

The Sour Switch: When Brand Hate Leads To Positive Outcomes For Competitors

Ekşi Geçiş: Marka Nefreti Rakipler İçin Olumlu Sonuçlar Doğurduğunda

Andaç Baran CEZAYİRLİOĞLU, İzmir Ekonomi Üniversitesi, Türkiye,

andac.cezayirlioglu@std.izmirekonomi.edu.tr

Orcid No: 0009-0007-6396-9803

Elif İZCAN, İzmir Ekonomi Üniversitesi, Türkiye, elif.izcan@std.izmirekonomi.edu.tr

Orcid No: 0009-0004-2413-9880

Hakkı Muammer KARAKAŞ, İzmir Ekonomi Üniversitesi, Türkiye, hakkı.karakas@std.izmirekonomi.edu.tr

Orcid No: 0000-0002-1328-8520

Selin BAYSAK ALTAN, İzmir Ekonomi Üniversitesi, Türkiye, selin.baysak@std.izmirekonomi.edu.tr

Orcid No: 0009-0009-7773-978X

Tuğba TUĞRUL, İzmir Ekonomi Üniversitesi, Türkiye, tugba.tugrul@ieu.edu.tr

Orcid No: 0000-0002-1369-8490

Abstract: While prior research has explored the psychological mechanisms behind brand hate, its effects in a competitive market remain underexplored. Building on Attribution Theory, this research examines how negative product experiences (NPE) (direct brand experiences) and negative word-of-mouth (nWOM) (indirect brand experiences) shape consumer switching behavior in response to brand hate. Using an experimental research design, 160 participants were assigned to either an NPE or an nWOM condition and compared in terms of brand hate intensity and switching intentions. The results show that consumers who have NPE exhibit higher brand switching intentions than those exposed to nWOM. Furthermore, those who have NPE are more likely to switch to premium competitors, supporting the notion that brand hate drives risk-averse behavior. However, contrary to expectations, nWOM did not significantly influence switching to comparable-value competitors, indicating that indirect negative brand experiences may not always lead to brand switching behavior. This research contributes to the growing discourse on consumer-brand relationships by demonstrating that brand hate can create opportunities for competitor brands, depending on the nature of the consumer's negative brand experience.

Keywords: Brand Hate, Negative Product Experience, Negative Word-of-Mouth, Brand Switching, Mixed Method

JEL Classification: M30, M31, M37

Öz: Önceki araştırmalar, marka nefretinin psikolojik mekanizmalarını incelemiş olsa da, markaya karşı duyulan bu nefretin rekabetçi bir piyasadaki etkileri yeterince ele alınmamıştır. Bu çalışma, Atıf Teorisi'nden yola çıkarak negatif ürün deneyimleri (NPE) (doğrudan marka deneyimleri) ve negatif ağızdan ağıza iletişimin (nWOM) (dolaylı marka deneyimleri) marka nefretine yanıt olarak tüketicilerin marka değiştirme davranışlarını nasıl şekillendirdiğini incelemektedir. Deneysel araştırma tasarımı kullanılarak, 160 katılımcı NPE veya nWOM koşullarından birine atanmış ve marka nefreti yoğunluğu ile değiştirme niyetleri bakımından karşılaştırılmıştır. Sonuçlar, NPE yaşayan tüketicilerin nWOM'a maruz kalanlara kıyasla daha yüksek marka değiştirme niyetine sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. Ayrıca, NPE deneyimleyenler riskten kaçınma davranışını destekler biçimde daha fazla premium rakiplere geçme eğilimi göstermektedir. Ancak, beklentilerin aksine, nWOM'un benzer değere sahip rakiplere geçmeyi anlamlı ölçüde etkilemediği, dolayısıyla dolaylı olumsuz marka deneyimlerinin her zaman marka terkine yol açmayabileceği saptanmıştır. Bu araştırma, tüketici-marka ilişkileri literatürüne,

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marka nefretinin tüketicinin olumsuz marka deneyiminin niteliğine bağlı olarak rakip markalar için fırsatlar yaratabileceğini ortaya koyarak katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Marka Nefreti, Olumsuz Ürün Deneyimi, Olumsuz Ağızdan Ağıza İletişim, Marka Değişirme, Karma Yöntem

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1. Introduction

Consumer-brand relationships are profoundly shaped by emotions, which play a critical role in influencing consumer attitudes, behaviors, and loyalty (Fetscherin 2019,116-119). Among the various emotional responses consumers develop toward brands, brand hate is one of the most extreme and impactful negative emotions (Zarantonello et al. 2016, 11). Defined as an intense negative emotional reaction toward a brand, brand hate can emerge mostly from direct or indirect negative experiences but also from moral misalignment, corporate misconduct, or perceived deception by the brand (Bryson, Atwal, and Hultén 2013, 395-399). The consequences of brand hate extend beyond mere dissatisfaction, often resulting in customer disengagement, negative word-of-mouth (nWOM), boycott behaviors, and even revenge-driven actions against the brand (Aziz and Rahman 2022, 2031-2032; Yadav and Chakrabarti 2021, 441).

Despite the increasing scholarly attention to brand hate, there remain significant gaps in the literature that require further exploration. Prior research has extensively examined the antecedents and brand-specific consequences of brand hate, but less is known about its broader market-level effects, particularly in terms of consumer responses toward competing brands. Specifically, the extent to which direct negative brand experiences (e.g. negative product experience, NPE) versus indirect negative brand experiences (e.g., nWOM) influence consumers' switching behavior remains underexplored. Additionally, only a limited amount of empirical research has investigated how consumers switch to certain competitors over others once they develop brand hate. The only study in the literature examining the impact of brand switching driven by brand hate on competitive brands is conducted by Ren et al. (2024, 16-18) in the context of not-for-profit (charity) brands. In this study, ideological incompatibility is associated with scandals and identified as an antecedent of brand hate. It is also revealed that while some consumers forgive the charity brand, others switch to alternative charity brands that offer a similar level of support and help. However, as highlighted in this study, brand hate toward not-for-profit brands is generally directed at specific individuals involved in the scandal, whereas brand hate toward for-profit brands is more broadly attributed to the brand's management team, which leads to stronger retaliatory consumer behavior.

Particularly, how consumers navigate alternative brand choices based on factors such as competitors' price differentiation and perceived quality is unknown. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for both scholars and practitioners seeking to comprehend the competitive effects of brand hate.

This study aims to address these research gaps by examining how NPE and nWOM influence consumers' brand switching behavior and intentions to purchase from specific types of competing brands (economic, premium, comparable-value options). By delving into these mechanisms, this study makes several key contributions. First, it enhances theoretical understanding of brand hate by expanding the discussion beyond its negative consequences to include its potential benefits for competing brands. Second, it provides empirical evidence on the relative impact of direct and indirect brand hate experiences on consumer decision-making. Ultimately, since marketing inherently takes place within the context of competition (Hunt 2014, 383-384), this research examines consumer-brand relationships from a broader and more competitive perspective.

2. Antecedents of Brand Hate: NPE and nWOM

Consumers' experiences with brands range from purely direct to purely indirect interactions. These direct and indirect experiences both serve key reference points for consumers when evaluating a brand. It is crucial to highlight that negative sentiments arising from these experiences often lead to retaliatory behaviors such as avoiding, switching, boycotting, or persuading others to avoid the brand (Bartikowski and Walsh 2011, 40; Tuzovic 2010, 453). These behaviors, whether rooted in personal dissatisfaction or shaped by the resonance of others' experiences, highlight the dual influence of direct and indirect encounters in consumer-brand relationships. Fournier (1998, 362) describes these behaviors as manifestations of "enmity," characterized by a desire to distance oneself from the brand or even inflict reputational harm. Hegner et al. (2017, 14) define these intense negative emotions directed at a brand, as "brand hate", which offers a framework for examining how consumers act upon feelings arising from negative experiences.

Rooted in Expectation-Disconfirmation Theory, the literature suggests that when actual performance falls short of expectations, such as in cases of defective products, safety issues, or functionality failures, negative emotions and behaviors emerge as a response (Oliver 1980, 460-461). These feelings are further intensified when such experiences cause financial loss, inconvenience, or harm (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2011, 710). Feelings of betrayal and

resentment escalate, undermining the implicit trust placed in brands. Consequently, brand hate arises, with product/service failures, poor quality, unmet expectations and overall trust violations (Johnson et al. 2011, 109-110; Fetscherin 2019, 116) serving as key catalysts (Hegner, Fetscherin, and Van Delzen 2017, 14; Jain and Sharma 2019, 986; Joshi and Yadav 2021, 440; Kamboj and Sharma 2023, 247). The literature offers extensive insights into how negative direct experiences contribute to the emergence of brand hate. For example, Jain and Sharma (2019) found that repeated service failures create accumulative dissatisfaction, ultimately culminating in consumer resentment that transitions into hate (Jain and Sharma 2019, 989). In line with this, Joshi and Yadav (2021) argue that unmet consumer expectations, especially when brands promise high quality but deliver subpar experiences, exacerbate feelings of betrayal and anger, heightening the potential for hate rather than mere dislike (440). Kamboj and Sharma (2023, 249-250) provide a nuanced view of the psychological underpinnings of brand hate, highlighting that negative experiences often trigger persistent rumination, distrust, and a desire for revenge.

Indirect experiences refer to second-hand encounters with a brand, where individuals are influenced by others' negative experiences rather than their own (Mooy and Robben 2002, 433). nWOM is a well-known example of such indirect experiences (Mooy and Robben 2002, 433). However, it is mostly studied as a consequence rather than an antecedent of brand hate (Zhang and Laroche 2020, 400). In the former setting, consumers speak negatively about the brand, sharing detailed accounts of perceived failures or posting critiques online (Bonifield and Cole 2007, 88; Zhang and Laroche 2020, 400; Seth and Soch 2024, 636; Sajid et al. 2024, 3-4) to express and justify their dissatisfaction and emotion, seek validation, distance themselves from the hatred brand or promote a change in others' consumption (Kashif et al. 2021, 629-630; Xie, Batra, and Peng 2015, 59-60; Rahimah et al. 2023, 620-622; Nguyen and Nguyen 2021, 77-78). It is well-documented that consumers with direct negative experiences or those who develop brand hate engage in nWOM (Ward and Ostrom 2006, 220; Kucuk 2019, 436; Zarantonello et al. 2016, 19).

As stated above, fewer studies have examined nWOM as an antecedent of brand hate. According to Bryson et al. 2021, 37) nWOM is as a significant antecedent to luxury brand hate, though with a smaller direct impact compared to other predictors like consumer dissatisfaction and negative stereotypes. As a matter of fact, nWOM not only reflects existing negative beliefs but also fosters new adverse feelings among other consumers (Grégoire et al. 2009, 19). When individuals come across negative or positive accounts from others, whether

through conversations, articles, or other digital or non-digital means, they often form judgments that influence their attitudes toward a brand. In a negative context, these second-hand narratives can be particularly compelling, as they provide cautionary examples, and establish a framework for interpreting future interactions (Curina et al. 2020, 4; Fetscherin 2019, 118). Consumers may respond to these shared accounts with empathetic alignment, further reinforcing their skepticism or aversion to a particular brand. Furthermore, as online platforms now allow grievances to be broadcasted instantly to large audiences, nWOM no longer remains solely an outcome of negative experiences but also becomes an antecedent that mobilizes backlash. When a consumer's negative experience prompts complaints that serve as warnings to others, nWOM emerges as a key driver of precautionary behavior, negative brand perceptions, and growing brand aversion. This underscores the need for research that conceptualizes nWOM as an antecedent rather than merely an outcome.

3. Consequence of Brand Hate: Brand Switching Behavior

Brand switching is defined as the act of consumers abandoning one brand in favor of a competitor, typically as a result of unmet expectations, perceived ethical violations, or unsatisfactory service experience (Zarantonello et al. 2016, 13; Hegner et al. 2017, 14-15). In such contexts, the cost of switching is relatively low, and consumers can readily shift their loyalties to competing brands that promise superior offerings or better experiences. However, while brand switching behavior is frequently highlighted as a significant outcome of brand hate, very few studies have empirically examined how consumers exhibit brand switching behavior when they develop brand hate toward a specific brand (e.g., Fetscherin 2019, 118; Islam et al. 2020, 7). Although the effect of brand hate on brand switching behavior has been demonstrated through empirical findings, the direction of this switching behavior has only been examined for non-profit brands (Ren et al. 2024, 16-18).

Pricing strategies play a significant role in developing competitive advantage and are therefore expected to have a significant influence on consumers' brand-switching behavior. Premium pricing is often employed by companies targeting customers who value exclusivity, superior quality, and brand prestige (Hinterhuber 2008, 42). Value-based pricing, on the other hand, emphasizes delivering an optimal balance between price and quality, derived from the benefits perceived by the customer rather than production costs or competitor benchmarks (Ingenbleek et al. 2003, 291-292). This strategy requires a comprehensive understanding of consumer preferences, willingness to pay, and perceived value, enabling businesses to

position themselves effectively in markets where consumers are quality-conscious but price-sensitive (Ingenbleek et al. 2013, 291-292). The last possible pricing option is the economical pricing that targets highly price-sensitive consumers by offering basic, no-frills products or services at the lowest possible prices. In the context of brand hate, Ren et al. (2024, 16-18) demonstrate that consumers attribute blame to charity brands for transgressions, fostering brand hate and driving them to seek alternative charities that provide comparable support and aid to those in need. Yet, their study also suggests that emotional responses to charity brand scandals are primarily driven by suspicion, unlike the emotions of disgust, anger, fear, or contempt typically observed in for-profit brand contexts.

Consequently, it remains uncertain whether consumers who develop brand hate will switch to an economic brand competitor (low-quality, low-price), a premium brand competitor (high-quality, high-price), or a comparable-value brand competitor (similar-quality, similar-price). Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how brand hate shapes consumer decision-making and competitive dynamics in the marketplace.

We focus on price-based competitive positioning not because price is the only relevant competitive instrument, but because it offers a theoretically meaningful and empirically tractable lens through which to observe how brand hate translates into gains for rival brands. In fast-moving consumer goods categories, brands are typically organized into widely recognized price tiers (economic, mainstream/comparable-value, and premium). These price tiers do not merely reflect monetary differences; they encapsulate bundles of expectations regarding perceived quality, safety, and reliability (Rao 2005, 401). As a result, changes in price tier constitute a natural behavioral indicator of how consumers reconfigure their value and risk-management strategies after developing brand hate toward a focal brand. Our operationalization of three rival brands (an economic, a comparable-value, and a premium alternative) serves three purposes. First, it allows us to link brand hate directly to consumers' risk perceptions and quality heuristics, which are closely tied to price. A premium alternative typically represents a "safer but more expensive" option; switching to such a brand after a severe negative product experience can be interpreted as a self-protective response in which consumers are willing to pay more to avoid a repetition of the harmful incident. By contrast, an economic alternative represents a "cheaper but potentially riskier" option, where savings may compensate for generalized distrust in the category, while a comparable-value alternative functions as a conservative lateral move that preserves the existing price-quality trade-off.

Second, concentrating on price-based positioning helps us maintain internal validity. Competing brands in the marketplace differ along multiple dimensions (e.g., communication strategy, distribution reach, packaging, brand origin). Attempting to manipulate all of these simultaneously would make it difficult to attribute observed switching behavior uniquely to the antecedent type of negativity (NPE versus nWOM). By structuring the competitive set primarily along the price value dimension and keeping other attributes standardized across the three fictitious brands, we can more cleanly isolate the effect of different sources of brand hate on consumers' brand-switching choices. Finally, our emphasis on pricing strategies is managerially relevant. In the aftermath of a brand-hate-inducing incident, rival firms may not be able to redesign products or reposition their overall brand architecture immediately, but they can adjust price-related cues and price-linked communication in the short term. Our design therefore provides actionable insight into how different types of competitors can strategically position themselves when a focal brand becomes the target of intense consumer hate.

4. Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory and Attribution Theory provide a robust framework for understanding consumer satisfaction and post-purchase behavior. Consumers form expectations based on extrinsic cues such as price, brand reputation, product origin, and sustainability claims, which collectively shape their evaluative judgements (Kokthi and Kruja 2016, 876-877). Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory posits that dissatisfaction arises from the discrepancy between consumers' pre-purchase expectations and their perceptions of actual product performance (Oliver 1980, 460-461; Yüksel and Yüksel, 2001, 108-109). This discrepancy, known as the disconfirmation of expectancies, serves as a critical metric for marketing professionals in evaluating consumer reactions and predicting future purchase behaviors (Anderson and Sullivan 1993, 126-128; Teas and Palan 2003, 82-85).

Complementing this perspective, Heider's Attribution Theory (1958) is widely applied in psychology and applied fields such as marketing and consumer behavior because it emphasizes that individuals' subjective perceptions of the causes of success or failure, rather than objective facts, shape judgments and subsequent behavior (Ayob et al., 2013, 22). Accordingly, attribution theory is frequently used to explain how and why individuals interpret experiences and form behavioral intentions.

In the festival context, the theory helps explain how visitors attribute their enjoyment or dissatisfaction to internal event-related factors or external situational factors, which in turn influence loyalty, support, and event sustainability (Ayob et al., 2013, 23). Similarly, in the mobile shopping context, attribution theory is used to examine how consumers assign purchase intentions to internal personal factors or external factors, shaping their reactions to mobile advertising and influencing purchasing behavior (Anić et al., 2023, 183–184).

More broadly, attribution theory explains how consumers interpret product performance, particularly failures, by assigning responsibility based on the dimensions of locus (who is responsible), stability (likelihood of recurrence), and controllability (whether the issue could be prevented) (Folkes, 1988, 556–558). When products underperform, consumers engage in causal reasoning to determine whether failures stem from internal factors such as brand quality or from external, uncontrollable circumstances, and these attributions play a key role in shaping future consumer behavior (Gaier, 2015, 7). Research shows that dissatisfaction and brand-switching are more likely when failures are attributed to stable and controllable internal factors associated with the brand (Folkes, 1988, 557).

Additionally, Luce, Payne, and Bettman provide critical insights into how negative emotions arising from unfavorable product attributes drive consumers to prioritize quality-maximizing strategies (Luce et al. 2000, 279). Consumers perceive high-quality choices as a way to mitigate emotional threats and perceived risks. Notably, when failures are seen as preventable and likely to reoccur (internal factors), negative emotions such as frustration and distrust intensify, leading consumers to seek superior alternatives as a coping mechanism (Luce et al. 2000, 279).

In this context, we propose that NPE, as an actual performance encounter, is likely to trigger a more consequential attributional process than nWOM. Based on the previous research, when consumers personally encounter a product failure and attribute it to stable and controllable causes internal to the brand, their negative emotions intensify and may escalate into brand hate. Moreover, this direct negative encounter is likely to amplify perceived risk and motivates consumers to avoid future dissatisfaction. Consequently, they become more inclined to switch to a premium competitor, one associated with (high-quality and high-price), as a strategy to minimize perceived risk (see Figure 1). Accordingly, we test the following hypothesis:

H1: Among consumers who intend to switch brands due to brand hate, those who develop brand hate as a result of NPE tend to exhibit stronger brand switching behavior than those who develop brand hate through nWOM.

H2: Among consumers who intend to switch brands due to brand hate, those who develop brand hate as a result of NPE are more likely to switch to premium brand competitors than those who develop brand hate through nWOM.

Luce et al. (2000, 279) highlight how consumers evaluate alternatives based on perceived similarity to the original brand in quality and price, particularly in situations involving moderately unfavorable conditions. This behavior arises from a desire to maintain consistent expectations while reducing the risks tied to drastic changes. At the same time, consumers exposed to indirect experiences, such as nWOM, are more likely to favor highly desirable products over those that are more feasible (Hamilton and Thompson 2007, 547). Since nWOM is often perceived as moderately negative rather than severely damaging, unlike direct negative experiences, consumers may be more inclined to switch to a comparable-value competitor, taking a risk-averse decision to avoid a drastic departure from their established expectations. We test the following hypothesis:

H3: Among consumers who intend to switch brands due to brand hate, those who develop brand hate through nWOM are more likely to switch to comparable-value brand competitors than those who develop brand hate as a result of NPE.

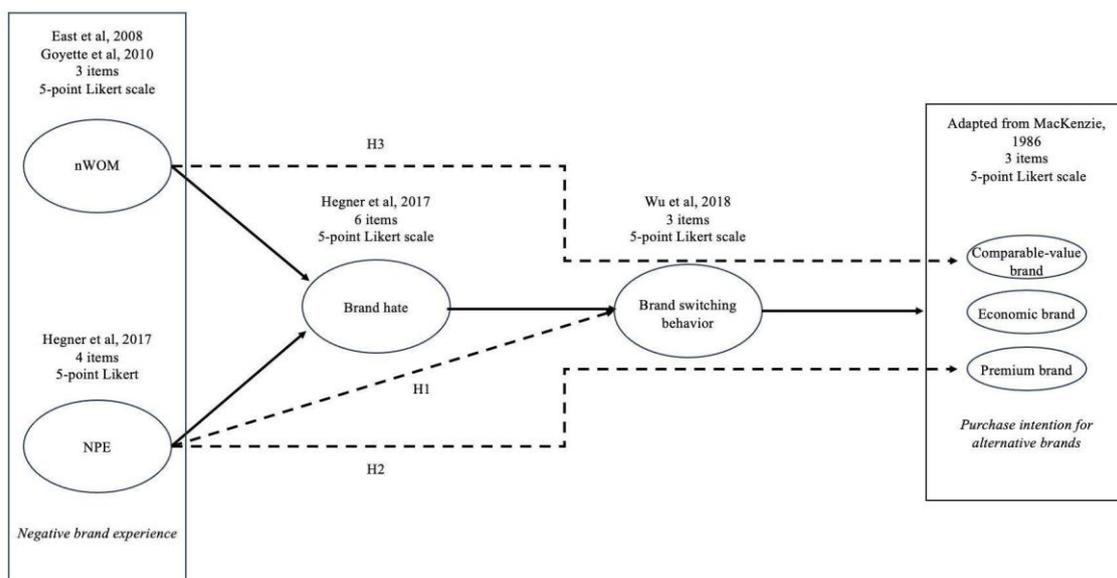


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

5. Methodology

5.1. Sample and Design

This study employs a between-subject experimental design to explore the influence of different antecedents of brand hate on consumers' brand switching behaviors. Participants (N = 160; 80 female, 80 male) were recruited via Prolific, an online research platform. Of them, 8.8% were between 18-24 years of age, 28.1% were between 25-34 years of age, 33.1% were between 35-44 years of age, 17.5% were between 45-54 years of age, 8.1% were between 55-64 years of age, and 7% 28.1% were 65 years of age or above. Eligibility criteria required participants to be fluent English speakers, aged 18 years or older, and to have completed at least a high school education. Prior to the main study, a pilot manipulation (i.e. directedness of the experience) and realism check was conducted with 36 participants to ensure the scenarios effectively elicited the intended responses.

5.2. Procedure

At the start of the survey, participants completed a demographic questionnaire to confirm eligibility. Then they were randomly assigned to read one of two vignettes describing either a direct brand experience (NPE) or an indirect brand experience (nWOM). In the NPE condition, participants read a scenario depicting a firsthand product failure that resulted in food poisoning and medical complications. In the nWOM condition, participants were exposed to an online consumer review detailing the same product failure experienced by someone else. After reading their assigned scenarios, participants were asked to answer the questions based on the scenario. First, brand hate was measured, followed by brand switching behavior, and finally, consumers' purchase intentions toward three alternative brands. Participants who indicated no intention to switch were subsequently dismissed from the study. Those who indicated a willingness to switch then completed the Brand Switching Behavior Scale (Wu et al. 2018, 699) and evaluated their purchase intentions for three alternatives: an economic brand (low-quality, low-price) (EcoMilk), a premium brand (high-quality, high-price) (CreamyGold), and a comparable-value brand (similar-quality, similar-price) (DairySure).

5.3. Vignettes

Two vignettes were constructed to simulate a realistic consumer experience with a milk brand, MilkyPure, manipulating the source of negative brand information; direct brand experience (i.e. NPE) versus indirect brand experience (i.e. nWOM). Both vignettes began with an

identical introduction designed to highlight prior positive brand experience and brand trust, such as:

“MilkyPure is a popular milk brand, known for its promise of quality and safety. You’ve been a loyal customer of this brand for several years now, appreciating its good taste and the company’s claims of maintaining hygiene. You, as a family, typically consume MilkyPure daily, whether with your children's breakfast cereal or in your morning coffee.”

This shared setup was included to ensure that any differences in response would arise solely from the manipulated experience type. The key manipulation occurred in the next section of the scenario. In the NPE condition, participants read about a personal, firsthand incident of contamination:

“One morning at breakfast... you both started to feel sick. At first, you both had a bit of a stomachache, but within a few hours, it got way worse. Finally, you ended up with bad stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, and dehydration. The emergency doctor informed you that the contamination likely originated from the milk you had consumed.”

In contrast, the nWOM condition described learning about similar incidents through online reviews, while participants themselves remained unaffected:

“While adding MilkyPure to your cart, a recent consumer review attracts your attention. The reviewer mentions bad stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, and dehydration after he/she and his/her child had consumed MilkyPure. The emergency doctor informed them that the contamination likely originated from the milk they had consumed.”

Both versions included identical brand response elements to maintain comparability, describing dismissive customer service:

“MilkyPure’s customer service responded in a generic and dismissive manner.”

Finally, both vignettes concluded with an identical outcome sentence designed to evoke feelings of betrayal and anger:

“After that experience / After these reviews, you feel betrayed and angry, especially since you trusted MilkyPure with something as important as your health or the health of your loved ones.”

By holding the brand, context, positive introduction, and emotional conclusion constant, and varying only the source of negative information (NPE versus nWOM), the manipulation isolated the hypothesized causal factor.

The vignette development process incorporated expert evaluations to enhance plausibility, clarity, and alignment with the constructs of brand hate. Feedback from an expert panel of

three academicians ensured the scenarios accurately represented the constructs and reflected plausible consumer behavior. Their insights also guided refinements, such as emphasizing the freshness of the milk and streamlining the narrative for better engagement. This rigorous development process ensured that the vignettes effectively distinguished between the direct and indirect triggers of brand hate while maintaining their validity for measuring behavioral outcomes.

5.4. Measures

To verify the experimental manipulations, two complementary checks were employed. First, NPE was measured with four items adapted from Hegner et al. (2017, 25), assessing the perceived severity of the product failure described in the scenario. Respondents indicated their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). nWOM was measured with three items adapted from East et al. (2008, 223) and Goyette et al. (2010, 11), capturing participants' perceptions of the severity of negative experiences shared online, rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

These measures confirmed each vignette elicited its intended brand experience. Secondly, all participants answered the item “I think the interaction with the product in this situation represents a(n) ____” on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Completely indirect experience, 7 = Completely direct experience). Brand hate was measured by using a six-item scale adopted from Hegner et al. (2017, 25), a widely used scale in the literature (e.g., Hashim and Kasana 2019, 247; Husnain et al. 2021, 5; Ahmed and Hashim 2018, 841; Yigit and Irfanoglu 2021, 69), rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Brand switching behavior was assessed in two ways: a dichotomous forced choice yes/no item and a three-item likelihood scale adapted from Wu et al. (2018, 699) which is rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Alternative brand purchase intention was measured using a three-item, 5-point Likert scale adapted from MacKenzie et al. (1986,134-135). Appendix II includes the complete set of measurement items used in this study, as well as their corresponding source references.

5.5. Statistical Analyses

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS version 30.0. The assumption of normality for the data distribution was assessed using kurtosis and skewness values. The homogeneity of variances was tested using Levene's test. The data satisfied the assumptions of normality and homogeneity, justifying the application of parametric tests. Accordingly, independent sample t-tests were performed to compare the responses of two groups of consumers: NPE and

nWOM regarding brand switching behavior and purchase intention for alternative brands. Mean scores were used for the former and total scores were used for the latter. Cohen's *d* was used as the effect size measure. Logistic regression was used to estimate the type of product experience. The effects of the type of product experience, gender, and age on purchase intention for alternative brands was tested using parametric tests.

6. Results

6.1. Verification of Realism and Experimental Manipulations

According to the assessment of vignettes simulating NPE and nWOM conditions on pilot participants, both scenarios were found to be realistic ($M_{NDE} = 5.50$, $SD_{NDE} = 0.51$ and $M_{NWOM} = 6.06$, $SD_{NWOM} = 1.11$). No statistically significant difference was found between NPE and nWOM groups regarding realism ($t(24) = -1.93$, $p = 0.07$). Participants of the pilot study in the NPE condition indicated a higher level of direct experience with the product ($M_{NPE} = 6.39$, $SD_{NDE} = 0.778$) than participants in the nWOM condition ($M_{NWOM} = 3.44$, $SD_{NWOM} = 2.04$), $t(22) = 5.73$, $p = 0.0001$. These findings, together, confirmed that each vignette elicited its intended brand experience.

6.2. Brand Hate Antecedents

According to the analyses complementary checks results, the mean Negative Product Experience Scale (Hegner et al. 2017, 25) average score for participants of NPE group was 3,89 ($SD = 0,88$). The mean Negative Word of Mouth Scale (East et al. 2008, 223; Goyette et al. 2010, 11) average score for participants in nWOM group was 4,11 ($SD = 0,95$). These findings, along with the findings in Section 6.1. further confirmed that each vignette elicited its intended brand experience.

6.3. Brand Switching Behavior

Of all participants, 11 in the NPE condition and 17 in the nWOM condition stated that they did not consider switching the brand. Among those who indicated an intention to switch, the mean level of switching behavior was $M = 4.49$ ($SD = 0.66$). Participants in the NPE condition ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 0.57$) exhibited significantly higher switching behavior than those in the nWOM condition ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.71$), $t(130) = 3.022$, $p = 0.003$. Therefore, H1 was supported.

6.4. Alternative Purchase Intentions

The effects of experimental conditions on the total purchase intention scores were examined using ANOVA. NPE and nWOM consumers showed significant differences regarding the purchase intention toward premium brands. In that context, participants who experience brand hate through direct experience (M=10.99, SD=3.03) demonstrate significantly greater intention to switch to premium brands compared to those who experience brand hate through indirect experience (M=9.35, SD=3.00), $F(1,120) = 7.139$, $p = 0.009$, $\eta^2 = 0.056$ (see Table 1). Therefore, H2 was supported. However, the two experimental conditions did not differ from one another in terms of purchase intention toward the comparable value brand (M = 12.42, SD = 2.17 for NDE; M = 11.83, SD = 2.56 for nWOM; $F(1,120) = 0.123$, $p = 0.726$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$) (see Table 1). Therefore, H3 was not supported.

The effect size analyses reinforce the practical importance of our findings. Specifically, the partial $\eta^2=0.056$ value for H2, which examined switching to a premium brand, reveals that the risk avoidance motivation induced by NPE has a moderate but measurable practical effect on consumers' alternative choice. In contrast, the lack of support for H3 and the associated negligible η^2 value (0.001) strongly prove that indirect negative experiences (nWOM) do not have a practical effect on changing consumer behavior.

Table 1. The comparison of purchase intention scores for different product types, and their significances

Product type	Experience type	n	Mean*	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig.	Effect size
Comparable value	NPE	69	12.42	2.17	1.445	130	.151	.253
	nWOM	63	11.83	2.56				
Premium	NPE	69	10.99	3.03	3.118	130	.002	.567
	nWOM	63	9.35	3.00				
Economic	NPE	69	8.13	3.07	-.492	130	.624	-0.54
	nWOM	63	8.40	3.14				

* The mean score reflects the average value of the composite scores calculated by summing the three items measuring alternative brand purchase intention.

6.5. Further Analysis

In the logistic regression analysis, among the three scores included in the analysis, only one score remained significant after the backward elimination process and in the single-step model. This score was for premium brand $t(\text{Wald} = 7.926, \text{df} = 1, p = .005)$. The chi-square value obtained for the model was 11.04, which was significant at the $p < .05$ level.

The overall correct classification rate of the model was found to be 63.6%. The predictability of the NPE group was 71%, indicating that 49 out of 69 NPE participants were correctly classified, while 20 participants were assigned to the nWOM group. The predictability of the nWOM group was found to be 55.6%, indicating that 35 out of 63 healthy participants were correctly classified, while 28 participants were assigned to the NPE group (see Table 2).

Table 2. Logistic Regression Analysis of Purchase Intention Total Scores

Observed Group	Predicted Group		
	NPE	nWOM	Percentage Correct
NPE (n=69)	49	20	71%
nWOM (n=63)	28	35	55,6 %
Overall Percentage			63,6 %

The effects of group, gender, and age on the total purchase intention scores were examined using ANOVA as an exploratory analysis to assess potential differences. In terms of gender, a difference was observed in the low quality-low price product group $F(1,120) = 5,689, p = 0.019, \eta^2 = 0.045$. MANOVA analysis did not reveal any interaction effects among the variables (see Tables 3 and 4). Examination of the means showed that male participants had higher purchase intention scores for the economical brand ($M=8.76, SD=3.07$) compared to female participants ($M=7.51, SD=2.99$) (see Table 3).

The analyses revealed a significant difference between NPE and nWOM groups regarding the premium brand (Wilks' Lambda: $F(3,118) = 2.980, p = 0.034, \eta^2 = 0.070$). To identify the source of the difference, the means were examined, and it was observed that participants in the NPE group had higher purchase intention scores for the premium brand ($M=10.99, SD=3.03$) compared to those in the nWOM group ($M=9.35, SD=3.00$) (see Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of Test Scores

Test score	Sex	NPE		nWOM	
		Mean*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Comparable value	Female	12.66	1.98	11.81	2.87
	Male	12.18	2.35	11.84	2.24
	Total	12.42	2.17	11.83	2.56
Premium	Female	10.86	3.39	8.97	3.00
	Male	11.12	2.65	9.74	2.99
	Total	10.99	3.03	9.35	3.00
Economical	Female	7.51	2.99	8.00	3.28
	Male	8.76	3.07	8.81	2.99
	Total	8.13	3.07	8.40	3.14

* The mean score reflects the average value of the composite scores calculated by summing the three items measuring alternative brand purchase intention.

Table 4. MANOVA Results and Related Post Hoc Analyses

Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	η^2	Post Hoc
Group							
Comparable value	14.71	1	14.71	2.64	0.107	0.022	AD
Premium	63.47	1	63.47	7.14	0.009	0.056	NPE>nWOM
Economical	1.19	1	1.19	0.12	0.726	0.001	AD
Sex							
Comparable value	8.48	1	8.48	1.52	0.219	0.013	AD
Premium	1.03	1	1.03	0.12	0.734	0.001	AD
Economical	54.84	1	54.84	5.69	0.019	0.045	Male>Female

Age							
Comparable value	2.58	2	1.28	0.23	0.793	0.004	AD
Premium	37.09	2	18.54	2.09	0.129	0.034	AD
Economical	6.11	2	3.05	0.32	0.729	0.005	AD
Group x Sex							
Comparable value	0.05	1	0.05	0.01	0.922	0.000	AD
Premium	13.45	1	13.45	1.51	0.221	0.012	AD
Economical	22.31	1	22.31	2.31	0.131	0.019	AD
Group x Age							
Comparable value	4.62	2	2.31	0.42	0.661	0.007	AD
Premium	2.36	2	13.18	1.48	0.231	0.024	AD
Economical	4.14	2	2.07	0.22	0.807	0.004	AD
Sex x Age							
Comparable value	17.95	2	8.98	1.61	0.204	0.026	AD
Premium	13.20	2	6.60	0.74	0.478	0.012	AD
Economical	22.42	2	11.21	1.16	0.316	0.019	AD
Group x Sex x Age							
Comparable value	20.31	2	10.16	1.83	0.166	0.030	AD
Premium	30.70	2	15.35	1.73	0.182	0.028	AD
Economical	36.27	2	18.14	1.88	0.157	0.030	AD

7. Discussion

7.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study provides empirical evidence on the differentiated effects of direct and indirect negative brand experiences on consumer behavior, particularly in the context of brand hate and brand switching. By employing an embedded mixed-methods experimental design, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how distinct types of brand-related adversity influence consumer decision-making. Based on Attribution Theory, our findings offer a perspective on how consumers process and respond to negative brand encounters,

emphasizing the role of causal attributions, stability, and perceived controllability in shaping their subsequent purchasing decisions.

The results confirm that NPE leads to higher switching intentions compared to indirect negative experiences via nWOM. This supports the idea that firsthand encounters, especially those associated with physical inconvenience, emotional distress, or personal harm, trigger more intense negative emotions and a heightened motivation to seek alternatives. Furthermore, our findings align with prior research suggesting that when consumers attribute brand failures to stable and controllable (internal) causes, they are more likely to engage in risk-minimization strategies (Luce et al. 2000, 279) by switching to a premium competitor. This outcome validates H2 and supports the psychological compensation framework, reinforcing that consumers experiencing brand hate due to product failures prioritize quality over price when selecting an alternative. The non-support for H3 suggests that indirect negativity (nWOM) does not automatically produce a proportionally moderate switching pattern toward comparable value competitors. This diverges from a large eWOM literature indicating that online reviews and review valence can affect demand and sales outcomes in many categories (e.g., Floyd et al. 2014). Our H3 result is also consistent with contingency perspectives showing that WOM influence depends on diagnosticity and prior impressions (e.g., WOM effects can attenuate when consumers rely on existing memory-based evaluations) and that the usefulness of negative online reviews depends on readers' attributions about reviewer motives and product type (e.g., Sen and Lerman 2007).

Additionally, H1 was strongly supported, confirming that brand hate resulting from direct negative experiences is a more potent driver of switching behavior than nWOM-induced brand hate. The supported H1 is consistent with prior work showing that consumer negativity rooted in firsthand experience tends to be especially behaviorally consequential. In brand hate research, negative past experience is repeatedly identified as a key trigger of brand hate and is associated with strong downstream responses such as avoidance/cessation and other anti-brand outcomes (e.g., Hegner et al. 2017; Zarantonello et al. 2016). Likewise, classic consumer behavior research on direct versus indirect experience shows that attitudes grounded in direct product experience (e.g., product trial) are typically stronger and more predictive of purchase behavior than attitudes formed from indirect communications such as advertising or descriptions (e.g., Hamilton and Thompson 2007). Our study extends these insights by experimentally isolating the source of consumers' negative brand-related experience (NPE

versus nWOM) and linking this distinction to competitor-related outcomes, namely, the magnitude of switching behavior among hate-driven switchers.

Beyond price–quality trade-offs, the present findings should be interpreted within a broader view of how consumers evaluate alternative brands after developing brand hate. In our experimental design, competitors were operationalized along economic, comparable-value, and premium tiers. This focus reflects the fast-moving consumer goods context, where price and quality are salient and easily comparable cues in everyday purchase decisions. However, prior work has shown that brand hate can also emerge from moral misalignment, value conflicts, or perceived violations of social norms (Hegner et al. 2017, 15) (e.g., brand scandals (Kapoor and Banerjee 2021, 1067), discrimination (Sharma et al. 2022, 712), or environmental irresponsibility (Singh and Wagner 2024, 1209), in which case consumers may prioritize non-price positioning cues, such as ethical reputation, identity congruence, or perceived social impact, when choosing among rival brands.

The contrast with Ren et al. (2024, 16) is instructive in this regard. Their qualitative study examines brand hate in the context of charity brands, where “switching” does not involve purchasing a cheaper or more expensive alternative, but redirecting one’s support to another organization that offers a comparable level of help. In such settings, price is structurally less relevant, while mission alignment, perceived integrity, and trust in governance are central evaluative criteria. Thus, their findings suggest that, when brand hate is triggered by ideological incompatibility or suspected misconduct, consumers may be less concerned with economic sacrifice and more concerned with restoring a sense of moral consistency.

7.2. Practical Implications

From a managerial perspective, this study provides valuable insights for crisis communication, brand recovery efforts, and strategic competitor positioning. For brands facing direct negative experiences, the findings suggest that the emotional intensity of these incidents demands more personalized and empathetic customer service interventions. A dismissive or generic response, as simulated in the vignettes, was insufficient and contributed to feelings of betrayal and anger, which are key components of brand hate. Brands should consider implementing proactive service recovery tactics, such as direct outreach, compensation, or public acknowledgment of fault, to restore trust and mitigate switching behavior.

In contrast, for indirect experiences like nWOM, firms must remain vigilant in online reputation management and digital engagement monitoring. Although the emotional response was weaker compared to NPE, a significant portion of consumers still expressed brand hate and considered switching. Therefore, investments in social listening tools, personalized review responses, and transparency in complaint handling are essential in containing the spread of brand hate via digital channels.

Additionally, competitor brands, especially those in the premium segment, can strategically benefit from the psychological state of disillusioned consumers. By positioning themselves as “safe havens” offering superior quality and reliability, premium brands can attract consumers seeking an escape from negative experiences. Marketing communications that emphasize brand trust, quality assurance, and customer care may resonate more strongly with consumers experiencing brand betrayal. This presents a competitive opportunity for challenger brands and category leaders alike.

7.3. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its strengths, this study is not without limitations. While the scenario-based experimental design ensures high internal validity, it may not fully reflect consumer reactions in real-world settings, thus limiting external validity. Additionally, future research may employ larger samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Although the sample was balanced by gender and age, the exploratory analysis showed that only in the context of economical brands did male consumers exhibit higher purchase intentions than female consumers. This finding highlights the need for further research on the role of demographic factors in consumers’ behavioral responses to brand hate. Individual personality traits or psychological predispositions were not considered in the current study. These factors are crucial in shaping how consumers process and respond to negative brand interactions (Bayarassou et al. 2021, 492). Previous studies have demonstrated that personality dimensions, such as neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness, play a significant role in influencing emotional reactions to brand transgressions and subsequent coping behaviors (Kucuk 2019, 436-437; Seth and Soch 2024, 640-641). Given that consumer decision-making is often driven by both situational factors and inherent personality characteristics (Orth 2005, 116-119; Kucuk 2019, 440-441), future research should incorporate the Big Five personality traits to offer a more detailed understanding of how individual differences affect brand switching tendencies in response to direct and indirect

experiences. By integrating personality factors into brand hate research, future studies can offer a more comprehensive perspective on consumer switching responses to brand failures, ultimately helping marketers and brand managers segment audiences and personalize recovery strategies.

Moreover, product involvement influences both how consumers feel (e.g., Ha and Lennon 2010, 81) and how they respond emotionally (e.g., Calvo Porral et al. 2017, 148). Therefore, a strong attachment to a product may intensify brand hate and the resulting negative consumer responses. This interaction between emotional investment and negative affect was not addressed in the present study and represents a compelling direction for future research.

A further limitation concerns the way competing brands were conceptualized solely through price and quality tiers. While this operationalization is appropriate for low-involvement FMCG categories, it does not fully capture the range of positioning attributes that may guide brand choice when brand hate is driven by other antecedents, such as ideological disagreement, perceived injustice, or violations of moral expectations. In donation and charity contexts, for example, Ren et al. (2024) show that consumers react to scandals by reallocating their support to alternative organizations that offer a similar level of help, where key differentiators are mission fit, perceived trustworthiness, and transparency rather than price. Building on this insight, future research should broaden the conceptualization of “competing brands” to include dimensions such as corporate social responsibility orientation, environmental performance, inclusivity and diversity practices, political or ideological stances, and brand personality.

Finally, the study’s findings on the weaker impact of negative nWOM suggest the need to explore conditions that amplify or moderate its influence, such as source credibility or the perceived severity of the issue (e.g., Hsieh and Li 2020, 256). Further exploration of potential moderators, including brand loyalty, emotional intensity (e.g., Ahluwalia et al. 2000, 204), and mediators such as perceived justice or recovery fairness (e.g., Huse et al. 2017, 336), could refine our understanding of the relationship between expectation disconfirmation and attribution processes. To expand the brand hate literature in general, the evolving nature of digital platforms calls for research into factors like algorithmic amplification of content, virality thresholds, and audience responsiveness, as well as the corrective potential of positive word-of-mouth (e.g., Amed et al. 2019, 434). Addressing these gaps will not only deepen theoretical insight but also offer practical guidance for managing consumer backlash in an increasingly digitized and transparent brand environment.

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Appendix I

Measurement Scales

Negative Product Experience (Hegner, Fetscherin, and Van Delzen 2017)

- The performance of MilkyPure products is poor.
- MilkyPure products are inconvenient.
- My hate for MilkyPure is linked to the bad performance of its products.
- I am dissatisfied with MilkyPure.

Negative Word of Mouth (East, Hammond, and Lomax 2008; Goyette et al., 2010)

- For MilkyPure, I mostly hear negative things from others.
- People have spoken unflatteringly about MilkyPure.
- To what extent do you agree that the last negative response about MilkyPure was strongly expressed?

Brand Hate (Hegner, Fetscherin, and Van Delzen 2017)

- I am disgusted with MilkyPure.
- I do not tolerate MilkyPure and its company.
- The world would be a better place without MilkyPure.
- I am totally angry about MilkyPure.
- MilkyPure is awful.
- I hate MilkyPure.

Brand Switching Behavior (Wu et al. 2018)

- I intend to switch to an alternative milk brand.
- Next time I need milk, I will consider buying from a different milk brand.
- I would not continue to use MilkyPure.

Alternative Purchase Intention (MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986; Nguyen and Nguyen 2021)

- I am likely to purchase DairySure/CreamyGold/EcoMilk.
- It is probable that I will purchase DairySure/CreamyGold/EcoMilk.
- It is possible that I will purchase DairySure/CreamyGold/EcoMilk.