

The Impact of Brand Trust Erosion on Boycott Behavior: A Contemporary Assessment (1213)

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Abstract

Trust is pivotal in shaping consumer decision-making processes and constitutes the foundation of brand-consumer relationships. The erosion of this trust can lead to heightened negative perceptions toward the brand and may trigger reactive consumer behaviors, such as boycotts. This study examines the impact of brand trust erosion on boycott behavior. Previous literature suggests that trust erosion directly fosters negative attitudes and boycott intentions. In this context, the present research adopts a quantitative methodology and investigates this phenomenon within a sample of Turkish and Syrian consumers residing in Gaziantep, Türkiye. Data were collected through an online survey administered to 422 participants and analyzed using SPSS software. The findings reveal that trust erosion has a statistically significant and positive effect on consumer boycott behavior. Notably, subdimensions such as emotional and social pressure, dissenting opinions, and the perceived effectiveness of boycotts were significantly associated with trust erosion. Furthermore, independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA results indicate that both gender and ethnicity significantly influence perceptions of trust erosion and tendencies toward boycott behavior. Female participants and Turkish consumers reported higher trust erosion and stronger boycott inclinations than their male and Syrian counterparts. In contrast, no significant differences were found regarding age and income levels. However, educational level demonstrated a meaningful variation: individuals with middle school education and those holding doctoral degrees perceived trust erosion differently. In conclusion, the findings largely align with the extant literature, emphasizing that trust erosion is a critical antecedent of collective consumer actions, particularly boycotts. Based on the observed variations in trust perceptions between Turkish and Syrian consumers, it is recommended that brands design and implement culturally sensitive trust-building strategies to address the expectations of diverse consumer segments

Keywords: Trust Erosion, Boycott Behavior, Consumer Behavior

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly competitive market conditions, achieving sustainable success for brands is not solely dependent on the quality of products or services; it is also directly related to the level of trust consumers place in the brand (Özdemir & Yaman, 2021). Within the context of consumer-brand relationships, trust is considered a critical factor in fostering long-term loyalty. This loyalty, often referred to as brand commitment, is the extent to which a consumer is dedicated to a particular brand, and is regarded as one of the fundamental building blocks of brand commitment (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003; Kim et al., 2021).

However, any deterioration in this trust can lead consumers not only to develop negative attitudes toward the brand but also to engage in punitive actions such as boycott behavior (Grégoire, Tripp & Legault, 2009; Lim et al., 2020). Particularly, unethical corporate practices such as misleading advertising or labor exploitation, or brand indifference to social crises like environmental disasters or human rights

violations, accelerate this process by eroding consumer trust, paving the way for widespread boycott movements (Chen & Yeh, 2021; Akhtar et al., 2022).

With the advancement of social media and digital communication technologies, consumer reactions have become more visible, organized, and impactful. This shift has significantly altered the dynamics of consumer-brand relationships. As a result, trust deterioration has evolved from being an individual consumer issue into a collective form of societal response (Zarantonello, Romani, & Grappi, 2022). This transformation demonstrates that boycotting is not merely an individual act but also a social reflex rooted in a collective quest for justice.

Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to investigate the impact of brand-related trust deterioration on consumer boycott behavior, to evaluate this relationship through sub-dimensions such as emotional-social pressure (which refers to the influence of social networks and emotional responses on boycott decisions), oppositional views, and perceived boycott effectiveness, and to examine whether these relationships vary significantly across demographic groups.

It is important to note that this study has certain limitations, which are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the research. First, the research was conducted solely in the province of Gaziantep, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions. The data collection was conducted between June and December 2024, which may have influenced participant responses due to period-specific events. Additionally, the sample consisted only of Turkish and Syrian consumers; thus, the findings cannot be generalized to other ethnic groups. There is also a potential for response bias due to participants' political sensitivities and the influence of social desirability. These limitations are significant and should be considered when interpreting the results..

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Consumer trust, a pivotal area of research in the marketing and consumer behavior literature, is the focus of our study. Delgado-Ballester et al. (2003) underscore the impact of brand trust on consumer loyalty, while Kim et al. (2021) extend this relationship to digital platforms. The deterioration of consumer trust in a brand can lead to adverse behavioral responses and, in some cases, to active boycott behavior (Grégoire, Tripp & Legault, 2009). Our research aims to explore this phenomenon in greater depth and its implications.

Boycott behavior, the deliberate rejection of a brand or product by consumers based on moral, ethical, or political grounds (Sen, Gürhan-Canli & Morwitz, 2001), has gained prominence in recent years. This is mainly due to the increasing prevalence of consumer boycotts in response to perceived corporate ethical violations or social injustices. The role of social media in amplifying these reactions by enabling their rapid dissemination (Zarantonello, Romani & Grappi, 2022) cannot be overstated.

Akhtar et al. (2022) indicate that brands' inaction in the face of social crises significantly undermines consumer trust and directly triggers boycott tendencies. Similarly, Chen and Yeh (2021) argue that a lack of corporate responsibility reduces brand value in the eyes of consumers, leading to erosion of trust. Lim et al. (2020) suggest that emotional responses play a key role in guiding boycott behavior.

To explain consumer responses, this study adopts the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) as its theoretical foundation. Additionally, Blau's (1964) Social Exchange Theory and Greenberg's (1990) Justice Theory are employed to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the individual and societal impacts of trust deterioration.

Despite the growing interest in the topic, research examining the relationship between trust deterioration and boycott behavior through the lens of demographic variables remains limited in the literature. Our

study, with its multidimensional approach, aims to fill this gap and make a significant contribution to the field.

Based on the literature review and theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were developed to explain the effects of trust deterioration on boycott behavior. The S-O-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), which views the loss of trust as a stimulus triggering emotional and cognitive responses in the consumer (organism), ultimately resulting in behavioral outcomes (response), provides the basis for these hypotheses.

In this context, trust deterioration may lead consumers to question their relationship with the brand and engage in punitive behaviors such as boycotts. The hypotheses proposed to explain this process are as follows:

H1: Deterioration of consumer trust in a brand has a statistically significant and positive effect on boycott behavior.

H1.1: Trust deterioration positively affects the emotional and social pressure sub-dimension of boycott behavior.

H1.2: Trust deterioration has a positive effect on the oppositional views sub-dimension of boycott behavior.

H1.3: Trust deterioration has a positive effect on the perceived effectiveness sub-dimension of boycott behavior.

Additionally, it is predicted that consumer responses to trust deterioration and boycott behavior may vary depending on demographic variables. Accordingly, a second central hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Consumer levels of trust deterioration and their corresponding boycott behaviors differ significantly across socio-demographic variables (gender, age, education level, income level, and ethnicity).

H2.1: Consumer levels of trust deterioration and boycott behaviors differ significantly based on the variable of gender.

H2.2: Consumer levels of trust deterioration and boycott behaviors differ significantly based on the variable of age.

H2.3: Consumer levels of trust deterioration and boycott behaviors differ significantly based on the variable of education level.

H2.4: Consumer levels of trust deterioration and boycott behaviors differ significantly based on the variable of income level.

H2.5: Consumer levels of trust deterioration and boycott behaviors differ significantly based on the variable of ethnicity.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study was conducted within the framework of a quantitative research approach using a correlational survey model. The primary objective of this research is to investigate the impact of deteriorating consumer trust in brands on boycott behavior and to examine how this relationship varies across different demographic variables.

The study population comprises Turkish citizens and Syrian immigrant consumers residing in the province of Gaziantep who are in direct or indirect contact with brands. The sample was determined using a simple random sampling method. Based on similar studies in the literature, a sample size of 300

was projected as a minimum. In this study, an online questionnaire was distributed to 470 individuals, yielding 422 valid responses with a response rate of 89.8%.

The data collection process was carried out in three stages. In the first stage, preliminary face-to-face interviews were conducted with 50 participants to identify product categories where boycott behavior is more prevalent. Based on these interviews, a brief pre-survey was prepared, and the most commonly boycotted categories were identified as beverages, food, cosmetics, skincare, clothing, and health products.

The questionnaire form consists of three main sections:

Questions related to socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education level, income level, and ethnicity;

The boycott behavior scale developed by Klein et al. (2004), adapted in this study into three sub-dimensions (emotional-social pressure, oppositional views, and perceived boycott effectiveness), consisting of 11 items;

A 7-item trust deterioration scale was adapted from Garbarino and Johnson (1999).

Both scales were translated into Turkish and Arabic, and back-translation and expert consultation were used to ensure cultural validity and linguistic equivalence. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

The collected data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. Descriptive statistics and frequency analyses were performed first. Subsequently, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to assess construct validity and reliability.

For hypothesis testing, simple linear regression analysis was used to assess the explanatory power of variance, and differences across socio-demographic variables were evaluated using one-way ANOVA and independent samples t-tests. The assumption of normal distribution was checked using skewness and kurtosis values.

RESULTS

Among the 422 participants in the study, 52.9% were Turkish citizens and 46.8% were Syrian refugees. The gender distribution was balanced, with 49.5% male and 50.5% female participants. The largest age group was those aged between 31–36, accounting for 24.6% of the sample. In terms of education level, the highest proportion was observed among university graduates, comprising 43.7% of the participants. Additionally, 46% of the respondents reported a monthly income between 22,100 and 27,000 Turkish Liras.

The construct validity and internal consistency of the scales used were evaluated using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. For the trust deterioration scale, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was 0.815, and Bartlett's Test was significant ($p < 0.001$). The Cronbach's Alpha value was calculated as 0.823. For the boycott behavior scale, the KMO value was 0.751, Bartlett's Test was significant ($p < 0.001$), and the Cronbach's Alpha was 0.852. The total variance explained was 67.94% for trust deterioration and 64.13% for boycott behavior. Factor loadings ranged between 0.669 and 0.783 for both scales.

A positive and moderately significant correlation was found between trust deterioration and boycott behavior ($r = 0.483$, $p < 0.01$). The mean score for trust deterioration was $\bar{X} = 3.845$, while the mean score for boycott behavior was $\bar{X} = 3.962$. Skewness and kurtosis values were within ± 2 , confirming the assumption of normal distribution.

According to simple linear regression analysis:

H1 was supported: Trust deterioration had a statistically significant and positive effect on boycott behavior ($\beta = 0.483$, $R^2 = 0.234$, $p < 0.001$).

H1.1 was supported: Trust deterioration positively affected the emotional and social pressure sub-dimension of boycott behavior ($\beta = 0.402$, $R^2 = 0.162$, $p < 0.001$).

H1.2 was supported: Trust deterioration positively affected the oppositional views sub-dimension ($\beta = 0.331$, $R^2 = 0.109$, $p < 0.001$).

H1.3 was supported: Trust deterioration positively affected the perceived effectiveness of boycott behavior ($\beta = 0.323$, $R^2 = 0.104$, $p < 0.001$).

Although no statistically significant differences were found based on gender and ethnicity, female participants and Turkish participants had higher average scores. No significant differences were observed in trust deterioration or boycott behavior based on age and income levels.

However, a statistically significant difference was found in trust deterioration based on education level ($p = 0.042$), particularly between participants with middle school education and those with doctoral degrees. No significant differences were detected in boycott behavior in terms of education level.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, the effect of consumer trust deterioration on boycott behavior was examined based on a sample of 422 Turkish and Syrian individuals residing in the province of Gaziantep. The findings revealed that trust deterioration has a significant and positive effect on boycott behavior. In particular, it was determined that the loss of trust leads consumers to exhibit punitive responses both individually and collectively. These responses manifest in various sub-dimensions such as emotional-social pressure, oppositional views, and perceived boycott effectiveness.

According to the regression analysis, trust deterioration explains 23.4% of the variance in boycott behavior, which is consistent with previous studies by Kim et al. (2021) and Akhtar et al. (2022). This indicates that brand trust is a strategic asset, and its erosion may result not only in customer loss but also in reputational damage.

The results also show that female consumers are more sensitive to trust deterioration and more inclined to engage in boycott behavior. This supports the idea that women are more attentive to brand behavior and may respond more emotionally (Alhouti et al., 2016). In terms of ethnicity, Turkish participants were found to experience greater trust loss and exhibit a higher tendency to boycott compared to Syrian participants. This difference may be attributed to cultural context, social media usage, and political sensitivity.

On the other hand, no significant differences were found in trust deterioration or boycott behavior based on age and income levels. However, education level did reveal a significant difference in trust deterioration. Specifically, individuals with higher levels of education were found to detect ethical violations more easily and react more strongly to such incidents (Erdoğan & Gümüş, 2022).

Brands should prioritize transparency, accountability, and ethical principles in order to sustain consumer trust. In times of crisis, trust must be rebuilt through effective communication strategies, and potential boycott risks should be anticipated in advance. Corporate social responsibility initiatives and actions addressing societal sensitivity should be used as tools to restore trust. Value-based communication strategies that address the concerns of female consumers and highly educated individuals should be developed.

From an academic perspective, future research should analyze other factors affecting boycott behavior—such as media influence, group norms, and ideological orientations—using multivariate models. Ultimately, trust deterioration should be recognized not only as a loss of individual loyalty but also as a critical factor that triggers broader societal reactions. Therefore, brands must invest in trust management at a strategic level.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have declared that there is no conflict of interest

Author Contributions

This study is derived from the doctoral dissertation of Muhammed Hayri Hacı İbrahim conducted at the Graduate School of Social Sciences, Gaziantep University. M.H.H.İ.: Data collection, execution of analyses, literature review, and initial draft writing. F.Ç.: Guidance and supervision on conceptual framework, hypothesis development, methodology, findings, and conclusion. İ.H.E.: Methodological consultancy and guidance during the analysis process.