

“When what we eat puts our life at risk” How do we punish brands?

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Abstract

• *Objective*

This article aims to study the concept of brand punishment by the customer and its characteristics. The context chosen is when the customer has to face a food crisis that could harm health. The article also seeks to understand the interaction effect of three determinants on the psychological punishment mechanism: the brand-customer affective relationship, the negative emotions generated by the crisis, and the perceived severity of the crisis.

• *Methodology*

A review of the literature on negative customer reactions, particularly on customer revenge and related concepts, made it possible to introduce the concept of customer punishment and to propose the research hypotheses. We conducted an experiment using cartoons with a sample of 432 respondents to test these hypotheses.

• *Findings*

This article highlights the concept of customer punishment by elaborating a typology of punishing actions and clarifying its psychological process under the influence of the affective brand-customer relationship. The results underline the preponderance of the “*love becomes hate*” effect of the affective brand-customer relationship.

• *Managerial implications*

Food brands must adopt a responsive, transparent, and explanatory communication strategy to reduce the perceived severity of the crisis. They should propose corrective actions to alleviate customer anxiety. If the brand is not responsible for the crisis, clarifying responsibility for the crisis is an interesting strategy for mitigating customer anger by reducing the perceived severity. The brand must also establish a short and long-term crisis communication management strategy.

• *Originality*

The article highlights the concept of customer punishment, which has not yet been studied in marketing. The methodological approach of cartoons helps the respondent immerse themselves in the experience. The context of a food safety crisis is original because previous works dealing with negative customer reactions have primarily focused on service failures.

• **Keywords:** customer punishment, food safety crisis, brand-customer relationship, negative emotions, customer revenge.

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