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What Drives Boycotts? Exploring Motivational Frames in Digital Activism

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Abstract

Transnational consumer boycotts have become increasingly visible forms of political expression, particularly in digitally mediated contexts where individuals mobilize consumption choices in response to conflict-related events. While existing research has examined political consumerism broadly, empirical studies analyzing the motivational framing of youth participation in contemporary boycott movements remain limited. This study examines how young people discursively frame their participation in consumer boycotts related to the Gaza war within digital environments. Drawing on a corpus of 4,670 English-language social media posts published between January 2024 and October 2025, the study employs BERTopic modeling and qualitative frame analysis to identify dominant motivational frames in youth-led boycott discourse. The analysis focuses on how political participation is justified, legitimized, and communicated through digital narratives. The findings reveal a set of prominent motivational frames through which youth engage with consumer boycotts, including perceived institutional inadequacy, moral-humanitarian justification, transnational solidarity, and market-based accountability. Across these frames, emotional expression plays a central role in amplifying political meanings and facilitating collective alignment in digital spaces. The study demonstrates how consumer boycotts function as a discursive form of political participation for young people, where market behavior, moral expression, and digital communication intersect. By foregrounding framing processes, this research contributes to scholarship on political consumerism, youth political engagement, and digital activism, offering new insights into how political meanings and collective motivations are constructed and circulated in networked public spheres.

Keywords

boycott behavior; digital space; social media; youth activism

1. Introduction

In recent decades, patterns of political participation have diversified beyond formal, institutionalized channels such as voting, party membership, or engagement with representative institutions. Alongside these established forms, scholars have increasingly documented the rise of informal, citizen-driven modes of political action, including protest, lifestyle politics, and political consumerism (Bennett, 2012; Dalton, 2009; Micheletti, 2003; Norris, 2002; Pickard, 2019). Rather than operating primarily through hierarchical organizations or electoral mechanisms, these practices emphasize symbolic action, moral expression, and collective identity formation in decentralized, networked environments. This transformation does not signal political disengagement but rather reflects changes in political cultural norms for enacting, communicating, and making political agency visible in contemporary societies.

One particularly salient manifestation of this shift is the growing visibility of consumer boycotts as a form of political participation. Consumer boycotts enable individuals to mobilize everyday consumption choices in response to political, ethical, or humanitarian concerns, while simultaneously situating these choices within broader collective narratives (Copeland & Boulianne, 2022; Micheletti & Stolle, 2015). Although enacted through individual market behavior, boycotts are rarely experienced as purely private acts; instead, they function as public, communicative practices through which political dissatisfaction, moral positioning, and solidarity are expressed. Importantly, participation in consumer boycotts does not necessarily imply a rejection of institutional politics. Rather, it often emerges alongside perceptions of institutional inadequacy, allowing individuals to articulate political claims and ethical commitments in non-electoral and non-institutional forms (de Moor, 2017). Digital platforms have played a central role in reshaping how such forms of political participation are communicated, coordinated, and legitimized. Social media environments facilitate the rapid circulation of political narratives, emotional expressions, and calls for action, enabling loosely connected individuals to engage in collective practices without centralized leadership or formal organizational structures (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). Within these digital spaces, political participation is frequently framed in expressive and affective terms rather than solely in instrumental terms. Short, emotionally resonant messages, moral claims, and symbolic gestures become key resources for mobilization, allowing political meanings to be articulated and amplified through everyday digital interaction.

Against this backdrop, youth participation in consumer boycotts related to the Gaza war has become particularly visible in online environments. Across social media platforms, young people have actively circulated boycott calls, humanitarian narratives, and expressions of solidarity, framing consumption as a site of political responsibility and moral agency. Rather than assessing the objective effectiveness of these boycotts or evaluating the performance of political institutions, we focus on how young participants frame their engagement in digital discourse. Specifically, we examine how consumer boycotts are discursively constructed as a form of political participation, how dissatisfaction with political responses is articulated, and how collective meanings around solidarity, responsibility, and accountability are produced and circulated. By analyzing youth-led social media discourse through a framing-oriented lens, this article contributes to research on political consumerism, youth political engagement, and digital activism, offering empirical insight into how political meanings and motivations are constructed in networked public spheres.

2. Theoretical Framework: Political Consumerism, Youth Participation, and Digital Framing

Research on political participation has long demonstrated that declining engagement with formal political institutions does not necessarily indicate political apathy but rather reflects a diversification of participatory repertoires (Bennett, 2012; Dalton, 2009; Micheletti, 2003; Norris, 2002; Pickard, 2019). As traditional modes of participation, such as voting, party membership, and institutional advocacy, coexist with newer forms of engagement, citizens increasingly express political preferences through informal, issue-driven, and non-electoral practices (Dalton, 2009; Norris, 2002). These forms of participation allow political grievances, moral commitments, and identities to be articulated outside institutional decision-making arenas while remaining politically meaningful. Importantly, this shift does not imply a rejection of politics itself, but a reconfiguration of how political agency is enacted, communicated, and experienced in contemporary societies.

Within this broader transformation, political consumerism has emerged as a prominent mode of participation through which individuals mobilize market-based choices to express political, ethical, or humanitarian concerns (Micheletti, 2003; Stolle et al., 2005). Consumer boycotts, in particular, enable participants to link everyday consumption practices to broader political narratives, framing market withdrawal as a symbolic and communicative act (de Moor, 2017). While boycotts are enacted through individual purchasing decisions, they are typically embedded within collective moral discourses that emphasize shared responsibility, visibility, and solidarity. As such, political consumerism should not be understood as a privatized or individualized form of politics, but rather as a mode of participation that redefines the boundaries between the personal and the political by situating consumption within public moral debate.

Existing scholarship emphasizes that consumer boycotts rarely function solely as instruments of economic pressure. Instead, they often operate as expressive and symbolic practices through which participants articulate moral judgments, signal political alignment, and construct collective identities (Friedman, 2002; Micheletti & Stolle, 2015). Even when their material effectiveness remains contested, boycotts serve important communicative functions by rendering political positions visible and by enabling participants to express dissent in contexts where institutional channels are perceived as ineffective or inaccessible. Historically, transnational boycott campaigns addressing human rights violations, environmental degradation, and labor exploitation illustrate how consumer action can operate as a collective moral statement, regardless of whether immediate policy or corporate change occurs (Hawkins, 2010).

Youth participation is particularly salient within this context. Research consistently shows that younger generations are disproportionately active in informal, expressive, and issue-based forms of political participation, especially in digitally mediated environments (Dalton, 2009, 2017; Grasso, 2016; Norris, 2011; Schlozman et al., 2010, 2018). Rather than indicating political disengagement, these patterns reflect generational shifts in how political legitimacy, voice, and participation are understood. Young people are more likely to engage in political action that emphasizes moral expression, humanitarian concern, and symbolic alignment over formal representation or organizational membership. Consumer boycotts thus provide a participatory avenue through which youth can assert political agency, articulate ethical positions, and engage in collective action without reliance on institutionalized structures that may be perceived as distant or unresponsive.

Digital platforms have fundamentally reshaped the communicative infrastructure through which such forms of participation are enacted. Social media environments facilitate decentralized, rapid, and emotionally resonant modes of collective engagement, allowing political action to emerge through loosely connected networks rather than hierarchical organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Within these networked spaces, political participation is often experienced as connective rather than organizational, relying on shared narratives, symbols, and affective resonance to sustain engagement. Digital communication enables individual expressions such as boycott calls, moral claims, or expressions of solidarity to be amplified and linked to broader collective meanings, transforming isolated acts into visible forms of political participation.

Framing theory provides a valuable analytical lens for understanding how political meanings and motivations are constructed within these digitally mediated environments. Frames shape how political issues are defined, how responsibility is attributed, and how action is justified, guiding participants' interpretations of both political problems and their own role within them (Benford & Snow, 2000). Significantly, framing processes do not depend on objective consensus or empirical verification; perceptions of injustice, institutional failure, or moral urgency can function as powerful motivational narratives regardless of their factual grounding. In the context of political consumerism, framing processes are central to understanding how consumption is redefined as a site of political agency and ethical responsibility. In digital contexts, framing processes are closely intertwined with affective dynamics. Social media platforms facilitate the rapid circulation of emotionally charged content, enabling shared feelings of outrage, grief, and solidarity to become central resources for political mobilization (Papacharissi, 2015). These affective publics do not merely express emotion but transform emotional responses into discursive and symbolic action, sustaining participation and enhancing the visibility of political claims. Emotional expression thus plays a crucial role in amplifying frames related to moral obligation, collective identity, and perceived institutional inadequacy within digital boycott discourse.

This study examines youth-led consumer boycott discourse related to the Gaza war as a case of digitally mediated political participation. It focuses on how political participation is framed within online discourse, particularly how consumer boycotts are justified as responses to perceived institutional inaction, how moral and humanitarian narratives are mobilized, and how solidarity and accountability are articulated through market-based language. Building on scholarship on political participation, political consumerism, and digital framing, the analysis interprets recurring discursive patterns through the lenses of institutional critique, moral-humanitarian justification, transnational solidarity, market accountability, and affective amplification.

3. Methodology

We employ a qualitative-computational research design to examine how youth-led consumer boycott participation related to the Gaza war is discursively framed on social media. The analysis focuses on identifying and interpreting dominant motivational frames through which consumer boycotts are justified, legitimized, and communicated in digital discourse. This approach is grounded in framing theory, which emphasizes how political meanings and motivations are constructed and circulated within communication processes rather than inferred from observable outcomes. Combining computational modeling with qualitative interpretation allows the analysis to capture both the scale and the interpretive richness of digitally mediated political discourse. While computational approaches enable the identification of recurring semantic patterns across large text corpora, framing analysis provides the conceptual tools necessary to

interpret how these patterns function as political justifications, moral claims, and collective narratives. This methodological integration is particularly well suited to the study of youth political expression on social media, where political meanings are often articulated through short, affective, and context-dependent texts that resist purely quantitative classification.

3.1. Research Design and Data Collection

The empirical material consists of publicly available posts (tweets) collected from X (formerly Twitter). X was selected because of its established role as a key arena for political communication, agenda-setting, and the coordination of collective action, particularly in relation to international conflicts. Crucially, X's communicative affordances prioritize textual density and explicit political articulation, which aligns with the requirements of BERTopic modeling. This technique relies on semantically rich text to identify recurring frames within discourse. While youth political engagement increasingly takes place on visual platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, X remains particularly well-suited for analyzing discursive framing due to its emphasis on text-based expression, hashtag coordination, and public political debate. Unlike image- or video-centered platforms, where meaning is often distributed across multimodal layers (visual, auditory, and textual), X enables the systematic analysis of explicit political claims, moral evaluations, and justificatory narratives articulated in concise textual form. Moreover, X functions as a hybrid communicative space in which youth activists frequently engage with, respond to, and challenge institutional actors directly, making it especially appropriate for observing frames related to perceived institutional inadequacy. For a study focused on framing processes rather than visual symbolism or algorithmic virality, X therefore provides an analytically appropriate and methodologically transparent data source.

To ensure relevance to the research questions guiding this study, namely, how youth participants justify, legitimize, and communicate consumer boycott participation related to the Gaza war in digital environments, several inclusion criteria were applied. Only English-language posts were retained to maintain linguistic consistency for computational analysis. Posts were required to reference Palestine, Israel, or Gaza through keywords or hashtags, ensuring that the discourse was directly connected to the conflict. In addition, the posts had to demonstrate a minimum level of engagement, defined as at least 10 likes, in order to exclude marginal or low-visibility content unlikely to contribute meaningfully to collective discourse. Posts shorter than 50 characters were excluded to reduce the likelihood of bot-generated content or slogan-only messages lacking substantive discourse. Hashtag selection included both conflict-oriented hashtags, such as #FreePalestine and #GazaGenocide, and boycott-oriented hashtags, such as #BoycottStarbucks and #BoycottMcDonalds. This strategy ensured that the dataset captured discourse linking humanitarian narratives to market-based action rather than general commentary on the conflict alone. To focus on individual-level digital expression rather than institutional communication, the posts originating from organizational, media, or officially affiliated activist accounts were excluded through a multi-stage filtering process. Accounts displaying institutional identifiers in usernames or biographies were removed, as were high-frequency media outlets, non-governmental organizations, and official boycott campaign accounts. This filtering ensured that the dataset reflected grassroots digital discourse rather than coordinated institutional messaging.

The study centers on youth-led discourse, operationally defined as content produced primarily by individuals aged approximately 18 to 30. To assess whether the dataset accurately reflected youth participation, a

random subsample of 1,000 posts was manually examined using a multi-step validation strategy. This process involved identifying self-disclosed age information in user biographies, examining self-referential language in posts indicating youth status, such as references to being a student or engaging in youth activism, and cautiously considering contextual profile cues alongside textual indicators. Based on this validation procedure, approximately 93.4 percent of the subsample met the youth criteria. Posts from accounts with ambiguous or unverifiable age indicators were retained, as individual-level age verification is not feasible across the full dataset (N = 4,670). To assess whether the dataset predominantly reflects youth participation, we conducted a manual validation of a random subsample (N = 1,000), examining self-disclosed age information, self-referential language, and contextual profile cues. This validation indicated that approximately 93.4 percent of the posts align with the defined youth category (18–30). Accordingly, while a small proportion of posts may originate from users outside this age range, their inclusion does not affect the identification of dominant discursive frames, which constitute the primary analytical focus of the study. Nevertheless, this constitutes a methodological limitation, which we acknowledge.

The monthly distribution of these collected data is presented in Figure 1. It is worth noting that a significant spike in digital activity occurred in October 2025, coinciding with the two-year anniversary of the conflict's commencement. Methodologically, the core analysis was conducted both with and without the data from this specific high-volume period. Since the two analyses yielded no significant differences in the fundamental findings, the article presents the results inclusive of the entire data collection timeframe. This approach ensures that the analysis provides the most comprehensive picture of youth digital engagement throughout the full study period.

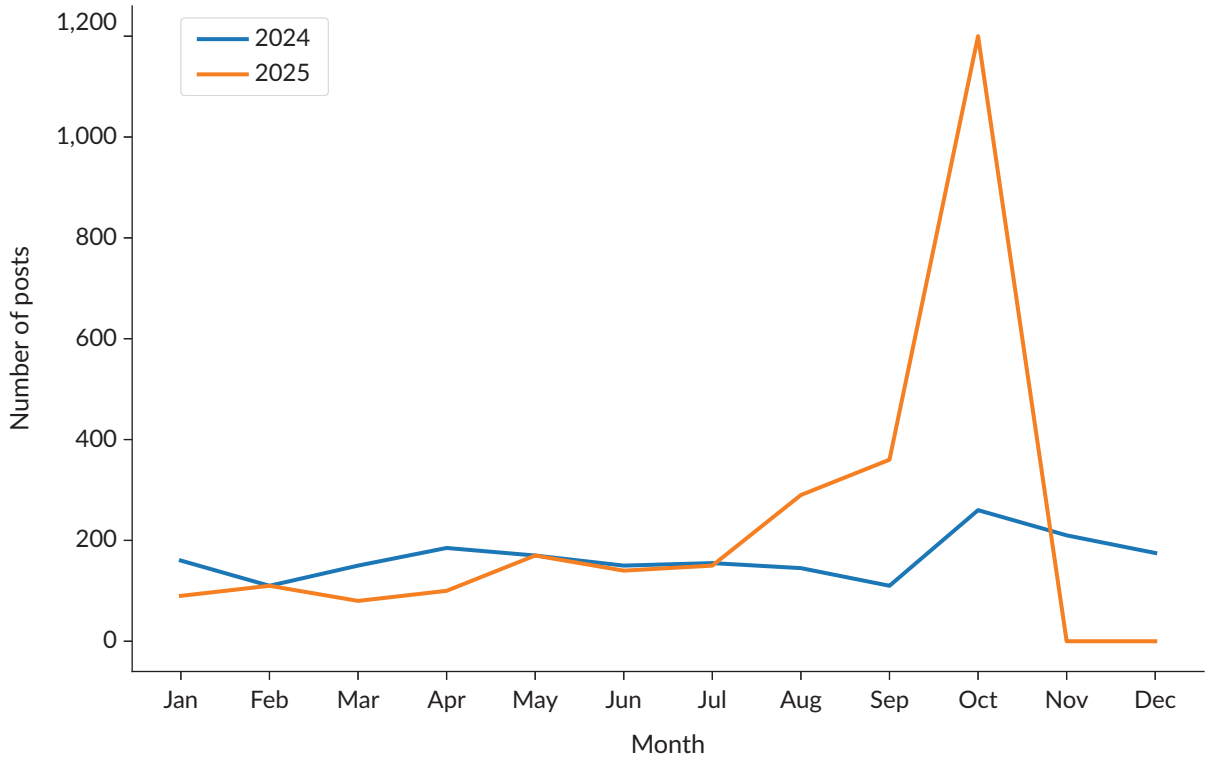

Figure 1. Monthly distribution of posts for 2024 and 2025. Notes: Data for 2025 were collected through October only; the zero values shown for November and December 2025 indicate that these months fall outside the study period rather than reflecting an absence of post activity.

Prior to analysis, the dataset underwent standard preprocessing procedures appropriate for short-text topic modeling. These included removing URLs, numerical characters, emojis, punctuation, and platform-specific artifacts such as mentions and retweet markers. The text was normalized through lowercase conversion, and custom stop-word lists were applied to remove high-frequency but analytically irrelevant terms. Duplicate entries and empty records were also removed.

Following preprocessing, a word cloud was generated to provide a descriptive overview of high-frequency terms in the cleaned corpus (Figure 2). The word cloud is included for illustrative and transparency purposes, offering a visual summary of dominant vocabulary patterns within youth boycott discourse. It is not used as an analytical tool and does not inform the identification of topics or motivational frames. Rather, it situates the subsequent topic modeling within the broader lexical environment of the dataset, allowing readers to observe the general discursive landscape prior to computational analysis. While word clouds do not capture semantic relationships or contextual meaning, they provide an accessible entry point into the dataset before more advanced computational techniques are applied.

Figure 2. Word cloud: Most frequent thematic terms in youth boycott discourse.

3.2. Computational Content Analysis: BERTopic

To identify latent themes within the discourse, the study employed BERTopic, a topic modeling approach specifically designed for short, semantically dense texts such as social media posts. BERTopic was chosen over traditional approaches like latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) due to its ability to leverage transformer-based embeddings, which capture contextual semantic relationships beyond simple word frequency. Traditional approaches like LDA primarily rely on word co-occurrence and often fail to capture the subtleties of meaning found in complex, high-dimensional data such as social media content. BERTopic, in contrast, uses sentence-level embeddings generated through a pre-trained Sentence-BERT model, which provides a richer representation of text meaning by accounting for word context and sentence structure.

These embeddings are then reduced in dimensionality using uniform manifold approximation and projection (UMAP), a technique that preserves both local and global structure in the data, ensuring that the clustering process maintains meaningful relationships between words and topics. The data are subsequently clustered using hierarchical density-based spatial clustering of applications with noise (HDBSCAN), which does not

require the pre-specification of the number of clusters. This is particularly useful for identifying semantically coherent topics in datasets like social media, where topics are often overlapping, ambiguous, and subject to changing discourse patterns. By using this density-based approach, HDBSCAN can automatically detect natural clusters, avoiding the need to impose arbitrary constraints on the number of topics.

The initial model generated 88 distinct topics, reflecting the granularity of discourse in the dataset. This large number of topics emerged from the high variability and semantic complexity of social media posts, especially when examining politically charged events like the Gaza war. The number of topics was not pre-specified; rather, it resulted from the data-driven nature of BERTopic. The 88 topics reflect fine-grained semantic clusters, which means that the model captures a wide range of thematic content. However, we recognize that an excessive number of topics can lead to overfitting and interpretability challenges. Thus, to ensure that the analysis remains focused and meaningful, the study selected the 30 most prevalent topics by document frequency. This decision helps to balance semantic granularity with the interpretability of the results, ensuring that the analysis prioritizes the most significant and widely discussed themes while excluding noise from low-frequency topics. After identifying the 30 most prevalent topics, one of the authors conducted the initial manual labeling based on their dominant semantic content. To enhance consistency, the labeling was subsequently reviewed and refined in consultation with the co-authors. The manual labeling process followed an established qualitative approach, in which the authors examined the top keywords and representative posts for each cluster. The authors also considered the contextual relevance of each topic to the research questions, ensuring that the labels were meaningful in the context of the Gaza war and youth participation in boycotts. To further support the consistency and reliability of the manual labeling process, the authors cross-checked the labels by revisiting a random sample of topics and discussing potential discrepancies. Where necessary, labels were adjusted to ensure conceptual clarity and alignment across the dataset.

Following manual labeling, the topics were aggregated into four higher-order meta-themes. The aggregation process was guided by clear interpretive criteria that prioritized conceptual coherence and thematic relevance. These criteria included: (a) thematic similarity between topics (i.e., whether they addressed the same core issue or motivational theme), (b) relevance to the research questions, and (c) internal consistency in the discourse. By grouping topics with similar content into meta-themes, we ensured that the final themes represented the dominant motivational frames driving youth engagement with consumer boycotts. The process of aggregation into meta-themes was not purely mechanical; it required interpretive judgment based on the researchers' understanding of the discourse. This is a standard approach in qualitative topic modeling, where interpretive flexibility is necessary to capture the richness of the data and avoid forcing topics into rigid categories. While this interpretive approach does not guarantee full replicability, it is consistent with established best practices in qualitative data analysis, where researcher judgment and domain knowledge are key to producing meaningful and coherent results. Topic coherence was assessed qualitatively by examining the top keywords and representative posts for each cluster, ensuring that the topics aligned with the theoretical framework and accurately reflected the discourse within the dataset. The analysis prioritized conceptual rigor and interpretive consistency rather than statistical validation or replicability. While quantitative coherence measures (such as topic coherence scores) are often used in large-scale corpus analyses, qualitative assessment was preferred in this case due to the short-text nature of social media posts and the subjective nature of framing analysis.

In terms of replicability, we recognize that qualitative topic modeling, especially when conducted by a single researcher, is not fully replicable in the same way as a purely statistical approach. However, the methodology followed is well-established in the field of qualitative content analysis and has been applied to social media data in similar contexts. The coding rules used for labeling and aggregating topics were explicitly defined and consistently applied throughout the analysis. This transparency in the methodological process allows future researchers to replicate the general framework of the study, even if the exact results might differ due to the inherently interpretive nature of the approach. This methodology, focusing on discursive framing, aims to capture the ways in which youth engage with political issues through consumer boycotts, and how these engagements are framed and communicated in digital spaces. The focus of the study is on expressive participation, where emotional and moral framing plays a central role in motivating and sustaining participation. The analysis is confined to English-language posts from a single social media platform, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study examines digital activism rather than offline action or long-term engagement, which is acknowledged as a limitation in the conclusion section.

3.2.1. Topic Generation and Exploration

To examine the substantive content of the topics generated by BERTopic, the analysis relied on the model's topic representations, consisting of the most salient keywords associated with each cluster. To complement this keyword-based representation and ensure contextual grounding, representative posts associated with each topic were retrieved and examined qualitatively, allowing topic meanings to be assessed within their discursive context.

Building on this exploratory step, the analysis proceeds with the 30 most prevalent topics identified in the previous stage. Their distribution across the dataset, by document count, is shown in Figure 3.

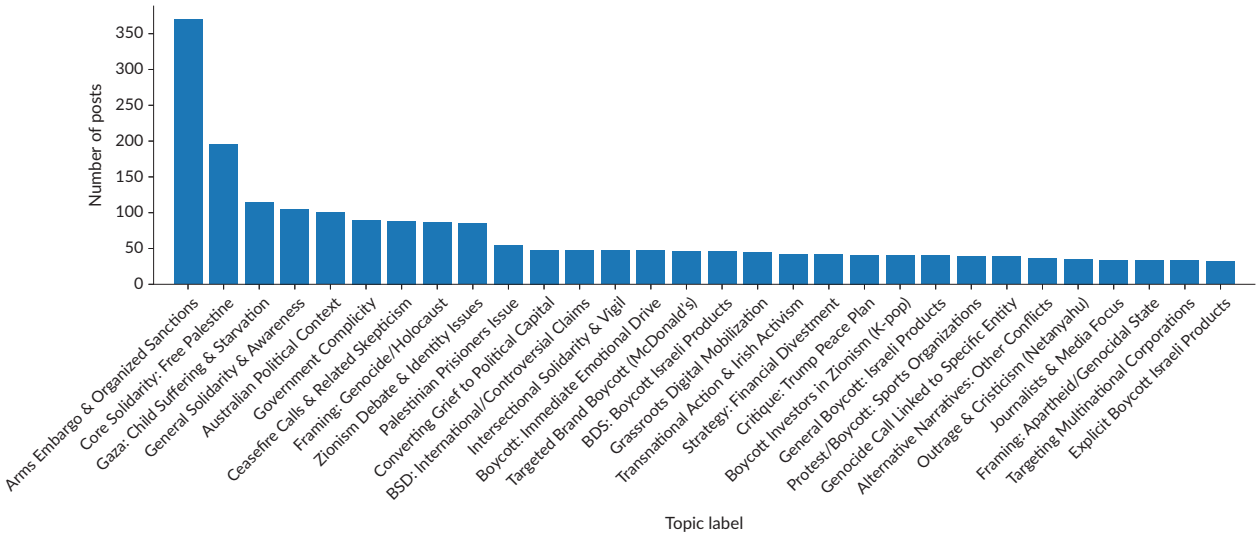

Figure 3. Distribution of the 30 most prevalent topics identified through BERTopic, based on document count. Note: BDS = Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions.

Each selected topic was assigned a concise, academically focused label reflecting its dominant semantic orientation. Topic labeling was conducted through an iterative examination of representative keywords and posts, with attention to relevance to youth boycott participation and to discursive framing. To ensure

consistency, labels were revisited through random cross-checks across the topic set. In a subsequent step, the labeled topics were aggregated into four higher-order meta-themes. This aggregation followed explicit interpretive criteria, including thematic similarity, shared motivational orientation, and internal discursive coherence. The resulting meta-themes correspond to the analytical expectations outlined in the theoretical framework and provide a structured bridge between computational topic modeling and the framing-based analysis presented in the following section. To reduce researcher subjectivity and enhance transparency, both topic labeling and meta-theme aggregation were conducted explicitly according to defined decision rules. Topic labels were assigned using a dominant-meaning principle, in which labels reflected the most recurrent justificatory claim and action orientation across the representative posts within each topic, rather than incorporating all possible semantic elements. Labeling was grounded in observable textual cues, including recurring evaluative language, blame attribution, named targets (e.g., institutions, civilians, corporations), and calls to action. Meta-theme aggregation proceeded through a second-stage grouping process, in which topics were clustered based on their shared diagnostic focus, motivational justification, and action-oriented framing. Topics that plausibly aligned with multiple meta-themes were assigned according to the frame most explicitly foregrounded in the representative posts, with borderline cases resolved through additional review within the same topic. To assess internal consistency under a single-coder design, labeling and aggregation were repeated after a time interval, and the results were compared for stability; discrepancies were resolved through re-examination of keywords and posts.

3.2.2. Meta-Theme Construction

The aggregation of the 30 dominant topics into four higher-order meta-themes and their relative distribution is illustrated in Figure 4. The meta-themes were developed as analytical categories designed to organize topic-level findings according to shared motivational and framing logics, rather than to treat individual topics as discrete units of meaning.

Meta-theme construction followed an iterative interpretive process. Topics were grouped when they displayed overlapping diagnostic narratives, similar motivational appeals, and comparable action-oriented language within the discourse. This procedure ensured that aggregation was guided by discursive coherence and alignment of framing rather than by surface-level lexical similarity alone. The resulting meta-themes correspond to the analytical expectations outlined in the theoretical framework and serve as the primary units of analysis in the following section. They provide a structured link between computational topic modeling and qualitative framing analysis, enabling systematic examination of how youth-led boycott participation is discursively justified and communicated in digital environments. The four meta-themes identified through this process are: (a) Critique of Institutional Failure & Non-Electoral Action, (b) The Moral Imperative & Humanitarian Catalyst, (c) Transnational Identity & Collective Solidarity, and (d) Economic Resistance (Corporate & Institutional). Importantly, the meta-themes are not treated as mutually exclusive or exhaustive categories, nor as variables whose relative weight implies explanatory power. Instead, they function as analytical constructs that organize recurring framing patterns within the discourse. Individual posts may reflect multiple meta-themes simultaneously, and the analytical focus remains on how these frames are articulated and combined in digital communication rather than on their frequency or causal effects. This approach ensures alignment with the framing-oriented objectives of the study and provides the foundation for the interpretive analysis presented in the following section.

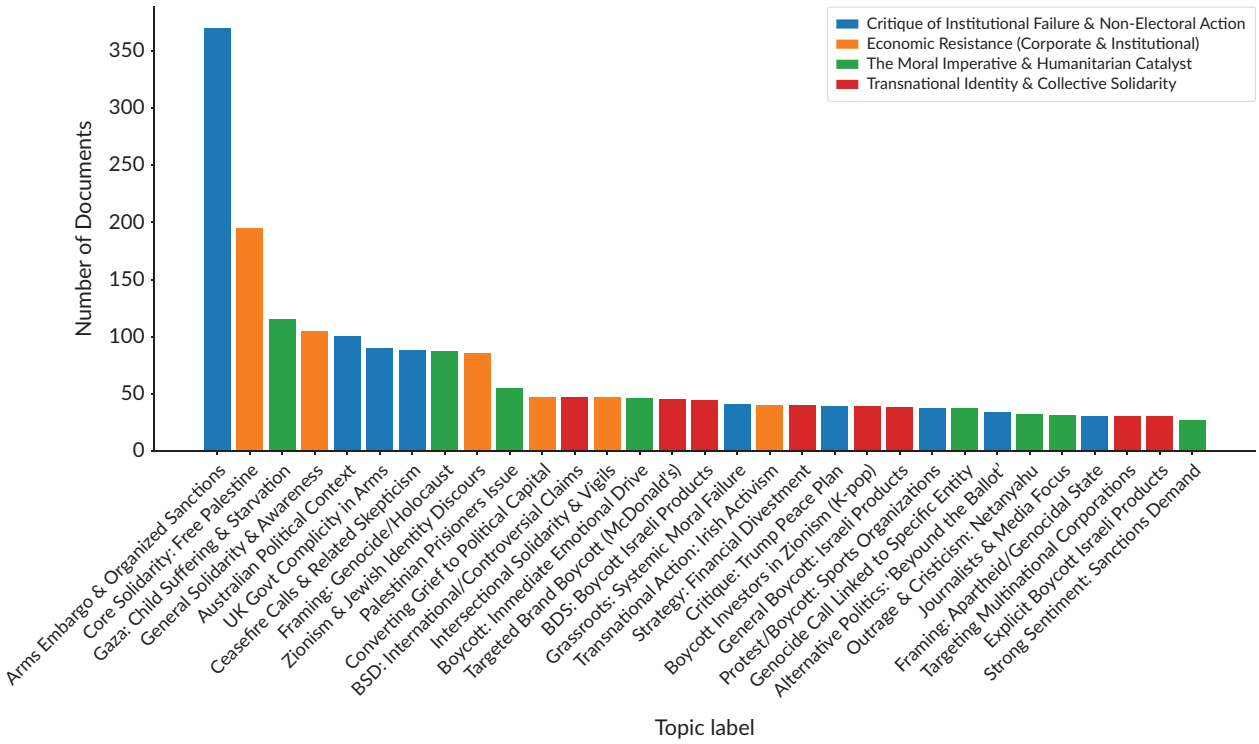

Figure 4. Topic distribution by meta-theme. Note: BDS = Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions.

4. Analysis of Motivational Frames

This section examines how youth-led consumer boycott participation related to the Gaza war is discursively framed on social media. Building on the computational identification of dominant topics and their aggregation into higher-order meta-themes, the analysis focuses on how political participation is justified, legitimized, and rendered meaningful through everyday digital communication. Rather than treating boycott participation as a singular or instrumental behavior, the findings show that youth discourse is structured by multiple, overlapping motivational frames that articulate political agency in moral, emotional, and symbolic terms. These frames do not operate independently; instead, they intersect and reinforce one another, reflecting broader transformations in how political participation is enacted and communicated in digitally mediated environments.

A prominent framing pattern constructs consumer boycotts as a response to the perceived failure or inadequacy of formal political institutions. Across the corpus, posts frequently depict governments, international organizations, and political elites as inactive, complicit, or unwilling to intervene. This institutional critique is often expressed through concise, declarative statements such as "Governments failed," "No accountability from leaders," or "Politics won't save Gaza." Rather than engaging in extended policy critique, these posts condense political judgment into short evaluative claims that position institutional channels as ineffective or morally compromised. Within this framing, boycott participation is articulated as a form of political agency that emerges precisely because institutional avenues are seen as exhausted or inaccessible.

Importantly, this critique of institutional politics is not monolithic. Some posts express resignation or cynicism, framing boycotts as the "only option left" or the "bare minimum" available to ordinary individuals. Others articulate a more confrontational stance, positioning consumer withdrawal as an active refusal to comply with political systems perceived as complicit in injustice. Statements such as "If politicians won't act, we will," or "We act where governments don't," frame boycotts not as apathy or disengagement, but as a reallocation of political responsibility from institutional actors to citizens themselves. In this way, everyday consumption becomes a site where political agency is reclaimed, allowing participants to assert relevance and voice in contexts where formal participation is viewed as ineffective.

Alongside institutional critique, moral and humanitarian reasoning constitute a central motivational frame through which boycott participation is justified. Posts frequently foreground civilian suffering and humanitarian crises as the primary rationale for action, often using stark, emotionally charged language rather than abstract moral argumentation. Common expressions such as "Children are starving," "Civilians are dying," or "This is genocide" appear repeatedly across the dataset, functioning as moral claims that require response rather than debate. In this framing, boycott participation is not presented as a strategic choice among alternatives, but as an ethical necessity grounded in conscience and responsibility.

This moral framing is closely tied to affective expression, which plays a critical role in sustaining participation and amplifying political meaning. Different emotional tones serve distinct framing functions within the discourse. Expressions of grief and sorrow, such as "I can't watch this anymore" or "My heart breaks for Gaza," often operate to construct a sense of moral obligation, positioning boycott participation as a response to shared human suffering. Anger and outrage, conveyed through phrases like "This makes me sick" or "Silence is violence," more frequently accompany attributions of blame and urgency, directing attention toward both institutional actors and corporate entities. Shame and complicity also emerge as affective motivators, with posts stating "I refuse to fund this" or "I won't be part of it anymore," framing consumption itself as a moral act that must be withdrawn. Rather than replacing political reasoning, emotional expression functions to compress complex ethical judgments into shareable, resonant forms that circulate effectively within digital platforms.

A further recurring framing pattern situates boycott participation within narratives of collective identity and transnational solidarity. Youth discourse frequently emphasizes shared responsibility and global belonging, framing consumer action as part of a broader collective struggle rather than an individual lifestyle choice. Inclusive language such as "We stand together," "From everywhere for Gaza," or "This is a global fight" constructs a sense of collective subjectivity that transcends national boundaries. Through such expressions, participants position themselves as members of a transnational moral community united by shared values and commitments rather than formal organizational ties.

This solidarity framing is reinforced through references to protests, marches, and coordinated actions across different countries, linking individual consumer behavior to visible collective mobilization. Statements like "Boycotts unite us" or "Our collective pressure matters" emphasize the relational dimension of participation, suggesting that meaning derives not from isolated acts of consumption but from their aggregation within a shared symbolic space. In this context, social media platforms function as connective infrastructures that allow individual expressions to be recognized, echoed, and validated as part of a larger movement. Boycott participation thus becomes a way of signaling belonging, alignment, and mutual recognition within a transnational activist identity.

Consumer boycotts are also framed as a form of strategic economic resistance aimed at holding corporations and broader institutional actors accountable. Within this discourse, companies are explicitly named and positioned as political actors whose economic influence renders them legitimate targets of pressure, while institutional actors are often implicated through calls for sanctions, divestment, or broader economic disengagement. Posts frequently adopt imperative or action-oriented language, such as "Hit them financially," "Profit is the only language they understand," or "Stop funding complicit brands," alongside demands to "sanction," "divest," or "cut economic ties." Rather than articulating detailed economic analyses, these statements rely on widely shared assumptions about the responsiveness of both corporations and institutional actors to financial pressure, transforming economic withdrawal into a symbolic act of resistance.

Notably, participants' own definitions of success within this frame rarely hinge on immediate policy change or measurable economic impact. Instead, posts often frame success in terms of visibility, signaling, and moral positioning. Expressions such as "At least don't give them your money," "Force brands to pick sides," or "Make them feel it" suggest that the act of withdrawal itself carries political meaning, regardless of outcome. In this way, market-based action is understood as communicative rather than purely instrumental: It publicly aligns the participant with a moral stance, signals disapproval, and contributes to the broader visibility of dissent. This framing allows boycott participation to remain meaningful even in the absence of clear or immediate results.

Across the corpus, these motivational frames frequently intersect within individual posts, illustrating the hybrid nature of youth political expression in digital environments. A single post may simultaneously condemn government inaction, invoke humanitarian suffering, affirm global solidarity, and call for targeted consumer withdrawal. For example, statements combining phrases such as "No justice from politicians," "Children are dying," and "Boycott complicit brands now" exemplify how multiple frames are layered within compact communicative units. This hybridity is not indicative of conceptual confusion; rather, it reflects an adaptive framing strategy that allows participants to mobilize different motivational logics simultaneously. The coexistence of institutional critique, moral obligation, collective identity, and market accountability within short posts highlights the affordances of digital platforms, where emotional resonance, symbolic alignment, and calls to action can be compressed and rapidly circulated. Hybrid framing enables boycott discourse to appeal to diverse audiences, sustain engagement across time, and remain resilient to critiques focused narrowly on effectiveness or feasibility. Together, these findings illustrate how youth-led consumer boycotts are discursively constructed as politically meaningful, morally grounded, and collectively oriented forms of participation, embedded within broader transformations of political engagement in contemporary digital culture.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how youth participation in consumer boycotts related to the Gaza war is discursively framed within digital environments. By combining computational topic modeling with qualitative frame interpretation, the analysis moved beyond assessing boycott outcomes or institutional effectiveness and instead focused on how young people publicly justify, legitimize, and narrate their engagement through everyday digital communication. In doing so, the study highlights consumer boycotts as a communicative and symbolic form of political participation, shaped as much by meaning-making processes as by market behavior itself.

Empirically, the findings demonstrate that youth-led boycott discourse is characterized by a recurring set of motivational frames that organize political meaning in distinct yet overlapping ways. Across the corpus, boycott participation is repeatedly articulated as a response to perceived institutional inaction, moral urgency, collective responsibility, and corporate accountability. These frames are not expressed through abstract political argumentation alone, but through concise, emotionally resonant statements that circulate easily within digital platforms—phrases such as "governments failed," "boycott is the bare minimum," "we stand together," or "hit them financially" encapsulate complex political positions in compressed, shareable forms. Such expressions illustrate how political participation in digital spaces is often enacted through short declarative claims, moral assertions, and calls to action rather than extended deliberation.

The analysis further shows that these motivational frames are rarely isolated. Instead, youth discourse frequently combines institutional critique, moral and humanitarian concerns, collective identity, and strategic market logic within a single post. A post condemning political inaction may simultaneously reference civilian suffering and call for coordinated consumer withdrawal, demonstrating how framing processes allow multiple political meanings to coexist within compact communicative units. This hybridity reflects the affordances of digital platforms, where emotional expression, symbolic alignment, and mobilizing language are intertwined and rapidly amplified. Rather than indicating inconsistency, the overlap of frames highlights the flexibility of youth political expression and the capacity of digital discourse to sustain engagement through layered motivational appeals.

By foregrounding framing processes, this study makes several contributions to research on political consumerism, youth political engagement, and digital activism. First, it empirically demonstrates how consumer boycotts function as discursive practices through which political agency is asserted when institutional channels are perceived as ineffective or unresponsive. Second, it shows how moral and humanitarian narratives do not merely accompany boycott participation but actively constitute its political legitimacy, transforming consumption into a site of ethical responsibility. Third, it highlights how transnational solidarity is constructed through everyday digital language, enabling young participants to position themselves within global moral communities without formal organizational affiliation. Finally, it illustrates how market accountability frames reconfigure corporations as political actors, making economic withdrawal a symbolic and communicative act even when material impact remains uncertain. Methodologically, the study illustrates the value of integrating computational topic modeling with qualitative framing analysis for examining large-scale digital discourse. BERTopic enabled the identification of dominant thematic patterns across thousands of posts, while qualitative interpretation ensured that these patterns were situated within their communicative and political context. This approach allows researchers to balance scale with interpretive depth, particularly in studies of short, emotionally charged texts where meaning is often conveyed through implication, repetition, and shared cultural references rather than explicit argument.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis focuses on English-language posts from a single platform and captures primarily expressive forms of participation, limiting insight into offline action, sustained engagement, or policy impact. While the dataset centers on youth-led discourse, age identification relied on indirect indicators and cannot fully exclude participation by individuals outside the defined age range. Moreover, the Gaza war represents a highly specific and emotionally charged context, and the framing patterns identified here should not be assumed to generalize automatically to other boycott movements or political issues. Future research could extend this approach by comparing boycott framing across platforms,

languages, or geopolitical contexts, or by integrating interviews to examine how digital discourse connects to offline practices and long-term political identities. Comparative studies could also explore whether similar framing dynamics emerge in boycotts related to environmental, labor, or racial justice issues, or whether conflict-driven contexts generate distinct motivational configurations. Despite these limitations, the study underscores the importance of examining how political participation is framed and communicated in digitally mediated environments. For young people engaging in consumer boycotts, political action is not only enacted through market behavior but articulated through moral claims, collective narratives, and emotionally resonant discourse. Understanding these framing processes is essential for grasping how contemporary political participation is constructed, experienced, and sustained in networked public spheres.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

We used BERTopic, a language model, to perform text analysis of X posts. We used Grammarly, an AI-powered tool, to help detect and correct grammar mistakes in the text.

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