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How do we react when companies respond?

A study of corporate response strategies in the geopolitical boycott context

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Abstract

Geopolitical conflicts have increasingly exposed multinational firms to consumer boycott pressure, raising the question of how companies should respond to protect consumer relationships. This thesis examines how corporate response strategies to geopolitical boycott pressure influence purchase intention and brand trust among university students in Sweden. While crisis communication and consumer boycott behavior have been studied separately, the intersection of these two streams has received limited empirical attention. Using a quantitative between-subjects vignette survey experiment conducted among students at Lund University, this study compares four response strategies: Denial, Minimization, Corrective Action, and Market Exit. The findings indicate that Corrective Action and Market Exit generated significantly more favorable results than Denial and Minimization across both dependent variables, while the two defensive strategies did not differ significantly from each other. Moreover, female respondents reported significantly lower purchase intention than male respondents. These findings underscore the importance of firms' actions when facing geopolitically driven consumer pressure.

Keywords: geopolitical boycotts, corporate response strategies, purchase intention, brand trust, market exit, vignette survey experiment, quantitative research method

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1. Introduction

Adverse events are an inevitable part of doing business (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). Product failures, unethical conduct, and other forms of organizational misconduct regularly place firms under public scrutiny (Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Kir & Nasir, 2026). In a fast-moving digital media environment, such events can become visible almost instantly through news platforms, social media, and online activism (Mady et al. 2025). As information spreads quickly and consumers are increasingly able to compare brands and switch between alternatives (O'Sullivan et al. 2026; Sen et al. 2001), companies face growing pressure not only to resolve crises operationally but also to communicate their response in ways that address consumer expectations (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). Crisis communication, therefore, becomes a central part of protecting organizational reputation, which is a valuable asset because reputational damage can weaken customer relationships, reduce stakeholder support, and harm future performance (Coombs, 2007). In this sense, crisis communication is not merely a reaction to a negative event, but a strategic effort to preserve trust and brand value.

While the importance of crisis communication is well established (Coombs, 2007), research also shows that not all crises should be managed in the same way (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). Firms generally seek responses that are both effective and efficient: they want to restore confidence and limit reputational damage without overcommitting resources or unnecessarily accepting blame. As found by Arendt et al. (2017), common intuition in research is that accommodative responses, such as apology or Corrective Action, are often more effective because they signal responsibility and concern for stakeholders. However, this does not mean that one response is always superior in all situations. Coombs (2007) shows that the appropriateness of a response depends on how stakeholders attribute responsibility for the crisis, while Dutta and Pullig (2011) demonstrate that the relative effectiveness of response strategies varies depending on the type of crisis. Their study is important because it moves beyond the assumption that Corrective Action is universally the best option.

More specifically, Dutta and Pullig (2011) distinguish between performance-based crises and value-based crises. Performance-based crises concern a brand's ability to deliver its promised functional benefits, for example, through defective or unsafe products. Value-based crises, by contrast, concern whether a firm violates moral, ethical, or socio-political expectations, such as through racism, exploitation, or other controversial conduct. Building on Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory, Dutta and Pullig (2011) compare three response strategies: Denial, Minimization, and Corrective Action. Their findings suggest that crisis-response effectiveness is contingent on crisis type, meaning that a standardized *one-size-fits-all* approach may be suboptimal.

The contemporary business environment suggests a need to look beyond the traditional distinction between performance-based and value-based crises. As highlighted by Casson and Lopes (2013), multinational enterprises (MNEs) have historically been entangled in geopolitical crises due to their operations across large and powerful countries. In recent years, such entanglements have grown more frequent, as conflicts including the Russia-Ukraine war, instability in the Middle East, and trade tensions between China and the United States continue to affect companies operating in these regions (Kir & Nasir, 2026). Unlike conventional brand crises, which typically stem from product failures or ethical transgressions (Dutta & Pullig, 2011), geopolitical crises expose firms to criticism because of their perceived public stance on contentious issues (Bhagwat et al. 2020), or their continued operations in conflict-affected contexts (Tosun & Eshraghi, 2022). These pressures are amplified by digital activism and boycott campaigns on social media, which can accelerate the spread of information and increase consumers' willingness to participate in boycotts (Mady et al. 2025). Firms that overlook the geoeconomic dimensions of politically driven consumer behavior may alienate key market segments (Kir & Nasir, 2026).

Prior research has examined geopolitical conflict and consumer behavior on one hand, and corporate crisis response strategies on the other, yet, to the best of our knowledge, these two streams have not been brought together. Existing studies demonstrate how geopolitical tensions shape consumer attitudes, boycott participation, and purchase intention toward foreign brands (Kir & Nasir, 2026; Mathur, 2025), but the main focus is on consumer reactions before the company applies a response strategy. Separately, Dutta and Pullig's (2011) crisis communication framework identifies response strategies, such as Denial, reduction-of-offensiveness, and Corrective Action, that vary in effectiveness depending on crisis type, yet this work does not address boycotts driven by geopolitical conflict. In addition, Market Exit, which despite being highly visible especially in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war (Tosun & Eshraghi, 2022;

Ganesan & Mallapragada, 2025; Zhuang, 2024), has not previously been evaluated as a corporate response strategy.

Beyond the gap in response strategy research, there are also reasons to expect that consumer reactions to geopolitical boycott pressure may not be uniform. Prior research suggests that individual characteristics may shape how consumers evaluate morally charged corporate behavior. For example, Lindenmeier et al. (2012) find that women reported stronger consumer outrage and stronger boycott intentions than men in response to unethical corporate behavior. Additionally, Cruz et al. (2013) found that women experience higher levels of guilt when purchasing from a boycotted brand, resulting from a greater sensitivity to the ethical implications of supporting a company perceived as harmful. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of corporate response strategies in geopolitical boycott situations may depend not only on the response itself, but also on the characteristics of the consumers evaluating it.

While existing research has examined why consumers participate in geopolitical boycotts (Kir & Nasir, 2026; Mathur, 2025) and how response strategies operate in crisis communication (Dutta & Pullig, 2011), it has not addressed how firms should respond once boycott pressure emerges, nor whether individual characteristics such as gender shape how consumers evaluate those responses. Therefore, it is unclear which strategy yields the most favorable evaluations across different consumer groups in geopolitical boycott contexts.

The primary aim of this study is to determine which corporate response strategy yields the greatest effectiveness in contexts where companies face boycotts driven by geopolitical conflicts, assessing its effects on consumer purchase intention and brand trust. The research question guiding this study is:

How do corporate response strategies to geopolitical boycott pressure affect consumer purchase intention and brand trust?

The empirical analysis will be conducted through a vignette survey experiment that simulates company responses to geopolitical boycott situations. Each scenario will use one of Benoit's (1997) corporate response strategies: Denial, Minimization, Corrective Action or Market Exit, reflecting the reality of conflicts (Tosun & Eshraghi, 2022; Ganesan & Mallapragada, 2025; Zhuang, 2024). Consumer responses are measured through purchase intention and brand trust items to determine which strategy yields the most favorable consumer evaluations. Additionally, the study examines how these effects differ across gender. The target population consists of university students in Sweden, broadly representative of Generation Z consumers. This group was considered particularly relevant given that younger consumers have been increasingly characterized as politically engaged and willing to act on their values through purchasing decisions (O'Sullivan et al. 2026), making them a highly relevant group for studying consumer reactions to corporate behavior in geopolitical contexts.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1 Nature and Evolution of Consumer Boycotts

Consumer boycotts are a phenomenon that has been an integral part of our society and, as such, have been defined by Friedman (1991) as primary tools for influencing consumers' behavior by abstaining from the purchase of selected products in the marketplace to pursue a range of specific objectives, with the individual consumer identified as the primary actor and defining the marketplace as the main ground for accomplishing these ends. Friedman (1991) found that boycotts are fundamentally categorized by their objectives: economic boycotts focus on marketplace goals like price and quality, whereas social or political boycotts target external issues such as environmental protection or civil rights. Furthermore, the author distinguished instrumental boycotts, which pursue practical ends like labor union recognition, from expressive boycotts, which focus on venting consumer frustration. Crucially, the framework introduced the concept of transformational boycotts, whereby a political issue is transformed into an economic one, shifting focus from specific corporate behavior to broader international issues.

While Friedman's (1991) framework remains significant, it overlooks the rapid digital evolution of these movements in a hyper-connected era. In more recent times, these transformational boycotts have adapted into a phenomenon that is both global and deeply political. As Kir and Nasir (2026) argue, consumer activism has undergone a fundamental shift where brands are no longer viewed as neutral market participants but rather as geopolitical proxies, where a foreign brand is framed not solely as a seller of goods but as a symbol of its home nation's policies. When combined with the concept of geoeconomics, the strategic use of economic tools to advance national objectives, it becomes clear that consumer purchasing power now functions as an informal diplomatic lever. Consequently, consumers can instantly filter by country of origin, giving them direct leverage over foreign brands in ways Friedman could not have anticipated.

Within the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict-related boycott, Kir and Nasir (2026) offer a detailed account of how Generation Z consumers have become the most active participants in this landscape. Their study reveals that roughly half of Generation Z consumers comply fully or partially with such boycotts, showing the strongest willingness to pay more, sacrifice product quality, and even endure personal discomfort to align consumption with values. Generation Z, broadly defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019), is the first generation to have grown up entirely within a digitally connected, information environment, making them more likely to base their purchase decisions on shared political beliefs or goals. Similarly, Mathur (2025) found that geopolitical tensions such as the India-China border dispute trigger consumers to avoid the brand altogether, as a symbol of national loyalty and not by product failure. Both studies by Mathur (2025) and Kir and Nasir (2026) establish that brands nowadays serve as proxies for state-level disputes and that Generation Z is most likely to sacrifice product quality and personal convenience for political alignment (Kir & Nasir, 2026), thereby explaining why they represent the most appropriate population to examine for our study.

However, a main limitation of the approaches taken by both Mathur (2025) and Kir and Nasir (2026) is that while they provide rich data on boycott participation and consumer motivations, neither explains how specific corporate response strategies influence the consumer recovery. Their findings exclusively show that geopolitical issues cause consumer-led sanctions and the attack phase of the boycott, yet they overlook the ‘recovery phase’ of the crisis. Furthermore, both studies are situated in the specific geopolitical climates of India and Turkey, and therefore, do not address how these dynamics translate to Western, theoretically neutral markets such as Sweden. This gap forms the core justification for the current study.

2.2 The Consumer’s Internal Struggle

To fully grasp the psychological side of the consumer’s decision-making process, it is necessary to understand that the choice to participate in a boycott is rarely straightforward. This section examines the internal struggle a consumer faces when confronted with a geopolitical boycott by exploring theoretical, emotional, and ideological dimensions of that struggle, and by considering gender as a key individual factor that shapes the intensity of the consumer’s internal struggle. Establishing these dynamics for understanding why certain corporate responses succeed or fail in restoring consumer trust provides the theoretical grounding for this study’s hypotheses.

2.2.1 Theoretical Framework: The Social Dilemma in Consumption

Consumers confronting a boycott exist in a state of internal conflict that Sen et al. (2001) define as a ‘social dilemma’, a situation where an individual’s personal interests conflict with the collective interests of a group. The authors have established that a consumer’s decision sits at the crossroads of self-interest and social concern. As Sen et al. (2001) state, for the majority of consumers, pursuing personal utility is often more desirable in the short run, as the personal costs incurred from withholding consumption frequently outweigh the uncertain utility gained from participating in a boycott. Conversely, it is in the interest of the collective to cooperate in the long run, since greater participation increases the probability of inducing a desired corporate response.

However, several factors make it particularly difficult for the average consumer to join a movement, as identified by Sen et al. (2001). Non-participation yields higher immediate utility, and is often coupled with the feeling that a single contribution is insufficient to make a change; a low perceived efficacy (Sen et al. 2001). Kir and Nasir (2026) found that three-quarters of respondents identify boycott targets as products they use daily, meaning that for Generation Z, whose consumption patterns are heavily tied to global brands, the tension between everyday habit and activist intent amplifies this dilemma. As Kir and Nasir (2026) state, this phenomenon is amplified by technological advancements; while social media facilitates the rapid spread of boycott calls, the resulting information overload can increase perceived inefficacy, leading consumers to act in self-interest.

2.2.2 Emotional Trigger: Consumer Outrage

While the social dilemma provides the structural framework for boycott decisions, the psychological trigger is defined as ‘consumer outrage’ by Lindenmeier et al. (2012): a compound negative moral, emotional reaction to unethical corporate conduct. This emotional response serves as the tipping point of the social dilemma, making consumers willing to sacrifice their personal utility for moral closure. According to the authors, consumers' rationale is explained by two processes: affective processes, representing an immediate, often impulsive emotional response to an event involving unethical corporate conduct, and cognitive processes, which form a rational foundation of outrage based on a disconfirmation of moral norms.

These affective and cognitive responses to unethical corporate conduct are not experienced universally across consumers, and gender has been identified as one of the most important sources of variation in this type of moral-emotional reaction (Lindenmeier et al. 2012). The study by Lindenmeier et al. (2012) revealed that women often reported higher emotional intensity and stronger feelings of consumer outrage, driven more heavily by affective processes, while men's reactions tend to be more cognitive and calculated. Complementing this, Cruz et al. (2013) identify 'perceived guilt' as the internal emotional pressure, a feeling that arises when a consumer realizes that purchasing from an unethical company may contribute to harmful practices. They found that women experience significantly higher levels of guilt when purchasing from a boycotted brand. Since women experience a more emotionally demanding social dilemma, they are expected to evaluate firms involved in geopolitical boycott crises more negatively than men, regardless of the response strategy employed. This reasoning leads to the following hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 1a: Female consumers will report lower purchase intention toward a firm involved in a geopolitical boycott crisis than male consumers.
>
> Hypothesis 1b: Female consumers will report lower brand trust toward a firm involved in a geopolitical boycott crisis than male consumers.

2.3 Corporate Response Frameworks

After establishing that consumers in geopolitical boycott situations experience a psychologically complex social dilemma that varies by gender, the focus now shifts to the firm. Understanding the consumer's internal state is only analytically useful if it is connected to the strategic choices available to management, since the firm's core challenge is not simply to select a response strategy, but to select one capable of resolving the specific psychological conflict the consumer is experiencing. A response that fails to address the source of the consumer's outrage or guilt will not shift their cost-benefit calculation back toward purchasing, regardless of how it is communicated. Critically, the timing of a response further complicates this: Lasarov et al. (2023)

argue that boycotting occurs in two phases, an initial Heat-up phase driven by emotional, impulsive outrage, and a following Cool-down phase in which cognitive, cost-benefit reasoning takes over. Firms responding during the Heat-up phase must therefore address the perceived moral severity of their actions directly, rather than waiting for moral fatigue to reduce consumer resistance. This section evaluates the nature of the crisis firms face and the response strategies available to them, building toward the rationale for this study's four tested conditions.

2.3.1 The Nature of Value-Related Crises

Dutta and Pullig (2011) argue that crises can be of different natures, categorizing them into two broad types based on the type of brand equity they threaten: performance-related crises and value-related crises. They found that performance-related crises refer to instances that involve defective products or failures that prevent the brand from delivering its primary functional benefits. Conversely, the authors state that value-related crises do not involve the product's functionality but rather focus on social or ethical issues related to the brand's values, such as allegations of child labor, racially insensitive remarks, or legal troubles involving high-profile brand figures. Applying this framework, geopolitical boycotts are inherently value-based, as they target a brand’s political alignment rather than its product quality.

Dutta and Pullig (2011) established that value-related crises present a unique challenge to tackle because they generate both social risk, how a consumer is viewed by others, and psychological risk, the internal tension caused by misalignment between personal values and consumption behavior. While symbolic strategies like ‘Reduction of Offensiveness’ may mitigate social risk, the authors found they are ineffective at resolving the ‘inner tension’ caused by psychological risk. Since it is difficult for a consumer to verify a firm’s ethical claims, they remain skeptical of partial explanations (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). Consequently, the sources indicate that full Corrective Action that is both substantive and credible is required, a finding that forms the critical foundation for our study.

2.3.2 Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Following the classification of the crisis, firms must determine the appropriate level of response based on public perception. Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides an evidence-based framework for protecting reputational assets by matching response strategies to the level of responsibility attributed to the firm. He defines 'Attribution of Responsibility' as the central mediator between a crisis and consumer behavior, which is rooted in the instinctive human search for the causes of negative events. SCCT clusters crises into three frames: the victim cluster, where the firm itself is harmed; the accidental cluster, where responsibility is low; and the preventable cluster, where the firm's actions are perceived as intentional (Coombs, 2007).

Coombs (2007) found that the logic of SCCT dictates that as the attribution of responsibility increases, the firm must shift from defensive to accommodative strategies to repair moral trust. The author found that mismatching these responses, specifically under-responding to high-blame situations, can actually worsen the reputational damage. In the geopolitical proxy context, this logic suggests that multinational brands face a significant threat: since Generation Z consumers often view a brand as a proxy for its home nation, they are likely to categorize corporate operations in conflict zones within the preventable cluster (Coombs, 2007). This justifies the need to test substantive responses, such as operational exits, against more traditional defensive strategies. However, SCCT (Coombs, 2007) has a key limitation in geopolitical contexts, since the framework was built around the assumption that responsibility can be objectively determined, meaning that the question concerning the firm's involvement can be answered with a simple yes or no. In geopolitical conflicts, this assumption does not hold, considering that the firm's involvement is determined by consumers' political beliefs, rather than objective facts. Therefore, the same corporate action can be viewed as deeply unethical by one consumer and entirely acceptable by another. SCCT, therefore, cannot fully capture the complexity of geopolitical boycotts, where consumers demand moral and political alignment rather than factual accountability.

2.3.3 The Response "Options": Denial, Minimization, and Corrective Action

Once a crisis is categorized and responsibility is attributed, firms select one of the communicative strategies to repair their standing. Benoit (1997) and Dutta and Pullig (2011) argued that the most defensive of these is Denial, where the organization claims no involvement or asserts that the crisis simply does not exist. While this aims to sever the link between the brand and the transgression, Benoit (1997) found that this is a high-risk strategy; if subsequent evidence proves the firm's involvement, the brand's credibility is often irreparably destroyed. This pattern is reinforced by Arendt et al. (2017) who found defensive strategies such as Denial to be consistently less effective than accommodative responses across a wide range of crisis contexts. For a digitally native generation accustomed to verifying information through social media, Denial is an especially fragile strategy, since exposure of any inconsistency is likely to amplify outrage rather than contain it (Kir & Nasir, 2026). This reasoning supports the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Denial as a response strategy will result in the lowest purchase intention compared to all other response strategies.

Hypothesis 2b: Denial as a response strategy will result in the lowest brand trust compared to all other response strategies.

Alternatively, firms may employ Minimization, a strategy Benoit (1997) identified as a subcategory of 'Reducing the Offensiveness,' where the firm acknowledges the event but attempts to downplay its severity or maintain a position of political neutrality. However, as Kir and Nasir (2026) state, Generation Z consumers often view corporate neutrality as a form of complicity. Consequently, while Minimization may satisfy stakeholders who prioritize economic utility, Dutta and Pullig (2011) observed that it frequently fails to resolve the inner tension or psychological risk.

Additionally, Corrective Action is typically the most effective strategy for value-based crises (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). This involves promising to alter internal policies, changing supply chains, or donating to relevant causes to fix the moral gap. Dutta and Pullig (2011) argued that this signals a moral reboot, allowing the consumer to return to the brand by resolving their internal psychological conflict. For a corrective response to succeed, it must be perceived as genuine and proportionate to the moral severity of the crisis. Critically, however, this framework was developed in the context of domestic CSR failures where corrective pledges are relatively verifiable; in geopolitical conflicts, where a firm's operational presence in a contested region is publicly observable, a corrective communication that does not change that presence may be perceived as insufficient regardless of its content. Nevertheless, among communicative strategies, Corrective Action remains the most theoretically grounded path toward trust recovery, a position further supported by Arendt et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis, which identified accommodative strategies as the most consistently effective across studies of apologia, image repair, and situational crisis communication. This reasoning supports the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 3a: Corrective Action as a response strategy will result in significantly higher purchase intention than both Denial and Minimization.*
>
> *Hypothesis 3b: Corrective Action as a response strategy will result in significantly higher brand trust than both Denial and Minimization.*

2.3.4 The Fourth Scenario: Substantive Exit vs. Symbolic Communication

While traditional frameworks provide a robust menu of communicative options, the main limitation of Dutta and Pullig's (2011) and Benoit's (1997) approaches is that they were primarily designed for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) failures rather than high-stakes geopolitical warfare. In the volatile landscape of 2026, a standard Corrective Action, such as a policy update or a donation, may be perceived by activist consumers as a decoupling tactic, a situation where a firm's rhetoric suggests change, but its operational core remains unchanged. For Generation Z, who value authenticity, such symbolic gestures are often dismissed as woke-washing, which can further diminish purchase intention (O'Sullivan et al. 2026).

This study, therefore, introduces 'Market Exit' as a fourth, extreme variable. This strategy involves a total operational withdrawal from a conflict-affected market, moving beyond words toward definitive action. In practice, such exits have been documented in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where international firms faced significant consumer and reputational pressure to fully withdraw from the market (Tosun & Eshraghi, 2022; Ganesan & Mallapragada, 2025; Zhuang, 2024).

Current literature does not explain whether such a total exit is more effective at restoring purchase intention than mere corrective communication, and therefore does not provide sufficient theoretical grounding for a direct hypothesis. Substantive Exit is therefore included as an exploratory condition in this study, with the aim of generating preliminary empirical insight into whether structural action outperforms communicative repair in restoring consumer trust among Swedish Generation Z. This represents the study's original theoretical contribution to the crisis management literature, moving beyond the communicative assumptions of existing frameworks to test whether definitive operational action is what the activist consumer ultimately requires.

2.4 Outcome variables: Purchase Intention and Brand Trust

After establishing which response strategies a firm can employ once they are under the pressure of geopolitical boycott, the effectiveness of these strategies must be evaluated through specific variables. This study uses purchase intention and brand trust, as together they capture the behavioral and relational dimensions of consumer recovery damaged by the firm's perceived involvement in value-related crises such as geopolitical conflicts (Dutta & Pullig, 2011).

Purchase intention is defined as the consumer's willingness to purchase a product or a perceived likelihood of a consumer to purchase the same product (Dodds et al. 1991). In the context of marketing research, purchase intention is a crucial connection in the chain of effects connecting consumers' perceptions and market outcomes such as market share. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) describe the relationship between purchase loyalty (willingness of the average consumer to repurchase the brand) and market share as one of the few "lawlike" generalizations and introduce a theory of double jeopardy: brands with higher purchasing loyalty and therefore higher purchase intention tend to attract more buyers who shop more frequently, resulting in higher market shares. When a consumer is boycotting a company, this is reflected in lower purchase intention, or in the most extreme case, in complete purchase abstention. In Kir and Nasir's (2026) study, purchase intention was used as an outcome measure to capture Generation Z consumers' willingness to engage with foreign brands during the Israel-Palestine boycott, demonstrating its sensitivity to politically driven consumer behavior. Once a firm implements a response strategy, its effectiveness will be perceived positively if purchase intention is renewed.

Brand trust, defined as “the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function” (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, p. 308), captures the deeper relational dimension. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) state that like purchase intention, brand trust is considered a key connecting variable between consumer perception and brand performance. The authors also emphasize that trust becomes especially relevant in situations of uncertainty, where a consumer who feels vulnerable, will turn to a trusted brand to avoid any risks associated with a purchase. Under these conditions, brand trust acts as a safety net, as consumers rely on the brand’s honesty and ability to perform its stated function. This becomes particularly relevant in the context of geopolitical boycotts, which constitute value-related crises. As Dutta and Pullig (2011) argue, such crises do not damage the brand’s functional performance, but rather the moral confidence consumers place in it, ultimately damaging the firm’s reputation and long-term performance.

Measuring both variables together captures different layers of consumer recovery. Purchase intention reflects short-term behavior willingness, which can be skewed by market convenience or a lack of substitutes, while brand trust reflects deeper moral alignment with the brand. A response strategy may therefore successfully restore purchase intention while failing to repair the underlying moral damage, leaving brand trust unrepaired. Combining both measures, the study provides insight into whether a corporate response has truly resolved the consumer’s internal dilemma.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a hypothetico-deductive research approach, as it builds on existing theory and prior research and then collects empirical data to test these theoretical expectations in a new context. A deductive approach is appropriate when the purpose is to examine whether established theoretical frameworks hold in relation to a specific research problem. In this case, the study seeks to assess how different corporate response strategies affect consumer outcomes in a geopolitical boycott context. As Bryman and Bell (2011) note, deductive research is particularly suitable for studies that test established theories and evaluate their applicability empirically.

The study applies a quantitative, hypothesis-testing design using a self-completion online between-subjects vignette survey experiment, in which respondents were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions, each presenting a different corporate response strategy to the same geopolitical boycott scenario. A quantitative approach allows for systematic measurement of variables and structured hypothesis testing (Bryman & Bell, 2011), making it well suited to identifying which response strategy yields the most favorable consumer evaluations in terms of brand trust and purchase intention. The between-subjects structure ensures that each respondent is exposed to only one strategy, reducing the risk of cross-scenario comparison or order effects, while also making it difficult for respondents to identify the study's purpose and adjust their answers accordingly (Steiner et al. 2016). The vignette format was further considered appropriate for its proven ability to reduce social desirability bias and encourage honest responses when researching sensitive topics (Steiner et al. 2016), which is particularly relevant given the geopolitical nature of the crisis scenario.

3.2 Population and sample

The target population of the study consists of university students, representing Generation Z consumers in Sweden, with a particular focus on individuals aged 18 and above to capture legally adult consumers with actual purchasing power. This group was selected because it is often described as particularly value-driven and more likely to respond strongly to companies' actions in socially or politically sensitive situations (O'Sullivan et al. 2026).

The sample frame consists of students at Lund University. Throughout the data collection process, active monitoring was conducted to maintain a roughly equal distribution between male and female respondents. As a result, the final sample mainly represents young adults in Lund who belong to Generation Z. Additionally, as Lund is a highly international environment, the sample includes both Swedish and international respondents.

The aim of the final sample was to gather around 400 responses, 100 per each vignette scenario (response strategy). The final sample was divided across the four experimental conditions through random assignment in the survey platform Qualtrics XM. This means that respondents were not manually placed into response-strategy groups by the researchers. Instead, each participant received one of the four vignette versions at random. This approach was intended to make the groups more comparable and reduce selection bias between the experimental conditions.

3.3 Procedure

Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted with 24 respondents to identify potential issues with wording, vignette coherence, and response options. Based on the feedback received, adjustments were made to improve the clarity and realism of the survey.

Data was collected over a ten-day period by approaching students across various campuses at Lund University and presenting them with a QR code linked to the online survey. Prospective respondents were asked if they would like to participate, and a brief overview of the study's purpose was provided when necessary. In cases where respondents were seated in larger groups, the researchers emphasized the importance of completing the survey individually, as vignette conditions differed between respondents. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were anonymous.

Upon accessing the survey, respondents first read a short introduction before answering the demographic gender question. They were then randomly assigned to one of the four vignette conditions, all of which shared the same general background information about Company X and the geopolitical boycott situation, with the only variation being the company's response strategy.

Following the vignette, respondents evaluated the company by answering questions related to purchase intention and brand trust on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The same outcome questions were used across all four conditions to allow direct comparison between groups. A manipulation check question was also included to verify that respondents had understood the assigned scenario. Survey design and vignette scenarios can be seen in detail in Appendix 1.

3.4 Variables

3.4.1 The Independent Variables

The independent variable in this study is the corporate response strategy presented in the vignette. The response strategies were drawn primarily from Benoit (1997), consistent with Dutta and Pullig's (2011) framework, and included Denial, Minimization and Corrective Action. Each scenario was designed in accordance with Benoit's (1997) descriptions of these subtypes. In addition, Market Exit is included as a response strategy, representing a common reaction to geopolitical conflicts seen, for example, in the Russia-Ukraine war (Tosun & Eshraghi, 2022; Ganesan & Mallapragada, 2025; Zhuang, 2024). Each respondent is exposed to only one of these conditions.

Gender is included as a secondary independent variable, measured through three response options: male, female, and other/prefer not to say, allowing the study to examine whether evaluations of the corporate response strategies differ between these groups.

3.4.2 The Dependent Variables

The dependent variables were purchase intention and brand trust. These were considered relevant indicators because purchase intention is frequently used in marketing research as a tool to predict future purchasing behavior and sales outcomes, although not perfectly (Morwitz, 2014). Therefore, purchase intention indicates how different corporate response strategies may influence consumers' likely future behavior. This variable was measured using items adapted from Dodds et al. (1991), using a seven-point Likert scale. It was operationalized through the following statements: “I would consider purchasing from this company,” “If I needed this type of product/service, I would choose this company over other alternatives,” and “If this company offered the lowest price, I would choose another option anyway”. Higher scores indicated stronger purchase intention, except for the last statement, which is reverse-coded.

Brand trust was further incorporated, given its established role in fostering both attitudinal and purchase loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). This variable was measured using items adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), using a seven-point Likert scale. It was operationalized through the statements: “I find this company trustworthy,” and “This is an honest company”. Higher scores indicated stronger perceived brand trust.

3.5 Data analysis

Following data collection, survey responses were exported to Excel for cleaning and coding. Respondents were coded according to the corporate response strategy they had been randomly assigned to; Denial, Minimization, Corrective Action and Market Exit, numbered 1 to 4 respectively. Likert-scale items were coded numerically from 1 to 7, where higher values indicate stronger agreement. One purchase intention item was reverse-coded so that higher values consistently reflect stronger purchase intention across all items. Regarding demographic variables, gender was coded as male = 1, female = 2, and other/prefer not to say = 3, with no respondents choosing the last option.

Purchase intention was calculated as a composite measure of all the purchase intention items. Brand trust was treated the same way using the trust-related items included in the survey.

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were first used to compare the average purchase intention and trust scores across the four response strategies.

To test the hypotheses, mean scores across the four response strategy groups were compared using appropriate statistical tests selected based on the outcomes of prior assumption testing. Since each respondent was assigned to only one response strategy, all comparisons were made between independent groups. Prior to analysis, the normality of score distributions was assessed through skewness and kurtosis values, as well as presented in the graphical visualization (see Appendix 3). Homogeneity of variances was examined using Levene's test. Where both assumptions were met, a one-way ANOVA was conducted, followed by Tukey's post-hoc test to identify which specific group pairs differed significantly. Where Levene's test indicated a violation of the homogeneity of variance assumption, a Kruskal-Wallis test was applied as a non-parametric alternative, with pairwise comparisons conducted to assess differences between individual groups. For hypotheses involving gender as a grouping variable, an independent-samples t-test was used. All analyses were performed using SPSS, and statistical significance was assessed at the 5% level throughout.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

In quantitative research, validity and reliability are central criteria for evaluating the quality of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Validity was addressed in several ways. Face validity was supported by designing questions that clearly corresponded to the concepts being studied. Construct validity was strengthened by grounding both the independent and dependent variables in established theoretical frameworks. The response strategies were drawn from Benoit's (1997) crisis communication theory, with Market Exit added as a context-specific adaptation reflecting responses observed in geopolitical conflicts (Tosun & Eshraghi, 2022; Ganesan & Mallapragada, 2025; Zhuang, 2024). The dependent variables were operationalized using validated scales from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Dodds et al. (1991).

Internal validity was supported by the experimental vignette design. All respondents received the same general crisis background, while only the company's response strategy differed between conditions. Since respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four response strategies, the design helps reduce systematic differences between groups (Steiner et al. 2016). This makes it more reasonable to interpret differences in purchase intention and trust as being related to the response strategy presented in the vignette.

However, internal validity comes at a cost to external validity. The specific choice of vignette factors, fictional scenario, and student sample does not straightforwardly assure generalization to other settings, populations, or response strategies (Steiner et al. 2016). The findings should therefore be interpreted as reflecting stated consumer evaluations within the scope of this specific experimental context rather than actual behavior in a real market setting.

Reliability was supported by using a structured online questionnaire with fixed response alternatives. All respondents answered the same demographic questions and the same purchase intention and trust items, using the same 7-point Likert scale. The only difference between respondents was the response strategy they were randomly assigned to in the vignette. This standardization reduced the risk that differences in responses were caused by differences in question wording or survey structure.

The pilot study also contributed to the study's validity and reliability. Before the main survey was distributed, a pilot study was conducted with 24 respondents to identify potential flaws in the questionnaire. This is consistent with Steiner et al. (2016), who emphasize that pilot studies can improve the validity and reliability of vignette experiments by testing whether the design is understandable and practically workable before the main study.

To assess the internal consistency of the measurement instrument, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for each construct, as one of the most widely used measurements of reliability (Bonett & Wright, 2015). The results are reported in Section 4. A sufficient Cronbach's Alpha value indicates that the items within a scale are internally consistent and measure the same underlying construct.

3.7 AI contribution

The use of Artificial Intelligence in this study was limited to checking and fixing grammar, as well as improving the cohesiveness of the sentences. The main tool being Grammarly that was implemented throughout the writing process. Additionally, ChatGPT was used to improve readability and overall flow of the text, as well as to identify synonyms that could reduce repetition. All of the AI suggestions were first evaluated and adjusted for our needs. The specific prompts are presented in the Appendix 2.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the primary variables used in the empirical analysis are shown in this section: distribution by gender, and overall scenario analysis. These descriptive analyses provide the base for the hypotheses and help in conducting the analysis. The final sample consisted of 415 respondents, of whom 260 were deemed valid for analysis. Exclusions were made on the basis of incomplete responses or failed manipulation check questions, the latter indicating either a misunderstanding of the vignette scenario or inattentive responding. Respondents were distributed across the four scenarios as follows: Denial (n = 67), Minimization (n = 70), Corrective Action (n = 62), and Market Exit (n = 61). In terms of gender, the sample comprised 127 male and 133 female respondents, representing a near-equal split of 48% and 52%, respectively. Key statistics such as the mean and standard deviation, are reported. The normality of the distribution was assessed from the skewness values and by creating the charts for each variable that can be seen in Appendix 3.

Table 1: *Descriptive statistics for overall results across response strategies*

	Dependent Variables				
	Purchase Intention		**Brand trust**		
Independent Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Denial	3.09	1.30	2.25	1.25	67
Minimization	3.14	1.39	2.26	1.47	70
Corrective Action	5.03	1.32	4.60	1.76	62
Market Exit	4.84	1.59	4.39	2.00	61

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for overall results across response strategies, including means and standard deviations for purchase intention (PI) and brand trust (BT). The Denial scenario yielded the lowest scores overall, with a mean PI of 3.09 (SD = 1.30) and a mean BT of

2.25 (SD = 1.25). The Minimization scenario scored similarly, with a mean PI of 3.14 (SD = 1.39) and a mean BT of 2.26 (SD = 1.47). The Corrective Action scenario produced the highest scores across both dependent variables, with a mean PI of 5.03 (SD = 1.32) and a mean BT of 4.60 (SD = 1.76). The Market Exit scenario performed comparably, though slightly below Corrective Action, with a mean PI of 4.84 (SD = 1.59) and a mean BT of 4.39 (SD = 2.00). The relatively large standard deviations observed across all scenarios suggest considerable variation in responses within the sample. Skewness values were positive but close to zero for Denial and Minimization for the PI variable, indicating approximately symmetric distributions, while for BT the skewness values were much higher, indicating responses clustered toward lower values. Corrective Action and Market Exit showed slight negative skewness for both variables, reflecting a concentration of responses toward the higher end of the scale. Overall, Corrective Action and Market Exit received notably higher evaluations than Denial and Minimization across both measures.

Table 2: *Descriptive statistics for gender differences across response strategies*

	Dependent Variables			
	Purchase Intentions		**Brand Trust**	
Independent Variables	Male (mean; sd)	Female (mean; sd)	Male (mean; sd)	Female (mean; sd)
Denial	3.61 ; 1.43	2.66 ; 1.02	2.58 ; 1.51	1.97 ; 0.91
Minimization	3.13 ; 1.56	3.14 ; 1.15	2.50 ; 1.73	1.93 ; 0.94
Corrective Action	5.13 ; 1.27	4.95 ;1.37	4.51 ; 1.87	4.67 ; 1.69
Market Exit	5.33 ; 1.23	4.39 ; 1.77	4.95 ; 1.79	3.87 ; 2.06
Overall	4.19 ; 1.68	3.77 ; 1.63	3.52 ; 2.04	3.11 ; 1.89

Table 2 presents the evaluation of each response strategy broken down by gender. In the Denial scenario, female respondents gave the lowest scores of all groups, with a mean PI of 2.66 and a mean BT of 1.97, while male respondents rated the same scenario considerably higher, with a mean PI of 3.61 and a mean BT of 2.58. In the Minimization scenario, the pattern reversed, with male respondents recording their lowest scores across both variables (PI = 3.13, BT = 2.50), while female respondents scored it marginally higher than Denial for PI (3.14) and marginally lower for BT (1.93). The Corrective Action scenario was the highest-rated strategy among female respondents, with a mean PI of 4.95 and a mean BT of 4.67, whereas male respondents also rated it favorably, though not as their highest, at PI = 5.13 and BT = 4.51. The Market Exit scenario received the highest scores among male respondents (PI = 5.33, BT = 4.95), while female respondents evaluated it somewhat lower, with a mean PI of 4.39 and a mean BT of 3.87.

4.2 Reliability Analysis

To evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement instrument, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for each construct. Cronbach's Alpha assesses the degree to which scale items are interrelated, serving as a widely used indicator of reliability (Bonett & Wright, 2015). In this study, the purchase intention items yielded an alpha of 0.834, and the brand trust items yielded an alpha of 0.931. Both values exceed the threshold of 0.70 considered indicative of acceptable internal consistency (Taber, 2018), suggesting that the items within each scale are coherently structured and reliably measure their respective constructs. The scales were therefore deemed appropriate for further statistical analysis.

4.3 Inferential Statistics

4.3.1 Differences between gender - Hypothesis 1a & Hypothesis 1b

Hypothesis 1a: *Female consumers will report lower purchase intention toward a firm involved in a geopolitical boycott crisis than male consumers*

Hypothesis 1b: *Female consumers will report lower brand trust toward a firm involved in a geopolitical boycott crisis than male consumers*

Table 3: *Results of independent-samples t-tests for gender differences in purchase intention and brand trust, Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b*

Dependent Variable	**Levene's p-value**	**Equal Variances Assumed**	**t(df)**	**p-value**	**Significance**
Purchase intention	.358	Yes	2.015 (258)	.045	Yes
Brand trust	.074	Yes	1.701 (258)	.090	No

Note: Statistical significance was assessed at the 5% level.

To test both Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to examine whether male and female respondents differed in their overall evaluations of the firm, regardless of the response strategy assigned, across purchase intention (PI) and brand trust (BT). Levene's test was first used to assess the assumption of equal variances. Based on the results, equal-variances-assumed row was used in both cases. The descriptive statistics show that male respondents reported a higher mean score for purchase intention (M = 4.19, SD = 1.68) than female respondents (M = 3.77, SD = 1.63), with a mean difference of 0.41. The t-test showed that this difference was statistically significant, $t(258) = 2.015$, $p = .045$. For brand trust, male respondents also reported a higher mean score (M = 3.52, SD = 2.04) than female respondents (M = 3.11, SD = 1.89), again with a mean difference of 0.41. However, this difference was not statistically significant at the 5% level, $t(258) = 1.701$, $p = .090$.

The results then indicate that Hypothesis 1a is supported, as female respondents reported significantly lower purchase intention than male respondents. However, Hypothesis 1b cannot be supported as the brand trust difference between men and women was not significant.

4.3.2 Response strategies' effects on Purchase Intention - Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 3a

Hypothesis 2a: Denial as a response strategy will result in the lowest purchase intention compared to all other response strategies.

Hypothesis 3a: Corrective Action as a response strategy will result in significantly higher purchase intention than Denial and Minimization.

Table 4: *One-way ANOVA with post-hoc results for purchase intention, Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 3a*

Hypothesis	**Dependent Variable**	**ANOVA Result**	**p-value**	**Significance**	**Key Tukey Post-hoc Result**
H2a	Purchase intention	$F(3, 256) = 36.677$	< .001	Yes	Denial did not differ significantly from Minimization, p = .997
H3a	Purchase intention	$F(3, 256) = 36.677$	< .001	Yes	Corrective Action was significantly higher than Denial and Minimization, both $p < .001$
Market exit (exploratory)	Purchase intention	$F(3, 256) = 36.677$	< .001	Yes	Market Exit was significantly higher than Denial and Minimization, both $p < .001$, but did not differ from Corrective Action, $p = .875$

Note: Statistical significance was assessed at the 5% level.

To test Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 3a, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether the four response strategies differed in their effect on purchase intention. Levene's test was non-significant (p = .325), indicating that the homogeneity of variance assumption was met and confirming that one-way ANOVA was appropriate for this analysis. The results showed a statistically significant difference between the response strategies. The mean scores showed that Denial produced the lowest purchase intention score ($M = 3.09$), followed closely by Minimization ($M = 3.14$). Corrective Action produced the highest purchase intention score ($M = 5.03$), followed by Market Exit ($M = 4.84$). Tukey post-hoc comparisons showed that Denial did not differ significantly from Minimization, $p = .997$. However, Denial was significantly lower than both Corrective Action and Market Exit, with both comparisons significant at $p < .001$. Minimization was also significantly lower than both Corrective Action and Market Exit, again at $p < .001$. Whereas, Corrective Action and Market Exit did not differ significantly from each other, $p = .875$.

Overall, Hypothesis 2a is not supported. Denial produced the lowest mean scores for purchase intention, but it was not significantly lower than Minimization. Therefore, Denial cannot be interpreted as uniquely the lowest-performing strategy for purchase intention. Hypothesis 3a is fully supported, as Corrective Action generated significantly higher purchase intention than both Denial and Minimization. The exploratory findings for Market Exit show that it also performed significantly better than Denial and Minimization, while not differing significantly from Corrective Action.

4.3.3 Response strategies' effects on Brand Trust - Hypothesis 2b and Hypothesis 3b

Hypothesis 2b: Denial as a response strategy will result in the lowest brand trust compared to all other response strategies.

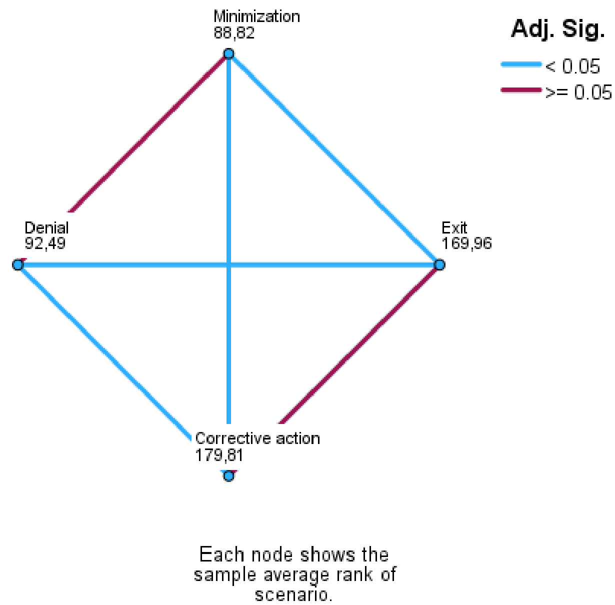
Hypothesis 3b: Corrective Action as a response strategy will result in significantly higher brand trust than both Denial and Minimization

Table 5: *Kruskal-Wallis and pairwise comparison results for brand trust across response strategies, Hypothesis 2b and Hypothesis 3b*

Hypothesis	**Dependent Variable**	**Kruskal-Wallis results**	**df**	**p-value**	**Significance**	**Key Pairwise Result**
H2b	Brand trust	H = 83.381	3	< .001	Yes	Denial did not differ significantly from Minimization, adj. p = 1.000
H3b	Brand trust	H = 83.381	3	< .001	Yes	Corrective Action was significantly higher than Denial and Minimization, both adj. p < .001
Market Exit (exploratory)	Brand trust	H = 83.381	3	< .001	Yes	Market Exit was significantly higher than Denial and Minimization, both adj. p < .001, but did not differ from Corrective Action, adj. p = 1.000

Note: Statistical significance was assessed at the 5% level.

Figure 1: *Visual representation of the pairwise comparison between response strategies*



Because Levene's test was significant ($p < .001$), the homogeneity of variance assumption was not met for brand trust, a Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted as a non-parametric alternative to one-way ANOVA, revealing a statistically significant difference across the four response strategies, $H(3) = 83.381$, $p < .001$. Mean ranks indicated that Corrective Action received the highest brand trust evaluations (179.81), followed by Market Exit (169.96), Denial (92.49), and Minimization (88.82).

Pairwise comparisons showed that Denial and Minimization did not differ significantly from each other, but both scored significantly lower than Corrective Action and Market Exit, which in turn did not differ significantly from one another. As a result, Hypothesis 2b is not supported, as Denial was not significantly lower than Minimization. Hypothesis 3b is supported, as Corrective Action yielded significantly higher brand trust than both Denial and Minimization. The exploratory findings for Market Exit further show that it performed comparably to Corrective Action and significantly better than the two defensive strategies.

4.4 Summary of Hypotheses

Table 6: Summary of hypotheses outcomes

Hypothesis		Result
H1a	*Female consumers will report lower purchase intention toward a firm involved in a geopolitical boycott crisis than male consumers.*	Supported
H1b	*Female consumers will report lower brand trust toward a firm involved in a geopolitical boycott crisis than male consumers.*	Not Supported
H2a	*Denial as a response strategy will result in the lowest purchase intention compared to all other response strategies.*	Not supported
H2b	*Denial as a response strategy will result in the lowest brand trust compared to all other response strategies.*	Not supported
H3a	*Corrective Action as a response strategy will result in significantly higher purchase intention than both Denial and Minimization*	Supported
H3b	*Corrective Action as a response strategy will result in significantly higher brand trust than both Denial and Minimization*	Supported

5. Discussion

5.1 Gender Differences

Hypothesis 1a: Female consumers will report lower purchase intention toward a firm involved in a geopolitical boycott crisis than male consumers.

Hypothesis 1a addressed the role of gender as a factor shaping purchase intention from a firm affected by a geopolitical crisis. The results of the independent samples t-test supported Hypothesis 1a. Female respondents reported a lower willingness to purchase from Company X than male respondents. The dispersion of responses was comparable across genders (Male SD = 1.68; Female SD = 1.63), meaning that variation in purchase intention was similar for male and female respondents, while the mean difference followed the predicted direction.

Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) framework suggests that higher trust should normally support stronger willingness to continue buying from a brand. However, in the present study, Hypothesis 1a indicates that gender substantially affected purchase intention. This suggests that female respondents' lower purchase intention was not necessarily driven by lower trust in the brand but rather by a more immediate emotional response to purchasing from a firm involved in a geopolitical crisis.

The direction of this finding is aligned with Lindenmeier et al. (2012), whose foundational study on consumer outrage demonstrated that women reported significantly higher levels of outrage than men and that their boycott intentions were consequently stronger. Their research showed that while men's answers are typically more cognitively based in normative calculations, women's resentment and behavioral reactions are more strongly influenced by affective processes, which are emotional and moral reactions. Additionally, Cruz et al. (2013) further showed that women experience significantly higher levels of perceived guilt when contemplating purchases from a boycotted brand, adding another emotional layer that translates into a more negative behavioral intention overall. The study's results align with these predictions: females scored consistently lower than males across most scenarios on purchase intention.

Hypothesis 1b: Female consumers will report lower brand trust toward a firm involved in a geopolitical boycott crisis than male consumers.

Hypothesis 1b, which addressed the role of gender in shaping trust-based evaluation of a firm in the context of a geopolitical crisis, was not supported. Although female respondents found the company's trustworthiness slightly lower than male respondents, this difference did not reach statistical significance, meaning the data does not provide sufficient evidence of a true gender gap.

An important observation lies in the dispersion of responses. For brand trust, the standard deviations were notably wider than those observed for purchase intention (Male SD = 2.04; Female SD = 1.89), indicating that respondents within each gender disagreed more strongly about how trustworthy the company was than they did about whether they would purchase from it. Moreover, this higher within-group variability means responses cluster less tightly around the gender mean, increasing the statistical difficulty of detecting between-gender differences and suggesting that gender is a weaker organizing principle for brand trust than for purchase intention in this sample.

Brand trust is defined as a more stable relational assessment developed over time and less responsive to single stimuli (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). The overall pattern is consistent with Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), suggesting that trusted brands tend to generate stronger purchase intention and loyalty. This study's findings align with this pattern for both genders, where Denial and Minimization produced significantly lower scores for both purchase intention and brand trust, while Corrective Action and Market Exit scored substantially higher in both measures.

Female respondents experienced stronger discomfort with the company's geopolitical crisis involvement, aligning with the emotional and guilt-based mechanisms identified by Lindenmeier et al. (2012) and Cruz et al. (2013). However, this temporary discomfort was likely not strong enough to fundamentally alter brand trust. Following Coombs' (2007) logic, a firm has to implement a number of verifiable measures to decrease uncertainty and stress for consumers over a period of time. Extending this logic to the damage of brand trust, it can be argued that if a deeply rooted construct such as brand trust cannot be easily fixed and repaired, it is likely resilient enough to avoid being damaged by a single isolated negative action. Consequently, while the gender gap is visible in immediate purchase intention, brand trust remains protected from short-term reactions to a single vignette.

5.2 Denial

Hypothesis 2a: Denial as a response strategy will result in the lowest purchase intention compared to all other response strategies.

Hypothesis 2a, which predicted that Denial would result in the lowest purchase intention compared to other response strategies, was not supported. Denial produced the lowest level of purchase intention, but was closely followed by Minimization. Consequently, post-hoc tests revealed that there is no statistically significant difference between Denial and Minimization as two different response strategies, meaning that both strategies performed equally in the context of geopolitical boycotts regarding purchase intention.

These findings may partly reflect how the vignette scenario was formulated. The scenario presented respondents with media reports of Company X's partnership with a government-affiliated organization, and as Coombs (2007) notes, information reported by the media tends to be the version most stakeholders adopt as truth. In this context, the Denial condition may have been perceived as a rejection of hard evidence. As stated by Benoit (1997), falsely rejecting responsibility can backfire on the company. Similarly, Coombs (2007) highlights that diminishing strategies, such as Minimization require strong supporting evidence to succeed, and even then, can fail when media reporting contradicts the company's position, which was precisely the situation presented to respondents. This helps explain why Minimization, despite performing relatively well in value-based crises in Dutta and Pullig's (2011) framework, scored comparably low in the present study.

The convergence of Denial and Minimization is also theoretically meaningful. Dutta and Pullig (2011) argue that value-related crises require moral resolution rather than functional reassurance, yet both strategies failed to provide this. While they find that Minimization can sometimes approach the effectiveness of Corrective Action in value-based crises, the present results suggest that geopolitical boycotts impose a stricter moral threshold. In this context, Minimization appears to be perceived as avoidance rather than resolution, visualizing it nearly as damaging as denial. This extends Dutta and Pullig's (2011) framework: when consumers, particularly Generation Z in geopolitical contexts (Kir & Nasir, 2026), expect explicit accountability, neither defensive strategy appears sufficient. Taken together, these findings confirm Dutta and Pullig's (2011) broader argument that consumer reactions to crisis communication are highly contingent on the nature of the crisis itself.

> *Hypothesis 2b: Denial as a response strategy will result in the lowest brand trust compared to all other response strategies.*

Hypothesis 2b proposed that Denial as a response strategy would result in the lowest brand trust among consumers compared to all other response strategies. This hypothesis was not supported. Denial resulted in the weakest level of brand trust, but, as with purchase intention, it was not clearly distinguishable from Minimization. This indicates that consumers perceived both strategies as similarly damaging to the firm’s credibility.

Dutta and Pullig (2011) argue that denial leaves key questions unanswered and provides no assurance that the problem will not recur, directly threatening consumer trust. They argue that this effect is further magnified in value-related crises, where symbolic and psychological brand benefits are at stake. Coombs (2007) reinforces this by arguing that a corporate response must match the perceived level of responsibility, and that stakeholder perceptions of the crisis should guide the choice of response strategy. In the present study, the company faces both media reporting and boycott pressure stemming from geopolitical involvement, a situation Coombs (2007) would likely classify as a preventable crisis, implying a need for more rebuilding-oriented responses. The low brand trust scores observed in the denial condition are further consistent with O'Sullivan et al. (2026), who argue that brands perceived as violating Generation Z values risk provoking backlash and eroding trust, which is particularly relevant given that the sample consisted entirely of university students.

The weak performance of Minimization in this study can also be justified through the lens of Benoit's (1997) framework. He argues that Minimization is a form of reducing offensiveness, meaning that the firm attempts to make the harmful act appear less serious and that this strategy cannot be uniformly expected to correct the problem. Moreover, Minimization may appear insufficient when stakeholders view the issue as morally serious (Coombs, 2007), which is especially relevant in a geopolitical boycott context where consumers may perceive the issue as such. Considering respondents perceived both strategies similarly shows that the attempt to reduce the seriousness of the crisis was not convincing. Rather than repairing brand trust, Minimization left the central ethical concern insufficiently addressed. The results therefore suggest that in geopolitical boycott contexts, brand trust is not restored through defensive communication. Both strategies were less effective because they lack moral clarity, implying that trust requires more than rejecting or reducing the blame.

5.3 Corrective Action

> *Hypothesis 3a: Corrective Action as a response strategy will result in significantly higher purchase intention than both Denial and Minimization.*

Hypothesis 3a proposed that Corrective Action, as one of the introduced corporate response strategies, would result in higher levels of purchase intention among the targeted consumers compared with the other response strategies. This hypothesis was fully supported. According to the tests, purchase intention levels were the highest for Corrective Action, significantly outperforming both Denial and Minimization.

This aligns with Dutta and Pullig's (2011) argument that Corrective Action is particularly effective in value-related crises because it directly addresses the internal values like the psychological or social risk. Consequently, suggesting that consumers were more willing to buy from the firm when the response addressed the controversy, rather than downplaying it. Corrective Action restores this by signalling that the firm recognised the issue and was willing to change its behavior (Dutta & Pullig, 2011).

Additionally, Sen et al.'s (2001) social dilemma framework captures the parallel shift in the consumer's cost-benefit calculation. They argued that in boycott situations, consumers weigh the personal benefits of continuing to buy against the moral or collective importance of supporting the boycotts. Therefore, Corrective Action, gives consumers a justification for returning to the brand without feeling that they are abandoning their values.

Hypothesis 3b: Corrective Action as a response strategy will result in significantly higher brand trust than both Denial and Minimization.

Hypothesis 3b was also supported, as Corrective Action resulted in higher brand trust than both Denial and Minimization. Unlike purchase intention, brand trust reflects a more relational and cumulative evaluation of the firm. This aligns with Coombs' (2007) argument that reputation is built on stakeholders' assessments of whether an organization has consistently met their expectations, suggesting that a single crisis response may be insufficient to fully shift trust, which requires more accumulated evidence to change meaningfully. Corrective Action was more effective because it provided evidence of accountability rather than only a defensive response.

This result is consistent with Benoit's (1997), who notes that addressing what steps have been taken to fix the problem and prevent its recurrence is more reassuring to stakeholders. Corrective Action scoring the highest, suggests that in the geopolitical boycott context portrayed, consumers do not favor the responses that rejected or downplayed responsibility. This aligns with Coombs (2007), who argues that the best methods to lessen the negative effect are rebuild strategies. Additionally, his SCCT framework links stronger stakeholder attributions of responsibility to greater reputational threat. In this sense, Corrective Action fits the logic of SCCT because it offers a more accommodative response to a crisis that consumers may perceive as preventable.

This effect is amplified among Generation Z consumers, who are highly attentive to authenticity and quick to reject symbolic or inconsistent corporate responses aligns with O'Sullivan et al. (2026). They also argue that this category of consumers expect transparency, accountability, and activism to be reflected in a brand's identity rather than treated as a superficial marketing add-on. The findings therefore show that trust recovery in values-based crises depends less on avoiding blame than on demonstrating credible responsibility.

5.4 Market Exit

As no existing literature has directly compared a complete Market Exit against other response strategies in a geopolitical boycott context, Market Exit was included as an exploratory finding rather than a hypothesis-driven one. The findings indicate that Market Exit performed similarly to Corrective Action, with no statistically significant difference for either purchase intention or brand trust. Like Corrective Action, Market Exit scored significantly higher than Denial and Minimization, suggesting that it is an effective response, but considering the similar levels as Corrective Action, not a superior one.

This partially aligns with Ganesan and Mallapragada's (2025) finding that firms withdrawing from Russia following the 2022 invasion experienced positive gains in consumer purchase intention, confirming that operational exits can lead to restoring consumers' trust in geopolitical contexts. However, the results of this study present a differing finding, which is that Market Exit does not outperform Corrective Action, suggesting that a full operational exit might not be necessary to achieve similar levels of consumer trust recovery.

These findings also challenge the assumption that value-driven Generation Z consumers will always favor the strongest possible corporate stance (Kir & Nasir, 2026; O'Sullivan et al. 2026). Another challenged theory is SCCT by Coombs' (2007) which claims that the most accommodative strategy (Market Exit) should outperform the less extreme strategies in high attribution crises. Instead, Corrective Action seems to represent a moral threshold for most consumers, resulting in equivalent reputational recovery without the costs associated with a full Market Exit. Considering the use of fictional scenarios within a vignette experiment, these findings are preliminary and should be examined further with real companies in real geopolitical contexts.

5.5 Limitations

Several limitations are to be considered in this study. Firstly, the sample mainly consists of students collected by convenience sampling at Lund University, meaning respondents were approached in person across campus locations based on accessibility rather than random selection. Since the sample primarily consists of university students who may be more educated, politically aware and value-driven than the broader Generation Z population, the findings cannot be generalized to all Swedish Generation Z consumers with certainty and may have amplified the moral reactions observed across response strategies.

Another limitation to be considered regarding the sample representativeness is the structure of the study's vignette experiment, since the only respondents characteristic recorded was their gender. Conducting a vignette experiment within a broader survey that collects detailed respondent characteristics such as age, nationality, income, or prior boycott participation would allow the sample's profile to be compared against the target population (Steiner et al. 2016). Consequently, the sample cannot be benchmarked against the broader Swedish Generation Z population. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive of the respondents in this study rather than a representative of the population.

The design and the presentation of the response strategies within the vignette experiment also presents limitations. While in each of the four scenarios, respondents received the same detailed background describing the geopolitical conflict, the corporate partnership, and the resulting boycott, each of the four response strategies was presented as a short statement from Company X. In real life cases, these response strategies unfold over time and involve multiple communications, follow-up actions, and media framing, none of which could be captured in a brief statement. The specific wording and tone of each response may therefore have shaped the respondent's evaluation as much as the underlying strategy itself, making it complicated to establish whether the findings reflect the response strategy itself or the specific wording used.

Additionally, the use of fictional vignette scenarios also presents limitations, as real brand attachment, prior consumer relationships and ESG reputation cannot be captured. Ganesan and Mallapragada (2025) showed that the positive effect of Market Exit was higher for firms with strong ESG reputations, indicating that brand history may significantly influence the effectiveness of a response strategy, which is something that could not have been measured in this study.

Ultimately, the study solely captures the respondents' intentions at a single point in time. Purchase intention reflects willingness to buy rather than actual purchasing behavior, and the well documented intention-behavior gap means that the reported reactions may not translate into real-world (Morwitz, 2014), particularly in survey contexts where moral pressure may inflate stated boycott intentions. The single-exposure design further means that the study captures immediate reactions to response strategies, whereas in real life consumer recovery from a boycott stretches over a long period of time and may get better or worsen over time.

5.6 Future research

Based on this study, there are multiple directions to potentially pursue for future research. A very significant next step would be to move beyond the fictional vignettes and conduct case studies on real companies that have faced geopolitical boycott pressure. This approach would allow researchers to capture the influence of brand history, ESG reputation, and prior consumer relationships, all of which were missing in this study's design. A case study would build upon Ganesan and Mallapragada's (2025) finding that ESG reputation strengthens the positive effect of Market Exit, and would provide more realistic insights into how consumers actually evaluate response strategies in real market contexts. As an addition to this approach, the longitudinal designs measuring purchasing intention and brand trust at multiple time points would reveal whether consumer recovery is durable or fades over time, addressing the limitation of capturing only instant reactions to a single exposure and aligning with Lasarov et al.'s (2023) distinction between the Heat-up and Cool-down phases of boycott behavior.

Future research could also expand on the range of response strategies evaluated. In real companies, multiple strategies are undertaken simultaneously, for example by initially denying involvement before issuing Corrective Action, or by pairing a Market Exit with public statements of accountability, compared to the isolated effect in the present design. Studies grounded in Benoit's (1997) image repair framework could test such combinations, as well as additional strategies not examined in this study, to better understand the complexity of real companies' response strategies. Additionally, the wording, the tone, and channel of these communications could vary to isolate which elements of a response actually drive consumer reactions.

Possibly the most interesting finding of this study is that Market Exit did not outperform Corrective Action, which deserves further investigation. Future research could examine if this holds across different industries, whether the financial cost signal of a Market Exit matters more than the action itself, and whether Market Exit produces different long-term reputational benefits even when short-term consumer evaluations are similar. Ultimately, replicating this study with a larger and more representative sample of Generation Z consumers in Sweden would allow firmer generalizations of the findings. This should be paired with collecting a broader set of respondent characteristics, so that the sample can be benchmarked against the target population and subgroup effects can be examined more rigorously.

6. Conclusion

This thesis studied the impact of corporate response strategies to geopolitical boycott pressure on purchase intention and brand trust among Generation Z consumers in Sweden. It examined four response strategies: Denial, Minimization, Corrective Action, and Market Exit. The study used a between-subjects vignette survey experiment to determine which type of corporate response is most positively rated when a corporation is connected to a politically sensitive geopolitical situation. The study therefore addressed the gap between research on geopolitical consumer boycotts and corporate crisis communication using response strategy logic within the setting of geopolitical boycott pressure.

The first finding is that the chosen corporate response strategy clearly shaped consumer evaluations, revealing a broad distinction between accountability-orientated and defensive strategies. Across both purchase intention and brand trust, Corrective Action and Market Exit significantly outperformed Denial and Minimization. Within the defensive cluster, Denial produced the lowest evaluations, but it did not statistically differ from Minimization. This indicates that Minimization does not function as a safer middle ground; rather, both defensive strategies were similarly ineffective. Crucially, while Market Exit generated highly favorable evaluations, it did not outperform Corrective Action. This comparison suggests that consumers do not necessarily reward the most extreme operational response. Instead, a communicative commitment to accountability, in the form of Corrective Action, proved sufficient to match the consumer recovery achieved by a drastic and costly complete market withdrawal.

Further findings showed that consumer characteristics mattered, although less than response strategy. Gender differences were only partially supported, as female respondents reported lower purchase intention than male respondents, while brand trust did not differ significantly. This suggests that gender may influence immediate willingness to buy more than deeper evaluations of trust in this study.

By directly addressing our research question; "*How do corporate response strategies to geopolitical boycott pressure affect consumer purchase intention and brand trust?*", the findings reveal a significant divide between defensive and proactive actions. Overall, this thesis illustrates how geopolitical boycott situations should not be treated only as external business risks but also as consumer-facing brand crises requiring careful response strategies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Survey Questions

1. What gender do you identify with?

- Male
- Female
- Other/Prefer not to say

2. Vignette question:

Country A has recently sent its military forces into neighbouring Country B without prior provocation, resulting in civilian harm and broad disapproval from the international community. During this period, investigative media reported that Company X had entered into a paid partnership with a government-affiliated sports organization in Country A.

According to the reports, the agreement involved financial support from Company X to the organization, which critics argued helped legitimize and indirectly support the aggressor state. After the reports became public, consumers and activist groups called for a boycott of Company X. The issue received widespread attention on social media and in the news.

In response, Company X stated that it has not engaged in any actions that support the conflict and rejected the accusations. The company said that claims about its involvement are false and that it has done "nothing wrong.”

Based on the response strategy the company used, please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements:

Scenario 1 - Denial

In response, Company X stated that it has not engaged in any actions that support the conflict and rejected the accusations. The company said that claims about its involvement are false and that it has done "nothing wrong.”

Scenario 2 - Minimization

In response, Company X stated that its connection to the situation has been exaggerated. The company said that its activities have had only a limited and indirect link to the conflict and that the actual harm associated with its involvement is not as serious as critics claim.

Scenario 3 - Corrective Action

In response, Company X stated that it has ended the partnership with the sports federation, cancelled any related payments, and introduced a new policy prohibiting partnerships with state-controlled organizations linked to the conflict.

Scenario 4 - Market Exit

In response, Company X stated that it will withdraw completely from Country A, close its operations there, stop all sales in that market, and terminate all business activities in the country.

3. Evaluation Questions on a 7-point Likert scale

Based on the response strategy the company used, please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements:

- I am likely to purchase a product from this company.
- If I needed this type of product/service, I would choose this company over alternatives.

- If this company offered the lowest price, I would choose another option anyway.
- I find this company trustworthy.
- This is an honest company.

4. Manipulation Check Question

Which of the following best describes the company's response?

- The company denied the accusations
- The company said its involvement was limited / not very serious
- The company took action to correct the issue
- The company exited the market entirely
- The company did not provide a response
- Not sure / cannot remember

Response Scale (for all scenarios) for all evaluation questions:

- 1 (Strongly disagree)
- 2 (Disagree)
- 3 (Somewhat disagree)
- 4 (Neither disagree or agree)
- 5 (Somewhat agree)
- 6 (Agree)
- 7 (Strongly agree)

Appendix 2

AI prompts used:

Example 1:

- Find synonyms for ‘the latter of which’

Example 2:

- Review this document and suggest more academic choice of words

Example 3:

- Rephrase and increase clarity in this text:

  ‘However, this temporary discomfort was likely not strong enough to fundamentally alter brand trust. Following Coombs’ (2007) logic, a firm has to implement a number of verifiable measures to decrease uncertainty and stress for consumers over a period of time. Extending this logic to the damage of brand trust, it can be argued that if a deeply rooted construct such as brand trust cannot be easily fixed and repaired, it is likely resilient enough to avoid being damaged by a single isolated negative action. Consequently, while the gender gap is visible in immediate purchase intention, brand trust remains protected from short-term reactions to a single vignette. ’

Example 4:

- Find grammatical inconsistencies in this text

Example 5:

- Find any unnecessary repetition throughout the text and suggest how to shorten it without losing any key points

Example 6:

- Check if the following reference matches the format needed from the LUSEM Harvard Referencing Guide

Appendix 3

Distribution Charts for Dependent Variables

Figure A1: Distribution of composite purchase intention scores

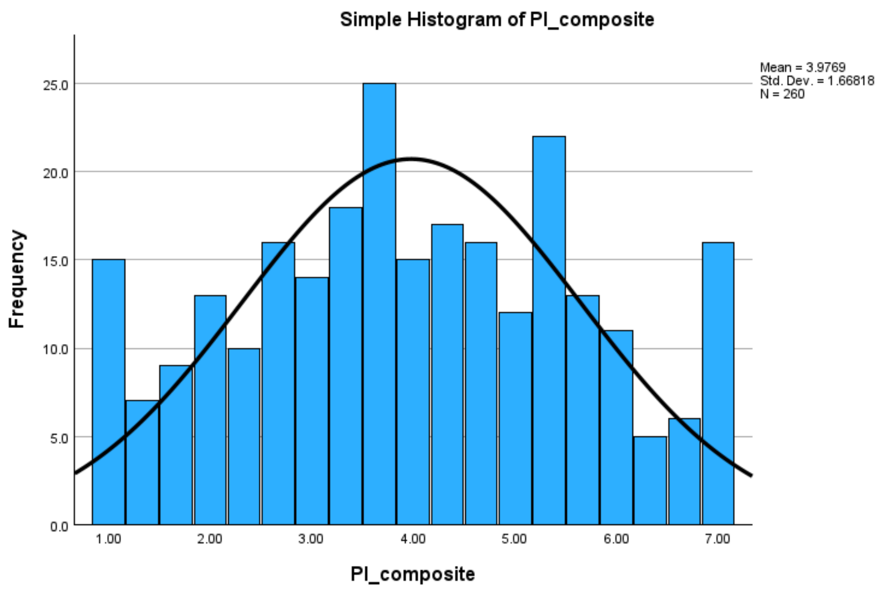
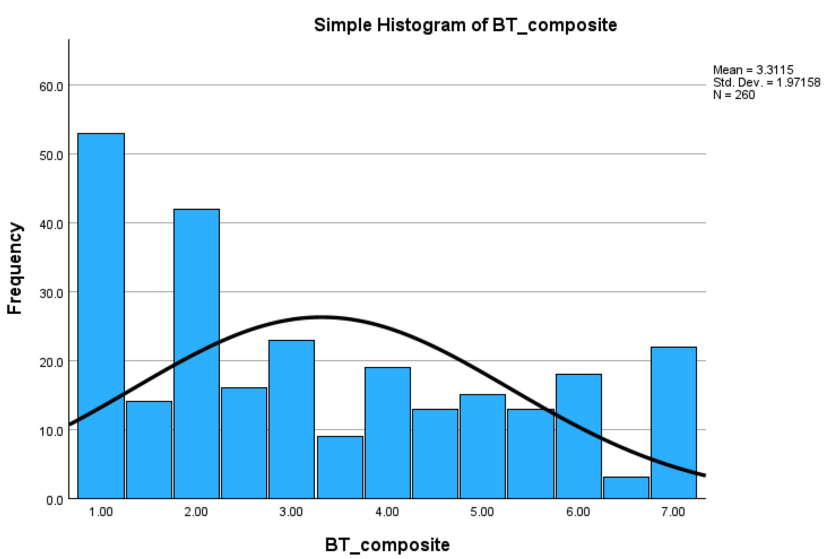


Figure A2: Distribution of composite brand trust scores



Appendix 4

Authorship statement

This bachelor's thesis was jointly authored by Paulina Barabas, Ena Ziga, and Alexandra-Ioana Potop. All three authors contributed equally to the project, approved the final version prior to submission, and take full responsibility for its content.