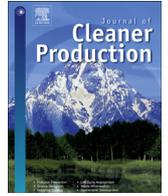




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## Corporate mobilization of political consumerism in developing societies

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### ABSTRACT

Political consumerism is increasingly acknowledged as a form of citizen participation and also as a set of behaviors instrumental to the accomplishment of sustainable consumption goals. However, scholarly research has overlooked occurrences in developing societies and tended to overemphasize cultural explanations, anchored in post-materialist values and the effects of sub-politics, as a catalyst for political consumerism. We offer an alternative interpretation, arguing that corporations invoke consumers' sense of shared responsibility for realizing public goods in order to mobilize consumers to engage in boycotting and buycotting behaviors. Using a representative sample of adults living in urban areas of Brazil, bivariate and multivariate analyses are performed to test the relative weight of these different explanations. The breadth of favorable attitudes towards corporate social responsibility and their stronger correlation with political-consumption behaviors suggest that citizens from low-income democracies strongly rely on cues related to corporate-citizenship activism for achieving political goals at the marketplace.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, research on political behavior has shifted its focus from conventional forms of individual participation, such as voting and working for political parties, to non-conventional modes of involvement, such as protesting in the streets and engaging in activism in new arenas like the marketplace and cyberspace (Dalton, 2008; Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 2002). Political consumerism—in which consumers act to influence producers by supporting or rejecting products and brands based on their ethical or socio-environmental credentials, in order to bring about societal change—is one such novel form of individual, unconventional participation (Micheletti et al., 2004; Stolle et al., 2005). As positive societal change has been increasingly defined in terms of making progress towards a model of sustainability, political consumerism has also acquired a pivotal status as a key component of sustainable consumption repertoires of action (Clarke et al., 2007a; Spaargaren and Oosterveer, 2010).

In this paper we focus on two emblematic expressions of political consumerism: rewarding economic agents by endorsing and purchasing from them (“buycotts”) and punishing companies

by engaging in contentious relationships with them (boycotts). These actions, be they at the point of sale or through favorable or adversarial word-of-mouth, acquire a political character; they ultimately seek to favor the generation of public goods by private providers like corporations. From a business perspective, political consumerism constitutes consumers' allocation of incentives in response to agents' perceived role in facilitating public goods. Consumers favor organizations perceived as promoting collective interests and withdraw support from companies that put currently available public goods at risk. By doing so, boycotts and buycotts affect the distribution of power (i.e., reputation, market share, and social license to operate) among corporate agents. Earlier definitions of political consumerism—which describe it as “having the aim of changing ethically or politically objectionable institutional and market practices” (Micheletti, 2010: 2)—overstate boycotting responses and downplay buycotting choices. Accordingly, we broaden these earlier descriptions: We understand that politically motivated consumer behavior in developing countries aims to assure the continuation of, or redress threats to, the private provision of public goods. This understanding takes into account the surrounding context of political consumerism practices; this context is characterized, on the one hand, by social inequality, environmental constraints, and a scarcity of government-delivered public goods (UNDP, 2013) and, on the other hand, by the increasing power of the corporate universe (as

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compared to government) to influence and provide governance to society through the supply of public goods (Scherer and Palazzo, 2010; Visser, 2008).

Research suggests that, second only to voting, politically motivated consumer choice is the leading mode of individual participation in industrialized democracies (Ferrer-Fons and Fraile, 2013; Zukin et al., 2006). However, scholarly discussions remain largely circumscribed to the context of northern hemisphere societies, overlooking conditions in developing countries. This is surprising, given the high rates of unorthodox forms of political participation in the developing world (Inglehart and Catterberg, 2002) and the prevalence of consumer protests to achieve political goals like social justice, labor and human rights, and economic fairness in regions like Latin America (Eckstein, 2006; Rhodes, 2006; Rodríguez-Garavito, 2005). Furthermore, individual-level data for this region indicates that joining boycotts is more popular than partisan membership, community involvement, joining strikes, or building occupation (Klesner, 2007). Accounts regarding boycotting and buycotting (rewarding companies for political reasons) estimate that, on average, at least one in seven Brazilians (14.3%), and one in five Argentineans (19%) and Mexicans (19.6%), have engaged in these behaviors since 1998 (Echegaray, 2015).

What accounts for the emergence of market-based activism in developing countries? To what extent do scholarly observations of influences in the northern hemisphere facilitate an understanding of citizen engagement with politically motivated consumption in the South? Are there unique characteristics of low-income democracies that affect their citizens' opportunities to practice political consumerism? This paper aims to address these questions by empirically discussing the individual-level influences that propel the politicization of relationships with companies in Brazil. In doing so, it seeks to enlarge the common interpretative framework of political consumerism—a framework that relies heavily on explanations of changing values towards post-materialist priorities (Inglehart, 1997; Stolle et al., 2005) and on the adoption of sub-political behaviors, such as making responsibility-taking decisions, to address social and environmental grievances. When traditional political institutions are perceived as failing to tackle these problems effectively, individuals turn to sub-political arenas like the market (Beck, 1997; Stolle and Micheletti, 2013).

These accounts might seem appropriate for societies with high numbers of post-materialists and high levels of education (necessary to process detailed information on corporate conduct and develop skills to stimulate individual responsibility-taking behaviors). Yet such is not the case for developing societies like Brazil, which exhibits a tiny minority of post-materialists.<sup>1</sup> In fact, regardless of context, evidence of the influence of post-materialism on political consumerism has proven inconclusive (Barbosa et al., 2014; Ben-Porat et al., 2014; Koos, 2012). The ambiguous connection between values and behaviors should come as no surprise, given the large body of research highlighting the gap between beliefs and action in the areas of sustainable consumption (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Jackson, 2005; Szmigin et al., 2009) and, particularly, political consumerism (Barcellos et al., 2014; Neilson, 2010; Shah et al., 2007).

Further, like much of the developing world, Brazilians' average level of education remains low (UNDP, 2013). This limitation hinders citizens' chances of achieving “an understanding of material products as embedded in a complex social and normative context, which can be called the politics behind products” (Stolle et al.,

2005: 246). Rather than behaving as subjects whose decisions are based on in-depth knowledge of firms and markets, citizens from developing regions like Latin America make intensive use of heuristics or cognitive shortcuts (Echegaray, 2005). We contend that business entrepreneurship in corporate citizenship (e.g., CSR activism) supplies individuals with powerful cues, which convey an understanding of how large companies perform with regards to society and the environment. In other words, CSR activism shapes public awareness of corporate accomplishments in privately providing public goods and molds individuals' comprehension of how to leverage companies into the continuous provision of those public goods.

Lastly, the theory of sub-politics presupposes that a perceived failure of political institutions to cope with society's problems stimulates individuals to engage in an alternative repertoire of action and take responsibility for promoting solutions to social and environmental issues (Beck, 1997; Stolle et al., 2005). Political consumerism emerges as a “citizen-prompted, citizen-created action involving people taking charge of matters that they themselves deem important in a variety of arenas” (Micheletti, 2010: 25). Thus, political consumers emerge as prototypical subjects of sub-politics. In Brazil, however, the viability of this bottom-up perspective is challenged by low levels of education, political interest, and efficacy (Ames et al., 2013). Moreover, political distrust is so pervasive among Brazilians (Moisés, 2011; Power and Jamison, 2005) that covariance between market-based activism and political mistrust cannot be gauged. As a result, the prospects for finding autonomous, self-guided, responsibility-taking individuals behind the enactment of political consumerism are grim. Low levels of post-materialism and political involvement and high levels of political mistrust prevalent in developing contexts like Brazil are not generally considered conducive to fostering political consumerism. How then, does one explain the prevalence of market-based activism in Brazil?

Given the lack of research on political consumerism in emerging nations, we offer a descriptive discussion that identifies the underlying characteristics of individuals who engage in this type of action, followed by an assessment of the conditions favoring consumer political activism. Using general population survey data from Brazil, this article seeks to address three questions: what type of individual connects to brands and products in order to advance political and ethical goals?; to what extent does political consumerism in this society align with standard theorizations about post-materialism and sub-politics?; and what role is played by consumer endorsement of corporate citizenship action, which ultimately mirrors business's efficacy in mobilizing society around its agenda of sustainability?

Citizens' attempts to use political consumerism to mobilize corporations to provide public goods is well established in the literature (Stolle and Micheletti, 2013); we contend that corporations, similarly, use their leverage to generate public goods through symbolic and substantive sustainability performance to mobilize consumers to favor them in the marketplace. Simply put, we posit that corporate social responsibility (CSR) actions stimulate citizens to engage in practices of political consumerism. CSR represents a multi-dimensional concept in which positive corporate involvement results in benefits for the community, the environment, the local economy, and the firm's most direct stakeholders (e.g., employees, consumers, etc.) (Dahlsrud, 2008). If it is true that CSR remains a complex, over-stretched concept—one that encompasses both external considerations like philanthropic initiatives, socially inclusive business practices, and green economy supply and internal considerations like progressive employee policies, resource efficiency programs, and extended product responsibility—then CSR can be synthesized as a market-born governance proposition

<sup>1</sup> World Value Survey incidence of post-materialists in Brazil reached 10.5% in 2006 and 11.1% in 2014. <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>.

whose repercussions are contingent on the actual or perceived effects accomplished with regards to collective interests. As such, CSR activism illustrates the extent to which the private provision of public goods becomes tangible to citizens and can be linked to corporate behavior.

The political mobilization of consumers occurs in defense of the private provision of public goods and is largely incentivized by a corporate rhetoric of shared responsibility between consumers and businesses. Corporate communications that highlight businesses' fulfillment of their share of these responsibilities aim to inspire individuals to engage in reciprocal behaviors through political consumerism, either by rewarding companies perceived as responsible for generating these goods or by chastising firms perceived as putting public goods at risk. Boycotting and buy-cotting are thereby presented as legitimate repertoires of action through which consumers can satisfy their share of responsibilities in ensuring the provision of public goods. It is our assumption that these effects of corporate mobilization of political consumption practices are more likely to spread in developing nations, which often endure weak state-governance regimes and underfunded public-policy programs (Rudra, 2002; UNDP, 2013); in these nations, big business effectively competes with government, as large companies have the resources and managerial capabilities necessary to influence and provide governance to society through the supply of public goods (Scherer and Palazzo, 2010; Visser, 2008). A correlation of political consumption practices with individuals' acknowledgment and advocacy of CSR policy as a key framework for bringing about positive societal change would indicate that corporate mobilization of market-based activism is taking place.

The remainder of this article is organized in five sections. First, we briefly review the context of political consumerism in Brazil. Then, we detail our conceptual framework and present our hypotheses. A third section summarizes data and methods, and a fourth, which discusses our findings, describes the distinctive characteristics of political consumers and investigates the relative weight of competing motivations for embracing market-based activism. The final section offers conclusions and implications, bearing in mind our primary intention to expand our comparative understanding of political participation, sustainable consumption, and, particularly, political consumerism.

## 2. Contextualizing political consumerism in Brazil

Research on political participation in Brazil has focused predominantly on state-oriented actions, while overlooking unconventional activities that enlist the action of nongovernmental agents (Avritzer, 2010; Cornwall and Coelho, 2006). Even scholarship that recognizes the mobilization of important segments from civil society and the connection between social capital and political involvement has tended to overlook market-based behaviors and to focus, instead, on state-related actions (Alvarez et al., 1998; McDonough et al., 1998). Yet, consumer practices (especially among Brazil's middle-class women), ignited by price increases in commodities and perceived abuses against customers by market forces, have been interpreted as instrumental to the formation of political-identity projects (O'Dougherty, 1998). Further, consumer influence has been recognized, at times, as a powerful political tool. Such was the case in 1986, when hyperinflation threatened Brazil's stillborn democracy; President Sarney, in an attempt to redress frustrations with democracy and secure public support for his government, made a successful call for citizens to act as his price watchdogs. The rhetoric of popularly elected authorities, in which accessibility and opportunities for consumption are equated with

the achievement of citizenship status, has further contributed to the politicization of consumer issues.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1990s, the privatization of public utilities gained legitimacy by presenting privatization as a vehicle for the realization of consumer sovereignty and reframing consumption practices and rights as acts of citizen empowerment (Baker, 2009; Rhodes, 2006). It also ignited boycott campaigns as service prices skyrocketed and violations of consumer rights became routine. In the telecom services, for example, consumer activism included picketing, filing class-action civil suits, and engaging in mass "hang ups" (Rhodes, 2006). Boycotts continued thereafter (Cruz, 2013) to such an extent that Brazilians rank as the population most actively engaged in boycotting activities in Latin America (Latinobarómetro, 2005–2010; WVS, 2005–2014).

Mainstream literature on political consumerism suggests that post-materialist life priorities and a rejection of conventional political channels in favor of other arenas (e.g., sub-politics) explain citizens' adoption of market boycotting behaviors (Stolle et al., 2005; Stolle and Micheletti, 2013). However, these consumer boycotts are often driven as much by materialistic causes (e.g., defense of jobs or price abuses) as by post-materialist reasons (like ethical or environmental concerns) (Rhodes, 2006); this finding calls into question the expectation that only a post-modern cohesive belief system could yield this type of politically motivated consumer activism. Further, while these boycotts targeted businesses, they rarely denied political agency to government or state-oriented institutions, which often were called in to provide further regulation (Aritzia et al., 2014; Balch, 2010). This raises doubts about how extensively sub-political orientations govern market-oriented activism.

Evidence of positive political consumerism, most commonly manifest in choices that favor organic, eco-labeled, certified and fair-trade products, has also been acknowledged in the developing world (Schäfer et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2014). In the specific case of Brazil, market figures bear witness to the magnitude and social impact of these expressions of politicized consumption, which affect the lives of millions.<sup>3</sup> Scholarly production, nonetheless, cautions that boycotting behaviors should not be construed as the byproduct of a unique set of post-materialist beliefs and responsibility-taking attitudes. For instance, while a few observational studies of organic-food shoppers indicate that purchases occur intentionally to redress market imbalances, empower small-scale and local producers, or chastise companies for engaging in unsound environmental practices (Castañeda, 2012; Portilho, 2010), other research built upon sample surveys posits that consumers' selection of organic food and producers is influenced by self-interest, personal health concerns, or hedonism (Dalcin et al., 2014; Oosterveer et al., 2007; Szmigin et al., 2009). Furthermore, grassroots movements and activists networks that advocate locally grown, organic food networks in Brazil clearly articulate their expectation that the state should step in and recognize the value of

<sup>2</sup> A passage in former President Lula's first state of the nation address nicely illustrates this point: "[the State's bank] Caixa ... opened up over a million of bank accounts for Brazilians previously deprived of banking services. This has enabled them to contract loans for as much as R\$ 1000 to start up new businesses or pay debts. Briefly speaking, they ultimately gained citizenship." (*Folha de S.Paulo*, 18 December 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Organic-food market turnover in Brazil reached USD 765 million in 2012 (*Valor Econômico*, "Mercado de orgânicos faturou BRL 1,5 bi em 2012, estima IPD", 14 May 2013). Consumer patronage of fair-trade products and support for a solidarity economy has benefitted nearly 1.7 million individuals (SIES 2005/2007: <http://www.mte.gov.br/Empregador/EconomiaSolidaria/Fase2/Relatorios/EmpreendimentoResumoNacional.asp>, accessed 29 January 2012). Sales of eco-labeled products have been estimated at USD 650 million (*Revista Globo Rural*, 21 June 2012).

solidarity-economy government policies (Portilho, 2010)—a dynamic that contradicts the notion that boycotting practices are informed by sub-political aspirations.

Civil-society activists aside, the broader context for political consumerism in Brazil is characterized by a top-down, multi-stakeholder composition, led by agents from the business constellation that promotes sustainable consumption as a means of attaining valuable political goals (Ariztia et al., 2014; UN Global Compact LEAD and BSR, 2012). Business political agency stands out, given the size of corporate social investments,<sup>4</sup> the vast capillarity of CSR policies, and the high degree of institutional maturity accomplished by the local CSR movement (Balch, 2010; UN Global Compact LEAD and BSR, 2012; Visser, 2008). Indeed, annual CSR spending rivals government funding for typical social assistance, cultural sponsorship, and environmental protection actions.<sup>5</sup>

We contend that corporate symbolic and substantive performance in social responsibility (what we refer to as CSR activism) works as a cognitive shortcut that informs consumers of the marketplace's efficacy as a means for generating public goods and cues citizens to engage in political consumerism in order to leverage the private provision of public goods. This contention aligns with research showing a strong covariation between the prevalence and degree of dissemination of CSR policies within the business community and individual political consumerism at the national level (Zorell, 2013). Such recognition supports the public's view of corporations as empowered agents for social change and public's valuation of CSR-oriented behavior as instrumental to realizing collective interests. Hence, we must acknowledge that boycotts and buycotts represent more than mere reflections of a post-materialist value balance or attempts to bypass traditional politics to address ethical or socio-environmental concerns. Further, these behaviors signal more than grassroots intents to discipline corporations by targeting them for individual political action; they acknowledge large companies as having a potential role in effecting social change. As the process of politicization of corporations through broader CSR engagement continues (Scherer and Palazzo, 2010), this study offers an opportunity to understand how political consumerism takes shape and evolves in developing societies.

### 3. Conceptual framework

Research on political consumerism has relied heavily on value change and sub-political motivations and largely overlooked the influence of external sources of market-oriented mobilization such as corporate activism. The politicization of consumer choice spurred by corporations, NGOs, and governments should not be discounted (Caruana and Crane, 2008; Clarke et al., 2007a; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014; Holzer, 2006; Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007). This paper is particularly interested in business

influences on the politicization of consumers, because this perspective has been neglected. The bulk of alternative, top-down readings of citizen involvement with ethical shopping has emphasized the role of organized civil groups in mobilizing individuals to boycott or support businesses (Clarke et al., 2007a; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013; Holzer, 2006). These theories, however, assume the existence of a strong, autonomous civil society, which, in the developing world, seems unwarranted (Kurtz, 2004; Weyland, 2004; Wiarda and MacLeish Mott, 2003). In fact, civil-society strength indexes and rankings of national social capital routinely rank developing countries poorly.<sup>6</sup> This poor performance is particularly acute in terms of the actual leverage civic groups and grassroots networks have to influence sustainable consumption policy and action (Costa and Teodosio, 2011; de Zoysa, 2010). Therefore, in addition to examining the role of beliefs and political attitudes, this paper also considers how corporations capitalize on the appeal of social-responsibility policies to mobilize citizens around political consumerism practices.

This study assumes that corporations shape the public's understanding of business responsibility (or irresponsibility) towards public goods in connection to their enactment (or omission) of CSR policies. In turn, these corporations expect consumers to both reward those businesses committed to expanding public goods and punish those competitors who engage in questionable market practices and/or exhibit behaviors that negatively impact segments of society or the environment. Thus, consumers' purchasing power gives them leverage to morally guide the market by directing positive and negative incentives to producers based on their management of public goods.

It is important to note that businesses engaged in CSR activities in Brazil have not mobilized political consumerism directly; rather they have sponsored an institutional setting composed of market-oriented NGOs and grassroots networks (like Instituto Ethos, Instituto Akatu, and GIFE – Grupo de Institutos, and Fundações e Empresas), pro-business think-tanks (like Conselho Empresarial Brasileiro para o Desenvolvimento Sustentável, Fundação Brasileira para o Desenvolvimento Sustentável, Instituto de Cidadania Empresarial, and Fundação Instituto de Desenvolvimento Empresarial e Social), and business-media platforms (like Planeta Sustentável weekly inserts in the most influential general-interest magazines *Veja* and *Epoca* and special green economy or sustainability issues of major business magazines like *Exame*). This institutional setting comprises a network of organizations and means that (a) ascribe consumers with political leverage and political responsibility for bringing about positive societal change, (b) translate and disseminate this societal change through privately provided public goods, (c) present CSR activism as the corporate exercise of their share of responsibilities in bringing societal change, and (d) validate repertoires of action for consumers (mostly limited to boycotts and buycotts) as quintessential tools for exercising responsibility and sovereignty. The repercussions of this institutional landscape extend into the public domain through the works of a cadre of entities and professionals in the CSR field (Shamir, 2004), composed of business schools, media spin doctors and expert publishers, consultants, and specialized pollsters.

The primary role of this institutional setting has been to acknowledge and propagate corporate-citizenship policy (i.e. CSR activism) as a new and critical criterion for market valuation and

<sup>4</sup> Projections of corporate sustainability spending for Brazil for 2016 amount to USD 9.9 billion, which reportedly exceeds similar spending of other countries like UK and Canada (*The Guardian*, "Brazil's big greenwash boom" <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/may/29/brazil-greenwash-environment-research-study-consumer-products> accessed 29 May 2015).

<sup>5</sup> For example, the CSR programs of the largest network of corporate philanthropic foundations projected total funds for BRL 2.4 billion in social and environmental public goods for 2012 (Censo GIFE–2012, São Paulo, Brazil: [http://www.gife.org.br/arquivos/publicacoes/22/Censo%20GIFE%20\(baixa\).pdf](http://www.gife.org.br/arquivos/publicacoes/22/Censo%20GIFE%20(baixa).pdf). Accessed 12 August 2013), a volume estimated to account for not more than one fourth of total CSR spending (GIFE personal communication, 2013). In turn, the budget allocation for 2012 by the state of São Paulo (Brazil's wealthiest and most populous state) for activities comparable to CSR investments was less than BRL 1.6 billion (Governo do Estado de São Paulo 2012, Orçamento do Estado 2012, São Paulo, Brazil: Secretaria de Planejamento e Desenvolvimento Regional).

<sup>6</sup> See, Legatum Prosperity Index: <http://www.prosperity.com/#!/social-capital>; and Lester M. Salamon, S. Wojciech Sokolowski, & Associates, *Global Civil Society: Dimensions of the Nonprofit Sector*, Volume Two (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2004), cap. 2. [http://ccss.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2011/12/Civil-Society-Index\\_FINAL\\_11.15.2011.pdf](http://ccss.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2011/12/Civil-Society-Index_FINAL_11.15.2011.pdf).

purchasing decisions – a parameter likely to operate as a cognitive shortcut for consumers, indicating which brands and products they should endorse or boycott. CSR gains value within the general public and enables consumer realization of its meanings and repercussions through different communication initiatives like persistent-topic advertising,<sup>7</sup> increased media coverage of corporate sustainability issues,<sup>8</sup> extended product labeling,<sup>9</sup> multi-stakeholder campaigns for cleaner production and greener consumer habits, and creation and dissemination of business rankings, indexes, and awards centered on corporate sustainability. Those communication initiatives fostered by the above-mentioned institutional setting guide the public to classify competing economic agents as good or bad corporate citizens (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Pivato et al., 2008) and connects the private provision of public goods with the individual use of consumer leverage at the marketplace to support or chastise market agents based on their performance with regards to the new valuation standard. In doing so, proponents of CSR activism organize the consumer landscape of individual choices by shaping an understanding that social services and public interests (such as community development programs, improved access to education and healthcare, environmental stewardship initiatives, and the supply of carbon footprint-reducing goods for individual consumption, to name a few) can be realized through the work of socially responsible companies. From this perspective, consumers approach the marketplace as though participating in a political referendum, voting for or against corporations based on their record and ability to provide (or put at risk) public goods.

Business engagement with CSR unequivocally addresses consumers as empowered stakeholders capable of bringing forward positive societal change through their individual alignment with corporate-citizenship efforts.<sup>10</sup> The pro-CSR institutional setting lays the groundwork for the social construction of consumer leverage and responsibility (mostly at the checkout line) as a means to secure or expand privately provided public goods. Consumers are ultimately represented as co-responsible actors for the attainment of the public goods associated to CSR policy; they are both conferred the responsibility of contributing to the effective provision of public goods derived from CSR actions through the use of acceptable repertoires of political consumerism, and bestowed the leverage to influence a new power balance in favor of those market players aligned with a specific standard of corporate citizenship. Few studies illustrate the narratives these business-sponsored entities use to empower consumers and make them responsible (e.g. the consumer as hero, pro-CSR

consumption as a sustainability trench, consumers micro-decisions as saving the planet), which are usually followed by a set of suggested instruments and practical prescriptions to enforce consumer sovereignty and accountability (e.g. the use of purchasing power to build a market for CSR-oriented firms, responsible consumption as an exercise of identifying green performance and corporate citizenship signals in products and brands) (Barros et al., 2008; Ariztia et al., 2014; Mutz, 2014). One apparent implication is that business's responsabilization of consumers, when connected to CSR entrepreneurship, does not necessarily aim to cast consumers as scapegoats (Akenji, 2014). Rather than transferring the entire responsibility to consumers, as the moralistic-governance thesis suggests (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), corporations mobilize citizens by framing political consumerism as a setting for governance.

Corporations sponsor this institutional setting to mobilize political consumerism for several reasons. By encouraging citizens to consider a company's CSR performance when making purchasing decisions, market leaders ensure their incumbent status by preemptively deflecting stronger social pressure or government regulation that might force them into practices of broader and riskier corporate accountability. Through pro-active CSR activism, business defines corporate citizenship in terms of philanthropic or social-investment spending, ecological footprint reduction, and/or green product supply – expressions of so-called “weak sustainability” (Lorek and Fuchs, 2011). This allows firms to bypass discussion of social accountability matters regarding the “politics behind the products” they are involved in.<sup>11</sup> For incumbents and challengers, proactive engagement with the private provision of public goods through CSR policy may also represent a competitive advantage and may successfully generate a market niche (Porter and Kramer, 2006); this engagement is likely to unsettle competitors and realign the balance of power within the firm and/or the business segment in which the firm operates (Holt, 2002; King and Pearce, 2010).

Evidence on effects of political consumerism upon companies further reinforces this perspective. Boycotts have a disciplinary effect upon irresponsible firms (Davidson et al., 1995; Craig, 2008; Stolle and Micheletti, 2013); equally important, boycotts also have a motivational impact on responsible corporations to expand their prosocial actions and are selectively embraced by firms as a tactical tool to promote consumer punitive engagement against competitors (McDonnell, 2012). These effects can be identified in Brazil as well (Balch, 2010; Ethical Corporation, 2013).

Positive political consumerism also influences how corporations deal with issues of sustainability (Clarke et al., 2007b; Stolle and Micheletti, 2013). In Brazil, boycotts have been followed by a rise of companies adopting higher standards of social and environmental reporting,<sup>12</sup> a larger supply of eco-labels and ethical schemes to communicate sustainable production processes to the public,<sup>13</sup> a booming market of organic and solidarity economy-

<sup>7</sup> Advertisement quantification and content analysis studies in relation to CSR actions report a 51% increase in companies' paid announcements in Brazil. <http://www.ideiasustentavel.com.br/2010/10/greenwashing-no-brasil>.

<sup>8</sup> Between 2000 and 2012, news published on topics related to CSR and corporate sustainability increased more than 9 times in Brazil's *Folha de S.Paulo*, the newspaper with the largest national coverage. <http://busca.folha.uol.com.br/search?site=jornal>.

<sup>9</sup> Market research studies on product labeling practices indicate a substantive increase in environmentally friendly appeals (427%) through package-embedded eco-labels and statements from 2010 to 2014 (Goerg et al., 2014). See also *The Guardian*, “Brazil's big greenwash boom” <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/may/29/brazil-greenwash-environment-research-study-consumer-products>, accessed 29 May 2015; and *Folha de S.Paulo* “Maquiagem verde' cresce em produtos brasileiros” <http://app.folha.uol.com.br/m/noticia/560125>, 5 June 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Caruana and Crane (2008), Fontenelle (2013), and Giesler and Veresiu (2014) offer accounts of how consumer responsabilization has been construed by corporate initiatives, although disconnected from CSR activism. In Brazil, the link between CSR and consumer empowerment/responsibilization is clearly stated in the documents and websites of leading market-oriented NGOs like Instituto Ethos and Akatu—entities that compose what we call the corporate-sponsored institutional setting for political consumption mobilization (see: <http://www.akatu.org.br/Institucional/OAkatu>).

<sup>11</sup> This confined notion of CSR relates to corporate giving practices that produce generic public goods, in other words, how companies spend money in society. These practices include community involvement, compensation policies to offset production social effects, philanthropy, and the management of selected externalities and selected stakeholders' expectations. Thereby, it eschews a more systemic, corporate social accountability involving all multiple constituents of corporation, in other words, how companies money-making activities relate to society's long-term interests. For a conceptual discussion of CSR, see Valor (2005).

<sup>12</sup> Corporate communications of CSR policy following Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards have swollen from only 2 companies in year 2000 to 207 in 2014 (see Global Reporting Initiative: <https://www.globalreporting.org/Pages/resource-library.aspx?resSearchMode=resSearchModeText&resSearchText=reports+list>).

<sup>13</sup> Eco-labels and prosocial and ethical standard certifications have increased from 17 to 41 in the span of only five years (2010–2014) (see <http://www.ecolabelindex.com/ecolabels/?st=country,br>).

based product offer,<sup>14</sup> and increased business spending on corporate sustainability.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, business mobilization of political consumerism completes the governance infrastructure promoted through CSR and the broadly disseminated principles of shared value creation linked to corporate sustainability, thus catalyzing a power redistribution among contenders while also creating new markets and new market rules.

The political appeals of the marketplace, the acknowledgment of corporations' political clout, and the resonance of consumer responsibility rhetoric are important yet insufficient conditions for mobilizing political consumerism. Political consumers require some degree of psychological involvement with economic organizations in terms of attentiveness to corporate action, self-perceived efficacy before market agents, feelings of confidence towards business, and a perception that business will be held accountable for failure to deliver public goods—conditions largely overlooked in empirical studies. Accordingly, political consumerism requires that citizens not focus solely on their own responsibility to make ethical choices in isolation; rather, they must recognize that their consumer choices can have political consequences when they function in tandem with those agents capable of effecting public goods. Such acknowledgment closely reflects corporate-sponsored discourses of consumer empowerment. Political consumerism also requires that businesses are perceived as predominantly trustworthy actors if the adoption of boycott practices is to extend beyond specific niches like organic, solidarity economy-based or locally-produced shopping. Unless these conditions are present, individual involvement in repertoires of market-based activism becomes pointless or purely ritualistic.

In Latin America, evidence indicates that formal institutions of politics trail corporations in terms of perceived problem-solving capabilities and public confidence (Latinobarómetro, 2005–2010; WVS, 2005–2014). In Brazil, for example, both confidence gaps have been particularly acute; comparative assessments of political organizations and large companies' performance in terms of perceived accountability, responsiveness, and ability to empower citizens have favored the latter (Echegaray, 2015). Given this context, as individuals' affective orientations towards government and political parties weaken, the likelihood of individuals accepting other channels of mediation for their political interests (such as corporations and the marketplace) increases.

#### 4. Data and methods

This paper aims to understand the extent to which mainstream explanations for political consumerism are applicable in developing societies like Brazil. Accordingly, we measure post-materialist values and political attitudes, which capture the essence of the bottom-up arguments based on value change and sub-politicization theses (Beck, 1997; Inglehart, 1997). We also test the performance of measures that illustrate our hypothesis of corporate mobilization of political consumerism. In doing so, we rely on a quantitative survey conducted with a representative

<sup>14</sup> Cf. footnote 3.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. footnote 4. Annual growth rate between 2012 and 2016 is estimated at 8% (see <http://www.verdantix.com/blog/index.cfm/post/brazilian-sustainability-spending-exceeds-european-major-economies-but-offers-limited-growth-prospects-60>).

<sup>16</sup> State capitals included in the survey are São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Recife, Salvador, Porto Alegre, Curitiba, Goiânia, and Brasília. Cases were distributed proportional to population size across cities. Sampling followed a multi-stage random selection of census tracks, block clusters and blocks, down to the level of residence. At each selected household, interlocked quotas of gender, age group, and social class were used to select respondents to reflect population parameters, thus avoiding any weighting.

sample of adults living in nine state capitals across the four largest regions of Brazil.<sup>16</sup> Interviews ( $n = 403$  adults)<sup>17</sup> were conducted in-home, face-to-face, between December 2011 and January 2012.<sup>18</sup> Metrics and expected relationships are outlined in this section (see Appendix for a full list of interview questions). Also, given the limited empirical scholarship on the topic for developing societies, our analysis begins by describing the characteristics of political consumers in Brazil; mean values, standard deviations, and statistically significant differences are reported for each variable between political consumers and non-political consumers. Next, in order to ascertain how social and attitudinal conditions favor market-based activism and to provide an empirical test of our theoretical expectations, we rely on a binary logistic regression analysis.

##### 4.1. Political consumerism

We identify political consumers as individuals who, over the past 12 months, rewarded or penalized brands or producers in response to their social or environmental performance. Two different questions were applied—one for boycotting and one for buycotting (see Appendix). The boycotting and buycotting behaviors observed<sup>19</sup> may not exhaust the forms political consumerism can take, but they do account for those practices that engage the largest number of individuals (Stolle and Micheletti, 2013). Political consumers—those respondents who actually engaged in one or both actions—comprised 18.7% of the sample (76 individuals out of 403 cases).<sup>20</sup> Boycotters and buycotters accounted for 6.9% and 18.1%, respectively—percentages reasonably in line with previous findings; these findings ratify the existence of a pro-buycotting asymmetry (Echegaray, 2015; Latinobarómetro, 2005–2010; WVS, 2005–2014).

##### 4.2. Values

To assess the impact of value change, we rely on Inglehart's (1997) simplified measures for composing the materialist-post-materialist values index. Hence, we ask respondents to select the top two priorities from the following four alternatives: maintain order, fight price rises, increase citizen participation in public

<sup>17</sup> Overall response rate (RR3) was 28%, whereas cooperation rate (COOP4) exceeded 67%. RR3 was mainly influenced by unoccupied residences, non-qualifying respondents (persons younger than 18, older than 69 or poorly literate), and refusals. RR3 falls in line with the survey industry's findings from similar studies. Quota sampling applied at the respondent-level assures that the survey sample matches socio-demographics distribution within each capital city. Margin of error = +/-4.83%.

<sup>18</sup> The survey was conducted by Brazilian market research agency, Market Analysis. Approximately 50% of the survey content was of a commercial nature, containing questions related to sustainability and social responsibility issues for paying clients. This factor restrained the number of indicators per variable.

<sup>19</sup> Our measures identify actions (not merely intentions), recognize both boycotting and buycotting behaviors, and include impactful practices of a transactional and communicational nature (as they affect agents' political capital, gauged through market-share or reputation). These are improvements compared to most quantitative studies on the topic. Furthermore, our boycott measure relates to activities that explicitly address companies (whereas academic surveys often use more abstract wording to identify boycotts, which may include governments, foreign nations, and other agents as political targets). More importantly, as our measures explicitly relate to ethical performance of companies, they capture politically motivated actions—that is, behaviors explicitly centered on concerns regarding the distribution of public goods like social and environmental justice.

<sup>20</sup> Inter-item correlation = 0.33,  $\alpha = 0.47$ ,  $M = 0.19$ ,  $SD = 0.39$ . Admittedly, the index reliability falls short compared to those reported by a few other studies (Stolle et al., 2005; Copeland, 2014), which suggests that boycotting and buycotting should be treated as being qualitatively different (Baek, 2010; Neilson, 2010). On the other hand, such treatment would have required working with even smaller samples, severely reducing the inferential power of our results and conclusions.

decision-making, and protect freedom of expression. The index identified 30.7% materialists, 7.5% post-materialists and 61.8% with mixed values (including 5% of unknown responses); these results are fairly in line with available data (WVS, 2005–2014). To optimize analysis, this variable is dichotomized to distinguish post-materialists from all other respondents.

Reflecting the importance of higher-order needs of self-actualization and well-being defined beyond possessions, post-materialism places issues of social and environmental equity as a priority, while favoring non-formal venues like the marketplace for individualized political expression (Inglehart, 1997). Following the mainstream literature, we hypothesize that political consumers in Brazil will exhibit a higher incidence of post-materialist values. However, as we bear in mind the documented disconnection between post-materialism and sustainability-related actions like environmentalism in this country (Abramson, 1997), we also expect these value effects upon market-based activism to be diluted once other influences are factored in.

#### 4.3. Political attitudes

We use four measures to discern personal attachments with formal politics, which should portray how, and to what extent, the sub-politicization argument underlies market-based activism. Information regarding confidence in government and political parties is captured using two separate four-point Likert scale questions. Data indicates that the vast majority of respondents feel distrust (little or no confidence) for parties (79.4%) and government (62.1%). For analysis optimization, an additive index of political confidence has been computed.<sup>21</sup> Partisanship (22.2%), in turn, is measured using an open-ended question that probes for personal identification with any political party. Lastly, political interest is identified using a four-point Likert scale question that probes the frequency of respondents' political conversations with friends and relatives: Only 17.7% report talking about politics somewhat or very often. All four variables provide values fairly in line with latest data available for Brazil (Latinobarómetro, 2005–2010). Furthermore, given the small number of cases in cells, all variables were dichotomized.

According to theory of sub-politics, perceived inefficacy of traditional political institutions to deal with societal problems (or perceived unwillingness to do so) breeds political disaffection with state-centered participation and spurs engagement with alternative arenas and forms of action like ethical consumerism (Beck, 1997). We therefore hypothesize that political mistrust and partisan independence should encourage boycott and buycott practices, in accordance with what most empirical studies have found. In turn, political interest should fuel consumer activism in defense of public goods, as it implies a personal effort to bring matters of public interest before a wider audience of influential agents.

#### 4.4. Attitudes towards corporations and CSR

Citizens' orientations towards business and the marketplace have been neglected by the political consumerism literature. Therefore, we opt to employ a number of measures in order to encompass a wide array of manifestations of those influences. We use eight indicators to examine the extent to which political consumption decisions reflect consumers' propensity to wield power over the corporate world as a means of addressing political issues, and we relate consumer mobilization at the check-out line to the persuasions of CSR activism.

As trust in business seems a logical precondition for individual investment in both boycott and buycott practices, we measure confidence in domestic and multinational companies using two separate four-point Likert scale questions. A majority of Brazilians trust both (60.5% and 57.7%, respectively).<sup>22</sup> Research suggests that trust in large firms functions both as an impetus for consumer engagement in politically rewarding actions and as an amplifier of the effects of CSR policy on ethical consumption (Pivato et al., 2008). Accordingly, we expect confidence in firms to favorably influence political shopping.

Perceived market influence is another key factor in understanding consumer involvement with sustainability-oriented action (Leary et al., 2014). It extends beyond a sense of behavioral control over personal practices to achieve a specific target or goal to include the ability to shape the actions of key market agents. To some extent, perceived market influence reflects the success of corporate-sponsored communication to implement citizens' capabilities as empowered consumers and their authorization as subjects of responsibilities to be fulfilled at the marketplace through responsible choices (Caruana and Crane, 2008; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). Three of four Brazilians surveyed responded affirmatively to our questions regarding their perceived influence in relation to market agents: 74.3% believed they were able to "influence a company to behave responsibly," and 76.6% agreed that "the way people shop can help to change the way companies behave" (see Appendix).<sup>23</sup> We expect perceived market influence to positively affect individuals' performance at the checkout line, although high levels of agreement may hamper substantive variations—a consideration already identified in other studies (Gilg et al., 2005).

We also measure attentiveness to corporate behavior, as this attitude should catalyze consumer choice based on indications of corporate contribution to (or endangerment of) the provision of public goods. A four-point Likert scale question probes the frequency of conversations with friends and relatives concerning corporate behavior and performance: 22.4% engage somewhat or very often—a higher percentage than political interest.

Lastly, we develop measures that quantify our core hypothesis regarding the corporate mobilization of political consumption through CSR activism. One set of measures relates to citizens' sensitivity to CSR activism, which is observed by gauging individual awareness of CSR policy (using a four point Likert scale to ascertain exposure to CSR news, with 44.7% reported incidence) and assessing the importance respondents attribute to firms' CSR behavior when choosing a brand or product (using a four point Likert scale, with 82.4% reported agreement). Perceived importance of CSR as a decision-making criterion is so widespread that certainly includes both people who use and do not use the market as a means to meeting political goals. This weakens the contribution of this variable to explain political consumerism in comparison to CSR awareness. Furthermore, CSR awareness (even if self-reported) indirectly reveals underlying social differences (such as level of education and access to news sources), which enhances its effects over practices of political consumption.

The second set of measures assesses citizens' support for a CSR-centric approach to the private provision of public goods. We posit

<sup>21</sup> Inter-item correlation = 0.59,  $\alpha$  = 0.74, M = 1.96, SD = 0.27.

<sup>22</sup> Both measures were further collapsed into a single index (inter-item correlation = 0.43,  $\alpha$  = 0.60, M = 2.54, SD = 0.74) and dichotomized for multivariate analysis.

<sup>23</sup> Both measures were further collapsed into a single index (inter-item correlation = 0.36,  $\alpha$  = 0.53, M = 3.04, SD = 0.78) and dichotomized for multivariate analysis.

that individuals adopt political consumer behaviors in the belief that political change can be affected through the marketplace by supporting those corporations engaged in CSR initiatives. By giving top value to public goods-related policies defined according to a CSR repertoire of action, individuals reflect the efficacy of the corporate mobilization of political consumerism. We appraise this construct using two questions. One indicates the normative support for an expanded CSR-policy environment by gauging levels of approval for government regulation (85.9% of agreement). A second question probes the level of perceived efficacy of CSR activism as a strategy for political change, relative to other modes of political involvement (see [Appendix](#)). One in five respondents (21.4%) selected consumer pressure on firms as the most effective mode, which indicates the extent to which political participation is aligned with the notion of CSR activism. To optimize analysis, this variable is dichotomized with the option that endorses CSR advocacy upholding the higher value.

Finally, considering all potential arguments together by means of a multivariate model, we expect that citizens' involvement with, and endorsement of, CSR will better provide a better understanding of motivations for engaging in political consumerism than value-based and sub-politics related arguments. By acknowledging how the corporate world shapes the context in which political consumption repertoires come to life, we gain an awareness of the constraints of bottom-up explanations for boycotting and buycotting in developing societies and achieve a more complete and realistic picture of what drives market-based activism.

#### 4.5. Socio-demographics

We use three socio-demographics (gender, age, and social class) both to profile political consumers and as control variables in the multivariate model. As a result of the quota sampling procedure followed at the level of respondent selection, all three variables match the population distribution. Age is split into five age groups (18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–69) yielding subgroups relatively balanced in size and thereby capturing generational effects. For the multivariate model, we compute a quadratic effect of age to test the non-linear relationship between age and the dependent variable found in previous research. Social class is measured according to industry standards<sup>24</sup> and then, to balance naturally skewed distribution of subcategories, is recoded into two major categories: upper and upper-middle classes, and lower-middle and lower segments. Since social class is highly correlated with income and education, and these two variables display a similar effect upon consumption politics, only effects of class are examined.

Scholars' assumption of females' higher awareness of consumer and shopping issues, coupled with their unfair treatment in the traditional political sphere compared to males, fueled expectations that political consumers would, predominantly, be women ([Micheletti, 2010](#)). Empirical evidence, however, has been less conclusive, with supporting data from earlier studies ([Sandovici and Davis, 2010](#); [Stolle et al., 2005](#)) being disputed by subsequent research ([Baek, 2010](#); [Barbosa et al., 2014](#); [Neilson, 2010](#); [Newman and Bartels, 2010](#)). In line with recent studies, we hypothesize that gender differences will be nil.

Mainstream literature on political consumerism contends that younger generations tend to prioritize participatory modes based

on loose and informal networks—the type of networks that enable market-based activism ([Bennett, 1998](#); [Stolle et al., 2005](#)). Yet, survey-data studies have usually found a positive curvilinear (rather than a negative linear) relationship between age and political consumerism ([Baek, 2010](#); [Barbosa et al., 2014](#); [Stolle and Hooghe, 2011](#)). We hypothesize that the age connection with political consumerism is better understood in generational terms and through a curvilinear relationship, as it is conditioned by opportunities to exercise consumer power (i.e., to uphold direct material responsibility for purchasing goods and financial independence to bear the costs) and to gain awareness of existing repertoires of action for voicing political concerns. Both conditions take place as individuals amass ongoing experience in the job market and the political sphere; in Brazil, these conditions seem unlikely for those in their twenties or nearing retirement (beyond age sixty).

As a result of the financial and cognitive conditions required to engage in acts of boycotting and buycotting, political consumerism is skewed in class terms ([Ferrer-Fons and Fraile, 2013](#)). Certainly, the increased costs incurred by postponing purchases to penalize companies and paying premium prices for sustainable products are more easily borne by the affluent segments of society. Moreover, obtaining and processing information about companies performance also requires resources heavily skewed towards upper classes. The high social inequality that typifies developing societies like Brazil ([UNDP, 2013](#)) should intensify such class effects on political choice at the marketplace.

## 5. Discussion

Research about political consumerism in low-income democracies is virgin territory; it seems appropriate, therefore, to begin with a descriptive analysis examining differences between political and non-political consumers with regards to key characteristics. Means, standard deviations, and statistically significant differences are reported in [Table 1](#), which summarizes the characteristics that motivate Brazilians to exercise consumer power for political reasons.

Results indicate that females and males are equally inclined to demonstrate their political desires by attempting to shape corporate performance. Thus, the supposition of female politicization of consumer activities as a mechanism that offsets gender imbalances in conventional spheres of civic participation finds no support in the Brazilian context. Similarly, data suggests that, in Brazil, engaging in political consumerism as a means of political inclusion and expression is not exclusive to younger cohorts.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, mainstream literature's assumption that market-based activism is a venue for youth identity politics remains unproven. Consistent with evidence for other societies, a significant curvilinear relationship with political consumers is more likely to be found among the group of young adults and middle-aged individuals (25–44 years old, with an average 22.9% incidence of political consumers). Younger (14.5% of political consumers) and older citizens (average 15.4% of political consumers) remain less interested in pursuing this path for civic engagement.

Social-class analysis indicates a link between affluence and the propensity to politicize consumer corporate relationships. In fact, those respondents in the upper social segments were nearly twice as likely to bring political wants to their relationships with brands and products. In other words, consumers' odds of using consumption as a political tool are influenced by their purchasing power and market experience, as these impact consumers' ability

<sup>24</sup> Standard measuring of social class in Brazil follows a 10-item index comprising possessions, services used and educational attainment thus going beyond income and more closely portraying consumer styles. See ABEP, <http://www.abep.org/novo/Content.aspx?ContentID=301>.

<sup>25</sup> Five age groups are computed and examined: 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54 and 55–69 years old. In [Table 2](#), age is squared to account for its curvilinear effect on consumer activism.

**Table 1**  
Social and attitudinal profile of political consumers.

Variables	Total sample (n = 403)		Political consumers (n = 76)		Non-political consumers (n = 327)		Test statistics
	Min	Max	M	SD	M	SD	
Gender	0 – Female	1 – Male	0.50	0.50	0.48	0.50	$\chi^2 = 0.04$
Age group	1 – 18–24	5 – 55–69	2.76	1.25	2.87	1.37	$\chi^2 = 0.37$
Social class	0 – Lower/lower-middle	1 – Upper/upper-middle	0.44	0.50	0.29	0.45	$\chi^2 = 6.57^{***}$
Post-materialism	0 – Mixed/materialists	1 – Post-materialists	0.15	0.36	0.06	0.23	$\chi^2 = 6.98^{***}$
Political interest	0 – Low	1 – High	0.45	0.50	0.11	0.32	$\chi^2 = 48.55^{***}$
Political confidence	0 – Low	1 – High	0.25	0.43	0.14	0.35	$\chi^2 = 5.51^{**}$
Party identification	0 – No	1 – Yes	0.43	0.50	0.17	0.38	$\chi^2 = 24.17^{***}$
Interest in business	0 – Low	1 – High	0.54	0.50	0.15	0.36	$\chi^2 = 55.29^{***}$
Confidence in business	0 – Low	1 – High	0.57	0.50	0.49	0.50	$\chi^2 = 8.72$
Perceived market influence	0 – Disagree	1 – Agree	0.77	0.42	0.65	0.48	$\chi^2 = 18.53^{**}$
CSR awareness	0 – Low	1 – High	0.70	0.46	0.38	0.49	$\chi^2 = 27.34^{***}$
CSR importance	0 – Low	1 – High	0.96	0.20	0.79	0.41	$\chi^2 = 12.00^{***}$
CSR advocacy	0 – Voting, protesting, or no participation	1 – CSR-oriented pressure	0.31	0.47	0.19	0.39	$\chi^2 = 4.78^{**}$
Support for CSR expansion	0 – Disagree	1 – Agree	0.95	0.23	0.84	0.37	$\chi^2 = 6.14^{**}$

Min = minimum value; Max = maximum value; M = mean value; SD = standard deviation.

to develop relationships with brands, afford extra costs involved in rewarding or punishing companies, and gather information about company behavior.

Results seemingly endorse the expectation that market-based politics is connected to a value change towards post-materialist values. Political consumers are, more often than not, found among post-materialists.<sup>26</sup> This suggests that beliefs are likely to be demonstrated as ethical shopping. This bottom-up motivational framework for market-based activism is critically predicated upon a belief that delegating matters to state institutions is pointless and that direct action through alternative channels, like the marketplace, is imperative. This attitudinal outlook is embedded in the notion of sub-politics, which assumes the co-existence of political interest and political mistrust in traditional institutions of governance and representation. However, the data in Table 1 challenges theoretical expectations concerning links between political attitudes and consumer activism inherent in the bottom-up perspective. While consumption politics is embraced by those who are more attentive to political matters, these consumer activists nonetheless espouse affective ties with party institutions and show no higher degree of skepticism about political organizations. In other words, an engagement with political consumerism does not imply a resignation of interest in politics or a repudiation of classical institutions of politics.

We turn, now, to examine the top-down perspective of corporate mobilization of political consumerism. Descriptive analysis indicates that consumer activism rests upon interest in corporate performance, perceived market influence, and support for CSR as both a goal in itself and a means for realizing collective interests. Contrary to expectations, political consumption is not clearly motivated by consumers' impressions of business's overall trustworthiness. It appears whatever positive effect confidence in business has to encourage boycotting practices is largely offset by the effect feelings of uneasiness with companies have to fuel boycotting behaviors. Contentious actions, channeled in the marketplace, rely on a pluralistic vision of businesses' contribution to socio-environmental wellbeing that encompasses praise as much as criticism. All things considered, results

reveal the persuasive effect of a CSR-oriented vision in mobilizing citizens to vote at the marketplace.

Multivariate analysis affords a fuller understanding of the underlying motivations for political consumerism and compares the relative weight of bottom-up and top-down perspectives in explaining consumption choices based on ethics (see Table 2). The bottom-up model considers political consumerism as an expression of self-guided responsibility-taking orientations that emanate from the joint influences of post-materialist values and sub-politics (Stolle et al., 2005; Stolle and Micheletti, 2013). The alternative model, dubbed corporate mobilization of political consumerism, acknowledges corporation's use of the CSR model to persuade consumers of their shared responsibilities (with corporations) in securing public goods; in this model, consumers' primary responsibility is to adopt penalizing and rewarding purchasing behaviors based on CSR criteria.

Given the nominal nature of our dependent variable (1 = political consumers, those who have practiced boycotts, buy-cotts, or both over the past year; 0 = non-political consumers), two binary logistic regression models are estimated. We examine the impact of all previously reported variables in the bivariate scrutiny, except for confidence in business that yielded non-significant effects. Gender and age are maintained as control variables, while the latter is transformed to account for its curvilinear relationship with the dependent variable. Table 2 reports the log odds (e.g., coefficients) for variables in both models, along with standard deviations and statistical significance. Even though, conceptually, both models assume interactions between key variables that improve their specification, we choose not to introduce these to avoid saturation, bearing in mind the small number of cases that qualify as political consumers. We consider this to be an acceptable trade-off considering this is the first study to comprehensively review, based on a representative sample of adults, the process and forces propelling citizens from a developing society to vest their shopping actions with political meaning.

The first model is labeled the post-materialist sub-politicization model. Results indicate that values appear to play a role in steering politicized consumer action as post-materialism sustains a significant effect (log-odds = 0.996, significant at  $p < .05$ ), even when controlling by socio-demographics. Apparently, adult political consumers behave differently than young university students in their ability to connect beliefs and practices (Barbosa et al., 2014; Barcellos et al., 2014). Accordingly, results mirror the profile of

<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, given the low number of post-materialist value holders (fewer than the total number of political consumers) this relationship should be viewed with a level of skepticism.

**Table 2**  
Models of political consumerism (binary logistic regression).

Variable	Post-materialist sub-politicization model			Corporate mobilization model			
	Coefficient	SE	p	Coefficient	SE	p	p
Gender (–)	–0.124	0.287	.666	0.024	0.318	.940	
Age (+)	1.015 <sup>†</sup>	0.561	.071	1.107 <sup>†</sup>	0.611	.070	
Age squared (–)	–0.193 <sup>*</sup>	0.093	.039	–0.197 <sup>*</sup>	0.101	.052	
Class (+)	0.543 <sup>†</sup>	0.297	.068	0.373	0.333	.263	
Post-materialism (+)	0.996 <sup>*</sup>	0.474	.035	0.640	0.528	.226	
Political interest (+)	1.731 <sup>***</sup>	0.319	.000	0.740 <sup>†</sup>	0.406	.069	
Political confidence (–)	0.110	0.359	.760	0.151	0.399	.705	
Party identification (–)	1.186 <sup>***</sup>	0.309	.000	0.791 <sup>*</sup>	0.350	.024	
Interest in business (+)				1.045 <sup>**</sup>	0.382	.006	
Perceived market influence (+)				–0.185	0.229	.419	
CSR awareness (+)				0.459 <sup>**</sup>	0.156	.003	
CSR importance (+)				0.626 <sup>*</sup>	0.271	.021	
CSR advocacy (+)				0.827 <sup>*</sup>	0.373	.027	
Support for CSR expansion (+)				0.820 <sup>**</sup>	0.265	.002	
Constant	–3.512 <sup>***</sup>	0.788	.000	–9.550 <sup>***</sup>	1.754	.000	
N	403			403			
LR $\chi^2$	320,690			272,554			
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.252			0.402			
Proportion correctly predicted	0.840			0.857			
Proportional reduction in error	14.65%			23.72%			

Coefficients are log odds.

Signs next to variable indicate hypothesized effects.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ; <sup>\*</sup> $p < .05$ ; <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .01$ ; <sup>\*\*\*</sup> $p < .001$ .

political consumers in North America and Northern Europe (Copeland, 2014; Stolle et al., 2005). Remarkably, political interest substantially increases the probability of problematizing relationships with products and corporations (log-odds = 1.731, significant at  $p < .001$ ). In other words, individuals attentive to public matters are more inclined to translate shopping into an opportunity for political expression in defense of public goods. This aligns with findings in developed nations (Andersen and Tobiasen, 2004; Copeland, 2014; Dalton, 2008; Forno and Ceccarini, 2006; Newman and Bartels, 2010; Stolle et al., 2005; Strømsnes, 2009).<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, evidence of sub-politicization as a motivation for market-based activism fails to materialize. This may be indicative of the lack of a relationship between individual engagement in political consumption and feelings of political mistrust in institutions of governance and detachment from political organizations. In Brazil, citizens using consumer choice in pursuit of public goods are not necessarily reacting out of frustration with the performance of parties and government (log-odds = 0.110, non-significant). While it may be true that an overwhelming majority of Brazilians manifest low confidence in political institutions, these varying levels of distrust do not correlate with individuals' likelihood of adopting political consumerism. Concomitantly, political consumers in Brazil have not abandoned their partisan attachments along the way. To the contrary, partisanship considerably raises an individual's odds of becoming a political consumer (log-odds = 1.186, significant at  $p < .001$ ); this indicates partisanship's instrumentality to forms of political involvement that extend beyond the conventional sphere of traditional institutions and arenas. Speculatively, the leverage of partisanship may also indicate the usefulness and assimilation of cue-giving mechanisms as a means to guide political decisions at the individual level (e.g., party labels for partisanship and voting, CSR policy signals for political consumerism). These outcomes

contradict interpretations of political consumers as full-fledged sub-politicians.

The second model reflects our understanding that corporate-sponsored processes of responsibility-sharing with consumers strongly encourage citizens to pursue public goods at the marketplace. Results indicate that—after controlling for perceived market influence, measures of public sensitivity and support for CSR, and the variable that captures attentiveness to business behaviors—the effects of value-based motivations and engagement in sub-politics weaken or vanish.<sup>28</sup> With the exception of perceived market influence, all variables gauging the effectiveness of corporate mobilization of political consumerism hold a significant impact. Attentiveness to corporate activities substantially increases the chances that an individual will embrace political consumption practices (log-odds = 1.045, significant at  $p < .01$ ); this implies that individuals concerned with business performance (compared to those unconcerned) are nearly three times more likely to bring politics into their relationships with brands and products (standardized logistic coefficient = 2.84). Consistently, the higher individuals rank the importance of CSR, the more likely they are to pursue political goals at the marketplace. Awareness and perceived usefulness of CSR condition engagement in ethical shopping significantly (log-odds = 0.459 and 0.626, significant at  $p < .01$  and  $p < .05$ , respectively): Brazilians sensitive to accomplishments in corporate citizenship are roughly 60–90% more likely to adopt boycott and buycott practices.

Indications of support for CSR also increase citizens' likelihood of engaging in market-based activism. Respondents are in favor of measures that advance CSR both through wider regulation and individualized advocacy (log-odds = 0.827 and 0.820, significant at  $p < .01$  and  $p < .05$ , respectively). This suggests that political consumers are, by default, proselytizers of CSR activism. Compared with those wary of these means for shaping public goods,

<sup>27</sup> The association of political consumerism with political interest refutes intellectual criticisms that suggest consumer action is linked to political apathy—a tenet strongly espoused by students of Latin American (Dagnino, 2005; Ianni, 1997; Oxhorn, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Supplementary analysis reveals no mediating effects of pro-CSR attitudes (e.g., CSR support or CSR advocacy) between post-materialism and political consumerism. Correlations between values and pro-CSR attitudes were not significant.

supporters of CSR are more than twice as likely to reward and penalize firms on the basis of political criteria (average standardized logistic coefficient = 2.28).

Compared to the post-materialist sub-politicization model, the model of corporate mobilization of consumers affords a better understanding of individual market activism in the context of a low-income democracy. The latter model reveals that value-based sub-political interpretations offer an incomplete account of the motivations that lie beneath political consumption. Further, the corporate mobilization model provides a more powerful explanation of how individuals come to engage in boycotting and buycotting, as evidenced by a larger explained variance (from a pseudo  $R^2$  of 0.252–0.402) and a greater proportional reduction in error (23.72%, versus 14.65%).

## 6. Conclusions

The pursuit of social, ethical, or environmental goals in the marketplace has crystallized as a venue for citizen action in developing societies like Brazil. Over the past few years, at least one in seven Brazilians wielded their consumer power to attain political goals by influencing corporate behavior (Echegaray, 2015). The number of citizens engaged in boycotts and buycotts usually exceeds those involved in more visible forms of activism such as partisan militancy, strikes, or public-protest marches (Latinobarómetro, 2005–2010). Compared to alternative expressions of sustainable consumption, like so-called “conscious consumerism” which connects sustainability goals to a broad array of daily habits like recycling, water and energy usage, and purchase planning, political consumerism seems far more persuasive.<sup>29</sup> It is therefore surprising that students of politics, business, and sustainability have conducted so little empirical research in developing societies on this topic.

This article sheds light on the underlying characteristics that distinguish political consumers and the conditions that favor political consumerism in a developing nation. Findings suggest that, unlike developed societies, the use of consumer choice to secure public goods from corporations corresponds less to personal values and political attitudes than to citizens' engagement with business social responsibility activism. Three major implications derive from results.

The first implications highlights that we cannot take for granted that political consumerism is a self-guided, responsibility-taking, identity-building project based on beliefs and an autonomous intention to “reinvent politics” through repertoires of sub-politicization. This requires recognizing that context matters (Koos, 2012). Indeed, political consumers from low-income democracies may behave somewhat differently, given the scarcity of state-provided public goods and the pervasiveness and social legitimacy of CSR activities (UN Global Compact LEAD and BSR, 2012). Equally important, results suggest that, rather than portraying a new moral identity for those engaged in it, market-based activism may just represent an additional arena and contain a supplementary toolbox for attaining political goals similar to those that citizens pursue elsewhere.

In developing societies, political consumption apparently represents a tactical behavior to realize public goods based on the integration of a corporate-sponsored proposition for shared responsibilities between consumers and self-presented sustainable

companies. Successful assimilation of this proposition by individuals requires the acknowledgment of CSR activism as a practical classification schema that broadly guides whom, why, and where to boycott and buycott.

The second implication is that analysis of political consumerism will overlook the bigger picture if they focus solely on the bottom-up and long-term forces that propel individuals to adopt such practices. Reported effects of socio-demographic and value-based influences greatly diminish after specific marketplace forces that mold the public's decision-making with regards to their leverage as consumers are factored in. Still, the curvilinear effect of age denotes the importance of exposure to market forces and experience with the exercise of consumer power. This finding contrasts with scholarly expectations of higher incidence of political consumerism among the younger cohorts, a prospect anchored in suppositions of fixed generational affinities with certain types of venues and formats.

Political consumers in low-income democracies abide by a corporate-citizenship-centered proposition that acknowledges power and responsibilities to both producers and consumers. Business, thereby, mobilizes citizens to use the marketplace as a venue for positive societal change. In the process, citizens reshape the competitive landscape by rewarding firms that generate public goods (as evidenced through their CSR activism) and/or punishing firms that may threaten public goods (as evidenced by their lack of espoused sustainability goals or as a result of their exposure to scandals). These findings challenge the implicit assumption in studies of political consumerism that market agents are merely passive targets of activism; instead, this study acknowledges that corporations actively assemble an institutional setting that frames their moral leadership and political engagement in terms amenable to established practices of CSR. Through the symbolic or substantive provision of CSR-related public goods, sustainability-friendly businesses mobilize consumers to adopt repertoires of action that ultimately serve corporate interests.

The breadth and weight of favorable attitudes towards CSR signals the effectiveness of the corporate-sponsored institutional setting in popularizing corporate sustainability actions as useful heuristics to guide market-level responses by individuals. The close connection of pro-CSR attitudes and political consumerism, together with a sustained pro-boycotting asymmetry, indicates that Brazilians politicize their consumer relationships with those companies greatly influenced by a CSR-policy framework.<sup>30</sup>

This study has some limitations. The total number of respondents in the sample who qualify as political consumers is relatively low ( $n = 76$ ), so some caution is advised regarding these findings. Also, we are able to test only a limited set of factors theorized as having an influence on new forms of political engagement, overlooking variables such as citizen duty and social capital. Despite these shortcomings, this research contributes to the recognition that political consumerism has expanded beyond developed societies and that, in these contexts, specific dynamics may be at play.

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<sup>29</sup> According to polls, the incidence of “conscious consumerism” (based on the enactment of eleven out of thirteen different behaviors) has remained stagnant at 5% of adult population between 2006 and 2012. See: <http://www.akatu.org.br/Publicacoes/Consumo-Consciente>.

<sup>30</sup> The connectedness of CSR attitudes and politicized consumer behavior has the additional implication of questioning the apparent futility of CSR performance on individual behavior (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001).

## Appendix

## Interview questions

Variable	Question
Boycott	Over the past year, have you considered penalizing a company you see as not socially or environmentally responsible by either refusing to buy their products or speaking critically about the company to others? Would you say you have done so, considered doing so but did not, or did not consider doing so?
Boycott	Over the past year, have you considered rewarding a socially or environmentally responsible company by either buying their products or speaking positively about the company to others? Would you say you have done so, considered doing so but did not, or did not consider doing so?
Post-materialism	Thinking ahead over the next few years, which of the following aims would you consider as the top priorities our leaders should pursue for this country? Would you please say which of them you yourself consider to be most important? And what would be your second choice? Maintaining order Giving people more say in government Fighting rising prices Protecting freedom of speech
Confidence in government	Please tell me how much you trust each of the following institutions to operate in the best interest of our society. Would you say you have a lot of trust, some trust, not much trust, or no trust at all in ... our national government?
Confidence in political parties	Please tell me how much you trust each of the following institutions to operate in the best interest of our society. Would you say you have a lot of trust, some trust, not much trust, or no trust at all in ... political parties?
Confidence in business (domestic)	Please tell me how much you trust each of the following institutions to operate in the best interest of our society. Would you say you have a lot of trust, some trust, not much trust, or no trust at all in ... large companies?
Confidence in business (international)	Please tell me how much you trust each of the following institutions to operate in the best interest of our society. Would you say you have a lot of trust, some trust, not much trust, or no trust at all in ... global companies operating in Brazil?
Political interest	How often would you say you discuss politics with relatives and friends? Very frequently, somewhat frequently, rarely, or never?
Partisanship	Considering all political parties in Brazil, would you say there is any political party that best reflects your views on politics? Yes; No
Perceived market influence	Please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements ... As a consumer I can influence a company to behave responsibly The way people shop can help to change the way companies behave
Interests in corporate behavior	How often would you say you discuss about large companies' behavior with relatives and friends? Very frequently, somewhat frequently, rarely, or never?
CSR awareness	Please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements ... I am very interested in learning more about the ways that some companies are trying to be socially responsible
CSR importance	When choosing a new product or service from a company, how much influence does the company commitment towards society and the environment have upon your choice? Would you say it is ... Very important, somewhat important, of little importance, not important at all?
CSR advocacy	In your opinion, which is the most effective way for people like yourself to bring about change in this country? Voting at elections to choose someone with similar views to yours; Joining protests to demand changes; Putting consumer pressure upon companies to behave more responsibly socially and environmentally.
Support for CSR expansion	Please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements ... Our government should do a lot more to ensure that companies deal with society and the environment more responsibly

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