

CONSUMERS ON A MISSION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF AN ONGOING CONSUMER BOYCOTT

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growth in the number of boycotts, marketing has not paid much attention to consumer boycott behavior. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to investigate one of the most heated consumer boycotts, namely the Canadian Seafood Boycott which began on March 29, 2005, to determine what drives consumers to boycott and whether the Canadian Seafood Boycott is likely to be effective (i.e., stimulate participation from consumers) as well as successful (i.e., convince the Canadian Government to outlaw the hunt of all seals permanently).

We first discuss the role of boycotts as drivers of social justice (Friedman 1999), and further look at boycott dynamics (John and Klein 2003), the potential costs of consumer boycotts (Chavis and Leslie 2007), and different boycott objectives (Friedman 1999; John and Klein 2003). We note that the Internet has become a very inexpensive and quick way of educating millions of consumers about boycotts. As the widespread dissemination of information, the tremendous growth in virtual communities, the increase in economic globalization, de-regulation, and competition have led to a proliferation of consumer sovereignty, the sovereignty of national governments and businesses has simultaneously been reduced (Harrison 2005).

We then turn to the Canadian Seal Hunt and discuss the First Seal War. Even though the first evidence of an international movement protesting the seal hunt can be traced back to the 1955 hunt (Watson 2003), the official beginning of the anti-sealing movement is placed in 1964 (Zeit 2007). Despite these efforts, the Canadian Government did not restrict the hunting of seal pups until 1987 (Canadian Geographic 2007). The second/current seal war was triggered after Canadian Fisheries Minister, Brian Tobin, announced an increased total allowable catch of 250,000 for the 1996 seal hunt (IMMA 1995). It took until the early 2000s for the seal war to heat up again. Considering that marketing theory and practice generally focus on satisfying consumer needs and wants, Canada's reaction to consumer demands to abolish the seal hunt are puzzling and counterproductive, especially in light of the fact that the value of the hunt has been estimated at 0.06% to 0.09% of the gross domestic product of just Newfoundland (DFO 2007; Southey 1997). Further, only about 4,000 to 6,000 fishermen participate in the annual seal hunt as an off-season activity (Klapper 2007) to supplement their annual income by an average of \$1500 Canadian before expenses (The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 2006).

In securing and analyzing the data we used "netnography," a qualitative research methodology (Kozinets 2002). The textual discourse is the outcome of an online petition that was posted on a virtual community that is frequented by over 7 million consumers who are interested in ethical and social issues. The petition was posted by the Humane Society of the United States which counts about 10 million members, and is thus the largest non-government organization focusing on animal welfare in the U.S. (HSUS 2007). The petition was posted on March 22, 2007 and its goal of 50,000 valid signatures was reached on May 20, 2007. Signatories were asked to declare their country of origin and also to add a message to the Canadian Government explaining why they were joining the boycott. To help streamline the data analysis, we decided to focus on the messages generated by boycotters in the U.S. The main topics reflected by these messages were: 1) the power of boycotts; 2) vowing to boycott all Canadian products and/or travel to Canada; 3) encouraging others to join the boycott; 4) videos of the hunt are unforgettable, even if viewed decades ago; 5) the "independent vet study" or 42% of all seals are skinned while alive and conscious; 6) Canada as compared to China and Japan; 7) the fishermen who hunt seals are criminals, barbarians, etc.; and 8) advising fishermen to find other jobs such as eco tourism, building a faux fur factory as offered by the Franz Weber Foundation in 1977 (Blaskin 1977), or taking the \$16 million CAD offered in 2006 to pay to end the seal hunt (BBC News 2006). The analysis shows that petition signatories are very angry about the Canadian Seal Hunt and boycott for a variety of objectives (instrumental, expressive, and punitive). To date, the boycott has been effective; considering the growing number of boycotters, it is moving toward success. It is predicted that in the long run, the Canadian Government will—in an attempt to circumvent both long-term financial and image penalties—be forced to outlaw seal hunting, except the aboriginal hunt.

In light of these findings, it seems advisable for the Canadian Government to reconsider a suggestion made by *The Economist* (2007, online) that would be "the very least bad for Canada's brand." Instead of selling the sealing licenses to sealers, auction them off to the highest bidder. Chances are that the animal welfare and animal rights organizations would win the bids, and the moneys raised could be used to provide alternate sources of employment for the fishermen.

References Available Upon Request.