target firm (Sen et al. 2001). Due to small agent problems, the likelihood of boycott success—and thus the instrumental incentives for individuals to participate—are low. Self-regarding actors thus have no incentive to contribute to the boycott but do have an incentive to free ride on the boycotting behaviors of other consumers (Klein et al. 2004), because the instrumental benefits of a successful boycott also accrue to consumers that have not participated in the boycott of the target firm's products. Thus, boycotts are beset with free-rider problems (John and Klein 2003; Klein et al. 2004).

Structurally, a boycott comprises two types of interactions: the interaction between the individual consumer and the target firm and the interaction among consumers to coordinate the boycott. We suggest that focusing on the interplay of strongly reciprocal and self-regarding actors in both interactions offers a better understanding of the effectiveness of consumer boycotts. A boycott is successful if it leads the target firm to cease the contested behavior that triggered the boycott, and many scholars have discussed the conditions in which boycotts are likely to succeed (Delacote 2009; John and Klein 2003; Klein et al. 2004; Kritikos and Bolle 2004; Sen et al. 2001; Tyran and Engelmann 2005). Building on this literature, we analyze the effects of the presence and interaction of different behavioral types on the effectiveness of consumer boycotts.

### Interaction Between the Boycotter and the Target Firm

Each consumer decides individually whether to boycott a target firm. It is commonly argued that boycotting behavior of an individual consumer is triggered by the perceived egregiousness of the behavior of the target firm (Friedman 1999; Klein et al. 2004), and perceived egregiousness predicts boycott participation (Klein et al. 2002). Surprisingly though, prior literature on consumer boycotts has not adopted equity theory widely, even though the formation of fairness judgments—a central tenet of equity theory—relates closely to both perceived

egregiousness, as described in the boycott literature, and fairness norms, which trigger strong reciprocity. Hayibor and Collins (2015), using an equity theory framework, find that consumers' intentions to boycott relate positively to their perceptions of the degree of fairness in their relationship with the firm. However, not all consumers who consider a firm's actions unfair decide to boycott that firm, because their perceptions of the egregiousness of firm behavior vary. The same firm action might be regarded as completely unacceptable by some consumers but acceptable by others. Such varying perceptions and judgments of a firm's behavior might be determined, at least partly, by the degree to which a person is directly affected by the firm's behavior.

In this context, we expect different perceptions of egregiousness among self-regarding versus strongly reciprocal consumers. Self-regarding consumers perceive high levels of egregiousness if the contested behavior by the firm directly harms them, such as in economic boycotts (Friedman 1999), in which consumers respond to unfair marketing practices and unfair price increases that affect their economic situation (e.g., purchasing power). This reasoning resonates with the literature on consumer perceptions of fair prices based on equity theory (Bolton et al. 2003; Mathies and Gudergan 2011). In contrast, self-regarding consumers likely perceive lower levels of egregiousness associated with social boycotts (Friedman 1999), because egregiousness judgments reflect the effects of the firm's behavior on a third party (e.g., workers in the supply chain, the natural environment, indigenous peoples). The consumer's own economic situation is not directly affected by the target firm's behavior.

Reciprocal consumers instead likely perceive high levels of egregiousness in both economic and social boycotts, because their reciprocal behavior is guided by fairness norms, irrespective of who is being treated unfairly. Unfair marketing practices and price increases trigger direct reciprocity and the desire to retaliate for the perceived unfair behavior that the firm has shown to the consumer directly (e.g., as in ultimatum games; Güth 1995; Roth 1995). A firm's unfair behavior toward third parties triggers indirect reciprocity and the desire to retaliate on behalf of that third party, even if the consumer is not directly affected (e.g., as in third-party punishment games; Fehr and Fischbacher 2004). We therefore expect that self-regarding consumers only perceive high levels of egregiousness if and to the degree that their own situation is directly jeopardized. Because the behavioral motives of strongly reciprocal consumers entail both other-regarding and self-regarding elements, we instead expect them to perceive high levels of egregiousness in response to the effects of the target firm's behavior on both third parties and themselves. Formally, we propose:

**Proposition 1a** *Self-regarding consumers perceive high levels of egregiousness in the target firm's behavior only when they are directly affected by it.*

**Proposition 1b** *Strongly reciprocal consumers perceive high levels of egregiousness in the target firm's behavior when they are directly affected and/or when a third party is affected by it.*

As Klein et al. (2004) find, the link between perceived egregiousness and an individual consumer's decision to boycott is moderated by multiple factors. Egregiousness is more likely to lead to boycotting behavior when consumers believe that they can actually change the firm's behavior (see also John and Klein 2003). However, the effect of perceived egregiousness on the individual's willingness to boycott diminishes when consumers think that their individual boycotting will have no impact, because it is too small to be noticed by the firm, or if they believe it is not necessary to boycott, because they can free ride on others' boycotting behavior.

We also expect different behaviors from strongly reciprocal and self-regarding consumers with regard to the expected effectiveness of individual participation in a boycott. Self-regarding consumers are particularly susceptible to small agent problems and free riding (Sen et al. 2001). They weigh the certain cost of forgone consumption against the uncertain instrumental benefits of a successful boycott. Consequently, "consumers' uncertainty about the extent to which people can (i.e., efficacy) and will (i.e., overall participation) contribute to the boycott's success is a key barrier to their willingness to participate" (Sen et al. 2001, p. 410). This reasoning resonates with Hayibor's (2012) argument based on expectancy theory that stakeholders are more likely to act against a firm if they perceive that they can undertake successful action and induce desired outcomes. We therefore expect that self-regarding consumers rarely boycott the target firm, even if they perceive the firm's behavior as egregious, because they regard it unlikely that instrumental benefits from a successful boycott will accrue to them, and they thus perceive boycotting as ineffective.

Strongly reciprocal consumers instead punish the target firm's behavior, even if the likelihood of changing this behavior seems low (Tyran and Engelmann 2005). Motivated by strong reciprocity, boycotting constitutes an unfriendly response to perceived unfriendliness by the target firm. The poor effectiveness of boycotting, in terms of achieving the desired outcome of ending the egregious act of the target firm, does not undermine their willingness to boycott, because effectiveness is not central to these strongly reciprocal consumers' motivation to boycott. They "pursue what appears to be lost causes [and] take action against focal organizations even if there is nothing to be

gained by doing so, as a means of punishing them for perceived malfeasance” (Wasieleski and Hayibor 2009, p. 608). We thus propose:

**Proposition 2** *Strongly reciprocal consumers are more likely than self-regarding consumers to boycott the target firm, even when the likelihood of a change of the firm’s behavior is low.*

As we detailed previously, reciprocal behavior is guided by fairness norms. Distributional fairness norms focus on the economic outcomes of a situation or transaction. Willingness to boycott may be particularly strong when reciprocal consumers base their perceptions of the target firm’s actions on not just material outcomes but also intentional fairness norms. Findings of strong reciprocity in the experimental economics literature suggest that with such norms, the behavior of others is judged on the basis of perceptions of their behavioral intentions (Falk et al. 2003; McCabe et al. 2003). Therefore, perceptions of egregiousness are driven by a sense of unfair outcomes (e.g., poor working conditions for employees in the textile supply chain in developing countries), but also by consumers’ perception of unfair intentions underlying the target firm’s behavior. Since intentions are nonobservable, strongly reciprocal actors attribute unfair intentions to the target firm on the basis of their belief that the firm has the discretion to choose more equitable alternatives (Falk et al. 2003) but still pursues the egregious behavior. Similar reasoning underlies Hayibor’s (2012) argument that stakeholders’ reactions to inequity are moderated by their attributions of unfair intentions to the firm, which depend on the stakeholders’ beliefs about whether the firm had discretion over the unfair act or was instead constrained by unfavorable conditions. In a consumer context, Hunt and Kernan (1991) show that consumers react differently to the perceived inequity of a marketer, depending on whether “they have attributed ... inequity to his intent [or] they had made attributions to external forces” (p. 686). Similar to findings about the effects of intentional fairness norms for strong reciprocity in the experimental economics literature, they find that consumers attribute fair intentions to firm behavior according to both external constraints and the control that the firm has over a decision (i.e., whether consumers believe that the firm had the option to choose a different, less egregious action). Strongly reciprocal consumers who attribute unfair intentions to the target firm’s behavior thus perceive higher levels of egregiousness. We propose that such an activation of intentional fairness norms has a positive moderating effect (Wasieleski and Hayibor 2009) on the likelihood of boycotting behavior by strongly reciprocal consumers.

**Proposition 3** *The likelihood of strongly reciprocal consumers to boycott the target firm is higher if they perceive that the target firm’s egregious behavior stems from unfair intentions.*

Overall, in the interaction between the individual consumer and target firm, we expect that strongly reciprocal actors are more likely to decide *individually* to boycott the target firm. This interaction does not involve any coordination with other consumers and thus does not create any social dilemma. In the absence of any coordination among potential boycotters, self-regarding consumers have no instrumental incentives to boycott, because due to small agent problems the likelihood of changing the target firm’s behavior is marginal. From this self-regarding perspective, the cost-benefit assessment of boycotting thus is negative (Sen et al. 2001). In contrast, strongly reciprocal consumers are driven by the mere act of punishing the egregious actions of the target firm. The presence of strongly reciprocal consumers can thus provide a basis for boycotting behavior that is relatively robust to unfavorable strategic conditions, such as the lack of coordination or a low likelihood of changing the target firm’s actions. Accordingly, Tyran and Engelmann (2005) find that even under conditions of anonymity and without an opportunity to build a reputation for boycotting or communication among boycotters, a substantial fraction of consumers continues to boycott, even if it proves ineffective. Strongly reciprocal consumers seem willing to forgo the benefits of consumption for the sake of punishing the actions of the target firm that they perceive as unfair. Strong consumer reciprocity thus helps alleviate small agent problems in consumer boycotts, because the motivational focus shifts from the success of boycotting (i.e., changing the target firm’s behavior) to the desire to punish egregious firm behavior.

### Interaction Among Boycotters

Consumer boycotts are beset with not only small agent problems but also free-rider problems. Participation in a boycott and coordination efforts among boycotters represent forms of cooperative behavior to increase the effect of boycotting on the target firm. The success of a consumer boycott in terms of ending the target firm’s egregious actions largely depends on the degree to which individual boycotters cooperate (Sen et al. 2001). When the likelihood of the success of a boycott increases, incentives for self-regarding consumers to participate increase, because the instrumental benefits of a successful boycott are more likely to accrue to them and to outweigh their private costs. Sen et al. (2001) assert that consumers who boycott for expressive reasons can induce the participation of other



consumers, through reward-and-punishment mechanisms; we similarly argue that the presence of strongly reciprocal consumers and their interaction with self-regarding consumers can help increase the likelihood of widespread cooperation in a boycott.

Perceptions of the likelihood of success of a boycott depend on expectations of overall participation (Albrecht et al. 2013; Sen et al. 2001). Strongly reciprocal consumers are more likely to decide to boycott, independent of the participation of other consumers, which provides a basis for boycotting behavior that is independent from instrumental considerations. As soon as self-regarding consumers gain information about the individual willingness of strongly reciprocal consumers to boycott, their expectation of overall participation and the likelihood of a successful boycott should increase. This baseline effect of sanctioning by strongly reciprocal consumers likely is particularly important for stimulating more widespread boycotting in the early stages of a consumer boycott. Strong reciprocators are more not only likely to punish egregious firm behavior individually but also engage in cooperative behavior in collective action situations (Fehr and Gächter 2000a, 2002), such as consumer boycotts. While self-regarding actors have an incentive to free ride, strong reciprocators start off by cooperating and stop doing so only if they feel exploited. This tendency adds to the baseline level of boycotting behavior in the initial stages of consumer boycotts. With such an initial stock of boycotting behavior, expected participation increases, and the instrumental benefits for self-regarding consumers due to a successful boycott are more likely to accrue. By increasing self-regarding consumers' expectancy that a consumer boycott will be successful (cf. Hayibor 2012), the presence of strongly reciprocal consumers influences expected overall participation in consumer boycotts, such that

**Proposition 4** *The presence of strongly reciprocal consumers increases expected overall participation and thus the expected instrumental benefits of boycotting among self-regarding consumers.*

This higher expected overall participation increases the perceived likelihood of boycott success, but it also increases the incentive for self-regarding actors to free ride (John and Klein 2003). When more consumers boycott the target firm, the instrumental benefits of a successful boycott are more likely to accrue. Yet even if these benefits outweigh the private cost of boycotting, it is still more attractive for a self-regarding consumer not to participate in the boycott to reap the benefits of a successful boycott without contributing to it (Klein et al. 2004). When there are only self-regarding consumers, the social dilemma likely undermines any participation in a boycott. In

contrast, strongly reciprocal actors are willing to enforce pro-social behavior (Hahn 2015) by punishing noncooperative and rewarding cooperative behavior in social dilemma situations (Fehr and Gächter 2000a, b). As suggested by evidence from various studies of public good games, a substantial fraction of actors is willing to punish free riding and reward cooperation in a collective action situation, even if doing so produces net costs to them (Fehr and Gächter 2000a, b). Thus, strongly reciprocal consumers punish not only egregious actions of the target firm, but they also are likely to positively or negatively sanction other consumers, depending on the degree of cooperation of these.

Klein et al. (2004) highlight the role of social pressure, “public censure,” and guilt as drivers of boycott participation. Strong reciprocity provides an underlying mechanism to implement social disapproval of noncooperation. For example, animal rights activists publically confront and blame people for wearing fur (Einwohner 2002; Jacobsson and Lindblom 2013). The Internet and social media offer additional platforms for such communication, including identifying people who do not participate in boycotts (Koku 2011, 2012), and such actions increase cooperation in social dilemma situations (Bohnet and Frey 1999). Public censure builds social pressure and raises self-regarding consumers' costs of nonparticipation in boycotts. Imposing such costly social pressures represents negative reciprocal behavior to punish free riding (Fehr and Falk 2002). However, social approval also can enhance voluntary cooperation (Gächter and Fehr 1999; Gächter et al. 1996). We expect that strongly reciprocal consumers are willing to exert the effort to reward consumers who participate in a boycott, in the form of social approval. Such positively reciprocal behavior provides a mechanism to create a sense of community (Klein et al. 2004) and solidarity (Kritikos and Bolle 2004) among boycotters, which increases incentives for self-regarding actors to participate. Overall, we expect that strongly reciprocal consumers are willing to bear the costs of rewarding other consumers' participation in a boycott and punishing free riding. They thus raise the cost of nonparticipation (in the case of punishments) or increase the benefits of participation in a boycott (in the case of rewards) for self-regarding consumers. Strongly reciprocal consumers thus can alter the incentives of self-regarding consumers, in favor of participation in the boycott. Analogous to findings in public good experiments (Fehr and Gächter 2000a, b), we expect that as soon as the presence of strongly reciprocal consumers and their willingness to sanction are known to self-regarding consumers, the credible threat of sanctioning is sufficient to discipline free riders without any need to actually implement these sanctions. We propose:

**Proposition 5** *The known presence of strongly reciprocal consumers increases the likelihood that self-regarding consumers participate in a boycott.*

However, for reciprocal sanctions to be effective, they must be observable by other actors (Fehr and Schmidt 2000a; Sethi and Somanathan 2003). The visibility of reciprocal sanctions is particularly relevant when they occur as social (dis)approval. If self-regarding consumers do not notice any social disapproval of free riding, they have no reason to change their behavior, so strongly reciprocal consumers' sanctioning will be futile. The Internet and social media offer more visible platforms, not just for blaming actors that do not participate but also for approving participation and building a sense of community among boycotters (Koku 2011, 2012). We expect that strongly reciprocal consumers are particularly willing to establish and use such platforms to (positively or negatively) sanction other consumers' (non)participation in a boycott, but the effectiveness of this social (dis)approval (Klein et al. 2004) also depends on the degree to which the social sanctions are coordinated. Effective boycotts often rely on NGOs (John and Klein 2003; Klein et al. 2004; Spar and La Mure 2003), such that reciprocal sanctions among consumers are more effective if an NGO actively coordinates the boycott. As Holzer (2006) argues, social movements can signal or prompt boycott behavior in markets. This coordination helps ensure effective measures toward the target firm while also establishing platforms to enable boycotters to interact and build communities. If these platforms of exchange and community (online or offline) are too dispersed or not well coordinated and connected, the effect of reciprocal sanctions to drive boycott participation will be limited. Therefore, we expect the presence of an NGO, which serves to coordinate the boycott, to positively moderate the relationship between the presence of strongly reciprocal consumers and the likelihood of self-regarding consumers to participate in the boycott.

**Proposition 6** *The likelihood of self-regarding consumers to participate in a boycott due to reciprocal sanctions increases if an NGO coordinates the boycott.*

Overall, the interaction of strongly reciprocal and self-regarding actors is crucial for explicating the effectiveness of consumer boycotts. By distinguishing two interactions (consumer-target firm and consumer-consumer), we argue that strong reciprocity exerts a dual effect on the likelihood of boycott success, because strong reciprocators react to the perceived (un)fairness of target firms *as well as* that of other consumers in a boycott situation. First, in consumer-target firm interactions, strong reciprocity provides a stable stock of boycotting behavior that helps alleviate

small agent problems and increases the effect of withheld consumption on the target firm's behavior (Kritikos and Bolle 2004; Tyran and Engelmann 2005). Second, in consumer-consumer interactions, strong reciprocity helps address free-rider problems, because strongly reciprocal actors reward cooperation and punish free riding. Through their willingness to implement costly reciprocal sanctions (rewards and punishments), strongly reciprocal consumers can substantially alter the incentive structure of the target firm, in favor of ending its egregious actions, both (a) directly, due to their willingness to boycott even in unfavorable conditions, and (b) indirectly, by increasing the likelihood of collective boycotting efforts among consumers with their willingness to sanction (non)participation. This predicted dual effect of strong reciprocity in boycott situations leads us to posit:

**Proposition 7** *The presence of strongly reciprocal consumers increases the likelihood of the success of a boycott.*

## Discussion and Implications

### Contributions to the Boycott Literature

As the main contribution of this study, we introduce heterogeneous motivations for consumers' boycotting behavior and argue that the interplay of self-regarding with strongly reciprocal consumer behavior offers a better understanding of the effectiveness of consumer boycotts. We thus go beyond the cost-benefit approach that has been proposed previously to explain boycotting behavior, building on the few studies in the boycott literature that acknowledge the presence and importance of expressive consumer behavior in boycotts. In addition, we offer a more conceptual account of the role and effects of motivational heterogeneity among boycotting consumers. By conceptualizing consumers who are willing to participate in boycotts, even at high costs and for low benefits, as strongly reciprocal (Tyran and Engelmann 2005), we offer a better understanding of (1) their motivation to participate in a boycott and (2) their influence on the success of a boycott.

With regard to what motivates consumers to engage in boycotts, we introduce the behavioral model of strong reciprocity to the boycott literature and thereby establish a solid, empirically robust, behavioral foundation for consumer behavior in boycotts that is not motivated by private utility maximization. Strong reciprocity is a stable behavioral trait that motivates consumers to reward or punish fair or unfair acts, even if doing so entails net costs. This motivation contrasts with a dominant assumption in the boycott literature that consumers are self-regarding actors

who only participate if the private benefits of doing so exceed the private costs.

By introducing strong reciprocity, we thus go beyond existing explanations of consumer behavior in boycotts that account for expressive motives and fairness (Cissé-Depardon and N'Goala 2009; Tyran and Engelmann 2005). Expressive motives cannot be clearly differentiated from self-regarding behavior, because “cost-benefit motivations incorporate psychosocial variables that are associated with self-enhancement: Participation enables the boycottter to boost social and personal self-esteem either by associating with a cause or group of people or simply by viewing him- or herself as a moral person” (Klein et al. 2004, p. 97). Most scholars argue about such a broad notion of private utility, encompassing both expressive benefits and fairness considerations. In a similar vein, when considering the effects of stakeholder reciprocity on firm performance, Bosse et al. (2009, p. 447) refer to “selfish utility maximizing behaviors [that] are bounded by norms of fairness” rather than conceiving of reciprocity as a behavioral motive unto itself. Broadening the notion of utility this way creates a risk of arbitrariness and the potential loss of explanatory power. As Sugden (1984) convincingly argued more than 30 years ago, the assumption of a broad notion of private utility that includes other-regarding aspects “makes each person’s welfare into a public good” (p. 773), to which people who seek to maximize their private utility will never contribute. He called for alternative explanations of behavior in collective action situations (e.g., consumer boycotts) that are not based on private utility maximization. Furthermore, various game-theoretical experiments have shown that strong reciprocity as a behavioral mechanism is clearly distinct from self-regarding behavior. Finally, our argument extends work by Tyran and Engelmann (2005), who propose fairness as a driver of boycotting but do not develop a consistent conceptual argument and call their interpretation “speculative.” The central role of fairness norms in strongly reciprocal behavior implies that conceiving of consumers as strongly reciprocal actors helps move Tyran and Engelmann’s (2005) propositions toward a better conceptual understanding of the effects of the coexistence of different behavioral types among consumers participating in boycotts.

As a second contribution, we address how and in which conditions strongly reciprocal consumers influence the effectiveness of consumer boycotts. The motivational differences between strong reciprocators and self-regarding boycotters result in varying attitudes and behaviors. To analyze the interaction of these two types of actors, we consider two distinct settings: consumer-target firm interactions and consumer-consumer interactions. In their interaction with the target firm, strongly reciprocal

consumers provide a robust stock of boycotting because they are willing to punish even in unfavorable conditions. This stock would never accrue from self-regarding consumers, in that it depends on the strong reciprocators’ lack of sensitivity to the low likelihood that the target firm will change its behavior. In interactions among consumers, this stock of boycotting positively influences self-regarding consumers’ perceptions of overall boycott participation and the likelihood of a success, both of which increase the boycott participation of those self-regarding consumers (Albrecht et al. 2013; Sen et al. 2001). In addition, strong reciprocators enforce cooperation by punishing or rewarding others’ participation, so it becomes rational for self-regarding actors to engage in boycotts. Following Sen et al. (2001), we explain how the presence of strongly reciprocal consumers in boycotts can directly change the behavior of self-regarding consumers; however, we go further and specify the conditions in which we expect a substantive effect of strong reciprocity in boycotts. In this context, we highlight the role of NGOs and social movements to coordinate boycotts and increase the visibility of strongly reciprocal behavior in markets (Holzer 2006; Spar and La Mure 2003).

### Practical Implications

Our reasoning has implications for the different parties involved in consumer boycotts, including consumers, firms, and NGOs. The consumer boycott literature usually assumes that an individual consumer has little incentive to engage in a boycott, because the individual decision to boycott likely has no effect on the target firm. However, our argument suggests that individual boycotting by strongly reciprocal actors can produce a robust stock of boycotting that helps “overcome one of the initial impediments to collective action: the high starting costs” (King 2008b, p. 28). If we supersede the assumption that boycotting is mostly driven by cost-benefit considerations and account for strongly reciprocal motives, this view reconsiders the role of the consumer and individual moral judgments of the conduct of firms. In this sense, strong reciprocity offers the prospect of re-empowering individual consumers, in contrast with the futile position cast by the social dilemma perspective of the cost-benefit approach. Such “virtue-as-reward effects...help shed new light on citizen reactions to corporate conduct and perceived misconduct” (Turillo et al. 2002, p. 863).

Many firms have difficulty determining morally sound responses to consumer boycotts while being mindful of their bottom line as well (Stoll 2009). Allowing for heterogeneous motives among consumers and strongly reciprocal consumer behavior grants corporate decision makers a more realistic understanding of consumers’

behavior in response to contested business practices. Strong reciprocity can translate moral concerns into economic incentives for firms (Hahn 2015), so accounting for strong consumer reciprocity should help corporate decision makers derive more suitable responses to consumer boycotts that consider both moral and business imperatives. Whereas simply to “attribute ‘irrationality’ to a stakeholder is to take the easy way out” (Freeman 1984, p. 133), considering strongly reciprocal motives for consumer boycotts helps avoid overly simplistic responses to boycotts and enables firms to understand “why some boycotts are...more threatening than others” (King 2008a, p. 397).

The most important implication of our line of argument for NGOs that coordinate consumer boycotts pertains to how they can trigger or foster strong consumer reciprocity. NGOs are particularly relevant for coordinating interactions among consumers; one of their most important roles in boycotts is to create and mobilize shared meanings and definitions among consumers through framing processes (Benford and Snow 2000). To help induce the influence of strong consumer reciprocity on self-regarding consumers’ willingness to participate in a boycott, NGOs can create mobilizing structures (King 2008b), such as consumer associations, consumer groups, or social media and Internet platforms, that provide a means to connect and mobilize people for collective action. In the context of strong consumer reciprocity such formal or informal structures can serve two key purposes: First, mobilizing structures provide means to signal reciprocal traits and a willingness to reward cooperation or punish free riding by self-regarding consumers (Holzer 2006). Second, NGOs can design mobilizing structures that offer strong reciprocators a means to sanction self-regarding consumers, depending on their contributions to a boycott. This channel for effective sanctions is crucial to the effectiveness of strong reciprocity (Fehr and Gächter 1998). Social sanctioning mechanisms on social media platforms built around consumer boycotts thus appear particularly useful (Koku 2011, 2012).

As a case in point in 2010, the NGO Greenpeace launched a boycott against the chocolate confectionary brand KitKat, manufactured by Nestlé, for using palm oil from uncertified sources that were associated with clear-cutting rainforests and destroying orangutan habitats. As part of the campaign, Greenpeace encouraged and supported massive protests by consumers on Nestlé’s Facebook fan site by providing them with a dedicated website that featured calls for action and easy-to-use materials, such as an altered version of the KitKat logo that Facebook users could use as a profile picture. Thousands of Facebook visitors posted critical comments to Nestlé’s Facebook site; others set up their own Facebook sites to foster the further exchange of critical comments (Chaudhari 2011). The

Nestlé Facebook fan page turned into a platform on which strongly reciprocal consumers could sanction not only Nestlé, the target company, but also regular consumers who had come to the Facebook site to “celebrate and discuss their favourite Nestlé brands” (Fox 2010). This opportunity for interaction among consumers, with social rewards for supporters of Greenpeace’s campaign and social disapproval for users who defended Nestlé and its brand (York 2010), had a huge impact and eventually contributed to the success of the campaign.

### Implications for Further Research

Our article offers a conceptual account of the effects of strong reciprocity on the effectiveness of consumer boycotts. Other than Tyran and Engelmann’s (2005), we are not aware of any empirical evidence in real-world conditions about strong consumer reciprocity. Research thus should test our propositions empirically, by studying consumer behavior directly in boycott situations. Moreover, further research could consider a wider range of potential contingencies that may strengthen or weaken the effects of strong reciprocity on the success of boycotts by addressing various influence factors and their interactions, along with the potential moderating roles of intentional fairness norms (P3) and NGO coordination (P6). Some relevant questions include, for example, whether strong emotional attachment to a brand and strong brand identification—both of which have been found to undermine the willingness of self-regarding consumers to participate in a boycott (Albrecht et al. 2013; Klein et al. 2004; Sen et al. 2001)—also affect strongly reciprocal consumers or even cancel out strong consumer reciprocity. The market conditions and characteristics of the product/service being boycotted also might have an effect. According to empirical evidence, substitutability and competition among actors can mitigate reciprocity (Fehr and Falk 1999; Schotter et al. 1996). Another potential area of interest for research involves the effects of competing perceptions of fairness and egregiousness among consumers. The experimental economics literature on strong reciprocity considers which reference points actors use to come up with their fairness judgments in any particular situation. Different actors or situations can serve as comparisons for judging a situation (Fehr and Fischbacher 2002; Kahneman et al. 1986), and these vary with the wider historical, cultural, and social context (Hayakawa 2000). The activation and strength of strongly reciprocal consumer reactions may depend on whether consumers judge the egregiousness of a firm’s acts relative to past events, developments in other sectors or countries, or the practices of proactive competitors. Additional research on the role of different reference points should combine findings from experimental economics with

insights based on equity theory, which holds that fairness and equity judgments depend on social comparisons. Insights into competing equity judgments—such as social comparisons internal and external to organizations and exchange relationships (Della Torre et al. 2015; Ronen 1986; Werner and Mero 1999)—might be particularly useful. Similarly, researchers could investigate the conditions in which NGOs and social movements can coordinate consumers for a boycott. While the influence of social movements on boycott success has been highlighted (King 2008a), strong reciprocity might offer a promising, alternative view to the predominantly interest-based and political explanations (Baron 1999, 2001) that attempt to describe the conditions in which collective action in social movements occurs (King 2008b).

We focused on consumers' strong reciprocity in boycott situations and therefore concentrated on a specific stakeholder group. Further research could address the role of strong reciprocity in stakeholder relationships and stakeholder action more generally. The stakeholder literature signals growing awareness that behavioral motives represent an important determinant of stakeholder action. Since de Bakker and den Hond's (2008, p. 9) assertion that "few stakeholder theorists have analyzed the motives ... of stakeholders," several authors have started to consider heterogeneous behavioral motives among stakeholders to theorize about stakeholder action and influence (Bosse et al. 2009; Bridoux et al. 2011; Bridoux and Stoelhorst 2014; Hahn 2004, 2005, 2015; Wasieleski and Hayibor 2009). Rather than broaden the notion of stakeholder utility to accommodate expressive benefits, as occurs with the interest- or identity-based views of stakeholder action (Hayibor and Collins 2015; Rowley and Moldoveanu 2003), it might be promising to conceptualize heterogeneous motivational types among stakeholders. As our argument in this article suggests, conceiving of strong reciprocity as a behavioral motive in itself, rather than "selfish utility maximizing behaviors [that] are bounded by norms of fairness" (Bosse et al. 2009, p. 447), provides a means to address the interaction among different behavioral types as well as a better understanding of stakeholder action and influence. This explicit focus on strong reciprocity as a behavioral motive (Bridoux and Stoelhorst 2014; Hahn 2004, 2005, 2015; Wasieleski and Hayibor 2009) appears particularly promising because it suggests a motive-based view of stakeholder theory (Bridoux and Stoelhorst 2014; Hahn 2015) that can complement interest-based (Frooman 1999), ideology-based (den Hond and de Bakker 2007), and identity-based (Rowley and Moldoveanu 2003) views. Accordingly, additional research should address interactions not just between strongly reciprocal stakeholders and the firm but also among members with different behavioral motives in stakeholder

groups. Investigations of the role of motivational heterogeneity in stakeholder theory also should consider a wider range of motives, beyond self-interest and strong reciprocity (Hahn 2015), to consider various, heterogeneous behavioral motives among managers and organizational members (Bosse and Phillips 2014; Bridoux et al. 2011).

## Conclusion

In this article, we consider heterogeneous motivations behind consumers' decisions to participate in boycotts and thereby go beyond the dominant cost-benefit approach in previous studies on consumer boycotts. Due to their focus on cost-benefit considerations most studies on consumer boycotts miss the effects of the interaction of different behavioral types among consumers. By introducing strong reciprocity to the consumer boycott literature, derived from empirical findings in experimental economics and social psychology, we explain why, how, and in which conditions strongly reciprocal consumers can improve the effectiveness of consumer boycotts. Strong consumer reciprocity, relative to both the target firm and other, self-regarding consumers, helps establish a more "coherent explanation for why some corporate targets are more willing than others to yield to the demands of boycotts" (King 2008a, p. 397).

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