



# Institutional trust as a driver of product boycotts in Europe

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## Abstract

Despite the significant growth in consumer boycotts, research has devoted insufficient attention to the institutional factors that may motivate consumers to engage in such behaviour. This article aims to address this research gap. The main objective is to analyse the factors that affect consumer boycotts from an institutional sustainability perspective, by focusing on a specific dimension of institutional sustainability: institutional trust. Information and data came from the 2023 round of the European Social Survey, a cross-national survey covering 25 Countries. The article applies a binomial univariable logit model to test the influence of institutional trust and other potential drivers on boycott decisions and a multivariable binomial logistic regression to explore possible interrelationship between independent variables. The results confirm that boycotts are affected by institutional trust and other factors including demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the consumers, consumers' perception of ICT, satisfaction with public institutions, and consumers' evaluation of personal well-being. This article contributes to political consumerism literature by focusing on the impact of institutional trust in boycotting behaviour. This relationship is underexplored in existing literature, since most literature researches consumer boycotts from a triple-bottom perspective and neglects the effects of the institutional dimension of sustainability in consumer behaviour. The article brings new insights into the motivations of consumers at the political and institutional levels and opens new directions for future research to explore institutional sustainability related to the good practices of governance.

**Keywords** Boycott · Consumerism · Institutional sustainability · Institutional trust

## 1 Introduction

The topic of sustainable consumption has been gaining increasing traction in consumer behaviour research (Le, 2023; Canlas & Karpudewan, 2023). Citizens with increasing education and skills in a globalized economy are worried about the

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negative impacts of production and consumption patterns (George & Schillebeeckx, 2022). Consumers are seeking ways to align purchase decisions with sustainability concerns (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2006). However, sustainability transition will require the efforts of other stakeholders. The world will not reach the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015) without committed intervention by both governments and companies (Leary et al., 2014).

A boycott is a typical form of consumer protest, which can be framed as a manifestation of political consumerism (Baptista & Rodrigues, 2018). Political consumerism is considered a type of political activity beyond the classical activities, where citizens use their buying power to attain certain goals (Koo, 2012). The most visible activities of political consumerism include boycotts and deliberate buying (buycotts) (Ferrer-Fons & Fraile, 2014). In some research boycotting and buycotting are classified as similar manifestations of political consumerism. However, some authors point out that the socio-demographic characteristics of these consumers and their motivations may differ significantly (Neilson, 2010). This research is focused on consumers practicing boycotts in Europe. A boycott can be defined as “a voluntary and deliberate abstention by consumers from purchasing or using or dealing with the specific target, such as a product, organization, country, or even person, to achieve a certain objective” (Kim & Kinoshita, 2023, p.2).

In the case of European consumers, and after the end of WW2, the motivations for boycotts include predominantly sustainability and ethical consumption objectives (Ben-Porat et al., 2016; Baptista & Rodrigues, 2018). However, the literature mostly explores consumer boycotts from a triple-bottom perspective and pays little attention to the effects of the institutional dimension of sustainability in consumer boycotts. Against this drawback, this study focuses on a specific dimension of institutional sustainability that is institutional trust, and which refers to trust between the citizen and public institutions (Koo, 2012).

Institutional trust can be defined as trust in national organisations (Koo, 2012; Baptista & Rodrigues, 2018). The relation between institutional trust and political consumption is not clear since the literature presents contrasting views. Some literature suggests that political consumerism is positively affected by institutional trust (Andersen & Tobiasen, 2004; Stolle et al., 2005), while others indicate the contrary (Koo, 2012; Hoffmann & Müller, 2009). Consequently, the main aim of this paper is to understand how institutional trust may affect consumers' decisions to engage in boycotting behaviour. Besides institutional trust, other drivers may affect consumers' decision to boycott. Thus, this research also aims to investigate other potential factors that may influence boycotting decisions.

This article is organised as follows: The following section presents the theoretical background of this research as well as the research hypotheses that guide the study. The following section describes the methodology. Next, the results are provided, followed by the discussion. The final section presents the conclusions of the study, identifies its limitations, and suggests some relevant research opportunities.

## 2 Literature review and research hypotheses

Pro-sustainability boycotting involves consumers' refusal to buy or consume products or services that negatively affect the social, economic, or environmental dimensions of sustainability (Seyfi et al., 2021). This focus implies an incomplete vision, considering the relevance of the institutional challenges involved in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Green Deal (UN, 2015). A holistic vision is crucial to align the sustainable practices of consumption, production and distribution and that approach requires a consideration of the institutional dimension.

### 2.1 From sustainability to consumers boycotts

The SDGs were adopted by the United Nations (U.N) in order to provide a solid framework for addressing global challenges and achieving the main goals, sub-goals, indicators and targets to 2030 based on the sustainability concept (UN, 2015). The traditional definition of sustainability in the UN defines the concept as the ability to meet the needs of the present and future generations (Hajian & Jangchi Kashani, 2021) and, according to the UN (UN, 2015), the concept of sustainability includes the standard social, environmental and economic dimensions, and the interdependencies and trade-offs between these pillars.

From an economic perspective, the literature highlights that boycotts can significantly impact corporate reputation and financial performance and can compromise competitive advantages across firms and countries (Villagra et al., 2021). Companies facing boycotts often experience negative publicity, damage to their brand image, and a decline in sales (King, 2008). The literature explored the long-term effects of boycotts on corporate value, finding that sustained boycott activity can result in substantial financial losses for the targeted companies (Koku et al., 1997).

From the environmental perspective, boycotts can raise awareness and mobilise public discourse with positive impacts on the environment (Vasi & King, 2012). Boycotts can raise awareness about environmental issues and stimulate public discourse. Boycotts can capture media attention and spark conversations about environmental concerns (Larson, 2020). By drawing public awareness to specific environmental problems, boycotts can create a sense of urgency, mobilise public support, and facilitate broader societal discussions on sustainable practices and policies (Keränen & Olkkonen, 2022). Scientific knowledge about the role of boycotts in shaping public discourse is essential for fostering a collective understanding and commitment to environmental sustainability.

From the social dimension of sustainability, boycotts serve as a powerful mechanism for raising awareness about social issues, mobilising consumers, and allowing firms to focus on social aspects (Seidman, 2007). Boycotts can draw attention to various social concerns, such as labour rights violations, human rights abuses,

and discriminatory practices (Nair & Thankamony, 2021). By boycotting companies associated with such issues, consumers signal their support for social justice and contribute to broader societal discussions. Understanding the role of boycotts in raising awareness can shed light on their potential to drive social change. Boycotts have the potential to drive companies towards adopting more social and responsible practices that align with societal expectations (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Companies and international firms often respond by implementing reforms, improving working conditions, and adopting sustainable business practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020). These can, in the long run, lead to a more powerful engagement among stakeholders and the respective institutions, and also to international agreements.

## 2.2 Institutional sustainability

Nowadays production and consumption due to the increasing globalisation is more complex. Involves multiple interactions and participation across countries, industries, and legislations, being affected by differentiated political visions of production and consumption, with participants' different levels of development, infrastructure patterns and policies. This complex reality requires a more holistic and complete vision of sustainability, one that emphasises the importance of the institutional context (Dos Santos & Ahmad, 2020).

The institutional dimension of sustainability adopts a top-down approach, by emphasizing the importance of government policy and intervention in making consumption sustainable (Haider et al., 2022; Tong et al., 2023). According to Dos Santos & Ahmad (2020), the level of support of governments across the world and the respective policies, public measures, and legislation affect the levels of participation and commitment of citizens and consumers. On the other side, the different patterns and levels of compromising or disagreement among consumers, require specific types of policy intervention. Hence, stakeholders and institutions play a crucial role in fostering sustainable business practices. This means that a holistic vision of sustainability needs to consider the macrolevel and institutional factors that directly and indirectly impact sustainability (Dos Santos & Ahmad, 2020; Haider et al., 2022; Isham et al., 2021).

Institutional trust, which pertains to the level of trust between the citizen and public institutions (Stupak et al., 2021), has been pointed as a potential driver for institutional sustainability because of the need to balance complex political, economic, institutional, and power relations (Ahsan et al., 2021). Public services that are essential to achieve sustainability goals, such as medical services, agricultural development, and education, need the trust of those that they seek to serve (Morse, 2024). Well-functioning public institutions reinforce citizens' trust in government policies and public institutions (Hondroyiannis et al., 2023) and

institutional trust increases compliance with public policies (Kol et al., 2024) and the likelihood of citizens' transferring decisions to the public sphere (Zhao et al., 2024).

Public institutions when promoting sustainability often face difficulties in ensuring compliance, because sustainability requires the change of behaviour of various actors, including consumers (Wood et al., 2023). A major concern is translating beliefs into action. Authors such as Andersen & Tobiasen (2004), Stolle et al., (2005), and Stupak et al. (2021) argue that institutional trust generates attitudinal change, meaning that citizens will support the public institution without much resistance and institutions will be expected to perform in the benefit of the citizens. Trust in public institutions is important when addressing complex or wicked problems, including the accomplishment of the sustainability agenda (Weymouth et al., 2020). As such, the following hypothesis is explored:

H1: Boycotting behaviour is influenced by consumers' institutional trust.

Besides institutional trust, socio-demographic factors may also affect consumers decisions to engage in boycotting behaviour. The literature indicates that citizens who adopt political consumerism are predominantly female, young and well-educated (Mata et al., 2023). Thus, this study resorts to political consumerism literature and tests socio-demographic variables that may potentially affect boycotting decisions, including gender (Stolle et al., 2005; Baptista & Rodrigues, 2018; Mata et al., 2023), age and life-cycle effects (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2006; Baptista & Rodrigues, 2018; Mata et al., 2023), and the level of education (Greif & Moky, 2017; Mata et al., 2023).

H2: Boycotting behaviour is influenced by consumers' socio-demographic characteristics.

On the other side, some literature suggests that political consumerism may be motivated by personal reasons, including health concerns and subjective evaluations of happiness (Nixon & Gabriel, 2016; George & Schillebeeckx, 2022). Extant research suggests that boycotts are not exclusively acts of altruistic opposition; consumers may oppose consumption based on self-interest, including health concerns (Black & Cherrier, 2010; Nixon & Gabriel, 2016) and a desire of personal well-being (Canlas & Karpudewan, 2023; Mata et al., 2023). Consequently, the following hypothesis is tested:

H3: Boycotting behaviour is influenced by consumers' self-interest.

The online environment may constitute an important source of information for boycott initiatives and for activist movements to organise (Seyfi et al., 2022).

The literature suggests that political consumerism may be affected by consumers' attitudes towards information and communication technologies (ICT) (Gundersen et al., 2022; Mata et al., 2023) and generalised trust, meaning the level of faith people have in other people, which affects the trust they posit on social media and other information available on the online environment (Baptista & Rodrigues, 2018; Mata et al., 2023). Thus, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H4: Boycotting behaviour is influenced by consumers' use and perceptions of ICT.

The literature also suggests that political consumerism behaviour may be affected by the level of satisfaction with public institutions, including satisfaction with the political and economic systems, satisfaction with government, satisfaction with democracy and public services (Ahsan et al., 2021). Based on this, the following hypothesis is presented:

H5: Boycotting behaviour is influenced by consumers' satisfaction with public institutions and services.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model that guides the present study, integrating the research hypotheses.

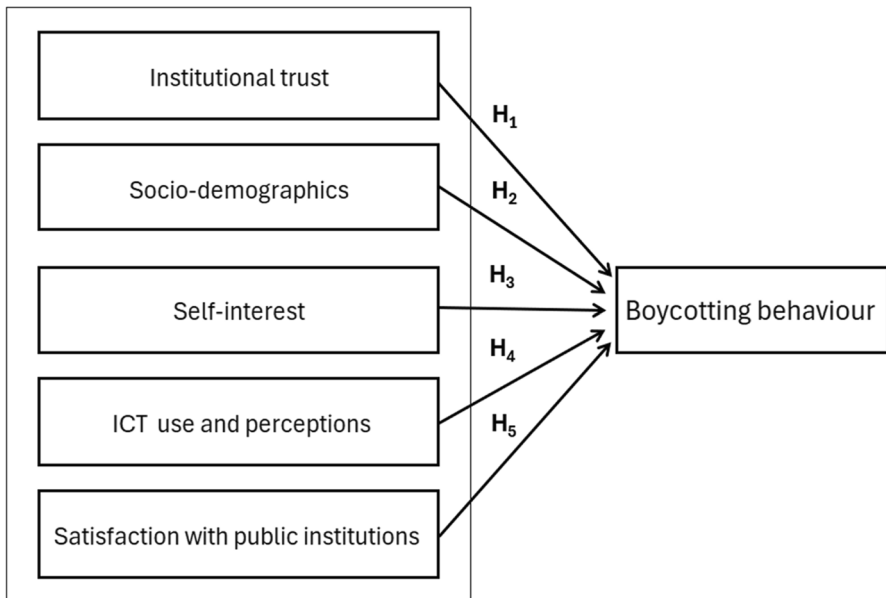


Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework. Source: Authors (2024)

### 3 Materials and methods

#### 3.1 Data

Information and data came from the more recent results of the European Social Survey (ESS) (ESS ERIC, 2022). The ESS is a international survey covering 25 European Countries. The data was collected by a direct questionnaire (face-to-face interviews), applied from the 25<sup>th</sup> of May to the 18<sup>th</sup> of September in 2022. The data includes a representative sample of citizens aged 15 and over from 25 European Countries. The number of valid responses was 18.060, after excluding outliers.

The full description and explanation of the dependent and independent variables are presented, respectively, in (Appendix 1, see Tables 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8). These include the questions of the questionnaire, the corresponding variables, classification, and units used.

The dependent variable (BOYCOT) is dichotomic (yes/no) and questions the respondent if he has boycotted any products in the previous 12 months.

The independent variables include:

- (i) Institutional trust, including: trust in the legal system (trstlgl); and trust in scientists (trstsci);
- (ii) Socio-demographic variables, including respondents': age (agea); gender (gndr); marital status (marsts); education (eduysr); and household size (hhmmb);
- (iii) Subjective norms, including: happiness (happy); and Subjective general health (health);
- (iv) Media usage, social trust, and ICT perceptions: watching, reading or listening to news (nwspol); internet use (netustm); social trust (pplfair); ICT impact on work and personal life (mcinter); ICT misinformation (mcmsinf); ICT impact on personal privacy (mcpriv);
- (v) Satisfaction with public institutions: satisfaction with the economic system (stfeco); satisfaction with the government (stfgov); satisfaction with democracy (stfdem); state of health services (stfhlth); and state of education (stfedu).

The independent variables “trust in the legal system” and “trust in scientists” are used as proxies for institutional trust since law and science have been considered as the two most relevant institutions affecting policymaking (Greif & Moky, 2017; Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2023). The legal system serves as a framework for governance, providing a structured set of laws, regulations, and policies that can promote sustainable practices (Dos Santos & Ahmad, 2020; Haider et al., 2022; Tong et al., 2023). Additionally, the legal system can facilitate sustainable innovation and provide a platform for stakeholder engagement, driving collective efforts toward a sustainable future (Baptista et al., 2019). Both policymakers and citizens depend on the scientific community for relevant information on critical sustainability issues. Previous research indicates that citizens tend to rely on scientific authorities to form attitudes concerning sustainability (Huber et al., 2022).

### 3.2 Methods

The methods used include a binomial univariable logit model (BULM). BULM was used to analyse the single effects of the independent variables. The Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC) was applied to adjust the model to the data. Cronbach's Alfa was applied to analyse the internal consistency of the questionnaire to the data. The results were 92.7, which is a very acceptable level (Sakhardande & Prabhu Gaonkar, 2022). In addition, a multivariable binomial logistic regression (MBLR) model, including all the variables, was used to further explore the interrelationship between independent variables. For the selection of variables, the backwards stepwise procedure was adopted in both models. The level of significance was  $p < 0.05$ . BULM and MBLR were used because the best fit was achieved with a logit link. The multivariate techniques were adjusted in univariable and multivariable models using the Generalized Linear Models routine in the statistical package IBM Corp.® SPSS® Statistics, Armonk, NY, USA. Version: 29.0.0.0 (241).

The probabilities of the multivariable logistic regression can be computed following the parameterization of the model:

$$\text{logit}[\pi(X)] = \beta_1x_1 + \beta_2x_2 + \beta_3x_3 + \beta_4x_4 + \beta_5x_5 \quad (1)$$

Where the  $\beta_i$  are the parameters of the multivariable logistic regression model and  $x_i$  are the value of the covariate. The number of parameters  $\beta_i$  reflects the number of significant IVs in the model.

From (1), the probabilities are calculated as:

$$\pi(X) = \frac{e^{\beta_1x_1 + \beta_2x_2 + \beta_3x_3 + \beta_4x_4 + \beta_5x_5}}{1 + e^{\beta_1x_1 + \beta_2x_2 + \beta_3x_3 + \beta_4x_4 + \beta_5x_5}} \quad (2)$$

## 4 Results

The single variable models are summarised in Table 1. First, the results indicate that boycotting behaviour is positively influenced by institutional trust, including both trust in the legal system (trstlgl); and trust in scientists (trstsci), validating hypothesis 1.

Results also confirm that boycotting behaviour is affected by the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, namely, age (agea), gender (gndr) and education (eduysr), validating hypothesis 2. It was found that the probability of boycotting is higher in females than males; increases according to the level of education; decreases as age increases; and couples have a higher probability of engaging in boycotting behaviour when compared with people leaving alone.

In terms of the relationship between boycotting and self-interest, the analysis indicates that the probability of boycotting grows with feelings of happiness and



**Table 1** Results of the single variable model

Classification /Variables	Variable	Intercept	$\beta$	$e^{\beta}$
Dependent	<i>BOYCOT</i>			
Independent	<i>agea</i> **	-1.431**	-0.010**	0.99
	<i>gndr</i> **	No		
	<i>Male</i>		-1.7**	0.18
	<i>Female</i>		-1.65**	0.19
	<i>marsts</i> **	No		
	<i>marsts1</i>		-1.451*	0.23
	<i>marsts2</i>		-0.069 <sup>NS</sup>	0.93
	<i>marsts3</i>		-1.998*	0.14
	<i>marsts4</i>		-1.588**	0.2
	<i>marsts5</i>		-2.202**	0.11
	<i>marsts6</i>		-1.663**	0.19
	<i>eduysr</i> **	-4.001**	0.150**	1.16
	<i>hhmb</i> **	No	-0.716**	0.49
	<i>nwspol</i> **	No	-0.017**	0.98
	<i>netustm</i> **	-2.002**	0.0013*	1
	<i>pplfair</i> **	-2.651**	0.126**	1.13
	<i>mcinter</i> **	-2.555**	0.107**	1.11
	<i>mcmsinf</i> **	-3.252**	0.189**	1.21
	<i>mcpriv</i> **	-2.613**	0.112**	1.12
	<i>trstlgl</i> **	-2.328**	0.078**	1.08
	<i>trstsci</i> **	-2.793**	0.095**	1.1
	<i>stfeco</i> **	-2.112**	0.038**	1.04
	<i>stfgov</i> **	-2.074**	0.033**	1.03
	<i>stfдем</i> **	-2.222**	0.059**	1.06
	<i>stfhlth</i> **	-2.285**	0.078**	1.08
	<i>stfedu</i> **	No	-0.299**	0.74
	<i>happy</i> **	-2.722**	0.107**	1.11
	<i>health</i> **	-1.678**	-1.678**	0.19

\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.001$ . Source: Authors (2024)

**Table 2** Results of the multivariable model

Variable	$\beta$	SE	Wald $\chi^2$	df	$e^{\beta}$	p-value
<i>trstlgl</i>	0.049	0.010	24.32	1	1.05	<0.001
<i>stfedu</i>	-0.108	0.104	107.783	1	0.9	<0.001
<i>mcmsinf</i>	0.16	0.008	4.519	1	1.17	<0.05
<i>agea</i>	-0.043	0.012	13.587	1	0.96	<0.001
<i>stfeco</i>	-0.028	0.001	679.707	1	0.97	<0.001

AIC = 12540, -2 Log likelihood  $\chi^2 = 8890$ , 5df,  $p < 0.001$ ; SE Standard Error. Source: Authors (2024)

decreases with positive self-health perceptions, Consequently, hypothesis 3 is considered validated.

Hypothesis 4 was also validated since it was found that boycotting is influenced by media usage, social trust, and ICT perceptions, including news consumption (nwspol); internet use (netustm); social trust (pplfair); perceptions about ICT impact on work and personal life (mcinter), ICT misinformation (mcmsinf) and ICT impact on personal privacy (mcpriv). More specifically, the probability of boycotting decreases with news consumption, and increases with internet use, trust in others, and negative perceptions about ICT.

Results also confirm that boycotting behaviour is positively affected by consumers' satisfaction with public institutions, including satisfaction with the government, the democracy, and the health, economic and education systems, validating hypothesis 5.

In Table 2 the parameterization of the multivariable model is summarised. The multivariable model aims to further explore possible interrelationships between some independent variables. With five independent variables, it is not possible to represent in a figure all the variability in the same model due to lack of dimensions. We have, therefore produced several combinations of graphs (Appendix 1, see Fig. 2) representing the boycotting probabilities associated with pairs of independent variables while fixing the others in their mean value.

The following statements result from the interpretations of the graphs in (Appendix 1, see Fig. 2). The probability of having boycotted a certain product in the past two years:

- Is lower in individuals satisfied with the status of the education in their countries and reduced levels of trust in the legal system;
- Is lower in individuals with both, lower levels of perception of misinformation in online/mobile communications, and lower levels of satisfaction in the legal system of their countries;
- Is lower in older individuals that trust the legal systems of their countries;
- Is lower in individuals satisfied with the state of education in their countries and lower levels of trust in the legal system;
- Is lower in individuals with lower perception of online/mobile misinformation and that are satisfied with the state of education in their countries;
- Is lower in older individuals that are satisfied with the state of education in their countries;
- Is lower in older individuals with lower levels of perception of online/mobile misinformation;
- Is lower in individuals satisfied with both the state of the economy and the state of the education in their countries;
- Is lower in individuals satisfied with the state of the economy of their countries and lower levels of perception of online/mobile misinformation;
- Is lower in older individuals satisfied with the state of the economy in their countries.

## 5 Discussion

This study found that consumers who trust in science are more likely to engage in boycotts. Consumers, as well as policymakers, depend on science for more precise information on critical sustainability issues. Considering the gap in knowledge between scientists and consumers, trust in science may become a condition for sustainable behaviour (Ferrer-Fons & Fraile, 2014). Furthermore, previous research concluded that citizens have generally a favourable opinion towards the principle of scientists participating in political debates concerning sustainability issues and public policy (Gundersen et al., 2022). Science-informed policy is crucial in solving the interconnected global to local sustainability problems society faces today.

This study confirms that boycotting behaviour is positively affected by trust in the legal system. These results are coherent with the perspective that highlights the government's role as trustee in sustainability (Bright et al., 2022). Trust generally refers to an expectation that the trustee is willing to fulfil obligations (Zasuwa, 2019). The possible underlying mechanism explaining the relationship between boycotting and trust in the country's legal system is that consumers may be more predisposed to make individual sacrifices, such as abstention from consumption, if they believe that a higher entity can observe their boycott behaviour and act in response (Harring et al., 2019). For example, pro-sustainability consumers may engage in boycotting to attract government attention and lead the government to exert its influence, by producing and implementing policy that forces companies to adopt sustainable business practices and to punish transgression. Trust in an institutional authority may lead political consumers to believe that their activism initiatives will have consequences and will be reflected in government action, this expectation builds a form of psychological contract between consumers and the government. Psychological contract literature first appeared in organizational behaviour studies (Liao & Liu, 2022; Alyahya et al., 2023). The term refers to an unwritten implicit expectation, in which actors may have different interpretations of the contract content, thus psychological contracts are a subjective understanding between parties (Liao & Liu, 2022).

Concerning the demographic characteristics of boycotters, it was possible to confirm that females have a larger probability of engaging in boycotting. This phenomenon has been attributed in classical consumerism literature to women's role in household provisioning (Yates, 2011; Koos, 2012). The data also confirms an age gap and the influence of life-cycle events in past boycott behaviour. Results reveal that the probability of boycotting decreases for older consumers. Life-cycle effects on boycotting behaviour are confirmed by this study's results since it was found that the probability of boycotting is higher for young couples and families with higher number of members. Still, age appears to play a decisive and intricate role in boycotting decisions. While the univariate model indicates that boycott is generally positively influenced by trust in the legal system, the multivariate analysis indicates that older individuals exhibit a lower probability of engaging in boycotting initiatives when the level of trust in the legal systems of their countries increases.

These results suggest that the drivers for product boycott are characterized by multidimensionality and complex processes. A similar conclusion was reached by previous research, including Baptista & Rodrigues (2018). These authors resorted to a clustering methodology to produce a segmentation model of European boycotters and concluded that different age segments significantly differ in their levels of institutional trust.

In terms of the relationship between boycotting and personal well-being, the analysis indicates that the probability of boycotting increases with feelings of happiness and decreases with positive self-health perceptions. This finding supports earlier research, which has suggested that boycotts are not exclusively acts of altruism or ideological opposition; consumers may oppose consumption based on self-interest (Black & Cherrier, 2010; Nixon & Gabriel, 2016). Consumers engaging in boycotting due to genuine concerns with the sustainability of the planet, may simultaneously be motivated by self-interests, such as the desire to secure a better future for their children, to reduce expenses, and adopt healthier lifestyle (Black & Cherrier, 2010). On the other side, boycotting behaviour may be motivated by a desire to impress and acquire social status rather than genuine sustainability concerns (Soper, 2007; Mata et al., 2023).

Although boycotting is usually framed under alternative forms of political participation (Acik, 2013; Ferrer-Fons & Fraile, 2014), it was found that the probability of boycotting is negatively influenced by the time spent paying following politics and current affairs. These results are intriguing and suggest that consumers may become involved in boycotts without proper knowledge about the issues involved. Social pressure and peer trust may lead consumers to adhere to boycotting initiatives without sufficient information (Mata et al., 2023). Peer trust reduces complexity and reduces risk and uncertainty in complex decision-making (Wim & Manshoven, 2024). Research devoted considerable effort to examine how consumption is affected by social pressure, less attention has been given in understanding how anti-consumption can sign in-group membership and the type of social pressures that may lead consumers to engage in anti-consumption (Baptista & Rodrigues, 2018). In opposition to the declining trend verified in traditional forms of political activity in Western democracies, such as voting and belonging to a political party, this new age is characterized by new forms of political participation such as boycotts, a development that has been attributed to globalization and ICT development, which have triggered a shared feeling of moral obligation (Baptista & Rodrigues, 2018; Mata et al., 2023). The data confirms the positive influence of digital communication on boycott behaviour. The probability of boycotting increases with internet use. This finding is consistent with literature suggesting that ICT facilitates political consumption activities by allowing activists to easily spread information about boycott targets and influence other consumers to adhere to boycott initiatives (Seyfi et al., 2022). According to Miconi et al. (2024) ICT can be used to connect with others alike, thus expanding one's support networks and mobilization capacity.

Results also show that the probability of boycotting is positively affected by negative perceptions about ICT, including opinions that communication technologies complicate work-life balance, expose users to incorrect information and affect consumers' privacy. Digital social media plays a contradictory role when it comes to political consumerism. Social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and online forums are making citizens more aware of their agency capacity (Kelm & Dohle, 2018; Seyfi et al., 2021). These forums constitute an important source for activists to be informed about boycott initiatives and for activist movements to organize (Seyfi et al., 2022). Through social media like-minded consumers can organize their boycott movements (Klinglmayr et al., 2017). However, some social media have also become the target of consumer boycotts (Seyfi et al., 2021; Bright et al., 2022). Social media companies have been criticized for misusing customers' personal data, abusive or unclear terms of service, interference in politics, and aggressive tax planning, that allows some of these companies to pay reduced taxes (Mata et al., 2023). Conspiracy theories, disinformation and radical views spread rapidly and are amplified through social media. Recognizing these problems, consumers with negative emotions about ICT, can redirect their boycott behaviour to social media. As noted by Seyfi et al. (2021), despite being an endeavour to achieve social benefits, the decision to participate in boycotting activity is mostly impacted by emotional aspects, and the motives to decline participation in boycotts are not the exact opposite of the motives to boycott (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2012).

Furthermore, the results indicate boycotting behaviour is positively affected by social trust. The different dimensions of trust interact with each other. Sustainability as a long-term investment requires predictable conditions, so both social and institutional trust must exist for transition to take place (Stupak et al., 2021). Institutional trust is affected by previous experience, including perceptions about the competence of public institutions to manage conflicting views and sustainability trade-offs (Lehtonen & de Carlo, 2019).

Finally, it was possible to conclude that boycotting behaviour is positively affected by consumers' satisfaction with public institutions. Trust in public institutions involves an overall belief in institutional capacity, including the government's general capacity to manage the public interest (Weymouth et al., 2020). Particularly important is the educational system, which plays a pivotal role in conforming sustainable mindsets, knowledge, and skills. The socio-economic status theory offers a possible explanation for the positive relationship found in this study between boycotting and consumers' education by positing that education provides individuals with the knowledge and capabilities to better understand sustainability issues, thus allowing consumers to be more engaged in political consumerism (Verba & Nie, 1972; Mata et al., 2023). By integrating sustainability principles into curricula and educational practices, the educational system can equip future generations with the necessary tools to address sustainability challenges. It fosters awareness, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities, empowering individuals to make informed decisions that contribute to sustainability. Moreover, the scientific and educational institutions themselves can serve as examples of sustainability by adopting eco-friendly practices, promoting sustainable behaviours among students and staff, and engaging with the wider community.

## 6 Conclusions

Despite the relevance of the institutional dimension there remains a paucity of studies covering the topic. This study focused on a particular dimension of institutional sustainability which is institutional trust. The results of this study indicate that boycotting behaviour is affected by institutional trust, as well as other socio-economic factors. The findings of this research have implications for policymakers. Understanding the role of institutional trust in driving pro-sustainability behaviour can inform the design of policies, regulations, and educational programs that foster sustainable practices. From a theoretical perspective, this paper highlights the positive influence of institutional trust in boycotting behaviour, a relationship that has been neglected in existing research, and advances a possible explanation for this relationship. This article posits that consumers may be more willing to engage in boycotts if they trust that the government can observe their activist behaviour and act in response, by producing and implementing policy that leads companies to adopt sustainable business practices and to punish transgression. Although the current paper provides theoretical and practical contributions, some limitations should be recognised. The process of selection of independent variables was based on political consumerism literature. Nevertheless, it is recognized that some relevant explanatory factors may be missing from the study and causality relationships cannot be proven. Next, some relevant research opportunities are enumerated.

First, there is the need of conceptual studies that further explore the complex relationships exhibited in this study between institutional trust and consumers' pro-sustainability behaviour. Further analyses are needed focusing on specific sustainability issues, such as climate change, poverty, income inequality or gender discrimination. Second, our attempt to identify drivers of product boycotts and possible relationships between these drivers, does not reveal much about the intricate and complex nature of these interdependencies. Empirical studies are needed to better understand how drivers relate and if there is a hierarchy of influences. Third, considering the role of institutional trust in pro-sustainability behaviour, there is a need to study measures that could increase institutional trust. Possible solutions include the government's use of communication modes with consumers and collaborative action between the government and consumerist organisations. Implementing public marketing policies for sustainability can also be important to engage local communities in achieving the desired SDGs objectives (Sharma & Hasti, 2024). Other possible routes to improve institutional trust that deserve attention involve institutional and social innovation. Institutional innovation may involve partnerships linking consumers' organisations and government agencies and collaborative ventures for sustainability. Considering the difficulties faced by governments in addressing some sustainability issues, policy intervention can focus in supporting third sector social enterprises and public-private partnerships, involving society and private sectors.

Appendixes

**Table 3** Boycotting behaviour

Classification	Variable	Description	Unit	Question
Dependent	<i>BOYCOT</i>	Boycotted certain products last 12 months	dichotomic nature (1-yes; 2- no)	And still thinking about different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong, during the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Have you.... ...boycotted certain products?

Source: ESS and authors, 2023

**Table 4** Demographic and socio-economic variables

Classification	Variable	Description	Unit	Question in ESS
Independent	<i>agea</i>	Age of respondent	Numeric (Integer)	Calculated based on year of birth
	<i>eduyrs</i>	Years of education completed	Numeric (Integer)	About of many years of education have you completed, whether full-time or part-time?
	<i>marst</i>	Legal marital status*	1 to 6 numerical status	This question is about your legal marital status not about who you may or may not be living with. Which one of the descriptions on this card describes your legal marital status now?
	<i>gndr</i>	Gender	Code	F; M
	<i>hhmb</i>	Number of people living regularly as member of household	Numeric (Integer)	Including yourself, how many people – including children – live here regularly as members of this household?

\* *marst* - *marst*1 - Legally married; *marst*2 - Legally registered civil union; *marst*3 - Legally separated; *marst*4 - Legally divorced or civil union dissolved; *marst*5 - Widowed or civil partner died; *marst*6 - None of the above or single

Source: ESS and authors, 2023



**Table 5** Media usage, social trust, and ICT perceptions

Classification	Variable	Description	Unit	Question in ESS
Independent	<i>mwspol</i>	News about politics and current affairs, watching, reading or listening	Minutes	On a typical day, about how much time do you spend watching, reading or listening to news about politics and current affairs?
	<i>netustm</i>	Internet use, how much time on typical day	Minutes	On a typical day, about how much time do you spend using the internet on a computer, tablet, smartphone or other device, whether for work or personal use?
	<i>ppl/fair</i>	Most people try to take advantage of you, or try to be fair	Scale 0 to 10	Do you think that most people try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?
	<i>mcinter</i>	Online/mobile communication makes work and personal life interrupt each other	Scale 0 to 10	To what extent would you say that online and mobile communication makes work and personal life interrupt each other?
	<i>mcmsinf</i>	Online/mobile communication exposes people to misinformation	Scale 0 to 10	To what extent would you say that online and mobile communication exposes people to misinformation?
	<i>mcpriv</i>	Online/mobile communication undermines personal privacy	Scale 0 to 10	To what extent would you say that online and mobile communication undermines personal privacy?

Source: ESS and authors, 2023

**Table 6** Institutional trust

Classification	Variable	Description	Unit	Question in ESS
Independent	<i>trstlgl</i>	Trust in the legal system	Scale 0 to 10	How much you personally trust each of the institutions... the legal system?
	<i>trstsci</i>	Trust in scientists	Scale 0 to 10	How much you personally trust each of the institutions... scientists?

Source: ESS and authors, 2023

**Table 7** Satisfaction with public institutions

Classification	Variable	Description	Unit	Question in ESS
Independent	<i>stfeco</i>	How satisfied with present state of economy	Scale 0 to 10	On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state of the economy?
	<i>stfgov</i>	How satisfied with the national government	Scale 0 to 10	Now thinking about the government, how satisfied are you with the way it is doing its job?
	<i>stfdem</i>	How satisfied with the way democracy works	Scale 0 to 10	On the whole how satisfied are you with the way democracy works?
	<i>stfhlth</i>	State of health services in country nowadays	Scale 0 to 10	Say what you think overall about the state of health services nowadays.
	<i>stfedu</i>	State of education in country nowadays	Scale 0 to 10	Say what you think overall about the state of education in [country] nowadays?

Source: ESS and authors, 2023

**Table 8** Subjective norms

Classification	Variable	Description	Unit	Question in ESS
Independent	<i>happy</i>	How happy are you	Scale 0 to 10	Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?
	<i>health</i>	Subjective general health	Code - Likert Scale 1 to 5	How is your health in general? Would you say it is...

Source: ESS and authors, 2023

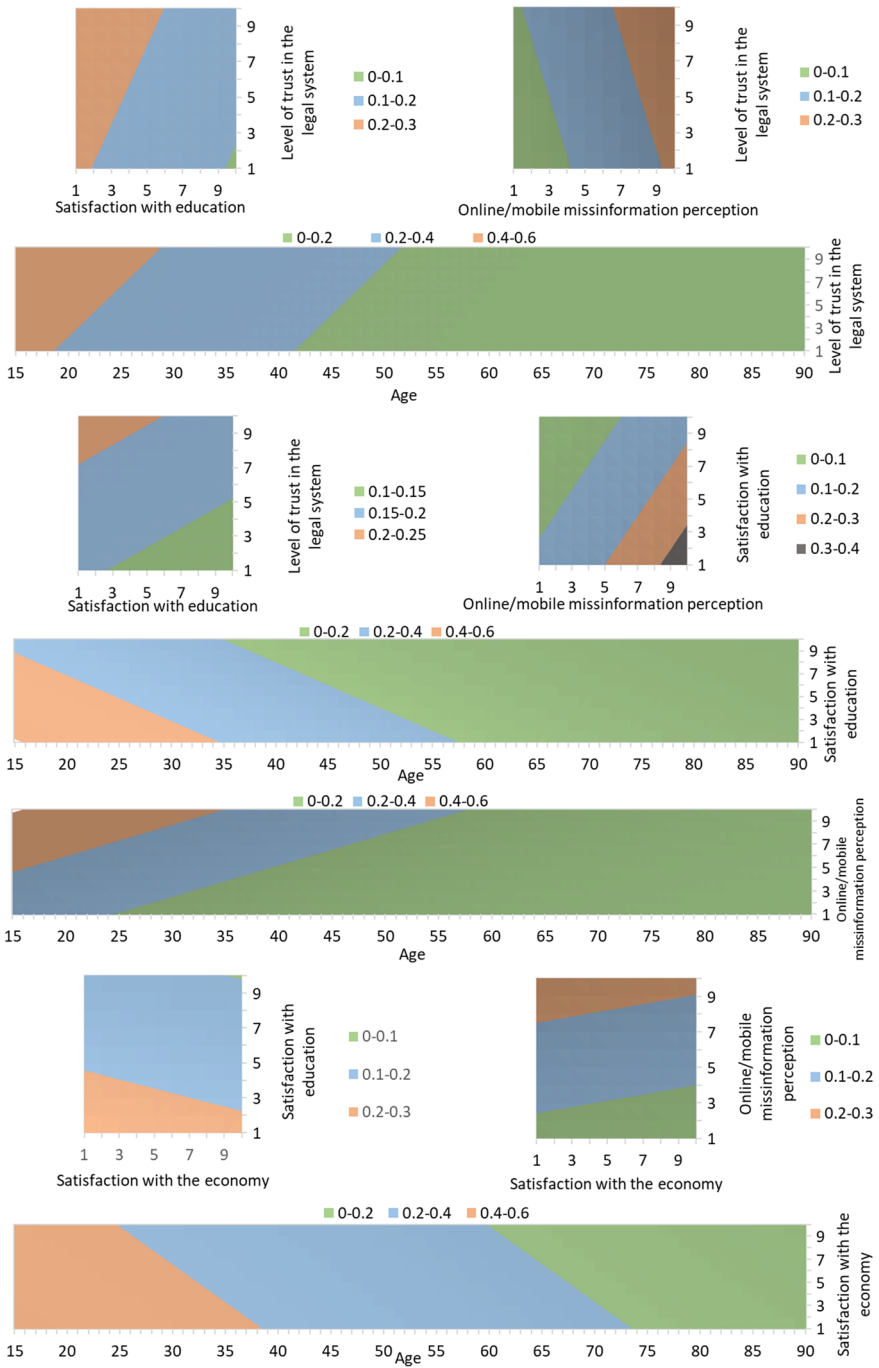


Fig. 2 Representation of the multivariable logistic regression for all the pairs of independent variables

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