Check for updates

Received: 23 May 2024 | Accepted: 26 February 2026

DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.70021

RESEARCH REPORT

Stratified consumer activism: How socioeconomic status shapes boycott participation

Yan Vieites[1] | **Daniel Fernandes**[2] | **Debora V. Thompson**[3]

[1]Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration, Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV-EBAPE), Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil

[2]Catolica-Lisbon School of Business and Economics, Catholic University of Portugal, Lisboa, Portugal

[3]McDonough School of Business, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA

Correspondence
Yan Vieites, Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration, Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV-EBAPE), 30 Jornalista Orlando Dantas Street, Rio de Janeiro, RJ 22231-010, Brazil.
Email: yan.vieites@fgv.br

Abstract

Consumer activism is becoming increasingly common worldwide, but are all consumer groups as likely to engage in these practices? The current research investigates the presence of socioeconomic status (SES) differences in boycotting participation and explores the psychological processes underlying potential discrepancies. Results from four studies, including cross-national surveys, experiments, and lab-in-the-field evidence, show that low-SES consumers display a lower likelihood of boycotting companies than their high-SES peers. The phenomenon emerges across different measures, including self-reported intentions, past actions, and actual behaviors. This reduced inclination to boycott among the socioeconomically disadvantaged is driven by their reduced sense of control, which induces lower beliefs that consumption can be used as an effective instrument to enact change. These findings offer important contributions to the study of boycotting practices and shed new light on the complex relationship between socioeconomic conditions and consumer behavior.

KEYWORDS

boycotting, consumer activism, political consumption, social class, socioeconomic status

Consumers are increasingly using consumption to express and promote their worldviews (Deloitte, 2020). To pursue this goal, many rely on their purchase decisions to drive change in the marketplace and society, a phenomenon known as consumer activism. In this research, we explore a specific form of activism—boycotting—where consumers collectively and deliberately refuse to purchase from certain companies to influence their practices (Klein et al., 2004; Sen et al., 2001), typically in response to political, environmental, or ethical concerns.

While there is growing evidence that consumers care about companies' stances on socially relevant issues (Eckhardt et al., 2010; Schlager et al., 2021), the literature has started to document important differences in boycotting across the political spectrum (Endres & Panagopoulos, 2017; Fernandes, 2020). We extend this body of work by investigating whether and why another relevant sociodemographic characteristic—socioeconomic status (SES)—predicts boycott participation.

Previous research offers theoretical grounds for predicting both positive and negative relationships between consumers' socioeconomic conditions and boycotting behavior. In this research, we investigate the direction of the relationship between SES and boycotting by considering two countervailing forces: communal orientation and sense of control (Cannon et al., 2025). On one hand, low- (vs. high-) SES consumers may boycott *more* because of their stronger communal orientation (Elbæk et al., 2023; Rucker et al., 2018), as boycotting may be construed as a way to help and protect the community. On the other hand, low- (vs. high-) SES consumers may boycott *less* due to a diminished sense of control (Kraus et al., 2009). Given that a sense of control is a well-established precursor to behavioral change (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1977), our prediction aligns with the sense of control account.

Accepted by Aparna Labroo, Editor; Associate Editor, Sankar Sen

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
© 2026 The Author(s). *Journal of Consumer Psychology* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Society for Consumer Psychology.

Political science research has documented a positive correlation between individuals' SES and political participation, emphasizing the lack of resources, access, or knowledge among low-SES individuals to engage in political behavior (e.g., Brady et al., 1995; Dalton, 2017; Heath, 2018). However, contextual distinctions between traditional forms of political engagement (e.g., voting, petitioning) and boycotting behavior warrant caution when assuming similar SES-based patterns across domains. Whereas behaviors such as voting seek to influence government actors through institutionalized channels, boycotting operates through marketplace exchanges, enabling consumers to hold firms directly accountable by withdrawing their patronage. Doing so implies some loss in utility, such as forgoing preferred products, paying higher prices, or sacrificing convenience, making it a form of activism that entails concrete tradeoffs. These tradeoffs may create uneven barriers across socioeconomic groups, but the direction of this asymmetry—whether it weighs more heavily on higher- or lower-SES consumers—remains unclear. In addition, because firms are frequent and proximate interaction partners, consumers may perceive their purchase decisions as more consequential in enacting change compared to their attempts to influence distant and abstract political institutions, which may also shape the SES-activism link. Indeed, when individuals perceive traditional political channels as unresponsive or ineffective, marketplace actions such as boycotting may emerge as viable and immediate avenues for enacting one's values (Hamilton, 2013).

Existing political science research primarily explains disparities in political engagement as a result of one's level of resources and civic skills (e.g., Brady et al., 1995), with limited empirical evidence about the psychological barriers that shape activism across the SES spectrum (for an exception, see Schaub, 2021). Most studies rely on self-reported behaviors or administrative data (e.g., voter registration, turnout) across political issues and actions (e.g., Armingeon & Schädel, 2015; DeMarco, 2022; Grasso & Giugni, 2022). In addition, moststudies are from US and European samples, which constrains the generalizability of findings (Henrich et al., 2010a, 2010b). We address these gaps by exploring SES disparities in consumer boycotting behavior by employing cross-national surveys, behavioral data, and lab-in-the-field studies. In doing so, we extend the fast-growing research on SES and consumer behavior (Thompson et al., 2025).

SES AND BOYCOTTING

SES is commonly defined as an individual's position within a socioeconomic hierarchy. It is assessed via objective indicators such as income, education, and occupational prestige, and subjective perceptions such as social rank vis-à-vis others in society (Kraus et al., 2012; Manstead, 2018). SES serves as a foundation for many of our psychological and social experiences (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). Given the disparities in their material circumstances and social rank, high- and low-SES individuals tend to be exposed to distinct sets of events and to develop particular interpretations of the self (Vieites & Mittal, 2025) and of the world around them (Kraus et al., 2012). These discrepancies give rise to two competing predictions about the influence of SES on boycotting behavior: one based on a communal orientation and the other based on a sense of control.

Why low-SES consumers may boycott more? A communal orientation account

Drawing on research showing that low-SES individuals exhibit a stronger communal orientation, one could argue that they should be more inclined to boycott. The disadvantaged, by definition, have very limited resources to cope with adversities, which creates the need to build networks of mutual support (Carey & Markus, 2017; Piff et al., 2010). When challenges arise, low-SES consumers tend to turn to one another to overcome hardships (Piff et al., 2012). In part due to this tendency, they also develop a more interdependent sense of self, seeing themselves less as isolated individuals and more as members of a broader community (Grossmann & Varnum, 2011; Stephens et al., 2007).

This heightened interdependence has important consequences for how low-SES individuals interact with the social world. For example, people from low- (vs. high-) SES backgrounds tend to pay more attention to others in their surroundings (Dietze & Knowles, 2016), engage more deeply in social interactions (Kraus & Keltner, 2009), perceive more accurately the feelings and emotions of their peers (Kraus et al., 2010), and respond with greater compassion to other people's suffering (Stellar et al., 2012). They also exhibit stronger moral identity and heightened prosocial intentions (Elbæk et al., 2023), which create a fertile ground for collective forms of action such as boycotts. Boycotting may be construed as a communal action because it requires individuals to incur a personal cost—abstaining from consumption—not for private benefit, but to uphold shared values and protect broader social groups. Thus, from a communal orientation perspective, this logic suggests that low- (vs. high-) SES consumers may be *more* likely to engage in boycotts.

Why low-SES consumers may boycott less? A sense of control account

Evidence that low-SES individuals experience lower levels of perceived control suggests the opposite prediction: they should be *less* likely to engage in boycotting. Due to

15327663, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://myscp.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jcpy.70021 by Universidade Catolica, Wiley Online Library on [27/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

their reduced material resources and the need to make ends meet, low-SES individuals are generally guided by goals of managing constraints and coping with external obstacles (Kraus et al., 2012). Their subordinate rank also makes them particularly aware of the external barriers to promoting change. For example, when interpreting the underlying reasons for relevant social outcomes (e.g., inequality), low-SES individuals focus on contextual factors such as external hurdles for advancement (e.g., the political system), whereas high-SES individuals tend to favor explanations based on internal drivers (e.g., effort; Kraus et al., 2009).

High- and low-SES individuals also tend to be geographically clustered in starkly different neighborhoods (Massey, 1990; Musterd & Ostendorf, 2013). The areas in which the impoverished live are marked by unpredictability and a higher exposure to threats such as elevated levels of violence (Griskevicius et al., 2011; Sampson et al., 1997). These harsher contexts create a reduced sense of control among the members of lower social echelons, who believe they have limited influence over the surrounding environment (Kraus et al., 2009; Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014) and may develop the belief that trying to change the current state of affairs is not effective, thereby inhibiting boycott participation. In contrast, the wealthier and more highly educated members of society have access to influential networks and are overrepresented in positions of power (Piff et al., 2018). High-SES contexts also favor the notion of voicing one's thoughts, values, and desires and striving to exert influence over the environment (Kraus et al., 2012), which may increase their sense of control and instill the belief that taking action is an effective way of enacting change.

Overall, we predict that differences in perceived control will outweigh communal orientation in shaping boycotting behavior. Foundational theories of behavioral change identify perceived control as a proximal determinant of whether motivation translates into action. The Theory of Planned Behavior highlights perceived behavioral control as a key predictor of behavior enactment (Ajzen, 1991), Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes self-efficacy as a necessary precondition for action (Bandura, 1977), and expectancy–value models propose that individuals act only when they believe their efforts can effectively produce desired outcomes (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). These frameworks suggest that perceived control functions as a necessary condition for action: without believing one's behavior can influence outcomes, individuals are unlikely to act, regardless of their underlying motivations.

In the context of boycotting, a communal orientation may heighten concern for collective welfare, but this concern alone may not translate into action if consumers doubt that their behavior can make a difference. By contrast, when consumers believe their actions are effective, they may engage in boycotting even in the absence of strong communal motives—for example, to express personal values or assert agency. Thus, while communal orientation may strengthen motivation to boycott, we reason that perceived efficacy is critical for boycotting behavior to occur. This prediction aligns with prior research showing that perceived influence is one of the strongest predictors of consumer activism, including boycotting (Klein et al., 2004; Sen et al., 2001).

In summary, we predict a positive relationship between consumer SES and boycott participation. We propose that the reduced inclination to boycott among the disadvantaged is driven by their lower sense of control and the resulting diminished belief that one's consumption choices have the power to influence companies, markets, or society at large. Figure 1 provides a visual depiction of the conceptual framework and Table 1 details the empirical package. All data and scripts are available at OSF (https://osf.io/cejw4/?view_only=fe36973b872b46579e3dfcb888a90baf).

STUDY 1

Method

Study 1 used data from the World Values Survey (WVS), a cross-national survey with representative samples from 99 countries worldwide, to assess the relationship between SES and self-reported past boycotting behavior.

Participants

We relied on data from four waves of the WVS (years 1994–2022) that measure participation in boycotts. The final sample has 298,749 observations in the model with no controls and 216,122 observations in the model with controls (M_{age} = 41.17, SD = 16.05; 50% female). For sample details across all studies, see Appendix S1.

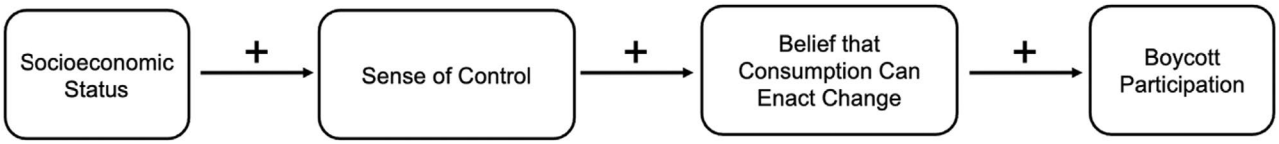

FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework.

15327663, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://myscp.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jcpy.70021 by Universidade Catolica, Wiley Online Library on [27/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

TABLE 1 Overview of the studies.

Study	Sample	SES measure	Dependent variable	Main findings
1	Cross-National (World Values Survey)	SES composite (education, subjective income rank, class identification)	Self-reported boycott participation	Low-SES consumers were less likely to participate in boycotts relative to their high-SES peers.
2	Cross-National (Online Pool, Prolific)	SES composite (education, SES rank, class identification)	Intention to boycott	Low-SES individuals displayed a reduced intention to boycott relative to their high-SES peers.
3	United States (Online Pool, Prolific)	Manipulated subjective SES	Intention to boycott	Individuals experimentally induced to feel low SES displayed a reduced intention to boycott relative to those prompted to feel high SES.
4	Brazil (Wealthy and Impoverished Neighborhoods)	Neighborhood-inferred SES	Past boycotting behavior Sense of control Belief that consumption can enact change	Low-SES individuals displayed a reduced intention to boycott relative to their high-SES peers. This effect was explained by the reduced sense of control, and ensuing diminished belief that consumption can enact change among low- (vs. high-) SES individuals.

Boycotting

Respondents reported their boycott participation by indicating whether they had joined a boycott in the past (coded as 1), had not joined a boycott but might join in the future (coded as 2), or had not joined and would never join one (coded as 3). We recoded this variable to compare the likelihood of having joined a boycott in the past (1) vs. not (2 and 3). In Appendix S2, we compare the likelihood of each category in a multinomial model. The results hold irrespective of the coding used.

Measure of SES

The WVS assesses individual SES through a composite measure of education (from 1994 to 2014: 1 = no formal education, 8 = university degree; from 2017 to 2022: 0 = early childhood education to 8 = Doctoral/equivalent), social class identification (1 = lower class, 5 = upper class), and subjective household income rank vis-à-vis others in the country (1 = lowest decile, 10 = highest decile).

Sociodemographic variables

We control for participants' age, gender (1 = male, 0 = female), political ideology (1 = left, 10 = right), importance of politics in life (1 = not at all important, 4 = very important), employment status (1 = full-time employee, 0 = not employed), and subjective state of health (1 = very poor, 5 = very good).

Results

We conducted a logistic regression of the likelihood of having boycotted in the past (1 = yes, 0 = no) as a function of individual-level SES. There was a significant positive effect of SES on past boycotting behavior both in the model with the previously described controls ($b = 0.454$, SE = 0.011, $p < 0.001$) and without controls ($b = 0.506$, SE = 0.009, $p < 0.001$). We tested the effect within each of the 99 countries in our sample and meta-analyzed these effects. The positive effect of SES was significant in 69 of the countries, leading to a combined effect-size of Hedges' $g = 0.15$. Appendix S2 provides further details about the effects of control variables and within-country analyses.

Discussion

Study 1 provides evidence supporting a positive relationship between consumers' SES and boycott participation. Compared to high-SES consumers, low-SES consumers are less likely to report engaging in boycotts. We replicated these effects in a supplementary study using US data from online Google searches, which tested the association between consumers' SES and their interest in boycotts (Appendix S3).

While providing initial support for the proposed effect, these studies have several limitations. First, our boycotting measure in Study 1 was the general likelihood to boycott, lacking specificity to consumer-company contexts. Second, these initial studies cannot rule out whether differences in one's ability to boycott

15327663, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://myscp.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jcpy.70021 by Universidade Catolica, Wiley Online Library on [27/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

(e.g., availability of substitutes, price of alternatives) contributed to the observed SES disparities in boycotting participation. We address these limitations in Study 2.

STUDY 2

Study 2 tests the link between SES and boycotting intentions in a context that (i) is directly tied to consumption and (ii) controls for alternative explanations based on discrepancies in the availability and price of substitutes. Participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which their favorite fast-food chain engaged in two different types of ethical transgressions and to indicate the likelihood that they would boycott the company by switching to a similarly priced competitor.

Method

Participants

The study was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/9prq-gz9d.pdf). We recruited 504 respondents from Prolific Academic (M_{age} = 36.74, SD = 13.16; 50% females). No participants were removed.

Procedure

Participants were asked to imagine that they were at the mall, looking for a fast-food chain to eat a quick meal. They were told that all fast-food chains at the mall had similar prices and that one of them was their favorite. However, while browsing their phones, they learned about an ongoing boycott by consumers against the company. Using a within-subjects design, participants read, in counterbalanced order, information connecting their favorite fast-food chain to two different transgressions: (a) racial bias, with reports of blatant discriminatory hiring decisions and unfair treatment of employees, and (b) environmental damage related to the company's carbon footprint (detailed descriptions are provided in Appendix S4). We used two scenarios in a within-subjects design to test whether the effect of SES on boycotting intentions generalizes across different types of company transgressions while maintaining efficiency in data collection.

After being presented with each scenario, participants indicated their likelihood of joining each boycott and avoiding their preferred restaurant (1 = very unlikely, 4 = very likely). Finally, they filled out a sociodemographic questionnaire containing questions about their age, gender, race, political ideology, and SES.

Measure of SES

We created a composite metric by standardizing and averaging three SES measures: educational attainment (1 = less than high school, 9 = doctorate degree), subjective social class identification (1 = lower class, 5 = upper-class), and subjective SES rank (self-placement on a ladder of socioeconomic status vis-à-vis others in the country; 1 = least well off in society, 10 = most well off in society).

Results and discussion

Following our preregistered analysis, we regressed boycotting intentions on SES, controlling for age, gender, race, political orientation, and a scenario/moral transgression dummy variable. Appendix S4 provides details on the effects of the control variables. We clustered standard errors at the individual level to account for the within-subjects nature of our study. Using scenarios that kept the availability and price of substitutes constant across all participants, we found that low- (vs. high-) SES individuals displayed a lower inclination to boycott their preferred fast-food chain (b = 0.11, SE = 0.05, CI = [0.02, 0.20], p = 0.018, η^2 = 0.01). A model including the interaction between SES and the type of transgression revealed that the interaction coefficient did not reach significance (p = 0.19).

Taken together, the results from the studies so far provide support for a positive link between SES and boycott participation; however, the evidence is correlational in nature. The next study addresses this limitation by manipulating SES.

STUDY 3

Study 3 sought to establish causality. Participants were prompted to think of themselves as being high or low in SES and then indicated the extent to which they would engage in boycotting behavior. This subjective SES manipulation aims to shift individuals' perceptions of their own social standing, thereby activating internalized beliefs and behavioral tendencies associated with low- versus high-SES groups.

Method

Participants

The study was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/q8ph-p9hp.pdf). We recruited 301 participants via Prolific Academic (M_{age} = 43.90, SD = 13.74; 53% females). No participants were removed.

15327663, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://myscp.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jcpy.70021 by Universidade Catolica, Wiley Online Library on [27/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to subjectively feel either low or high SES (Anderson et al., 2012; Dubois et al., 2015). They were instructed to think of a ladder representing the socioeconomic distribution in the US and imagine that they stood in an inferior (or superior) position to others. Participants were prompted to imagine they were in a worse-off (better-off) position compared to those who have the most (least) money, most (least) education, and the most (least) respected jobs. To reinforce the manipulation, they were then asked to think and write, using an open-ended field, about how it would feel to be in that situation and the things they could and could not be able to buy.

Next, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they would boycott a product or service of a company for a social, environmental, or political reason (1 = not at all, 7 = very likely; $M = 2.88$, SD = 1.32). In this study, we used a generic context to capture how SES influenced consumers' generalized proclivity to boycott irrespective of the type of company transgression.

Results and discussion

The results revealed a positive effect of manipulated SES on boycotting intentions, such that participants in the low-SES condition reported a lower intention to boycott ($M = 2.69$, SD = 1.30) than those in the high-SES condition ($M = 3.08$, SD = 1.32; $b = 0.38$, SE = 0.15, CI = [0.09, 0.68], $p = 0.011$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$). Results remained unchanged in an exploratory analysis adding gender, age, race, and political orientation as covariates ($b = 0.41$, SE = 0.15, CI = [0.12, 0.70], $p = 0.006$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$; see Appendix S5). Appendix S6 details the results of a replication of study 3 with a sample of university students from Portugal (rather than members of the US general population).

STUDY 4

Study 4 was designed to provide support for the sense of control mechanism. More specifically, it aimed to document the full mediation chain linking SES to boycotting behavior in a lab-in-the-field examination. We predicted that low-SES consumers would experience a diminished sense of control, which would, in turn, weaken their belief that consumption can enact change, reducing their boycotting intention.

Method

Participants

The study was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/bmss-3bpy.pdf). We recruited 380 participants in wealthy (i.e., South Zone [high-SES]) and deprived (i.e., Favela da Maré [low-SES]) regions of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil ($M_{age} = 38.42$, SD = 15.58; 49% female). Whereas the South Zone is one of the most affluent regions in the country, with extremely high square footage prices, Favela da Maré is a conglomerate of 16 slums where people struggle to meet basic needs.

Procedure

Participants were first asked to indicate whether they had refused to purchase any type of product or service because of the social, political, or environmental values of the company in the previous 12 months (yes vs. no). Next, we measured two serial mediators. Participants completed a six-item measure of sense of control (e.g., "I can do just about anything I really set my mind to" and "What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me") adapted from Lachman and Weaver (1998) (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). They also completed a two-item measure of belief that consumption can enact change: "As a consumer, I can use my consumption choices to influence change in society" and "The way people buy can help change the way companies behave" (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The order of the mediators was randomized. Finally, they completed a sociodemographic questionnaire containing questions about their age, gender, race, political ideology, and SES.

Measure of SES

Following recent research (Andretti et al., 2025; Jacob et al., 2022; Vieites & Mittal, 2025), we used a neighborhood-inferred measure of SES. A summary of the socioeconomic discrepancies across regions is described in Appendix S7.

Results and discussion

Boycott behavior

We regressed past boycotting behavior (1 = boycotted, 0 = did not boycott) on the SES dummy variable (1 = wealthy region, 0 = deprived region), controlling for age, gender, race, and political ideology. As expected, participants from the low-SES region were less likely to boycott than participants from the high-SES region ($b = 2.26$, SE = 0.78, CI = [0.73, 3.80], $p = 0.004$, Odds Ratio = 9.6). For details, see Appendix S8.

Serial mediation

A serial mediation model revealed that the reduced boycotting behavior among low- (vs. high-) SES consumers is driven by their reduced sense of control, which in

15327663, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://myscp.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jcpy.70021 by Universidade Catolica, Wiley Online Library on [27/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

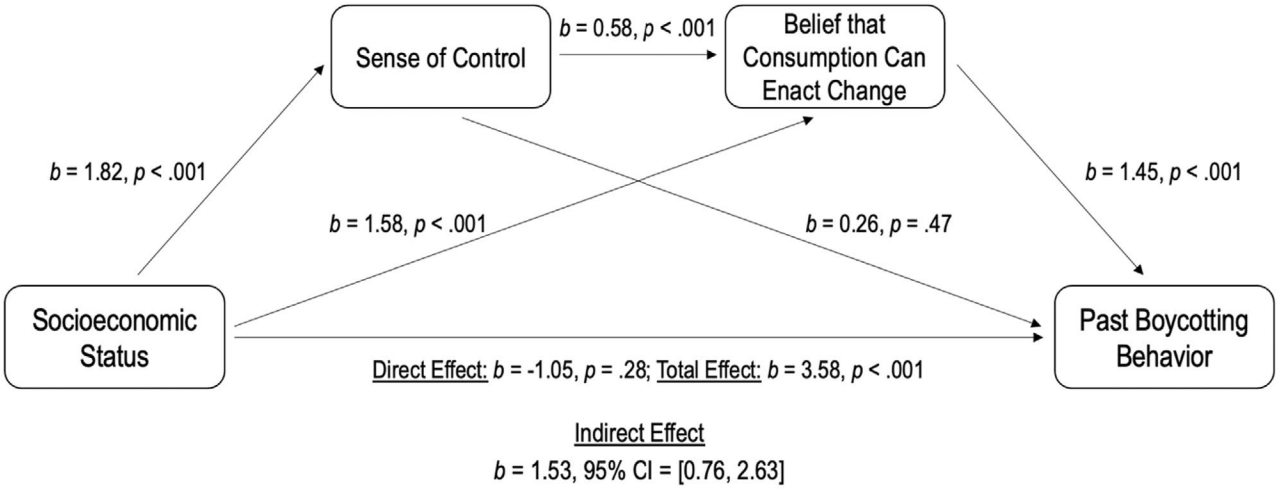

FIGURE 2 Serial indirect effect of SES on Boycott behavior via sense of control and beliefs that consumption can enact change (Study 4).

turn diminishes their belief that consumption can enact change (Figure 2).

We replicated these findings in a supplementary study conducted online with members of the broader Brazilian population (Appendix S8).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Boycotting provides a means for consumers to drive change in the marketplace. Our research reveals that, while consumer activism behaviors such as boycotting are becoming more common, this behavior is not uniformly adopted across consumer groups. Specifically, low-SES individuals are less likely to engage in boycotting than their high-SES counterparts, even after accounting for the influence of political orientation. We demonstrate that this gap is driven by a reduced sense of control among low-SES consumers, which decreases their belief that consumption choices can bring meaningful change.

Our research offers several theoretical contributions. We add to the consumer activism literature by identifying a segment of the population that is particularly reluctant to engage in boycotting. While prior studies have focused on the role of political ideology in shaping consumer activism (Endres & Panagopoulos, 2017; Fernandes, 2020), this research demonstrates that socioeconomic disadvantage can hinder engagement, independently of political ideology. In addition, rather than focusing on external constraints such as switching costs and lack of alternatives or resources (Sen et al., 2001) and examining how they shape SES discrepancies in engagement, we shed light on the psychological underpinnings of this resistance: sense of control and beliefs that consumption can enact change. In doing so, we respond to recent appeals encouraging consumer researchers to investigate more deeply the psychology of low-SES consumers (Carey & Markus, 2016; Pham, 2016; Shavitt et al., 2016) and shed light on the complex ways in which inequality shapes consumer behavior (Thompson et al., 2025).

Future research could examine when a communal orientation promotes boycott participation. Consumers may not construe boycotting as a communal action unless this aspect is made explicit. Absent such cues, people may interpret boycotting as an individual act of agency—which is less aligned with the typical modes of behavior adopted by low-SES individuals (Stephens et al., 2007). Future research could examine whether communal framing by making the tangible collective benefits of participation more salient helps bridge SES gaps in boycott participation. Another relevant factor that can strengthen the role of communal orientation on boycotting participation pertains to the perceived urgency of the cause. Because lower-SES individuals are particularly responsive to urgent causes (Vieites et al., 2022), communal orientation may play a stronger role when boycotts are framed as addressing immediate, high-stakes issues.

Our research also offers a number of other directions for future investigations. First, exploring the link between SES and consumer activism beyond boycotting—such as petition signing or protesting—could provide deeper insights into the generalizability of the phenomenon. While different forms of activism demand varying psychological, financial, and time-related resources, our measures of sense of control and belief that consumption can enact change were context-independent, suggesting that the proposed mechanisms may extend to other types of consumer activism. Providing initial evidence for the generalizability of the documented effects, a supplementary study with residents from wealthy and deprived regions of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, shows that low-SES consumers display a reduced belief in the effectiveness of not only boycotting but also protesting and petition signing (Appendix S9). Similarly, analyses of other forms of activism available in the WVS in Study 1 reveal that

15327663, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://myscp.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jcpy.70021 by Universidade Catolica, Wiley Online Library on [27/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

SES is positively associated with petition signing, joining strikes, attending demonstrations, and occupying private properties for protesting (Appendix S2). Thus, despite the contextual differences between boycotting and traditional forms of political engagement, the convergence of findings suggests that SES may influence a broader disposition toward political participation across different domains.

Future work could also examine the role of political ideology in shaping the responses of high- and low-SES individuals to companies' transgressions. Although we systematically replicated prior findings showing a negative effect of conservatism on boycott participation, our exploratory analyses revealed mixed results regarding the interaction between political ideology and SES (Appendix S10). Scholars could further investigate these heterogeneous effects and explore how they might vary depending on contextual factors, such as the type of transgression being considered.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Socioeconomic Status and Consumer Activism at https://osf.io/?view_only=fe36973b872b46579e3dfcb888a90baf.

ORCID

Yan Vieites https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3806-1876
Daniel Fernandes https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1318-9290

REFERENCES

Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *50*(2), 179–211.

Anderson, C., Kraus, M. W., Galinsky, A. D., & Keltner, D. (2012). The local-ladder effect: Social status and subjective well-being. *Psychological Science*, *23*, 764–771.

Andretti, B., Vieites, Y., Elmor, L., & Andrade, E. B. (2025). How socioeconomic status shapes food preferences and perceptions. *Journal of Marketing*, *89*(6), 33–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429241296048

Armingeon, K., & Schädel, L. (2015). Social inequality in political participation: The dark sides of individualisation. *West European Politics*, *38*(1), 1–27.

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, *84*(2), 191–215.

Brady, H. E., Verba, S., & Schlozman, K. L. (1995). Beyond SES: A resource model of political participation. *American Political Science Review*, *89*(2), 271–294.

Cannon, C., Goldsmith, K., & Roux, C. (2025). An integrative theory of resource discrepancies. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *35*(1), 81–97.

Carey, R. M., & Markus, H. R. (2016). Understanding consumer psychology in working-class contexts. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *26*(4), 568–582. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2016.08.004

Carey, R. M., & Markus, H. R. (2017). Social class shapes the form and function of relationships and selves. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *18*, 123–130.

Dalton, R. J. (2017). *The participation gap: Social status and political inequality*. Oxford University Press.

Deloitte. (2020). *Get out in front: Global research report*.

DeMarco, J. (2022). *1 in 4 Americans are currently boycotting a product or company*. LendingTree.

Dietze, P., & Knowles, E. D. (2016). Social class and the motivational relevance of other human beings: Evidence from visual attention. *Psychological Science*, *27*(11), 1517–1527.

Dubois, D., Rucker, D. D., & Galinsky, A. D. (2015). Social class, power, and selfishness: When and why upper and lower class individuals behave unethically. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *108*(3), 436–449.

Eckhardt, G. M., Belk, R., & Devinney, T. M. (2010). Why don't consumers consume ethically? *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, *9*(6), 426–436.

Elbæk, C. T., Mitkidis, P., Aarøe, L., & Otterbring, T. (2023). Subjective socioeconomic status and income inequality are associated with self-reported morality across 67 countries. *Nature Communications*, *14*(1), 5453.

Endres, K., & Panagopoulos, C. (2017). Boycotts, buycotts, and political consumerism in America. *Research and Politics*, *4*(4), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168017738632

Fernandes, D. (2020). Politics at the mall: The moral foundations of boycotts. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *39*(4), 494–513. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620943178

Grasso, M., & Giugni, M. (2022). Intra-generational inequalities in young people's political participation in Europe: The impact of social class on youth political engagement. *Politics*, *42*(1), 13–38.

Griskevicius, V., Tybur, J. M., Delton, A. W., & Robertson, T. E. (2011). The influence of mortality and socioeconomic status on risk and delayed rewards: A life history theory approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *100*, 1015–1026. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022403

Grossmann, I., & Varnum, M. E. (2011). Social class, culture, and cognition. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *2*(1), 81–89.

Hamilton, T. (2013). Beyond market signals: Negotiating marketplace politics and corporate responsibilities. *Economic Geography*, *89*(3), 285–307.

Heath, O. (2018). Policy alienation, social alienation and working-class abstention in Britain, 1964–2010. *British Journal of Political Science*, *48*(4), 1053–1073.

Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010a). Most people are not WEIRD. *Nature*, *466*(7302), 29.

Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010b). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *33*(2–3), 61–83.

Jacob, J., Vieites, Y., Goldszmidt, R., & Andrade, E. B. (2022). Expected socioeconomic-status-based discrimination reduces price sensitivity among the poor. *Journal of Marketing Research*, *59*(6), 1083–1100.

Klein, J. G., Smith, N. C., & John, A. (2004). Why we boycott: Consumer motivations for boycott participation. *Journal of Marketing*, *68*(3), 92–109. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.68.3.92.34770

Kraus, M. W., Côté, S., & Keltner, D. (2010). Social class, contextualism, and empathic accuracy. *Psychological Science*, *21*(11), 1716–1723.

Kraus, M. W., & Keltner, D. (2009). Signs of socioeconomic status: A thin-slicing approach. *Psychological Science*, *20*(1), 99–106.

Kraus, M. W., Piff, P. K., & Keltner, D. (2009). Social class, sense of control, and social explanation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *97*(6), 992–1004.

Kraus, M. W., Piff, P. K., Mendoza-Denton, R., Rheinschmidt, M. L., & Keltner, D. (2012). Social class, solipsism, and contextualism: How the rich are different from the poor. *Psychological Review*, *119*(3), 546–572.

Kraus, M. W., & Stephens, N. M. (2012). A road map for an emerging psychology of social class. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *6*(9), 642–656.

Lachman, M. E., & Weaver, S. L. (1998). The sense of control as a moderator of social class differences in health and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*(3), 763–773.

15327663, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://myscp.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jcpy.70021 by Universidade Catolica, Wiley Online Library on [27/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Manstead, A. S. (2018). The psychology of social class: How socioeconomic status impacts thought, feelings, and behaviour. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *57*(2), 267–291.

Massey, D. S. (1990). American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass. *American Journal of Sociology*, *96*(2), 329–357. https://doi.org/10.1086/229532

Mittal, C., & Griskevicius, V. (2014). Sense of control under uncertainty depends on People's childhood environment: A life history theory approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *107*, 621–637. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037398

Musterd, S., & Ostendorf, W. (2013). In S. Musterd & W. Ostendorf (Eds.), *Urban segregation and the welfare state: Inequality and exclusion in Western cities*. Routledge.

Pham, M. T. (2016). The forgotten working-class consumer. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *26*(4), 566–567.

Piff, P. K., Kraus, M. W., Côté, S., Cheng, B. H., & Keltner, D. (2010). Having less, giving more: The influence of social class on prosocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *99*(5), 771–784.

Piff, P. K., Kraus, M. W., & Keltner, D. (2018). Unpacking the inequality paradox: The psychological roots of inequality and social class. In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Elsevier.

Piff, P. K., Stancato, D. M., Martinez, A. G., Kraus, M. W., & Keltner, D. (2012). Class, chaos, and the construction of community. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *103*(6), 949–962.

Rucker, D. D., Galinsky, A. D., & Magee, J. C. (2018). The agentic–communal model of advantage and disadvantage: How inequality produces similarities in the psychology of power, social class, gender, and race. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *58*, 71–125.

Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science*, *277*(5328), 918–924.

Schaub, M. (2021). Acute financial hardship and voter turnout: Theory and evidence from the sequence of bank working days. *American Political Science Review*, *115*(4), 1258–1274.

Schlager, T., Mohan, B., DeCelles, K., & Norton, M. (2021). Consumers—Especially women—Avoid buying from firms with higher gender pay gaps. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *31*(3), 518–531. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1219

Sen, S., Gurhan-Canli, Z., & Morwitz, V. (2001). Withholding consumption: A social dilemma. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *28*(3), 399–417.

Shavitt, S., Jiang, D., & Cho, H. (2016). Stratification and segmentation: Social class in consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *26*(4), 583–593. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2016.08.005

Stellar, J. E., Manzo, V. M., Kraus, M. W., & Keltner, D. (2012). Class and compassion: Socioeconomic factors predict responses to suffering. *Emotion*, *12*(3), 449–459.

Stephens, N. M., Markus, H. R., & Townsend, S. S. (2007). Choice as an act of meaning: The case of social class. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *93*(5), 814.

Thompson, D. V., Kirmani, A., Hamilton, R., Li, A., du Plessis, C., Fernandes, D., & Wilcox, K. (2025). Cycles of inequality in the marketplace: Insights from macro, marketer, and consumer perspectives. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*.

Vieites, Y., Goldszmidt, R., & Andrade, E. B. (2022). Social class shapes donation allocation preferences. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *48*(5), 775–795.

Vieites, Y., & Mittal, C. (2025). How low socioeconomic status hinders organ donation: An extended self account. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *52*(2), 266–287.

Wigfield, A., & Eccles, J. S. (2000). Expectancy–value theory of achievement motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *25*(1), 68–81.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Vieites, Y., Fernandes, D., & Thompson, D. V. (2026). Stratified consumer activism: How socioeconomic status shapes boycott participation. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *36*, 261–269. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.70021

15327663, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://myscp.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jcpy.70021 by Universidade Catolica, Wiley Online Library on [27/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License