

Consumer Boycotts

Mental Representations and Consumer Behavior



Principles of International Marketing-

BSc International Business

Exam type: 72-hour Individual take home exam

BINBO1160U

March 27, 2025

Characters: 22.384 – Pages:9

1. Introduction

A global movement to boycott American goods has spread rapidly. A central reason is the second Trump Administration's actions creating a global debate with shared negative perceptions of America. The effects are significant for American companies, Tesla with Elon Musk as founder has experience these effects first-hand. Around 15% of their share value decreased only few days after Elon Musk began as head of "Department of Government Efficient" formed by Trump.

The second Trump Administration has become a target for consumer anger, leading to negative brand and country associations. The perception on American brands has resulted in many countries and companies striving to prevent the consumption of American goods. The negative global perception on America is highly challenging for brand managers to circulate since their country of origin is now associated with the second Trump Administration, this is especially affecting Tesla negatively (Beaumont, March 2025). We can understand that social values are highly related to emotions, emotions are initially what form one's mental representations together with cognitions. When diving further into consumer attitudes and behavior, it is therefore relevant to understand how one's mental representations and emotional responses are formed. (Lazarus, 1984).

The purpose of this paper is to research:

"How does mental representations shape consumer behavior and perceptions of American brands hereunder Tesla and how can Tesla cope with consumer biases?"

It is crucial for American companies' development to gain insight into how mental representations shape consumer behavior. By analyzing the underlying mechanisms of consumer behavior, American marketing managers can gain insight into strategically targeting appropriate segments to minimize consumer repulsion. By analyzing consumer biases American marketing managers can gain knowledge to identify potential challenges and opportunities. The relevancy of investigation is therefore seen for American marketing managers, particularly Tesla. However also highly relevant for resellers of American products since the boycott is seen both regionally and internationally.

1.1 Theoretical background

To examine the research question, the Cognitive Appraisal Theory together with the underlying mechanisms of mental representations, cognitions and emotions will be used to analyze how consumers'

mental representations effect their consumption. In addition, the Balancing Theory will be included to underline the arguments made. This analysis will help gain insight to how negative perceptions have arisen towards American brands, with a specific focus on Tesla. Afterwards the four dimensions of the Perceived Brand Authority will be examined to understand how Tesla's brands authority is viewed concerning recent events. The combination of these analyses gains a comprehensive understanding of both consumer behavior and brand authority in relation to Tesla.

To gain a further comprehension of consumer behavior the Consumer Attraction-Repulsion Matrix will be examined. Based on this, Tesla and American brands can evaluate how to efficiently segment markets based on the degree of attraction/repulsion towards American products. Additionally, the analysis will illustrate how mental representations shape degrees of attraction/repulsion.

The above-mentioned analyses will lead to a discussion on how Tesla can navigate consumer biases. For this discussion the APG/APL framework is chosen to examine how marketing managers/resellers can adapt to local/global consumer attitudes, based on values and perspectives as analyzed earlier.

The research has selected Tesla as focus, the brand's economic effects can be seen as a symbol of how mental representations and perceptions have influenced consumer behavior towards American brands. The optimal approach would be to also conduct market research in specific countries, with focus on culture. This could be conducted through Hofstede's cultural dimensions to gain a further insight on specific differences in cultural dimensions for consumer groups and further measure how mental representations shape consumer behavior. This is however beyond the scope of this research. The research is conducted exclusively on secondary sources, consisting of both qualitative and quantitative data. Ideally, primary data in forms of interviews with Tesla or previous costumers would contribute to a deeper insight this is however not obtained primarily due to lack of time and resources.

2. Analysis

2.1 Consumer behavior: Mental representations and PBA-analysis

To understand how mental representations shape consumer behavior the Cognitive Appraisal Theory will be analyzed. To distinguish the consumer's perception on American brands, the perceived Brand Authority (PBA) of Tesla will be analyzed constructed through four dimensions.

Mental representations are formed through cognitions and emotions, these enable individuals to think, reason, feel and act. The combination of cognitions and emotions plays a central role in consumers purchasing behavior. Individuals seek to balance their cognitions by adjusting the importance of beliefs and attitudes. (Lecture 2, slide 22). Tesla together with many American brands, are experiencing negative brand association, that are tightly related to the second Trump Administration. Demonstrations in front of Tesla showrooms, with signs such as “*Protect democracy*” and “*Stop Musk*” illustrate the negative association the CEO Elon Musk has on the company Tesla.

To further understand the negative associations Tesla and American brands are experiencing, the Cognitive Appraisal Process of consumers can be evaluated. The theory suggests that emotions are generated by the evaluation of events in relation to our personal goals, needs, and values. The cognitive Appraisal Process consists of three steps. (Lazarus, 1984)

As described above, many consumers have chosen to boycott Tesla and form demonstrations to symbolize their shared negative perception on the brand and CEO Elon Musk. It is highly possible, that participants of the demonstration share the same set of values and beliefs. This possibility underlines the first step of the Cognitive Appraisal Process **personal relevance**, for consumers to engage in demonstrations with others who share similar beliefs and values. This can be explained due to many consumers experiencing negative emotions towards Tesla, now forming a community that further supports their beliefs. We often see groups being formed between individuals with high levels of similarity. (Ghetta et al., 2020) In this case the shared set of values and beliefs are negatively related to the brand and formed in a personal relevance, as a symbol of negative brand association. The personal relevance can also be considered for current Tesla owners. Many Tesla owners wish to distance themselves from Elon Musk. (Arunasalam, 2025.) Tesla owners may feel complicit in the company’s immoral behavior by consuming their products, leading to an experience of cognitive dissonance. The Balancing Theory suggests that when cognitive dissonance appears, there’s a motivational drive to restore balance, this is seen when Tesla owners’ distance themselves from the brand. (Jedicke, 2025)

Media posts in front of the White House can be understood as a symbol of the brand's goals and values. The possibility of consumers disassociating with Tesla because of the events underlining the second step, **Congruent Goal**. The picture of Trump standing next to a Tesla car in front of the White House is a symbol of Tesla supporting the second Trump Administration's goals and actions. (Arunasalam, 2025.) This draws a visible image of Trump's relation to Tesla. When purchasing cars, the mental representation of Tesla will now be highly associated with Donald Trump and the Administration's recent goals. The perception of the second Trump Administration is clearly negative, highlighting that the Administration has a horrible culture of racism together with offensive international policy. (Beaumont, 2025) We can understand that the purchase of American brands and Tesla are seen to hinder one's congruent goal. For ones supporting Donald Trump the association towards Tesla becomes even more positive since their goals now are perfectly aligned with the brand's vision, however, decreases in share value show that majority of consumers do not feel congruent with their goals.

The last step is the individual's ability to **cope with the stimulus**. This is highly related to consumers purchasing opportunities. The emotional response to the purchasing of American products can be understood by looking at their purchasing opportunities as well as financial situation. If the consumers can buy non-American products or other cars, their values and beliefs are balanced, while not being able to either afford local products or get rid of Tesla car can result in cognitive dissonance since their beliefs and values are in conflict. Consumers in pursuit of cognitive consistency align their beliefs and values with their consumption, this leads to boycotts of American products and Tesla owners distancing themselves from the brand. (Kim, 2025)

The above-mentioned mental representations underlined in the Cognitive Appraisal Theory highlights the negative emotional responses consumers experience in relation to Tesla and American brands. This can also be understood in relation to a negative Perceive Brand Authority (PBA). A brand's PBA is constructed through four dimensions. (Morhart, 2015)

Firstly, **Symbolism** is highly related to the section above, Tesla reflecting values and beliefs that contrast with many consumers globally, creates a negative perception. We see that consumers use brands to define

themselves, and with negative associations tied to Tesla, a low level of symbolism contributes to Tesla being less authentic.(Morhart, 2015)

The **Continuity** dimension refers to a brands ability to remain timeless and survive trends. In many ways Tesla has a history of being timeless, offering a sustainable car with a high level of new technologies. However, with the CEO Elon Musk being politically involved with the second Trump Administration, a destabilization of the brand's history and continuity occurs, since a political influence is introduced to the public, making the brand's role more subjective.

The negative associations can also be understood by looking at the brands **Credibility**. Tesla is tightly associated with the Trump Administration politically and has drawn attention to through marketing efforts, including Donald Trump driving a Tesla Infront of the White House with Elon Musk by his side (Appendix 1.) The second Trump Administration is seen as a target for consumer anger together with low creditability since the Administration's actions contrast with human rights and democracy. Both regarding freedom of expression, gender regulations (Casey, 2025.) and the fiery meeting between Volodymyr Zelenska and Trump last month. (Beaumont, 2025) Thus Tesla being associated with the Trump Administration shapes a weak perceived Brand Authenticity for Tesla through less creditability.

Lastly, we can consider Tesla's **Integrity**, meaning the brands intentions and agenda. Tesla as a brand has become tightly associated with the founder and CEO Elon Musk, contributing to questioning integrity. As earlier mentioned, many negative emotions arise from their marketing efforts and activities, these highly relate to the lack of integrity consumers feel when purchasing from Tesla, one could argue that the opposite is happening since owners of Tesla now wish to disassociate with the brand, this is also in relation to one's cognitions.(Arunasalam, 2025)

Overall, the Perceived Brand Authority towards Tesla is very negative. In addition to the reasons found in the four dimensions, the negative brand image can be understood by looking at the mental representation's consumers experience concerning Tesla. There is a clear consumer anger towards the international policies encountered by the second Trump Administration composing disassociation

towards Tesla, resulting in demonstrations and boycotts. Consumers seek to balance their beliefs and values, why Tesla owners may feel complicit in the company's immoral behavior by their purchase. The mental representations illustrate the negative emotions and cognitions shaping consumers perceptions and beliefs towards Tesla encountering them to group, this is also illustrated with demonstrations and signs saying, "*protect democracy*". (Arunasalam, 2025)

2.2 Consumer Attractions-Repulsion Matrix (appendix 2)

The Consumer attractions/repulsion matrix allows a deeper understanding of consumers behavior towards American brands with focus on Tesla. When using the consumer attraction-repulsion matrix, it is important to separate consumer biases from country images. Country image refers to the overall perception of a country, influenced by factors such as political stability, historical events and cultural influence creating a country perception in the minds of consumers. Consumer biases refer to one's subjective feelings and affections when evaluating products/services. (Albaum, 2016) Consumer's purchasing behavior is a blend of both positive and negative feelings towards a country conducted through subjective experiences, marketing efforts and mental representations.(Kim et al., 2025)This analysis will focus on consumer biases.

The Consumer Attraction-Repulsion Matrix consists of four quadrants capturing the four biases that have been identified in international marketing. The matrix reflects both consumer attraction and repulsion and can be analyzed to shed light on how managers can predict biases and thereby target consumer groups' perceptions beyond product quality. (Albaum, 2016)Based on the above analysis of mental representations and Perceived Brand Authority for Tesla, the global consumer biases towards the US will be identified. The identification will allow Tesla to understand and develop strategies that can help them encounter attraction and diminish repulsion.

Consumer Disidentification, meaning an active rejection and distancing from one's domestic country. This repulsion emerges when individuals feel disassociated with the domestic religion, political, or demographic views. Hence the above analysis, consumers experience cognitive dissonance purchasing from American brands on account of difference in values, highlighting culture of racism leading to demonstrations and negative emotional responses.(Beaumont, 2025) The recent online events have also

affected foreign consumers, leading to boycotts accentuated as a repulsion against products of a specific origin. Domestic and foreign boycotts of American products can be perceived as a response to the second Trump Administration's political actions and culture of racism generating repulsion both domestically and internationally. We recognize a regional **animosity** from groups in the US not supporting the second Trump Administration creating boycotts, demonstrations and a general case of **consumer animosity** for global consumers boycotting American products. (Arunasalam, 2025.)

On the other hand, the matrix explains attractions in terms of **Consumer affinity** and **Consumer ethnocentrism**. Consumer ethnocentrism towards American products is lacking, one could argue, that the political actions compose a higher level of consumer ethnocentrism for consumers outside of the US. As a response to the American boycotts, alternative importers must be considered. Salling Group (Danish retailer) affording Danish consumers to choose European products easily over American, with a black label as guidance for where products are from. This is further a symbol of low consumer affinity, since the cultural and political similarity between European countries and the US are diminishing resulting in less positive emotions towards American products. (Sabina del Castillo et al., 2024)

Canada has been described by Trump as the 51 states of the US, creating an affinity between the nations, however Canada distances themselves from the US by boycotting products, lowering truths and rejecting US producers. One can argue that the second Trump Administration has encountered to focus on similarities between Canada and the US to obtain a higher level of **consumer affinity**. However, due to the negative emotions and cognitive dissonance occurring between Canadian consumers, the boycotts began in Canada and has now spread to Scandinavia creating a higher level of Repulsion over attraction. (Beaumont, 2025)

The Consumer Attraction-Repulsion Matrix illustrates that consumer behavior is highly affected by consumer biases conceived by negative mental representations. The attitudes towards American products are both regional and international repulsive resulting in boycotts together with incentives to increase domestic purchasing. The political environment highly sharpens the consumer's biases towards products from the US that together with their negative associations found in the first analysis create an overall repulsion. Additionally, it can be important to consider, that competing firms to Tesla and American

products are experiencing increasing attractions due to higher level of consumers affinity and consumer ethnocentrism.

3. Discussion

To discuss marketing strategies for Tesla to efficiently cope with boycotts and consumer repulsion, the AGP and APL framework will be considered. (Steenkamp, 2010) The research findings illustrate consumer repulsion explained through consumer animosity shaped by low level of brand authority and cognitive dissonance. The motive of the framework is to suggest Tesla to tailor marketing strategies to cope with the country biases together with low the level of perceived brand authenticity.

Tesla is because of the second Trump Administration's international perception, experiencing a country and company boycott, resulting in a weakening of the consumer-brand relationships. (Kim et al., 2025) The boycott behaviors are significantly influenced by the political environment together with cognitive dissonance resulting in global repulsion. For Tesla to target new markets a localization strategy would be beneficial, this could be obtained through a strategic alliance with a local partner. Tesla has earlier partnered with wind turbine market leader Vestas; the Danish company is internationally recognized and has much credibility tied to its operations. (Maloney, 2017) The partnership could therefore allow for higher level of credibility and an opportunity for Tesla to become more authentic. (Low AGP, High ALP) (Appendix 3.) The partnership will also allow Tesla to engage in social responsibility's in the local environments minimizing animosity together with symbolizing positive values. The analysis finds that consumers experience repulsion towards American products and cognitive dissonance resulting in boycotting. With a local partnership, consumers can distance Tesla from the second Trump Administration and aligning them with Vestas sustainable operation, affording Tesla a symbol of local values and beliefs. All leading to a higher level of attraction built through positive mental representations and strength of brand authority simply by adapting locally.

Tesla is however an American brand at its core, with its CEO representing the second Trump Administration's values and goals. This challenges the companies' opportunities for localization and partnerships. Therefore, one could argue, that the ideal strategy for Tesla is to keep focus on the global

consumer culture (High AGP, low ALP) continuing their operations unaffected by the consumer's repulsion. This would allow Tesla to keep its brand at core and illustrate complete integrity internally since the brand does not adapt to changes in local or global consumer attitudes. A change in operation would strive against the brand's identity thus creating less brand authenticity. Elon Musk has together with Donald Trump through social media encountered that they are "*doing the right work*". (Beaumont, 2025) This strategy addresses high AGP, low LGP through aggressive marketing efforts such as a picture in front of the white house (Appendix 1) However, the brand exposure leads to global debates, creating more attention towards Tesla. This could be a marketing strategy made to generate more awareness for the brand creating mental representations globally. Even though the representations are overall negative, a debate and exposure are affording the brand increasing attention and brand awareness is unenviable. This strategy is tightly related to Tesla since they are associated directly with the county boycotts. For American brands not directly associated with the second Trump Administration's action, it's important to distance their company from the country to reduce risk of boycotts. The influence of consumer's subjective response to a brand or countries values is seen to be diminishing over time affording Americans brands the opportunity to overcome boycotts. (Kim, 2025)

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, mental representations formed through cognitions and emotions effect consumer's purchasing behavior. Firstly, there is a global boycott towards American products arising from negative emotional responses and creating cognitive dissonance As the Balancing Theory suggests, individuals must seek to restore balance resulting in boycotts through consumer animosity.

Tesla with Elon Musk as front figure is directly associated to the negative country image creating both a country and company boycott for Tesla to navigate through. To navigate this, marketing managers must identify whether media attention poses reputation risk or an opportunity. Tesla could benefit from both localization and homogenization, depending on which perspective you impose.

For American marketing managers and resellers, distancing the brand from its country images is key to retain a positive brand-consumer relationship. This can be obtained through localization to strengthen the brand's authority. Lastly, we can consider that consumers subjective responses towards brands can change and diminish over time, affording American marketing Managers and resellers the opportunity to overcome boycotting.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

- Marketing effort of Tesla with CEO Elon Musk together with President Donald Trump in front of the White house. March 11, 2025.



U.S. President Donald Trump, right, speaks to reporters as he stands beside a Tesla electric vehicle parked in front of the White House, with company CEO Elon Musk looking on, in Washington, D.C., on March 11. Musk's role in the Trump administration has sparked public anger directed at Tesla. (Kevin Lamarque/Reuters)

Source: cbc news <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/tesla-clon-musk-car-owners-1.7489099>

Appendix 2

- Attraction-Repulsion matrix consisting of four quadrants that reflect consumer attraction or repulsion to domestic and feign products. Measurable to predict biases.

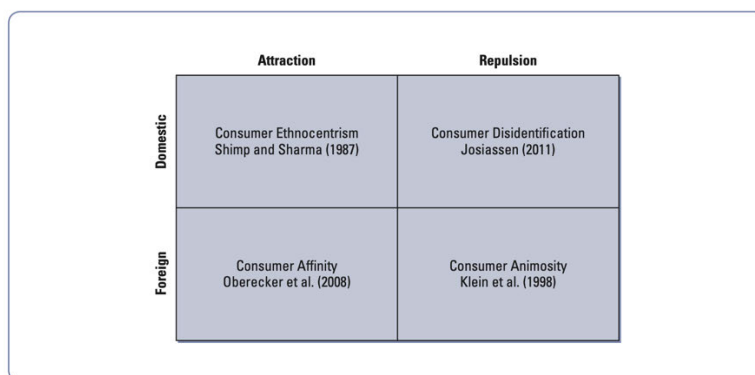
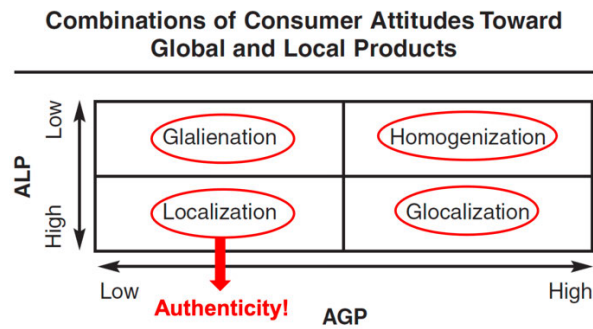


Figure 10.18 The Attraction-Repulsion Matrix

Source: Albaum, Gerald., D. E., & J. A. (2016). *International Marketing and Export Management*. www.pearson.com/uk

Appendix 3.

- Framework illustrates how to adapt to attitudes towards local and global products (APL & APG)
- The framework suggests that a positive attitude towards one must result in a negative towards another. The matrix consists of both localism and globalism dealing with both global and local consumer culture.



Source: A Global Investigation into the Constellation of Consumer Attitudes Toward Global and Local Products.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261734523_A_Global_Investigation_into_the_Constellation_of_Consumer_Attitudes_Toward_Global_and_Local_Products