David versus Goliath: understanding how consumers navigate their relationship with a brand involved in online moral-panic dynamics

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Abstract

Purpose – Research on brand transgressions has primarily examined consumers' emotional and behavioural responses at the individual level, yet little is known about how such transgressions unfold as collective phenomena on social media. This study aims to examine how consumers individually and collectively negotiate their relationships with brands during moralised online controversies, focusing on the escalation of brand transgressions into moral-panic dynamics and their implications for the consumer-brand relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – A nine-month netnography was conducted to analyse Reddit discussions related to the 2022 Balenciaga controversy. Approximately 800 conversational traces posted between November 2022 and August 2024 were unobtrusively collected from the 20 most active and content-rich threads across 16 relevant subreddits.

Findings – Findings provide evidence of both individual-level (relationship destabilisation, decoupling and rupture) and collective-level negotiation practices (relationship rupture amplification, rupture delegitimisation and reframing). A theoretically informed interpretation explains how consumer-brand relationships are simultaneously personally experienced and socially constructed.

Originality/value – This study advances brand transgression research by conceptualising moral-panic dynamics as a collective phenomenon unfolding across moralised brand controversies, shifting the focus from individual reactions to collective processes reshaping consumer-brand relationships in digital environments.

Keywords Fashion marketing, Social media, Consumer empowerment, Netnography, Brand relationships

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The biblical account of David and Goliath tells the story of the young shepherd David who, armed only with a sling, defeats Goliath – the formidable Philistine giant at war with the people of Israel – symbolising an unequal confrontation in which a weaker actor overcomes a seemingly invincible opponent. In the marketplace, brands have traditionally occupied the role of "Goliath" due to their institutional authority and market dominance, whilst consumers have long represented "David" as comparatively less powerful actors. The rise of digital platforms has increasingly disrupted this longstanding asymmetry (Peng and Haq, 2026), with social media reshaping interactions between consumers and organisations, enabling greater consumer empowerment to challenge brand authority (Beech and Simkin, 2025) and serving as arenas where traditional power relations can be temporarily reconfigured.

Individual consumers can catalyse large-scale reactions against powerful brands by leveraging platform affordances. A salient example of this dynamic is the controversy involving the Spanish luxury fashion house Balenciaga in November 2022, following the release of two controversial advertisements. The Gift Shop campaign featured children surrounded by sadomasochism-inspired items, while the Garde-Robe campaign displayed a handbag alongside court documents related to child pornography laws. The backlash was immediate, with many accusing the brand and its creative director of condoning child exploitation and promoting paedophilia. An initial viral post by an X user (*@shoe0nhead*) exposing the campaigns garnered over 115,000 likes, 40,000 retweets and 4,000 comments by August 2024.

Nowadays brands are frequently involved in intentional or unintentional online controversies (Klütz and Albrecht, 2025; Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Shin and Kim, 2026) that destabilise consumer-brand relationships (Alvarez *et al.*, 2021). Some controversies are perceived as moral transgressions, defined as

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violations of ethical or societal norms and expectations (Mahmud and Guzmán, 2025; Tran and Bartsch, 2025; Youn, 2022), triggering severe negative consumer responses, including brand avoidance, negative electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), patronage cessation and boycotts (Mahmud and Guzmán, 2025; Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Tran and Bartsch, 2025; Youn, 2022). In some cases, consumers' reactions to corporate transgressions can escalate into moral-panic dynamics (Cohen, 1972; Hier, 2026), where collective outrage and media amplification frame the brand as a threat to societal values (Johnen *et al.*, 2018). Social media intensify these processes by fostering polarisation, backlash, protests and anti-brand activism (Dessart *et al.*, 2020; Gambetti and Biraghi, 2023; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020), often encouraging incivility (Batista *et al.*, 2022) and accelerating the spread of negative information.

Understanding how brand transgressions evolve requires moving beyond individual-level emotional and behavioural frameworks. Existing literature has mainly focused on individual consumer reactions to organisational wrongdoing (Mahmud and Guzmán, 2025; Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Youn, 2022), providing limited insight into how these reactions evolve in highly mediated and interactive digital environments. In particular, it overlooks how individual responses may escalate into collective dynamics that reshape consumer-brand relationships. This transformation is particularly pronounced during moral panic, where reactions are amplified and collectively shared (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). As consumers do not merely react to brand misconduct but negotiate their relationship with brands, moral controversies can further transform or deteriorate consumer-brand bonds.

Existing research linking moral panic literature to branding remains incomplete regarding relational outcomes. Whilst prior research suggests a moral compass and a desire for social recognition as drivers of collective backlash (Johnen *et al.*, 2018), it leaves implications for consumer-brand relationships unexamined. Understanding how collective moralised reactions – rather than isolated individual responses – reconfigure consumer-brand bonds is crucial given the severe consequences for brand equity and reputation. A moral panic can rapidly associate brands with negative values, erode trust, damage brand image and hinder recovery; furthermore, it can influence consumers' decision-making by encouraging boycotts and amplifying criticism across social media (Johnen *et al.*, 2018).

Bridging the gap between individual-level and collective-level responses requires examining digital platforms as spaces for relational negotiation. Prior research has separately documented individual responses to brand moral transgressions (e.g. Mahmud and Guzmán, 2025; Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Youn, 2022) and the dynamics of online outrage (Batista *et al.*, 2022; Gambetti and Biraghi, 2023; Johnen *et al.*, 2018), yet few studies trace how individual and collective negativity interlock (Dong *et al.*, 2026a) to reconfigure consumer-brand relationships. Addressing this gap, this study asks: *how do consumers negotiate their relationships with a brand amidst moral-panic dynamics triggered by a controversial online campaign?* Through a netnographic approach, it examines how the 2022 Balenciaga scandal exhibited online moral-panic dynamics on Reddit. Findings reveal both individual-level (*Relationship Destabilisation*, *Decoupling* and *Rupture*) and collective-level negotiation practices (*Relationship Rupture Amplification*, *Rupture Delegitimisation* and *Reframing*), demonstrating that consumer-brand relationships are simultaneously personally experienced and socially constructed.

This study's contribution is threefold. It advances brand transgression literature by conceptualising moral-panic dynamics as a collective process through which brand controversies escalate into broader social phenomena. It also expands research on negative consumer-brand relationships by conceptualising relationship breakdown as an evolving moral negotiation unfolding across individual coping strategies and collective discourse. Finally, this study extends moral panic theory into branding by examining how brand-related moral-panic dynamics give rise to a severe form of brand crisis, triggered by moralised controversies and intensified through platform-mediated collective reactions.

Navigating brand-related moral-panic dynamics requires a shift from traditional crisis management towards an understanding of the broader digital ecosystem in which consumer-brand relationships are constructed and negotiated. Marketing practitioners should detect early signs of moral escalation and tailor responses to heterogeneous audiences. They must avoid actions that may intensify controversy and recognise online platforms as distinct moral arenas with their own specific political logics.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Negative consumer-brand relationships

Brands are collections of perceptions held in the consumer's mind, shaped through interactions, practices and rituals that imbue them and branded products with meaning and enable consumers to form relationships with them (Alvarez *et al.*, 2021). These consumer-brand relationships resemble interpersonal ones, involving similar expectations and emotional bonds, particularly when consumers perceive strong alignment between the brand and their self-concept. Consequently, when a brand engages in perceived wrongdoing, this alignment is disrupted, transforming routine consumption into a site of relational tension.

Whilst prior research has primarily focused on positive consumer-brand relationships – especially brand love (Brandão *et al.*, 2023; Shimul *et al.*, 2025) – recent studies highlight the importance of negative forms, including brand hate (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2018), brand disengagement (Villanova and Matherly, 2024), brand grief (Berndt and Tierney, 2026) and brand distrust (Tuominen *et al.*, 2025). Consumer-brand relationships are dynamic and may deteriorate when consumers perceive dissonance between their expectations and brand performance (Shin and Kim, 2026). Such disruptions can lead to negative emotions (e.g. anger) and reduced behavioural intentions, prompting consumers to adopt coping strategies, including "attack-like" behaviours (e.g. negative word-of-mouth), "approach-like" behaviours (e.g. complaints) and "avoidance-like" behaviours (e.g. patronage cessation) (Brandão *et al.*, 2023).

The impact of such tensions depends on the strength of the prior relationship and whether the violation confirms or disconfirms established relationship norms. Existing relationships

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can buffer negative responses through the "love-is-blind effect" (Zhang *et al.*, 2021), making consumers more tolerant of brand mistakes and more inclined to attribute them to situational factors rather than the brand itself (Brandão *et al.*, 2023; Shimul *et al.*, 2025). In other cases, violations may transform positive attachment into adverse reactions, known as the "love-becomes-hate effect" (Tolunay and Veloutsou, 2025; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Understanding this adverse transition is crucial, as negative relationships are more common than positive ones and can harm a brand more than positive relationships can benefit it (Tuominen *et al.*, 2025).

This body of research predominantly adopts an individual-level perspective, offering limited explanatory power regarding how consumer-brand relationships collectively evolve within highly mediated digital environments (Haq and Kwok, 2025). The emergence of the Internet has shifted these relationships into online spaces, changing how consumers encounter and interpret brand meanings as well as how relationships develop through networked interactions (Kozinets *et al.*, 2021). Compared to offline contexts, these environments are more highly connected and information-rich (Klütz and Albrecht, 2025), enabling consumers to provide instant feedback and publicly share their experiences with brands through electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (Kozinets *et al.*, 2021). Nonetheless, literature largely treats relationships as dyadic and internally experienced, offering limited insight into how they are publicly negotiated across interactive media platforms.

Online communities have become crucial arenas for the collective negotiation of brand meanings, hosting behaviours ranging from strong advocacy to intense opposition (Haq and Kwok, 2025). They facilitate rapid emotional connections through networked affect (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016) whilst also enabling collective phenomena such as brand sabotage (Kähr *et al.*, 2016), consumer boycotts (Tran and Bartsch, 2025), collaborative attacks (Rauschnabel *et al.*, 2016) and brand cancellations (Demsar *et al.*, 2023). Social media further intensify negative reactions by fostering polarisation and incivility, often encouraging users to express extreme viewpoints (Batista *et al.*, 2022). As a result, anti-brand communities – online environments where users publicly express negative experiences and intense dislike towards specific brands (Brandão and Popoli, 2022) – have emerged, generating polarised discourse and amplifying negative brand narratives (Dessart *et al.*, 2020; Gambetti and Biraghi, 2023; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020). These interactions are often reinforced by echo chamber dynamics, where users predominantly encounter content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, whilst dissenting opinions are filtered out (Dubois and Blank, 2018). Together, these processes reinforce the idea that consumer-brand relationships are collectively negotiated rather than individually determined.

2.2 Brand transgressions

Brand transgressions represent a "violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding relationship performance and evaluation" (Aaker *et al.*, 2004, p. 2). Literature identifies two main types of brand transgressions:

1 performance-related scandals, involving defective products or services; and
2 values-related scandals, stemming from a brand's misalignment with its declared values (Brandão *et al.*, 2023).

The latter – also known as moral transgressions – can be further divided into ethical and social categories. Ethical transgressions involve violations of individual freedom or human dignity; in contrast, social transgressions involve threats to broader social norms and expectations (Youn, 2022).

As consumers perceive brands as active relationship partners (Fetscherin *et al.*, 2021), brand transgressions act as relational disruptions that undermine relationship norms and foster negative consumer-brand relationships (Klütz and Albrecht, 2025). Regardless of their nature, brand transgressions are perceived as threats to individuals' physical, emotional or psychological wellbeing, prompting consumers to manage emotional responses and decide on appropriate actions (Yoruk *et al.*, 2025). These violations frequently evoke strong emotions, including betrayal (Shin and Kim, 2026), hate (Tolunay and Veloutsou, 2025), indignation (de Villartay *et al.*, 2026) and shame (Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2025). Such responses often translate into behavioural outcomes, such as brand avoidance (Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Rasouli *et al.*, 2025), brand switching (Seth and Soch, 2024), brand retaliation (Gong and Wang, 2021; Ly *et al.*, 2027), negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (de Villartay *et al.*, 2026; Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Youn, 2022) and patronage cessation (Youn, 2022).

Online environments amplify the visibility of corporate wrongdoing. Consumers frequently turn to online brand communities to interpret negative marketing events, gather information, attribute responsibility and express negative emotions (Casey *et al.*, 2024). Collective sentiments within these environments can shape blame attribution or forgiveness, generating a contagion effect that amplifies emotional responses (Casey *et al.*, 2024). Notable examples include the 2024 controversy involving influencer Matilda Djerf over toxic workplace allegations within her brand Djerf Avenue (Klütz and Albrecht, 2025), alongside advertising campaigns conflicting with diversity, equity and inclusion (e.g. Victoria's Secret, Abercrombie and Fitch), both triggering public backlash and financial consequences (Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024). Even within these adverse interactions, however, consumers may experience micro-moments of broadening through practices such as venting, seeking connection or offering support, enabling them to find positive meaning following negative episodes (Dong *et al.*, 2026b).

Despite extensive research documenting negative consumer responses to brand transgressions, existing research remains predominantly individual-centric. Literature privileges individual emotional and behavioural responses to organisational wrongdoing (Mahmud and Guzmán, 2025; Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Youn, 2022), offering limited insights into how individual responses may escalate into collective phenomena, particularly in digital environments where interactions are highly visible and socially reinforced (Batista *et al.*, 2022; Haq and Kwok, 2025). In online communities, consumers publicly negotiate the meaning of controversies and their relationship with brands (Brandão and Popoli, 2022), yet limited understanding exists of how individual-level reactions

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articulate with large-scale collective backlash, leaving a critical gap in explaining the transformation of consumer-brand relationships under intense public scrutiny. Moreover, this perspective underplays how such reactions are socially constructed and amplified through digital interactions.

Addressing this limitation requires moving beyond individual-level explanations and considering collective processes of meaning-making (Haq and Kwok, 2025). The concept of moral panic provides a useful yet underused lens in branding research, enabling scholars to examine how moralised reactions spread and intensify across digital environments. Integrating individual consumer-brand relational dynamics with collective moral-panic processes offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how individual cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions interlock with collective meaning-making.

2.3 Online moral-panic dynamics in brand controversies

Consumers' reactions to brand transgressions can escalate beyond individual responses and exhibit characteristics of moral panic (Cohen, 1972; Conyers, 2025; Hier, 2026). Moral panic is a form of collective behaviour in which a condition, episode, person or group – the so-called "folk devils", namely actors portrayed as responsible for a social problem – is defined as a threat to societal values, triggering stereotypical representations and moral condemnation. Nowadays the concept more broadly captures exaggerated societal reactions that reinforce moral boundaries between right and wrong (Conyers, 2025). Central to this escalation is the heightened concern and collective hostility towards the accused, feeding an exaggerated consensus regarding the severity of the threat. These emotionally charged episodes are inherently volatile and characterised by disproportionality, as public outrage rapidly surpasses the initial event (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). The emotional intensity and short-lived nature of the moral panic distinguish it from conventional corporate crises.

Media ecosystems provide the structural conditions through which moral-panic dynamics are amplified and polarised (Hier, 2026). Catalysing these dynamics requires the combined role of moral entrepreneurs and moral crusades. Moral entrepreneurs identify perceived threats and ignite moral panics through moral crusades, mobilising collective responses to combat perceived social problems and re-establish societal norms (Conyers, 2025). In marketplace settings, moral entrepreneurs are influential actors – ranging from prominent social media activists to highly active community members – who label corporate actions as moral violations, framing brands as a threat to societal values and driving collective condemnation. Through moral crusades, including coordinated actions such as negative eWOM, online activism and boycotts, they reinterpret brand imagery through moral lenses, calling for public sanctions against both the firm and its consumers.

Online environments further intensify these processes, giving rise to brand-related online moral-panic dynamics. Compared to traditional moral panics, online settings enable larger and faster outrage diffusion whilst facilitating rapid consensus among like-minded individuals (Johnen *et al.*, 2018). Platform affordances – particularly anonymity and interactivity – encourage disinhibition and amplify aggressive and uncivil behaviour (Batista *et al.*, 2022).

At the individual level, participation in online moral-panic dynamics is driven by two factors (Johnen *et al.*, 2018): 1) a "moral compass", namely the perception that attacking the accused is socially appropriate in situations of high moral arousal and 2) a desire for social recognition, defined as the expectation of receiving positive peer feedback (e.g. likes, retweets, approving comments). The visibility of others' reactions further reinforces participation through social identity processes, as individuals align with groups to gain a sense of belonging (Carlson *et al.*, 2026). This online behaviour has been conceptualised as "virtue signalling", whereby individuals publicly display moral concern to gain social recognition (Rotman *et al.*, 2026).

Despite growing attention to online controversies and brand transgressions (Klütz and Albrecht, 2025; Mahmud and Guzmán, 2025; Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Tran and Bartsch, 2025; Shin and Kim, 2026), the role of moral panic in branding remains underexplored. Existing studies on moral panic primarily focus on individual participation dynamics (Johnen *et al.*, 2018), with limited attention to consequences for brands as well as for consumer-brand relationships. This gap is critical, as moralised controversies generate more intense and collective responses than typical brand crises. The intensity of such reactions is further shaped by the tendency of online scandals to prioritise emotional over rational responses (Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014). Online brand-related moral-panic dynamics can thus provoke intense consumer outcry even without sufficient cues of the brand's responsibility.

Variations in perceived severity further complicate how transgressions unfold across individuals, especially in symbolic communication domains like advertising (Youn, 2022), where meaning is open to interpretation. Consumer emotional responses depend on unique cognitive appraisal processes, shaped by contextual information, personal concerns or past experiences (Klütz and Albrecht, 2025). These individual-level evaluations are continuously reshaped by online exposure, as users observe and align with peer reactions (Johnen *et al.*, 2018), amplifying collective moral condemnation. Heightened consumer sensitivity to social responsibility issues (Batista *et al.*, 2022) and enhanced collective mobilisation capacity may prompt increasingly critical evaluations of brand misconduct, especially when vulnerable groups are involved.

Moral-panic episodes generate enduring reputational and financial consequences that extend far beyond their short-lived nature (Hewett *et al.*, 2016). Relational disruption during moral-panic dynamics can reflect a psychological contract violation (de Villartay *et al.*, 2026), wherein consumers perceive that a brand has failed to meet implicit expectations, diminishing behavioural intentions and forgiveness (Yoruk *et al.*, 2025) whilst escalating retaliatory or boycott tendencies (Gong and Wang, 2021). Because moral-panic dynamics are conceptually distinct from conventional brand transgressions, their specific impact on consumer-brand relationships remains insufficiently understood. Addressing this gap is essential for explaining how collective moralised reactions emerge and escalate, ultimately reshaping consumer-brand bonds. To this end, this study examines the 2022 Balenciaga scandal, investigating how advertisements featuring children ignited

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widespread outrage and exhibited online brand-related moral-panic dynamics with tangible consequences for brand image and reputation.

3. Methodology

This study draws on a nine-month netnographic engagement from March 2024 to November 2024 with online conversations and discursive practices sparked by the Balenciaga scandal. Netnographic procedures followed Kozinets' (2019) guidelines, which provided a flexible framework and research transparency. These procedures enabled a deep cultural understanding of the vocabularies, symbolism and meanings surrounding the transgression.

The netnography followed three phases: investigation, immersion and data integration (Kozinets, 2019). The initial one-month investigative phase in March 2024 involved examining Balenciaga's corporate website, press releases, media coverage (The Fashion Law, The Guardian, The New York Times, Rolling Stone and Vogue Opinion) and public discussions across social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn and X). While Balenciaga deleted its official campaign posts and its official X account – the platform where the controversy sparked – shortly after the scandal erupted in November 2022, secondary media reports and user-generated content remained publicly accessible via targeted hashtag queries, enabling the reconstruction of the controversy's timeline and context. These materials served a purely contextual function, helping to understand the broader narrative and the cultural relevance of the controversy and thus were not included in the final analytical data set.

Coverage in the USA was amplified by QAnon followers (Paton *et al.*, 2022), a far-right conspiracy movement claiming the existence of a secret global elite involved in child abuse and satanic rituals, echoing the "Satanic Panic" fears of the 1980s and 1990s. This phenomenon was characterised by unfounded fears of an imminent threat posed by Satanism, rooted in both Catholic and Protestant "Christian right" beliefs (Doherty, 2024). Such beliefs were driven by conspiratorial thinking aimed at finding evidence of "an international, secret, hierarchically structured and tightly organised cult network that is actively engaged in a variety of nefarious activities" (Bromley and Ainsley, 1995, p. 405).

This conspiratorial environment surrounding the Balenciaga controversy provided fertile ground for counter-cultural discourses to flourish online. These discourses ranged from clicktivist practices – low-effort forms of mobilisation reflecting the low-commitment nature of social media, where users express socio-political views with a simple "click" of their mouse (Halupka, 2014) – such as liking, commenting, sharing content or hashtags (e.g. #cancelbalenciaga; #balenciagagate; #boycottbalenciaga; #burnbalenciaga; #balenciagascandal), to higher-effort forms of mobilisation fuelling anti-brand behaviours – e.g. user-generated videos explaining the scandal, footage of users burning Balenciaga items and protests outside stores.

Data collection throughout the subsequent eight months (April-November 2024) focused exclusively on Reddit counter-communities. Reddit was selected due to its relevance (52 million daily active users across 138,000 communities; Proferes *et al.*, 2021), its history of hosting coordinated collective events (e.g. the WallStreetBets stock movement in 2021; Kozinets and Seraj-Aksit, 2024) and the absence of official corporate accounts, allowing discussions to unfold organically among global users. From March 2024, the researcher regularly visited, read, reflected upon and saved data from the 20 most interactive threads (i.e. discussions within topic-focused communities called "subreddits") related to the controversy. Data collection was retrospective and unobtrusive, with no direct interaction with forum participants. The resulting data set captured both threads posted during the scandal's peak in November 2022 and subsequent ongoing community discussions up to August 2024. Entire threads, including comments and replies, were downloaded into a Word document. Data were then selected according to Kozinets' (2019) criteria – relevance to the research question, recency and regularity of activity, interactivity, data diversity and richness. Comments were excluded if they were not in English, lacked textual content, did not make sense or were irrelevant to the scandal. The final data set included approximately 800 online conversational traces across 20 threads in 16 subreddits (see Table 1 for data set details).

At the heart of netnography lies immersion in data sites, a core ethnographic principle distinguishing it from other forms of online research. The process of experiencing, scouting, observing, recording and reflecting upon Reddit data was documented in an immersion journal – the digital equivalent of ethnographic fieldnotes – resulting in a narrative of approximately 46,000 words. The immersion journal enabled the researcher to map the research territory, record encounters with data, integrate insights with extant constructs and abstractions and acknowledge the researcher's subjective experience through reflexivity (Kozinets, 2019).

During the data integration phase, online traces were first manually analysed through open coding, allowing themes to emerge organically from users' discourse (Kozinets, 2019). Each comment was interpreted within the context of its thread, the broader controversy and the researcher's reflexive fieldnotes. Open coding of the 800 Reddit traces enabled the identification of initial codes, capturing users' emotions, cognitive processes and behavioural patterns elicited by Balenciaga's transgression (e.g. expressions of personal unease, temporal distinction between creative directors, calls for boycotts, political alignment). These initial open codes were then consolidated into first-order concepts (e.g. *discomfort, temporal decoupling, outrage amplification, political reframing*). Through constant comparison, first-order concepts were abstracted into second-order themes, interpreting consumer reactions as relational dynamics with the brand rather than isolated responses towards a transgression (e.g. *Relationship Destabilisation, Decoupling, Rupture* and *Relationship Rupture Amplification, Rupture Delegitimisation, Relationship Reframing*). Within *the Relationship Rupture Amplification* theme, moral entrepreneurs were identified through discursive practices such as thread initiation, aggressive enforcement of moral boundaries, as well as active mobilisation efforts (e.g. circulating lists of Balenciaga subsidiaries, creating call-to-action hashtags and dedicated anti-brand communities or criticising brand-defending users).

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Table 1 Composition of the netnographic data set

Community focus	Subreddit	Thread title	Link
General discussion forum	r/AskReddit	How is Reddit feeling about the Balenciaga scandal and subsequent apology?	https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/z8v6sp/how_is_reddit_feeling_about_the_balenciaga/
Fashion forum	r/Balenciaga	When high fashion and QAnon collide	https://www.reddit.com/r/Balenciaga/comments/z9znlo/when_high_fashion_and_qanon_collide/
Resale forum	r/BehindTheClosetDoor	Does anyone know why Balenciaga has been removed from luxury section?	https://www.reddit.com/r/BehindTheClosetDoor/comments/164mjlq/does_anyone_know_why_balenciaga_has_been_removed/
Conspiracy forum	r/conspiracy	Why do you think all celebrities are Currently biting their tongue on Balenciaga's controversial ad?	https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/z8sisa/why_do_you_think_all_celebrities_are_currently/
Pop culture forum	r/Fauxmoi	Balenciaga designer Demna apologizes for 'inappropriate' campaign amid scandal	https://www.reddit.com/r/fauxmoi/comments/zaphyi/balenciaga_designer_demna_apologizes_for/
		Alexa Demie has cut ties with Balenciaga after their campaign scandal	https://www.reddit.com/r/Fauxmoi/comments/zmdtvc/alexa_demie_has_cut_ties_with_balenciaga_after/
		Has anyone seen this? Julia fox talking about the Balenciaga campaign with the kids	https://www.reddit.com/r/Fauxmoi/comments/zg2xyl/has_anyone_seen_this_julia_fox_talking_about_the/
Fashion forum	r/handbags	Did you cancel Balenciaga?	https://www.reddit.com/r/handbags/comments/118eq4o/did_you_cancel_balenciaga/
Pop culture forum	r/KUWTKsnark	And now, a NEW message from Kims sponsor	https://www.reddit.com/r/KUWTKsnark/comments/z75im1/and_now_a_new_message_from_kims_sponsor/
		This Balenciaga stuff is a road way too far for me. . .	https://www.reddit.com/r/KUWTK/comments/z2wch5/this_balenciaga_stuff_is_a_road_way_too_far_for_me/
Pop culture forum	r/popculturechat	Fans are calling out celebrities who attended Balenciaga's runway show One year after the brand's controversial holiday campaign scandal	https://www.reddit.com/r/popculturechat/comments/18a1plk/fans_are_calling_out_celebrities_who_attended/
		Balenciaga recent photo shoot fiasco? If this is real, it's absolutely disgusting. Wanting to know if anyone has more info on this	https://www.reddit.com/r/popculturechat/comments/z14tvr/balenciaga_recent_photo_shoot_fiasco_if_this_is/
Pop culture forum	r/redscarepod	What is with the paedophilia panic over Balenciaga	https://www.reddit.com/r/redscarepod/comments/z4s00m/what_is_with_the_pedophilia_panic_over_balenciaga/
Occult and esoteric forum	r/SaturnStormCube	Now do you see why the Balenciaga scandal was as big as it was	https://www.reddit.com/r/SaturnStormCube/comments/162ar8b/now_do_you_see_why_the_balenciaga_scandal_was_as/
General discussion forum	r/TerrifyingAsFuck	Balenciaga subliminally promoting paedophilia on their website	https://www.reddit.com/r/TerrifyingAsFuck/comments/z0x63d/balenciaga_subliminally_promoting_pedophilia_on/
TikTok content forum	r/TikTokCringe	Balenciaga being SUS with children	https://www.reddit.com/r/TikTokCringe/comments/z2w1y3/balenciaga_being_sus_with_children/
Anti-conspiracy forum	r/TopMindsOfReddit	Top Pizzagators question why celebrities aren't condemning paedophilia following the controversial Balenciaga ad campaign	https://www.reddit.com/r/TopMindsOfReddit/comments/z8yihm/top_pizzagators_question_why_celebrities_arent/

(*continued*)

Table 1

Community focus	Subreddit	Thread title	Link
General discussion forum	r/unpopularopinion	Balenciaga campaign - tasteless and in many ways disturbing, but I don't think they had demonic messages and paedophilia in mind	https://www.reddit.com/r/unpopularopinion/comments/z9jjev/balenciaga_campaign_tasteless_and_in_many_ways/
Political forum	r/VaushV	Some context for The Balenciaga Ad Campaign	https://www.reddit.com/r/VaushV/comments/z1qi7q/some_context_for_the_balenciaga_ad_campaign/
Fashion forum	r/WagoonLadies	Are you still wearing your Balenciaga?	https://www.reddit.com/r/WagoonLadies/comments/10ynslm/are_you_still_wearing_your_balenciaga/

Source(s): Author's own work

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The final aggregate dimensions (individual-level and collective-level negotiation practices) reflected the orientation of the subreddits analysed. Individual-level dynamics derived primarily from consumption-centric subreddits (r/handbags, r/WagoonLadies), where interactions were personal and centred on private consumption dilemmas. Collective-level themes emerged predominantly from political and debate-orientated subreddits (r/AskReddit, r/conspiracy, r/Fauxmoi, r/SaturnStormCube), where discourse was public, inter-subjective and focused on collective mobilisation as well as moral boundary enforcement (see Tables 2 and 3).

A coding guideline was followed and iteratively refined throughout the analysis, with the researcher moving back and forth between emerging codes and literature. Negative consumer-brand relationships, brand transgressions and moral panic served as sensitising lenses, directing attention towards adverse cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses to relationship violations, negativity diffusion within online communities, as well as online environment features (e.g. anonymity and incivility) fostering perceived threats and exaggeration. Moral panic theory illuminated how individual consumer reactions scaled into collective moralised dynamics. Care was taken not to impose these frameworks *a priori*, ensuring themes and concepts emerged organically from users' discourse. To mitigate positionality bias, two independent researchers participated in coding and engaged in regular debriefings. Discrepancies were resolved through discussions, enhancing the trustworthiness of the interpretations.

Combining coding with hermeneutic interpretation allowed for a more sensitive comprehension of the data (Kozinets, 2019). Analytical procedures followed an iterative hermeneutic circle of understanding, where each portion of data was interpreted in relation to the developing sense of the whole (Thompson *et al.*, 1994). Triangulation across different threads and subreddits strengthened accuracy and reliability by continuously comparing emerging themes across multiple sources. Although single-case studies naturally limit generalisation, this research provides a deep understanding of the interplay between individual and collective dynamics in the aftermath of online brand-related moral-panic dynamics that might otherwise remain obscured in broader comparative analyses.

3.1 Research ethics

The investigation followed the ethical guidelines recommended for netnography. As the study relied exclusively on non-interactive observation of publicly available discussions on open forums, formal institutional ethics approval and participant consent were not required under standard unobtrusive research protocols (Kozinets, 2019; Kozinets and Seraj-Aksit, 2024). Data were gathered from public forums where users voluntarily engage in discussions, aware that comments are publicly accessible. While participants frequently shared polarised content on political and social topics, these discussions were not considered sensitive due to their commonplace nature, posing minimal risk to users (Kozinets, 2019). Researcher disclosures were deemed unnecessary, as no direct interaction with subreddit members occurred (Kozinets and Seraj-Aksit, 2024). To ensure confidentiality, redditors' usernames were replaced with pseudonyms. Message content was slightly edited to prevent traceability, explicit language was softened and minor typographical corrections were made to improve readability.

4. Findings

The netnographic analysis reveals that audience responses to the Balenciaga controversy were not a uniform moral backlash. Instead, consumers navigated the crisis through a complex set of individual and collective practices that reconfigured the consumer-brand relationship. To examine these relational transformations, the findings are structured across two levels. Individual-Level Negotiation Practices (*Relationship Destabilisation*, *Decoupling and Rupture*) refer to cognitive, emotional and behavioural negotiations through which consumers navigated tensions between attachment to the brand and its immoral conduct. These micro-level processes emerged primarily within consumption-centric subreddits (r/handbags and r/WagoonLadies), where users privately negotiated identity threats through ownership dilemmas and future consumption (Table 2). Collective-Level Negotiation Practices (*Relationship Rupture Amplification*, *Rupture Delegitimisation* and *Reframing*) refer to networked processes through which moral entrepreneurs and community members amplified and polarised the controversy. Emerged mainly across debate-orientated subreddits (r/AskReddit, r/BehindTheClosetDoor, r/conspiracy, r/Fauxmoi, r/handbags, r/KUWTKsnark, r/redscarepod, r/SaturnStormCube, r/TerrifyingAsFu*k, r/TikTokCringe, r/TopMindsOfReddit and r/VaushV), these collective dynamics extended individual moral negotiations into public digital arenas where consumer-brand relationships were socially constructed and contested (Table 3). Figure 1 provides a visual map of the identified practices.

4.1 Individual-Level negotiation

Relationship destabilisation: The first individual-level category emerging from the analysis captures the emergence of moral and emotional tensions within the consumer-brand relationship without leading to immediate rupture. It shows how moral conflicts become embedded in everyday consumption practices, shaping how individuals manage their identity as well as their relationship with the brand both within their inner moral self and in interaction with others. Several users engaged in *moral self-assessment*, questioning whether continued brand engagement constituted implicit endorsement of the firm's wrongdoing. Others reported experiencing *discomfort*, feeling uneasy using branded items due to perceived social judgement or stigma associated with brand visibility.

From a relational perspective, these users were drawing the moral boundaries of their consumer-brand relationship, questioning what continued use of the product communicates about the self. The branded object thus becomes a moralised extension of the brand, carrying ethically charged meanings in everyday consumption. In Audrey's case (see Table 2 for full quotation), the relationship is not fully ruptured but reconfigured in a more ambivalent way: the bag remains in her possession, yet its use is temporarily suspended and the identity of the self as a wearer becomes problematised. The expression "horrendous acts" further illustrates how the scandal is amplified through emotionally charged language, consistent

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Table 2 Themes and concepts emerging from the analysis of individual-level negotiation of consumer-brand relationship

Themes	Concepts	Definition	Exemplary quotes
Relationship destabilisation (Emergence of moral and emotional tensions within the consumer-brand relationship without rupture)	*Moral self-assessment*	Engaging in reflexive evaluation of consumer responsibility within the consumer-brand relationship	Audrey (r/handbags): "since the news came out, I've been avoiding wearing my Balenciaga purses. I don't know if I should sell them. Did you cancel them? . . . *I feel I'm kinda like supporting their horrendous acts* when I'm wearing mine". Elodie (r/handbags): "At first I was super concerned like, '*Am I being complicit* in whatever behaviour they may or may not be hinting at supporting by carrying this?'"
	Discomfort	Feeling uneasy using branded items due to perceived social judgment or stigma associated with brand use	Barbara (r/WagoonLadies): "having those bags doesn't mean I support their foolery, but it also doesn't mean I'll go out of my way to show off that I have Balenciaga items. I know that *with social media a lot of people assume if you still have Balenciaga items you support their foolery.* A lot of us bought these items long before this crap came to light . . .". Beatrix (r/handbags): "*I don't feel great* about carrying my bag right now"
Relationship decoupling (Maintaining the relationship through the separation of ownership and brand identity)	*Temporal decoupling*	Separating the brand's past from its present moral identity	Denny (r/handbags): "I put my bags away for a little bit now, but I'm not getting rid of them. I still love all of them. They're all from *the ghesquière era* and they're beautiful with the softest leather. I'll use them again One day for sure". Dorothy (r/handbags): "I have a *2012 Velo* that I'm using. I put it away when those ads first came out, but now I'm using it again. It's a great bag, *from long before the current people were working at the company".* Elodie (r/handbags): "*the Balenciaga bags I have are from before Demna's tenure . . . I feel okay using what I have and not selling or destroying it".*
	Economic decoupling	Maintaining use of branded goods while disconnecting them from financial endorsement of the brand	Connie (r/WagoonLadies): "I have a cheap *replica* that was like 60$ from DHG and I only wore it a couple times last year. After what happened, I haven't really touched the bag at all". Emily (r/handbags): "I bought my motorcycle bag *secondhand* and I still have it. I won't be selling it. If I buy in the future it will be secondhand". Felix (r/WagoonLadies): "I still wear my Balenciaga but my *vintage style reps.* Like the original classic city. I think anything NOT designed under Demna is appropriate"

(***continued***)

Table 2

Themes	Concepts	Definition	Exemplary quotes
Relationship rupture (Withdrawal from the consumer-brand relationship following the controversy)	*Value-driven disengagement*	Conditional disengagement based on value alignment requiring fundamental brand transformation	Fannie (r/handbags): "I am not a proponent of cancel culture per se, but I do believe in *choosing where my support and money go*. The fact that children were involved makes acceptance a hard pill to swallow. *Balenciaga would have to undergo a complete makeover* before I would consider any of their products". Geordie (r/handbags): "... I didn't get rid of the pieces I already own but I would no longer buy anything from them. I do try to "*put my money where my mouth is*" and will do my best (acknowledging that pretty much all companies are gross to some extent) to not give money to brands that go against my values" Barbara (r/WagoonLadies): "... for me, I'm not buying more Balenciaga items". Jade (r/WagoonLadies): "keeping my pieces and won't be wearing the noticeable ones and *definitely not buying anymore Balenciaga again*". Imogen (r/handbags): "I had some Balenciaga shoes that I plan to sell off and One city bag that I plan to keep. *I will not buy their items – replica or authentic – again*. They didn't come out with a strong enough response condemning what occurred"
	Patronage cessation	Stopping future purchasing while potentially retaining existing brand possessions	

Source(s): Author's own work

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Table 3 Themes and concepts emerging from the analysis of collective-level negotiation of consumer-brand relationship

Themes	Concepts	Definition	Exemplary quotes
Relationship rupture amplification (action-orientated rupture of the consumer-brand relationship led by moral entrepreneurs	*Outrage amplification*	Intensifying perceived wrongdoing through conspiratorial narratives and viral diffusion, strengthening justification for rupture of the consumer-brand relationship	Irina (r/SaturnStormCube): "*welcome to the rabbit hole. . . it's so much bigger than you can imagine*. The truth is hidden in plain sight. These individuals are doing rituals right in our faces and using us without our consent. Time to Wakey-Wakey y'all". Joy (r/TikTokCringe): ". . . it's not a rogue photo and it's not a mistake. ALL their promotional media is riddled with references to child exploitation. They have deleted EVERYTHING on their Instagram – it's now an empty account. This needs to be investigated. Someone somewhere in that company, in a powerful enough position to make ALL of this happen, *has some secrets that need to be exposed".* Xavier (r/BehindTheClosetDoor): "people/platforms/companies are distancing themselves (heavily) from this brand. *The hashtag #cancelbalenciaga went viral for a reason".* Zoe (r/KUWTKsnark): ". . . every single photo I see of Kim or any of the other sisters supporting Balenciaga I will post nothing but: "Kim Kardashian enables the normalization of child pornography" or fill in the name with anyone else. *I hope everyone else spams it as well.* It needs to be known that the public won't just let it slide; we all know there is far too much of a process for this to have been an "Oopsie, my bad. We didn't know" situation"
	Boycott mobilisation	Translating outrage into coordinated calls for economic disengagement from the brand	Walt (r/TikTokCringe): "The One thing we can all do is to, 1. *Boycott Balenciaga and all who wear, endorse or simply ignore what is clearly an evil company!* Don't give this company a cent of your money! . . . These people responsible for this ad campaign need to be in prison!". Yvonne (r/TerrifyingAsFu*k): "*join r/CancelBalenciaga on reddit*! I have made a list of all parent company and its subsidiaries! [link]"
Relationship rupture delegitimisation (Reducing the legitimacy of rupture and sustaining the consumer-brand relationship)	*Outrage minimisation*	Reducing perceived severity and offline significance of the controversy, undermining motives for disengagement from the consumer-brand relationship	Helena (r/TopMindsOfReddit): " it's funny, *I see Reddit more upset with the response others have of this ad campaign, than the actual campaign itself".* Ian (r/popculturechat): ". . . it's not that deep. This was a *very online scandal* to begin with, I doubt most people could even explain what actually happened". Ozzy (r/handbags): "I thought the controversy was ridiculous. . . . people would much rather *virtue signal* by ditching luxury brands than ditch their staples that actually harm people". Peter (r/conspiracy): ". . . I generally see the *only people mad about Balenciaga don't buy it anyways".* Ron (r/AskReddit): "nobody is nearly as offended as they pretend to be in their social media posts. It's only a Balenciaga ad. *Your anger is nonsense and you're doing it for clout".*

(***continued***)

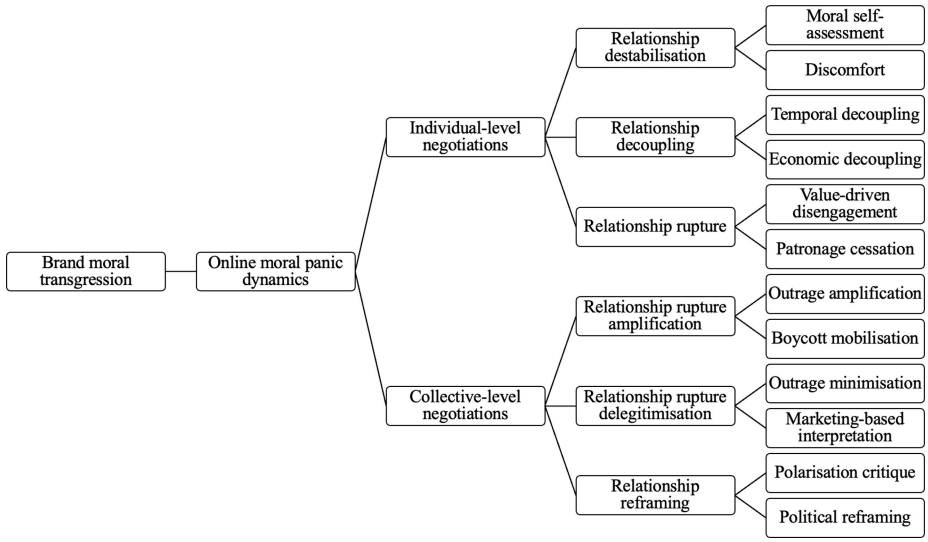
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Table 3

Themes	Concepts	Definition	Exemplary quotes
	Marketing-based interpretation	Reinterpreting the controversy as strategic (or normalised within the industry), neutralising its threat to the consumer-brand relationship	Mary (r/TerrifyingAsFu*k): "... This is all marketing, exploitative, but marketing nonetheless. The apology. The photos. The completely blacking out their Instagram. "Taking legal action". Their previous marketing has some pretty dark imagery as well. Who HAS those documents lying around? ... This thread alone has 900 comments, I think it worked. ... *I honestly think they're doing this purposely to get sales".* Grace (r/TerrifyingAsFu*k): "Designer high fashion advertising tries really hard to push the envelope on being "edgy" and "arty" but lots of times just ends up being tasteless and/or offensive. No more meaning to it than that. Or *have people forgotten about the controversy surrounding Calvin Klein ads going all the way back to the 80 s?".*
Relationship reframing (Reconstructing how the controversy and the consumer-brand relationship are understood)	*Polarisation critique*	Challenging moral dichotomies that reduce the consumer-brand relationship to binary support or rejection	Quinn (r/TopMindsOfReddit): "they want to use the *kindergarten-level form of argument/condemnation that reduces everything to binary extremes*. ... ergo, they try to say that if you don't condemn what they call paedophilia, you endorse paedophilia. They want *witch hunts* with no One looking too closely at why their accusations and "research" hold water"
	Political reframing	Attributing interpretations of the brand controversy to political agendas or platform-specific ideological bias, reshaping how the consumer-brand relationship is evaluated	Sue (r/fauxmoi): "... the pictures and the campaign were strange, however I don't think that means any of the children involved were necessarily harmed or that there is some sort of trafficking ring being orchestrated by Balenciaga. The insinuations that *right winged blog sites* are making after looking at Instagram pictures are being taken as fact. It's all very satanic-panicky". Lauren (r/fauxmoi): "it was a gross ad, but the reaction to it has been very disproportionate and I hate how it's become *another obsession for right-wing conspiracy theorists* – people who are doing real damage to this country". Ulric (r/VaushV): "... the people claiming that the clearly-dog-harness thing is somehow BDSM gear are almost adorable in their idiocy because they clearly have no idea what they are talking about. The psychotic attempts by the conservatives to smear everyone and everything as paedophilia is going to get a lot of people killed." Violet (r/VaushV): "*conservatives* prove day by day that they are the true threat. They are taking this way too far with their conspiracy theories and somebody else is going to get hurt from their rhetoric. This needs to stop". Tommy (r/TopMindsOfReddit): "... right-wing crazies are leading the charge and *Reddit tends to disagree with those guys"*

Source(s): Author's own work

Figure 1 Visual map of the identified dynamics



Source: Author's own work

with moral-panic dynamics. Elodie's account similarly illustrates how these dynamics function as a form of self-surveillance, through which she questions her complicity and attempts to restore coherence between ownership practices and moral integrity. The brand is not rejected but becomes problematised within everyday consumption, capturing a shift from routine use to a troubled relationship with the product.

Social scrutiny further intensifies relationship destabilisation. Whilst Audrey and Elodie's accounts focus primarily on internal moral self-evaluation, Barbara's response is more explicitly shaped by social judgement. By highlighting the binary opposition between "supporter" and "non-supporter" typical of moral-panic dynamics, her comment reflects an ongoing relational negotiation under conditions of public scrutiny, where consumption becomes a visible marker of moral positioning.

Relationship decoupling: The second individual-level mechanism emerging from the analysis captures how consumers maintain consumer-brand relationships under conditions of moral tension by separating ownership from brand identity. This decoupling is enabled by items purchased before the scandal or through second-hand channels. Rather than fully disengaging, consumers establish fictitious boundaries that allow continued usage whilst distancing themselves from the brand's wrongdoing.

Drawing on moral decoupling (Haberstroh *et al.*, 2017) – the process through which consumers dissociate judgments of morality from judgments of performance to justify purchasing from companies deemed to act immorally – two strategies emerged inductively from the data: *temporal decoupling* and *economic decoupling*. These strategies are both psychological and performative: they operate as relational mechanisms through which consumers negotiate their moral selves – enabling them to preserve affective and economic investments whilst managing the inner conflict provoked by the transgression – and signal virtue within Reddit communities, expressing moral stances through public declarations of disapproval and selective consumption.

Temporal decoupling constructs moral boundaries across the brand's history, separating a "legitimised" past from a "contaminated" present. Rather than abandoning the brand entirely, Denny and Dorothy reconstruct Balenciaga as a temporally segmented entity composed of different creative eras. As responsibility for the controversy is attributed to a specific creative period – Demna Gvasalia's tenure (2015–2025), which includes the 2022 controversy – items purchased before this phase are reinterpreted as morally acceptable. Through this temporal partitioning, ownership of products designed under earlier creative directions becomes a statement of moral distancing that legitimises continued use of branded goods without feelings of guilt or complicity. These accounts also suggest that the intensity of moral concern diminishes over time, enabling gradual resumption of use.

Economic decoupling separates product use from financial contribution to the brand. Consumers maintain relationships with branded products whilst disengaging from the brand as a commercial actor. Through vintage (in the case of Felix) or second-hand (in the case of Emily) channels, consumers avoid directly contributing to firm revenues, hence reducing their perceived complicity. Alternative markets function as strategies to alleviate discomfort without resorting to full boycott. Similar to products from earlier creative eras, vintage and second-hand consumption become a compromise enabling consumers to condemn misconduct without discarding previous economic investments and maintaining access to the brand's aesthetic value. The brand is not rejected but de-personalised through alternative market channels that metaphorically disrupt the link between consumption and endorsement.

Interestingly, this logic extended beyond legitimate markets into counterfeit consumption, as reflected in Felix's trace. Moral distancing extended beyond financial investment, as consumers with no direct economic connection to the brand still felt morally implicated. Replicas became subject to the same moral economy as authentic goods, with the stigma of

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immorality contaminating all visible associations with the brand, even when the economic involvement was minimal.

Relationship Rupture: The third and most radical individual-level relational dynamic involves complete withdrawal from the relationship following the controversy. Unlike destabilisation and decoupling, relationship rupture entails cessation of engagement with the brand. Two forms of rupture emerged from the analysis: *value-driven disengagement* and *patronage cessation*. The former reflects a conditional refusal grounded in moral principles, where re-engagement is contingent upon substantial transformation of the brand, whereas the latter involves stopping future consumption whilst potentially retaining previously owned items.

Fannie's account frames consumption as a moral allocation of economic resources, where the consumer-brand relationship is suspended unless the brand undergoes a fundamental reconstruction in leadership and advertising practices. For her, moral alignment becomes a pre-condition for re-entering the relationship. Imogen's commentary instead reflects a more definitive rupture. Future engagement is unequivocally compromised, although existing possessions are treated differently, suggesting that relationship breakdown does not necessarily entail the complete erasure of prior attachments. Rupture can coexist with residual affective ties, revealing the layered nature of consumer-brand relationships even at the point of withdrawal. Both accounts show that consumer evaluation extends beyond the transgression itself to include how the controversy is managed by the company and its creative team.

Finally, it is worth noting that relational tensions between Balenciaga and its consumers are articulated within a broader online social context governed by a "moral gaze". Consumers engage in brand cancellations as collective actions to withdraw support and realign with prevailing moral and societal values (Demsar *et al.*, 2023). Public declarations of cancellation – even when not fully endorsed but nonetheless invoked, as in Fannie's account – function simultaneously as sanctions against the brand and signals of moral positioning within online communities. Cancellation practices construct a shared moral order where consumption becomes subject to public evaluation, particularly during morally intense scandals such as Balenciaga's, where the involvement of vulnerable groups transforms what might otherwise be seen as a tasteless marketing ploy into a moral violation. Consumption shifts from a private domain into a publicly visible expression of moral alignment, through which individuals both punish the brand and negotiate their moral identity within communities of morally conscious consumers.

4.2 Collective-Level negotiation

Relationship rupture amplification: The first collective category emerging from the findings captures the action-orientated amplification of relationship rupture. It involves *outrage amplification*, namely the intensification of perceived corporate wrongdoing through conspiratorial narratives and viral diffusion, strengthening justification for withdrawal from the consumer-brand relationship. A prominent pattern in the Balenciaga controversy was its rapid escalation into moral-panic dynamics infused with conspiratorial thinking. Outrage amplification was largely orchestrated by moral entrepreneurs, namely users who initiated discussion threads around conspiratorial topics (e.g. in r/conspiracy, r/SaturnStormCube) to frame Balenciaga's campaign as a deliberate moral transgression, casting creative director Demna Gvasalia and campaign photographer Gabriele Galimberti as "folk devils" whilst amplifying elite corruption and child-protection concerns.

In Irina and Joy's commentaries (Table 3), the scandal extends beyond the controversial campaigns to embody broader cultural anxieties. Conspiratorial narratives – particularly those aligned with QAnon – cast Balenciaga as part of a secret global elite involved in child abuse and satanic rituals. The widespread use of the internet and social media is frequently cited as a cause of the purported increase in conspiracy beliefs (Kindynis, 2025). The brand's misconduct became a symbolic battleground for broader societal fears tied to child commodification and moral decay. The moral-panic dynamics fostered interpretative frames where "everything is connected", dividing those who "see" from those who do not. The controversy merged with populist narratives opposing "ordinary people" and "manipulative elites" (Kozinets and Seraj-Aksit, 2024), echoing long-standing conspiratorial tropes such as the "satanic elite" and "Hollywood paedophile rings" to position Balenciaga as a symbol of cultural depravity.

Alongside conspiratorial narratives, users engaged in *boycott mobilisation*, translating outrage into coordinated calls for economic disengagement from the brand. Digital infrastructures such as hashtags (e.g. #cancelbalenciaga) and anti-brand subreddits (e.g. r/CancelBalenciaga) served as online mobilisation hubs for collective action. The subreddit enabled the circulation of boycott instructions, the sharing of resources (e.g. lists of Balenciaga's parent company and subsidiaries) and the coordination of responses targeting both the brand and its wider network. The boycott was both economic – as users encouraged others to withdraw financial support by refusing to purchase Balenciaga products – and social – as those who continued wearing or promoting the brand were publicly ostracised. Within this digital moral economy, forgiveness was largely absent, replaced by demands for accountability and visible consumer attacks. Discursive practices aimed to saturate the information space, ensuring continuous public exposure of the perceived wrongdoing and its actors.

Relationship rupture delegitimisation: The second collective dynamic concerns the delegitimisation of relationship rupture, whereby consumers challenge the validity of disengagement and sustain the consumer-brand relationship. This dynamic operates through discursive strategies that weaken the perceived severity of the transgression and question the legitimacy of collective outrage. A first mechanism involves *outrage minimisation*, whereby users downplay the severity of the controversy and frame it as disproportionate and primarily confined to online spaces. As evident in Ian and Ron's commentaries, the scandal is reframed as inflated by social media amplification rather than grounded in the actual severity of the transgression, reducing the necessity of participating in the collective backlash and legitimising continued brand engagement.

Several Reddit users delegitimised virtue signalling behaviours (Rotman *et al.*, 2026), questioning the authenticity

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of others' moral reactions by framing them as performative attempts to gain visibility and social capital online. Expressions of outrage were thus interpreted not as genuine ethical concern but as efforts to participate in an online moral spectacle. Undermining the motives of outrage instigators weakened justifications for relationship rupture and legitimised non-participation in the backlash. Highlighted discrepancies between the most vocal critics and Balenciaga's actual consumer base suggested that much of the outrage was driven by individuals with negligible economic impact on the brand, generating a form of meta-outrage in which attention shifted from the brand's alleged misconduct to the perceived absurdity of the public backlash itself.

A second mechanism involves *marketing-based interpretation*, where consumers reinterpret the controversy as a deliberate or routine feature of the fashion industry, neutralising moral threats to consumer-brand relationships. Rather than being evaluated in moral terms, the campaign is interpreted through a marketing lens as intentionally orchestrated to gain visibility and increase sales. Whilst Grace situated the scandal within a long-standing tradition of provocative fashion advertising, Mary interpreted it as "edgelord" marketing characterised by deliberately offensive or shocking behaviour designed to attract attention (Cambridge Dictionary, 2026). Normalising shock advertising as a standard industry practice provides an indirect brand defence: if such strategies are widespread, Balenciaga becomes no exception. In doing so, these accounts reduce the need to withdraw from the consumer-brand relationship.

Relationship reframing: The third collective dynamic involves the reframing of the event, whereby consumers reconstruct how both the controversy and the consumer-brand relationship are understood. Rather than directly supporting or rejecting the brand, users engage in interpretive work that shifts attention from corporate actions to the broader political and ideological context in which the controversy unfolds. Two mechanisms underpin this dynamic: *polarisation critique* and *political reframing*.

Polarisation critique challenges the binary logic, reducing the consumer-brand relationship to a dichotomy of support versus rejection. Quinn's commentary contests the moral absolutism underpinning the outrage, whereby a complex issue – i.e. the brand's alleged responsibility for the controversial campaign – is reduced to binary moral positions (innocence versus guilt). Commentaries such as Quinn's critique the inquisitorial "witch hunt" mentality that privileges rapid outrage and emotional escalation over critical reflection. Social media users are driven by the desire to rapidly identify and punish offenders even without sufficient evidence of their guilt. The controversy is reinterpreted as a collective overreaction shaped by moral-panic dynamics, shifting attention from the brand's actions to the collective processes through which guilt and responsibility are constructed.

Political reframing relocates the source of the controversy from the brand to broader ideological agendas and platform-specific political biases. Users interpret the scandal as a product of right-wing conspiratorial discourse, shifting responsibility to the actors who manufacture and circulate outrage. The central issue becomes not whether Balenciaga acted immorally, but whether the reaction itself is ideologically distorted and socially harmful, potentially placing involved actors at risk through misdirected accusations or extreme responses (e.g. the photographer of the campaign reportedly received death threats following the controversy). Defending the brand does not require asserting its innocence but questioning the ideological origins behind culpability narratives. As a result, the controversy becomes a site of political contestation where competing ideologies shape how the transgression is evaluated, with users attributing exaggerated outrage to opposing political groups, reframing them as the primary source of social harm. This shift reorients attention away from the brand and towards the political uses of the controversy. Once again, the perceived harm stems less from the campaign itself than from the ideological discourse amplifying it.

Platform culture notably shapes these reframing dynamics. Reddit is characterised by a predominantly left-leaning orientation (Fulay and Roy, 2026). This political profile is driven by its core cohort, which tends to be younger (18–29) compared to other platforms (Pew Research Center, 2025). In contrast to more right-leaning platforms where the controversy gained notable traction, Reddit operates as an ideologically structured echo chamber (Dubois and Blank, 2018) where conservative outrage was marginalised, allowing counter-narratives to gain legitimacy whilst right-leaning accusations were dismissed. Right-leaning interpretations of the Balenciaga scandal tended to express heightened outrage, whereas left-leaning users often downplayed or criticised such reactions. Ideologically aligned subreddits like r/Vaush filtered the transgression through left-leaning lenses, reframing it as the outcome of right-wing conspiratorial thinking rather than a marketing failure.

Overall, relationship reframing demonstrates how reactions to the Balenciaga controversy were inextricably linked to politicised and platform-biased environments. The controversy became a space in which the evaluation of the brand is inseparable from broader ideological struggles. Consumer-brand relationships in turn are transformed into sites of political contestation, shaped through collective negotiation and meaning-making enabled by partisan platform dynamics.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how consumer-brand relationships evolve amidst online brand-related moral-panic dynamics. Findings offer a conceptual refinement of existing relational processes, highlighting how brand transgressions escalate into broader social phenomena that reshape relationships between consumers and brands. By integrating consumer-brand relationship dynamics (Alvarez *et al.*, 2021) with the concept of moral panic (Johnen *et al.*, 2018), this research demonstrates that brand controversies are negotiated not only through individual emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses (Klütz and Albrecht, 2025; Ly *et al.*, 2027; Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Rasouli *et al.*, 2025) but also through collectively mediated processes unfolding within digital environments.

Extending prior brand transgression literature that views consumer reactions primarily through the lenses of brand betrayal (Ly *et al.*, 2027; Rasouli *et al.*, 2025; Shin and Kim, 2026), avoidance (Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Rasouli *et al.*, 2025) and retaliation (Gong and Wang, 2021; Ly *et al.*, 2027), this

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research frames brand transgressions as continuous relational negotiations rather than purely reactive outcomes. Individual-level analysis identifies three distinct yet interconnected relational dynamics (*relationship destabilisation*, *decoupling* and *rupture*), revealing how consumers do not automatically disengage from morally compromised brands but instead navigate tensions between moral disappointment and brand attachment.

Brand betrayal is widely conceptualised as a pivotal intermediary emotional response – particularly salient among strongly attached consumers due to psychological proximity (Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2025) – that triggers negative behaviours such as negative e-WOM, brand avoidance, boycott intentions (Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Rasouli *et al.*, 2025) and retaliation (Gong and Wang, 2021; Ly *et al.*, 2027; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2025), ultimately damaging consumer-brand bonds (Shin and Kim, 2026). Findings refine this view by demonstrating that betrayal does not dictate immediate relationship termination. *Relationship Destabilisation* captures how moral tensions first become embedded within everyday consumption practices, transforming branded objects into carriers of ethical meaning and prompting reflective evaluations of identity and complicity prior to overt behavioural shifts.

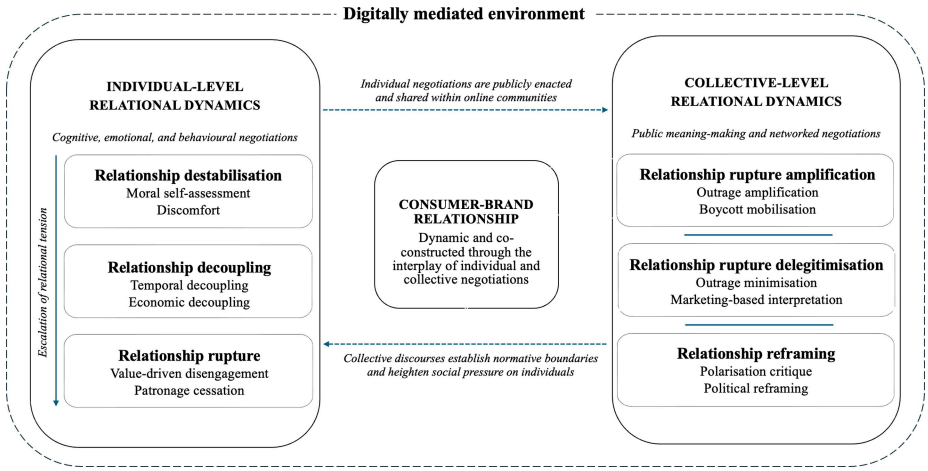
Whilst literature on brand avoidance emphasised patronage reduction and desire for avoidance (Rasouli *et al.*, 2025), *Relationship Decoupling* reveals a more sophisticated relational dynamic. *Temporal* and *economic decoupling* demonstrate that consumers avoid brand abandonment by engaging in moral self-regulation to resolve inner conflict, continuing to wear or use branded items while reconfiguring object meanings to separate ownership from endorsement through cognitive and performative strategies (e.g. wearing vintage or replicas to prevent financial contribution). In doing so, *Relationship Decoupling* extends the "love-becomes-hate" literature (Tolunay and Veloutsou, 2025; Zhang *et al.*, 2021) by explaining how consumers protect their moral identity in front of digital communities without sacrificing their possessions.

Finally, research on brand retaliation focuses primarily on destructive behaviours aimed at harming the brand when consumers feel wronged (Gong and Wang, 2021; Ly *et al.*, 2027). *Relationship Rupture* shows that disengagement is more nuanced than previously conceptualised (Youn, 2022). Specifically, consumers may terminate future patronage whilst retaining residual attachments to pre-existing possessions.

Collective dynamics surrounding the Balenciaga controversy evolved into a broader process of networked moral regulation in which individual tensions were publicly enacted, amplified, contested and reframed through digital interaction. This finding resonates with research linking corporate misconduct to destructive consumer engagement, where individuals post negative views online to damage the brand's reputation and reinforce group identity within anti-brand communities (Brandão and Popoli, 2022; Dessart *et al.*, 2020; Dong *et al.*, 2026a). Beyond outrage amplification – driven by desires for social recognition through performative outrage and virtue signalling (Johnen *et al.*, 2018) – and digital activism (Brandão and Popoli, 2022; Gambetti and Biraghi, 2023), this research extends moral panic literature by uncovering counter-discourses that challenge outrage legitimacy (*Relationship Rupture Delegitimisation*) and reinterpret the controversy through political ideological lenses (*Relationship Reframing*). Together, these insights suggest that online brand-related moral-panic dynamics differ from traditional moral panics (Cohen, 1972; Conyers, 2025) in being fragmented and shaped by competing narratives that do not necessarily produce destructive outcomes (Dong *et al.*, 2026b).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that consumer-brand relationships following brand transgressions are co-constructed through the intertwining of personal experiences and social discourse. By addressing the call to trace linkages between individual and collective negativity (Dong *et al.*, 2026a), this study provides theoretically informed evidence that relational meanings are continuously negotiated within digitally mediated environments. To explain how these processes interlock, Figure 2 proposes a conceptual model framing individual-level coping strategies and collective-level discourse dynamics identified across different communities as mutually conditioning one another.

Figure 2 Model of consumer-brand relationship negotiations during brand transgressions exhibiting online moral-panic dynamics



Source: Author's own work

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Within this framework, individual emotional, cognitive and behavioural negotiations – such as *moral self-assessment*, *discomfort*, *temporal* and *economic decoupling*, *value-driven disengagement* and *patronage cessation* – are publicly enacted and shared within online communities, providing the discursive material that may fuel collective dynamics and potentially trigger rupture amplifications, moral delegitimisations or political reframing. In turn, collective discourses establish normative boundaries and heighten social pressure on individuals. Faced with the risk of social stigma (e.g. complicity accusations) or virtue-signalling, consumers may re-evaluate their relationship with the brand and continuously adapt their negotiation practices – shifting, for instance, from *relationship destabilisation* to more explicit forms of temporal or economic decoupling – to signal moral alignment within digital spaces.

6. Theoretical implications

This research's contribution is threefold. It extends literature on negative consumer-brand relationships by conceptualising them as ongoing moral negotiations unfolding across both individual and collective levels. Whilst prior studies have primarily examined negative consumer-brand relationships through constructs such as brand hate (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2018), disengagement (Villanova and Matherly, 2024) and distrust (Tuominen *et al.*, 2025), these findings demonstrate that relational responses evolve through progressive stages of destabilisation, decoupling and rupture. By introducing a decoupling perspective, this study advances the "love-becomes-hate" body of knowledge (Tolunay and Veloutsou, 2025) and enriches literature on brand betrayal (Shin and Kim, 2026; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2025), avoidance (Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Rasouli *et al.*, 2025) and retaliation (Gong and Wang, 2021; Ly *et al.*, 2027). Specifically, it reveals that moral distress does not necessarily dictate abandonment or punishment, as consumers deploy cognitive and performative self-regulatory tactics to separate ownership from endorsement.

This study also advances brand transgression literature by shifting the focus from dyadic consumer-brand interactions to collective digital ecosystems (Dong *et al.*, 2026a). Existing research mainly categorises brand transgression responses as isolated behavioural outcomes such as boycott, negative e-WOM or patronage cessation (e.g. Brandão *et al.*, 2023; Mazzoli *et al.*, 2024; Youn, 2022). Present findings show that digital environments transform brand controversies into contested moral arenas where outrage and its legitimacy are collectively negotiated. These insights challenge assumptions that transgressions lead directly to disengagement, demonstrating how consumers simultaneously sustain, contest or renegotiate their bonds with morally tainted brands under the gaze of digital communities.

Finally, this study bridges moral panic research with branding literature by examining how brand-related moral-panic dynamics unfold during severe brand crises. Unlike traditional moral panics (Cohen, 1972), which are often conceptualised as relatively uniform collective reactions, online brand-related moral-panic dynamics manifest as fragmented and politically contested processes shaped by ideological polarisation and platform-specific dynamics. Positioning moral-panic dynamics as a discursive process conceptually linking individual coping strategies to collective negotiations provides evidence of how consumer-brand relationships are co-constructed during periods of intense public scrutiny.

7. Managerial implications

Managing corporate transgressions during online brand-related moral-panic dynamics requires brand managers and communication strategists to move beyond traditional crisis management approaches and implement targeted strategies aligned with specific relational dynamics.

During *Relationship Destabilisation* consumers experience discomfort when wearing branded items, fearing they will be perceived as complicit in corporate misconduct. To prevent products from becoming walking symbols of stigma, brand managers should avoid defensive statements and instead provide transparent accounts of internal failures (e.g. gaps in creative oversight) alongside concrete corrective actions, such as restructuring campaign approval workflows or terminating contracts with responsible third-party actors. This transparency enables consumers to attribute the controversy to isolated events, reassuring them to continue using previously purchased items.

When disaffected consumers engage in *temporal decoupling*, brands can facilitate re-engagement by strategically leveraging archival collections and corporate heritage, thus offering consumers socially acceptable narratives that legitimise retaining their possessions. Marketing managers should monitor second-hand platforms as diagnostic indicators of conditional loyalty, using heritage-focused campaigns or re-issuing classic archive pieces to re-engage consumers who admire the brand's aesthetic legacy while rejecting recent corporate conduct.

At the collective level, aggressive or legal counter-statements often backfire by fuelling *Relationship Rupture Amplification*. To contain viral outrage, managers should leverage *Relationship Reframing* dynamics by treating digital platforms as distinct moral arenas with unique communicative logics. Discussion-based platforms like Reddit present environments where community threads oscillate between *relationship reframing* and *relationship rupture delegitimisation*. When unfounded conspiratorial narratives emerge around perceived corporate misconduct, firms should publish transparent step-by-step accounts detailing accurate chronologies, verified facts and external actors involved. This clarity empowers rational community members to delegitimise false accusations themselves, neutralising viral panic and protecting brand equity without provoking secondary backlash.

8. Limitations and further research

This research is based on a single-case netnographic analysis of the Balenciaga controversy, which enables rich cultural insights into consumer negotiation processes but limits broader generalisability. Future research could examine whether destabilisation, decoupling and rupture similarly characterise consumer-brand relationships in less moralised contexts. Second, relying on Reddit as a primary data source provides valuable access to publicly expressed moral negotiation, yet captures only one dimension of platformed discourse. Since findings show how moral-panic dynamics are shaped by

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platform-specific ideological cultures, scholars should adopt cross-platform designs (e.g. TikTok, X, Instagram) to examine how amplification, delegitimisation and reframing vary across digital environments. Finally, this research only partially addressed how individual and collective dynamics extend across broader brand networks. Investigating the repercussions for affiliated celebrities and corporations (e.g. multi-brand online retailers) could provide further insight into how online brand-related moral-panic dynamics spread across interconnected entities.

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