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Consumer boycott amidst conflict

The situated agency of political consumers in the Occupied
Palestinian Territory

The small village where Ibrahim lives is surrounded on three sides by Israeli watch towers, the segregation wall and military fencing. [...] After I have been shown the small-hold garden, where his parents grow vegetables for home consumption and keep bees, we [Ibrahim and his parents] visit his wider family, who live on the same plot of land, but in the house next door. There I meet his grandparents, an aunt and two uncles. Over tea, we start talking about everyday life and politics. Ibrahim mentions the nature of my research. The father straight away answers ‘Boycott doesn’t do anything. The conflict is not a conflict over products. The conflict runs much deeper and is about land. And there is no point in boycotting Israeli products anyway, as their quality is much better’. [...] Ibrahim and his dad felt that boycott was a ‘trend thing’ – whenever there were obvious political issues, such as the war on Gaza last year, then people call for and participate in boycott and as soon as the political situation calms down again, “everyone’s like ‘let’s have a Tapuzina’ (Israeli juice brand)” (Excerpt from field notes, 10 May 2015).

Participation in political consumption has often been explored from the lens of individual motivation and willingness of the potential consumer activist. We argue that such actor-centric approaches are inadequate in explaining participation in political consumption across different social, cultural, economic and political contexts. To do this, we explore political consumption amidst conflict to show how an agentic view of the political consumer and his/her participation in consumer activism is limiting. Conflict settings – marked by experiences of violence and/or asymmetric power relationships – call for a consideration of the structural and contextual influences on the behaviours of political consumers.

The vignette above illustrates the complex attitudes of Palestinians towards a consumer boycott currently calling on all Palestinians (and solidarity activists) to boycott Israeli (and international) goods and services in protest of the occupation of Palestinian territory (BDS, 2005). It is one tactic among a wider strategy of economic actions that seek to address perceived injustices in the protracted conflict between the state of Israel and Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). If drawing on existing consumer boycott research, statements on participation such as the one above could be interpreted from the lens of the individual, explaining non-participation as attribution, rationalisation or even justification/excuse for inaction; positioned as a free choice made by the potential boycotter (Eckhardt et al. 2010, Klein et al., 2004; Yuksel, 2013). These explanations may also ring true for Ibrahim and his family, but they only partially explain their relationship to the consumer boycott. In the past, Ibrahim had a serious health condition. With necessary medicines and treatment unavailable in the West Bank, he relied on Israeli medical support. Further, Ibrahim’s father lost his public sector job during a recession following the second Intifada – *uprising* – in the mid 2000s and took work in an Israeli settlement to continue to care for the family. These first-hand

experiences of reliance on Israeli provisions have led the family to conclude that ending the conflict through a boycott appears unfeasible to them, when in this case Ibrahim's survival and the livelihood of the family depended on existing relations with Israel. Neither Ibrahim nor his father mentioned this dependency when justifying their non-participation in the boycott during the more formal research conversations. Rather, the first author found these out during other meetings with the family during her field research. Situating the non-participation of Ibrahim's family in the consumer boycott in this way highlights factors other than personal motivation and willingness that may inhibit consumers to participate in political consumption.

Situating political consumption within a conflict setting can heighten our awareness of how consumers experience context-specific barriers that influence the way in which they may or may not use market transactions as a tool for effecting change. This research responds to calls for a deeper consideration of contextual, circumstantial factors in the study of consumer practices more broadly (Carrington et al., 2010; Steg and Vlek, 2009) and in the study of consumer boycott more specifically (Koos, 2012). The questions addressed in the paper are: How do consumers in challenging environments navigate boycotting behaviours? How does the experience and socio-political setting of conflict influence their boycott participation? We highlight how political, economic and sociocultural factors can become barriers that make participation in political consumption less likely.

Based on our findings, we propose the concept of 'situated agency' to explore the relationship between context and available range of action for potential boycotters, moving our understanding beyond the predominant focus on individualised agency in existing political consumption research (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Nixon and Gabriel, 2015). In the following sections, we review the literature on boycott participation and highlight the (often implicit) individual consumer lens. We then explore how political consumption amidst conflict settings, highlighting some of the successes and challenges they have faced. We then present findings from a study of Palestinianⁱ participation in the Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions (BDS) campaign in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). Based on data gathered during field research in the West Bank, the findings highlight the influential role of the particular setting and personal circumstance of political consumers in their boycotting behaviours. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications for political consumption within a conflict setting.

Why consumers boycott (or not)

Political consumption refers to market transactions with a wider public, political or social aim (Neilson, 2010; Trentmann, 2007). There are four types of political consumption: boycott, buycott, discursive actions and lifestyle changes (Micheletti and Oral 2018). Consumer boycott - the attempt to achieve certain goals or objectives by refraining from making particular purchases or consumption choices – involves the use of (individual or collective) market actions as a tool for political, social and economic change (Micheletti et al., 2012). Existing consumer research has often focused on individual motivations for consumers to participate in consumer boycotts including: the desire to make a difference

(Klein et al., 2004), feelings of animosity towards the boycott target (Braunsberger and Buckler 2011; Klein et al., 1998), political or religious leanings that are aligned with the boycott's purpose and goals (Bossy, 2014; Farah and Newman, 2009) or the way a boycott makes us feel (Cherrier, 2009; Kozinets and Handelman, 1998). Studies also highlight the role of individual attributes: those who are wealthier, younger, more highly educated and otherwise politically motivated are more likely to practice political consumption (Baek, 2010; Copeland, 2014).

Based on available data, researchers have made inferences about why consumers may not participate in boycott (Chatzidakis and Lee, 2012). These studies have highlighted the perceived cost evaluations of potential boycotters that may result in non-participation (eg. Braunsberger and Buckler, 2011, Klein et al., 2004). Consumers may refrain from joining if participation is either high already (Sandikci and Ekici, 2009) or perceived as uncertain (Sen et al., 2001); if the associated opportunity cost – the loss of options once a decision to boycott has been made – are high, or consumers deem the boycott unlikely to succeed (Klein et al., 2004; Sandikci and Ekici, 2009). Yuksel's (2013) study of Australian consumers who were unwilling to partake in a boycott of Coca-Cola, highlighted three overarching reasons for boycott non-participation: out-group feelings towards those sought to be helped through the boycott; perceived invasion of personal free choice through boycotting; and perceived lack of evidence of the boycott target's 'wrongdoings'.

These analyses frame the non-participation from the lens of the individual consumer and consumer 'choice'. They repeat earlier studies that have inferred consumers' willingness to participate, framing participation as a straightforward individual choice. In fact, much of the literature on political consumption has either explicitly or implicitly inferred from individual factors, implying that in all contexts consumers have the necessary freedom and agency to partake in political consumption (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010). Yet, the notion of consumer agency and the concomitant view of the 'active consumer' is far from universal (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007), and the concept of consumer agency for political consumption is problematic (Arnould, 2007).

Social movement theory has advanced our understanding of how the social context in which a social movement exists can enhance participation (e.g. Tarrow 1994, McAdam 1996). From this research, we know that splits amongst political leaders or the 'ruling authority' (Marullo and Meyer 2008), institutional context (Williams 2008) as well as economic and demographic changes (Kriesi 2008) all provide contextual opportunities for the mobilization towards collective political action. Consumer studies are also beginning to recognize the importance of social context for understanding why some boycotts may gain a large following while others don't. A study of poor Finnish consumers' non-voluntary simplicity – i.e. a reduction in their consumption practices due to their financial situation – highlights the potent influence of personal circumstance in political consumption participation (Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2014). Koos (2012) further suggests that participation in political consumption increases with the overall affluence of a nation and with the availability of alternative, ethical resources.

Reflecting on these insights from consumer and social movement research, it is unlikely that taking either an overly agentic or an overly contextual view of the consumer is likely to be sufficient in explaining why some political consumption movements attract widespread participation over others. Instead we propose the concept of ‘situated agency’ – i.e. understanding agency as spatially, relationally and temporally embedded (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) – to the constraints or barriers that individuals face when negotiating their participation in boycott movements.

Political consumption amidst conflict

Throughout history, consumer boycotts have been used in conflict situations as a form of economic political activism. This type of political consumption goes beyond an expressed desire to effect change in marketplace behaviours to envision an alternative future society (Bossy, 2014; Neilson, 2010). It moves the relationship between the boycotter and the boycott target beyond that of consumer and producer/service provider; consumer boycott becomes a proxy for addressing perceived economic, social or political injustices embedded in the relationships between conflicting parties, e.g. citizens and the state, or between a people and its perceived oppressor.

Some political consumption in conflict situations is considered unproblematic, when the boycotts’ moral claims are clearly understood as well as widely accepted and supported (Micheletti and Oral, 2018). These boycotts are able to gain a large following to achieve moral societal outcomes (Dubner, 2016; Lekakis, 2017; Thompson, 2011). They are used to fight experienced injustices and campaign for social, economic and political equality (Friedman, 1991; Penaloza and Price, 1993). Boycotts that fit within this template – eg. the boycott of British goods in India’s struggle for independence; the South African boycott to protest apartheid; or, the bus boycotts of Black Americans against race segregation policies – have entered into the memory of the media and societies around the world (Micheletti and Oral, 2018).

However, making moral societal claims through consumer boycotts creates additional challenges for increased participation, especially when boycotts pose dilemmas for prospective participants – for example when fighting the oppression of one group may result in the temporary oppression of another – or demand the choice of proxy targets – e.g. companies that act as substitutes for a political entities (ibid). Mobilisation for such boycotts may be more challenging as the ‘problems’ they seek to solve are seen as ambiguous. Political consumption amidst conflict poses particular challenges to the participation of potential consumer activists. Consumer boycott amidst conflict incorporates social and cultural factors that influence the interpretation of a campaign’s aims and methods. It thus begins to unpack how a particular consumer boycott may be perceived across contexts. To further highlight the influence of these contextual factors, we now explore the consumer boycott of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign operating in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt).

Consumer boycott in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)

Palestinians in the oPt have lived under Israeli occupation since 1967. Since the early 1990s increased international efforts, broadly described as liberal peacebuilding, have introduced economic and political changes in an attempt to resolve the conflict. The economic element of liberal peacebuilding consists of market liberalisation and the establishment of bilateral trade between conflicting parties. Analysis suggests that this type of peace – also dubbed ‘capitalist peace’ – has been successful in reducing violence in conflict settings (Gartzke, 2007). Proponents argue that marketisation opens new opportunities, not least by providing a breeding ground for new forms of market-based activism that could be used to challenge the overarching ideology embedded within the conflict (Chandler, 2010). Critics of liberal peacebuilding posit that it exacerbates existing power asymmetries and harms those already vulnerable in the global order, hindering equitable conflict resolution or post-conflict development (e.g. MacGinty, 2008; Pugh, Cooper and Turner, 2008; Thiessen, 2011). If the new economic structures are introduced amongst continued asymmetric power relations and inequality, this creates unfavourable conditions for the agency of political consumers (Bröckerhoff, 2017).

Peace talks between the State of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) have led to the signing of various agreements – the Oslo Accords – for a transition to peace in the region. The Paris Protocol signed in 1994 outlines the nature of future economic relations between the two parties, introducing liberalized market structures to the oPt (e.g. Hanieh, 2013). Typical of trends in other emerging economies, it has facilitated an accelerated rise in a consumer economy (Eckhardt and Mahi, 2004; Sandikci and Ger, 2002; Üstüner and Holt, 2007, 2010). In particular urban environments in the West Bank have witnessed the emergence of new cuisines, products and services, alongside the proliferation of malls, shops, cafes and entertainment centres catering to the emerging Palestinian middle class (Samara, 2000; Shikaki and Springer, 2015).

With violence and conflict between Israelis and Palestinians still ongoing to this day, liberal peacebuilding has seemingly failed to deliver not peace to the region (Hanieh, 2013). Critics have further argued that much of the economic enterprise that has emerged in the oPt since the Oslo years has been formed out of necessity to make a living amidst hostile economic conditions, leaving little room to challenge the imposed structures through daily micro-economic practices (Tawil-Souri, 2009). Unemployment (average 27%) and poverty (average 21% below the poverty line) are high across the oPt, with large variations between the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. Palestinians continue to be dependent on Israeli support and international aid (Merz, 2012; Nasser, 2011). Palestinians living in the West Bank in the post-Oslo years rely on Israel for a broad range of daily necessities beyond work opportunities, such as medicines, water and electricity, to name but a few (Farsakh, 2002). There are further particularities to the Palestinian economic dependency: with no autonomous international port or airport, for example, Palestinian trade relies on Israeli infrastructure resulting in de facto Israeli control of trade into and out of the oPt. This has generated a view among Palestinian

critics that the Oslo process has brought with it an ‘illusion of development’ (Nassar, 2011), in real terms reducing Palestinian opportunities for economic autonomy and independent development (Qassoum, 2017).

This is the context for political consumption in the oPt. Following the Oslo years, consumer boycotts have witnessed renewed attention, especially so in the aftermath of the second intifada (Qumsiyeh, 2017, 2010). In 2005, Palestinian activists and civil society organisations came together to organise a Boycott, Sanctions and Divestments (BDS) campaign of political action, containing three boycott elements: economic, cultural and academic actions. The consumer boycott, part of the former, is defined as the ‘boycott of Israeli companies, goods and services or of international companies involved in Israeli policies violating Palestinian human rights and international law’ (BDS, 2015). It seeks to raise public awareness of the conflict globally by applying economic pressure on Israel (BDS, 2005) and aims to open a conversation about economic empowerment and autonomy for Palestinians (Hever, 2009).

The BDS boycott has many opponents as well as supporters (Thrall, 2018). Despite its controversial nature, one might expect an occupied people to participate widely, especially considering the history of large-scale consumer boycotts by Palestinians (Qumsiyeh, 2010). Yet, the BDS consumer boycott appears to have received relatively little take up from within the oPtⁱⁱ (Darweish and Rigby, 2015). In the next sections, we analyse some of the political, economic and sociocultural factors that have shaped these mobilisation difficulties and may influence individual decision making for consumer boycott.

Method

This study draws on findings from a 6-week study conducted in the West Bank by the first author during spring and summer 2015. The study combined longer, qualitative interviews with Palestinian consumers and consumer activists with participant observation. The underlying questions guiding the data collection and analysis were: How do Palestinians negotiate their participation in the BDS consumer boycott? How does personal, political, economic and sociocultural context affect these negotiations? What barriers do they experience?

The researcher followed previous protocol for research in the oPt and built personal trust with prospective participants by spending time with them, sometimes over multiple meetings, immersing herself in the study locations, and answering any questions about the research prior to conducting interviews (Norman, 2009). Initial interviews were arranged using personal referrals followed by a snowballing technique (e.g. Thompson and Tambyah, 1999; Üstüner and Holt, 2010). Most interviews were conducted in English. Interviews took place in participants’ homes, workplaces or in cafés/restaurants chosen by participants. Participants who did not speak English invited a family member or trusted friend to interpret for them. Interviews were recorded, unless participants asked not to be recorded or for recorders to be turned off during the interview. In total, 29 Palestinians (13 women, 16 men) participated in this study. Additional insight was gained from participant observation. The first author spent time in places relevant to the context

of this study (Zahle, 2017), such as cafés, supermarkets and shops, and participants' homes. This approach allowed us to gain a more in-depth contextual knowledge of the rising Palestinian consumer economy and attitudes towards the BDS boycott. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the transcripts using descriptive and interpretive coding and identifying overarching themes (King and Horrocks, 2010). The findings that emerge contextualise the lived experience of political consumers amidst conflict.

Negotiating context: Barriers to participation in consumer boycott

So far we have highlighted how research in political consumption has predominantly focused on actor-centric approaches, paying less attention to the influence of political, economic and social factors on potential consumer activists. We have also highlighted how political consumption amidst conflict poses particular challenges; in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict those of economic dependency, ongoing experiences of violence and the marginalisation of many Palestinians living in the emerging consumer economy of the West Bank. Many of the activists interviewed for this research expressed frustration at how difficult it was to mobilise locally for the BDS boycott; non-activist Palestinians highlighted the realities of daily life as challenges to participation in boycott. Below we discuss the particular experiences of both.

Fragmentation and legitimacy

Previous research has found that boycott leaders need to be seen as legitimate and trusted by potential boycotters (Yuksel, 2013). Changes to the Palestinian political economy have created socially uneven development and economic inequality between social groups and regions: the political and geographical fragmentation, exacerbated through curfews and travel restrictions, make mobility and access to opportunities difficult (Qassoum, 2017, 2004). Many participant narratives described an increasing division between political parties and factions since the 2006 election, in particular between political party rivals Fatah and Hamas. One university lecturer of political studies interviewed for this research stated: "Every party works for the benefit of its party, rather than for the whole of the nation". This sentiment of fragmentation of people, places and institutions has resulted in a crisis of legitimacy for Palestinian leadership, leaving a vacuum for a trusted body to coordinate disparate activist efforts (Nabulsi, 2010). The university lecturer again stated:

[Political consumption] has a strong relation with leftist parties in Palestine, and they are not the majority of society. And they couldn't reach out to people. People often reject leftist parties for different reasons, like religion...

Consumers don't trust boycott leaders whose views and agendas do not align with their own, resulting in non-participation (Yuksel, 2013). Activists, including those interviewed for this study, tend to belong to the rising middle class in the West Bank: they have often travelled abroad, espouse liberal world views and choose to reject an overtly consumerist lifestyle, rather than be financially restricted to do so. These changes transform established societal norms and risk contributing to growing polarisation between liberal elites and traditional consumers (Cherrier and Belk, 2015; Ger and Belk, 1996). In the

West Bank, this has created tensions between activists and the general population who often don't trust their methods, and, as a result, their intentions. As one participant explained:

They [the activists] don't have direct touch with our daily lives, at national level. [...] If you go [...] to some of the villages, you will see some sort of pre-judgement. A sort of stereotype image about the activists: they are few, they are mixing with foreigners, they are mixing with Israelis. [...] I think there is a kind of confidence and trust gap.

Ordinary Palestinians may reject boycott leaders not just because their privileged economic situation renders them out of touch with the struggles of ordinary people, but also because they espouse a lifestyle that to them reflects global values of liberalisation and marketisation, rather than traditional Palestinian values.

Market liberalisation and dependency

The positioning of the consumer boycott within the post-Oslo economic structures is shaped by the nature of the conflict. Due to the military occupation, Palestinians experience a high-level of direct dependency on the occupying power for access to employment. Furthermore, checkpoint and closure policies allow Israel to control and facilitate goods entering and leaving the oPt (Hever, 2009; Farsakh, 2016). This leaves prospective political consumers with a feeling of precariousness, as is illustrated by these two quotes from a young man from Jenin and an activist from Beit Sahour:

I have family in Israel who live and work there. Israel controls everything, our water, our electricity, they even own most of our roads. What if they decided to cut off electricity, water and medical treatments?

Because they [the Palestinians] are working with them [the Israelis], they are worried [to participate in boycott].

During the first intifada, subsistence farming and home growing were still widespread practices among Palestinians, which allowed sharing of home-grown produce as a way of sustaining the consumer boycott of Israeli products (Rigby, 1991). With the progression of liberal peacebuilding, this form of localised production has been significantly reduced and replaced by a reliance on more formalised economic exchanges. Combined with the relatively low productivity of the Palestinian economy insufficient to meet the needs of its population, there is a widening the gap between it and the 'high value' economy of Israel (Burton, 2016).

Although economic exchange between Israel and the Palestinians was close before the Oslo years, the 'peace of markets' (Davidi, 2000) operating in the interest of Israeli and international businesses working with Palestinian elites, has led to an increase in the volume of foreign imports to the oPt (Hanieh, 2013; McMahan, 2014). These cheaper imports from Israel and overseas make it more difficult for Palestinian producers to compete in their local markets. Many Palestinians interviewed for this study encouraged the boycott of non-essential consumer items where Palestinian alternatives were available, even if they saw boycotting these as non-consequential to the overall political and economic situation. However, certain essential consumer goods, such as electricity, water and medicines, are only available in the oPt through the Israeli market, rendering the boycott of these difficult, if not impossible. Below, a mother of a family and a local businessman reflect on the limitations to viable alternatives:

The commodities, you know, we don't have [Palestinian] alternatives in many cases. We don't have alternatives.

I mean the fruit and vegetables are mainly brought by the Israelis because we don't have enough production. And this is the result of the lack of agriculture, which is mainly all controlled by Israel one way or another. No access to water for planting for agricultural sector. That is why our production is not enough for the consumption, for our need of the community. So we start to rely on the Israeli products.

A further challenge emerges among the liberalisation of markets: when consumers' everyday lives are more structured through market exchange, the concomitant rise in consumerism may give a sense of consumer sovereignty to those who experience it (eg. Miles 1998). Choosing between a variety of products, including those from Israel, may give Palestinians a sense of freedom of choice (in the marketplace) to opt for the best products to satisfy their needs on often limited resources. To justify choosing Israeli over Palestinian, many participants spoke about the superior quality of Israeli goods compared to Palestinian products:

But I am not boycotting in all cases. Sometimes, Israeli products are good in quality, they are much better, even in taste, especially edible things.

Sometimes it is also the quality, you can't get the good quality. I'll tell you some qualities that we don't have here, like cement for building. [...] So some people they prefer, they are building their houses just once in their lives, so they choose good quality and they choose Israeli. [...] And to be honest, the products of the Israelis are good quality.

Ger and Belk (1996) documented that when less-affluent countries are first exposed to global consumer culture, confidence and pride in local goods and material culture diminishes. Combined with a reverence for new items, this means consumers in emerging economies are more likely to choose new over locally produced goods. One shopkeeper of a grocery store in a small Palestinian village outside of Jenin stated that he would not concede to stocking only Palestinian products, as in many cases the quality of Israeli products was better and the price lower. The shopkeeper added that even boycotting ordinary Israeli-produced items such as milk and cheese would further diminish many Palestinians' quality of life and consumer freedom. He felt that the BDS boycott privileged those elites who could choose to pay more for products of perceived lesser quality, while many of his customers faced economic hardships that meant they could or should not make such sacrifices (field notes, 21 May 2015).

Soper (2016) has highlighted the need for critical investigation of the limits of oppositional practices within current market structures. The unequal distribution of economic power shapes the circumstances of Palestinian political consumers. Further, dependence on Israel for many basic needs renders many Palestinians vulnerable to the point that choosing to boycott would pose an existential threat – either perceived and/or actual.

Cost of living and debt

Consumer researchers have long observed that an adjustment towards global consumer culture turns items once perceived as luxuries into daily necessities. This was also evident in the lived experiences of participants in this study, including a family father and activist from Beit Sahour:

We didn't use to have internet, we didn't use to have mobiles, we didn't use to have many things that we would pay much for nowadays [...]. I can't work without the internet, none of the family can work without the internet, I mean, the kids sometimes do their exams online, so can't live without these things.

As a result of globalisation and the concomitant perceived need/desire for additional goods that facilitate everyday life, the cost of living rises in an emerging consumer economy. The increased demand for consumer goods and services entering emerging markets encourages a "work-and-spend ethic", often contrasting with prior consumption and saving patterns (Ger and Belk, 1996: 283). According to statistical estimates from the World Bank (2018) that unemployment was 18% in the West Bank in 2017, and figures from 2011 show that 21% of West Bank Palestinians were living below the poverty line. Yet, the introduction and availability of new consumer goods and services, such as mobile phones and the internet make life more expensive (e.g. Hanieh, 2013; Palestinian Bureau of National Statistics, 2010). An activist from Jenin and a young woman from Bethlehem noted:

We have to live, we have to eat [...]. Economic, daily living, economic hardships are dominating Palestinian life recently [...]. And if you see at the end of the month, how people are queuing just before the ATM machines in order to get their salaries – it is a time to celebrate.

And others, many of my friends are also very busy, usually related to earning a living. They often have to work more than one job to earn a living and pay for children's education, because the cost of living is very high.

This creates a gulf between the opportunities offered by the rising consumer economy and people's lived experience thereof, diminishing, if not cancelling the promise of 'consumer freedom' implied in liberal market economies (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). In order to keep up with these increasing pressures, consumer credit has grown significantly in Palestine in recent years: between 2008 and 2010, for example, bank credit almost doubled, mainly fuelled by consumer-based spending on property, cars and credit cards (Palestine Monetary Authority, 2011 in: Hanieh, 2013). A young mother from Jenin said:

I have many friends in Ramallah they live their lives like this: they are getting married by loan, they buy a house by loan, they buy a car by loan. [...] And they buy it, they didn't have the money, but they want to be like their family and the family in Ramallah, they buy a car. And they continue their life, working day and night, just to pay back the money to the bank. And this is also what makes [turn away] from resistance in Palestine. In the aftermath of market liberalisation an increasing number of Palestinians have gone into debt and financial dependency, with the individual's sense of self-worth increasingly defined by their possessions. Hanieh (2013) argues that this has inhibited the way Palestinians view their own capacities for social solidarity. The next section further highlights the perceived erosion of social solidarity and its influence on participation in political consumption.

The rise of consumerism

Although the impact of economic and political changes since the Oslo years are subject to extensive scholarly debate (e.g. Farsakh 2016), the transformation of the structural landscape, in particular in the West Bank, to facilitate consumption as well as its social

and cultural effects are more widely documented (McMahon, 2014; Samara, 2000; Shikaki and Springer, 2015). Previous consumption literature has highlighted the paradoxical nature of a consumerist lifestyle as both liberating and constraining (Miles, 1998). This so-called “consumption paradox” (ibid.) was also reflected in the observations of participants who had varying perspectives about the opportunities and pressures provided by the transformations of the local economy into a consumer society. The appeal of the consumer lifestyle has grown for Palestinians at precisely a time when other elements of their lives are restricted by the experiences of the ongoing conflict. In particular younger research participants said they felt a sense of freedom they could experience through the offerings of global consumer culture. They saw consumerism as an escape: not just from the conflict but also from the otherwise more traditional values of Palestinian society. An activist from Beit Sahour, a charity worker from Bethlehem and a young man from a small village outside Jenin observed:

They want to feel that they can do things and have things, not always be victims of oppression. If they are always victims of oppression, they will look for things that will make them feel more developed.

We can go on vacation, we can go to nice restaurants, we have a nice house, we have a nice car, so what do I need more than this?

[Interviewer: what do you love about the Western lifestyle?] The freedom. You can do what you want, when you want it. Here in Palestine, besides the occupation, Palestinian traditions all inhibit people’s freedom. Not the same level as the occupation, but still. Many participants in this study, however, said they were anxious about the impact of embracing consumerism. Consumption in emerging economies becomes tied up in the discourse of modernity and development – the way we spend our time and money becomes a perceived index of our social status (Üstüner and Holt, 2010). A complex mix of status anxiety, outgroup feelings towards others and a sense of nostalgia formed part of many Palestinians’ lived experiences, as noted by a young professional couple living in Jenin and a middle-aged mother, also from Jenin:

You need to borrow [money from the bank] to be one of them in society.

But it is all about consumption and superficial appearances. If you can buy the most expensive dress, you will buy it. [...] Back [in the old] days you used to have to do traditions when you get married, now you don’t.

Perceived fragmentation in emerging consumer economies is often because – beyond any potential increase in inequality in socioeconomic terms – society *appears* more stratified as people engage in more differentiated lifestyles through their consumption (Sandikci and Ger, 2002). Such feelings contribute to a polarization between people and their varying social and cultural lifestyle choices (Cherrier and Belk, 2015; Ger and Belk, 1996). The emergence of consumer culture can thus negatively influence feelings of solidarity and subsequent inclinations to participate in consumer boycott, even before an actual reduction in participation may have taken place (Hanieh, 2013). Many of the Palestinians interviewed for this study expressed concern over the lack of social solidarity in Palestinian society since the Oslo years that made mobilisation for political consumption more challenging. One BDS activist living outside of Bethlehem and a mother living in Jenin link this reduction in political engagement to the rise of consumer culture:

People have developed this concept of consumption. I mean people consume everything that is needed and not needed. I mean, if you are now going to ask young people in the street what is your dream for the coming months, and you will have 60% telling you I want to change my mobile to have i6plus or i6what.

People are busy in material things, rather than the people being busy fighting for the homeland and the right to return.

Such sentiments reflect the concern that consumer culture in the West Bank is pacifying potential political consumers, making them more reluctant to politicise their everyday (consumption) practices (Bröckerhoff, 2017). However, many participants interviewed for this study said they were aware of the inequalities and injustices embedded within the structures of this new consumer economy, and they emphasized the short-term and illusory relief offered by consumption. The same young couple quoted above said: People consume and they have a sense life is getting better and then something happens and they remember ‘Oh no! I am under occupation!’.

Situated agency for political consumption

We have argued that problematizing the political, economic and sociocultural context of political consumers also enhances our understanding of political consumption. As this and other recent research (e.g. Leipäama-Leskinen et al., 2014) is beginning to show, contextual factors can inhibit or force consumers’ hands and thus shape their ability to participate. We therefore propose a revised consideration of agency for political consumption and highlight the concept of ‘situated agency’ as a more holistic approach to understanding consumer participation.

Agency is defined as ‘the ability to set and pursue one’s own goals as individuals or as a society’ (Sullivan et al., 2012: 56). Building on the findings of this research, we propose a more explicit focus on agency as situated – i.e., understanding it as spatially, relationally and temporally embedded (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). This shift in focus invites us to consider the influence of contextual factors on boycotters’ behaviours. Situated agency explores the relationship between conduct and circumstance of human action and considers behaviours as influenced, if not fully determined, by context (Choi, 2007; Sullivan et al., 2012). In this stream of thought, structures provide causal conditions that constrain or enable human action (e.g. Giddens, 1984). ‘Situated agency’ is thus a mediating point between completely psychological or constructionist views of the individual (Choi, 2007). It goes beyond an exploration of individual motivations for participating in political consumption by placing these considerations within its specific setting. Framing the actions of potential boycotters through the lens of situated agency allows us to position their individual negotiations for boycott participation against their personal, political, economic and sociocultural contexts and entanglements at a particular time in history.

Building on the findings of this research, we highlight different market and societal barriers that may prevent political consumers from participating in consumer activism. Market barriers – those that are embedded within the political economy of the context – include a lack of viable alternatives, dependency on the boycott target and

economic instability. The threat of an ensuing deterioration of personal circumstances as a result of political consumption would lower participants’ ability and willingness to participate. Societal barriers work more comprehensively across a range of political, economic and sociocultural factors. In particular, the impact of political divisions and (perceived) social stratification means that consumer activists have to overcome the gulf created by low levels of legitimacy and solidarity within the wider population before being able to successfully mobilise for their campaigns. Further, when inequality rises, the pool of possible boycotters shrinks. This reduction in potential political consumers is aggravated when the ‘lure of consumerism’ is so appealing that it turns new consumers away from politicising their consumption behaviours.

	Consequences for political consumption
Market barriers	
Lack of viable alternatives	Reduced feasibility for boycott
Dependency on boycott target	Increased associated costs to boycotters
Economic instability	Restricted opportunity due to financial insecurity and dependency
Societal barriers	
Political fragmentation	Legitimacy crisis for boycott leaders
Consumer lifestyles	‘Pacification’ through consumption
Stratification	Reduction in social cohesion and solidarity

Table 1. Contextual barriers for participation in political consumption amidst conflict

These market and societal barriers have serious consequences for participation in political consumption by reducing the range of possible and feasible actions for political consumers. They ultimately question whether consumer boycott is the most effective form of political consumption across situations and contexts. It may be that local economic development and ‘buycott’ campaigns designed to promote consumption of local products are better suited and lead to more sustainable outcomes in certain instances. Such considerations could be useful for local mobilisation in the Palestinian case too, given some of the more problematic aspects embedded within the BDS, such as the distinction between the settlements and the Israeli economy as boycott targets, or accusations of anti-semitism (Micheletti and Oral, 2018).

The future of political consumption amidst conflict

The Palestinian experience of consumer boycott has been mixed since the days of the first intifada and following the Oslo years: participation from within the oPt has been low amidst the vast array of economic, political and sociocultural changes that were triggered during the Oslo process. One could criticise Palestinians for seemingly turning away from activism and instead embracing the hegemony of the consumer economy. Yet, reducing non-participation to the individual actions of those living amidst conflict would be too simplistic. In this paper, we have questioned the often-assumed agency of political consumers. We have shown how the changing circumstances and context for Palestinian political consumption have shaped the role of the 'activist consumer' in the oPt and made participation in consumer boycott less likely. Consumers in conflicts have a limited range of options and choices for political action via the marketplace. In fact, the marketplace itself often becomes an ideological battleground, further shaping the roles and the capacities of political consumers. We have proposed the concept of 'situated agency' to highlight the limited ways in which Palestinians could effect change through their consumption choices amidst an ongoing conflict and the simultaneous marketisation and rising consumer economy of the oPt.

Of course, these limitations of consumer agency may not be restricted to conflict settings. Consumption is shaped differently across countries and contexts, as well as over time (Jacobson and Dulrud, 2007). Consequently, the role and importance that is assigned to consumption choices also shapes their employment and employability for political influence. And while consumer activism appears to be having its moment across the globe (eg. Holder, 2017), there is also a growing number of voices that express concern about the often assumed power that consumers have to change the world (eg. Jacobsen and Dulrud, 2007; Soper, 2016; Valor et al., 2017). While the politics of buying and not buying may be a useful tool in a wider toolbox of social and political action, the cultural framing of consumer behavior as well as the individualistic nature of acts of consumption can limit their potential (Lukacs, 2017; Halkier and Holm, 2008). Simon (2011) suggests that acts of (not) buying may only be the starting point in a longer process of politicisation. The history of the consumer boycott in the oPt raises the question of whether this is possible in a consumption context marked by limitations, inequality and violence. The risk is that in such instances consumer activism dissipates experienced frustrations without having effectively engaged in contentious issues or challenged established structures of oppression (Broeckerhoff, 2017)

Participation in political consumption is often explored from the lens of the individual consumer activist. Using the example of the BDS boycott in the oPt, we have argued that such approaches are inadequate in explaining participation in political consumption across different contexts. By reconsidering the influence of circumstance and context, we have developed a more nuanced understanding of consumer activism that accounts for market and societal barriers shaping the role of the consumer as well as participation in political consumption. The findings of this study support recent calls for more psychosocial analyses of consumption ethics (Chatzidakis et al., 2018). But more than that, they also challenge us to reconsider the often assumed roles of consumer power

and agency. By highlighting the way in which contextual barriers limit the possibility of political consumption, we also invite researchers and activists to re-evaluate the extent to which political consumption can be an effective oppositional practice, not just in conflict settings.

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ⁱ Over the course of the occupation, physical boundaries (eg. checkpoints) and restrictions on movements for Palestinians (eg. curfews and permits) have increased; further, the West Bank is divided into three areas (Areas A, B and C) with differing levels of Israeli and Palestinian administrative powers, resulting in different access to and involvement in political and economic life across the West Bank (Tawil-Souri, 2009). Due to this physical fragmentation and its social, political and cultural implications, the experiences of Palestinians vary across different parts of the West Bank, let alone other areas of the oPt not included in this study. Throughout this paper, the word 'Palestinian' refers to the experiences of the participants based in two areas of the West Bank – the Jenin and Bethlehem governorates –classified as Area A, indicating a higher level of control by the Palestinian Authority.

ⁱⁱ It is difficult to ascertain accurate statistical data for participation in BDS. This may be partly due to the controversial reputation attached to the BDS movement which makes BDS supporters more hesitant to identify publicly with BDS (Thrall, 2018). Darweish and Rigby (2015) make their argument based on

extensive fieldwork with Palestinian activists and their own longstanding engagement with popular resistance in the oPt.