# Lost in the Supermarket

*Youth Political Consumerism under Hegemonic Neoliberalism*

By

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Lost in the Supermarket: Youth Political Consumerism under Hegemonic Neoliberalism

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*"To the vegans who fly every week.*
*To the meat eaters who only shop local.*
*To the DIY mums who use disposable nappies.*
*To the electric car owners who don't compost.*
*To the zero wasters who eat fast food.*
*To the gardeners who buy fast fashion.*
*And to the recyclers who have long showers.*
*To all of those who are making a difference…"*

*(Unknown Source)*

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# Preface

This book explores how political consumerism has evolved into a distinct form of youth political engagement. It is a phenomenon that reflects the sociological transformations of our times—postmodern uncertainty, post-materialist value orientations, and the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideology. Young people today are not only "shopping" for goods but also for identities and moral frameworks, seeking to align their individual choices with global concerns about justice, sustainability, equity and belonging. The 'Supermarket' they seek to navigate is no longer just physical; it's everywhere—in our screens, in our feeds, in our daily lives. The supermarket of late modernity is no longer just a literal space but a metaphorical one—a marketplace saturated with messages urging us to consume as a means of being. And yet, it is here that young people are finding ways to express their values, hold companies accountable, and push for change. For young people, this marketplace is both a site of constraint and an arena of agency. This is where their search for identity meets their desire to take responsibility for the world around them. Their consumption becomes thus, a statement, not only about who they are but about the kind of world they want to live in.

Political consumerism refers to citizens' use of boycotting and buycotting as they seek to influence political outcomes within the marketplace, rather than through more traditional routes such as voting. It has been widely theorised as a lifestyle form of political participation, which reflects the progressively converging roles of the *citizens* and the *consumers*. Young people in particular, are increasingly harnessing their individual consumer power to collectively express their political, ethical, and environmental considerations through their consumer choices. However, the perceived persistence of such a market-oriented form of political participation despite the ongoing financial crisis, calls for a re-evaluation of the underlying motivations, values and orientations of young political consumers.

Given the susceptibility of political consumerism to a neoliberal modus operandi, the lack of literature problematising its emergence in response to the tenets of neoliberalism is somewhat surprising. The present study will thus address this gap by distinguishing between two antithetical,

yet complimentary effects. Firstly, the internalised neoliberal critique of democracy emphasises a 'push' effect out of the political, and into the commercial sphere. Secondly, the neoliberal emphasis on the effectiveness of the markets, advanced by young people's postmaterialist sensitivities, calls attention to the existence of a parallel 'pull' effect into the marketplace as a locus of political participation.

The overarching aim of this study therefore is to identify and interpret the key drivers underpinning the persisting patterns of political consumerism among young people in Greece and in the UK, using a mixed-methods, paired-country research approach. It initially develops a *Political Consumerism Index*, a novel theoretical tool for the measurement of the phenomenon. It subsequently uses a primarily quantitative research approach, in conjunction with young people's own insights from a series of focus groups, to provide a comprehensive picture of young people's political consumption in times of austerity.

Chapter 1

# Political consumerism past and present

## 1. Introduction

The late 1970s were a tumultuous era, both in the United Kingdom and across the globe. Young people, in particular, were struggling to find their place in a changing society, as the world was grappling with economic decline, social unrest, and rising unemployment. Aiming to respond to these pressing issues, Margaret Thatcher led the Conservatives to a decisive electoral victory in 1979, that was bound to inaugurate decades of free-market orthodoxy in the UK but also in several western economies – Greece included; although much later. Thatcher's cabinet embarked immediately and with an almost religious rigour on an ambitious program which involved diminishing the role of the state in favour of (economic) self-determination and individualism (Gerstle, 2022). In the same period, Greece was still nursing its wounds left by the Regime of the Colonels – a right-wing military junta that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974 and paved the way for PASOK's socialist reforms at the beginning of the 80s (Veremis, 2024).

Outside of Westminster, 'London [was also] calling' for reforms. The punk rock scene had recently emerged as the voice of disenfranchised youths to express their frustrations against a system that seemed rigged against them. The song bearing the same title (London Calling, 1979) became the punk-rock anthem of a whole generation which felt alienated, disillusioned and disenfranchised (Gall, 2022). In the same album, the song "Lost In The Supermarket" is using a literal supermarket as a wider metaphor for the alienation and existential angst which consumed young people in an increasingly consumerist culture:

*I'm all lost in the supermarket*
*I can no longer shop happily*
*I came in here for the special offer*
*Guaranteed personality*

This was a song about a perceived loss of identity amidst the perils of consumerism, as young people, in particular, were seeking for meaning. It echoed the sentiment of detachment and dislocation of a whole generation in a culture that values material wealth over human connection.

Almost four decades later, consumption has now become the uncontested site of identity formation (Campbell, 2004), as consumer culture provides constantly novel ways of forging social, cultural and political identities. It is indicative that at the time this adapted doctoral thesis was being written, the UK Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary, George Eustice, at the daily coronavirus briefing on March 21, 2020, urged British citizens to "Be responsible when [they] shop and [to] think of others" (BBC News, 2020). The phrasing of this address frames consumption no longer as a threat but instead, as a locus of political agency. Consumption still remains a predominately individualist act, but it is now entrenched with collective implications, and is thus embedded with political meaning.

Ultimately, the search within the supermarket becomes emblematic of something larger: the search for meaning and belonging in a commodified world. The supermarket, once a symbol of the alienation and disorientation of young people under the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson, 2016), might now also be reimagined as a place of possibility. Amid the aisles of mass-produced goods, young people are finding ways to repurpose the tools of consumer culture to create meaningful change. They are rejecting passive consumption in favour of conscious and consistent action, turning what might have been a space of alienation into a site of empowerment.

Nevertheless, the act of consumption as an action imbued with political meaning is hardly a recent phenomenon.

## 2. Political consumerism past and present

Captain Boycott – from whom '*boycotting*' got its name – was an Irish land agent, against whom the peasants organised in 1880 (Gabriel and Lang, 2015, p. 154). However, the practice of consumer activism which came to be known under his name, may be as old as the boycotts of British goods as part of the Boston Tea Party protest on December 16, 1773 (Ulrich, 2013),

which provides one of the first instances of consumer citizenship in recent history. The American revolutionary John Adams writes in his diary in 1773, "This destruction of the tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid and inflexible, and it must have so important consequences, and so lasting, that I can't but consider it as an *Epocha* in History" (Ulrich, 2013, p. 66).

Bruni and Zamagni (2016, p. 137) note that John Stuart Mill's insight on "consumer sovereignty" in the late 19th century found its application almost one century later, since "consumers potentially have the ability to send messages to producers to persuade them to take into account the values they, as consumers, believe in". By spending their money in a certain way instead of another "they send a very precise signal to producers", which communicates not only *what* they would like them to produce, but also the *way* they would like them to produce it. Consumer citizenship, or as it has been often described "voting with your wallet" (Bruni and Zamagni, 2016, p. 138; Stolle et al., 2005), becomes thus a notable example of social and political innovation.

The concept of consumer citizenship has been in evidence ever since. It was prominent in the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s. Following the arrest of Rosa Parks for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery City Line in 1955, a by-stander casually proposed that, "every Negro in town should stay off the buses for one day in protest" (Vogel, 1978, p. 21). Examples of political consumerism during the 1980s and 1990s included high-profile campaigns against Nestlé, and even boycotting whole countries like France or the USA against their position on the Gulf War (1990-1991). This was considered an effective means of influencing political decisions through the use of the market.

At the wake of the Global Justice Movement in the late 1990s, political consumerism exhibited a sharp increase across all Western democracies (Grasso, 2018). Although in the previous decades consumerism was primarily perceived as the "very paradigm that is fuelling our eco, social and political decline" (Schossboeck, 2012), the social movements that emerged after the widespread mobilisation against the WTO in Seattle in 1999 recognised the opportunity of harnessing this individual consumer power towards collective ethical, political and environmental concerns, and thus utilising the marketplace as an arena of political activism (Della Porta, 2006). Politi-

cal consumerism therefore, was re-introduced in the vocabulary of several grassroots civic initiatives that flourished in the same period.

More recently, it resurfaced in particularly visible fashion through the demands of the 2011 Occupy movement, enriched with discursive actions such as flash mobs, mall sit-ins, community events or 'walks of shame' as additional methods of raising awareness against certain consumer brands (Cloke et al., 2016). Even more recent examples include the boycotting of the NFL League, in response to Colin Kaepernick's exclusion from the league, which followed his attempt to draw attention to racial inequality (McNeal, 2017); or Starbucks facing boycotts after barring its employees from wearing logos in support of 'Black Lives Matter' movement (Ortega, 2020).

On the production side, several corporations have responded to these consumption trends by developing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) schemes, which seek to monetise on consumers' demand for ethical and political responsibility (Soulas and Clark, 2013). Latest figures for the value of all ethical purchases in the UK recorded a consistent expenditure growth from £17 billion in 1999 to over £141 billion in 2023, whereas the value of consumer boycotts in the Food and Drinks sector, rose by 10.6% in 2021-2022 alone, despite an overall decline in the number of active campaigns in the same period (Ethical Consumer, 2023, p. 12). The same survey confirms that 32% of the respondents were buying second-hand clothing for environmental reasons. Buying second hand clothing was markedly more popular with women (45%) than men (19%), and although it is popular across all age groups, it remains consistently more popular among young people (Ethical Consumer, 2023, p. 9). These figures reflect the persisting appeal of ethical and political consumerism, even during times of economic slowdown.

Simultaneously however, political consumerist initiatives have shifted away from the mainstream business sector, so as to include local-based exchange networks, alternative currency systems and time-banks (Sotiropoulou, 2012); that is, grassroots civic initiatives that seek to experiment in practice with the theoretical frameworks of *Economies of De-growth* and the *Transition Movement* (Schneider et al., 2010). Although the expansion of such initiatives can be observed all around Europe, they are particularly prominent in the European South since they are being perceived as alternative, inclusive and participatory ways for withstanding the disproportionately

adverse effects of the 2008 global financial crisis, both on practical (Petmesidou, 2016), but also ideological terms (Kousis, 2017). It can be argued therefore that the crisis may have served as a catalyst for the emergence of grassroots, bottom-up, participatory initiatives which involve the use of the market as an arena for collective action (D'Alisa et al., 2015; Kousis, 2017; Lekakis, 2015), and which seek to "simultaneously foster and facilitate a new form of political engagement/participation aimed to strengthen open, democratic forms of governance" (Kousis and Paschou, 2017, p. 142).

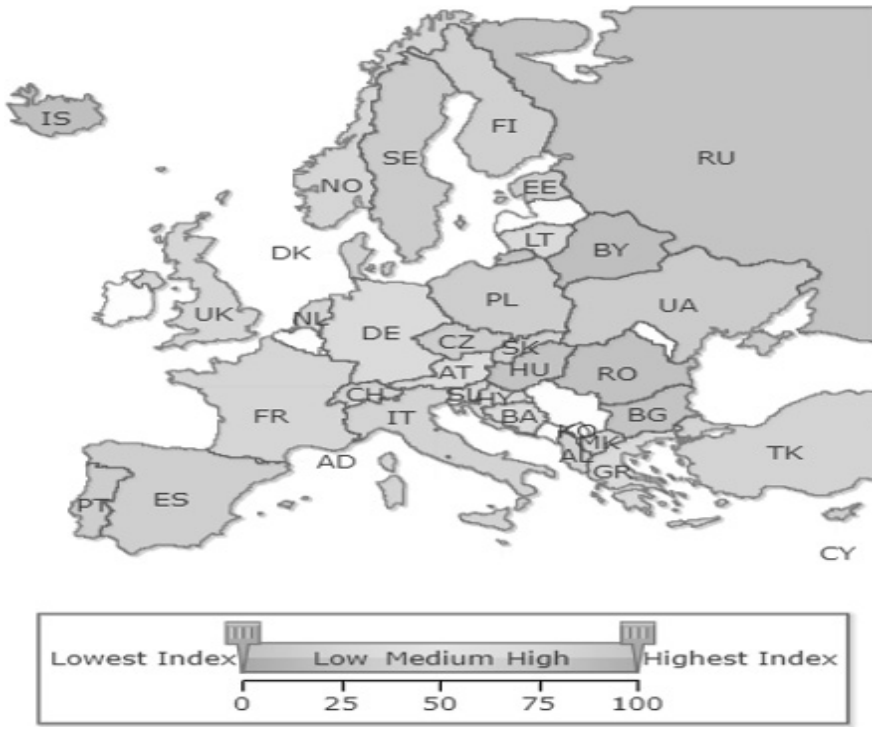


**Figure 1***'Have engaged' or are 'willing to engage' in boycotts among young people up to 29 years of age (World Values Survey, 2017-2020, N = 62,703).*

*Resource link: http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSOnline.jsp*

These trends are particularly evident among the young (Kyroglou and Henn, 2022a; Nonomura, 2017; Ward & de Vreese, 2011; Wicks et al., 2014). Stolle et al. (2010) report that boycotting was the form of political participation that demonstrated the greatest rate of growth over time by the end of the 20th century, with young people being four times more likely to engage in it in 1999 as opposed to 1974. Survey data from the World Values Survey

(WVS) reports that several lifestyle forms of political participation – such as buycotting and boycotting – have visibly been on the rise among the younger generations in many European countries. Although the Scandinavian countries remain consistently the world leaders in political consumerist practices (Stolle et al., 2010), similar trends are also discernible both in Greece (Kioupkiolis and Pechtelidis, 2018) and in the UK (Pickard, 2019c). The 2017-2020 wave of the WVS (see **Figure 1**) reports that young people up to 29 years of age, have engaged or are willing to engage in boycotts, by 61.4% in Greece and by 55.6% in the UK; whereas 15.8% and 10.2% of the same age category had already done so in each country respectively, in the previous 12 months.

As a consequence, the consumer-citizen has re-emerged in the spotlight of political repertoire. Instilled with the postmaterialist values of their affluent socialisation before the outbreak of the 2008 global economic recession (Copeland, 2014b; Henn et al., 2017; Inglehart, 2018), the consumer-citizen aspires to become a key figure of the globalised market.

## 3. Research aim and objectives

The lack of conclusive empirical evidence in the literature on the determining factors of political consumerism among young people, has informed the research aim and objectives of this study. Motivated by the perceived persistence of political consumerism during times of economic downturn – as well as in times of relative affluence, the overarching research aim of this research therefore, is to **identify** and **interpret** the key drivers underpinning the changing patterns of political participation, with particular emphasis on political consumerism, using a paired-country comparison research approach, among young people in the UK and in Greece.

In order to achieve this aim however, the following research objectives needed to be addressed:

1. Firstly, it was necessary to gain insights concerning young people's motivations for, and patterns of, political consumerism, through a series of focus groups conducted in the two countries;

2. secondly, to inform a survey questionnaire with the insights gained from the focus groups, and devise an innovative measurement instrument for political consumerism;

3. thirdly, to examine the extent to which young people in the UK and Greece may be driven into political consumerism by the 'push and pull effects' of neoliberalism.

4. finally, analysing the data from the survey, to identify the key drivers underpinning young people's decisions to engage in political consumerism in the UK and in Greece.

The research design employs a mixed-methods comparative approach. The initial analysis of the focus groups conducted in the two countries informed the subsequent development of a survey questionnaire. The use of primarily quantitative research methods, in conjunction with qualitative data provides thus, a comprehensive (and comparative) picture of political consumption in the UK and in Greece.

## 4. Research questions

Although Diamond (2008, p. 294) has argued that in order to build free, democratic societies around the world, both "leaders and citizens must internalise the spirit of democracy", the present thesis has assumed a comparative individualist approach that moves beyond the usual elite-focused focus of the literature. Notwithstanding a continuous increase and expansion in political consumerist activities (Copeland and Boulianne, 2020; Gundelach, 2020), not much is known about their political nature or about the profile of the political consumers (Baek, 2010; Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; Dhaoui et al., 2020). Following Stolle et al. (2005) this adapted doctoral research project acknowledges five areas of inquiry into political consumerism, which will be cumulatively pursued in the subsequent chapters:

**RQ 1:** First and foremost, stands the question of operationalisation. How should we measure political consumerism? How can we make sure that this measure captures those young people who *consistently* and *intentionally* purchase, or refrain from buying, products or services for environmental, ethical or political con-

siderations? Although the issue of measurement has recently received renewed interest (Gundelach, 2020), it remains an issue of critical concern, as we are still a long way from an intuitive, but comprehensive instrument which captures political consumerism's *praxial* components, as well as the *breadth* and *depth* of the phenomenon.

**RQ 2:** The second issue this thesis will address refers to the economic or market-related predictors of the phenomenon. Given the centrality that political consumerism places on the market, would income levels, economic and market-related factors '*pull*' young people to engage in it? Stolle et al. (2005, p. 252) posit that "income makes a difference here; citizens with deeper pockets might be able to afford ethical products (…) while those with more limited budgets might not". Further to their subjective socio-economic conditions, how does satisfaction from the market-environment or the internalisation of neoliberal governmentality affect their decisions to use the market as an arena for politics?

**RQ 3:** A third issue of concern is how these economic conditions may affect the value-orientations and the social embeddedness of young political consumers. Post-modernisation literature (Inglehart, 1997, 2016) has consistently emphasised the role of the prevalent economic conditions during one's formative years, towards the development and crystallisation of postmaterialist values. These in turn, have been found to be associated with a perceived increase of lifestyle forms of political participation. However, this theory was developed in times of unprecedented economic prosperity. Would the same apply to young political consumers in the UK and in Greece, who are socialised in times of economic austerity instead?

**RQ 4:** A fourth issue derives from social capital theory, which broadly put, suggests that embeddedness in informal networks, such as voluntary associations, in the form of generalised and particularised social trust, allows young citizens to overcome collective action problems (Putnam, 1995). Mobilisation theory (Almond and Verba, 1963) expands this rationale suggesting that networks

and associations facilitate recruitment for political participatory acts (Almond and Verba, 1963). The theory of imagined communities (Anderson, 2006) in turn, implies that the personal outlook of the agent affects their conception of the ingroup and may further enhance the engagement of young people in participatory activities. Sloam and Henn (2018) have recently discerned the role of widening personal identity outlook, or cosmopolitanism, behind an alleged '*Youthquake*' in Britain. What is the role of the formation of individual and collective identities on young peoples' propensity to engage in political consumerism?

**RQ 5:** Finally, what is the relationship of political consumerism to more traditional forms of participation? From the standpoint of *risk society* and *sub-politics* (Beck, 1992), we should expect that political consumers would be less trusting of political institutions and would therefore utilise alternative ways of making their voices heard. Is political consumerism therefore '*crowding-out*' institutional forms of political participation, and if so, to which extent is the traditional political arena responsible for alienating young people, and thus 'pushing' them away from traditional repertoires of participatory action, towards more imaginative approaches such as political consumerism? Is such a relationship exclusive or does it instead imply a widening of the available political participation repertoires (Pickard, 2019b; Theocharis and van Deth, 2018), so as to include both contentious and institutional politics?

Of course, the issues above cannot be examined in isolation, especially since they are to a great extent interrelated, and contextual background information should therefore also be considered. This research will therefore assume a multi-layered process (Zorell, 2019c) with regards to the examination of political consumerism. The following sections will thus discuss the philosophical assumption and the methodological approach that will be employed throughout this research.

## 5. Philosophical assumptions

The term 'social sciences' refers to "the disciplined and systematic study of society and its institutions, and of how and why people behave as they do, both as individuals and in groups within society" (Pontes, 2019, p. 120) and encompasses several areas like psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics and political sciences (Halloran, 2010). The philosophical bases of social sciences therefore may be divided into **a)** ontological, **b)** epistemological, and **c)** methodological. The first relate to the existence of a 'real' and 'objective' world. The second links to how we can acknowledge this world and the forms this knowledge will take. Finally, the latter refers to the selection of instruments that may be used to acquire this knowledge (Corbetta, 2003, pp. 13–14). A clear distinction between these three components of social sciences is therefore needed in order to avoid confusion when recognising and discussing theoretical approaches to social phenomena (Pontes, 2019, p. 123).

The two predominant ontological approaches in social sciences may be summarised as follows: *essentialism* comprises of the standpoint that phenomena are 'real', that is natural, inevitable, and often biologically determined. *Constructivism* instead rests on the standpoint that – although not any less 'real' – what we call external or objective 'reality' is a social construct and highlights language as the epistemological 'tool' by which we interpret experience. With regards to young people's political participation, an essentialist ontological position would consider young people as being fundamentally different from adults, demonstrating features that are common across cultures, and persistent across time. This research instead, perceives these differences as *socially constructed outcomes* of their nurture and the material, social and economic conditions in which they are being brought up. The approach taken in **Chapter 2** on the definition of 'young people' will already assume a clear constructivist standpoint on the ontological approach of this research.

The purpose of this research therefore is not merely to identify the patterns with which young people engage in political consumption, but to inform our ontological understanding of how these patterns are being influenced by the prevalent socio-economic conditions during their socialisation, allowing for these patterns to be altered in a socially desirable way. The empha-

sis of this research on consumption as a post-modern phenomenon and lifestyle forms of political participation, according to young people's own understanding of the concept, is indicative of this standpoint. For example, examining young people's postmaterialist value orientations (Inglehart, 1997) is indicative of the constructivist ontological standpoint of this study. The postmaterialist thesis is focusing on the existence and the role of material conditions prevalent during one's socialisation in the development of their values and attitudes throughout adulthood. By implication, a change in these conditions could potentially alter young people's focus, patterns and intensity of political engagement in the foreseeable future.

This ontological position has in turn, informed the epistemological standpoint of the research. Two contrasting epistemological standpoints have dominated research in social sciences: '*Positivism*', which is often associated with quantitative research and '*Interpretivism*' which is usually associated with qualitative research. The former advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social interactions (Pontes, 2019, p. 123). A purely positivist epistemological standpoint with regards to political participation would perceive the political engagement of young people as linked to essentialist attributes of being 'young'. For example Ackermann (2017) emphasises individual differences and personality traits of young people in explaining participation in protests. An interpretivist epistemological position instead, is predicated upon a methodological approach that "requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action" (Bryman, 2016; Pontes, 2019, p. 122). For instance, Sloam (2018) assumes an interpretivist epistemological position by seeking to understand the processes through which young people become politically active. Since the present research will utilise a primarily quantitative approach, its positivist dimension is self-evident. However, the intention to *interpret* the processes through which young people engage in political consumerism is also central to the aims and objectives of the research. Transcending thus the standard epistemological cleavage between positivism and interpretivism, the quantitative findings of the research will be augmented by the qualitative insights from the focus groups, so as to *identify* and *interpret* the processes through which young people engage in political consumerism.

## 6. Methodological approach

The present study utilised a paired-country comparison method, within a *multi-method research* design. It initially conducted a series of focus groups in the two countries, the insights of which informed both the survey questionnaire and subsequently the theories utilised to support the findings. In other words, the approach of this research utilises elements of *grounded theory*, whereby "theory emerges from the data" (Henn et al., 2009:184) through an iterative process.

The architect of grounded theory, Strauss, defined the three elements any research design utilising grounded theory should include (Legewie and Schervier-Legewie, 2004):

- *Theoretical sampling* refers to deciding which variables to examine next or whom to interview according to the status of theory generation. In other words, starting the analysis with the first samples, or transcriptions, and developing hypotheses from an early stage.
- *Theoretical sensitive coding* refers to generating theoretically robust insights from the data to explain the phenomenon under scrutiny.
- The necessity of *comparisons* between contexts and phenomena to strengthen the theories developed.

The research design of this study therefore, is based primarily on quantitative methods, while however, when appropriate, traces support from the qualitative data, that is the insights of the young people themselves, collected during the focus groups.

According to Bergman (2008) multi-method analysis diverges from the traditional quantitative versus qualitative methodological cleavage by recognising how different research methods – when combined – may complement each other and "generate confident, well-rounded research findings" (Robertson, 2009, p. 67). On the one hand, quantitative methods are particularly useful in understanding large data sets and allow therefore for comparisons across different cases. Such an approach however, when used in isolation, often lacks contextualisation, and therefore presents the

difficulty of confidently explaining divergent findings. By way of contrast, qualitative methods remain restricted to much smaller population sizes. For the same reason however, they present the benefit of more in-depth and contextualised insights, which may allow for more convincing explanations behind particular findings (Kuehn and Rohlfing, 2010).

Research on youth political participation has often acknowledged important differences between researchers' and young people's own understandings of politics (Henn and Foard, 2014). Consequently, closed-ended survey questions alone, which ask about people's participation, interest and trust in politics, are likely to result in a distorted representation of young people's engagement levels. Conversely, research that introduces politics in general terms and relates it to young people's own understanding and experiences may yield significantly different findings. For example, a mixed-methods study of young people's political engagement in Britain (Henn, Weinstein, and Wring, 2002), disclosed that participants held strong opinions when asked in focus groups about political issues that concerned them, despite their survey responses conveying an overwhelming disillusionment with formal party politics.

The following sections therefore will outline the research design of the present study, which involves: **a)** a paired country comparison, using a combination of **b)** focus groups, in conjunction to **c)** survey questionnaire analysis.

a. Paired-country comparison

The decision to conduct a paired-country comparison was informed by the concise advantages of this approach over large population studies on the one hand, and single-country case studies, on the other (Robertson, 2009, p. 39). With regards to the former, which usually aim to compare and contrast several countries at once, paired-country comparisons allow for more in-depth examination into the underlying factors behind the dependent variable. In this way, they avoid the conceptual stretching which is often detected in large population studies (Landman and Carvalho, 2016; Robertson, 2009). With regards to a single-country case study, a paired-country comparison approach also offers distinct advantages, since it allows the findings "to be tested across contrasting political, economic and social

contexts" (Robertson, 2009, p. 40) and therefore is able to generate more robust conclusions, instead of a crude description of a single national case.

The decision to compare and contrast political consumerism in the UK and in Greece, has been dictated on the one hand by practical reasons, that is my personal access in these societies, but also on theoretical grounds in relation to their underlying economic and socio-political differences, which **Chapter 6** will later discuss in detail. With regards to political consumerism for example, by holding the dependent variable constant (that is political consumerism measured either in terms of buycotting and boycotting in **Chapters 9** and **10**, or by the PCI in **Chapter 11**), and contrasting it among the UK, that is a 'Liberal Market Economy' (LME) country, as opposed to Greece, a 'Mediterranean – or Mixed- Market Economy' (MME) country (see **Chapter 6**), has allowed me to unpack the country-specific factors which influence young people's engagement in political consumerism, in each. Especially in view of the lack of studies examining the impact of neoliberalism on political consumerism, and the fact that the greatest part of existing research is based on large population studies or independent case studies instead (Copeland and Boulianne, 2020), a paired-country comparison approach is expected to offer useful insights on the topic.

b. Focus groups

With the above in mind, this research assumed the position that focus group discussions were a particularly useful method for gaining insights concerning young people's motivations for, and patterns of, political consumerism. Focus groups allow participants to openly talk about the topic under examination in terms of their own frames of reference and have been previously employed elsewhere to study both consumer motivations (Bray et al., 2011), as well as youth political engagement (Pontes et al., 2018) with similar numbers of participants and research designs to this study.

This research therefore follows the recommendations of Henn et al. (2009) according to which small groups are usually preferred during focus groups to minimise potential social-desirability bias effects, especially in cases where young people may feel reticent in large groups to challenge opinions which are at variance with their own. A series of focus groups were thus

conducted in Greece and in the UK, each ranging in size from four to six young political consumers, aged 18 to 29 years of age[1].

Previous research (Hopkins and Williamson, 2012) has examined the links between neighbourhood design and preferred political participation modes. In order to minimise these effects, the focus groups in Greece were conducted both in the capital city of Athens and the rural town of Nea Epidavros, to ensure representation from both urban and rural populations. Likewise, the UK focus groups took place in Nottingham, a large city in central England, and participants included young people from a mixed socioeconomic background, distinguishing between inner-city (socio-economically deprived) cohorts and outer-city (socio-economically advantaged) cohorts. However, during the analysis of the focus groups, there has been no attempt to compare insights according to residency, class or gender as sample numbers were too small to make meaningful generalisations across these factors. These variables however, have not been neglected during the analysis of the survey.

The focus groups were arranged with emphasis on gender-balance. Although Kitzinger (2007) contends that focus groups are particularly conducive to feminist studies, allowing access to the interactional context of women's lives, this study conducted mixed-gender focus groups instead. The intention was to capture how young people interacted in mixed groups when discussing their political consumerist motivations and how they responded to disagreements. The interactive dynamic of the mixed focus groups was a critical element shaping the selection of participants. The moderator and the assistant moderator used certain tactics to mitigate the danger of 'dominant talkers' – an issue that is particularly gender- and class-sensitive in focus groups (Henn et al,. 2009). These included tactfully asking participants to curtail their contribution, or by noting how they expressed certain points and how others reacted to these – including gestures, posture or facial expressions – to ensure, as far as was possible, that all voices were encouraged, heard and amplified.

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[1] In order to make sure that none of the participants had any previous theoretical knowledge on the topic of political participation or neoliberalism which could drive the discussion away from young people's own understandings and towards existing theoretical paths, students of political and social sciences were excluded from the focus groups.

As mentioned above, the research approach of the focus groups utilised elements of grounded theory, whereby "theory emerges from the data" (Henn et al., 2009, p. 184) through an iterative process. Having thus introduced the general topic of political consumers' motivations, the moderator offered participants opportunities to shape the course of key aspects of the discussion. Having conducted the focus groups, I coded their transcriptions thematically, searching for patterns and relationships within the data. Subsequently, I turned to theory in order to explain these patterns. Previous work on the subject (Bray et al., 2011; Hay, 2007; Stolle et al., 2005) did of course partly inform my thinking about which key themes to address, whilst however, remaining open to data-driven understandings emerging from the discussions.

The eventual aim of the focus groups was to reveal important insights concerning the dynamics of young peoples' engagement in political consumerist activities within a broad political, spatial and social context, in both countries. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the sample size, the qualitative part of my research design does not make any claims concerning the generalisability of the findings. Instead, the intention behind the focus groups was to enhance the knowledge from the literature review by accessing the young participants' own understandings and frames of reference on the topic of political consumerism. Such insights would not have been possible to acquire by using a survey-based study involving a large number of participants.

c. Survey questionnaire

In turn, the quantitative part of this study has adopted an intensive cross-sectional research design. Several survey questions were adapted with permission from a survey on political participation of young people previously conducted by Henn et al. (2012). Others have been adapted from the European Social Survey (ESS)[2] and the World Values Survey (WVS)[3]. An pilot sample from both Greece and the UK was initially collected, with respondents commenting on errors, omissions, unclear wording, and problems with question order. This feedback allowed me to change the unclear

[2] https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/

[3] http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/

language, question order and to include some additional questions. The responses of the test samples were then discarded.

A convenience sampling method resulted in 1,114 survey responses created, 471 of which were only partially responded, yielding eventually 634 completed responses among young people, 18 to 29 years of age, from both Greece (n= 313) and the UK (n=321). Having conducted a scoping study of both PhD theses and peer-reviewed articles on youth political participation, the results indicated that such a sample size was reasonable, considering both the financial and time constraints of the study. For example, Long (2010) analysing ethical consumption in the state of Colorado utilised a sample of 463 completed surveys in his thesis, whereas Pontes (2019) in her thesis on a comparative study between Britain and Portugal utilised a primary sample of 257 and 297 completed responses respectively. Moreover, in their seminal and widely influential study on political consumerism, Stolle et al. (2005) based their study on a sample of 372 university students from Canada, 284 from Sweden, and only 187 from Belgium.

The UK participants were recruited both at Nottingham Trent University and via other UK educational institutions and likewise for the Greek participants, from the National and Kapodestrian University of Athens. The selection of the above educational institutions was made because they provided relatively easy access to a large pool of respondents within the age cohorts of concern. I also personally disseminated the survey in open spaces in Nottingham, Cardiff, Stirling and London, in the UK and in Athens, Epidavros, and the island of Kythira in Greece. The overall sample of the initial respondents was subsequently also disseminated to youth civil society organisations in both countries. All of the young people who took part in the research were requested to sign an Informed Consent Form, stating that they agreed to do so on an individual and voluntarily basis, and not as members of these organisations.

Across the whole sample (n=634) , 64.5% (n=409 respondents) reported that they had actively engaged in buycotts in the past 12 months, as opposed to 59.6% (n=378) who engaged in boycotts. The percentage of those who engaged in either buycotts or boycotts, reaches 73.2% (n=464) of the overall respondents, demonstrating that political consumerism has indeed

become one of the most widespread forms of political engagement among the young (Albacete, 2014; Stolle et al., 2010b; Ward and de Vreese, 2011).

## 7. Independent contribution to knowledge

Through the multi-method research design outlined above, the original contribution of this study is to identify the key drivers behind young people's decision to engage in political consumerism, in the UK and Greece. Although both anecdotal and case-study evidence have long suggested that consumer behaviour such as the buycotting or boycotting of products and services for political, ethical and environmental reasons can take on political significance (Stolle et al. 2005), this will be the first time that such a study will be focusing on young people socialised in times of austerity, examining how the material conditions of relative scarcity at the time of their socialisation may have affected their propensity to engage in political consumerism. Moreover, and despite claims that political consumerism has become more widespread in recent years, it has not been examined systematically in a cross-sectional comparative study between the UK and Greece. By doing so, not only will the research provide insights about the underlying behaviour, attitudes and value orientations of young political consumers in both countries; but it will also help in positioning political consumerism among the emerging repertoires of youth political participation, in a changing political context, where the political and the economic spheres become increasingly indistinguishable.

Furthermore, the literature review along with the preliminary findings, have identified – not unexpectedly – an additional contextual factor behind the perceived rise of political consumerism in both countries, albeit in different directions in each. That is none other than the internalisation of neoliberal governmentality, as discussed in **Chapter 5**. Disenfranchised and disillusioned by the seeming incapacity of the purely electoral-political sphere to respond to their individualised claims, and having internalised the neoliberal critique of democracy, the young, empowered citizen-consumers will thus often search for the 'political' within the bounds of the marketplace and will be increasingly attracted to consumerist methods of political participation, such as boycotting and buycotting. Given the susceptibility of political consumerism to a neoliberal modus operandi, the lack