

# Action-Reaction: Study of the behavioural responses adopted by consumers of brands involved in scandals

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## **Action-Reaction: Study of the behavioural responses adopted by consumers of brands involved in scandals**

### **Abstract:**

The aim is to characterize and classify the behavioral responses of consumers of a brand that has been the subject of a scandal, according to the level of hatred felt. To this end, we carried out a case study. We identified 12 companies from different strategic sectors that had faced a major crisis. Articles reporting on these events were searched on the Internet, then consulted, before being analyzed to highlight and explain consumers' behavioral reactions. The results established links between corporate behavior, consumer reactions and corporate responses. Our results confirm the literature on corporate behavior (Makarem and Jae, 2016) and the links between hatred and resistance (Buffaz, Perraud, Rodriguez, 2024). This reading grid enables us to recommend to brands the implementation of an appropriate and specific response to each consumer reaction according to the type of scandal identified.

*Key words: Scandal; Brand hate; Resistance; Boycott; Case study.*

*Track: Marketing Strategy & Theory*

## Introduction

For the past few days, the Yuka food scanning application has enabled its 37 million French and American users to publicly point the finger at brands whose products' nutritional quality is marred by the presence of at least one of the 55 additives categorised as “at risk”. In practice, by scanning such a product with their smartphone, users of the application can decide to send a pre-written email to the manufacturer's customer service department and/or post a tweet on X to publicly challenge them using a denunciatory hashtag: ‘Swing your additive’<sup>1</sup>. More generally, this new option offered by Yuka is part of a growing desire on the part of consumers to take responsibility for their own consumption, and to react to the many and varied abuses and scandals that brands can be guilty of, sometimes even unwittingly. Consumers' reactions seem to vary, depending on the type of scandal, which means that the behaviour they adopt is marked by a hatred that can oscillate between cold and hot, and a resistance that can take the form of behaviour ranging from avoidance to sabotage. That's why we thought it would be relevant to look at: 1/ the behavioural responses made by consumers to scandals caused by brands, 2/ the correspondence between the level of hatred felt and its behavioural translation, 3/ the postures to be adopted by brands for each type of consumer behavioural reaction according to the type of scandal identified. To do this, we carried out a case study in the form of a documentary analysis of articles available on the Internet relating to 12 companies that had recently been the subject of a scandal. From a theoretical point of view, this research adds to the literature on brand hatred and resistance by providing a framework for reading these two concepts in relation to each other. From a managerial point of view, recommendations in terms of postures to adopt in the face of different types of scandal are proposed to brands for an effective crisis marketing strategy.

### 1. Theoretical framework

#### *1.1 The origins of the scandal*

Etymologically, the word ‘scandal’ comes from the Sanskrit skand, and was later taken from the Greek skandalon, which meant a trap. According to the psychologist and philosopher René Le Senne, there are three elements that make up a scandal, whether true or false: firstly, a community, that of the ‘scandalised’; secondly, the existence of shared values; and thirdly, a receptor public<sup>2</sup>. From a marketing point of view, corporate social irresponsibility (Scheidler

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lesechos.fr/industrie-services/conso-distribution/name-and-shame-le-pari-tres-militant-de-yuka-pour-faire-reagir-les-marques-2132330#:~:text=Exclusif-,Name%20and%20shame%20%3A%20le%20pari%20%C2%AB%20tr%C3%A8s%20militant%20%C2%BB%20de%20Yuka,d'interpeller%20directement%20les%20marques.>

<sup>2</sup> <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-sesame-2017-2-page-6?lang=fr>

& Edinger-Schons, 2020) covers a broad spectrum of acts committed by companies and perceived as reprehensible by consumers, including scandals, crises and boycotts for reasons as diverse as tax evasion, poor working conditions, supply chains and waste management. In the literature, this bad behaviour is often grouped around political, ethical or social reasons (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013; Hoffman, 2011; Yuksel, 2013). It is the work of Makarem and Jae (2016) that points to 5 categories of behaviour by organisations that may be deemed unacceptable to the point of leading to a boycott: (1) political causes (including Obamacare, media subjectivity or government policies), (2) behaviours related to human rights (freedom of expression, discrimination and racism, working conditions), (3) actions related to animal rights and respect for the environment (torture, captivity, pollution), (4) strategic business decisions (fair pricing, customer service failures, breaches of privacy and data security), (5) corruption (theft, lobbying and pressure groups, questionable use of funds).

### *1.2 Between cold hatred and hot hatred*

When brands fail to meet their customers' expectations, or when their customers' experiences are negative, they tend to develop negative feelings towards the brand. Negative past experiences, ideological incompatibility or a lack of confidence in the brand can lead consumers to hate a brand. In marketing, brand hatred is defined as *'a psychological state in which a consumer experiences intense negative emotion and hatred towards a brand, a hatred that manifests itself in anti-brand activities'* (Kucuk, 2018, p.566). Brand hatred is a complex and multidimensional construct (Monahan *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, for Sternberg (2003), hatred *'has multiple components which can manifest themselves in different ways on different occasions'* (p.306). Manifestations of brand hatred can be passive or active (Bayarassou, Becheur & Valette-Florence, 2020) and are likely to vary according to the intensity of the feelings experienced by the consumer. Passive brand hatred will be reflected in a non-aggressive attitude/behaviour, whereas active brand hatred will be reflected in the desire to take revenge on the brand and a certain activism, with the consumer then entering into resistance. According to Fournier (1998, p.89) resistance corresponds to a set of *'acts that engage someone in riposte, neutralisation or opposition with the aim of thwarting, foiling or defeating manoeuvres deemed oppressive'*. For resistance to exist, Roux (2007) postulates that three conditions must be met: *'the existence of a force on the individual, the perception of that force by the individual and an attempt by the individual to nullify that force'* (Perraud, 2012, p.66). According to Hirschman (1970), consumers can show their resistance through different types of behaviour. A dissatisfied consumer will choose between three alternatives: remaining loyal to the company despite their dissatisfaction (Loyalty), ending the relationship and opting for another alternative (Exit), or

speaking out to try and change things (Voice). Thus, several attitudinal and behavioural consequences of this brand hatred have already been identified in consumers, marking their resistance and leading them, for example, to online and offline complaints (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016; Rodrigues, Brandao & Rodrigues, 2020; Zhang & Laroche, 2020), negative and/or vindictive word-of-mouth (Kurtoglu *et al.*, 2021), brand avoidance (Bryson, Atwal & Hulten, 2013) or boycott (Xie *et al.*, 2015).

### *1.3 The boycott, a collective anti-consumer action...*

Friedman (1985, p. 97) defines a boycott as '*an attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by inducing individual consumers to refrain from making certain market purchases*'. Boycotts are then seen as a means to an end, which is usually the mass non-consumption of the product or service of the organisation targeted by the boycott. Boycotts can involve companies, the media, countries or geographical regions, but also celebrities or sports teams, NGOs, the public administration, specific policies or public transport (Makarem & Jae, 2016). Boycotting is one of the most extreme reactions, motivated by the perceived seriousness (Klein *et al.*, 2004; Smith, 2005) of the act committed by the organisation. Depending on the degree of seriousness of the company's bad behaviour as perceived by consumers, the threshold of acceptability will be exceeded, which may make consumers want to take revenge and make the company pay for its bad behaviour (Sen *et al.*, 2001; Klein *et al.*, 2004).

### *...but above all a means of individual expression*

The development of social networks has made it possible for internet users to organise themselves more quickly and to share their boycott intentions effectively on a very large scale, thereby increasing the negative effects on companies' performance (Sen, Gürhan-Canli & Morwitz, 2001). There is a great deal of research on consumer motivations to boycott (John and Klein, 2003; Klein *et al.*, 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998) and on the consequences of boycotts on company performance. Despite this, a number of gaps remain which this research proposes to fill, at least in part. While studies of the motivations for boycotts have mainly focused on the theoretical cost-benefit perspective (James, 2010), a more socio-psychological viewpoint allows us to emphasise the importance of consumer emotions. Thus, according to Hoffmann and Müller (2009), the boycott is a means of emotional expression that plays a decisive role. The expressive dimension of the boycott is even more apparent in Garrett's (1987) definition, since he defines it as '*a concerted refusal to do business with a particular person or company in order to obtain concessions or to express dissatisfaction with certain acts or practices of the person or company*'. The boycott therefore appears to be both a means to an end and a means of expression. Even if the boycott can be considered as a planned and collective

anti-consumer action (Friedman, 1985; Garrett, 1987), boycotting behaviour remains an individual's private response to companies. It is a way for consumers to express themselves emotionally (Hoffmann & Müller, 2009), which is an important dimension of consumer complaint behaviour (Singh, 1988). However, to our knowledge, little research takes into account the role of emotions in the choice of boycott behaviour and in the expression of emotions in boycott messages. Yet Shoefer and Ennew (2005) show that emotions are crucial between consumers' perceptions of the unfairness of the company and post-purchase behavioural reactions, particularly when they are very intense and arouse disgust or hatred. The work of Makarem and Jae (2016) highlighted 4 instrumental motivations for consumers to write/share a boycott call: call to action, raising awareness, sharing information and proposing alternatives or substitutes. Following the example of previous research (Braunberger & Buckler, 2011; Brennan & Lomasky 1993; Friedman, 1999; Klein *et al.*, 2004), they identify non-instrumental motivations including, in particular, the expression of anger and discontent, the desire to punish, threaten, warn of the boycott or even self-esteem.

## **2. Methodology**

For this research, a case study was carried out. This method, which is little used but recognised by the scientific community (Alexandre, 2013), enables an in-depth examination of a phenomenon (Fortin, 2016) and the collection of a large amount of information (Latzko-Toth, 2009). It is a qualitative method that can be exploratory, descriptive or explanatory (Alami & Aftiss, 2022). The case study corresponds to a '*global research strategy (...) comprising a research design logic, data collection techniques and specific approaches to data analysis*' (Yin, 2003, p.14). The case study consists of 'relating a phenomenon to its context and analysing it to see how it manifests itself and develops' (Hamel, 1998, p.123). It therefore deals with a contemporary phenomenon, includes a large number of variables, is supported by evidence that is triangulated, and is based on a theoretical framework (Yin, 2003, p.13). In particular, it helps to understand elements that are difficult to measure (Roy, 2009). To carry out this research, a documentary analysis was carried out based on a selection of French-language press articles consulted on the Internet (non-exhaustive list), and based on a descriptive/explanatory study of the most relevant articles (El Fakir, 2023). Documentary research, and hence documentary analysis, requires researchers to have a number of qualities: '*an open mind, a critical spirit, the ability to grasp documents of diverse nature and form, and the ability to adapt to different sources*' (Chirouze, 2007). They have a number of advantages, such as the speed with which they can respond to the problem posed, the variety of analysis methods and their low cost, but they also have drawbacks, such as the lack of detail on the subject studied or the difficulty in

controlling the source used (Chirouze, 2007). To carry out this research, the authors proceeded in several stages: 1/ identification of companies that had recently faced a major scandal/crisis, 2/ selection of the companies to be studied (N=12) according to the diversity of the crises they had faced and according to the categories of corporate behaviour that lead to boycotts (Table 1), 3/ Internet search for press articles and social media posts related to the selected companies (Appendix 1), 4/ floating reading of each article, categorisation (Table 2), vertical and horizontal content analyses. In total, 109 articles were studied. All references cannot be presented in an appendix for reasons of space, but will be made available to interested readers.

### 3. Main results

The analysis of press articles and social media posts found on the Internet and relating to 12 brands that have recently caused scandals enabled us to cross-reference the crises with the categorisation of corporate behaviour that could lead consumers to boycott (Makarem & Jae, 2016) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Cross-referencing of categories of company behaviour likely to lead to consumer boycotts with companies affected by scandals

Categories of company behaviour that could lead to consumer boycotts	Companies affected by scandals
Political causes	Disney ; Jack Daniel's ; Zara
Behaviour relating to human rights	Nike ; H&M
Action linked to animal rights and respect for the environment	Volkswagen ; Balenciaga
Strategic business decisions	Pernod Ricard ; ENI ; Nestlé Waters ; Buitoni
Cases of corruption	Enron (avec Arthur Andersen)

We have attempted to materialise consumer reactions in terms of feelings of hatred and resistance behaviour in the face of these crises, and to add to them the responses of companies (Table 2).

This work thus makes it possible to define consumer reactions and, by anticipation, the various possible responses, depending on the type of crisis initiated by an organisation, enabling companies to decide on the best strategy to adopt in response to the scandal. Two indicators that could facilitate this decision would be the dimensions of the resistance and the level of hatred felt by the consumer. The boycott is undoubtedly a collective act, but its expressive dimension does not necessarily seem to be linked to the degree of perceived seriousness. The case of contaminated pizzas is a case in point. The risk was sanctioned by the death of two children, and sales of the entire sector were affected, but we did not observe any calls for boycotts.

**Table 2.** Materialization of consumer reactions in terms of feelings of hatred and behaviour of resistance in the face of these crises, and company responses

Company name	Description of the crisis	Categories of company behaviour that lead to boycotts	Consumer reactions		Actions / responses from companies
			Feelings of hatred	Consumer resistance observed	
Pernod Ricard	Partnership deemed inadequate by supporters of OM football club	Strategic business decisions	Anger, rage, incomprehension.	Boycott : -Purchase of substitute products (rum, etc.) and/or competing products (pastis, etc.); -Creation of a hashtag #boycottPernodRicard; -Use of scotch tape to mask Ricard inscriptions on water jugs in a bar. Vehement complaints (negative word-of-mouth): -Posts on social networks (X) with the creation of a song by one of the internet users. Sabotage : -Degradation of google rating (reviews).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The company backtracked by announcing the cancellation of the partnership;</li> <li>Public apology from the Chairman of Pernod Ricard.</li> </ul>
H&M	Racist advertising	Behaviour relating to human rights	Anger, incomprehension	Negative word-of-mouth, call for boycott	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A public apology was made and the advertisement was withdrawn;</li> <li>However, the sweatshirt is still on sale on the brand's website.</li> </ul>
Zara	Advertising political support	Political causes	Anger, incomprehension	Boycott, demonstration in a shop in Canada, complaints on social networks (negative word-of-mouth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explanation/justification of the advertising campaign;</li> <li>Decision to discontinue the campaign.</li> </ul>
Disney	Adoption of a marketing policy considered to be wokist	Political causes	Disgust, exasperation, outrage	Exit (boycott), voice (negative word-of-mouth), loyalty (remains loyal because a key player in the market)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brand indifference and maintenance of the policy implemented.</li> </ul>
Enron (with Arthur Andersen)	Falsification of company accounts with the complicity of Arthur Andersen	Corruption	Feeling of having been cheated, duped, loss of confidence	Removal of financial and moral support from customers and shareholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The company's inability to react until it disappears.</li> </ul>
ENI	Regularisation of high customer invoices	Strategic business decisions	Anger, surprise, irritation, annoyance	Collective action, with customers joining together to form an anti-brand community and mobilising resources (press, lawyers, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The company's overall refusal to agree with customers, but out-of-court settlements reached on a case-by-case basis.</li> </ul>
Nestlé Waters	Use of prohibited treatments and negligence	Strategic business decisions	Hatred, betrayal, disgust	Smear campaign, negative word-of-mouth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Honourable fine: payment of a substantial fine to the state and a commitment to rectify negligence.</li> </ul>
Volkswagen	Deception, falsification of CO2 emissions Dieselgate	Action linked to animal rights and respect for the environment	Surprise, feeling cheated, anger	Boycott, negative word-of-mouth, defamation campaign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The carmaker admits to having equipped 11 million of its vehicles worldwide with fraudulent software;</li> <li>Resignation of CEO Martin Winterkorn ;</li> <li>The German justice system opens a criminal investigation;</li> <li>The German automotive agency orders Volkswagen to recall 2.4 million cars. The group extends the recall to all 8.5 million vehicles affected in Europe;</li> <li>Volkswagen agrees to pay \$14.7 billion in compensation to its American customers. The group ends the year with an annual loss: the first time this has happened in twenty years;</li> <li>Engine modifications for future vehicles.</li> </ul>
Balenciaga	Inappropriate advertising campaign referring to child abuse	Behaviour relating to human rights	Anger, incomprehension	Negative word-of-mouth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Publication of a press release apologising on behalf of the brand;</li> <li>Introduction of a new internal process for approving advertising campaigns.</li> </ul>
Nike	Working conditions > several episodes	Behaviour relating to human rights	Indignation, discontent	Negative word-of-mouth, boycotts, strikes by employees, rebellion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bad pre-existing conditions: the brand does not acknowledge its wrongdoing;</li> <li>Change in minimum working age &gt; subcontractor ;</li> <li>Committed to improving working conditions;</li> <li>Payment of social security contributions.</li> </ul>
Buitoni (Nestlé France)	Contamination of pizzas leads to death	Strategic business decisions	Indignation, anger	Avoidance, negative word-of-mouth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Product recall ;</li> <li>Out-of-court settlement between Buitoni and the families of the deceased children;</li> <li>Closure of the factory.</li> </ul>
Jack Daniel's	Policy of inclusion (wokism)	Political causes	Anger, rage	Exit (brand change) and voice (negative word of mouth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Company apology;</li> <li>Abandonment of the wokist policy.</li> </ul>



#### 4. Discussion

**Theoretical contributions.** This research was based on several concepts from the literature: corporate social irresponsibility, brand hatred and consumer resistance behaviour, with a particular focus on boycotts. Its originality lies in the combination of these concepts to produce a framework for reading the crises studied, and the emotions and responses of companies. Our work confirms, on the one hand, that of Makarem and Jae (2016) in their categorisation of the types of corporate behaviour that can lead consumers to boycott, and, on the other hand, that of Buffaz, Perraud and Rodriguez (2024) in linking consumer hatred and resistance behaviour. The results obtained seem to demonstrate a link between the causes of behaviour that could lead to boycotts, consumer reactions and company responses.

**Managerial recommendations.** Several recommendations can be made to organizations. First of all, our results should lead companies to carry out a risk analysis in relation to potential consumer reactions linked to the content of their marketing and communication policies, in order to anticipate and prevent scandals. Then, when a crisis appears, it is necessary to characterize it, as well as consumer responses, in order to respond adequately. Furthermore, when choosing its response, the company has, thanks to the aforementioned results, a range of solutions implemented for similar causes of scandal, and it can thus choose the least damaging solution. For example, if an advertising campaign implemented by a brand causes debate/creates controversy, it is preferable to apologize to show consumers that they have been heard, to withdraw it as quickly as possible in order to cut it short to negative word of mouth and thus to stop their more or less vehement complaints depending on the nature of the scandal. Thus, the implementation of these recommendations will perhaps allow organizations to react more quickly and thus preserve their reputation.

**Research limits and perspectives.** This research has a number of limitations. First of all, our work is exploratory and could, for example, be enriched by the study of additional cases of corruption, the conduct of semi-structured interviews with consumers who have expressed a negative reaction/emotion towards the scandals studied, or the production of a netnography of anti-brand communities linked to companies that have caused scandal, in order to consolidate our results and reinforce their completeness. An avenue of research could also be the verification of our results via a model making it possible to test the causal links between the concepts addressed and the generalization of their effects. Finally, a quantification, in economic, financial and social terms, of the solutions proposed to respond to a scandal could be carried out, in order to guide companies in their choice of response.

## Conclusion

This exploratory study has the advantage of highlighting the links between corporate behavior, consumer reactions and corporate responses. It attempts to show that similar causes of potential boycotts can lead to different reactions from consumers who in turn are treated differently in companies' responses. Therefore, this paper tries to give companies a perspective so that they can choose the best (or less bad) solution to respond to the scandal they have caused and thus try to save their reputation.

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