

Socially Responsible Communication in the Service of the Ethical Enterprise

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how firms' ethical practices affect consumers' decisions not to boycott, particularly when one or more incident(s) are perceived as unethical. It also highlights the moderating role of socially responsible communication in this dynamic. In an environment marked by heightened awareness of ethical issues, companies increasingly have to justify their actions to an active and connected public. The empirical study conducted with 279 respondents shows that a strong ethical commitment can positively influence the decision not to boycott, even when unethical incident(s) are perceived. Furthermore, the results indicate that socially responsible communication mobilizes social-media users in support of the firm, thereby mitigating boycott intentions by reinforcing the firm's moral legitimacy. These findings provide actionable insights into the levers companies can use to safeguard their image in a context where consumers are growingly sensitive to ethical concerns.

Keywords: Corporate Ethical Practices; Boycott; Non-Boycott; Digital Social Networks; Socially Responsible Communication.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer mobilization dates back to the late eighteenth century and gradually fostered collective critical competences able to challenge political and economic spheres (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2012). Within this dynamic, boycott follows a historical trajectory of activism driven by successive local and international civic initiatives. It constitutes a vehicle of expression for global civil society and operates as a counter-power, akin to class struggles that marked the industrial era (Nyström & Vendramin, 2015).

Digital social networks (DSNs) have reshaped stakeholder relationships—particularly firm–customer—by establishing new power asymmetries in which consumers possess greater mobilization capacity. Firms are thus urged to construct and disseminate a coherent worldview (Aron & Chtourou, 2014), aligned with dominant social norms and grounded in transparency (Sauvajol-Rialland, 2012), by foregrounding ethical practices that can preserve reputational capital.

In this perspective, socially responsible corporate communication (hereafter, SRCC) becomes a central engagement lever capable of shaping stakeholders' behaviors. It is especially strategic in interactive digital environments where support or rejection spreads at scale (Cai & Ding, 2023; Macca et al., 2024). Recent research confirms that SRCC delivered via social media—especially Facebook and Instagram—stimulates consumer engagement, influences perceptions of a firm's social image, and strengthens loyalty (Leclercq-Machado et al., 2022; Macca et al., 2024).

Generational and technological shifts have integrated new communication tools with traditional forms of mobilization, broadening opportunities for interaction between brands and their communities. This study investigates the concept of non-boycott through the mobilization of virtual communities, particularly via DSNs.

It examines ethical business practices- especially when an incident is perceived as unethical- and the moderating role that SRCC may play in consumer perception and reaction.

Our objective is to determine to what extent a firm's ethical practices, via DSN mobilization, can shield it from boycott when faced with perceived unethical incident(s), and how SRCC might strengthen the decision of non-boycott. The article proceeds in four sections: theoretical background; research methodology; analysis of a quantitative survey with 279 respondents; and a discussion of contributions, limitations, and avenues for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Corporate Ethical Practices: A Strategic Imperative

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a voluntary approach that integrates social, environmental, and ethical concerns into core economic activities and stakeholder relations (Van Marrewijk, 2003; Freeman et al., 2010). While the concept lacks full consensus, it encompasses sustainability, business ethics, philanthropy, and corporate citizenship (Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2011; Popa & Salanta, 2014; Koos, 2012). ISO 26000 and the GRI framework structure commitments across economic, environmental, and social pillars (Capelli et al., 2015).

At the heart of CSR lies ethics - a set of guiding benchmarks for rightful action (Toti & Moulins, 2017) - which assumes the reconciliation of performance and responsibility (Nilles, 1998). The organizational ethical climate -a shared perception of internal ethical practices (Victor & Cullen, 1988; Lavorata, 2007) - becomes a lever for transformational change.

Stakeholder theory underscores the importance of addressing expectations of both internal and external actors. In this frame, firm – consumer relations are fundamental: consumers expect brands to embody values and concrete commitments (Handelman & Arnold, 1999; Janssen & Swaen, 2017).

Adopting ethical practices enhances reputation (Fombrun et Van Riel, 1997), image (Parguel & Benoît-Moreau, 2007), and consumer loyalty (Ali et al., 2015). Signal theory further suggests such actions are read as reliability cues (Luce et al., 2001), enabling competitive advantage and durable differentiation (Dellech, 2013).

In sum, transparent and engaging SRCC is a strategic vector of intangible performance, capable of turning consumers into ambassadors- or detractors- thereby reinforcing the need for coherent practices aligned with dominant societal values.

Digital Social Networks: Territories of Collective Engagement and CSR Levers

DSNs have become pivotal spaces for mobilization. Melucci (1983) contends that new information and communication technologies maintain latent networks that surface during collective mobilizations on salient issues before submerging again into everyday life. Traditional territorial notions (Alliès, 1980; Le Roux & Thébault, 2018) now extend to virtual territories structured around uses, symbols, and communities (Musso, 2008, 2009).

These virtual territories facilitate the formation of online communities where collective emotions and identities are expressed (Badouard, 2013; Granjon, 2017). Collective emotions fuel activism through “moral shocks” (Gerbaudo, 2012). Platforms such as Facebook activate militant interactivity and reinforce belonging (Granjon, 2017).

DSNs deeply reshape SRCC by fostering interactive, direct, and continuous dialogue with stakeholders; they enhance transparency and organizational responsiveness to societal expectations (Ali et al., 2015; Colleoni, 2013; Belafhaili et al., 2017). As a strategic lever, SRCC on these platforms elicits positive emotional responses, stimulates expressive consumer behavior, and spurs allyship - potentially transforming consumers into ambassadors when discourse aligns with concrete actions.

Consequently, firms should interpret digital resistance (Peñaloza & Price, 1993) as a meaningful signal, requiring a responsible stance. The strategic challenge is to adopt authentic, participatory SRCC aligned with emerging values and emotions within digital territories (Urlaub, 2012).

Ethical practices, while driving online mobilization, may also play a preventive role by moderating the intensity or virulence of DSN reactions. A firm perceived as socially responsible and sincerely engaged benefits from reputational capital that can temper criticism in the face of a punctual non-conforming incident. Consumers may adopt a more nuanced posture, leveraging DSNs not to punish but to question or dialogue. Ethical coherence thus becomes a symbolic shield against protest movements.

H1. The adoption of ethical practices by the firm positively influences mobilization on digital social networks (DSNs) when one or more incident(s) are perceived as unethical.

1.3. Boycott in the Era of DSNs

Historically rooted in civic resistance, boycott is now a widely mobilized repertoire of collective action (Friedman, 1999). It functions both preventively and punitively (Klein et al., 2004; Amirault-Thébault, 1999) to discipline firms vis-à-vis ethical, social, or environmental expectations. The digital turn has transformed its modalities: mobilization now relies on DSNs, enabling rapid worldwide diffusion of e-boycott campaigns (Makarem & Jae, 2016; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010) and broadening geographic reach.

Against this citizen pressure, CSR has become strategic. Once fuzzy, it is now embedded in governance, supplier relations, and communication (Popa & Salanta, 2014; Ukko et al., 2022). It aims to reconcile economic performance and societal responsibility within an inclusive-capitalism logic (Aggeri & Godard, 2006; Martinet & Reynaud, 2004).

Within stakeholder theory, CSR engages actors influenced by corporate activity: employees, consumers, NGOs, governments, etc. (Ali et al., 2015). Beyond voluntarism, it is structured by norms and practices designed to meet rising demands for legitimacy and sustainability (Birindelli et al., 2015). Boycott reveals perceived CSR failures yet catalyzes transformation by compelling firms to reevaluate practices, intensify stakeholder dialogue, and operationalize commitments credibly. In this context, a firm perceived as ethically coherent may reduce the likelihood of hostile mobilization even amid perceived unethical incident(s). Trust accumulated over time through sincere, transparent practices plays a protective role.

H2. Supportive DSN mobilization in favor of a firm known for its ethical practices positively affects the decision of non-boycott when the firm faces perceived unethical incident(s).

Socially Responsible Corporate Communication (SRCC)

SRCC has undergone a major transformation from one-way diffusion to dialogic and interactive engagement, particularly via DSNs (Colleoni, 2013). This evolution enables direct, continuous exchanges with stakeholders, strengthening transparency of commitments and responsiveness to societal expectations (Blanc et al., 2017). Sustainability communication encompasses internal and external communications aimed not only at informing about environmental and social performance but also at fostering genuine stakeholder engagement (Perez & Rodriguez Del Bosque, 2012; Manetti & Bellucci, 2016).

Motivations to communicate on sustainability are multiple: increased media attention, external pressures, and the need to protect reputation or legitimacy (Cho et al., 2017; Blanc et al., 2017; Apostol et al., 2021). Beyond firm-controlled messaging, external sources—media, customers, watchdog groups, online communities—play a major role in disseminating and legitimizing information, amplifying the impact of CSR communication (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Ali et al., 2015).

Current research examines how SRCC is constructed internally through the sensemaking lens (Weick, 1995; Apostol et al., 2021), whereby organizational members actively craft meaning around sustainable commitments via reflective and narrative processes.

SRCC is thus an essential strategic lever to strengthen reputation and trust. It must rest on sincere, coherent, and open discourse that fosters active exchange with all stakeholders (Testarmata et al., 2018)—all the more crucial in a digital environment where rapid diffusion coincides with heightened expectations. Moral habits shape how firms conceive and implement CSR daily (Oldham et al., 2025), yet may be challenged by contestation- often voiced on social media- requiring justification or adjustment. Responsible communication is therefore dynamic and adaptive, maintaining coherence between stated values and enacted practices.

In crises involving perceived unethical incident(s), authentic, coherent SRCC can strengthen consumer mobilization on DSNs; not to amplify protest or encourage boycott, but to foster constructive support for non-boycott. This dynamic reflects pre-existing trust and durable stakeholder engagement that act as a shield against controversy.

H3. In firms known for ethical practices, SRCC strengthens, in the face of perceived unethical incident(s), DSN mobilization by socially responsible consumers in favor of the decision of non-boycott.

Based on the various causal relationships that enabled us to formulate our three hypotheses, our conceptual model is presented as follows:

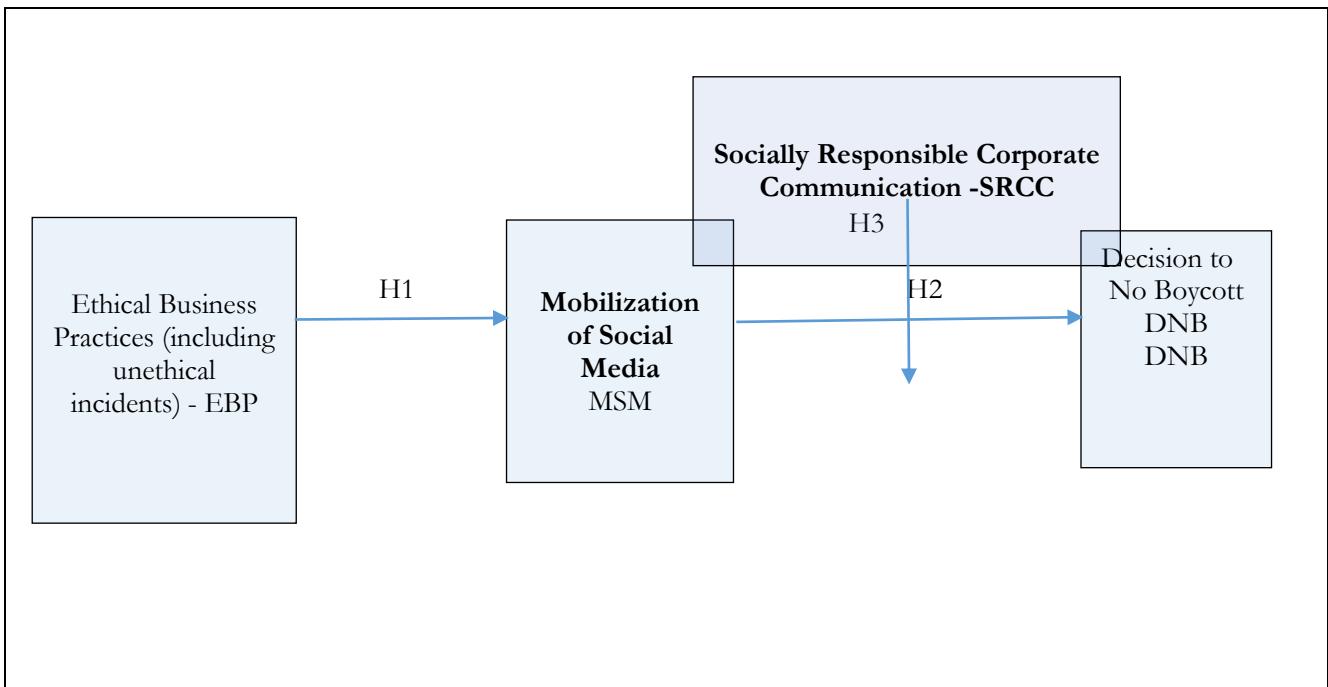


Figure 1: Conceptual model: Impact of ethical practices on protection against boycott decisions

METHODOLOGY

Target Population, Study Context, and Sampling Method

We fielded an online questionnaire among users of digital platforms, including consumers, administrators of consumer-rights groups, and university community members. The non-probability purposive sample comprised 279 individuals (Kline, 2005). We ensured heterogeneity in gender, age, socio-professional status, income, and DSN experience, targeting participants likely to be sensitized to boycott and CSR issues.

Measures and Data Collection Procedures

To mitigate interviewer effects—particularly Pygmalion effects (Gavard-Perret et al., 2012)—the survey was administered online. The introduction emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers to foster candid responses. We also used a snowball approach, inviting respondents to share the link via email and social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, X/Twitter, Instagram, etc.). Participation was voluntary; anonymity and confidentiality were strictly observed.

Measures relied on validated scales. Corporate ethical practices were measured using Abid & Moulins (2014) (10 items). DSN mobilization (mediator) used Le Roux et al. (2015) (6 items). Non-boycott was adapted from Cissé-Depardon & N'Goal (2009) (6 items) by reversing items initially designed to capture boycott intentions, given the conceptual linkage between non-adherence to boycott and perceived ethical conduct and the absence of a dedicated non-boycott scale. SRCC (moderator) used Capelli & Sabadie (2005) (6 items).

A final section collected socio-demographics. The questionnaire was hosted on Google Forms. A pretest with 80 respondents verified clarity, coherence, and comprehension of items and constructs.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The sample comprises 46% men and 54% women. Table 1 details the socio-demographic profile.

Table 1. Description of the Sample from the Final Data Collection (n = 279)

Sample characteristics		Effective	Percentage
Genre	Boys	127	46%
	Girls	152	54%
	Under 20 years old	30	30 %
	21 to 30 years old	64	28 %

Age	31 to 40 years old	61	24 %
	41 to 50 years old	88	18 %
	over 50 years	36	
Employment status	Employee	143	51%
	Independent - contractor / freelancer	25	9%
	Business owner / self-employed	59	21%
	Other (unemployed, student, retired, etc.)	52	19%
Experience of social media use	Less than 3 years	27	10%
	3 to 5 years	86	31%
	5 to 10 years	67	24%
	More than 10 years	99	35%

Psychometric Quality (Exploratory Factor Analysis)

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) indicates satisfactory data quality. All KMO indices exceed 0.50 and Bartlett's tests are significant ($p \leq 0.000$), confirming factorability. Total explained variance exceeds 60% across scales, and Cronbach's alphas are all above 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Table 2: Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Coded variables	Explained variance	Cronbach's Alpha	KMO	Statistical significance
EBP	72	0,729	0,805	P = 0,000
MSM	72	0,790	0,897	P = 0,000
NBD	65	0,722	0,927	P = 0,000
SRCC	70	0,738	0,952	P = 0,000

EBP: *Ethical Business Practices* - MSM: *Mobilization of Social Media* - NBD: *Non-Boycott Decision* - SRCC: *Socially Responsible Corporate Communication*.

Confirmatory Analysis

We assessed the conceptual model via confirmatory analysis using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), given its robustness for confirmatory factor analysis and complex model validation (Hair et al., 2016). We tested the measurement (outer) and structural (inner) models simultaneously.

Measurement Model Validation

Applying the PLS algorithm to the full sample, we evaluated internal reliability and convergent validity via composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha, average variance extracted (AVE), Jöreskog's rho (ρ), and discriminant validity. Table 3 reports the indicators.

Table 3: Validity and Reliability

Coded latent variables	Alpha de Cronbach	Rho de Jöreskog; ρ	CR	AVE
EBP	0,746	0,313	0,728	0,789
MSM	0,758	0,816	0,830	0,668
NBD	0,806	0,823	0,787	0,673
SRCC	0,786	0,788	0,875	0,700

Discriminant Validity

We examined discriminant validity using cross-loadings and the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Indicator loadings on their respective constructs exceeded cross-loadings. Diagonal entries (square root of AVE) were greater than inter-construct correlations.

Table 4: Fornell–Larcker criterion

	EBP	MSM	DBD	SRCC
EBP	0,840			
MSM	0,314	0,714		
NBD	0,427	0,532	0,790	
SRCC	0,552	0,552	0,120	0,688

Structural Model Evaluation

We assessed predictive accuracy with R^2 (squared correlation between observed and predicted values for each endogenous construct; Hair et al., 2016). Endogenous constructs exhibited substantial predictive power with R^2 values ranging from 0,503 (DNB) to 0,838, confirming robustness (Croutsche, 2009). Predictive relevance (Stone–Geisser's Q^2) was positive across constructs (Hair et al., 2021). We also examined effect sizes (f^2 ; Cohen, 1988) and multicollinearity via VIF (all < 5).

Table 5: Results of the structural model fit validity test

Coded latent variables	R²	Adjusted R²	Q²	f²	VIF
EBP	0,815	0,814	0,546	0,195	1,314
MSM	0,822	0,820	0,627	0,297	1,066
NBD	0,503	0,498	0,602	0,158	2,43
	0,838	0,837	0,533	0,285	3,061
SRCC	0,824	0,823	0,036	0,301	2,93

Hypothesis Testing

We tested direct effects using bootstrapping. Coefficients were deemed significant when $|t| > 1.96$ and $p < 0.05$. Table 6 summarizes the path results.

Table 6: Analysis of path coefficients

Hypothesis	Path	t-Value	P-Value (sig)	Accepted/ Rejected
H1	EBP -> MSM	2,895	0,019	Accepted
H2	MSM -> NBD	2,428	0,016	Accepted
H3	SRCC-> NBD	2,434	0,000	Accepted

We also explored the mediating role of DSN mobilization by examining specific indirect effects. Paths involving three constructs showed significant indirect effects with $t > 2$. Table 7 reports the results.

Table 7: Specific indirect effects

Lien	t-Value	P-Value (sig)
EBP -> MSM -> NBD	2,691	0,007

DISCUSSION

Our results confirm that, in the current context, DSNs constitute strategic spaces of mobilization where engaged consumers actively share social and environmental concerns (Füller, 2010). Recent work shows social-media marketing can reinforce brand loyalty via consumer engagement (Shelash AlHawary & AlFassed, 2022; Fetais et al., 2022). When a firm adopts ethical practices and is perceived as attentive to stakeholders, consumer loyalty strengthens, and consumers may act as defenders in reputational crises (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Raïes & Gavard-Perret, 2011). This resilience is explained by attachment, brand identification, and valorization of social engagement (Moorman et al., 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). DSNs intensify this

engagement by enabling community mobilization around brand ethics, favorably influencing loyalty (Fetais et al., 2022; Fatma & Khan, 2023; Alsharari et al., 2024). Participants can resist negative information and even become brand ambassadors (Raïes & Gavard-Perret, 2011), creating a “reservoir of goodwill” that strengthens the trust-commitment-loyalty nexus, especially when CSR is seen as authentic (Waghmare et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2024).

Responsibility-centered communication focused on ethical practices positively shapes consumer reactions- via DSNs in particular- in trust and loyalty (Lecompte & Valette-Florence, 2006; Cho et al., 2017). Fetais et al. (2022) demonstrate that responsible communication activities enhance community engagement, and Fatma & Khan (2023) show that perceived CSR authenticity strengthens loyalty and support. However, opportunistic or top-down communication can trigger distrust or boycott (Le Roux & Thébault, 2018). Firms should thus adopt authentic communication aligned with savvy consumer expectations to reinforce attractiveness while hedging against reputational crises (Siadou-Martin & de Lanauze, 2010; Aron & Chtourou, 2014).

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Ultimately, socially responsible behavior aims to balance economic, ecological, and social dimensions while addressing stakeholder expectations. To guard against boycott risks amplified by DSN mobilization, managers should strengthen the social dimension of practices by identifying social, environmental, and ethical issues that elicit the greatest consumer sensitivity- particularly in the Tunisian context- and assessing themes most likely to trigger boycott reactions. This proactive approach positions CSR as a strategic lever of legitimization and reputational protection.

Firms should maintain an active digital presence and vigilant listening to stakeholder expectations and reactions. Effective digital communication entails ongoing dialogue and rigorous assessment of the usability and effectiveness of social-media channels used to relay CSR initiatives. As our results show, DSN engagement can translate into positive mobilization in favor of responsible firms. Investing in trust-based relationships can both consolidate reputation and attenuate the effects of perceived irresponsible incidents.

In crisis contexts, a proactive and reactive CSR communication strategy acts as a buffer: it showcases responsible and ethical efforts while reassuring stakeholders. Integrating SRCC at the heart of strategic positioning bolsters credibility, CSR perceptions, and overall attractiveness- provided communication is abundant, diverse, coherent, and interactive across digital channels.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study has limitations. First, we did not test the model on a specific brand or community type. Future work should validate findings across sectors and community configurations, examining socially responsible behavior and SRCC within a dialogic stakeholder-interaction perspective. Second, deeper analysis should focus on the most used socio-digital channels in Tunisia- especially Facebook- to precisely gauge their role in mobilization dynamics concerning boycott and non-boycott, firms' response strategies, and the capacity of SRCC to diffuse or defuse reputation crises.

Third, the absence of a dedicated non-boycott scale required us to invert a boycott-intention scale. Future research should develop and validate instruments specifically tailored to non-boycott decisions and supportive behavior. Finally, the model could be enriched by incorporating perceived transparency, credibility of CSR communication, and social-norm effects within virtual communities, and by conducting cross-cultural comparisons to test generalizability and uncover cultural specificities. A systematic content analysis of Tunisian firms' Facebook pages could help build a context-sensitive conceptual framework for SRCC on digital networks.

CONCLUSION

As a historical instrument of contestation, boycott remains a powerful lever of social mobilization-especially via DSNs. In the current context, this study examined how firms' ethical practices- despite perceived unethical incident(s) - influence online consumer mobilization toward non-boycott. Results underscore the moderating role of SRCC as a protective factor against negative stakeholder reactions and highlight how digital technologies enable firms to better understand and dialogue with stakeholders on ethical, social, and environmental issues. Responsible firms can both prevent boycotts and mobilize defenders even amid incidents, confirming the strategic importance of integrated ethics and proactive-reactive communication in building durable, trust-based consumer relationships.

Declarations

- **Funding:** None declared.
- **Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.
- **Data Availability:** Available upon reasonable request.
- **Ethical Approval:** Not applicable.

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