Brand image under threat: How resistance shapes Moroccan consumer engagement and loyalty

Image de marque menacée : comment la résistance façonne l'engagement et la fidélité des consommateurs marocains

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Abstract

Consumer resistance or opposition has turned into a crucial element in defining brand engagement and loyalty, particularly in situations where the reputation of the brand is at risk. This research examines how consumers in Morocco respond to brand controversies, cultural differences and behaviors deemed unethical. Building on consumer resistance theory and brand capital theory, the study investigates the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes that lead to resistance and guide brand choices. Through a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews, the survey detects the main factors of resistance, such as perceived injustice, attacks on autonomy, degradation of loyalty and mismatch with individual or cultural values. The results indicate that resistance erodes the crucial elements of brand capital (loyalty, perceived quality and brand connections), ultimately leading to a withdrawal or overt opposition. The results also highlight the importance of consumer involvement, which can mitigate or strengthen resistance depending on the strength of the pre-existing brand link. By contextualizing consumer responses in the Moroccan socio-cultural framework, the analysis provides insights for brand crisis management and customer relationship approaches in developing markets.

Keywords: Resistance, brand equity, engagement, loyalty, brand image, consumer behavior.

Résumé

La résistance ou l'opposition des consommateurs s'est transformée en un élément crucial pour définir l'engagement et la fidélité à une marque, particulièrement dans les situations où la réputation de la marque est mise en péril. Cette recherche examine la manière dont les consommateurs du Maroc répondent aux polémiques de marque, aux différences culturelles et aux comportements jugés non éthiques. S'appuyant sur la théorie de la résistance des consommateurs et la théorie du capital marque, l'étude scrute les processus émotionnels, cognitifs et comportementaux qui mènent à la résistance et orientent les choix en matière de marque. Par le biais d'une approche qualitative basée sur des interviews semi-structurées, l'enquête détecte les principaux facteurs de résistance, tels que l'injustice ressentie, les atteintes à l'autonomie, la dégradation de la fidélité et le décalage avec les valeurs individuelles ou culturelles. Les résultats indiquent que la résistance érode les éléments cruciaux du capital de marque (fidélité, qualité perçue et liens de marque), menant finalement à un retrait ou à une opposition manifeste. Les résultats soulignent aussi l'importance de l'implication du consommateur, qui peut atténuer ou renforcer la résistance en fonction de la solidité du lien préexistant avec la marque. En contextualisant les réponses des consommateurs dans le cadre socio-culturel marocain, l'analyse fournit des éclairages pour la gestion de crise des marques et les approches de relation client sur les marchés en développement.

Mots clés : Résistance, capital marque, engagement, fidélité, image de marque, comportement du consommateur.

Introduction

In an era marked by heightened brand visibility and increasing public accountability, consumer resistance has emerged as a critical phenomenon shaping contemporary brand-consumer relationships. With the rapid circulation of information across digital platforms and social media networks, consumers today possess unprecedented power to scrutinize, contest, and collectively mobilize against brands that they perceive as violating ethical, cultural, or social expectations. As a result, brand engagement and loyalty are no longer assured by traditional marketing strategies alone, rather, they depend on the extent to which consumers perceive a brand as authentic, culturally respectful, and aligned with their personal or societal norms.

This study situates itself within the Moroccan consumer context, where cultural identity, religious values, and socio-economic transformation intersect to form a unique environment for interpreting brand behavior. Moroccan consumers (deeply connected to global markets, yet strongly rooted in local traditions) evaluate brands not only through functional attributes but also through their symbolic, ethical, and cultural positioning. In such a context, any perceived threat to a brand's image, whether stemming from controversial communication, cultural insensitivity, or unethical practices, can activate resistance responses ranging from mild disengagement to severe backlash, including boycott behavior or public condemnation.

According to the literature, a brand image threat occurs when customers' perceptions and symbolic associations with a brand are adversely affected by events or brand actions. These risks are frequently caused by unethical scandals, unfavorable media coverage or online "bad buzz," unjust or excessive pricing policies, and poor service, especially when these events go against the brand's stated ideals and commitments. Beyond the event's objectivity, academics stress that image risks are essentially perceptual because they rely on how customers understand and assess brand behavior in relation to their norms and expectations. But resistance isn't always the result of bad things happening. Research indicates when certain activation conditions are satisfied, such as the perceived seriousness of the incident, the degree of moral or cultural sensitivity involved, and the identity proximity between consumers and the values at stake, brand image threats are more likely to cause negative reactions. These circumstances may exacerbate consumers' emotional and cognitive reactions in situations where religious beliefs, cultural standards, or economic identities are significant such as in emerging markets. Therefore, consumers are more likely to consider brand actions as threats to brand image and initiate resistance behaviors when they are perceived as morally undesirable, culturally

incongruent, or socially unjust (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Roux, 2007; Grégoire et al., 2010; Xia et al., 2004).

Drawing on Consumer Resistance Theory (Peñaloza & Price, 1993; Fournier, 1998; Roux, 2007) and Brand Equity Theory (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), this research explores the psychological and behavioral mechanisms underlying Moroccan consumers' reactions to brand-image threats. Resistance is conceptualized not merely as an oppositional act but as a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional responses (e.g., anger, disappointment), cognitive evaluations (e.g., perceived injustice, moral dissonance), and behavioral manifestations (e.g., avoidance, complaint, protest). In contexts where brands are increasingly scrutinized, consumers rely on cognitive mechanisms to interpret and evaluate brand behaviors. Social categorization, in particular, allows individuals to organize and interpret their social environment, shaping their responses to external stimuli and guiding their subsequent actions (Benbari & Bhih, 2025). When brand practices are perceived as incongruent with consumers' values or cultural expectations, such cognitive evaluations may trigger resistance and disengagement.

Through this theoretical lens, the study investigates how consumers negotiate autonomy, fairness, identity, and moral agency when confronted with brand transgressions. Furthermore, this research examines the conditions under which resistance leads to long-term disloyalty and erosion of brand equity or, conversely, to re-engagement once trust is restored.

By doing so, the study highlights how resistance can function not only as a destructive force but also as a form of consumer empowerment, a mechanism through which individuals hold brands accountable, demand transparency, and encourage culturally sensitive and ethically responsible practices. This question raises a central issue: **How does consumer resistance triggered by brand-image threats shape Moroccan consumers' engagement and loyalty toward brands?** Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on brand crisis management and consumer–brand relationships in emerging markets by offering an in-depth understanding of resistance dynamics within the Moroccan socio-cultural context. It does so by mobilizing an integrated theoretical framework that combines consumer resistance theory and brand equity theory, alongside an exploratory qualitative methodology. This approach enables both the conceptual clarification of key theoretical constructs and their empirical examination within real-world consumption experiences.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Consumer Resistance Theory

The concept of resistance was first introduced into marketing by Murray and Ozanne (1991). It has become a topic that occupies marketers today due to the forms and reasons for resistance are becoming unavoidable, and the reactions that result from it can have a lasting and negative impact on business activities. According to Roux (2007), resistance represents the emotional state in which the consumer finds himself in order to respond to situations of pressure, influence, or practices, and market dissonant discourses. It is also a question for the young consumer to implement strategies of appropriation in the face of domination structures (Penaloza & al., 2009).

In psychosociology, resistance is manifested against a pressure exerted by others (resistance to the designs, wills, or feelings of another) or towards oneself (resistance to temptation or to one's own passions). The resistance is said to be someone who has been struggling a long time. As Roux (2007) states, in social sciences, resistance is presented as an opposition reaction in an interaction and requires the meeting of two conditions, a force is exerted on a subject and that it seeks to cancel the effect.

While relationship marketing has focused on understanding the drivers of consumer trust and loyalty (Webster, 1992), research simultaneously reveals that consumers are increasingly engaging in avoidance, resistance, and outright rejection of the offers presented to them, some people boycott particular brands, either individually or collectively (Lee et al. 2009; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). While others prefer a different lifestyle, outside the mass consumption limit. These oppositions take different forms (Zavestoski, 2002). Individuals voluntarily limit their consumption and no longer seek fulfillment in the consumption and accumulation of goods but rather in the simplification of material (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002). Others, adopt a consumer-oriented approach, the "boycott," and favor the use of alternative channels such as fair trade (Robert-Demontrond, 2010).

We are also faced with two notions, namely cynicism and skepticism. These two concepts are two individual characteristics often noted in resistance behaviors (Dobscha, 1998; Fournier, 1998; Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001). Cynicism is the tendency to condemn advertising and to systematically be wary of hidden motives of advertisers (Boyer et al., 2006). As for skepticism, this concept has the tendency to doubt or not be convinced of the veracity of advertising promises (Boyer et al., 2006). It should also be noted that the skeptical consumer doubts the veracity of the commercial discourse, while the cynical consumer doubts the hidden dishonest

intentions that he attributes to such discourses (Kanter and Wortzel, 1985). More generally, these two concepts are part of the continuum of doubt (Boyer et al., 2006) and refer to the idea that consumers tend not to believe companies' claims and therefore refuse to be influenced by any market attempts.

1.1.1   Basic models of consumer resistance

Several models have been proposed in literature reviews to present this phenomenon of resistance. These models will be analyzed below, and a summary table will be presented later.

❖   **The Hirschman model (1970)**

Hirschman was the first to study oppositional behavior by focusing on possible manifestations of discontent. In his pioneering model, he proposed a continuum of four phases. The first "voice" is to express or demand opposition to a particular company's actions, the second "exit" is to stop or stop consumption of the products of these companies, and the third "loyalty," as its name suggests, is loyalty, which means continuing to consume the products of a firm while hoping for change or improvement. The fourth phase of "neglect" is joined by the loyalty phase, where you continue to maintain a brand without making any effort.

Figure N°1: The theory exit, voice, loyalty de Hirschman (1970)
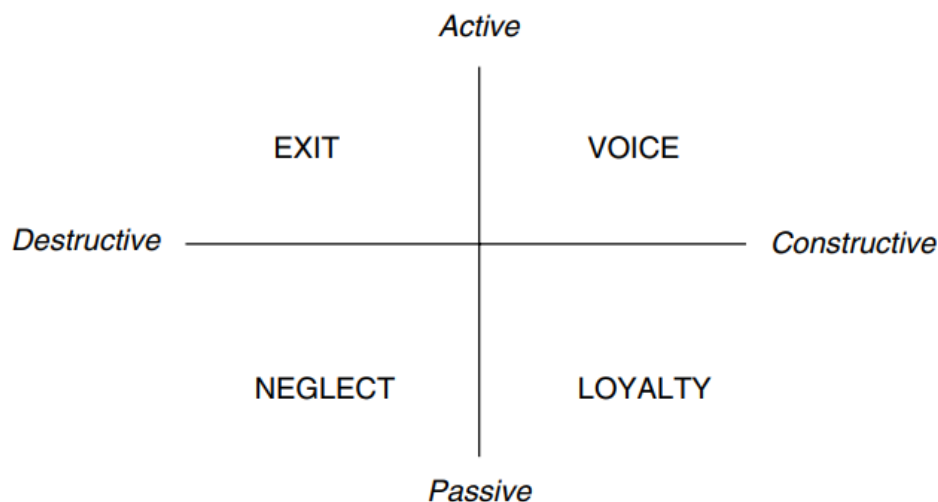
Source: The Hirschman model (1970), published online by Cambridge University Press, 2012.

❖   **The Ram and Sheth Model (1989)**

Consumer resistance was first systematically conceptualized by Ram and Sheth (1989) through their Innovation Resistance Theory (IRT), which remains a cornerstone in understanding the non-adoption or rejection of innovations. Departing from adoption-focused models such as

those of Rogers (1983), Ram and Sheth highlighted that resistance is a unique psychological and behavioral response to innovation rather than just the lack of acceptance. Their paradigm states that there are three progressive ways that consumer resistance might appear: passive, active, and inertial.

- Inertial resistance represents the lowest level of opposition, occurring when consumers are indifferent to an innovation and display no motivation to adopt it. This form of resistance often stems from habit, low involvement, or the absence of perceived need.

- Passive resistance, on the other hand, reflects a cautious or risk-averse stance, that is to say, consumers may recognize the innovation's potential benefits but postpone adoption due to perceived risks or uncertainty regarding its performance, value, or compatibility with their lifestyles.

- Active resistance constitutes the most intense and deliberate form of opposition. In this case, consumers perceive the innovation as inappropriate or threatening to their beliefs, values, or autonomy, and may engage in overt behaviors such as criticism, rejection, or even boycott.

❖ **Peñaloza and Price's model (1993)**

These researchers were the first to propose a model that holistically addresses resistance behavior by indicating targets to which consumers resist and how they express or manifest their resistance. They contributed to a proposal for a framework for analyzing consumer resistance in four dimensions: individual/collective, reformist/radical, products/signs, and internal or external position.

**Figure N°2: The consumer resistance model according to Peñaloza and Price (1993)**
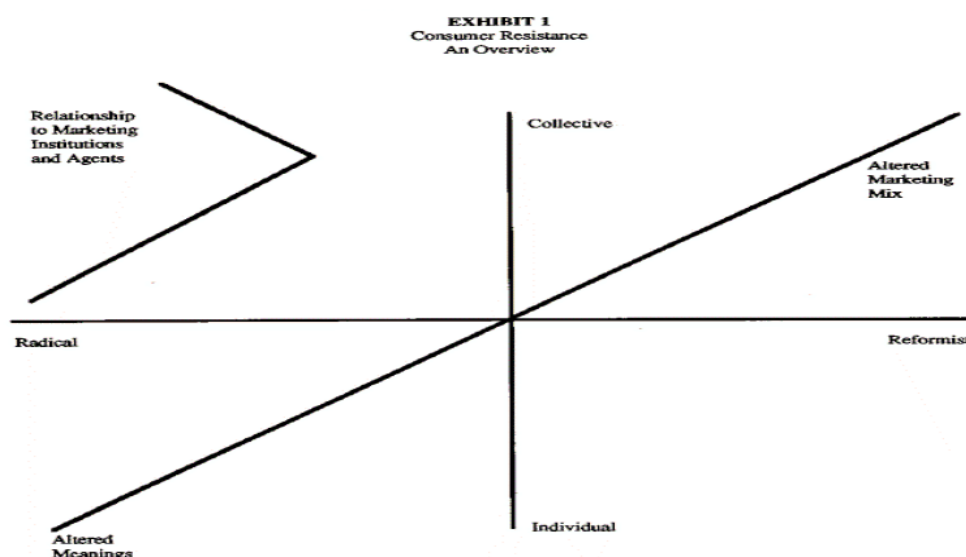
Source: Peñaloza L et Price L. (1993)

❖ **Roux Model (2007)**

Roux (2007), following an in-depth review of specialized literature, proposed a model that serves as a framework for analysis and reflection on consumer resistance. This is a version with a recent, global, and simplified vision of the model proposed in 2006. He attempted to bring better clarification of the resistance by defining the three conditions for its triggering, namely, a force or attempts at influence or pressure exerted on the consumer, a perception of force that is explained by the recognition of this pressure, and an attempt to cancel its effect, which consists of taking action by expressing one's dissatisfaction with the situation.

Figure N°3: An integrative framework for analyzing consumer resistance
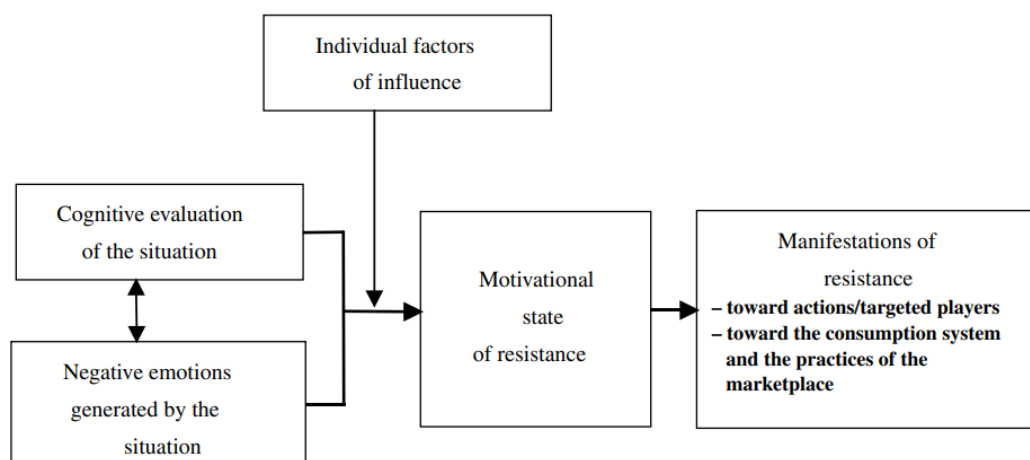
Source: Roux Model (2007).

1.1.2 Contemporary studies of consumer resistance theory

Over the past decade, Consumer Resistance Theory has had substantial conceptual and empirical development, reflecting changes in consumer empowerment, digitalization, and market dynamics. The idea has expanded to include psychological, cultural, and technological aspects that explain how and why consumers reject marketing influences and brand activities. It was first based on critical marketing and sociological viewpoints.

Research has gone beyond the conventional understanding of resistance as a straightforward refusal to buy between 2015 and 2025. Researchers like Cherrier and Lee (2022) and Van Lear with Izberk-Bilgin (2019) reinterpreted resistance as a complex reaction ingrained in moral posture and identity creation. According to their research, consumers rebel against prevailing market beliefs in order to demonstrate their values, autonomy, and ethical positions in addition to economic or functional reasons.

Digital resistance became an important subfield with the emergence of digital technologies. Research like Dessart and Veloutsou (2021) and Kozinets et al. (2017) looked at how social media platforms developed into places where customers organized collective resistance, whether through online boycotts, anti-brand communities, or counter-narratives. This change is indicative of a larger trend toward participatory consumer culture, in which people use connectivity to question corporate speech and brand authority.

The psychological processes that underlie resistance are the subject of another significant theoretical advancement. Researchers like Lwin et al. (2022) investigated how resistant actions are triggered by perceived threats to autonomy and freedom of choice, building on Brehm's (1966) reactance theory. These investigations highlighted the fact that resistance is not just behavioral but also involves emotional and cognitive processes that come before visible actions of opposition or disengagement, such as wrath, counterargument, or moral outrage

Additionally, resistance theory has been included into frameworks for consumer engagement and brand relationships in recent research. According to researchers like Zarantonello et al. (2020) and Hegner, Fetscherin, and Van Delzen (2017), customers may be emotionally invested in companies while also opposing or condemning specific brand behaviors. Nuanced conceptualizations like "ambivalent resistance" and "critical engagement," which more accurately describe contemporary consumer-brand interactions, have emerged as a result of this dichotomy.

Since 2020, an increasing amount of writing has also concentrated on geopolitical and cultural circumstances, highlighting the various ways that resistance appears in various civilizations. Nadeem et al. (2025), for example, looked into resistance in emerging countries and found that cultural identity, perceived unfairness, and pressures from globalization all influence different patterns of consumer resistance. These observations demonstrate resistance theory's contextual adaptability and suitability for non-Western contexts, such as the Middle East and North Africa. According to Kannou et al.'s 2024 study on brand substitution, for example, resistance is driven by surprise, unpleasant feelings, and connection to the previous brand. By 2025, Ding et al.'s Consumer Resistance Theory will be a multifaceted framework that incorporates sociocultural dynamics, technological agency, and psychological reactance. It presents resistance as an active, meaning-making process that redefines the power dynamics between customers and brands, in addition to explaining consumers' defensive responses to marketing persuasion. For example, studies on "metaverse resistance" by "Generation Z" show how perceived alienation, psychological burden, and value skepticism trigger resistance beyond classic barriers. This

theoretical evolution reflects the shift from passive consumerism toward empowered, reflexive, and ethically motivated consumption behaviors.

1.2. Brand Equity Theory

Consumer Resistance Theory is enhanced by Brand Equity Theory (Keller, 1993), which explains how resistance actions directly affect brand performance outcomes. Essential aspects of brand equity, such as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty, can be undermined by customer reactions to perceived threats to a brand's image, such as decreased engagement, diminished emotional attachment, or boycotting.

In a broader sense, Brand Equity Theory (BET) offers a conceptual framework that clarifies how customers assess a brand's value and how those assessments influence their purchase decisions. It emphasizes that brand equity is the value that a brand adds to a good or service beyond its useful features. Customers' attitudes, feelings, and behavioral intentions (factors that influence their engagement, preference, and loyalty) reflect this value. Therefore, when customer resistance arises, it can significantly reduce the brand's perceived value and ultimately affect market performance.

The main models related to this theory include the Aaker Model (1991) and the Brand Equity Model. A. Aaker defines brand equity as shaped by four main dimensions that affect consumer perception and behavior.

Figure N°4: Aaker's Brand Equity Model
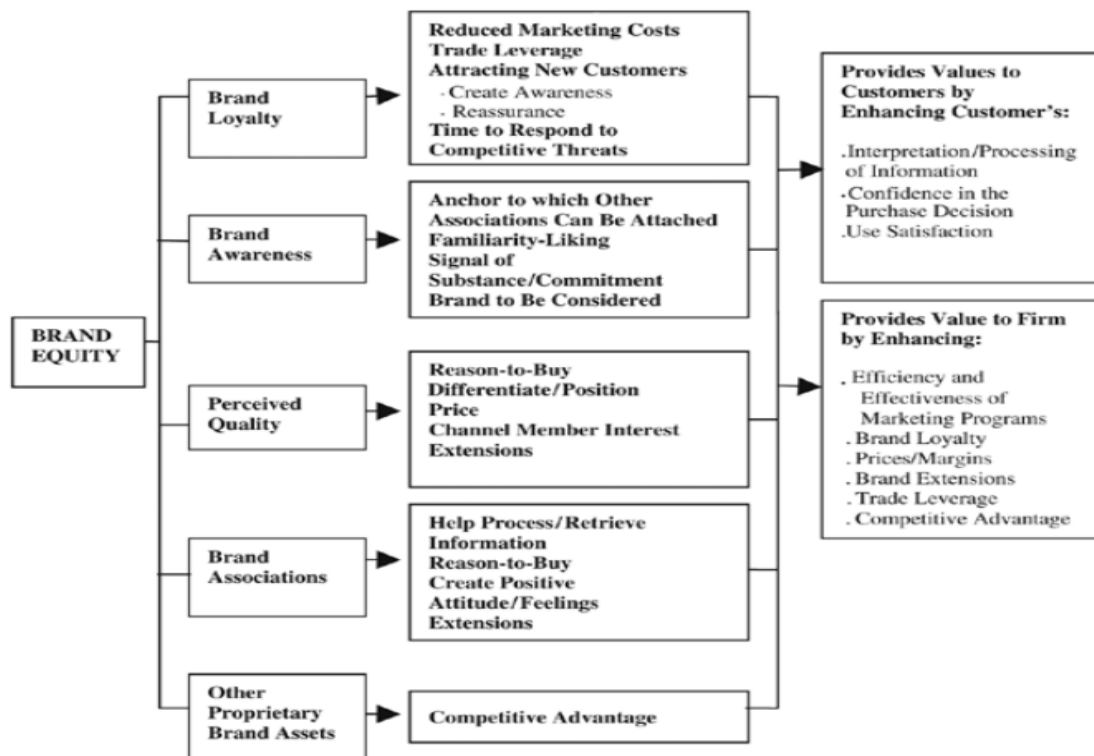
Source : Aaker's Brand Equity Model (1991)

- Brand awareness refers to the extent to which consumers recognize and recall a brand. Strong brand awareness allows a brand to stand out in the market and be easily identified by its target audience.

- Perceived quality is the subjective assessment of the quality of a product or service associated with the brand. It plays a crucial role in the overall brand perception and can influence consumer trust and preference.

- Brand associations encompass all the cognitive and emotional elements of a brand, such as its values, image, and reputation. These associations shape the brand identity and influence consumers' perception of the brand.

- Brand loyalty reflects consumers' attachment to a brand and their willingness to continue buying it despite the presence of competitive alternatives. Strong loyalty ensures a loyal customer base and reduces sensitivity to competitor actions.

- Other proprietary brand assets represent a strategic dimension often less visible but essential to protect and strengthen the value of a brand. This category includes patents, trademarks, exclusive distribution rights, and privileged relationships with business

partners, including retailers. These assets play a decisive role by providing the brand with legal and competitive advantages that limit the possibilities for imitation, secure market access, and reinforce barriers to entry. They also ensure the stability of the brand's presence in distribution channels through exclusive agreements or the quality of established professional relationships. By consolidating the position of the brand, these assets contribute directly to the creation of sustainable brand capital, which is difficult for competitors to replicate and generates strategic value in the long term.

According to our research, if brand image is threatened, these dimensions of brand equity can be affected, influencing consumer resistance and engagement. In 1993, Kevin Lane Keller introduced the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, which focuses on consumer perception in building brand equity. This model is based on a multi-stage hierarchy.

Figure N°5: Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid
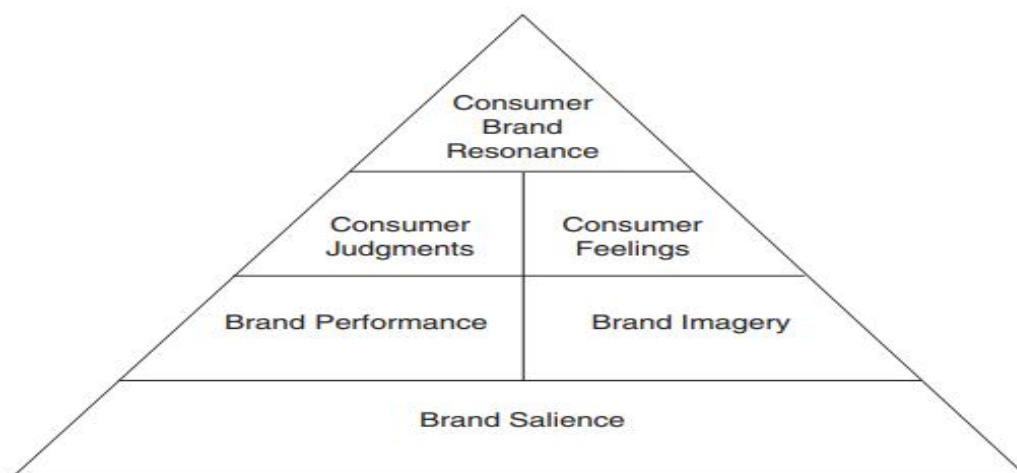
Source: Keller, K. L. (2001). Building Customer-Based Brand Equity.

The first is brand identification (brand salience), which corresponds to notoriety, the ability of consumers to recognize and remember the brand in different purchasing situations. The second, the brand meaning (brand performance and brand imagery) is built through the associations with the brand and perceived quality, which influence how consumers perceive the brand based on its characteristics and image. The third step is the brand response (consumer judgments and consumer feelings), in which consumers make judgments and experience emotions, such as brand judgment and feelings, based on their experience with the brand. Finally, the model leads to brand relationships (brand resonance), that include loyalty and emotional attachment illustrating the degree of consumer engagement with the brand and their propensity to recommend and defend it against competitors. Otherwise, a threat to brand image can

deteriorate consumer perceptions and feelings, increasing consumer resistance and decreasing engagement and loyalty.

Building and properly managing brand equity is a top priority for many companies (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003). Keller (1993) suggests that building brand equity requires internal brand identity efforts and then integrating the brand identity into the company's overall marketing plans, such as product, pricing, advertising, promotion, and distribution decisions. Furthermore, Keller (1993) argues that the strength of a company's brand equity achieved through communications depends on the extent to which the brand identity is integrated into supporting marketing programs. Furthermore, Keller (2003) calls for effective strategies that integrate marketing communications into the building and maintenance of brand equity. Although all marketing programs (e.g., product, pricing, advertising, promotion, and distribution plans) have the potential to create and maintain brand equity, in this article, we will focus on the role of a company's marketing communications efforts in its brand equity strategy.

2. Research methodology

In field surveys, qualitative and quantitative approaches constitute two major methodological orientations widely used in social science research. While quantitative methods aim to measure phenomena and establish statistical patterns, qualitative approaches focus on understanding the meaning that individuals assign to their experiences, actions, and representations.

To better engage in our research work, we aim to use a qualitative method to explore more aspects of reality. As Loubet (2000) explains, the qualitative method does not yield to any quantification. Its concern is to seek meaning, both obvious and implicit. By this, it is opposed to modern techniques based on quantitative enumeration. It often rests on a rational foundation. This perspective highlights that qualitative research is not merely descriptive, rather, it aims to uncover the complexity, and subtleties of social phenomena that numbers alone cannot capture. It targets the most relevant and significant elements of the investigation, gathering data with strong explanatory value that touches the core of the research problem. Through interpretation and thematic generalization, qualitative inquiry seeks to reveal the underlying mechanisms, motivations, and symbolic dimensions that shape respondents' viewpoints.

Furthermore, the researcher and participants are encouraged to be close and communicate in qualitative research. Its relational approach, which emphasizes field immersion, empathy, and careful listening, makes it possible to uncover meanings that are concealed in more structured and remote study methodologies. This closeness makes it easier to investigate subjective

realities using techniques like semi-directive and directive interviews, which offer a flexible yet methodical approach to gathering detailed and complex data.

The interview brings together an investigator and an informant in an interactive setting where dialogue becomes the primary tool of inquiry, the mutual interaction of these two people (...) allows to explore in detail the attitudes, opinions and motivations of the respondent. (Pellemans,1999). This interactive process makes the interview a privileged instrument for understanding the deeper dimensions of human behavior, since the researcher can probe, reformulate, and elicit elaboration in ways that allow meaning to emerge organically.

Through this combination of interpretive depth, methodological flexibility, and relational engagement, qualitative inquiry offers a powerful framework for capturing the richness of social phenomena, particularly in studies seeking to understand perceptions, resistance, engagement, identity, and the subtle cognitive and emotional mechanisms behind decision-making.

2.1 Research design and data collection method:

To examine the mechanisms underlying consumer resistance in situations of perceived brand image threat, this study adopts a qualitative research design. Given the exploratory nature of the research and its focus on capturing subjective perceptions, emotional reactions, and value-based judgments (dimensions that are difficult to apprehend through quantitative instruments) a qualitative approach is particularly appropriate.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method that offers respondents the freedom to articulate their experiences in their own terms while ensuring a sufficient level of consistency across interviews. The sample comprised fifteen Moroccan consumers selected using purposive sampling. Participants represented diverse demographic profiles in terms of age, gender, and socio-professional background, as well as varied consumption experiences. Inclusion criteria required participants to have previously encountered brands associated with controversial, unethical, or culturally sensitive situations.

Data collection was conducted iteratively and continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that additional interviews no longer generated new analytical insights. The participants were ordinary consumers rather than organizational leaders or experts, as their everyday perspectives were central to understanding the lived experience of consumer resistance. All interviews were conducted by the researchers, who adopted a neutral and semi-directive posture in order to foster open expression while limiting interviewer bias. This

methodological stance is consistent with qualitative research principles that emphasize closeness to participants, interpretive depth, and the faithful reconstruction of lived experiences.

Table 1: Profiles of interviewees

Participant	Gender	Age	Socio-professional status	Type of brands concerned	Level of prior engagement
P1	Female	24	Student	Fashion, cosmetics	Low
P2	Male	27	Private-sector employee	Technology, telecom	Medium
P3	Female	28	Self-employed	Retail, e-commerce	Medium
P4	Male	31	Private-sector employee	Food & beverage	High
P5	Female	33	Freelancer	Fashion, beauty	Low
P6	Male	29	Entrepreneur	Digital services	Medium
P7	Male	35	Public-sector employee	Banking, telecom	High
P8	Female	37	Homemaker	Food, household brands	Medium
P9	Male	41	Private-sector manager	Automotive, retail	High
P10	Female	36	Teacher	Cosmetics, apparel	High
P11	Male	45	Self-employed	Consumer goods	Medium
P12	Female	39	NGO worker	Ethical & local brands	High
P13	Male	26	Graduate	Digital platforms	Low
P14	Female	42	Business owner	Retail & services	Medium
P15	Male	34	Engineer	Technology brands	High

Note: *All participants are Moroccan consumers with prior experience of brand-related controversies or image-threatening situations.*

2.2 Sampling and recruitment conditions:

The participants were recruited according to a purposive sampling method, in accordance with the objective of the study which aimed at selecting individuals able to provide rich and relevant information on consumer resistance phenomena. The inclusion criteria required that participants be Moroccan consumers, whether they were exposed to brands involved in situations perceived as controversial, unethical or culturally sensitive, and that they agree to share their personal perceptions and experiences. Recruitment was carried out through personal networks and online contacts, in order to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender and socio-professional status. The interviews, conducted face-to-face or online depending on the availability of the participants, took place over the period of October and November 2025. Their average duration varied between 45 and 60 minutes, with interviews ranging from about 40 minutes for the shortest to nearly 70 minutes for the longest.

The data were analyzed using a manual thematic analysis, in accordance with the methodological principles proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The use of a manual protocol was privileged in order to promote a deep immersion in the data and to preserve the interpretative sensitivity of the researcher. The analysis followed an iterative four-step process. Initially, the transcriptions of the interviews were reviewed several times in order to familiarize oneself with the narratives of the participants and to grasp their overall meaning. Then, an initial coding was performed manually, consisting of identifying and assigning descriptive codes to the relevant meaning units, in connection with emotions, perceptions and behaviors associated with perceived threats on brand image and resistance reactions. In a third phase, the codes with conceptual similarities were grouped into broader themes, allowing to identify regularities and recurring patterns across all interviews. Finally, these themes have been the subject of a process of refinement and abstraction, leading to their organization into higher-level dimensions, in coherence with the theoretical framework used, notably psychological reactance, forms of resistance, engagement, and loyalty.

2.3 Credibility and trustworthiness of the study:

Despite the manual nature of the data analysis, a number of methodological protections were put in place to increase the validity and reliability of the qualitative findings. In order to compare viewpoints across age groups, professional backgrounds, and different levels of brand involvement, data triangulation was first guaranteed by gathering views from participants with a variety of demographic profiles and consuming experiences. In order to make sure that

participants' perspectives were accurately reflected and not skewed by researcher interpretation, participant validation, also known as member checking, was carried out throughout the interviews. Key interpretations and developing meanings were reformulated and validated with participants. In order to evaluate coding consistency, a subset of interview transcripts that had undergone partial double coding were reexamined and recoded after a period of time. The themes were improved, analytical dependability was reinforced, and the subjective bias present in qualitative research was lessened thanks to this iterative procedure.

3. Results:

3.1. Perceived pressure, advertising intrusion and psychological reactance

According to interview data, one of the main causes of resistant customer behavior is perceived marketing pressure. The analysis indicates that Moroccan consumers tend to perceive threats to brand image through a set of recurrent and socially salient situations, notably unethical business practices, culturally insensitive or inappropriate communication, misleading or exaggerated advertising claims, and increasingly intrusive marketing strategies. These situations are interpreted not merely as isolated managerial failures, but as symbolic violations of both personal and collective values, particularly those linked to honesty, respect, and cultural identity. Such perceived threats systematically elicit strong emotional responses that are indicative of a state of psychological reactance. Participants reported feelings of anger, frustration, disappointment, and growing distrust toward the brand, reflecting an affective reaction to the perceived restriction of their freedom of judgment and choice. This emotional arousal often stemmed from a sense of moral or cultural transgression, where consumers felt that the brand overstepped acceptable boundaries or attempted to manipulate their perceptions. As a result, participants expressed an immediate rejection of the brand's intentions, positioning their reactions as acts of resistance aimed at restoring personal autonomy and preserving alignment with their values. According to our third and seventh participants, they stated that:

"When a brand does something unethical, it feels like a personal offense. I feel angry because they are trying to profit without respecting people." (P3, female, 28)

"Sometimes the problem is not the product, but the message. When it doesn't respect our culture, I immediately lose trust." (P7, male, 35)

That is to say that cognitive responses systematically accompanied such emotional reactions. Participants reported engaging in counter-arguments aimed at rejecting the advertising message or questioning the brand's credibility. Respondents indicated cognitive reactions in addition to

emotional ones, such as doubting the brand's legitimacy and reconsidering its claims. Customers' attempts to regain their autonomy and moral agency are reflected in this cognitive reevaluation, which frequently comes before resistance activities.

Several interviewees mentioned that when a message appears *"too insistent"* or *"too perfectly tailored"*, it increases their perception that the brand is attempting to manipulate their decision-making process, one of the participants claims:

"I began to question anything the brand said after the issue. I no longer trust their advertising." *(P11, 41, male)*

The protective mechanism aimed at regaining a sense of autonomy is reflected in this cognitive resistance. These responses show how psychological reactance is triggered by perceived intrusion. The more consumers perceive advertising practices as invasive or coercive, the more they exhibit behaviors aimed at restoring their threatened freedom of choice.

3.2. Forms of resistance: from subtle avoidance to overt opposition

The qualitative analysis highlights three layers of resistance, each reflecting a different degree of behavioral intensity.

3.2.1. Inertial resistance

This first level is the least visible, yet most frequent. Participants adopt strategies of ignoring the advertising message, scrolling past content, or mentally disengaging from the brand. They do not necessarily express opposition, rather, the advertising fails to capture their interest or is dismissed as irrelevant. As several respondents explained, inertia results from the perception that the brand is *"too present"*, *"not authentic"*, or simply *"not aligned"* with their needs. This confirms that resistance can occur in the absence of negative sentiment, driven instead by indifference or saturation. According to other participants, they proclaim:

"I don't criticize the brand, I just stop paying attention to it. I skip their ads and move on." *(P2, female, 24)*

Rather than being motivated by overt moral outrage, this type of resistance is frequently motivated by saturation, apathy, or little discomfort.

3.2.2. Passive resistance

Passive resistance emerges when consumers experience doubt or discomfort, yet do not engage in confrontation. Respondents often delay purchasing decisions, verify the brand's credibility, or seek additional information from online reviews. This intermediate form of resistance is

driven by perceived risk, like economic, social, or symbolic, and reflects a cautious attitude toward brands perceived as intrusive or inconsiderate. Several respondents noted that they prefer to *"wait and see"* before adopting a product or trusting a brand, especially when the advertising appears exaggerated or misleading.

3.2.3. Active resistance

Active resistance emerged when participants felt the brand had crossed a line in its communication, ethical stance, or decision-making practices. In such cases, consumers adopt explicit oppositional behaviors such as boycotting the brand, sharing negative comments on social media, discouraging peers from buying the brand's products, or switching to competitors. Respondents described feelings of betrayal and indignation, especially when the brand's behavior contradicted their ethical expectations. One of them specified:

"I told my friends not to support the brand anymore and stopped purchasing it." (P14, female, 39)

When customers believe there have been serious betrayals of their principles or confidence, they become actively resistant. Boycotts, unfavorable word-of-mouth, and social media public criticism are examples of this type*:*

"Because brands need to be held accountable, I expressed my opinion online." (P6, male, 29)

Public criticism serves as a form of accountability, and active resistance enables consumers to restore symbolic justice.

3.3. Brand image threat, brand equity erosion, and engagement

Participants frequently reported incidents where brands damaged their own image through inappropriate communication, controversial decisions, pricing strategies, or service failures. Customer engagement and loyalty are greatly impacted by resistance behaviors. Following threats to brand image, several participants experienced diminished attachment, emotional disengagement, and weaker loyalty. The consequences of such events were immediate and multidimensional. Consumers reported a noticeable decline in trust, accompanied by reduced perceived quality and weakened associations with the brand. In several cases, the incident also produced a rupture of the emotional connection that previously tied them to the brand.

Interestingly, reactions differed markedly depending on the consumer's level of engagement. For highly engaged individuals, a strong attachment to the brand sometimes mitigated the negative effects of image-threatening events. These participants expressed willingness to give the brand another chance, justify the incident, or wait for corrective actions. However, other

engaged consumers reacted more severely, interpreting brand missteps as a betrayal of their emotional investment. For them, the disappointment was deeper, and resistance more intense.

Reactions, however, differed based on past interactions with the brand. Highly engaged customers occasionally showed conditional loyalty by expressing dissatisfaction rather than outright rejection. Some explained for example:

"I felt deceived because I had a strong attachment to the brand. I watched to see if they would offer an apology." (P10, female, 36)

Low-engagement customers, on the other hand, quickly disengaged and quickly switched brands. Low-engagement customers, on the other hand, quickly disengaged and quickly switched brands, one of the interviewers said:

"It was easy for me to switch brands because I wasn't loyal." (P5, male, 27)

These results imply that resistance outcomes are moderated by involvement, which may result in either long-term disloyalty or possible re-engagement. Consumers with low engagement tended to disengage quickly, exhibiting little tolerance for mistakes. Several noted that they *"felt no loyalty"* and found it easy to switch to competitors when a brand violated their expectations.

These contrasting reactions show that engagement functions in influencing whether a brand image threat leads to mild concern or strong resistance. These relational dynamic parallels the identity-based reactions observed among participants in the uploaded article, where inclusion or exclusion triggers emotional and behavioral consequences depending on participants' level of identification with the organization.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that consumer resistance emerges from a multidimensional process shaped by emotional, cognitive, and relational mechanisms. The perception of advertising pressure is central to understanding these reactions. Participants' experiences demonstrate that psychological reactance is not merely an internal state but a determinant of consumer behavior. Their narratives confirm that intrusive or coercive marketing practices trigger protective responses aimed at restoring a threatened sense of autonomy. This aligns with theoretical arguments suggesting that individuals resist persuasion when it threatens their ability to choose freely. The results also support the idea that resistance is not uniform. Instead, it expresses itself along a continuum (from inertial to active boycott) depending on the perceived intensity of the threat. Inertial and passive forms of resistance reflect early stages of

disengagement, where consumers quietly distance themselves from the brand. Active resistance, by contrast, emerges when dissatisfaction becomes morally or emotionally charged. These results resonate with contemporary literature highlighting that resistance is often rooted in ethical considerations, identity protection, or perceived violations of consumer rights. The theme of brand image threat provides further insight into consumers' vulnerability to reputation-related cues. The erosion of brand equity observed in this study confirms that trust, perceived quality, and emotional connection are interdependent elements. When a brand fails to meet expectations (whether through inconsistent messaging, unethical behavior, or poor service) these components deteriorate simultaneously. This creates a fertile environment for resistance and disengagement. Finally, the role of engagement highlights the relational complexity underlying resistance behaviors. Highly engaged consumers may react with forgiveness or amplified disappointment depending on their interpretation of the event. This supports the idea that strong relationships do not shield brands from criticism, rather, they increase the emotional stakes involved. Just as employees in inclusive environments respond differently based on their identity dynamics, consumers negotiate the meaning of their engagement when confronted with brand transgressions. These findings suggest that managing engagement requires careful attention to expectation-setting, transparency, and relational continuity. Taken together, the results highlight that consumer resistance is not a simple refusal or rejection but a nuanced response shaped by autonomy, identity, relational expectations, and perceived authenticity. Understanding these dynamics offers valuable insights for designing communication strategies that respect consumer autonomy, preserve brand equity, and strengthen long-term engagement.

Conclusion

A thorough foundation for comprehending how Moroccan consumers react when brand image is challenged is provided by the integrative review of Consumer Resistance Theory and Brand Equity Theory, which is followed by the qualitative technique used in this study. The theoretical underpinnings show that consumer resistance has developed into a multifaceted construct influenced by psychological reactance, cultural values, ethical concerns, identity protection, and digital empowerment rather than being restricted to passive dissatisfaction. Perceived intrusions, attempts at coercive persuasion, and inconsistent brand behavior all have a significant impact on this resistance, which ranges from lethargy to aggressive boycott. The brittleness of the relationship between consumers and brands is further highlighted by Brand

Equity Theory. The brittleness of the relationship between consumers and brands is further highlighted by Brand Equity Theory. Threats to one's image undermine essential elements including loyalty, affiliations, perceived quality, and trust, which intensifies resistance actions and speeds up disengagement.

The qualitative approach, which was based on semi-structured interviews and was grounded in these theoretical concepts, was crucial for capturing the richness, complexity, and subtle emotional aspects of Moroccan consumers' responses. The subtle cognitive and affective mechanisms that quantitative approaches could miss, were revealed through interpretive analysis. The interview format's direct interaction with respondents enabled the exploration of nuanced dimensions, including perceived threats to autonomy, moral judgments, cultural sensitivity, and the relationship expectations consumers have of companies. Given that consumer resistance and engagement are dynamic, subjective, and context-dependent phenomena, this strategy proved especially suitable.

When the literature review and qualitative findings are combined, they reveal an important relationship between resistance and brand equity: resistance arises as a response to threats as well as a process of meaning-making that redefines how consumers perceive, negotiate, and sustain their relationship with brands. These behaviors are further influenced by collective identity, social norms, and the growing influence of digital platforms as venues for action and expression in Morocco. This leads to the conclusion that resistance reshapes engagement and loyalty rather than just undermining them. Resistance can result in either definitive withdrawal and reputational harm or constructive criticism and increased relational expectations, depending on the degree of previous participation and the nature of the perceived threat.

Therefore, this study shows how crucial it is for firms looking to preserve or regain their equity during times of crisis to comprehend consumer reluctance. The research offers a nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of how brand image threats affect consumer behavior by combining insights from theoretical traditions and grounded qualitative evidence. It also explains why brands operating in the Moroccan marketplace now need to strategically manage resistance.

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