CONSUMER RESISTANCE TO MARKETING: DRIVERS, MANIFESTATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

ОПІР СПОЖИВАЧІВ МАРКЕТИНГУ: РУШІЙНІ СИЛИ, ПРОЯВИ ТА НАСЛІДКИ

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Consumer resistance has emerged as a defining force in contemporary marketing, reshaping traditional brand-consumer dynamics. This paper examines how empowered consumers are increasingly rejecting or challenging marketing practices perceived as intrusive, unethical, or inconsistent, driven by social media, declining trust, and heightened ethical awareness. Drawing on theoretical insights and global case studies, the analysis highlights how resistance manifests along a spectrum, ranging from quiet avoidance to collective activism. At the same time, resistance is positioned as a feedback mechanism, signalling shifts in societal expectations and offering opportunities for authentic, transparent, and dialogic brand strategies. The article argues that navigating resistance requires moving from persuasion to participation, embedding accountability, responsiveness, and value alignment into communication and long-term brand positioning.

Keywords: consumer resistance, brand trust, social media activism, marketing ethics, boycotts.

У статті досліджується феномен споживчого опору маркетингу як новітній виклик сучасним підприємствам у цифровому та соціально чутливому середовищі. Автори акцентують увагу на тому, що споживачі перестали бути пасивними реципієнтами рекламних повідомлень і дедалі частіше виступають критиками, які активно ставлять під сумнів етичність, правдивість та відповідність брендових комунікацій власним цінностям. У роботі систематизовано підходи зарубіжних і вітчизняних дослідників до вивчення форм та мотивів споживчого опору, серед яких – ідеологічні, психологічні, соціокультурні та етичні чинники. Зроблено огляд актуальних досліджень і практик, що висвітлюють падіння рівня довіри до корпоративних комунікацій, поширення бойкотів, антиспоживчих кампаній та соціального активізму в мережі. Особлива увага приділяється кейсам Starbucks, H&M, Shell, Gillette, а також кампанії Stop Hate for Profit, які демонструють різноманітні прояви опору – від індивідуального уникнення реклами до масових рухів у соціальних мережах, здатних спричиняти значні репутаційні та фінансові втрати компаній. У статті підкреслюється, що опір не варто трактувати виключно як загрозу. Навпаки, він може стати важливим механізмом зворотного зв'язку, що сигналізує про зміни суспільних очікувань і вимагає від брендів більшої прозорості, автентичності та відповідності задекларованих цінностей реальним практикам. Обґрунтовано необхідність переходу від одностороннього переконання до двостороннього діалогу, розвитку адаптивних маркетингових стратегій, посилення етичної узгодженості та формування довгострокових відносин довіри з цільовою аудиторією. Зроблено висновок, що ефективне управління брендом у сучасних умовах потребує стратегічного зсуву: від домінування рекламного впливу – до активної участі споживача у формуванні комунікаційного простору. У цьому контексті споживчий опір стає не лише викликом,

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але й можливістю для компаній удосконалити свої практики, підвищити рівень соціальної відповідальності та побудувати стійкіші відносини зі спільнотами. Зростання масштабів і впливу споживчого опору вимагає від компаній не лише перегляду комунікаційних стратегій, але й глибинної трансформації корпоративної культури у напрямку відкритості, відповідальності та сталого розвитку.

Ключові слова: опір споживачів, довіра до бренду, активізм у соціальних мережах, маркетингова етика, бойкоти.

Statement of the problem. In today's highly connected and media-saturated world, consumers are no longer passive recipients of marketing messages - they are increasingly critical, empowered, and willing to reject, question, or actively oppose marketing practices they find unethical, misleading, or culturally tone-deaf. While traditional marketing theory has often emphasized persuasion and message effectiveness, growing evidence suggests that a large segment of modern consumers actively resist such efforts, whether by ignoring advertisements, calling out brands on social media, or organizing large-scale boycotts [1, p. 182–183].

Despite the increasing visibility of this phenomenon, consumer resistance remains underexplored in both academic research and practical marketing strategy [2; 3]. There is a need to better understand not only the forms and motivations behind consumer resistance, but also its implications for brand communication, trust, and long-term strategy. This is especially urgent as resistance behaviors are becoming more organized, visible, and impactful – amplified by social media, political polarization, and heightened ethical awareness [4; 5].

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications. Recent scholarly literature has increasingly addressed the complexities of consumer resistance. Peñaloza, L., and Price, L. L. (1993) [6], and Kozinets, R. V., and Handelman, J. M. (2004) [7] emphasized the sociocultural dimensions of resistance, where consumers act not only as market participants but as cultural critics. Cherrier, H. (2009) [1] and Roux, D. (2007) [2] identified various psychological and ideological motivations for resistance, from anti-consumption to ethical activism.

Meanwhile, marketing analysts such as Edelman (2019, 2021) [4; 5] and Harris Poll (2023) [8] highlighted a steep decline in consumer trust toward corporate messaging. Empirical studies show that a significant portion of consumers – particularly among Gen Z – actively avoid advertising or boycott brands that fail to align with their values [9]. Research into social media activism (e.g., StopHateForProfit [10], #BoycottGillette [11]) further illustrates how digital platforms have facilitated collective resistance with real economic consequences [12].

Despite this growing body of work, gaps remain in understanding how companies can strategically respond to resistance while maintaining authenticity and trust [3; 13]. This article seeks to bridge that gap by integrating theoretical classifications, global case studies, and managerial recommendations.

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Formulation of the article's objectives (problem statement). The purpose of this article is to provide an original perspective on consumer resistance to marketing in today's digital and socially conscious landscape. The research aims not only to outline the key factors behind resistance – such as ethical considerations, declining trust, and media overload – but also to offer a conceptual framework for interpreting these dynamics. In addition, the article proposes actionable strategies that companies can adopt to preserve authenticity and remain relevant amid rising consumer scepticism.

Presentation of the main research material. Consumer resistance has emerged as a significant and complex phenomenon in contemporary marketing discourse [2; 3]. As markets have become increasingly saturated with persuasive messages, and consumers more digitally literate and value-conscious, the traditional dynamics of marketer-consumer interaction have undergone a profound transformation. No longer passive recipients of advertising, consumers now actively assess, reinterpret, and often reject marketing narratives that they perceive as intrusive, unethical, or disconnected from their own beliefs [7; 13].

At its core, consumer resistance reflects an act of agency. It represents a response to the perceived overreach of marketing into spheres of identity, ethics, and everyday life. While early

marketing models were built on the assumption of rational, persuadable consumers, current research highlights the growing tendency of individuals and communities to question the legitimacy of brand claims and to oppose corporate practices they deem unacceptable. Resistance can manifest in various ways, ranging from subtle behavioural adjustments to open confrontation. Some consumers may disengage quietly by ignoring advertisements or shifting toward alternative products that align with their values. Others adopt more visible forms of opposition, such as publicly criticizing brands on social media, initiating boycotts, or participating in activist campaigns aimed at exposing manipulative or exploitative marketing tactics [6; 14].

These behaviours exist along a continuum that includes both individual and collective expressions. Individual resistance may take the form of personal lifestyle choices, such as reducing consumption or avoiding specific brand categories. However, in the digital age, even isolated acts can rapidly scale into collective resistance through the mechanisms of online sharing and social amplification. Hashtags, viral content, and influencer engagement have made it possible for personal dissatisfaction to evolve into coordinated public movements, which can substantially impact a company's reputation and market performance.

Resistance is also influenced by broader sociocultural and technological trends. The erosion of trust in corporate communication, growing ethical and ecological concerns, heightened sensitivity to issues of representation and fairness, and increasing awareness of surveillance and data misuse have all contributed to the climate in which consumer resistance thrives [15]. Moreover, the oversaturation of marketing across all media channels has led to fatigue and scepticism, encouraging consumers to actively avoid or subvert commercial content.

In recent years, several high-profile cases have demonstrated the force of consumer resistance. The backlash against perceived greenwashing, such as in the case of H&M's sustainability claims or Shell's renewable energy advertisements [12], revealed how quickly consumers can mobilize when they detect inconsistency between messaging and actual business practices. Similarly, campaigns like #BoycottStarbucks or the polarized response to Gillette's "The Best Men Can Be" ad highlight the reputational risks associated with misaligned brand positioning or tone-deaf engagement with

social issues [11]. These examples illustrate not only the diversity of resistance forms but also their potential to reshape corporate communication strategies [9; 10].

It is increasingly evident that consumer resistance should not be interpreted solely as a threat. For brands willing to listen and adapt, it serves as an important feedback mechanism, indicating shifts in societal expectations and signalling areas where alignment with consumer values may be lacking. Engaging constructively with resistance can lead to more authentic, transparent, and responsive marketing approaches, ultimately fostering stronger brand-consumer relationships.

Contemporary consumer resistance manifests through various high-profile cases that demonstrate how marketing strategies can provoke backlash, particularly when they conflict with public expectations around ethics, transparency, or authenticity [16].

A notable case involves Starbucks, which faced intense criticism in 2018 following the arrest of two Black men in a Philadelphia café. The viral video of the incident sparked the #BoycottStarbucks movement, forcing the company to issue a public apology, close over 8,000 stores for racial bias training, and revise its in-store policies. The brand's swift and transparent response helped restore some public trust, yet the case remains a powerful reminder of how local incidents can escalate into national crises when amplified by social media.

Another prominent example is the 2020 Stop Hate for Profit campaign, which targeted Facebook's advertising platform in response to its perceived inaction on hate speech and misinformation. A coalition of civil rights groups, supported by hundreds of brands including Coca-Cola, Unilever, and Ford, suspended their ad spend on Facebook and Instagram. Although Facebook's financial impact was limited due to small advertisers, the reputational damage and media scrutiny pressured the platform into engaging with campaign organizers and announcing changes to its content moderation policies.

Consumer backlash against greenwashing has also intensified. H&M's "Conscious" collection, which featured sustainability scorecards, was exposed in 2022 for presenting misleading environmental data. As a result, the company faced lawsuits and regulatory warnings, ultimately removing the claims from its website. Similarly, Shell's campaign promoting its renewable energy investments was banned

in the UK for omitting the fact that its core operations remain fossil fuel-based. Both cases reflect growing consumer intolerance toward brands that exaggerate or misrepresent environmental responsibility.

Resistance also arises in response to cause-related marketing. In 2019, Gillette's campaign addressing toxic masculinity received both praise and strong backlash. While some supported the brand's message, others viewed it as accusatory or condescending, leading to calls for a boycott. The campaign illustrates the risks companies face when engaging in social commentary, especially when the tone or messaging is perceived as inauthentic or divisive.

Collectively, these examples underscore how consumer resistance can quickly mobilize online audiences, impact brand reputation, and force corporate responses ranging from public apologies to policy changes. They demonstrate the increasing power of consumers not just to reject marketing messages, but to shape them – demanding that brands align their communications with credible action and shared values.

The growing wave of consumer resistance fundamentally reshapes how companies approach brand strategy and marketing communication. In an era of heightened transparency and accountability, consumers are no longer passive recipients of messages but active agents capable of scrutinizing, questioning, and challenging brand behavior. This demands a strategic shift in how brands operate and communicate.

First, authenticity has become central to trust. Marketing messages must align closely with a company's actual operations, values, and impact. Discrepancies between what a brand claims and what it does – particularly in areas such as sustainability or social responsibility - are increasingly met with public skepticism or backlash. Cases like H&M's flawed sustainability claims or Shell's "green" advertising show that even well-intentioned campaigns can trigger resistance if perceived as insincere or misleading [12].

Second, marketing communication must become more dialogic and transparent. In contrast to top-down persuasion, modern consumers respond better to honest, two-way engagement. Brands are expected to acknowledge mistakes, communicate corrective actions clearly, and listen actively to public concerns. Companies that engage in this way - such as Starbucks during the 2018 racial bias controversy – are more likely to retain consumer trust, even amid crisis.

Third, marketers must adapt to fatigue and resistance to advertising overload. Instead of bombarding audiences, brands should prioritize relevance, value, and authenticity in messaging. Practices such as user-generated content, peer recommendations, and educational storytelling are often more effective than traditional promotions. Moreover, trusted voices – employees, experts, or customers – can lend credibility that standard advertising lacks.

The rise of consumer resistance also underscores the need for agile crisis response. Companies should be prepared for reputational challenges by building internal mechanisms for rapid, coordinated action. Missteps - whether in ad campaigns, executive statements, or supply chain issues – can escalate quickly on social media, as seen in the backlash against United Airlines or Gillette. Timely, sincere responses can mitigate reputational damage, while delays or defensive messaging may deepen public distrust.

Finally, long-term brand positioning increasingly relies on clearly defined values. While not all brands must engage in activism, maintaining consistency between brand identity and public positioning is essential. As neutrality becomes difficult to sustain, companies need to anticipate how silence or action on sensitive issues will be interpreted by different segments of their audience. Brands like Patagonia that have long embraced a clear value stance tend to generate loyalty even in controversial moments, whereas those perceived as opportunistic may provoke consumer pushback.

In sum, consumer resistance is not just a communication challenge but a strategic one. Brands that prioritize transparency, responsiveness, and value alignment are better positioned to build resilient relationships with consumers and navigate resistance constructively.

In an era defined by empowered and vocal consumers, marketing is no longer a one-way projection of brand identity. Today, it is a dynamic, two-way engagement in which consumers not only interpret messages but actively question, reshape, and at times, resist them. This new reality calls for a transformation in how marketers think, communicate, and respond.

First and foremost, transparency has become a foundational requirement. Modern consumers are highly informed and deeply skeptical of claims that appear inconsistent with corporate behavior. When brands present

themselves as sustainable, inclusive, or socially responsible, these values must be reflected in tangible practices, not just polished messaging. Marketing can no longer function as a façade to mask deeper organizational contradictions. Instead, successful brands ensure that their communication aligns with their internal values, strategies, and actions. Authenticity is not just desirable – it's essential. When a gap between messaging and reality is exposed, trust erodes quickly, often fueling collective resistance.

This shift also demands a more human approach to communication. The traditional top-down tone of corporate advertising – impersonal, overproduced, and overly positive – tends to breed suspicion. In contrast, brands that speak honestly, admit mistakes, and engage with their audiences in a candid, relatable voice often earn greater trust. In the face of controversy, vague responses or defensive positioning can exacerbate tension, while clear acknowledgments and concrete corrective actions help reestablish credibility. The most resilient brands are those that prioritize conversation over control, encouraging open dialogue and making themselves accessible across platforms.

When criticism arises – and it will – the instinct to dismiss or ignore should be replaced by a willingness to listen. Even vocal critics can be valuable stakeholders, offering insights into shifting consumer expectations. A respectful engagement strategy, where concerns are acknowledged and responded to thoughtfully, often diffuses anger and prevents escalation. In fact, some of the most transformative brand moments arise from listening closely to dissenting voices and adapting accordingly.

Trust, however, is not built in moments of crisis alone. It is the result of consistent, long-term relationship-building. Brands that regularly demonstrate a genuine commitment to their communities, to social values, and to customer well-being are more likely to be granted grace when they falter. Consumers remember acts of responsibility, empathy, and generosity – and these impressions can serve as buffers when scrutiny intensifies. The emotional capital brands accumulate through meaningful engagement often translates into a kind of resilience, making them less vulnerable to transient backlash.

In this environment, adaptability becomes a strategic asset. Marketing plans that are too rigid – developed months in advance without room for course correction – risk becoming liabilities. Public sentiment can shift rapidly, and the ability to pivot messaging or campaign strategy in real time can make the difference between relevance and reputational damage. Agile marketing teams, closely integrated with communications, customer service, and social listening units, are better equipped to respond thoughtfully and quickly.

Finally, a clear articulation of brand values is no longer optional. In a polarized world, neutrality itself is interpreted as a stance. Consumers increasingly expect brands to stand for something – and to do so consistently. This doesn't mean every brand must become politically active, but it does require a coherent, authentic identity that guides actions across all touchpoints. Brands that understand what matters to their audiences, and that communicate those commitments sincerely, are more likely to withstand controversy. In contrast, brands that attempt to speak to everyone during moments of tension often end up convincing no one.

Consumer resistance should not be seen as a threat to avoid but as a mirror reflecting the values, anxieties, and hopes of society. For marketers, the challenge – and opportunity – lies in responding not with defensiveness, but with curiosity, integrity, and a genuine desire to connect. In doing so, resistance becomes not a barrier, but a bridge – toward stronger relationships, sharper strategies, and more resilient brands.

Conclusions. The phenomenon of consumer resistance represents a significant paradigm shift in marketing, challenging long-held assumptions about the relationship between brands and consumers. In a landscape shaped by social media amplification, heightened ethical awareness, and a growing demand for transparency, resistance should not be seen merely as a threat to neutralize but as a signal – a call for deeper alignment between brand values, communication, and real practices.

Consumer resistance clearly shows that inconsistency, inauthenticity, or opportunism in marketing messages can lead to reputational and financial losses. At the same time, these situations reveal opportunities: brands that approach resistance with openness, humility, and genuine responsiveness are capable not only of restoring trust but also of strengthening consumer loyalty.

In this context, effective marketing requires a reorientation from persuasion to participation – fostering dialogue, embracing accountability, and ensuring ethical coherence across all dimensions of brand activity. Companies that

invest in trust-building, internal alignment, and strategic agility are better prepared to respond to the evolving expectations of empowered consumers.

Ultimately, consumer resistance offers businesses a valuable opportunity to listen, adapt, and evolve. When resistance is perceived as constructive feedback rather than as opposition, marketing transforms into a more responsive, inclusive, and resilient practice - one that resonates with today's critical and socially conscious audiences.

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