CONSUMER ACTIVISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICT

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Purpose: This paper aims to examine the dynamics of consumer engagement and sentiment in social media activism during geopolitical conflict, focusing on how consumer activism manifests online. By analyzing user interactions and shifts in sentiment, the study seeks to offer insights into the scale and impact of digital activism, particularly how consumers mobilize on social media in response to geopolitical events. Additionally, the research aims to provide guidance on how brands can adapt their communication strategies to navigate the challenges posed by widespread digital activism effectively.

Design/methodology/approach: The research employs a quantitative sentiment analysis and qualitative content analysis of Facebook interactions. The study specifically investigates three brands from the Mulliez Group (Leroy Merlin, Auchan, and Decathlon) during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The analysis covers user-generated content from Polish Facebook profiles.

Findings: The study identifies a distinct pattern of consumer engagement, characterized by an initial surge in activism and negative sentiment that peaks early during the conflict before gradually stabilizing. This trend highlights the short-lived intensity of social media-driven activism, influenced by hedonic adaptation. While initial consumer responses were emotionally charged and fueled by calls for boycotts, sentiment analysis shows a decline in negative engagement towards the end of the year, indicating the effectiveness of adaptive brand communication strategies.

Research limitations/implications: The study is limited by its focus on a specific geopolitical event and a narrow sample of brands, which may affect the generalizability of the findings.

Practical implications: The findings suggest that brands can benefit from implementing transparent, adaptive, and responsive communication strategies during periods of intense consumer activism. Real-time sentiment monitoring and proactive engagement are crucial for managing public perception and mitigating negative impacts.

Originality/value: This paper contributes to the literature on social media activism and brand communication by offering a detailed analysis of consumer engagement patterns during a geopolitical crisis. The use of advanced sentiment analysis and engagement metrics provides a novel approach to understanding the temporal dynamics of online activism. The study is valuable for brand managers, marketers, and researchers interested in navigating the complexities of digital consumer behavior and crisis communication.

Keywords: consumer activism, sentiment analysis, consumer engagement.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Social media due to specific affordances (Rhonzhyn et al., 2023) serves as a nexus connecting brands with their consumers (Zeng et al., 2022). Communication via separate brand accounts on social media allows one to build long-term or short-term relationships with current and potential consumers through parasocial interactions - PSI (Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011). PSI are defined as a concept meaning an illusory sense of social connection resulting in specific relationships, and loyalty with (social) media personalities and entities, widely perceived as brands (Labrecque, 2014; Jia et al., 2024). The interactivity of social media (the ability to establish and maintain a mutual relationship through specific interactive cues; Ma et al., 2022) is one of the factors facilitating the creation and inclusion of PSI in the brand-consumer relationship (Kim et al., 2021). Brands perceived as highly interactive on social media significantly improve their sales opportunities, level of customer knowledge and satisfaction, and build networks of loyal customers (Bozkurt et al., 2021). Simultaneously, content created and shared by brands - Marketer Generated Content (MGC), directly or indirectly associated with a brand or product (Qian et al., 2022) - influences the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activities of recipients (Ma et al., 2022), and overall consumer brand's attitude - the position expressed by the consumer based on a set of arguments, emotions, knowledge (Kuehnl et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2024). Social media also enable users to immediately react to reports about the crisis and its effects (Schultz et al., 2011).

Social media platforms have become crucial spaces, where individuals not only fulfill personal needs like information exchange and social interaction but also exert influence on each other (Grover et al., 2022). This digital engagement has become integral to individuals' online presence, particularly in expressing opinions on socio-political issues (Anderson et al., 2018; Grover et al., 2022).

Social media activism often utilize hashtags to signal participation and build communities of support among like-minded individuals (Johnson et al., 2019). These platforms also provide avenues for social influence, allowing users to share opinions and shape others' perspectives on specific products or brands (Boulianne, 2015; De Zúñiga et al., 2014).

This study delves into the dynamics of the consumer engagement in the social media activism. Specifically examining Polish users of Facebook, whose interest is heightened due to Poland's significant intake of Ukrainian refugees and historical ties with Russia, we analyze public reactions to the Mulliez Group's decision to maintain its Russian operations. Utilizing sentiment analysis, our methodology unveils an understanding of evolving brand-consumer relationships, characterized by the transient nature of social media activism.

While initial boycott engagements are emotionally charged and propelled by social media's mobilization capabilities, their impact tends to stabilize over time due to shifts in public attention and corporate responses. This transition underscores the importance for companies to

engage in empathetic and proactive communication, directly addressing the underlying concerns fueling boycotts.

2. Consumer activism on social media

Consumer activism, particularly on social media, has emerged as a powerful force that allows individuals to hold companies accountable for their business practices. Traditionally, consumer activism was understood as a form of resistance where individuals or groups sought to pressure corporations into adopting more ethical or socially responsible behaviors (Friedman, 1999; Garrett, 1987). The primary goal of this activism is to influence corporate actions through tactics like boycotts, public campaigns, and petitions (Smith, Cooper-Martin, 1997). With the rise of digital platforms, the nature of consumer activism has shifted significantly, enabling rapid mobilization and the ability to reach a broader audience. This transformation highlights the dynamic and evolving character of consumer activism in the digital age.

Social media engagement plays a critical role in shaping consumer activism, providing an interactive platform where users can share information, discuss concerns, and coordinate collective actions. Engagement on social media can be divided into internal and external interactions. Internal engagement occurs within an individual's own social network, while external engagement involves interactions within the social space of others (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Paris, 2004).

The engagement process is often multidimensional, encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects. Behavioral engagement includes actions such as liking, sharing, and commenting, reflecting an active involvement in online discussions. Cognitive engagement involves the mental effort and attention users dedicate to processing social media content, while emotional engagement relates to the affective reactions users experience, such as anger or joy, which can drive activism (Kietzmann et al., 2011). These varied forms of engagement help amplify consumer voices and facilitate the spread of activist messages on social media platforms.

The emergence of social media has revolutionized the landscape of consumer activism, turning it into a more dynamic form of digital activism. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow consumers to instantly share grievances and coordinate large-scale movements, which can quickly gain momentum and reach a global audience. The efficiency and cost-effectiveness of digital platforms have made it easier for consumer-led movements to gain traction (Sen et al., 2001). The interactive and community-building features of social media enable activists to form supportive networks, enhancing the impact of their campaigns and solidifying the sense of a shared purpose (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2012). The Social Media Honeycomb model further illustrates how elements such as identity, sharing,

and conversation play a role in facilitating the mobilization of digital activism (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Boycotts represent a central tactic in consumer activism, often serving as a collective method for consumers to express discontent and pressure companies into making changes (Garrett, 1987; Klein, 2003). The rise of digital platforms has transformed traditional boycotts into highly organized, large-scale digital movements. Online boycotts leverage the reach of social media, making it easier for activists to coordinate their efforts, raise awareness, and encourage widespread participation (Yuksel, Mryteza, 2009). Research by Sen et al. (2001) highlights the effectiveness of digital boycotts due to their viral nature, where boycott calls can rapidly spread across networks. This shift illustrates how digital activism has amplified traditional resistance tactics, turning localized efforts into global campaigns with significant implications for the targeted brands.

The power of consumer boycotts has been well-documented in the literature, demonstrating their potential to impact both the financial performance and brand image of targeted companies. Chavis and Leslie (2009) investigated the effects of politically motivated boycotts and found a significant decline in sales for affected companies. Boycotts serve not only as a tool for collective resistance but also as a means for consumers to express ethical and political values through their purchasing decisions (Jae, Jeon, 2016). This shift towards values-based consumption underscores the increasing influence of consumer activism as a mechanism for social control and a driver of corporate accountability (Klein et al., 2004).

In recent years, the role of the Internet and social media in consumer boycotts has attracted growing scholarly attention. The advantages of the Internet, including its speed and wide accessibility, have made online boycotts an effective mechanism of consumer activism (Sen et al., 2001). Koku (2012) noted that the widespread use of the Internet warrants examining both the tactics consumers use to mobilize against companies and the strategies companies can employ to counteract these movements. Studies by Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022) have shown that social media provides a powerful platform for articulating consumer dissatisfaction, underscoring the importance of understanding digital boycott dynamics for both activists and businesses.

Overall, consumer activism on social media has become an influential force capable of shaping brand narratives and driving corporate change. The interconnected nature of social media allows for efficient organization of collective actions, making it crucial for companies to adopt robust engagement and crisis management strategies (Lokhande, Natu, 2022). Recent studies by Sun et al. (2021) and Bronnenberg & Dubé (2022) have demonstrated the substantial impact that consumer-driven campaigns can have on brand reputation and financial performance. As digital activism continues to grow, companies must acknowledge the power of consumer engagement on social media and leverage this understanding to foster dialogue, address concerns, and align their practices with evolving consumer expectations, ultimately turning challenges into opportunities for positive change.

3. Research method

Our research methodology centered on evaluating consumer engagement and sentiment on Facebook, particularly within online movements. Specifically, we chose to focus on three brands under the Mulez family brand group: Leroy Merlin, Auchan, and Decathlon. These brands, according to available information, continued operations in Russia during the initial phase of the armed conflict and became prominent targets of consumer actions.

To align with the methodological rigor advocated by Kozinets (2002), we carefully selected the communication platform, opting for Facebook due to its prevalence among Polish-speaking consumers. Our analysis encompassed content shared by Polish-speaking users on Facebook from the onset of the conflict, spanning from February 24th to December 31st, 2022. In total, we analyzed 4615 Polish Facebook profiles.

This research was divided into two sections. The first section focused on the analysis of the Facebook profiles of three brands from the Mulliez Group, examining total user engagement (Interactivity Score), average user engagement (Engagement Score), and the sentiment expressed in comments (Sentiment Score). Each metric was designed to provide a nuanced understanding of user engagement and sentiment across social media interactions.

1. **Interactivity Score**: This metric evaluates the overall engagement level of a brand's social media profile, encompassing all user interactions, including reactions (e.g., like, love, ha-ha, sad, angry, wow), comments, and shares. The Interactivity Score reflects the relative performance of the analyzed profile compared to a representative sample of over 4000 Polish Facebook profiles from various industries. The score is standardized on a scale from 0 to 100, where a higher score indicates greater overall user engagement. A score of X implies that the weighted total of interactions (Interactivity Index - INI) for the brand's profile exceeded that of $X\%$ of the sampled Polish Facebook profiles during the given period.

2. **Engagement Score**: This indicator measures the effectiveness of individual content posted by a brand, calculated as the average engagement per post (Interactivity Index - INI). Unlike the Interactivity Score, which considers total engagement, the Engagement Score emphasizes the quality of content by rewarding profiles that generate significant interaction despite a lower posting frequency. The score is standardized on a scale from 0 to 100, and a score of X indicates that the average engagement per post for the analyzed profile was higher than that of $X\%$ of the sampled Polish Facebook profiles, reflecting its relative content quality and resonance with the audience.

3. **Sentiment Score**: The Sentiment Score quantifies the emotional tone of user discussions under posts on a brand's social media profile. Utilizing an artificial intelligence algorithm, this metric assesses the sentiment of user comments, categorizing them as positive, neutral, or negative. The Sentiment Score ranges from

0 to 100, where a score of 0 indicates exclusively negative comments, and a score of 100 reflects purely positive comments. A score of 50 represents a balanced sentiment, with equal proportions of positive and negative comments. This metric provides a direct measure of public sentiment, highlighting consumer attitudes towards the brand in the context of online discussions.

The sentiment analysis model in this study categorized social media posts and their comments into three sentiment classes: Neutral, Positive, and Negative. Neutral posts lacked a clear sentiment or had balanced positive and negative expressions, while positive and negative posts displayed explicit sentiments. The analysis began with text preprocessing, where content was tokenized into words and meaningful symbols. Texts were then represented as vectors using the "FastText" algorithm, tailored specifically for the informal language of social media, unlike traditional models that rely on formal text sources.

These vector representations were fed into a neural network model, specifically a BiGRU (Bidirectional Gated Recurrent Unit) for Polish-language texts. The model determined the sentiment by evaluating the probability of each class and selecting the one with the highest likelihood. This vector-based approach captured the context of the words, providing more accurate sentiment analysis that accounts for the nuances in social media language.

The second section analyzed online mentions of these brands, with a focus on the content of these mentions. We employed content analysis to categorize the discourse, aiming to identify recurring themes behind consumer engagement in the social media activism (Hsieh, Shannon, 2005). Particular attention was given to those related to the war, especially mentions calling for boycotts. The mentions categorization was done in two stages. Firstly the content was grouped into two categories: War-related and Other. Then, the first part of data (concerning war) was divided into three subcategories: Boycott, Exit from Russia and Other. As a result, more than 340.000 mentions from February 24th to December 31st, 2022, were included in the analysis.

4. Results

An analysis of the number of comments shows that the number of comments starts to increase immediately after Russia's aggression against Ukraine on February 24th, reaches a clear peak in March, and then starts to decrease with varying dynamics until the end of April or May (Figure 1). Simultaneously, the number of comments with negative sentiment compared to those with a positive sentiment is highest in this interval, which may indicate that users' involvement was in line with their attitude. At the same time, the corresponding period coincides with a decrease in brand activity, particularly between April and the end of May, when the number of profile posts generated by the brands themselves slowly starts to increase while the interest of users in commenting decreases.

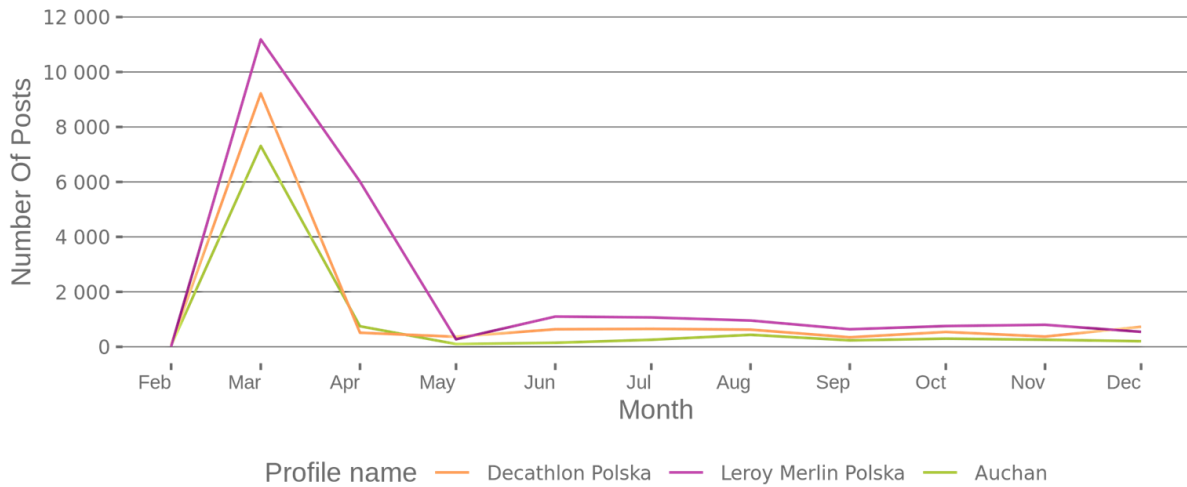## Number of user comments

February - December 2022

Figure1. The number of use comments.

The Sentiment Score analysis (Figure 2) reveals a dominant trend of negative sentiments across all three brands: Decathlon Poland, Leroy Merlin Poland, and Auchan. Despite slight variations, the sentiment scores hover around the 30-point mark, with Decathlon Poland slightly exceeding the average at 33, while Leroy Merlin Poland aligns closely with the average score of 30, and Auchan falls below at 26. This proximity to the 30-score threshold underscores a generally unfavorable consumer perception, indicating a significant prevalence of negative sentiment across social media discussions related to these brands.

Figure 2. Sentiment Score.

Throughout the period, Decathlon Polska consistently exhibits higher sentiment scores compared to the other two brands, showing an upward trend towards the end of the year. In contrast, Leroy Merlin Polska generally demonstrates lower sentiment scores, with a notable dip in March (Figure 3). In March 2022, coinciding with the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, a stark decline in Sentiment Scores was noted. This period saw an outpouring of negative commentary, pushing for the brands to halt their operations in Russia, reflecting a palpable public discontent. The overall trend indicates a slight improvement in sentiment for all three brands by December. By year-end, the proportion of negative comments had reduced, suggesting a gradual diminishing of the boycott's impact on brand reputations. This trend highlights the fluid nature of public sentiment in the digital age, where initial uproars can eventually give way to a more balanced discourse.
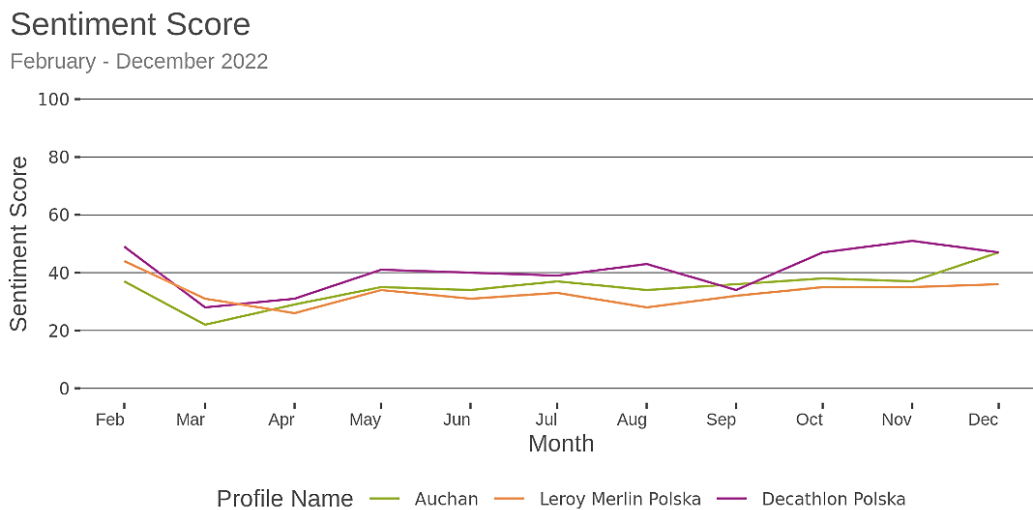
Sentiment Score
February - December 2022

Figure 3. Sentiment Score divided by months.

The phenomenon of social media activism was reflected even more strongly in the Engagement Score, i.e. the engagement around individual posts. Between 24 February and 31 December 2022, content on the Leroy Merlin profile attracted the most attention; it generated more activity on average than posts from 87% of profiles on Polish Facebook. This high result was also influenced by the lack of breaks in the brand's communication. In second place was Auchan's profile with an Engagement Score of 73, and in last place was Decathlon with content engaging more than the posts of 63% of Facebook profiles (Figure 4). The lower score on Decathlon's profile was the result of a large number of user posts on the brand's page (which was a reaction to the shop's lack of clarity on its Russian operations).
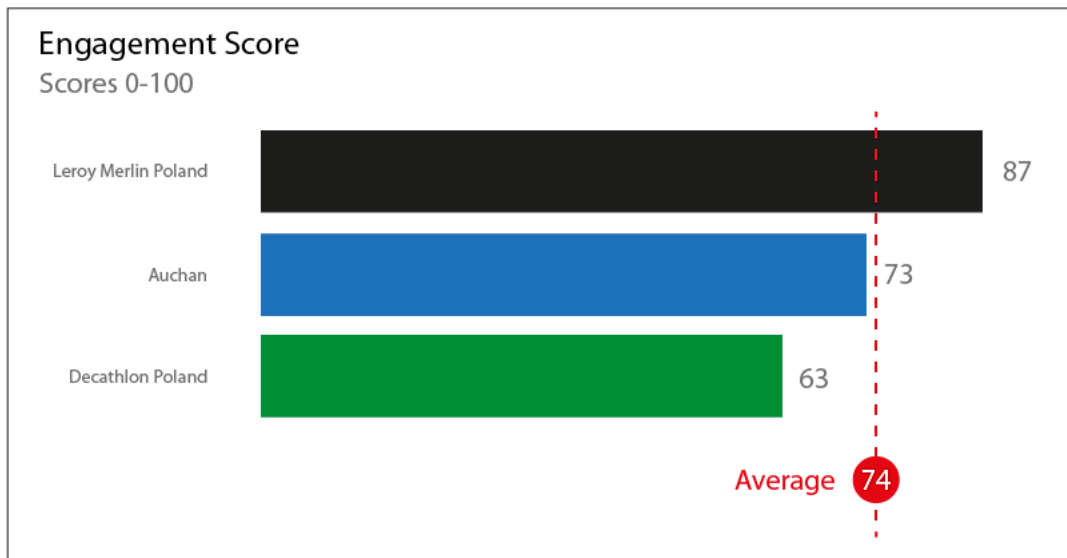
Figure 4. Engagement Score.

At the end of February 2022, after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, only two posts were published on Leroy Merlin's profile, which accumulated very high engagement (there were then hundreds of comments calling for an end to business in Russia), resulting in an Engagement Score of 100 (Figure 5). The lower score on Decathlon's profile was influenced by user posts (referring to the brand boycott), which lowered the average engagement per post. The engagement trends indicate that while Auchan experienced a sharp, temporary surge in early 2022, Decathlon Poland and Leroy Merlin Poland maintained steadier levels of consumer engagement.
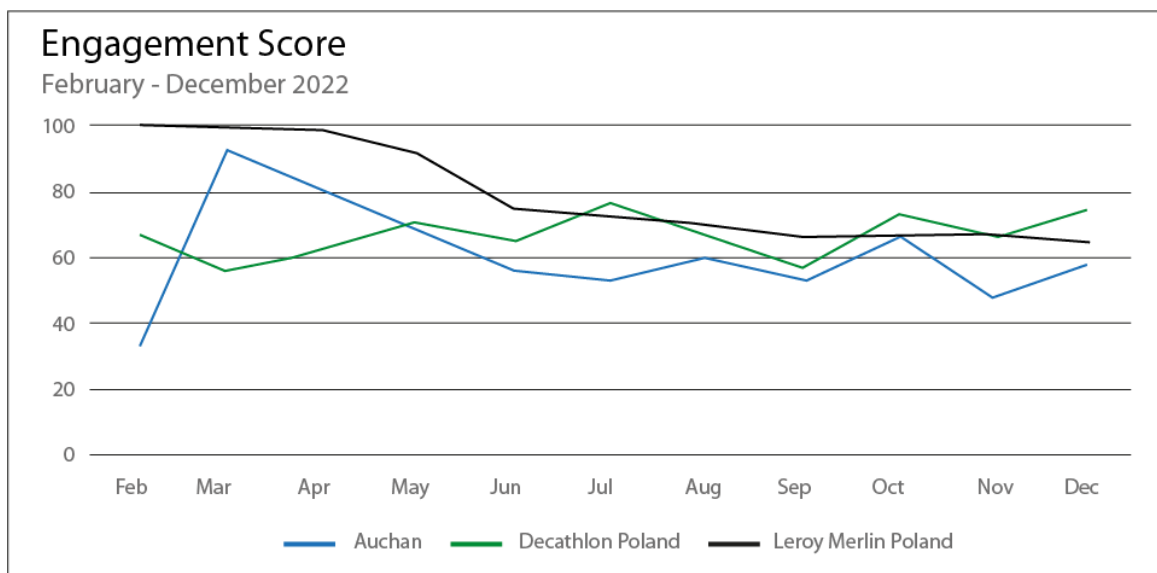

Figure 5. Engagement Score divided by months.

Throughout February to December 2022, a significant surge in user interactions related to the boycotts—comprising reactions, comments, and shares—was observed. This led to notable variations in the Interactivity Score among the brands, with Leroy Merlin achieving the highest engagement, followed by Decathlon and Auchan (Figure 6). Leroy Merlin, in particular, stood

out with an Interactivity Score peaking at 79, indicating its posts elicited higher engagement than 79% of the analyzed Polish Facebook profiles. This heightened engagement was not merely a reflection of post volume but was significantly influenced by the nature of the public discourse—predominantly negative comments stemming from the boycott calls. The heightened engagement levels, despite relatively fewer posts, were attributed to the public's boycott actions, particularly the extensive negative commentary.
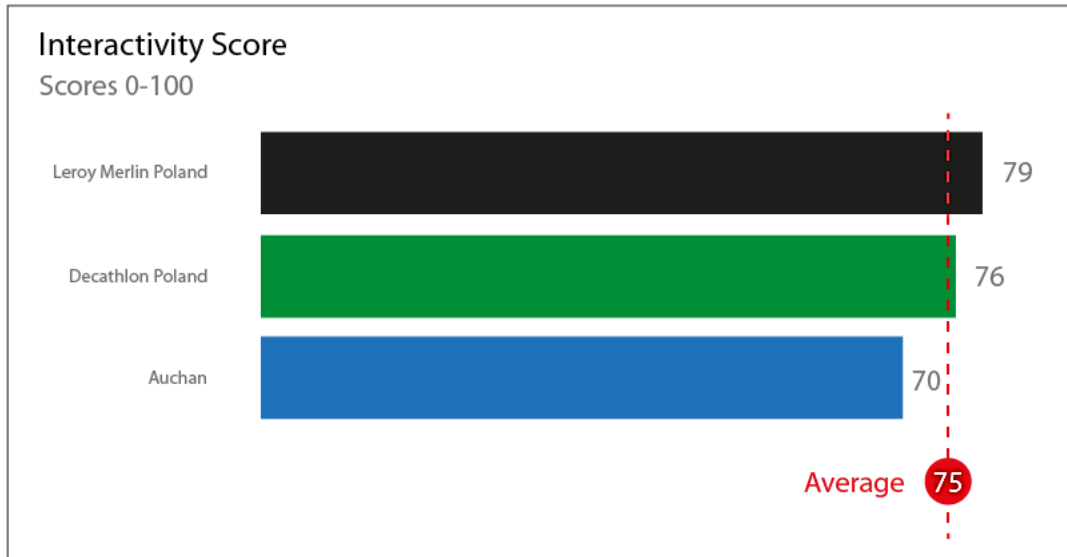

Figure 6. Interactivity Score.

Analysing the Interactivity Score trend over time, we can see that there was a significant volume of posts on Decathlon's profile as early as the end of February, just after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Customers clearly started to communicate their dissatisfaction with the brand remaining on the Russian market and declared a boycott of purchases at Decathlon in favour of the competition. In contrast, high engagement on the profiles of Auchan and Leroy Merlin was only recorded in March, when the decision not to withdraw these brands from Russia was publicised. Comments also drew attention to the barcodes of goods from Russia and Belarus (Figure 7).
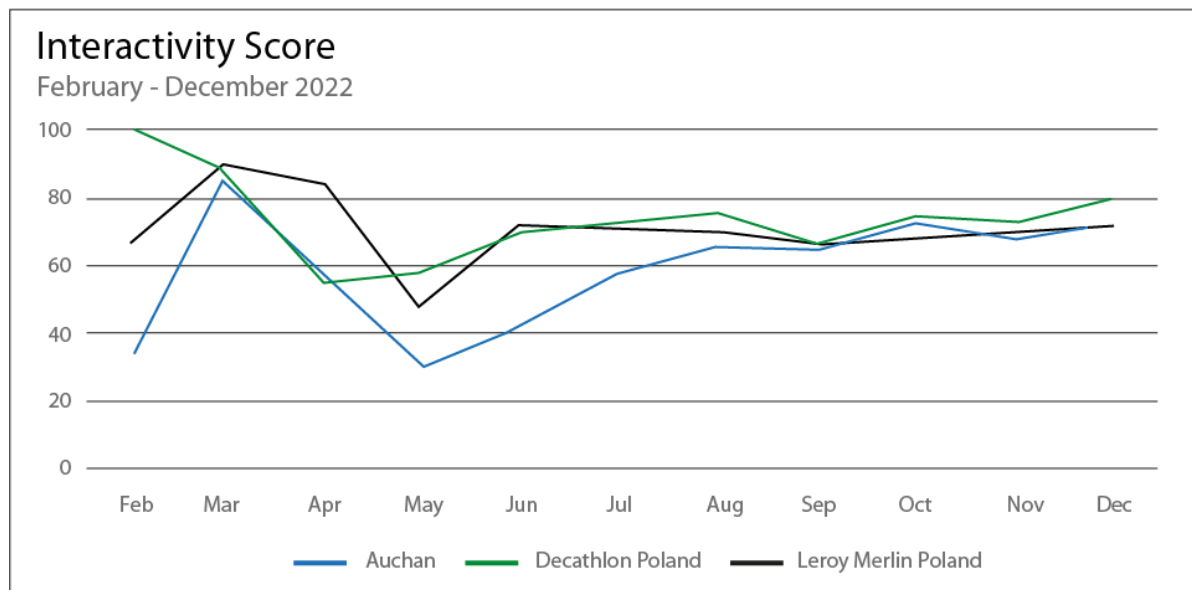
Figure 7. Interactivity Score divided by months.

In April, the Auchan and Decathlon brands decided to stop publishing posts, which resulted in a drop in engagement on these two profiles. Leroy Merlin, on the other hand, published 4 posts on its Facebook in April, all referring to Ukraine aid. However, the reception of the content was far from what was expected, with ANGRY and HAHA type reactions dominating under the posts and more than 60% of the comments having negative overtones. In May, content started to appear on Decathlon's profile again, which resulted in an increase in Interactivity Score. User comments ranged from those relating to the boycott of the Mulliez chain to those relating directly to product communication. There was still not a single post on the Auchan profile, while a post referring to Mother's Day appeared on the Leroy Merlin website, but was quickly removed due to the high number of negative comments. From June 2022, the situation changed and all profiles returned to regular posting. Comments calling for boycotts still appeared, but their number steadily decreased, Interactiviy Score began to stabilise.

4.1. Content analysis

Between February 24th and December 31st, 2022, there were nearly 342,000 mentions (including posts and comments) of the brands Auchan, Decathlon, and Leroy Merlin on Facebook. These mentions underwent a detailed content analysis, which identified three main discussion themes:

1. Topics related to the war, including the suspension of business operations in Russia and consumer-driven activism.
2. Product-related content, focusing on store operations and offerings in Poland.
3. Mentions concerning product availability, promotions, and events sponsored by the brands.

For both Auchan and Leroy Merlin Polska, war-related content accounted for 32% of the total mentions, while the remaining 68% comprised various other topics (Figure 8). In contrast, Decathlon Polska had a significantly smaller share of war-related content at 15%, with the majority (85%) focused on non-war topics. Auchan had the highest total volume of content, with 49,084 war-related mentions and 105,028 other mentions. Overall, the data suggests that while all three brands experienced discussions linked to the war, Decathlon Polska had relatively less war-focused content compared to the other two brands.
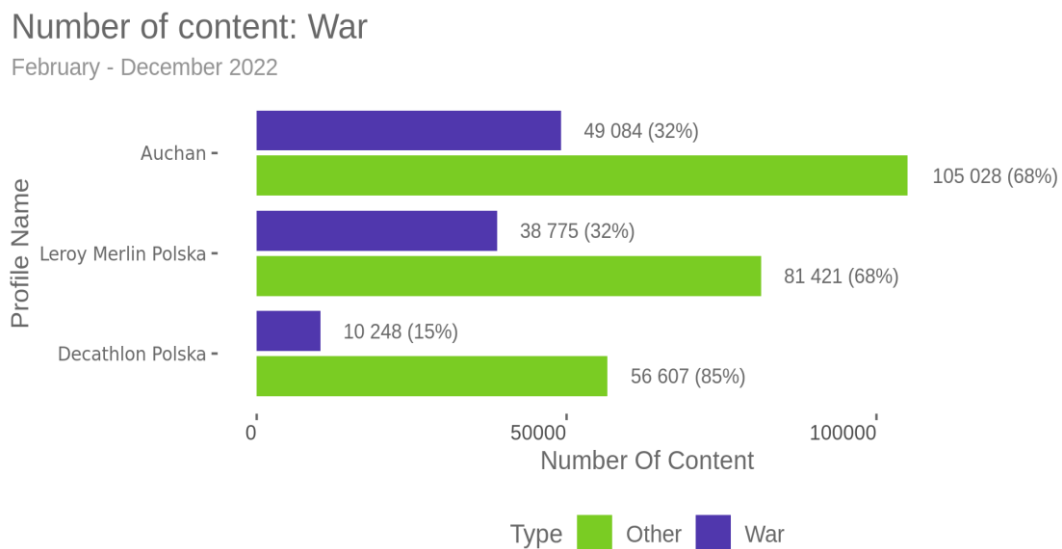

Figure 8. Number of war-related content.

The war-related data were further broken down into three specific categories: Boycott, Exit from Russia, and Other content (Figure 9). For Auchan, mentions related to boycotts made up 45% of the total war-related content, slightly surpassing discussions about their decision not to leave the Russian market (44%). This pattern might be linked to the competitive dynamics in the Polish market, where Decathlon faces limited competition, Leroy Merlin has a moderate level of competition, and Auchan is appealing to more price-sensitive consumers. Additionally, there was significant skepticism regarding the brands' strategies, with fewer demands for their withdrawal from Russia. This response may be attributed to the fact that none of the brands are Polish or have significant Polish ownership, potentially shaping the tone of public criticism.

The bar chart shows that Auchan had the highest volume of content across all three categories, with a notable portion allocated to boycott-related discussions. Leroy Merlin's content was balanced between boycott mentions (21%) and criticisms regarding their continued operations in Russia (53%). Decathlon, however, had a significant share of content focused on other issues (39%), indicating less emphasis on activism-related topics compared to the other two brands. This distribution highlights varying levels of public pressure and criticism faced by each brand during the analyzed period.

Number of content in each context
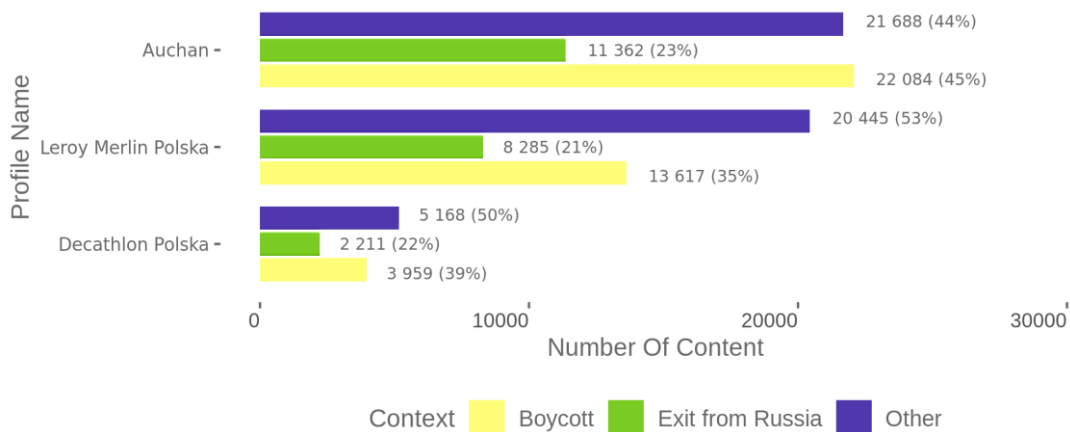February - December 2022

Figure 9. Number of content related to Boycott, Exit from Russia, Other.

Activism-related content, including calls for boycotts and criticism of the brands' choices to continue operations in the Russian market, attracted significant levels of user engagement (Figure 10). Although this type of content accounted for a smaller fraction of the total posts (notably for Decathlon), it still generated a high volume of interactions, highlighting the substantial role that social and geopolitical issues play in driving user activity.

Boycott-related discussions for Leroy Merlin Polska and Decathlon Polska, in particular, received strong user responses, signaling heightened public sentiment and critical engagement. This high level of interaction, especially for Leroy Merlin, appears to be influenced by consumer perceptions of the brand's strategic decisions within a sensitive geopolitical context. Overall, the data indicate that consumer activism had a pronounced effect on engagement patterns, with topics related to activism contributing significantly to the overall user interactions, despite their smaller share of the content. This finding suggests that, while general brand-related posts continued to be important, discussions driven by consumer activism had a considerable influence on shaping the broader public discourse surrounding these brands.

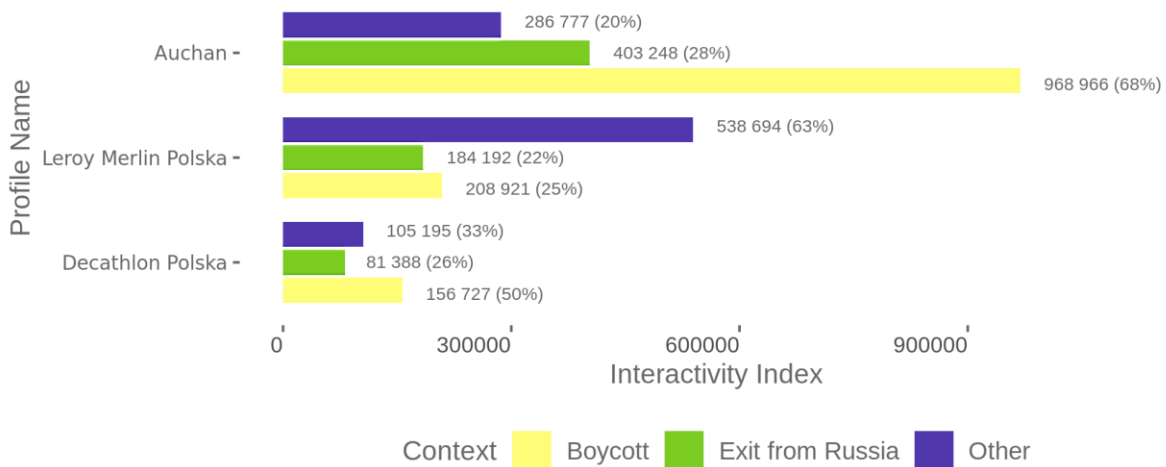**Engagement in each context: Interactivity Index**

February - December 2022

Figure 10. Engagement related to Boycott, Exit from Russia and Other content.

5. Discussion

This study provides insights into the dynamics of consumer engagement and sentiment on social media in the context of geopolitical conflict, specifically examining the response to the Mulliez Group's continued operations in Russia during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Our findings reveal a clear pattern in consumer behavior, characterized by an initial surge in engagement and a predominance of negative sentiment, particularly during the early stages of the conflict in March 2022. This heightened activity underscores the capacity of social media to rapidly mobilize consumer activism and drive widespread participation in boycotts, leveraging the platform's reach and immediacy to amplify consumer voices.

However, as the analysis indicates, this intense initial engagement is often short-lived. Despite the strong response observed immediately following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the level of consumer activism and negative sentiment gradually subsided within a few months. The decline in engagement aligns with the concept of hedonic adaptation, where individuals initially exhibit strong emotional responses to significant events but gradually return to a baseline level of emotional intensity (Brickman, Campbell, 1971; Frederick, Loewenstein, 1999). This pattern suggests that while social media can be effective in mobilizing rapid, short-term activism, sustaining such movements over a prolonged period may be challenging due to shifts in public attention and emotional adaptation.

The stabilization of sentiment observed towards the end of the year further highlights the transient nature of public discontent. Although the conflict persisted, the intensity of negative consumer sentiment waned, pointing to the importance of strategic brand responses in managing the long-term impact of social media activism.

5.1. Implications for brand communication strategies

As consumer activism becomes more prominent on social media, companies face increasing pressure to manage these movements effectively, particularly in times of crisis. The rise of social media activism necessitates that brands develop comprehensive crisis communication strategies that include prompt acknowledgment of consumer concerns and transparent responses (Chavis, Leslie, 2009). Successful crisis management often involves directly engaging with stakeholders and addressing issues openly to rebuild trust (Pöyry, Laaksonen, 2022). However, a lack of response or inadequate handling of consumer grievances can exacerbate negative sentiment and lead to long-term damage to the brand's reputation (Koku, 2012).

The implications of this research emphasize the necessity for well-crafted brand communication strategies, particularly in responding to consumer activism on social media during socio-political crises. The backlash faced by the Mulliez Group for continuing operations in Russia illustrates the power of digital activism in shaping brand perception. Effective strategies, therefore, involve comprehensive crisis management practices that include real-time sentiment monitoring, active stakeholder engagement, and a dynamic approach to communication.

One of the critical elements in crisis communication is the use of transparent messaging. As seen in the case of Leroy Merlin, the absence of clear communication initially heightened the negative sentiment. Image Restoration Theory (IRT) offers a useful framework for addressing such crises, emphasizing strategies like corrective actions, partial apologies, and expressions of accountability (Benoit, 1997). These approaches are designed to convey sincerity and demonstrate the brand's commitment to addressing the underlying issues, which can be instrumental in rebuilding consumer trust.

Incorporating accommodative strategies, as outlined in the Contingency Theory of Accommodation (CTA), may provide an effective pathway for brands dealing with crises. The use of apologies, compensation, and expressions of sympathy can help de-escalate negative sentiment and enhance brand reputation (Coombs, 2015). Decathlon's adaptive approach, shifting its focus to community aid and engagement, highlights how accommodative responses can temper initial backlash and foster a more positive public dialogue. This adaptive strategy aligns with the need for brands to remain flexible, responding to changing consumer expectations and sentiment in real time.

Monitoring engagement metrics, such as Interactivity and Engagement Scores, offers a data-driven method to assess the effectiveness of communication strategies. High engagement levels, especially when driven by activism-related content, underscore the importance of actively participating in ongoing discussions rather than remaining silent. A "no comment" approach, as noted by Ulrich & Flöter (2014), is often interpreted as an admission of guilt and can exacerbate the crisis. Engaging directly with the conversation and acknowledging consumer concerns can help mitigate backlash and maintain a positive brand presence. This aligns with the recommendations from the Contingency Theory, which suggests balancing advocacy and accommodation to effectively navigate crisis situations (Cancel et al., 1997).

The choice of communication platform also plays a significant role in shaping brand messaging during a crisis. Schultz et al. (2011) argue that the medium of communication can be as important as the message itself, given the varying preferences of different consumer segments across platforms. For example, younger audiences may prefer immediate updates on platforms, while more detailed and community-oriented discussions may be better suited for Facebook. Tailoring the communication strategy to fit the platform's unique characteristics enhances the reach and impact of the brand's message, ensuring that it resonates with the target audience.

An evolutionary and adaptive approach to brand communication, as highlighted by Coombs (2015) and Do & Nham (2021), can be particularly effective in managing the fluid nature of social media activism. The findings show a transition from initial outrage to a more balanced sentiment over time, suggesting that brands benefit from an adaptive strategy that evolves with the changing dynamics of public discourse. By actively listening to consumer feedback and adjusting their messaging accordingly, brands can better navigate the complexities of digital activism, reducing the risk of prolonged reputational damage.

Moreover, the use of accommodative tactics, such as apologies and corrective actions, can be enhanced by incorporating elements of Image Restoration Theory (IRT) and Contingency Theory. For example, expressing sympathy and offering compensation can help demonstrate the brand's commitment to consumer well-being, fostering a sense of empathy and understanding (Coombs, 2015; Scher, Darley, 1997). This approach not only addresses the immediate concerns of the consumer but also helps build a long-term positive relationship, positioning the brand as responsive and responsible.

In summary, the integration of proactive monitoring, accommodative strategies, and platform-specific communication methods forms the backbone of effective brand communication in the context of social media activism. Leveraging frameworks like IRT and CTA provides a structured approach for responding to crises, allowing brands to balance advocacy with accommodation while addressing consumer concerns transparently. By maintaining an active dialogue, adapting messaging based on consumer feedback, and employing a data-driven approach to engagement metrics, brands can effectively manage crises, mitigate reputational risks, and strengthen consumer trust.

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