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# Guest editorial

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## Consumer negativity towards brands

If marketing and consumer researchers have traditionally been attracted to better understanding the *positive* consumer responses in the marketplace, including brands, in recent years we have witnessed a growing interest in the *negative* responses of consumers towards products, services and brands. Recent brand crises ranging from tactical ones to others questioning the very nature of the business – Gillette’s #MeToo advert, Ryanair’s tweet making fun of British Airways, Ford’s pollution scandals, Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal – have further iterated how important it is for companies to understand consumer responses and try to deal with them in the best possible way. So far the topics that have been investigated by scholars include negative consumer emotions, such as brand hate (Hegner *et al.*, 2017; Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016, 2018), consumer anti-consumption and anti-actions (Kähr *et al.*, 2016; Kucuk, 2008; Romani *et al.*, 2015) and, more generally, negative consumer-brand relationships (Fournier and Alvarez, 2013; Park *et al.*, 2013).

Despite the significant advances in our understanding of consumer negativity towards brands, the area is still underdeveloped. With this in mind, we launched a call for papers and, not surprisingly, we have received an overwhelming response with more than 50 submissions by scholars all around the world. Among these, thanks to the help of reviewers, we have selected eight papers that deal with the topic of consumer brand negativity from different points of view.

More specifically, by using a multi-method qualitative approach composed of in-depth interviews and an ethnography of a pro-environmental activist group, Cambefort and Roux examine perceived risks in the context of resistance behaviour. The typology of risks they identify consists of performance (lack of suitable alternatives for the brand), social issues (stigma and exclusion), legal reasons (legal proceedings) and physical considerations (violation of physical integrity), which are linked to different anti-brand behaviours. These are conceptualized along a brand resistance intensity continuum that goes from avoidance to extreme acts and includes offline word-of-mouth, online word-of-mouth, boycott and activism in-between.

Focussing on sub-Saharan African countries, Odoom, Kosiba, Djamgbah and Narh conceptualize brand avoidance as moral avoidance, identity avoidance, deficit-value avoidance, experiential avoidance and advertising-related avoidance and develop a measurement scale to capture it. They also show how brand avoidance is positively related to non-patronage intention.

In another scale development paper, Guèvremont theorizes brand hypocrisy from a consumer perspective and develops a scale to measure it. The multi-study process results in the conceptualization of brand hypocrisy as consisting of four dimensions – image hypocrisy (brand failing to put words into action), mission hypocrisy (brand exerting a negative impact on society or consumer well-being), message hypocrisy (brand conveying unrealistic/unattainable images) and social hypocrisy (brand supporting social responsibility initiatives for strategic purposes only) – as well as in the development of a scale to capture the construct. Importantly, brand hypocrisy is shown to be a significant predictor of negative consumer behaviours such as negative word-of-mouth and brand distance.

Osuna, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas develop the concept of brand polarization and discuss the benefits associated with it. Their exploratory findings, resulting from semi-structured interviews with consumers, highlight the advantages of brand polarization for companies. In particular, they identify specific opportunities for the brand management team, for the brand itself and for the consumers involved with the polarizing brand.

Fetscherin and Sanpedro examine brand forgiveness in the context of brand transgressions of different types (performance, image, value) and degree of severity (high vs low). Results from their experimental study show that consumers witnessing a performance-based brand transgression are more likely to forgive the brand than in the case of image- or value-based brand transgressions, and that the more severe the brand transgression, the less likely the forgiveness.

Baghi and Gabrielli focus on values-related versus performance-related crises, and using an experimental design, they investigate consumer affective and behavioural responses, namely, negative word-of-mouth and purchase intention. In doing so, they take into account the mediating role of negative emotions and the moderating role of cultural belongingness (collectivistic versus individualistic). Their findings suggest that consumers belonging to a collectivistic culture tend to react in a more severe manner when faced with a values-related brand crisis event than with a performance-related crisis. The arousal of negative emotion towards the brand represents the mediating variable in behavioural responses.

Kordostrami and Kordostrami investigate, through a qualitative and quantitative multi-method approach, the effect of consumers’ individual differences (regulatory focus and attachment styles) on their reactions to brand failure. The results show that consumers with a promotion focus display less negative (revenge and brand avoidance) and more positive (trust and loyalty) behaviour than those with a prevention focus. In addition, results reveal the presence of an interaction between consumers’ attachment style and regulatory focus: the effect of regulatory focus holds only for secure consumers; for fearful consumers, regulatory focus does not change their behaviour.

Finally, through case studies in the retail fashion industry, Cooper, Stavros and Dobeles examine how companies can deal with negative sentiment on social media. Findings reveal five key domains of influence around which the firms base their approach to addressing social media backlash. These are categorized as either relational domains, built on human exchange, or transformational domains, grounded in corporate culture and operational practices.

Altogether, these articles shed some light on how consumers perceive and react to brand negativity, as well as

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how companies can deal with such consumer responses. They provide conceptual and operational tools that can be used to assess consumer negative responses towards brands. Key learnings from these articles, which are based on a variety of qualitative and quantitative research methods, represent an important step forward for better understanding consumer negativity towards brands – although this topic should remain an important object of investigation for future research.

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**Silvia Grappi**

*Department of Economics, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Modena, Italy*

**Lia Zarantonello**

*University of Roehampton, Business School, London, UK, and*

**Simona Romani**

*Department of Business and Management, LUISS University, Rome, Italy*