



## Whose justice? Social (in)justice in tourism boycotts

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### ABSTRACT

Boycotting has long been acclaimed as an exemplary nonviolent tactic utilized in the pursuit of social justice. Guided by justice and political consumerism literature and using critical media discourse analysis, this study sought to investigate the portrayal of social justice in tourists' discourses surrounding travel boycott campaigns against Myanmar. While online narratives exhibit genuine concern for justice and morality, this research elucidates variations in the expression and application of justice, thereby emphasizing the intricate moral decision-making faced by tourists. Overall, this paper illustrates how social justice discourses may be usurped by tourists as a means to blunt justice narratives, calling for a new 'moral turn' in research that is more sensitive yet critical towards social justice in politicized tourism consumption.

*"Burma will always be here, and when it is democratic it will be a place that I think tourists will enjoy visiting with no qualms and guilty feelings"*  
(Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Leader of Myanmar's National League for Democracy, cited in Hopfner, 2002, p. 1).

### 1. Introduction

Tourism, as a global industry, is a complex and highly political phenomenon that transcends formal government structures and processes, often serving as a policy instrument (Henderson, 2003; Yang, 2023). Previous studies have demonstrated the interconnection between tourism consumption and broader political and ethical issues (Fennell, 2006; Johnson, Everingham, & Everingham, 2023; Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013; Seyfi, Sharifi-Tehrani, Hall, & Vo-Thanh, 2023; Vukomanovic, Barbieri, Knollenberg, Yoshizumi, & Arroyo, 2022; Yang, 2023). The consumption practices of tourists are increasingly significant in the global pursuit of social and environmental justice (Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2022), as well as human rights (Shaheer, Carr, & Insch, 2019; Shaheer,

Insch, & Carr, 2018). Furthermore, scholarly research has demonstrated that tourists are becoming more aware of their political influence, particularly through participation in boycotts, and the consequential impact on the destinations they visit (Shepherd, 2021; Seyfi, Hall, Saarinen, & Vo-Thanh, 2021). Additionally, tourism is recognized as a means of demonstrating solidarity with oppressed communities, and there is a growing body of literature highlighting its significance in supporting social justice and human rights (e.g., Higgins-Desbiolles, Scheyvens, & Bhatia, 2022; Josiassen, Kock, Assaf, & Berbekova, 2023; Shaheer et al., 2019).

As tourists become more politically aware, destination boycotts are also becoming more prevalent (Shepherd, 2021; Yang, 2023). The significant impacts of such activities have led to an increasing consideration of sustainability and justice principles in tourism decision-making, policy, and practices (Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2022). However, despite the increasing focus on tourism's potential for promoting social justice, many tourism communities, particularly in low and middle-income countries, continue to experience injustices due to limited control over tourism development, its impacts, decision-making processes, and their

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own future (Bianchi & de Man, 2021; Jamal & Higham, 2021; Rastegar, 2020). Therefore, as tourism evolves into a more politically charged and conscientious activity (Seyfi & Hall, 2020; Yang, 2023), greater attention is needed on tourists' politicized consumption and its connection to justice and human rights.

The current stream of literature on boycotts and tourism has primarily focused on various aspects, such as the reasons behind tourism boycotts (Shaheer et al., 2019), tourists' motivations and perceptions of boycotts (Shepherd, 2021), the role of digital media in boycotting (Liu, Zhang, & Yao, 2021; Seyfi, Hall, Vo-Thanh, & Zaman, 2022), ethical considerations and decision-making processes related to tourism boycotts (Hudson, 2007), and the impacts of boycotts on destinations (Castañeda & Burtner, 2010; Yu, McManus, Yen, & Li, 2020; Zhai & Luo, 2023). Human rights activism has long been recognized as a significant driver of tourism-related boycotts (Hall, 1994; Shaheer et al., 2018). Yet, despite the assertion that tourists actively wield their purchasing power to exert their political agency, there is surprisingly limited research on the relationship between human-rights-related boycotts and social justice, as well as the broader connections between boycotts and the notions of social justice within the realm of tourism.

This research gap highlights the need for further exploration and understanding of how boycotts, as a form of political consumerism, intersect with the principles of social justice within the intricate dynamics of the globalized and politicized tourism phenomenon. Thus, this study aims to address the aforementioned research gaps by examining the role of justice in destination boycott campaigns that focus on human rights abuses. Specifically, the study aims to investigate how the concept of social justice is understood and applied within the context of tourism boycotts aimed at addressing human rights violations, with a particular focus on Myanmar (formerly known as Burma). Myanmar has witnessed repeated calls for travel bans and tourism boycotts in response to critical incidents within the country including systematic human rights abuses (violent and systematic persecution of its minorities) by the ruling military junta (Henderson, 2003).

The study will make several significant contributions to our understanding of the interplay between social justice, the business of tourism, and politics. Firstly, it will shed light on the various notions of social justice that underlie and inform boycott campaigns targeting human rights violations, as well as the strategies employed to promote their objectives. This will provide a nuanced understanding of how social justice concerns are communicated and addressed through these campaigns. Secondly, the research will offer valuable insights into the diverse expressions and applications of social justice exhibited by tourists, demonstrating that tourism consumption extends beyond mere hedonistic motivations for politically engaged individuals. Lastly, the study will respond to previous calls for empirical evidence on the relationship between social justice and politically motivated tourism consumption (e.g., Seyfi, Hall, Vo-Thanh, & Zaman, 2022; Yang, 2023). Together, these contributions will establish a solid foundation for future research on boycotts within the tourism context, shedding light on their intricate and sometimes contentious relationship with issues of justice and human rights.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Boycott as political consumerism

Political consumerism, defined as the intentional choices made by individuals to change objectionable market practices that one finds ethically, environmentally or politically objectionable (Micheletti, 2003), is an integral part of social and environmental justice activism (Boström, Micheletti, & Oosterveer, 2019; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Yang, 2023). It falls under the umbrella of 'lifestyle politics', offering an alternative form of political and civic engagement that addresses quality-of-life concerns beyond traditional electoral politics (Copeland & Boulianne, 2022). This form of engagement has taken two common

manifestations: boycotts and buycotts, wherein consumers either refrain from purchasing certain products, brands, or services based on their objectionable attributes or actively support those aligned with their political or ethical values (Neilson, 2010; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013).

Boycotts, the oldest and most studied form of political consumerism, can be defined as urging individual consumers to abstain from specific purchases in order to achieve certain objectives (Friedman, 1999). In the context of tourism, Seyfi and Hall (2020) expand the definition to include punitive measures applied to destinations, individuals, businesses, and governments. The tourism industry has experienced a significant increase in boycotts, with 90% occurring in the past decade (Shaheer et al., 2018). This rise reflects the growing trend of collective responses to perceived injustices, encompassing human rights violations, animal welfare concerns, political issues, and environmental problems (Shaheer et al., 2019). The proliferation of boycotts can be attributed to the active use of digital media by tourists, who utilize these platforms to enact economic, social, and political change (Mkono, 2018). Seyfi et al. (2021) highlight how contemporary tourism consumption practices are driven, in part, by the active use of digital media to exert political agency. Similarly, Seyfi, Hall, Vo-Thanh, and Zaman (2022) demonstrate how digital media stimulate sustainability-driven consumerism and reinforce both tourism boycotts and purchasing behaviors.

Recent research underscores the significant influence that public discussions surrounding destination boycotts due to poor human rights records can have on the tourism industry and a destination's reputation (Seyfi & Hall, 2020; Shaheer et al., 2019). These conversations shape public perception, consumer behavior, and can influence the decisions of governments and businesses involved. Boycotts can send a powerful message to governments and businesses, signalling that the international community closely monitors and takes a stance on human rights issues, potentially motivating them to adopt more ethical practices. The occurrence and prominence of discussions related to travel boycotts are influenced by several factors, including the severity and timing of human rights abuses, the interests of various stakeholders, and the advocacy efforts of civil society groups and activists (Shaheer et al., 2018, 2019). These factors determine the level of attention and engagement these boycott discourses receive and their potential for meaningful impact.

Power imbalances also play a role, with developed countries and Western media outlets often exerting more influence over public perception and discourse compared to the targeted countries themselves (Marmura, 2010). This power imbalance in media representation can shape the framing of boycott discussions and the narratives that emerge, potentially influencing the actions and decisions of individuals, organizations, and governments. Additionally, a country's reputation holds significant importance in the global tourism market. When a country's reputation is tainted by human rights concerns, it directly impacts its ability to attract tourists, businesses, and investments (Yu et al., 2020; Zhai & Luo, 2023). Public discourses surrounding travel boycotts can have far-reaching consequences beyond the tourism industry, affecting perceptions, decision-making processes, a country's international standing, diplomatic relations, as well as its socio-political and economic landscape (Seyfi & Hall, 2020).

### 2.2. Social justice through tourism

The concept of social justice has gained prominence in the evaluation of global tourism, reflecting a search for ethical and alternative forms of tourism (Lanfant & Graburn, 1992). Over the years, numerous studies have examined different conceptualizations of social justice in tourism, recognizing its intricate and dynamic nature and its implications for tourism policies and practices. For example, scholars have studied the role of just and sustainable tourism in recognizing diverse voices and rights (Jamal, 2019), promoting peace (Farmaki, 2017), a tool for education and respecting local values (Buzinde & Caterina-Knorr, 2022),

women's empowerment (Seyfi, Hall, & Vo-Thanh, 2022; Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023), and building a positive future (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008; Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2021). Despite the increasing number of studies on tourism and justice, the concept of social justice in tourism remains multifaceted and contested, with various theoretical and practical approaches reflecting diverse perspectives, interests, and values.

These conceptualizations of social justice include distributive justice, procedural justice, recognition justice, and restorative justice. Distributive justice focuses on the fair allocation of tourism benefits and burdens among stakeholders, aiming to reduce poverty, inequality, and disadvantage. It emphasizes economic and social equity in tourism development, contributing to local stakeholder acceptance and minimizing opposition (Jamal & Camargo, 2014). However, distributive justice has been criticized for neglecting power asymmetry and broader structural issues (Dadashpoor & Alvandipour, 2020).

Procedural justice emphasizes the fairness and transparency of decision-making processes, with a focus on the participation and empowerment of local communities and stakeholders, ensuring a just process that respects human rights and cultural diversity (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2021). By involving all relevant parties, procedural justice seeks to create a more inclusive and democratic decision-making framework. Recognition justice in tourism activities emphasizes the quality of relationships and interactions among stakeholders, emphasizing mutual respect, trust, empathy, and the recognition and preservation of cultural identity, heritage, and values. This conceptualization highlights the importance of valuing and acknowledging diverse perspectives and fostering positive relationships among stakeholders (Camargo & Vázquez-Maguirre, 2021). Restorative justice, a recent conceptualization in tourism, aims to address harm and promote justice and fairness by restoring and repairing the impacts of injustice, with a particular emphasis on dignity and respect (Rastegar, 2022).

Incorporating these conceptualizations, just tourism aims to ensure the "fair dissemination of costs and benefits that recognizes individuals' values and world views by contributing to more representativeness in decision-making, with policies in place to mitigate potential impacts" (Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2022, p.4). It prioritizes the well-being and empowerment of local communities while minimizing adverse effects on their social, cultural, economic, and environmental aspects. By embracing principles of fairness, equality, and respect for human rights, just tourism seeks to shape a more equitable and sustainable future (Camargo & Vázquez-Maguirre, 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008, 2020; Jamal, 2019).

### 2.3. Boycotts and the pursuit of social justice

Boycotts have long been utilized by civil society organizations as a nonviolent means of exerting political pressure and advocating for social justice (Carter-Hallward & Shaver, 2012). Due to their perceived legitimacy and widespread participation, they are viewed as effective tools for bringing about socioeconomic, political, and social change, although their use remains a subject of controversy. Boycotts are seen as "a behavior in the moral toolbox of ordinary people" (Radzik, 2017, p.18) and have long been hailed as a tool for combating injustice and wrongdoing. They can be viewed as a social dilemma, where individuals weigh the benefits of their own consumption against the collective benefits of refraining from consumption, often working in solidarity with others (Seyfi & Hall, 2020). Tourism has emerged as a political activity, with individuals increasingly engaging with social justice issues in contemporary tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2021; Jamal & Higham, 2021; Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2022). Examples of international boycott movements fighting for social justice include the South African boycott movement and the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement. However, there are debates surrounding the legitimacy and impact of such movements, with some arguing against the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement as detrimental to peace and social justice (Newman, 2016).

Nonetheless, studies have indicated that tourists generally avoid supporting businesses associated with human rights violations when visiting countries with a history of poor human rights (Seyfi et al., 2021; Shaheer et al., 2019). These findings suggest that tourists, as a collective, prioritize ethical considerations and strive to make responsible choices while traveling. However, the hosting of the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup, despite concerns over the country's human rights record, and the increasing demand for tourism in countries with similar records, demonstrate that tourists' preferences and behaviors can be influenced by evolving circumstances, perceptions, individual motivations, and specific contexts that warrant boycotts. This implies that tourists may be willing to overlook or rationalize certain aspects for the sake of attending high-profile events. Various factors, including the appeal of attending a prestigious sporting event, the impact of marketing campaigns promoting the host country, and individual judgments regarding the event's significance compared to human rights concerns, contribute to this willingness.

The ethical discussions surrounding tourism and boycotts also encompass the imposition of sanctions on tourism and destinations (Seyfi, Hall, & Vo-Thanh, 2022). This debate becomes evident in the case of Myanmar tourism, where some proponents advocate for a boycott as a means to exert pressure for regime change. On the other hand, opponents argue that visiting such destinations can help alleviate the isolation of the broader population, create employment opportunities, and enable visitors to advocate for justice (Henderson, 2003; Hudson, 2007). Taking a justice-oriented perspective, Rarick (2006) raises a crucial question: is it appropriate to destroy a country in order to save it?

Understanding justice discourses in the context of tourism requires recognizing that justice is intimately linked to people's lives, well-being, homes, communities, work, and the places they travel to (Jamal, 2019). From a justice and sustainability perspective, making decisions about boycotting or other actions requires thoughtful deliberation at the national or global level. While boycotts may be perceived as a form of protest to address human rights violations and other injustices, making such a decision requires a comprehensive understanding of the specific context, encompassing the broader implications for justice, sustainability, and the well-being of the communities affected.

## 3. Research methodology

### 3.1. Study context

Myanmar presents an intriguing case for examining the interplay between boycotts and social justice, as it has experienced one of the most significant tourism boycotts since apartheid-era South Africa (Responsible Travel, 2023). The country's regime and the politicization of its tourism industry make it an ideal case for investigating this phenomenon (Henderson, 2003). Myanmar's history is marked by political instability, military coups, and human rights violations. It was under military rule from 1962 until 2011 when a civilian government was established. However, the military retained substantial control over key political and economic sectors. Democratic reforms took place in the 2010s, including the release of political prisoners and free elections in 2015. However, the situation deteriorated in 2021 when the military staged a coup, overthrowing the elected government based on unfounded claims of election fraud. This coup sparked widespread protests, met with brutal repression by the military, resulting in numerous deaths and thousands of arrests (Maizland, 2022).

In response to these events, various actors, including governments, international organizations, and civil society groups, have called for a boycott of Myanmar. Pro-boycott non-governmental organizations view visits to Myanmar as a tacit endorsement of the government (Henderson, 2003). Lovelock (2012, p.185) further notes that "tourism brings international recognition and legitimacy to such regimes... while potentially paying for arms that strengthen their control." The boycott

movement is supported by a range of individuals, organizations, and advocacy groups, including international and local human rights organizations (e.g., Amnesty International), pro-democracy activists, civil society groups (e.g., Rohingya advocacy groups, Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel laureate and former leader of Myanmar's National League for Democracy), international governments and policymakers (e.g., United Nations, European Union, and individual countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia), as well as celebrities and public figures. These actors aim to target the military junta and its business interests, asserting that the military's control over key sectors of the economy enables them to maintain power and finance their repressive actions.

The boycott calls aim to exert pressure on the military regime in Myanmar, urging them to relinquish power and restore democracy. Several countries and international organizations have imposed sanctions on Myanmar, while civil society groups advocate boycotting companies associated with the military, including those in the tourism industry (Michalon, 2017). Additionally, the boycott seeks to dissuade tourists from visiting the country in order to disrupt a significant revenue source for the regime and compel them to address human rights abuses, ultimately restoring the country's reputation and promoting tourism (Burma Campaign Uk, 2022).

### 3.2. Research approach

Using a social justice perspective and employing a case study methodology, this study aims to extract and explore the multifaceted aspects of tourism boycott in Myanmar through online narratives. Case studies involve in-depth investigations of phenomena within their contexts and are commonly used in various fields, including tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). They are particularly suitable when researchers seek to answer "how" and "why" questions that require a comprehensive and detailed description of a social phenomenon (Yin, 2014).

In this study, critical discourse analysis was chosen as the appropriate approach (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010), given its interdisciplinary nature. This approach draws on discursive psychology, ethnomethodology, and Foucauldian approaches, perceiving language (e.g., text, discourse, or media samples) as a "social practice" and examining how texts are utilized to produce, reproduce, or challenge social and political dominance (Fairclough, 2013). Discourse analysis is increasingly employed in the field of tourism (Qian, Wei, & Law, 2018) to uncover cultural and social meanings and messages.

Fairclough (1995) proposed a comprehensive analytical framework for critical discourse analysis that comprises three dimensions. The first dimension involves linguistic description, where the language used in the text is analyzed. The second dimension focuses on the interpretation of discourse practices involved in producing and comprehending the text, emphasizing the social practices that shape language use. The third dimension pertains to the explanation of the sociocultural context in which the text is embedded, examining broader cultural, political, and economic influences (Li, Pearce, & Low, 2018). These dimensions encompass three types of analyses that are interconnected and conducted simultaneously. Textual analysis scrutinizes language use and its influence on meaning. Processing analysis investigates how people interpret and understand text, with a focus on the social practices that shape interpretation. Social analysis delves into the broader sociocultural context of the text, exploring power relations and social structures that shape language use. By incorporating these dimensions and types of analysis, Fairclough's framework provides a comprehensive approach to critical discourse analysis that recognizes the complexity of language use and the broader social, cultural, and political influences, enabling researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of language use, meaning, and influences. Thus, a critical approach with social justice concerns necessitates unpacking and questioning discourse to identify power relations and highlight dominant interests within a media context.

For this study, online content from sources such as TripAdvisor, Twitter, blogs, and newspapers serves as the primary resource for identifying and examining how dominant discourses in travel boycott campaigns against Myanmar portray social justice narratives. The critical media discourse analysis approach acknowledges the growing influence of digital media platforms and the need to analyze how they shape discourse and influence public opinion (Qian et al., 2018). Additionally, online content allows for a broad range of perspectives to be included in the analysis, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation. This study primarily collects data from social media platforms rather than news articles. While social media and online platforms offer accessible and cost-effective sources of data that can be conveniently collected and analyzed, the findings may place greater emphasis on user-generated content and public opinion, which can diverge from views expressed in official news sources.

### 3.3. Data collection and analysis

To collect data for the study, the researchers followed the process outlined by Liasidou (2018) and Li et al. (2018). In August 2022, a Google search was conducted using keywords such as "tourism boycott Myanmar," "travel boycott Myanmar," and "holiday boycott Myanmar." Eight rounds of searches were performed to gather relevant data on the topic of Myanmar tourism boycott. Initially, the search yielded approximately 2,510,000 pages. The search was then narrowed down to "verbatim" and continued up to page 10 of the results, as beyond that point, the topics became repetitive. A total of 100 links were identified, with each page displaying 10 URLs. All the links were reviewed and screened for relevance to tourism, and duplicate items were removed. Ultimately, 58 samples, including news articles, webpages, ask-answer questions, and social media posts, were selected as eligible samples for the study.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the collected data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that allows scholars to go beyond simple word counting and interpret the meaning of the data. The researchers followed a six-step process suggested by Esfehiani and Walters (2018) for conducting thematic analysis. The first step involved familiarizing themselves with the collected data by reading and re-reading it multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. In the second step, the researchers utilized Maxqda 20, a software tool, to develop codes and categorize the data into meaningful groups. The third step entailed using the initial codes to identify and define initial themes. These initial themes were then combined in the fourth step to develop organizing themes, which provided a more holistic understanding of the data. In the fifth step, global themes were extracted from the organizing themes, offering a high-level overview of the data that addressed the research question. Finally, in the sixth step, the authors conducted an analysis and description of the data based on the global themes, interpreting the data and presenting findings relevant to the research question. A coding process was employed to analyze the data, where initially two authors independently extracted 10 codes. These codes were later cross-checked and merged using "Wordstat," an automatic content analysis tool. The final codes were verified by two tourism professors who possessed knowledge of the studied topic.

## 4. Findings and discussion

The findings are presented in the context of dominant discourses and subject positions identified within them, exploring how writers from various parts of the world discuss the Myanmar travel boycott and its impact on both the regime violating human rights and the communities affected by injustice.

### 4.1. Tourism boycotts and the justice discourses

The discourses surrounding the Myanmar boycott are intricate and

varied, with online platforms presenting a diverse range of arguments and perspectives that influence individuals' opinions and discussions on the subject of boycotts and justice. The discourses presented demonstrate how different conceptualizations of social justice can reflect individuals' diverse perspectives, interests, and values (Camargo & Vázquez-Maguirre, 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008, 2020; Jamal, 2019). The arguments surrounding the Myanmar travel boycott can be categorized into two main camps: supporters and opponents of the boycott. Advocates of the boycott argue that it can effectively exert pressure on the Myanmar government to address human rights abuses. They believe that boycotting Myanmar raises global awareness about these violations and creates pressure on the government to act, thereby promoting social justice. They also argue that failing to take any action may be seen as complicity and can contribute to the perpetuation of social injustice. Some proponents of the boycott acknowledge that similar human rights issues exist in other parts of the world that are not subjected to boycotts. However, they maintain that acting in one situation can still have a positive impact, and the urgency of the situation in Myanmar justifies this action. To support their arguments, they point to ongoing conflicts in Turkey and China, the challenges faced by illegal refugees in Australia, the Muslim travel ban in the USA, and the difficulties encountered by migrant workers in Dubai and Qatar. These arguments align with the understanding that social injustice occurs when certain groups, typically minorities or marginalized populations, are denied basic rights (Seyfi, Hall, & Vo-Thanh, 2022). Social injustice can manifest in various ways, such as the disregard for individuals' or groups' rights and values, limited or no access to resources, or being subjected to harmful actions (Rastegar, 2020).

*Perhaps the poster should also consider scrapping a visit to Australia: treatment of the Boat Refugees, anyone? Perhaps the poster should also consider scrapping a visit to the USA: mass shootings and the Trump "Muslim Ban", anyone? Perhaps the poster should also consider scrapping a visit to Israel. Treatment of Palestinians, anyone? Etc., etc. here are problems all over the world, and I've traveled in some tough places. World that doesn't have blood on its hands or turns a blind eye to atrocities for their own gain (Tripadvisor, 2018).*

*Is it ethical to visit communist China or Vietnam? Is it ethical to visit Australia with their refugee camps on Manus Island? Ethical to visit Dubai, where they enslave workers? Was it ethical to visit Burma before Rohingya crisis, with all the skirmishes in Northern Shan State? Is tourism ethical in general? Look what it did to Vietnam, Bali or Machu Picchu (Tripadvisor, 2018).*

The arguments presented by various writers highlight their belief that socially and economically disadvantaged groups are adversely affected by the Myanmar travel boycott, which aligns with the principles of social justice. While many of these groups support holding the Myanmar regime accountable for its human rights violations, some express skepticism regarding how the boycott would lead to justice, freedom, or peace in the country. These statements also indicate that some writers view the boycott as potentially marginalizing the most vulnerable members of society. This perspective is not uncommon, as boycotts can sometimes have unintended consequences that disproportionately impact marginalized groups. For instance, in the context of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Palestine, some argue that boycotts can be a "double-edged sword," targeting Israel and international companies benefiting from the conflict but also undermining peace negotiations and efforts towards conflict resolution (Chaitin, Steinberg, & Steinberg, 2017). Similarly, civil society organizations perceive boycotting as a non-violent tool for exerting political pressure to address issues of social injustice (Carter-Hallward & Shaver, 2012).

Supporters of the Myanmar travel boycott frame their actions as a means of sending a powerful message to both the military regime in Myanmar and international organizations, urging them to support social justice. The arguments put forth suggest that combating injustice in Myanmar should involve withholding legitimacy from the government

and its actions. By doing so, supporters of the boycott hope to hold the regime accountable for its human rights violations and to inspire others to stand in solidarity with the people of Myanmar (Greyson, 2012).

*Travel boycott is totally counter-productive. It will strengthen the military hold on this country and erode the modest progress towards democracy (Tripadvisor, 2018).*

*"by traveling to Myanmar, we are arguably sending a signal to the Myanmar population and the world writ large that the government's actions are normal. By normalizing this kind of behavior, we encourage it and are complicit in it" (inews, 2022)*

#### 4.2. Threatening local livelihoods

It is widely acknowledged that tourism boycotts can have negative socio-economic impacts on a destination, affecting tourism communities, stakeholders, and small businesses (Shaheer et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2020; Shepherd, 2021). These findings support the arguments put forth by those who claim that boycotts can have adverse effects on residents and communities (Hudson, 2007) and can result in negative consequences for disadvantaged individuals, similar to sanctions (Seyfi & Hall, 2020). The discussions surrounding this topic raise concerns about the potential harm that tourism boycotts can inflict, particularly on economically marginalized residents. Within the conceptual framework of social justice, this viewpoint aligns with discourses on restorative justice, which aim to identify and address harm caused by policies or actions (Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2022). These arguments suggest that a more nuanced approach is necessary when considering boycotts as a means of exerting political pressure. Those who believe that boycotts restrict an important source of income for many communities contend that engaging in large-scale blanket strategies is unfair to those who are not responsible and cannot bear the consequences. Support for this perspective can be found in the literature, which suggests that crises can exacerbate existing inequalities for marginalized and disadvantaged groups, such as women, children, and lower socioeconomic groups (Seyfi, Hall, & Vo-Thanh, 2022). This standpoint implies that any action taken to address social injustice must consider the potential economic repercussions for local communities, particularly those already facing disadvantage.

*The boycott question is a difficult one, which must be a personal decision after weighing up the pros and cons. But in the short-term, tourism looks certain to be hard hit, with airlines cutting flights and hotels reported to be slashing prices in the face of largely empty rooms. Whatever the overall rights and wrongs of tourism to Myanmar, the livelihoods of many workers in the industry are under threat again (thewayfares, 2018).*

*"Often the segment of society that suffers the most because of travel boycotts are local tourism providers and the many subsidiary small businesses who rely on tourism dollars for their livelihood and who do not reflect the beliefs of extremist militants (worldexpeditions, 2018).*

*The (mostly Western) travel industry boycott of Myanmar due to Rohingya situation should halt. Ordinary (i.e. poor) Burmese people have seen their tourism livelihood disappear (Twitter, 2018).*

The effectiveness of tourism boycotts in pressuring governments and achieving positive change is a subject of ongoing debate. Additionally, the literature has not extensively explored the full range of impacts that such actions can have on destinations and their communities (Yu et al., 2020). Therefore, it is essential to thoroughly assess the effectiveness of boycott strategies in these destinations and their subsequent effects on various communities and populations. For example, in the case of the Myanmar tourism boycott, while its intention is to induce behavioral change or inflict economic losses on the military regime, there are indications within the text that some individuals perceive the boycott as ineffective. The diverse arguments presented illustrate the unequal

distribution of the burdens of this action (distributive justice) among different groups. Ideally, any strategy aimed at promoting social justice should prioritize the well-being of all affected populations and strive to create sustainable, positive change.

*“Tourism brings in tiny amounts of \$ compared to Timber, Gems and LPG which provide the big money that goes to the Generals and their supporters” (Tripadvisor, 2010).*

*“Rather than impacting the government, jobs and livelihoods would be lost, and it’s the citizens who are affected” (telegraph, 2018).*

The study of Hudson (2007) revealed that while tourists disapproved of the behavior of the target of the boycott, they were unwilling to participate in the boycott itself. They believed that tourism had positive effects on the local population, enabling transformative dialogues and allowing them to demonstrate solidarity with the people of Myanmar. This perspective is also reflected in tourism guidebooks (Michalon, 2017). The argument is made that tourists can engage in responsible travel practices that support local communities without contributing to the revenue of the regime. This highlights the significance of responsible and sustainable tourism approaches. For instance, Lonely Planet suggests that Myanmar can be visited in a manner that does not support the regime if tourists travel “responsibly.” This approach to tourism offers an alternative to boycotts while still promoting social justice and responsible tourism practices. Other studies in the field of tourism have similarly asserted that boycotts can harm those who are already being punished by state policies over which they have little control (Radzik, 2017; Shepherd, 2021).

#### 4.3. Ethics and guilty pleasure

This study highlights an important ethical issue surrounding the Myanmar tourism boycott. Building upon the previous discussion, the authors’ discourse reflects their belief that the boycott may not be ethically justifiable for local communities. This creates an ethical dilemma due to the potential negative impact on the livelihoods of these communities, who rely on the tourism industry as a source of income. The boycott could consequently harm these communities, leading to increased poverty and marginalization. The argument against the boycott is that it ends up punishing the wrong people, while the government and military elite responsible for human rights violations remain largely unaffected. Similar findings were observed in Hudson’s study (2007) on the Myanmar boycott, where despite the boycott campaigns, many people still supported tourism. This highlights the complexity of the situation, as the boycott may be intended to pressure the government and promote social justice, but it can also have unintended consequences for the very communities it seeks to protect. Balancing the goals of promoting human rights and addressing social injustice with the potential harm inflicted on local communities is a challenging ethical dilemma. It calls for a careful consideration of alternative approaches and strategies that can support responsible tourism practices while minimizing the negative impact on vulnerable communities.

*“I made my first trip to Myanmar last year and I’m looking forward to my next visit in 2019. Unethical? give me a break” (Tripadvisor, 2019).*

Nevertheless, there are also those who believe that visiting a country with a repressive regime or a history of human rights abuses is unethical, regardless of whether the traveler is actively supporting the government and who believe that tourism contributes to the suffering of its citizens.

*“It is absolutely not ethical to visit Myanmar at the moment. The government, army and many locals are engaged in an active genocide against a minority ethnic group that lives in the country” (Tripadvisor, 2019).*

The findings of this study reveal narratives that illustrate the ethical complexity of the situation and the various discourses surrounding it

have created mixed emotions and feelings among individuals. Such arguments indicate that individuals feel uncomfortable traveling while also having a desire to visit the destination, revealing a state of cognitive and affective ambivalence. Motivations behind supporting or opposing the tourism boycott may be closely linked to an individual’s beliefs and value systems (Yu et al., 2020). As evident from the comments below, there is significant tension between beliefs and mixed feelings of positive and negative effects of the decision and behaviors.

*I have deeply conflicted feelings about this issue (TravelLemming, 2021).*

*“I feel increasingly uncomfortable about our forthcoming trip. I also really want to visit before it becomes too spoiled. I will feel a bit guilty especially when we are relaxing at Ngapali beach but when you think about it an awful lot of Countries have been involved in similar type behaviour down the Centuries” (Tripadvisor, 2018).*

*“I would love to visit the country with my family, but I can’t decide if I should. With the current situation is it ethical to do so? Are you condoning it in a way with some of your money going to the government etc?” (Tripadvisor, 2018).*

#### 4.4. Empowering change through smart tourism boycotts

While the issue of tourism boycotts is undoubtedly complex, it is worth considering alternative approaches that can be employed to promote positive change in destinations. One such approach is known as “smart boycotts,” which involve targeted and strategic efforts to exert pressure on specific actors or entities rather than implementing a blanket boycott of an entire destination (Seyfi & Hall, 2020). This approach aims to minimize the negative impacts on local communities and small businesses while still applying pressure for change. In the context of Myanmar, both supporters and opponents of sanctions held different perspectives on how to address the conflict. However, despite their differences, both groups acknowledged the potential of tourism to bring about change. Some believed that a travel boycott could be utilized to exert economic and political pressure, while others saw tourism as a means of taking humanitarian action and supporting those affected by the conflict. These conversations revealed that, despite differing strategies, both groups shared a common hope that their actions would lead to positive social, political, and economic transformations.

*Additionally, tourism can often be one the most effective methods of “backdoor diplomacy” available to the average foreigner. By visiting countries with human rights abuses, poor educational systems, government corruption, and other injustices, travelers are able to facilitate the exchange of ideas and ideals from which locals are otherwise isolated. You as a traveler have the ability to share a different, educated stance on violence, oppression, and human rights (Wayfaress, 2018).*

The comments individuals make when they feel united in a common goal highlight the significance of the perceived power of tourism. This sense of solidarity can be observed in discussions surrounding political and humanitarian crises, such as the situation in Myanmar. One notable action that has emerged in response to the crisis is the ‘smart boycott’ movement. This movement aims to generate momentum among both proponents and opponents of the Myanmar travel boycott, ensuring that tourism spending does not support military actions and armed groups that commit human rights violations, while also providing support to communities in need. Previous studies have shown that attitudes such as sympathy for those affected by unjust actions can serve as strong motivations to support and participate in boycotts (Hoffmann, 2013). Similarly, Cheon (2019) views boycotts as a form of political consumerism driven by motivations such as sympathy and a desire for justice. While tourism can be a powerful tool for fostering solidarity and achieving shared objectives, it necessitates a deliberate effort to ensure that it does not inadvertently support unjust actions.

*It's my own mission to support local people and locally owned businesses. This means avoiding government / crony-owned and affiliated businesses and services whenever possible. I disagree with the blanket idea that just because money to purchase a visa goes to the government, that it negates making any other positive impact on the ground in the country. (TripAdvisor, 2018).*

*Say no to a general boycott of an entire country. it is always a good idea to be cautious about where your tourism dollars are being spent; choosing not to fund state-run airlines, tour agencies, sites, and programs, or organizations that are harmful to the environmental, humans, or animals, is definitely appropriate in these circumstances (Thewayfaress, 2018).*

The findings also reveal a form of consumer activism or favorable behavior towards companies that participate in smart boycotts. Consumers' perceptions of a company's social responsibility and commitment to social justice can significantly influence their actions (Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021). When consumers perceive a company as socially responsible, they are more inclined to support it. This suggests that consumers have the power to shape the behavior of companies through their actions and choices. Companies are likely to respond to consumer demands when they anticipate potential negative impacts on their reputation or financial performance. This dynamic creates an opportunity for consumers to leverage their influence in driving corporate social responsibility and encouraging companies to align their practices with principles of social justice.

*The 6 UK companies who promote tours to Myanmar all have detailed explanations in their brochures explaining how they use private companies and hotels and how important they feel that the money they spend trickles down to employees such as guides, drivers and hotel staff (TripAdvisor, 2011).*

*Asking international tourism related business to stop working with government. "We call on Hilton to immediately end their business with the Myanmar military and compensate the people of Myanmar who are victim of the human rights violations associated with Hilton's bloody and corrupt hotel deal (responsibletravel, 2011).*

## 5. Conclusion and implications

Taking a critical approach and grounded in political consumerism and social justice literature, this study sought to examine the discourses of tourists involved in the Myanmar tourism boycott campaigns, which have been active since the 1980s, with only a brief pause during a period of power-sharing with the military. The enduring nature of these campaigns has facilitated the integration of social justice concerns and narratives into public discourse. The study aims to investigate how social justice is employed to frame boycott campaigns addressing human rights issues within the tourism context. The study's findings shed light on how social justice issues are conceptualized and expressed in the tourists' narratives surrounding the boycott. Four main themes emerged from the analysis: 'tourism boycotts and the justice discourses' 'threatening local livelihoods,' 'ethics and guilty pleasure,' and 'empowering change through smart tourism boycotts.' These themes illustrate diverse perspectives and approaches to justice, emphasizing the intricate moral decision-making involved in the choices made by tourists.

The study highlights the intriguing aspect of the varied scales and interpretations of social justice within the context of the tourism boycott. Supporters of the boycott tend to focus on the national level, targeting the junta, while opponents often emphasize the community level or consider the interests of the most vulnerable populations. This demonstrates the intersection and potential conflicts of different justice discourses within the boycott. Furthermore, pro-boycott narratives primarily center around political justice and rights, whereas anti-boycott arguments invoke notions of economic justice and rights. In the latter case, employing a specific narrative does not necessarily indicate

support for the government, but rather reflects the belief that the economic benefits to communities outweigh the economic and political gains received by the junta. These observations emphasize that the narratives and representations of social justice in tourism boycotts go beyond mere depictions or discourses of social reality. They encompass personal ideologies, politics, and practices that have tangible impacts on destination development and local communities.

The study findings underscore the need for further research to delve into the moral dimensions of tourist decision-making and behavior. There is a growing need for a "moral turn" in tourism research, as advocated by [Caton \(2012\)](#), focusing on social justice within tourism-related political consumerism and exploring the moral complexities arising from tourist choices and actions. This necessitates a sensitive yet critical examination of how moral concerns manifest in tourist behavior, considering the justice narratives associated with campaigns that target different scales of destinations. The justice narratives linked to campaigns against national-scale destinations may differ from those against sub-national destinations. Similarly, attention must be given to a closer examination of industry and consumer perspectives on the morality of boycotts and their relationship to political beliefs and systems.

The study highlights that social media provide a platform for tourists to exchange ideas and express their support or opposition regarding justice-related decisions. Given the ongoing debates surrounding (in) justice in boycott campaigns, it is crucial to assess public opinion to formulate effective policies. This has significant implications for non-governmental organizations, boycott campaign participants, and organizations opposing them. The findings suggest that arguments supporting rights and justice-based campaigns should be communicated in a manner that resonates with diverse justice narratives, rather than relying solely on a single narrative, to maximize their effectiveness.

## 6. Research limitations and directions for future research

Although this study offers valuable insights, it has several limitations. *Firstly*, the chosen approach of critical media discourse analysis, which focuses on online content, has inherent limitations, including the sampling method employed that may not generate a fully representative dataset and therefore limit the generalizability of the findings. *Secondly*, employing an Anglophonic search for online discussions as the primary data collection method introduces bias by excluding non-English speakers and their cultural perspectives, potentially overlooking language nuances and impacting result interpretation. It is also important to consider the power dynamics at play when utilizing this approach as it has the potential to reinforce existing power imbalances ([Marmura, 2010](#)). *Lastly*, the reliance on predetermined notions of relevant keywords may limit the breadth of analysis, potentially excluding significant discussions and perspectives.

Despite its limitations, this study offers valuable insights and suggests potential avenues for future research that can contribute to a deeper understanding of boycotts and their broader implications. *First and foremost*, to effectively address the conflicting moralities surrounding human rights and tourism, a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach is essential, involving diverse research methods, stakeholder engagement, and community partnerships. This approach should incorporate quantitative surveys to uncover tourists' attitudes and intentions towards human rights, qualitative interviews to explore moral complexities influencing travel decisions, sentiment analysis of online reviews and social media posts to identify expressed attitudes, and ethnography and participatory research to document how tourists and locals navigate moral complexities in the situation.

*Second*, this research reinforces the previously espoused need for greater consideration of issues of morality in tourism scholarship and its entanglement with ideological and political values, offering numerous avenues for future exploration. These include investigating how moral values shape various aspects of tourist behavior, destination development, and management practices. Examining the influence of political

and ideological factors on the justice aspects of tourism policies and their impacts on stakeholders, particularly marginalized groups, experiences, and practices, could contribute to evaluating tourism policy and practice.

*Third*, conducting comparative research on boycotts in various contexts, such as countries hosting mega-events or those with poor human rights records, can yield valuable insights. This research raises several important questions: What are the primary effects of boycotts on targeted companies, industries, and economies? How do these effects vary in diverse political and cultural contexts? How do boycotts intersect with other political and social movements? Additionally, what are the ethical and moral aspects of boycotts, and how do these dimensions influence the discourse and strategies of boycott movements? To address these questions, various methodologies can be utilized, including comparative case studies, public opinion surveys, media analysis, and interviews with key stakeholders.

*Fourth*, examining the discursive strategies employed by pro-regime actors in response to travel boycott campaigns can gain insights into power dynamics and resistance within contested discourses surrounding human rights and political struggles. This analysis helps us understand how different actors construct and frame their arguments, shape public opinion, and influence narratives on these issues. It also reveals how dominant power structures strive to maintain their authority and legitimacy when confronted by boycott movements.

*Finally*, this study focused specifically on tourist narratives and their varying understandings of social justice in Myanmar, without capturing the perspectives of local residents. Hence, future research should prioritize investigating the viewpoints of local Myanmar residents. Exploring their views and experiences can provide invaluable insights into the lived realities and perceptions of those directly affected by the social, political, and economic dynamics related to tourism.

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