Brand repulsion: consumers' boundary work with rejected brands

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to conceptualize brand repulsion as a specific nuance of brand rejection, highlight the boundary work at play in situations of collective brand repulsion and extract implications for the brands that are at the centre of such situations and to delineate future directions for scholars.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors' study of the "I Hate Apple" group on Facebook is grounded in a six-year long naturalistic enquiry designed to capture the boundary work performed by its members. The authors' sources include netnographic data, online focus groups, observations and personal online correspondence with members and moderators.

Findings – This study's findings reveal that certain brands serve the identity work of consumers by allowing them in erecting boundaries based on three major sources of repulsion: anti-fandom, anti-hegemony and anti-marketing. They show that for each type of boundary work, corporate and product brand repulsion seems prevalent.

Research limitations/implications – This research limits itself to considering the types of boundary work related to brand repulsion as regards a single brand: Apple.

Practical implications – The study can help managers identify the types(s) of boundary work related to their brand and it provides practical recommendations for these various sources of brand repulsion. It also helps them distinguish between consumer brand repulsion directed against their product and their corporation.

Originality/value – This study advances knowledge in the field of brand rejection by exploring a specific nuance: brand repulsion. Its close examination of consumer collective practices offers a deeper understanding of the ins and outs of the paradoxical phenomenon of repulsion/attraction for a brand. The cultural lens is used as an original approach to this under-investigated nuance of brand rejection.

Keywords Boundary work, Apple, Attraction, Brand repulsion, Identity projects, Rejection

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A bitter battle is raging on Twitter today. On the one hand, Tesla fans, ranging from teenage boys to great-grandmothers, burst into tears of joy at every new announcement concerning the brand created in 2003. On the other, Tesla critics gather under the $TSLAQ hashtag and question the company's every move. How can a brand be at the centre of such a movement of attraction and repulsion (Wolter *et al.*, 2016)? Is this a futile game resulting from the overdevelopment of social media in our lives? Or is it at all serious? There seems to be no reason why a car brand should be so divisive, but the warring tribes of Tesla fans and $TSLAQ speak to human nature and today's polarizing impact of brands (Osuna Ramírez *et al.*, 2019). In addition, it is all the more puzzling to see that people who reject the brand

spend so much time and efforts discussing it. Far from simply showcasing a brand that attracts a specific segment of consumers while repulses another who do not invest in the brand (Wolter *et al.*, 2016), the Tesla example highlights how attraction and repulsion seem to mingle for $TSLAQ people who spend time and energy discussing and criticizing every move of the brand they reject. In this fascinating context, the purpose of this work is to make better sense of the phenomenon of brand repulsion. To do so, we mobilize the theoretical lens of consumer boundary work, to shed light on sources of brand repulsion.

The "attraction of repulsion" (Herz, 2012) that is at play in this example epitomizes a nuance of the broad phenomenon of brand rejection (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2020) that has largely been neglected by scholars: brand repulsion. Collectives gathering consumers who are repelled by a brand but also "obsessively" concerned by it offer a unique opportunity to understand the role of brands in today's society. "Brands are a ubiquitous aspect of daily life" and they are "at some level meaningful to ordinary contemporary citizens" (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2009, p. 190). The marketing literature has emphasized how brands provide major pillars to build, maintain and develop consumers' identities by adhering to their values and their communities of followers (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Black and Veloutsou, 2017). The Tesla example introduces the other side of the coin: consumers viewing a specific brand, not as a source of identity value, but as an unwanted and undesired model. Some brands indeed have become major resources to build one's identity against them in a repulsive move.

The paper contributes to positioning and clarifying the concept of brand repulsion. As such, this study advances knowledge in "the emerging fields of brand rejection, which constitutes an area of high priority for branding theory and practice alike" (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2020, p. 45). While Veloutsou *et al.* (2020) offer us a detailed account of brand rejection and its relation to consumer-based brand equity at the individual level, other axes of the concept still need uncovering. The collective dimension of brand repulsion and its paradoxical nature that oscillates between repulsion and attraction are the focus of this study. We contend that to get a better understanding of such a phenomenon, we have to put it into the wider context of the construction of identity in our societies (Bauman, 2013), and approach that has been suggested as relevant (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2020) but yet little explored (Wolter *et al.*, 2016). Understanding the repulsive phenomenon from the identity work standpoint (Thompson, 2014) would outline the major triggers underlying collective repulsion for a brand. To do so, we focus on "boundary work" (Weinberger, 2015) as defined by consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). We explore brand repulsion through a six-year long netnography of the "I Hate Apple" Facebook group, using multiple data sources. This approach makes it possible to interpret the phenomenon of consumer collectives declaring repulsion for a brand. The end-result highlights three different types of boundary work undertaken by consumers, anti-fandom, anti-hegemony and anti-marketing identity work, which reflect the current zeitgeist (Cantone *et al.*, 2020).

Towards brand repulsion

Recent scholarship suggests that "negative brand associations might be playing a more active role than positive ones" (Kucuk, 2019a, p. 26). In the field of negative brand relationships (Fournier and Alvarez, 2013), which encompasses negative emotions, behaviours and attitudes towards brands, there exist "different nuances of brand rejection from brand dislike to brand hate" (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2020, p. 49). While most of the literature focuses on the extreme emotional phenomenon of brand hate (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016; Kucuk, 2019a), there is a paucity of research regarding other nuances of negative

relationships, such as brand avoidance (Grégoire *et al.*, 2009), brand sabotage (Grégoire *et al.*, 2009) or brand divorce (Sussan *et al.*, 2012).

One of these under investigated nuances is "brand repulsion". Brand repulsion is sometimes understood in the marketing literature as a "cool brand hate" (Kucuk, 2019a, 2019b) that does not necessarily entail a desire of revenge and stands in between "cold" and "hot brand hate". However, most of the times brand repulsion is twinned with "attraction" (Wolter *et al.*, 2016), which comes as its opposite, just as brand hate is the opposite of brand love (Kucuk, 2019a; Osuna Ramírez *et al.*, 2019). In this perspective, brand repulsion is broadly defined as a process of disidentification with a brand (Wolter *et al.*, 2016), i.e. consumers state they have nothing to do with brand X or brand Y. They consider these brands "impediments to social identity creation and expression" (Wolter *et al.*, 2016, p. 791). Lee *et al.* (2009) also refer to the theory of disidentification by stating that consumers avoid brands that clash with their self-concept. A brand may represent an undesired self and consumers thus refuse to be associated with it. From the identity process perspective (Wolter *et al.*, 2016), brand repulsion may very well be associated with other forms of negative brand relationships, whether emotional or behavioural, such as brand hate, boycott or avoidance.

It is worth noting that, the polarized perspective on attraction/repulsion is based on the classic insight of Simmel on the sociology of conflicts (Simmel, 1904, p. 491):

> As the cosmos requires "*Liebe und Hass*", attraction and repulsion, in order to have a form, society likewise requires some quantitative relation of harmony and disharmony, association and dissociation, liking and disliking, in order to attain to a definite formation.

Simmel (1904) emphasized the fact that society is made of attractions and repulsions between actors. Marketing scholars have reintegrated Simmel's thinking into the framework of segmentation: "Asymmetric attraction and repulsion between consumer segments has quickly become a major topic among marketers and consumer researchers" (Bakshi *et al.*, 2013, p. 1). When an offering attracts a specific segment of consumers, it is likely to repulse another segment thus serving the (dis)identification process of consumers (Higgins and Scholer, 2009; Wolter *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, in dominant marketing thinking, product or brand attributes simultaneously attract and repulse different segments of consumers (Wolter *et al.*, 2016).

Marketing scholars adopting the attraction/repulsion polarization assume that the one *or* the other "pole" occurs in consumer segments or individuals, not the one *and* the other simultaneously. Yet, in her discussion of the abject in terms of "horrendous delight" in *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva (1982) treats of the possibility of being attracted by something repulsive. In her account, the repulsive is simultaneously fascinating and frightening, pleasurable and painful. This is a "dialethic" contradiction leading people to state, for instance, that "It was so revolting I couldn't take my eyes off it" (Priest, 2019, p. 47). This type of contradiction can be condensed into the idea of "the attraction of repulsion" (Herz, 2012). As envisioned by the French intellectual Georges Bataille (Stronge, 2017), repulsion is magnified as a force which threatens attraction, yet is inseparable from it.

Traces of "attractive repulsion" for a brand are especially found in the literature dealing with consumer collectives of opponents to a brand (Dessart *et al.*, 2020). Far from witnessing consumers withdraw from interactions with the brand, such as in situations of brand avoidance (Rindell *et al.*, 2014), brand repulsion translates into situations of consumers' active participation through discussions about the brand and sometimes *with* the brand (Popp *et al.*, 2016). The time and effort spent liking, sharing and commenting for spreading negative brand-related communication are the mark of anti-brand communities (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010).

They "are groupings of people who have negative feelings towards a brand and self-select to join together to voice their antipathy to the brand" (Dessart *et al.*, 2020).

If brand repulsion has to be considered a relevant nuance of brand rejection, we need not limit our view of it from a mechanistic perspective as the opposite of brand attraction and operating in a different segment. Our contention is that:

- brand repulsion must be understood as a composite phenomenon that can exist within the same segment or consumer collective; and
- brand repulsion is inseparable from brand attraction with the aim to serve (dis) identification purposes.

We now review how consumer culture theorists (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) have conceptualized consumer identity work to illuminate the phenomenon of brand repulsion.

Boundary work by consumer collectives

The practices consumers resort to build, protect and develop their individual and/or collective identities through the deployment of marketplace resources has been depicted as consumers' identity work (Thompson, 2014). A significant part of identity work involves rising meaningful boundaries and highlighting differences (Weinberger, 2015). Identity work is generally akin to reliably distinguishing between "just the right amount" of some trait, too much of it or not enough (Parsons, 2010). Research has demonstrated that brands play a significant role in boundary work at an individual or collective level (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Brand communities have been particularly apprehended as providing a safe haven for identity projects and boundary work (Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Brand communities provide a protected social context within which people do their best to "belong" and develop a shared identity (Luedicke *et al.*, 2009). "An emergent sense of membership and identity arises from the trajectory or the development of communal practices" (Schau *et al.*, 2009, p. 35). Identity work, thus, is performed through a set of communal brand-related practices, i.e. the doings of brand communities. A key observation concerning these is grounding their self-definition in opposition to another brand and its community members. When consumers reject a brand because they love another, we speak of "oppositional loyalty" (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Rivalries between members of opposing brand communities, such as in the past decades that of Mac vs personal computer or Newton vs Palm, surface in the context of online conversations "leading to brand preference debates that can range from simple name-calling to sophisticated and passionate discussions of why each brand is better" (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005, p. 488). The desire of the members of each group to define themselves, particularly by who or what they are *not*, using a reference group and an "out-group", is at play here. Identity work, then, is about defining themselves in contradistinction to the other brand and to its community.

In addition, consumers can erect boundaries with brands out of oppositional brand associations. This signals identity projects where consumers collectively flaunt themselves as being *not* a Starbucks consumer (Thompson and Arsel, 2004), *not* a Hummer owner (Luedicke *et al.*, 2009), *not* a Jeeper (Rosenbaum, 2013), *not* a Nutella eater (Cova and D'Antone, 2016), *not* a Walmart shopper (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010) and so on. Luedicke *et al.* (2009) show this kind of boundary work at play between those who own and drive a Hummer – an iconic cultural brand – and the community of those who castigate Hummer owners "for wastefully consuming scarce petroleum resources and for producing excessive carbon emissions that worsen the problems of climate change" (Luedicke *et al.*, 2009, p. 1020). The Hummer owners who are unable of evading the feedback of non-owners

respond by ascribing to their critics the identity of "being un-American, terrorist sympathizers, tree-hugging socialists, and a host of other epithets, which challenged Hummer critics' commitment to true American values" (Luedicke *et al.*, 2009, p. 1019). Through the mobilization of the Hummer brand, people produce boundary work that helps to build their identity in negative or positive relation to the brand. They use the brand as a cultural resource composed of a set of functional, economic, aesthetic and ideological distinctions that inspire vivid interactions among people. Thompson and Arsel (2004) show how some consumers vilify Starbucks as a corporate colossus seeking world domination, and experience it as a personal affront to their aesthetic, social and political values, i.e. to their identities. Boundary work is thus performed by different consumers who share a common critical construction of an enemy brand – Starbucks – without necessarily having a favourite coffee shop. In the cases of Nutella (Cova and D'Antone, 2016) and Jeep (Rosenbaum, 2013), the opposition stems from environmentalist concerns. The environmentalists' collective identity is reinforced by marking disagreement with a brand using palm oil in the case of Nutella, or with brand community members ravaging wooded areas in the case of Jeep when they go off-road. Again, neither of these opponents have a favourite hazelnut cream or carmaker to oppose to these brands. Yet, they form consumer communities, which, for collectively voicing their antipathy to the brand, can be labelled anti-brand communities (Dessart *et al.*, 2020).

Whereas a collective identity certainly emerges (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010) from each of these anti-brand communities, we know little about the kind of boundary work supporting such collective antipathy. This kind of brand repulsion is not without connection with what the literature on anti-branding (Krishnamurthy and Kucuk, 2009) has already labelled "identity clashing", i.e. people "disliking the identity represented by the brand and its followers [because] [. . .] they are foolishly following the brand just to be noticed in the society or gain some status" (Kucuk, 2019a, p. 52-53). Psychological works on identity clashing have made it the result of "negative double jeopardy": the higher the brand's social signal value (as is the case of Hummer, Starbucks, Nutella and Jeep), the bigger the magnitude of anti-branding efforts. These brands indeed are proven to attract more anti-brand websites than less valuable brands on the internet (Rogers *et al.*, 2017).

From a socio-anthropological standpoint (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), previous investigations regarding this clash of identities (Wolter *et al.*, 2016) do not yet clarify the kind of boundary work at play in repulsive attraction for a brand. Whereas we praise the efforts made to understand them, we contend that such phenomenon of identity-based repulsion is worth a second look to comprehend it from the contradictory attraction/ repulsion phenomenon in which the brand is enmeshed. Brands are too important today to remain at the surface of facts (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2009; Kornberger, 2010). Beyond the emergence of a collective identity (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010) based on the brand repulsion lived within an anti-brand community, a host of different types of boundary work is performed. Understanding which type of boundary work consumers construct their identity "against" a specific brand will help scholarship move beyond the general principle of disidentification, to understand the nature of brand repulsion.

The framework of consumer identity work brought about by consumer culture theory (CCT) makes it possible to elucidate the way consumers raise meaningful boundaries – hereafter referred to as boundary – with brands. The present study takes the perspective of identity and boundary work to understand the different meanings and tactics that consumers collectively generate to position themselves against a brand, as part of an identity-forging project. Beyond the contribution that could be made to consumer research, such a viewpoint would also contribute to the branding literature by shedding light on the little investigated nuance of brand repulsion.

Study: "I Hate Apple" community netnography

To develop a cultural viewpoint on the phenomenon of boundary work at play in brand repulsion, it is worth investigating the life of the members of an anti-brand community in its natural setting (Belk *et al.*, 1988). Natural setting for such anti-brand community members does not just mean offline, during their physical gatherings as investigated in the CCT tradition [from Schouten and McAlexander (1995) to Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2010)], but also online throughout their virtual exchanges on a dedicated internet platform (Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Cherrier *et al.*, 2011). On these platforms, they aim to ridicule, parody and expose the rejected brand (Fournier and Avery, 2011). This kind of online investigation is an adaptation of ethnography to the virtual world that Kozinets (2010) has broadly labelled "netnography". Netnographic work is highly used in consumer research and branding (Kozinets, 2010) because of its ability to capture consumers' engagement with brands online and its essential focus on consumer behaviour (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). To avoid the pitfalls of Blitzkrieg ethnography (Belk *et al.*, 1988), such a naturalistic investigation has to examine, not a short-lived word-of-mouth phenomenon, but a persistent one. By tracing the ways consumers exhibit their own negative brand meanings in the long run within a communal context, it becomes possible to understand what kind of identity work is at play in their virtual exchanges.

A vast amount of anti-brand communities exists on virtual platforms, such as anti-Walmart and anti-Starbucks. We have chosen to examine the "I Hate Apple" group on Facebook on account of several of their characteristics and those of the brand. The group was created in 2007 and maintains a steady engagement against Apple, a brand that owing to its strength has the disadvantage of attracting more negativity than weak ones (Kucuk, 2019a). Multinationals are known to attract the largest number of followers in fan communities, but are also most prone to consumer boycott (Balabanis, 2013) and opposition. Apple sceptics, indeed, form a community which is well-known to stand against this multinational and spend a considerable amount of time on their (anti)-relationship with the brand (Lee and Soon, 2017). A second reason for our choice is that Apple offers a particularly interesting brand architecture, simple apparently but offering connoisseurs many nuances and intricacies. This architecture follows a "monolithic" brand strategy, characterized by dominant visibility (Berens *et al.*, 2005) and naming (e.g. iWatch vs Apple TV). We believe that this richness offers grounds for nuanced and vibrant boundary work. Lastly, focusing on a technology brand is pertinent because purchasing Apple products usually entails a relatively high level of involvement and significant financial cost. Moreover, the frequent changes in the depth, breadth and technicity of product lines and attracting significant consumer attention provide an effervescent context for the study of boundary work (Lam and Shankar, 2014).

Consumer practices in the "I Hate Apple" group on Facebook were observed during a total period of six years, using an evolving participant-observational process to collect netnographic data. Counting about 4,500 members to date, the community welcomes people who reject Apple, and technology-savvy consumer, who are not there to rant or be overly offensive. The group rejects Apple for producing "over-priced, slave-produced, sub-standard crap", as expressed in the group description (I Hate Apple, 2013). It is moderated by six administrators from various countries, and with little evolution since its creation, it has remained quite stable over time, thus keeping to its initial orientation and standards. While the platform does not specify the country of origin of all members, its names clearly indicate a good mix in ethnic background.

This community also represents an excellent case for this paper because it presents a variety of user profiles, reflecting a wide spectrum of lived experiences within the community context (Cova and D'Antone, 2016). Moreover, the community is very active;

whereas Facebook groups do not provide statistics, it was observed that this group receives at least one post daily and that these posts systematically get liked and are more often than not commented on (sometimes gathering over 100 comments).

Data collection and analysis

Our purpose in collecting data was to understand what type of boundaries and differences consumers mobilize to forge their identities with respect to a brand they reject. Given the new and exploratory nature of the research question, we used qualitative data to gather evidence of boundary work in the anti-brand community. Qualitative data make it possible to gather insight on consumers' "lived experiences" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 10), such as their relationships with brands and the meanings they ascribe to them. Our data are triangulated using complementary methods:

- a netnographic analysis of the "I Hate Apple" community on Facebook, where the researcher alternately adopted a position of observer and participant;
- semi-synchronous digital focus group; and
- email communications.

Our use of multiple methods, investigators and data sources strengthens the validity of our findings, while answering the call for more longitudinal netnographic work (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018).

Data collection over six years (2013-2019) provides a longitudinally robust understanding of the enduring forms of boundary work at play in the "I Hate Apple" community. Following Lee and Soon (2017), a first major and active phase of data collection was carried out in 2013, followed by an observational netnography, and it was completed in 2019 by another active phase of fresh data collection. Firstly, one of the authors of this paper joined the group and observed the participants' behaviour for a month starting in July 2013, without interacting with the community (Cova and D'Antone, 2016). Once familiar with the functioning of the community, she then spent four months in participant observation in the community, which enabled her to directly interact with the group, interview members and explain the research project. Neither was the researcher's identity nor her motives were concealed. The community was very open and supportive of the research project, and disclosed valuable information. During this period, the researcher also collected data directly from targeted group members. A Facebook Messenger chat was created, which included all the moderators of the hate group as well as three highly involved members. Through this channel, the researcher conducted a semi-synchronous digital focus group (Kozinets, 2010), i.e. asking questions on the group chat and letting everyone answer freely and in their own time. Over the same period, emails were exchanged with the lead administrator of the group. Questions in these interactions were open and the ordering of the themes covered was decided on the basis of the discussion flow (Banister and Hogg, 2004), and was always driven by the main research aim. Participant observation continued until the saturation point was reached, i.e. when the researcher felt that she had a clear picture of what was going on and felt confident to produce an appropriate explanation for it (Mason, 2017).

Following this participant observation, which helped her understand the members' perception of how the repulsive brand is undermining their needs, she went on observing the group without participating. Doing so, she gathered existing data on the hate group on a more *ad hoc* basis, paying special attention to points that might have been overlooked in her previous observations and discussions, and capitalizing on important brand-related events and scandals.

After several years of ongoing (non-participant) observation, one of the authors conducted another semi-synchronous digital focus group in 2019, again, using Facebook Messenger. The author submitted her initial results and interpretation of the data to the participants. She presented them the three main categories of boundary work, as well as some variations in repulsion. She asked them if they felt this reflected the reality of the group, and offered them to comment freely on it. Participants typed-in their input in an asynchronous manner and could read other members' input. This method allowed following-up on the first wave of online focus group and obtaining further comments and thoughts, which were then embedded in the analysis. This approach permitted to show continuity in the members' boundary work. Online focus groups are a proven an effective way to gather deep data (Reid and Reid, 2005), and the authors felt it would not cause any friction for highly computer-savvy participants. Indeed, Kozinets (2015) advocates the use of any form of netnographic interview as long as the message matches the medium. Throughout the netnography, the authors collected text and visual data on the page, approximately every two months, as suggested by Kozinets and Handelman (2004). The data thus include threads of spontaneous consumer-generated content (Cova and D'Antone, 2016) as well as researcher-initiated discussions. Overall, across the six years of data collection, the authors collected 50 pages of text from email discussions and online focus groups, in addition to user-generated-content collected directly from the Facebook group and captured through screenshots.

Data from various sources (posts, comments on posts, text from email exchanges and text from digital focus group) were aggregated in a file and coded using a line-by-line analysis following recommended procedures (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The authors repeatedly analysed this data for anticipated and emergent themes, going back and forth between the data and the literature to understand if the theoretical frame of identity work could be used to explain the phenomenological data. The authors specifically looked for evidence of types or sources of (dis)identification among the community members and against out-groups, as evidence of brand repulsion. The meanings, tactics and practices that consumers collectively enact and communicate were anticipated. The authors also looked for underlying tones of attraction, as a complementary facet of repulsion. Data was also coded based on the year it was created and collected. This was allowed through a year-by-year overview of the data in considering the potential evolution of repulsion through time. The authors used an open coding approach, moving from simple to more aggregated categories that emerged, involving a constant iteration between data and theory, as codes were progressively integrated and adapted according to the data at hand. Expressions or phrases that offered insight into the focus of the boundary work were sought. The following analysis details consumers' stories and netnographic evidence gathered in the "I Hate Apple" Facebook group between April 2013 and December 2019.

Boundary work in the "I Hate Apple" group

A striking finding that permeated throughout the analysis is the persistent nature of the community itself, and the huge amount of boundary works at play among its members. Throughout the years (2013-2019), the community showed stability in numbers as well as in its ethos. Confronting our understanding of the community prior to 2019 with members back in 2019 allowed us to verify that members agree with the three boundary works identified. Alongside the various scandals or rumours surrounding Apple, despite the product releases and various actions taken by the brand, the discourse of the members remains stable, coherent, vivid and though-through. Members showcase a strong knowledge of the brand, of themselves and of other members. The community enables them to express, develop and

maintain their identity while operating with a true sense of self-awareness and reflexivity. Three inter-related types of boundary work emerge from the data: anti-fandom, anti-hegemony and anti-marketing. Throughout the three types of boundary work presented in the analysis, they collectively disidentify from the brand while at the same time discussing it abundantly. The findings also show that product and corporate repulsion are not mutually exclusive. Results attest that "I Hate Apple" members can erect boundaries specifically at the Apple products, Apple corporation or both, with great awareness. The relations between the different types of boundary work and product or corporate brand repulsion within the "I Hate Apple" community are summarized and defined in Table 1. In addition, the table proposes a rough qualitative evaluation of the impact of each type of boundary work on the product brand or the corporate brand (see Table 1, Key). Moreover, a longitudinal summary of the data is provided, with verbatim from the totality of the time period covered, broken down into three main periods. The first period is 2013-2014, when the first bulk of participant observation and active interviewing of members took place. The second, 2015-2018, was an observation period. Lastly, in 2019, a second wave of active interactions occurred.

Three types of boundary work
Anti-fandom boundary work
The first type of boundary work showing in our data is anti-fandom. Anti-fandom refers to taking distance from would-be corporate branding lies and naïve trust in them. Anti-fandom boundary work is evidenced by discourses against the "ifanboys", who are portrayed as lazy, naïve and/or pretentious. According to one of the moderators of the group, they are generally viewed in the group as "wannabe faux-nerd hipsters who care more about image than usability". The members of the "I Hate Apple" community evidence strong identity work to delineate the limits of the group by defining what is the "in" and the "out" group (Carlson *et al.*, 2008), with respect to how one consumes, uses and showcases the product brand:

[. . .] once people decided they like a particular product, even though they haven't actually properly researched and tried other products, they rave about how great it is to their friends. In some cases, I suspect many are overcompensating – they may have a few things they dislike about it, but they want to convince themselves even that it's a great product that they spent so much money on. Regardless though, they haven't really truly compared products, even though they are so quick to tell how their iDevice is so much better than all the rest, and their friends believe them. To be perfectly frank, the average (Apple) consumer market is apathetic and lazy (Comment on researcher's post, 2013)

In the anti-fandom situation, it appears that the product is the first cause of repulsion, because of how consumers choose it, that is without thought or effort to document themselves, blindly believing the brand promise and the status it is bound to deliver. Figure 1 expresses criticism for thoughtless consumers queuing for days to purchase a product free of any innovation. This exhibit seems to presents Apple lovers as fanboys or the epitome of idiocy.

The Apple products seem to be repulsive because of people's use of it, i.e. for parading essentially, and are discarded for being a staple to humiliate the non-Apple users, i.e. manifesting the "in" vs "out" group boundary work:

The reason people band together against Apple is because of their fans. If their fans remained quiet and didn't confront PC users then I doubt there would be much need for a community. But when you are constantly having to justify either your opinion, or having to produce facts, I think people naturally search for likeminded individuals to attempt to seek assistance. I know that many of the users arrived at the site seeking help. (Email communication, 2014)

Table 1.
Types of boundary work and their relations with brand repulsion within the 'I Hate Apple' group

Boundary work	Product brand repulsion	Corporate brand repulsion	Identity by repulsion: example of the 'I Hate Apple' group	Evidence 2013-2014	Evidence 2015-2018	Evidence 2019
Anti-fandom	Naïve and passive product lovers(**)	Branding strategy(*)	Repulsion is focused on the naïve lovers of brand products that do not perform as they should, and on the passive brand lovers who are oblivious of this. The corporate brand fuels a brand image that is overrated, wrong and based on aesthetics rather than quality. Consumers wish to distance themselves from such branding practices, which they perceive as fandom-inducing lies, and from blindly credulous fans	"The reason people band together against Apple is because of their fans. If their fans remained quiet and didn't confront PC users then I doubt there would be much need for a community." (Email Communication, 2014)	"iSheep at work today: 'So glad I can finally upgrade my 4s now there is a small one again, I'm so sick on phones getting bigger" Typical iSheep brain thinking only phones in the world are from Apple." (Post on Group – 2016)	"If Apple users weren't so obnoxious, and if they simply said they know Apple isn't the best but they just like using it, then I don't think most users of our group would be so "hateful" towards them." (Online Focus Group, 2019)
Anti-hegemony	Lock-in products(*)	Captive strategies(**)	Repulsion is focused on the hegemony of the brand and the ensuing control over consumer experience. The corporate brand creates captive strategies aimed at locking people in. This translates into product lock-in and product usage frustration. Consumers focus their hate on the product itself or on the company that created it. They seek to avoid brand hegemony and individual disempowerment	"Buying an Apple is like buying a Ford and be required to buy your gas, tires, batteries, only from. . .Ford". (Comments on Researcher's Posts, 2014)	"Makes me sick to my stomach to see the stupid Apple logo everywhere I go. People are so proud to display it on their laptops and phones, and tablets (which Bill Gates invented and Apple took all the credit for)" (Post on group – 2018)	"Seeing the Apple brand popularised in movies and always showing up annoyed me deeply. Apple's corporate culture me it easy for me to 'hate' them." (Online Focus Group, 2019)

(continued)

Boundary work	Product brandrepulsion	Corporate brandrepulsion	Identity by repulsion: example of the 'I Hate Apple' group	Evidence 2013-2014	Evidence 2015-2018	Evidence 2019
Anti-marketing	Product brands in general (**)	Other marketing strategies (**)	Repulsion is generated by marketing actions. All forms of marketing strategies that are deemed unfair are denounced (overpricing, ethical wrongdoing...) and product brands are rejected as a whole, beyond Apple. Consumers building their own computers are particularly well represented in this category as they develop a creative consumer identity	"As an IT Manager with the distinct pleasure of working with a graphics department (Mac users) I'm always asked "Why are mac's so much more expensive?" Here's my answer: It takes a lot of money (time and energy) to polish a turd. It costs even more to convince the world that the shiny turd is really a diamond." (Post on Group – 2014)	"I build my own computers. Try building your own computer using all Apple parts and you will spend a fortune and end up with nothing more than an overpriced PC. My computer has an Intel CPU w/6 cores w/ hyperthreading which gives it an actual 12 cores. It is so fast it's un believeable. There's nothing special about Apple, the only thing special is it's sheep." (Post on Group - 2015)	"I hate them for their over packaging with plastics galore. I hate them for skirting tax laws and trying to be "All American". I hate them for their shoddy operating system, dodgy pricing strategies, crappy Quality Assurance... should I go on?" (Online Focus Group, 2019)

Notes: *Low impact; ** High impact

Table 1.

Figure 1.
Example of anti-
fandom – product

Source: Picture posted on group (2016)

This point of view is further supported in 2019 by another member of the community:

> If Apple users weren't so obnoxious, and if they simply said they know Apple isn't the best but they just like using it, then I don't think most users of our group would be so "hateful" towards them. If Apple fans were decent, most of the "hate" would be directed at the company [. . .]. (Online focus group, 2019).

Interestingly, the anti-fandom boundary work also stems from branding practices aiming to over-represent the brand on the basis of false pretences. Members hold the view that product brand lovers "are being or have been groomed to think that their choice of computers is superior" by a company really good at selling "regardless of quality".

> There are a lot of tricks used such as making the exterior of the product look like it harbors a higher quality product compared to what is actually inside [. . .] Apple is like BOSE in this: they put in JUST enough quality that people get a product that IS better than the status quo and then past that they utilise a lot of marketing tricks including better looks (and there's no denying that Apple products are fashionable looking!) but then they stop there. (Comment on researcher's post, 2013).

"I Hate Apple" members view the corporate brand seeking to be "idolized" in dishonest ways. This religious connotation to the brand was already at play when the Apple Newton tablet was discontinued (Muñiz and Schau, 2005). As well, Apple consumers are often

viewed by the anti-brand community members as sheep blinded by corporate tales: Figure 2, posted on the group, metaphorically depicts a flock of deluded followers handing over their money to Tim Cook and his enchanting tales of phones costing $1,000. The corporate owner's portrayal as a "rat-catcher" speaks for the repulsion induced by the doings of the corporate brand: the brand owner's actions and consumers' reactions to it represent behaviours to take distance from.

Anti-fandom boundary work appears to stem from the product brand (its purchase, usage and display by consumers), which members wish to dissociate from corporate strategies. Boundary work directed at the product features more prominently and heatedly in community members' discourse (as represented by the stars in Table 1) than reactions towards the corporation. As a process, anti-fandom boundary work originates in the way the product is consumed and the meaning associated to it, and is later motivated by corporate actions.

Furthermore, moderators of the community explain how their members root their anti-fandom in a general tendency towards "anti-culture" and a need to think differently:

> On a group level I'd say there is a movement against popular things. To be nonconforming by conforming to nonconformity. So as Apple got popular and embraced its own popularity there for sure arose some "anti-fandom". It's popular to hate the popular kid. Especially since Western culture changed from embracing the top dog to the underdog. (Online focus group, 2019).

Interestingly, a true desire of protected marginality exists in the group. While members boast about not wanting to follow a mainstream trend, they are also very protective of their small group. They state later wanting to "conform to" this group, be clearly exhibit a desire to keep it marginal and "select", which evidences a clear identification and disidentification process. With just over 4,000 members in 2013 and about 4,500 in 2020, the group clearly shows no desire to expand, prove a point or gain more allies. In fact, a group of moderators ("mods") acts as the guardian of the ethos of the group and reject anyone who would not be a true member, and just there to shame the brand or have fun.

Source: Picture posted on group (2015)

Figure 2.
Example of anti-fandom – corporate

Anti-hegemony boundary work

> I hate them for their corporate abuse of power (Online focus group, 2019)

The second boundary work exhibited by the "I Hate Apple" community members refers to a rejection of brand hegemony, which refers to "the domination of one brand over others, to the extent that the purveyor of the dominant brand can largely dictate marketplace terms to its advantage" (Cromie and Ewing, 2009, p. 220). From a general standpoint, how omnipresent on the cultural scene the brand is, is a reason of repulsion for some members:

> Seeing the Apple brand popularised in movies and always showing up annoyed me deeply. Apple's corporate culture me it easy for me to "hate" them. (Online focus group, 2019)

Informants largely cite corporate dominance and power abuse, product lock-down and the imposition of proprietary technology as grounds of their repulsion, themselves deriving from corporate decisions.

> It's not so much brand hate as it is a hatred for proprietary technology. Apple's design philosophy and business practices work against technological advancement; on another note they don't seem to empower their use base by giving them the tools to fix or modify their devices. They seem to be adamant about limiting the user experience and peddling their proprietary products instead. Primary example would be the severely limited license for mac OSX: one cannot build their own device as an apple machine is required to legally own and operate it. (Comment on researcher's post, 2013)

Figure 3 illustrates that "I Hate Apple" members criticize the corporate brand for taking specific actions to modify the products. The corporate brand, speaking as "we", is parodied as communicating its new releases and changes, and the hashtag below calls it savage. In this case, this "savagery" in handling product decisions is attributed to the corporate brand and casts an ironic look at its innovation strategies. The corporate brand is the subject of repulsion on account of its peddling of the customer experience, which is portrayed as a deliberate decision. This is something Apple seems to boast about despite the perceived savagery of the action, evidencing a disidentification with brand practices.

As Cromie and Ewing (2009) point out, brand hegemony is implemented through a number of strategies aiming to increase the company's profits at users' expense. As a result of the captive strategies dictated by the corporate brand that aim to control user experience (Lee and Soon, 2017), consumers feel thwarted in their autonomy to use the products. They evidence complexity in the use of the products because of "lock-in" strategies. Apple creates a situation of "technological lock-in", whereby the decision of purchasing a specific computer operating system limits future decisions, such as new software acquisition (Harrison *et al.*, 2012). Disempowerment resulting from corporate decisions is particularly well depicted in Figure 3.

The lock-in effect and programmed obsolescence both induce a feeling of loss of control and of trust in consumers. Consumers wishing to freely use their digital devices are frustrated because the brand does not allow for any autonomy in the co-production and co-creation of their experience (Etgar, 2008), and restricts it in time. Frustration experienced through product usage is particularly apparent in the following quote:

> Buying an Apple is like buying a Ford and be required to buy your gas, tires, batteries, only from [. . .] Ford. (Comments on researcher's posts, 2014)

In 2019, members remind us that one of their main issues with the brand has to do with their ecosystem, which they still qualify of "restrictive" and "for how they hold the whole industry back with their incompatible proprietary technology" (Online focus group, 2019).

Source: Picture posted on group (2017)

Figure 4 speaks for the utter frustration felt when using Apple products. It is a direct criticism of the product and its usage – the user claims not to be able to fathom "how people can live in such a restricted world" – denouncing the product's limitations and its users' acceptance of this situation.

When it comes to anti-hegemony boundary work, the corporate brand seems to be the one most at fault. The products are rejected as a result of corporate brand actions. In other words, it appears that the products could be much more satisfying and user-friendly if the company did not impose restrictions on them. Additionally, brand hegemony reinforces with time and makes product usage increasingly frustrating over time, which again results from evolving corporate decisions. As our data suggests, the issue of technological lock-in is as salient in 2013 as it is in 2019. As depicted in Table 1, captive strategies are more fiercely blamed than lock-in products.

Reactions to corporate and product hegemony have been constant through time, as evidenced from 2013 to 2019 (see Table 1). Community members have kept arguing against hegemony-like and lock-in practices. However, we notice that discourses of repulsion are more numerous and heated when specific product releases or company condemnations in the media occur. When an issue arises, there are numerous comments and reactions. Administrators of the group even reflect on this situation, highlighting that the group is attracting more members when product usage issues are surfacing (here in the case of the removal of the headphone jack in September 2016):
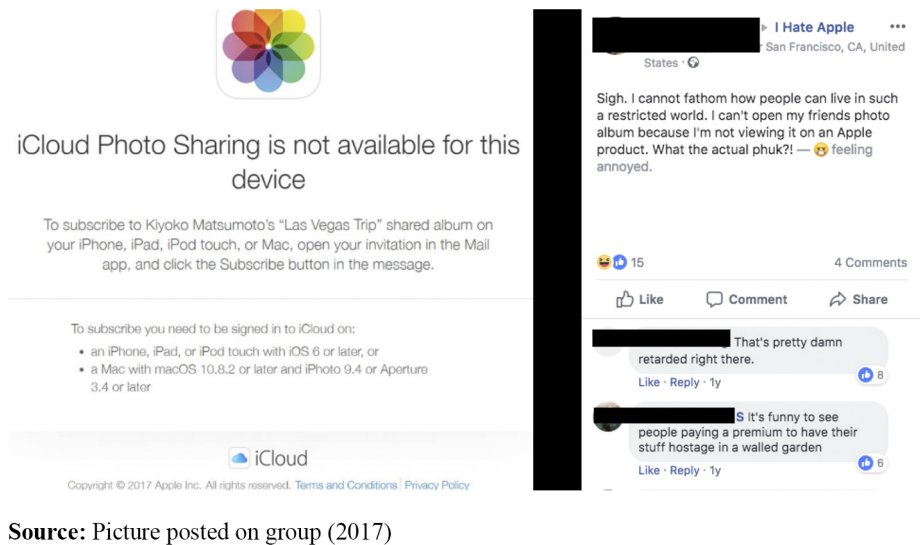
Source: Picture posted on group (2017)

I have noticed a big uptake of new users. Wonder if it's related to the jackless iPhone [. . .]. (Post on group by an administrator, 2016).

Anti-marketing boundary work

The last type of boundary work we identified within the "I Hate Apple" group is also located at the level of desired marginality, but rather shows repulsion for marketing strategies in general. In this case, the community members rebel not so much against Apple itself but against products and corporate marketing actions.

At the product level, there is repulsion for marketed products in general and the will to escape the market (Kozinets, 2002). The repulsion regarding marketed products is partly related to the issue of technological lock-in, as some community members appear to be tech-savvy creative consumers, who enjoy tweaking, customizing or even creating their own products from spare parts – a growing trend in the digital context (Yadav and Pavlou, 2014). In addition to the lock-in effect, working consumers feel that building their own device is much cheaper than owning an Apple product or any other branded product in some cases, and that the quality standards are superior. These creative consumers are used to transforming and adapting proprietary offerings (Berthon *et al.*, 2007).

Figure 5 in particular shows that the community members who create their own computers, not only seek performance at a better price and freed of corporate strategies, but also invest a lot in sharing tips and improving, thanks to the community, thus fostering a stronger sense of communal resistance to the market. Brand repulsion, in this example, seems to be emanating from a boundary work against the market and common marketing practices of "overpriced" and "hyped-up" products.

I'm against such brands because you're always getting far worse overall when you consider the alternatives. It's not even a specific alternative (and I got the impression they expected that we'd be polarized, so if we hate Apple we should be completely loyal to, say, Samsung for instance.) I'm just for always getting the best overall bang for the buck option with the best qualities and not

Source: Picture posted on group (2017)

Figure 5.
Example of anti-
marketing – product

wasting tons of cash, and Apple is very much against that concept, thus I am against them. (Comment on post, 2013)

Even members who do not create their own computers and purchase one from a brand state wanting to stay clear from any form of marketing-induced trend:

I don't buy my phone because it is trendy. I buy it because I like it. And I look for price quality. (Comment on researcher's post, 2014).

The quotes above further evidence that members erecting boundaries based on marginality are largely against big corporations imposing their products through overmarketing and branding. These members do not exhibit oppositional loyalty (for Samsung for instance) and are largely against all forms of corporate abuse or malpractice, whether in terms of customer care, working conditions or approach to competition:

They're a company (Apple) who has built products based on technology others have developed and they continue to pursue their competition strategy [. . .] (Comment on post, 2013)

For anti-marketers, there does not appear to be more prominence on the corporate or the product level, as both feed into each other. As the quote above suggests, product and strategies are intimately connected. Resistant identity is achieved through distancing with all approaches that are more marketing-oriented than technology-oriented.

Interestingly, the group also shows variations, evolution through time and internal disagreements. The following quote represents the view of a person who is strongly against Apple's market strategy, and who nonetheless decides to leave the group after a while, because he/she disidentifies with other members' views:

I think I should leave the group. I'm still an apple hater but it's just that previously what I saw [. . .] This group is far too close-minded. Filled with negative bias. And some of those people are kind of [. . .] aggressive over tiny things [. . .]. I only hate Apple for their market strategy and how they ruin the mentality of modern humans [. . .]. (Comment on post, 2016).

While consistency in terms of the exhibited forms of brand repulsion could be noticed through time, we also note internal contradictions and sometimes disagreements between

the members of the group, showing that boundary work is not always consistent and experienced in the same way by group members.

Different focus of boundary work
Because Apple is one of the most recognized and valuable global brands, its status naturally exposes it to much criticism with the "I Hate Apple" community functioning as a breeding ground. Contrary, though, to the general understanding of anti-branding being directed aimlessly and indiscriminately at the company, brand or product (Grégoire *et al.*, 2009), our informants interestingly suggested that subtle nuances in the focus of boundary work need to be considered.

Throughout the data, community members, some of whom own Apple products, consciously declared their focus of disidentification and made a clear distinction between the company and its products. Whether or not this ownership is entirely deliberate, some of them identify the corporate brand as the source of their repulsion:

> I don't dislike Apple's products: I own a Mac and an iPod, but their conduct lately is appalling. They're a company who has built products based on technology others have developed and they continue to pursue their competition strategy [. . .] If it came down to it I'd probably buy a new mac laptop. It's a bit of a cliché but they're the best laptops for anything to do with audio production – and that's from experience. (Comment on post, 2013).

This quote, condemning the corporate brand and its strategies but acclaiming the product brand as second to none, speaks for a strong polarization of both. Negative relationship with the corporate brand can therefore happen in a context of low self-brand distance with the product brand (Fournier and Alvarez, 2013). This verbatim also introduces nuance in the understanding of repulsion: one may be repulsed by the corporate brand actions, but attracted by its products, having therefore a bivalent process of identification/ disidentification with the brand.

If the example specifically targets the corporate brand as a source for repulsion while acknowledging some legitimacy to the product brand, product brand repulsion is also rampant in the community. Repulsion regarding products in particular calls for nuancing about the reasons or the exact focus of boundary work. Some community members who used to own Apple products turned away from them after a negative experience (Dalli *et al.*, 2006; Lee *et al.*, 2009):

> I worked on Apple products for 20 years in the graphics industry. I can't begin to describe the pain they caused me [. . .] during that time. The only way I could get satisfaction for that is watch piles of Apple products burn. (Comment on post, 2013).

While these product sceptics are moderate in their judgements, die-hard haters of the product brand have never touched an Apple product. They either buy other brands or create their own computer from spare parts.

Overall, members of the "I Hate Apple" community exhibit thorough knowledge of the company's current and past products, their functionalities and performance as well as the company's actions and strategies. This strong investment in understanding and documenting the subjects of their repulsion leads to clear distinctions between product brand and corporate brand repulsion in the community. Members also acknowledge that product and brand repulsion may be distinct, but that "both feed into each other" (Online focus group, 2019), as the analysis of the different types of boundary exhibited, further suggesting that attraction/repulsion are two sides of the same coin which can coexist at the collective and individual levels.

Boundary practices enacted by "I Hate Apple" members indeed make it possible to discriminate between brand repulsion directed at the product and at the company. The way these boundary works focus on the one or the other may be specific to the case under investigation – the "I Hate Apple" community. However, the three types of boundary practices highlighted by our findings can be generalized to any case of brand repulsion phenomenon.

At the sources of a paradoxical phenomenon

The aim of this paper was to nurture the concept of brand repulsion by identifying the types of boundaries consumers collectively erect with brands they reject to pursue their identity projects. Findings show that brands, such as Apple, act as anti-totems that at once repulse and attract several consumers, getting together with the purpose of rejecting it. There are no specific religious, political or nationalistic reasons behind this phenomenon. People share the same repulsion (and attraction) for contemporary traits of our societies, that are fandom, globalization and marketization and they attach it to a certain brand.

If well-known nuances of brand rejection, such as likes and dislikes, or even intermittently brand love and brand hate, are the new normal for managers, the long lasting attraction of repulsion for a brand – and its societal intertwining – requires specific attention. It is an enduring phenomenon that brand managers have to face. This phenomenon exceeds a simple product harm crisis to encompass many issues existing in contemporary societies. In our societies, identity is at stake and identity work is inescapable (Thompson, 2014). The uncertainties of events and experiences that may threaten the lives of individuals and the order of society (Bauman, 2013) stimulate anxiety and efforts to build, develop and maintain self-identity in relation to a brand (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2009; Kornberger, 2010).

Our understanding of brand repulsion goes beyond the mechanistic tradition in marketing (Bakshi *et al.*, 2013; Higgins and Scholer, 2009; Wolter *et al.*, 2016) that has so far contributed to conceptualize it. The case of consumer collectives of opponents to a brand (Dessart *et al.*, 2020) is used to understand the "dialethic" nature (Priest, 2019) of brand repulsion: consumers are at once repulsed and attracted by a brand. They spend a lot of time and effort voicing their repulsion to a brand they do not want to be associated with (Popp *et al.*, 2016). As shown by our research, the members of the "I Hate Apple" group have shared their repulsion for the Apple brand on Facebook since 2007. Brand repulsion at a collective level can be thus understood as a "serious leisure" (Stebbins, 2007), i.e. the systematic pursuit of a hobby or voluntary activity, which is sufficiently fulfilling for the participant to engage in. The serious leisure of brand repulsion requires intense and sustained information search and discussions to fuel antipathy for a brand and thus produce boundary work. This boundary work is triggered by three societal trends which at once attract and repulse people today: fandom, globalization and marketization:

- *The generalization of the fandom phenomenon*. As advocated by Jenkins who built a lot of his theory of fandom (Jenkins, 1992) on the notion of deviance and the related one of resistance, "we should no longer be talking about fans as if they were somehow marginal to the ways the culture industries operate [. . .] The old categories of resistance and cooptation seem quaint compared to the complex and uncharted terrain that we are now exploring" (Jenkins, 2007, p. 363). Jenkins' (2007) works emphasize that there is no longer a centralized or dominant culture against which deviant subcultures of fans define themselves: "Maybe there is no typical media consumer against which the cultural otherness of the fan can be located. Perhaps we are all fans or perhaps none of us is" (Jenkins, 2007, p. 364). In brand

repulsion, consumers collectively position themselves as opposed to the dynamics that make everyone a fan of something.

- *The development of global corporation hegemony.* As argued by Korten (1998), who was one of the first to pinpoint this dynamic, a handful of corporations and financial institutions command today an ever-greater concentration of economic and political power in an assault against markets, democracy and life. A few companies now have the power to cast consumer needs and expectations in a universal mould ("McDonaldization", Ritzer, 2016) and to determine consumption practices (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). In brand repulsion, consumers collectively oppose this by positioning themselves as anti-hegemonic and thus anti-global corporation. This research extends work on brand rejection proposing that brand hegemony is a key factor influencing it (Cromie and Ewing, 2009) and places it in a broader context of general dismissal of hegemonic practices. To be opposed to the mainstream satisfies the desire of marginality of certain consumers who prefer the underdogs – as Apple was in the past – to the successful brands – as Apple came to be since the beginning of the new millennium.

- *The growing anti-marketing trend.* In this context, consumers are more cynical about marketing. As Brown wrote, certain consumers today "are wise to the wiles of marketers. They possess a 'marketing reflex', an inbuilt early warning system that detects incoming commercial messages, no matter how subtle, and automatically neutralizes them" (Brown, 2003, p. 37). This "marketing reflex" rose against the backdrop of consumers' renewed resistance to marketing: "the anti-marketers today argue that the process has gone too far, the system is out of whack, and our consumer paradise has turned into a quagmire of commercialism, consumption, and materialism. Marketing, they say, is a major culprit" (Johansson (2004, p. 41). In brand repulsion, consumers collectively adopt this anti-marketing position as a way to depart from the masses of consumers that tamely accept marketing intemperance (Witkowski, 2005). Our work complements work on emancipatory practices and how the consumer communities react to market dominance (Kozinets, 2002).

It is not just by chance that a specific brand, such as Apple, serves as a kind of "attractive repulsor" – to parody a wargame – at the basis of such types of boundary work. Episodes in the life of the brand are mobilized and highlighted to ascertain the relevance of erecting boundaries with this brand, which embodies the traits of fandom, globalization and marketization. This evidence can be related to the product line or to the corporate culture. Figure 6 summarizes the system of brand repulsion that consumers develop: they play with the three identified societal trends to work at building a continuing and long-lasting series of episodes of boundary work with the repulsive brand. This leads them to develop and maintain their identities in the long run.

The findings thus complement and contrast the brand rejection literature in various ways. The anti-fandom boundary work echoes the anti-branding literature arguing that rejecting the fans of the rejected brand, and wanting to distance oneself from what they represent, is a key determinant of brand rejection (Romani *et al.*, 2015). From an ethical standpoint, rejection of hegemony is also strongly linked to rejection of practices that consumers consider as immoral and thus rooted in what brand hate researchers refer to as symbolic or ideological incongruity (Hegner *et al.*, 2017; Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016). Cherrier *et al.* (2011, p. 1,759) summarize this phenomenon by explaining that "the mark of consumer resistance, then, is acting against a particular antagonist, which, for the most part represents a system of domination". The anti-marketing boundary work, on the other hand, has found little echo in the anti-branding literature, which always considered
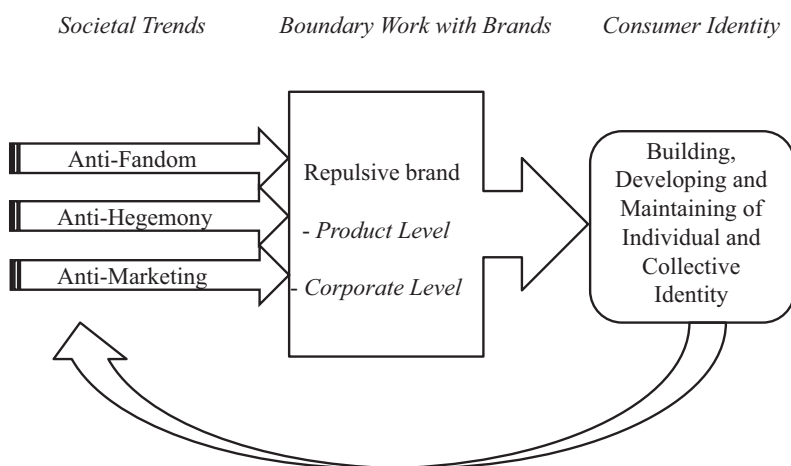
Figure 6.
Brand repulsion
system

rejection of specific brands rather than decoding brand rejection as a manifestation of a broader dismissal of marketing practices. Indeed, while brand rejection can be experienced at an individual level, it is important to comprehend it as a collective phenomenon embedded in a broader societal context (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). These interpretations thus show that beyond personal considerations such as dissatisfaction after a product failure or disagreement with a corporate practice (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2018), brand rejection and the nuance of it we investigated – brand repulsion – should be understood at a collective and societal level.

Finally, the data offers a rich and balanced perspective on the exact object of consumer repulsion. Contrary to Lee and Soon's (2017) research on Apple haters, this paper distinguishes product brand and corporate brand repulsion ("product level" and "corporate level" in Figure 6). Findings evidence that members of the "I Hate Apple" community are there because they feel that the corporate brand undermines their fundamental needs, and they express their repulsion in a highly conscious and reflective way. They actively build their identity by erecting boundaries with the corporate brand, even though some of them buy and use Apple products. Consumption experiences of the repulsive branded products are not inexistent within the "I Hate Apple" online community. For these consumers, brand loyalty is not incoherent with the existence of consumer resistance (Lee and Soon, 2017) to the Apple company, showing thus the mingling of brand repulsion and attraction. While past studies on anti-branding made headway in explaining the sources of brand rejection from a brand relationship perspective (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016, 2018), most of them have tended to automatically fuse together product and corporate brand rejection. This paper shows that product and corporate brand repulsion are separate and consciously acknowledged as such by consumers themselves. This distinction in important because it proves that repulsion is nuanced, and that product-related failures are not necessarily attributed to the corporate brand or vice versa. The study also evidences that brand repulsion is rooted in different types of boundary work, which may determine whether or not people rejecting the brand could be consumers or not, and how product vs corporate repulsion may prevail over one another. Consequently, this study evidences that product and corporate brand repulsion should be understood as distinct, yet intertwined occurrences, falling under the prism of identity work. Not only can the types of boundary

work be distinguished, they must be treated carefully for representing wider societal dynamics likely to appeal to ever growing masses of consumers.

Managerial implications

One major question for brand managers facing such phenomenon organized by groups of consumers is what to do. What to do when consumers discharge anger and transfer blame about contemporary societal concerns onto your brand? What to do when your brand becomes the incarnation or vessel of certain unwanted evils? Practices developed by consumers around the brand can be seen as an identity risk for the brand (Nakassis, 2013; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020). They destabilize the brand, trouble its meaning and even threaten the brand's positioning and the image marketers wish to portray.

Above all, brand managers and other marketers have to admit that this kind of repulsive phenomenon is the price to pay when their brand has become a strong global brand. Instead of searching reasons why consumers reject a brand, it is better to enlarge the perspective and think that there could be "nothing personal" in that repulsion and that it is inseparable from brand attraction. The current zeitgeist makes people quest for identity through boundary work and a well-known brand is often – at a product or a corporate level – a good point of anchorage to develop this kind of work. Anti-fandom, anti-hegemony and anti-marketing are not proper to a specific brand; they are characteristic of our society and navigate the market prior to spotting a certain brand. Indeed, as argued by Swaminathan *et al.* (2020), brands are taken as arbiters of societal issues that are shaping current values and perceptions in society and that happens whether they want it or not.

When it comes to a specific brand, its managers have to understand what major antagonist dynamics consumer have adopted and find a way to scale it down through an adapted brand strategy. While societal issues could be the reason of brand repulsion, specific brand actions and strategies also impact the intensity of the repulsion. Several recommendations can be made to brands suffering from boundary-work-based repulsion. A first one is to avoid closed-up ecosystems and being more inclusive of other products and technologies. Our study shows that brand standing high on their ivory tower are at risk of attracting hegemony boundary work. On the contrary, openness and compatibility go hand-in-hand with consumer empowerment, and brands like Apple should open their system to be more inclusive of other brands, ecosystems and ways of consuming.

Consumers also deplore the marketing fluff surrounding brands. They want brands to give them bang for their buck and be dependable. Rather than producing hyped-up products at an incredibly fast pace, brands should rethink their overall strategy. Indeed, a brand like Apple uses a "masstige strategy" (Kapferer, 2016), i.e. selling mass-marketed goods by adopting luxury codes. However, more radical innovation of their products, spaced-out releases of new versions and increased quality may help position them rather like premium brands, where the performance/price ratio is higher (Kapferer, 2016).

Whereas anti-hegemony or anti-marketing-based brand repulsion seems to be "easy" to tackle by lowering the level of hegemony or diminishing marketing pressure, it appears counter-productive to recommend that companies abandon their brand community strategy. Indeed, creating a sense of belonging for consumers through brand fandom is what the most successful marketers are striving for (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). However, we know that some brand fans can act as fanatics and show non-sustainable borderline-dysfunctional levels of enthusiasm that may turn into something darker or problematic for managers and other consumers. In such cases, managers and consumers could meet on the idea of getting rid of this extreme level of fandom.

Future research
The insights gained from our study on the nuance of brand repulsion hopefully set the course for further research. We envision four major axes of research: one related to the individual consumer, another to the consumer collective, a third to the brand and a fourth to the relation between product brand and corporate brand.

Firstly, beyond consumers joining together to voice their antipathy to the brand (Dessart *et al.*, 2020), as seen in the "I Hate Apple" group, we need research at the individual level and disconnected from any grouping. Is the same brand repulsion system at play for an isolated individual?

Secondly, regarding consumer collectives, the existence of conflicts and even people leaving the collective asks for a better understanding of the heterogeneity of such groups (Thomas *et al.*, 2013). Do people leave because they do not align on the rejection of a major societal trend? Are there different clans aligned on different societal trends among the members of such a consumer collective?

Thirdly, regarding the brand, research must understand what motivates people to band together against a specific brand. We know that human communities are inclined to unify, such as by choosing them a common victim or enemy (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014). The "I Hate Apple" community functions the same way. Could we predict brand repulsion on the basis of the triggers of boundary work?

Fourthly, our work opens the discussion on the distinction between product brand and corporate brand repulsion. This overlooked aspect of the literature deserves pursuing as one lens to understand the variations of the attraction–repulsion phenomenon. Can one individual or collective be repulsed by just one aspect of the brand? Should several aspects of the brand be considered in brand repulsion situations?

The study of brand repulsion and boundary work still has far to go.

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