

Do boycotts against McDonalds and Starbucks work? They can, just not for the reason you might think

December 6 2023, by Cody Mello-Klein



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

What do Starbucks, McDonald's, Target and Amazon have in common, other than being some of the biggest corporations in the world?

Boycotts.

At some point in the last year, each of them has been the target of a consumer boycott, either on social media with hashtags or in person with protesters outside their doors.

The reasons vary: ire over Starbucks and McDonald's perceived support for Israel during the Israel-Hamas war; opposition to Amazon's tax avoidance and union-busting tactics; conservative backlash over Bud Light's social media partnership with a transgender influencer.

Boycotts are a tried and true strategy, one of the few ways consumers have of making their voices heard, using the one tool they have—their wallet—to let corporations know what they think by dealing some damage to their bottom line.

But do boycotts actually work? Is voting with your wallet as powerful as consumers hope it is? According to Yakov Bart, associate professor of marketing at Northeastern University, the success of a boycott often comes down to the brand, not the consumers.

"It more likely has to do something with the brands chosen as the target," Bart says. "When the brands are more easily replaceable, then they're more vulnerable to a consumer boycott."

The more market power a company has, the more pervasive it and its products are, the more challenging it is for consumers to make a dent in its profits with a boycott. The inherent challenge most boycotts face is that every company creates products and designs brands to make them seem indispensable to consumers in their daily lives, Bart says. But companies like Amazon, due to its global reach and deep integration into the fabric of modern life, pose an even greater challenge.

"It's easy to say or put #boycottAmazon on [social media](#)," Bart says. "It's much harder to reduce your dependency on Amazon, which for a lot of people is substantial these days."

Unlike unions for workers, there's no consumer union helping to keep people organized, so it's naturally hard for boycott movements to pick up large-scale momentum.

"As long as you occasionally go out to buy those brands because it's convenient for you, then clearly the boycott is not going to work," Bart says. "If it doesn't translate to mass behavior of consumers actually switching away from brands, then it doesn't work."

Consumers have to choose not to buy a product, but that choice isn't easy for people who may buy certain products because of their price and convenience or a lack of other options in their area. In the past, that's been a challenge for boycotts against Starbucks, Bart says. In major cities, there is no shortage of other coffee shops, but outside cities or even in smaller cities, Starbucks is often the most convenient, readily available option.

Efforts like the boycotts against Bud Light and Target, which resulted in plummeting sales for both companies, are successful less because of how effective anti-LGBTQ political organization is and more because those companies exist in markets that are saturated with options, Bart says. They're the perfect targets for a [boycott](#).

"How difficult is it to shop at Walmart instead of Target?" Bart says. "Maybe it's not so difficult. How difficult is it to switch from Bud Light to another light beer, of which there are so many and they're so accessible?"

Just because certain companies are less susceptible to boycotts doesn't

mean consumers can't have an impact through boycotts. But it can result in a psychological paradox similar to the one that exists for some people with voting: If people think their vote doesn't matter, they are less inclined to vote. If enough people start to think that way, then it does actually start to have an impact.

"Bud Light losing a quarter of its sales, Target losing billions in market cap—these are tangible dents to companies," Bart says. "You could think that whether you're going to order from Amazon today or you're going to walk out and buy something at a local store is not going to change how well Jeff Bezos is going to sleep tonight. But if millions of consumers are going to take the same action, then of course there is a material effect on the [company](#)'s bottom line."

This story is republished courtesy of Northeastern Global News news.northeastern.edu.

Provided by Northeastern University

Citation: Do boycotts against McDonalds and Starbucks work? They can, just not for the reason you might think (2023, December 6) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-boycotts-mcdonalds-starbucks.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.