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# When consumers click away: understanding the dynamics of social media boycotts—lessons from Orange Egypt

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Politically motivated rumors on social media can ignite brand animosity and mobilize boycott movements, posing reputational risks to brands. This study examines Orange Egypt, a telecommunications brand targeted during heightened geopolitical tensions, to explore how politically charged narratives emerge, spread, and mobilize collective action online. Using a qualitative netnographic approach, over 2,000 Facebook posts and 616 tweets were analyzed through semantic and lexical analysis, complemented by network mapping with Netvizz and Gephi. Findings reveal that social media affordances—particularly sharing and retweeting—substantially amplified the visibility and virality of emotionally loaded narratives. Hashtags, provocative language, and coordination between activist pages and individual users were instrumental in sustaining momentum. Network visualization showed transnational clustering patterns shaped by cultural and ideological proximity, aligning with Latané’s Dynamic Social Impact Theory. The study extends the literature on consumer animosity and digital activism by highlighting how geographically and culturally linked online communities can accelerate the dissemination of politically charged content. Practical implications underscore the importance for multinational brands to proactively monitor online discourse and develop culturally sensitive strategies in politically volatile contexts.

## KEYWORDS

boycott, brand animosity, Middle East, network analysis, online rumors, social media activism

## 1 Introduction

On November 24, 1921, the Egyptian journal *Al-Ummah* introduced the term “boycott” to the Egyptian public, marking the beginning of a significant movement aimed at resisting colonial policies and British goods. This movement played a critical role in fueling the Egyptian revolution (Azzam and Atef, 2023). In today’s digital landscape, social media has become a powerful tool for mobilization, especially in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring. The January 25 revolution in Egypt sparked a heightened awareness of the influence of social media in shaping public sentiment and facilitating mass mobilization. Activist groups like the 6th of April Youth Movement - حركة شباب 6 إبريل, the Kefaya movement - حركة كفاية (meaning: that’s enough) and the Tamarod movement - تمرد (meaning: Rebel) harnessed these platforms to advocate for political change, demonstrating their undeniable impact.

Recently, since the beginning of the Israel-Gaza war on Seventh of October 2024, hashtags in Arabic like “The Boycott,” and “Support local” have been utilized in countless online posts. Additionally, another rise in social media campaigns calling for a boycott of brands believed to support Israel took place (El-Menawy et al., 2024). To better understand such a recurring

phenomenon, our case study depicts this new face of animosity in the shape of online rumors under study and how it can get aggravated.

Building on this historical and social context, this study investigates how social media serves as a vessel for expressing political animosity through online rumors. Specifically, we focus on a case where a multinational firm became the target of a rumor, exacerbating consumer animosity rooted in geopolitical tensions. Past research highlights the detrimental effect of negative consumer sentiment on international business performance (Maher and Mady, 2010). However, our main question addresses a significant gap in understanding how social media platforms facilitate the spread of animosity, particularly in Egypt and the Middle East? This general issue raises three sub-questions:

Q1: How can animosity be manifested in the form of an online rumor?

Q2: How do social media functionalities facilitate the dissemination of online rumors?

Q3: How does geographic-cultural proximity impact consumer animosity expression?

To address these questions, we employ a qualitative methodology, including content analysis using software like Netvizz and a netnographic approach, to examine how rumors spread and how political animosity manifests on social media. Our analysis extends to semantic mapping of five indexed hashtags and rumor-related keywords to uncover patterns in 2000 messages on Facebook and 616 posts on X (Twitter), offering deeper insights into how animosity is expressed online enabling us to analyze thoroughly internet users verbatim to express their feelings of political animosity. Despite considerable research on animosity, its manifestation through social media rumors remains unexplored. The final sections discuss findings, draw conclusions, offer theoretical and managerial implications, and avenues for further research.

This paper is structured into eight key parts:

- Introduction
- Academic literature review and theoretical frameworks highlighting existing gaps in the literature.
- Research methodology presenting an empirical case study using netnography as a methodology to analyze Facebook and X (Twitter) content.
- Analysis and results.
- Discussion and key findings
- Theoretical and managerial implications.
- Limitations and perspectives for future research.
- Conclusion.

## 2 Literature review and theoretical framework

Our study contributes to the literature on social media activism and brand animosity in four ways. First, we provide an overview of the relevant literature on consumer animosity, with a specific focus on the political animosity dimension. Second, we examine the relationship between consumer boycotts and animosity, with particular attention to how these dynamics are expressed by internet users in online

environments. Third, we analyze the mediating role of digital platforms through their techno-semiotic functionalities, defined as the ways in which platform affordances and functionalities: such as hashtags, sharing mechanisms, and algorithmic visibility, shape the production, circulation, and interpretation of meaning in online interactions (Hutchby, 2001; Kress, 2010). This analysis adopts a semio-contextual approach to communication (Mucchielli, 2000; Verlaet, 2008), which conceptualizes media and communication phenomena as occurring at the intersection of meaning construction and circulation, mediated through digital technologies (Allard-Huver and Gilewicz, 2015). Fourth, we frame our discussion using Latané's Dynamic Social Impact Theory (1981) to explain how social influence spreads within geographically and culturally connected groups, and we examine how socio-geographic positioning and cultural orientations shape the expression of consumer animosity. Unlike previous research that focuses on historical conflicts between two nations, our study explores brand animosity in the context of an ongoing social conflict affecting multiple Middle Eastern countries. Given the limited existing knowledge on this topic, we contribute to the literature by empirically demonstrating how geographic culture influences consumer animosity expression on social media.

### 2.1 Focus on political and war animosity dimensions

Consumer animosity has gained considerable attention in international marketing literature as a determinant of foreign product purchase behavior. According to the study of Klein et al. (1998), animosity negatively affects product purchases independently of product quality judgements. There exist four different types of animosity feelings as explained by Riefler and Diamantopoulos (2006, p.87) "consumers differ in their animosity targets, and there may be a number of (different) reasons causing animosity feelings such as economic, political, religious or personal". More recently, Yelkur and Silkoset (2012) suggested a four-dimensional structure of animosity. These four-dimensional constructs encompass military (war), economic, political, and social components. While acknowledging this multidimensional structure, the present study deliberately focuses on two specific animosity dimensions: political animosity and war animosity. This choice is driven by the nature of the empirical context examined, which centers on politically motivated rumors and boycott discourse linked to military conflict and state actions. This choice is driven by the nature of the empirical context examined, which centers on politically motivated rumors and boycott discourse linked to military conflict and state actions. Accordingly, the study examines how political and war-related animosities are expressed and mobilized by consumers on Facebook and X (Twitter) during the circulation of an online rumor. Building on prior work, we further explore the mediating role of affective emotional responses and the influence of socio-geographic and culturally embedded orientations on the dissemination of such discourse. These relationships are analyzed through a qualitative case study of online interactions in the Egyptian context.

According to the study of Yelkur and Silkoset (2012, p. 2) "Political animosity is an expression of animosity due to unacceptable use of power within the animosity target as perceived in the sample country". Their findings further suggest that "feelings based on normative and

moral evaluations of use of political power within a foreign country may be animosity background, even when such policies have no direct impact on the sample country” (ibid). This understanding of political animosity also extends to contexts involving historical military conflicts. In this study, war animosity refers to consumers’ negative affective responses, such as anger, hostility, and resentment toward a country that are specifically triggered by military conflict, armed violence, or perceived acts of aggression, rather than by economic or historical grievances alone (Klein et al., 1998; Shoham et al., 2006; Harmeling et al., 2015). These forms of animosity can negatively influence buying behavior through morally driven motivations, including a perceived obligation not to support the economy of an offending country (Yelkur and Silkset, 2012). Supporting such an economy may also evoke feelings of guilt, defined as a “negative emotion which results from a consumer decision that violates one’s values or norms” (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994, p. 33). Guilt can be considered a psychosocial variable that adversely affects self-enhancement (Klein et al., 2004), leading consumers to avoid purchasing products from the target country in order to mitigate these negative feelings (John and Klein, 2003). In addition, social influence and pressure from reference groups may further motivate consumers to participate in boycott behavior, as discussed in the following section (John and Klein, 2003).

## 2.2 Boycott and animosity expression

Consumer resistance, which emerges from boycotts and anti-consumption movements, reflects deeply held sentiments of animosity (Hirschman, 1970). Consumer boycotts, such as those against Israeli products, are often driven by animosity related to political or war conflicts. Klein et al. (1998) introduced the concept of consumer animosity in relation to national conflicts, which was further expanded by Shaw et al. (2006), who demonstrated the importance of animosity as a key motivator in boycott participation.

In the context of anti-consumption, Chatzidakis and Lee (2011) argue that consumer resistance often emerges from dissatisfaction with corporate or governmental actions. These acts of resistance, such as consumer boycotts, allow consumers to express opposition to the societal implications of supporting certain products or companies. However, Yuksel (2013) emphasized that despite understanding the motives behind anti-consumption and boycotts, many consumers are reluctant to participate due to personal and social factors. These factors include skepticism about the effectiveness of boycotts and the personal inconvenience they might entail, thus complicating the direct relationship between animosity and boycott behavior.

Thus, feelings of animosity are closely linked to subjective social norms, often manifesting as long-lasting consumer boycotts (Klein et al., 1998). As Hirschman (1970) explains that during boycott cases, resistant consumer behavior emerges and is essentially characterized by the “*power of expression*” and “*voice*.” He adds that the direction of communication is “*both ascending from the consumer to the company (complaint, boycott, protest), and horizontal with negative word-of-mouth*.” As an example, from this digital era, this “*voice*” is often amplified through social digital platforms, where rumors, including fake images and messages, are spread to incite boycotts. Similarly, tweetstorms on X (Twitter) often propagate hashtags urging consumers to boycott specific brands.

The influence of consumer animosity on purchasing behavior is well documented. Klein et al. (1998, p. 90) defined this animosity as “remnants of antipathy related to previous or ongoing military, political, or economic events.” Research by Cai et al. (2012) supports this, illustrating how consumer animosity directly impacts purchasing decisions.

It’s also important to mention that consumers participate in boycotts to express severe dissatisfaction with a company or country’s actions and policies (Shaw et al., 2006), and animosity plays an important role in attitudes toward participating in boycott activities (Smith and Li, 2010). Therefore, a boycott may be an outcome of animosity.

An illustrative example of animosity-driven boycotts occurred in response to France’s opposition to the U. S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. In an online survey, 73% of American respondents reported boycotting French products, such as wine and cheese, while 53% favored renaming “French fries” and “French toast” to “free fries” and “free toast,” respectively. Additionally, U. S. retailers removed French products from shelves, liquor stores returned French wines to wholesalers, and French restaurants experienced a loss of customers in various cities (Ebenkamp, 2003). More recent examples are found in Canada, according to the *New York Post* (2025), despite the fact the term “Canadiano” has been used in some Canadian cafés for years, however in early 2025, the recent trend of renaming the coffee “Americano” to “Canadiano” is more about political expression and as a response to proposed U. S. tariffs on Canadian goods and comments suggesting Canada should become the 51st U. S. state.<sup>1</sup> Other recent political responses leading to boycott actions were also depicted in Northern Europe, particularly in Denmark where many Danes have consciously avoided purchasing American goods such as Coca-Cola, California wines, Pringles, and even cancelled subscriptions to services like Netflix and Amazon. This movement stems from dissatisfaction with U. S. policies, including attempts to assert control over Greenland and the imposition of tariffs on European products.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.3 Mediation of animosity expression by social media functionalities

Animosity is a four-dimensional construct that impacts buying behavior through affect (Balabanis et al., 2012). Mediating factors are afforded by social media functionalities translating emotions into affects and sharing actions. Building on cognitive dissonance theory and boycott literature, we can suggest that social affect mediate the impact of animosity on buying intentions. This social affect is related in the scope of our study as a positive or negative brand affect. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) define brand affect as a “brand’s potential to elicit a positive emotional response in the average consumer as a result of its use.” This definition encompasses positive

1 <https://nypost.com/2025/02/28/lifestyle/how-canada-is-getting-quiet-revenge-against-the-us-with-coffee/> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1HyBaSigVw>

2 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/us/after-canada-its-now-denmarks-turn-danes-boycott-american-products-ban-netflix-and-californian-wine/articleshow/119672584.cms>

affect only, while negative brand affect is likely a consequence of country animosity.

To analyze these affects, our study is theoretically anchored on semio-contextual theory (Mucchielli, 2000). This theory focuses on the construction of meanings for actors. It answers questions such as: How does such communication intervene to create meanings for a social actor? How is contextualisation achieved through communication? What makes sense for a social actor in a situation and why? How do social actors proceed to give meaning to their expressive behaviors?

It is important to say that this theory is an extension of the theoretical framework Dynamic Social Impact Theory which is detailed in the following section. In this paper, we expand the framework by incorporating a focused layer of analysis on the semiological meanings embedded within specific, dynamic communication contexts—particularly of online expressions of animosity. This addition allows for a deeper understanding of how signs and symbols function within ideologically and culturally charged digital interactions.

## 2.4 Geographical-cultural dimension of consumer expression

Animosity is directed toward a country and hence, should be addressed at the same level (Yelkur and Silkoset, 2012, p. 33), i.e., on a level larger than individual personality traits. In the same vein, socio-geographical-cultural dimensions have been generally neglected by earlier animosity studies, even though culture is a vital driver of customer behavior in marketing contexts according to Hofstede (2001). Within this research context, cultural factors are conceptualized as collectively shared orientations, such as collective identity alignment, moral framing of political conflict, shared historical narratives, and norms of group loyalty and online solidarity, that shape how political animosity and boycott-related expressions emerge and circulate on social media. For example, Lin and Kalwani (2018) reported that cultural orientations influence electronic word-of-mouth signaling and screening. Most of previous research have mostly analyzed the relationship between personality traits and culture as drivers shaping consumer animosity behavior (Leonidou et al., 2019). Few studies in literature have examined the role of geographical-culture dimension. This considerably limits our understanding of the consumer animosity phenomenon related to certain nations that goes beyond one country's territory.

Talking about countries' cultural orientations Hofstede's framework of cultural dimensions provides a widely used reference point in consumer behavior research (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). Although this framework encompasses multiple dimensions, the present study focuses specifically on the individualism–collectivism dimension, given its strong theoretical relevance to collective action, normative influence, and group-based expressions of animosity. This focus is also contextually justified, as Egypt is commonly characterized as a collectivist society, where social behavior is shaped by in-group norms, shared moral obligations, and collective identity. Empirical research supports the relevance of this dimension in animosity-related contexts. For instance, Han (2017), in a survey of 304 Korean consumers, demonstrated that individualism/collectivism can precede consumer animosity and moderate its

effects on purchase intentions. In individualistic societies, “the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his or her immediate family only;” whereas in collectivistic societies individuals “from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 225). Consequently, collectivistic consumers tend to conform more strongly to referent group norms (Han, 2017).

Prior studies further indicate that consumers from collectivistic societies are more likely to express loyalty toward their home country and skepticism toward foreign countries (Yoo and Donthu, 2005). As a result of heightened susceptibility to normative influence from in-groups, animosity-related emotions in collectivist contexts are more likely to translate into foreign product avoidance and boycott behavior (Han, 2017; Park and Yoon, 2017).

While other Hofstede dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity, have also been shown to strengthen the relationship between consumer animosity and product avoidance (Leonidou et al., 2019), these dimensions are less directly observable in qualitative analyses of social media discourse. Accordingly, they fall outside the analytical scope of the present study, which uses individualism/collectivism as a conceptual and interpretive lens rather than as a directly measured variable.

To further address the interplay between geographic and cultural dimensions of social influence, this study draws on Latané's Dynamic Social Impact Theory (DSIT). DSIT explains how cultural elements and social representations are unevenly propagated and may become self-organized through repeated interactions, leading to processes of clustering, consolidation, and correlation within social systems (Latané, 1996). Central to the theory is the idea that certain individuals or sources exert greater social influence based on their perceived importance or relevance, thereby shaping how attitudes, norms, and narratives diffuse across connected populations.

Drawing on DSIT, Latané (1996) conceptualizes culture as emerging from bottom-up communication processes, whereby repeated interactions among individuals generate shared social representations that become geographically and culturally patterned. From this perspective, culture is not imposed from above but formed through cumulative social influence, resulting in clustered patterns of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

DSIT extends Social Impact Theory (SIT; Latané, 1981) by introducing a dynamic view of social influence within self-organizing social systems. In SIT, social impact is defined as the degree of influence individuals exert on one another and is determined by three key elements: strength (the persuasive capacity of the source), immediacy (psychological or social closeness), and number (the size of the influencing group). In social media contexts, strength may be reflected in verified accounts, political actors, or opinion leaders, while number and immediacy are amplified through interaction metrics and networked proximity.

Importantly, DSIT emphasizes clustering as a core mechanism, whereby individuals who interact frequently become more similar over time, leading to the emergence of localized cultural patterns (Latané, 1996; Harton and Bullock, 2007). In online environments, such clustering is not only geographic but also cultural and normative, as users align around shared moral frames, collective identities, and affective orientations.

In this study, DSIT is used to explain how political rumours function as tools of social mobilization within culturally connected online publics. Recent research demonstrates that rumour sharing is often motivated by mobilizing collective opposition and intensifying group alignment rather than by informational accuracy alone (Petersen et al., 2023). Consistent with DSIT, repeated exposure to emotionally charged content strengthens social impact, reinforces group norms, and contributes to the diffusion of animosity-laden narratives.

Accordingly, our analysis applies DSIT to interpret how interactions among social media users lead to the formation of culturally embedded clusters of boycott discourse, where political and war animosity are collectively expressed, amplified, and normalized. While geographic proximity shapes interaction patterns, cultural orientations such as collectivist norms, group loyalty, and moral alignment, play a central role in structuring the social influence and mobilization processes observed in the data.

### 3 Research methodology

A netnographic design was used to analyze 2,000 + Facebook posts and 616 tweets about the Orange Egypt boycott. Semantic and lexical analysis uncovered dominant themes and emotional patterns. Network visualization via Netvizz and Gephi mapped how politically charged messages spread through user interactions and clustered around activist-driven narratives. In this section we present a briefing on the empirical case study of the telecommunication company: Orange Egypt as well as data collection methodology.

#### 3.1 Briefing of the case study

In 2015, Orange Egypt completed the acquisition of Mobinil, and by 2016 the Mobinil brand was fully replaced by the Orange brand in Egypt. Prior to the rebranding, Mobinil was the largest mobile operator in the country, with approximately 33.4 million subscribers as of December 31, 2015<sup>3</sup>. During and following this transition, a wave of politically motivated rumours circulated widely on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), triggering boycott campaigns directed at both Mobinil and Orange.

These rumours falsely claimed that Orange was an Israeli-owned company with active operations in Israel and alleged links to the Israeli military. Such claims drew on longstanding political sensitivities and economic tensions between Egypt and Israel. The narrative was primarily rooted in a legacy commercial agreement inherited from France Télécom (Orange's predecessor) with the Israeli telecommunications firm Partner Communications, which was misrepresented online as evidence of direct political or military affiliation. Given the historical context of armed conflict between Egypt and Israel, beginning with the 1948–1949 Arab Israeli war and persisting symbolically despite the 1978 peace treaty, these rumours resonated strongly with existing political and war-related animosities.

Although formal diplomatic relations were established, economic exchange between the two countries has remained limited. For example, in 2015, Israeli exports to Egypt amounted to approximately US\$236 million, compared with a total foreign investment volume of US\$6.4 billion in Egypt during the same year (Darmon, 2016).<sup>4</sup> Against this backdrop, consumers increasingly expressed animosity on social media by sharing posts, often accompanied by manipulated or misleading images, calling for collective disengagement from the brand.

The hashtags #Boycott\_Mobinil were widely circulated on social media, calling on Egyptian users to disengage from the brand. To capture the broader boycott discourse, the analysis also included four indexed hashtags including:

#BDSEgypt, #Egypt\_boycott, #One\_million\_boycotters\_of\_telecommunications\_companies, #Internet\_revolution. These indexed hashtags functioned as discursive markers of boycott-related mobilization, enabling the identification, aggregation, and analysis of user-generated content and facilitating the tracing of politically motivated rumours and calls for collective action across Facebook and X (Twitter).

#### 3.2 Data collection methodology

A qualitative research approach was deemed most appropriate for providing an in-depth understanding of the triggers and channels consumers utilize to seek revenge online (Obeidat et al., 2018). The study primarily employed netnographic research methods, which involve empirical observation combined with technical tools to analyze consumer interactions on Facebook and X (Twitter), particularly in relation to expressions of animosity. Netnography, a form of ethnography adapted to the study of cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated communication, allows researchers to explore online environments using publicly accessible information (Kozinets, 2006).

##### 3.2.1 Data collection techniques

As mentioned earlier, netnography was used for data collection allowing the observation and gathering of messages posted and exchanged between Internet users involved in the process of animosity expression on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). This method allowed for the tracking of the dissemination and reach of online rumors across online platforms. Specifically, the data collection focused on “*stories reproduced by collective dissemination techniques*” (Renard, 2002, p. 73), particularly traces in the form of publications and discussions shared between users on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter).

The data collection process started on September 8, 2017, and continued over a period of 3 weeks. During this period, data was systematically extracted and organized into a spreadsheet that included various categorization columns, such as the geographic location of users and the number of hashtags used in each post. The refinement of keywords and hashtags followed a systematic,

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.orange.com/fr/Press-Room/communiqués-2017/communiqués-2016/Mobinil-devient-Orange-en-Egypte>

<sup>4</sup> DARMON A. (2016, 24 Août). Hausse des investissements étrangers en Égypte. Selon l'Israël Export and International Cooperation Institut. Israël Magazine. Consulted on <http://israelmagazine.co.il/hausse-investissements-etrangers-Egypt> (01/08/2019).

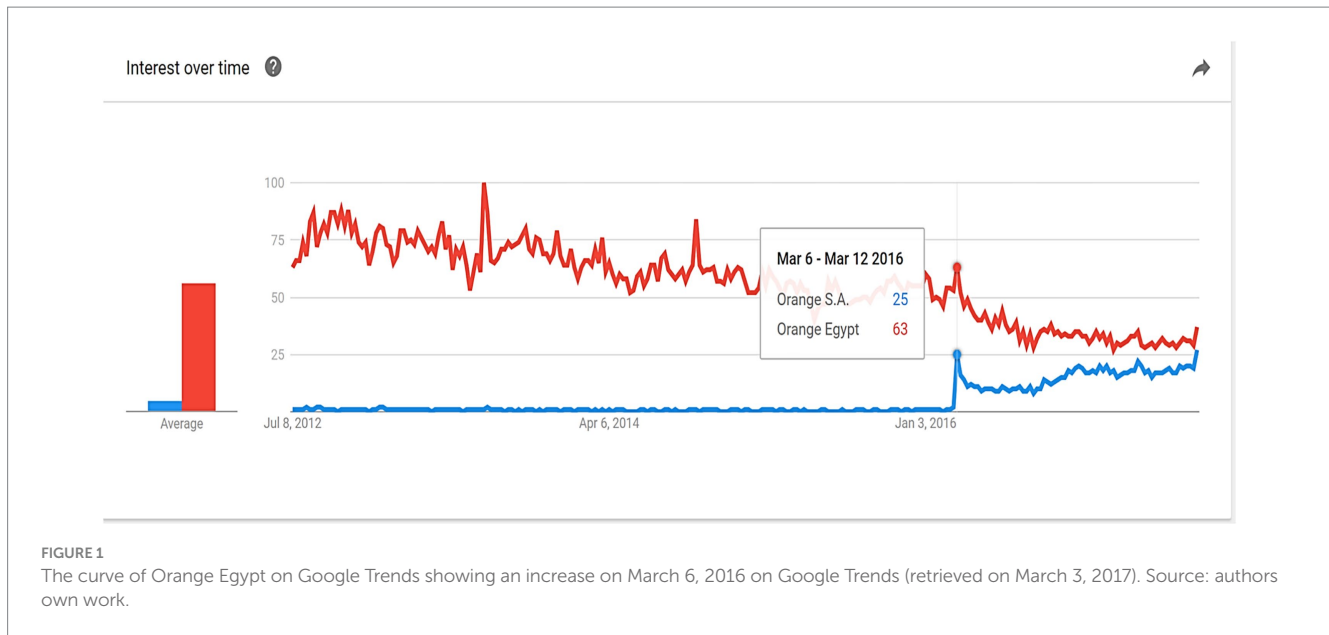


FIGURE 1

The curve of Orange Egypt on Google Trends showing an increase on March 6, 2016 on Google Trends (retrieved on March 3, 2017). Source: authors own work.

multi-stage procedure. First, Google Trends was used to identify the initial emergence and temporal evolution of rumour-related keywords, allowing us to trace peaks in public attention associated with boycott discourse. Second, exploratory searches were conducted on Facebook and X (Twitter) to observe how these keywords were operationalized by users, enabling the identification of recurrent hashtags actively used in politically motivated rumour and boycott-related content.

The keyword and hashtag list was then refined through iterative filtering. Redundant or weakly related terms were excluded, while relevant hashtags were retained based on their frequency, co-occurrence with boycott narratives, and engagement levels. Particular attention was paid to language variation, as distinct hashtag sets emerged in Arabic and English contexts. Finally, the refined keywords and hashtags were validated by cross-checking their consistent association with rumour dissemination and collective mobilization across both platforms.

In total, 2,087 shared Facebook posts were gathered and subjected to analysis. The corpus of data was generated using the academic tool Netvizz,<sup>5</sup> which facilitated the extraction and organization of large volumes of social media interactions for research purposes. And using XPath programming language to retrieve and analyze 616 posts on X (Twitter).

### 3.2.2 Detection of the incident

To conduct an initial assessment of the incident's visibility in the public sphere, Google Trends was employed to trace online interest in the term "Orange Egypt," as illustrated in Figure 1. The resulting graph reveals fluctuations in search frequency, reflecting shifts in public attention over time. Particular focus was placed on the year 2016, corresponding to the emergence of the online rumour under investigation, to evaluate its potential impact and digital footprint. During this timeframe, the graph reveals a notable increase in search activity, which indicates heightened public interest and suggests the

occurrence of an incident related to the dissemination of the rumour. This upward trend serves as evidence supporting the presence of a significant event during that period.

Subsequently, relevant hashtags associated with the boycott campaign against Orange Egypt were identified and collected. These hashtags served as entry points for gathering targeted data from social media platforms, specifically Facebook and X (formerly Twitter).

### 3.2.3 Hashtags

Based on our observations, the public page BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) Egypt, active on both Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), have initiated and disseminated the rumour within the Egyptian digital media on May 23, 2015. The circulation of this rumour was marked by the strategic use of multiple indexed hashtags embedded in the content of the associated posts. These hashtags, appearing in Arabic and English functioned as key vectors in amplifying the message across social media platforms as we analyze in the following parts.

User engagement further facilitated the rumour's dissemination, as internet users adopted and replicated the campaign-specific hashtags in their own publications. The earliest recorded instance of these hashtags dates to May 22, 2015, in a tweet posted by the official BDS Egypt account. This tweet (as shown on Figure 2) featured an explicit call to action and mentioned @BDSJordan, indicating a coordinated, extra-territorial scope aimed at expanding the campaign's reach. This digital coordination reflects a broader regional strategy in which ideological narratives are operationalized and disseminated through shared online mechanisms.

It is important to mention that the design of the hashtags indexed in Egyptian Arabic closely mirrored the jargon popularized during the 2011 Arab Spring Revolution in Egypt, which was intended to mobilize large masses of internet users. These hashtags echoed the same rhetoric of collective action and digital activism. As an example: "one million boycotters of telecommunications companies" as well as "the \_Internet\_ revolution as shown in Table 1.

The process of identifying and tracking relevant content through indexed hashtags presented several challenges, most notably the

<sup>5</sup> Netvizz, an academic application to extract Facebook data for Public Page accounts, designed by Rieder (2013).



overlap and similarity with hashtags associated with other unrelated crises. To address this, we first established a clearly defined temporal frame corresponding to the initial emergence of the rumour, as previously illustrated using the Google Trends graph. This time-bound approach enabled us to effectively exclude irrelevant data and focus on content specific to the case under study.

Following this, we progressively refined our selection of keywords and hashtags across Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), enhancing the precision and relevance of our data collection. This methodological approach ultimately led to the identification of a sample of public Facebook pages and X user accounts, which formed our dataset used for analysis, as discussed in the following part.

## 4 Analysis and results

As previously discussed, the spread of an online rumour touching on a culturally sensitive topic of animosity within Egyptian society was identified and examined in depth. This study focused on how expressions of animosity surfaced through user interactions on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), platforms that played a key role in revealing the extent of consumer sentiment during both the initial emergence and wider dissemination of the rumour. In this section we will try to bring answers to the three research sub questions mentioned in the introduction of this paper. To explore this further, a lexical and semantic analysis was carried out on the written captions added by internet users when sharing a post. This analysis aimed to identify patterns in the language used to express animosity. Additionally, a word-pairing analysis was performed to examine the co-occurrence of specific terms in user interactions, providing further insight into the structure and intensity of these interactions, as detailed in the following sections.

### 4.1 Lexical categorization and sentiments analysis in pre-shared messages content on Facebook

To answer the first research sub question: *Q1: How can animosity be manifested in the form of an online rumour?*

From our analysis of user engagement in the dissemination of the online rumour, we observed that sharing behavior significantly

TABLE 1 Indexed hashtags of the boycott campaign against Orange in Arabic.

Indexed hashtags
#BDSEgypt
#مقاطع_مصر (translation:#Egypt_boycott)
#موبينيل_قاطع (Translation: #boycottMobinil)
#الاتصالات_شركات_مقاطعه_مليونيه (Translation: 1 million boycotters of telecommunications companies)
#الانترنت_ثوره (Translation: #Internet_revolution)

surpassed all other forms of interaction, particularly on Facebook, highlighting how consumers respond within a context marked by animosity. The diffusion of the rumour in Egypt was characterized by a clear predominance of sharing-related interactions. On Facebook, 83% of user interactions consisted of shares, followed by likes (13%) and comments (4%). A similar pattern was observed on X (Twitter), where retweets accounted for 72% of interactions, followed by likes (18%) and comments (10%). Across both platforms, interaction patterns were largely comparable, indicating a strong prioritization of rumour propagation through acts of sharing and retweeting rather than through expressive reactions or discussion.

Prior research has shown that sharing tends to be the most common behavior in the spread of online rumours (Shehata, 2021), and our findings are consistent with this pattern. Accordingly, we concentrated our analysis on the shared messages themselves to better understand their characteristics and communicative intent. We hypothesize that, to enhance the reception and impact of online rumours, internet users frequently add captions incorporating words, symbols, emoticons, hashtags, and user tags when sharing content. This practice allows users to adapt and personalize the rumour content, aligning it with their own value systems and ideological beliefs, which may, in turn, increase its perceived credibility.

For this study, we selected user-generated captions linked to a specific post from the BDS Egypt public page. This post had the

highest level of engagement, receiving over 2,000 shares. To systematically analyze these captions, we manually developed a categorization scale (see Table 2), identifying 10 distinct thematic categories: (1) calls for action (e.g., boycotts), (2) messages featuring one or more indexed hashtags, (3) emotionally manipulative or blackmailing messages, (4) defamatory content, (5) messages including user mentions (@), (6) references to conspiracy theories, (7) messages expressing doubt, (8) messages introducing new, non-indexed hashtags, (9) messages denying the online rumor, and (10) messages affirming the online rumor’s validity. Each message was assigned to a single dominant category, regardless of the presence of overlapping features. For example, if a message was both defamatory and included a hashtag, it was classified based on the most prominent thematic element. These 10 lexical categories reflecting consumer sentiment are summarized in Table 2. Messages are categorized as calls for action—specifically those urging consumers to participate in boycott efforts, were the most prominent,

accounting for 24% of all analyzed messages across the identified categories.

### 4.2 Word-pairing analysis for detecting patterns in online discourse on X

A content analysis was conducted on X (formerly Twitter) to examine patterns of word pairing, using applications such as NodeXL and Gephi to visualize the co-occurrence of specific terms within 616 user posts, as shown in Figure 3. The network mapping presented in Figure 3 highlights four key terms—Orange, Boycott, Israel, and BDS—which frequently appeared together in posts related to the dissemination of the online rumor. The repeated association of these terms suggests a shared narrative among users, reflecting a strong underlying sentiment of political animosity toward Israel that shaped the discourse surrounding the rumor on X.

The co-occurrence of these key terms illustrates the strained relationship between Egypt and Israel, which has been shaped by historical political tensions and conflicts, often surfacing in expressions of animosity. Consequently, expressions of consumer animosity can significantly impact purchasing decisions, as noted in the research conducted by Cai et al. (2012). This animosity frequently translates into explicit calls for boycotts, reflecting the consumers’ desire to express their discontent through their buying patterns and market choices.

### 4.3 Consumer expressions as mediated by social media functionalities

In this section, we aim to provide answers from our data collection to the second research sub-question: Q2: How do social media functionalities facilitate the dissemination of online rumors? Cognitive and affective metrics refer to the various options provided by social media platforms that allow users to express their reactions—whether emotional or rational—through likes, comments, and shares.

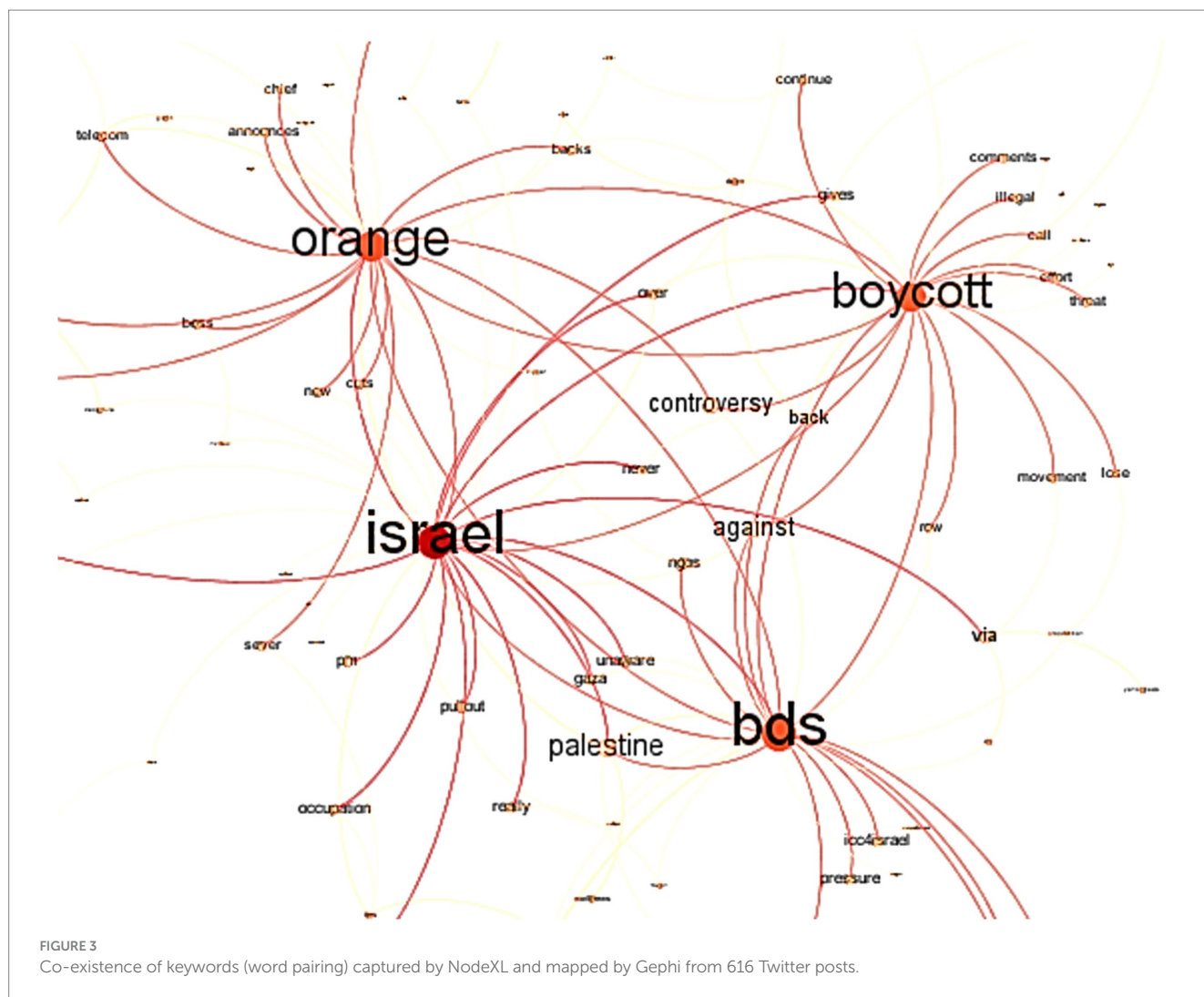
In the case study of Orange Egypt, we analyzed engagement metrics related to the most shared post published by the BDS Egypt Facebook page. The data clearly showed that sharing actions significantly surpassed other types of interaction. Specifically, 83% of consumer activity involved sharing the post, compared to 13% for likes and only 4% for comments. This highlights how the sharing functionality plays a key role in spreading online rumors, reinforcing the idea that users actively participate in dissemination when motivated by certain triggers; whether ideological, emotional, or social.

Similarly, the volume of retweets on X (formerly Twitter) reached 72%, making it the most dominant form of user interaction. Likes followed at 18%, while comments accounted for the remaining 10%. On both platforms, the interaction patterns show a similar tendency, emphasizing the propagation of the online rumor primarily through the act of sharing and retweeting. This reinforces the idea that users are more inclined to amplify content rather than engage with it through discussion or simple approval, highlighting the functional role of these platform features in rumor dissemination.

TABLE 2 Lexical categorization of consumers’ sentiments accompanying the shares on Facebook (Orange case).

Lexical categories of messages	% of each category on Facebook	Representative message excerpt (translated into English)
Call for action (boycott)	24%	“Boycott Orange.” / “Share this and support BDS.”
Messages featuring one or more indexed hashtags	23%	“#قَاطِع_موبينيل #BDS” (#Boycott_Mobinil #BDS)
Emotionally manipulative or blackmailing messages	19%	“Is there blood in our mobile phones and internet access?”
Defamatory content	10.50%	“Orange provided support to Israeli soldiers during the Gaza assault.”
Messages including user mentions (@)	7.30%	“@user (anonymized) Quit your job at this company.”
references to conspiracy theories	7%	“I know very dangerous information about the CEO, but I can only reveal it when the source allows.”
Messages expressing doubt	4.20%	“I am not sure this rumor is true, but if it is, then to hell with them.”
Messages introducing new, non-indexed hashtags	3%	#IBoycott
Messages denying the rumour	2%	“This boycott campaign is stupid—Mobinil employs thousands of Egyptians.”
Messages confirming the rumour	0%	—

All message excerpts are translated into English where necessary, and all user identifiers have been anonymized for privacy reasons.



#### 4.4 Geographical-cultural dimension in consumers' expression

In this section, we aim to provide answers from our data collection to the third research sub-question: Q3: How does geographic-cultural proximity impact consumer animosity expression?

To answer this question, we apply Dynamic Social Impact Theory (DSIT) as an analytical framework to interpret the spatial and cultural organization of online rumor dissemination.

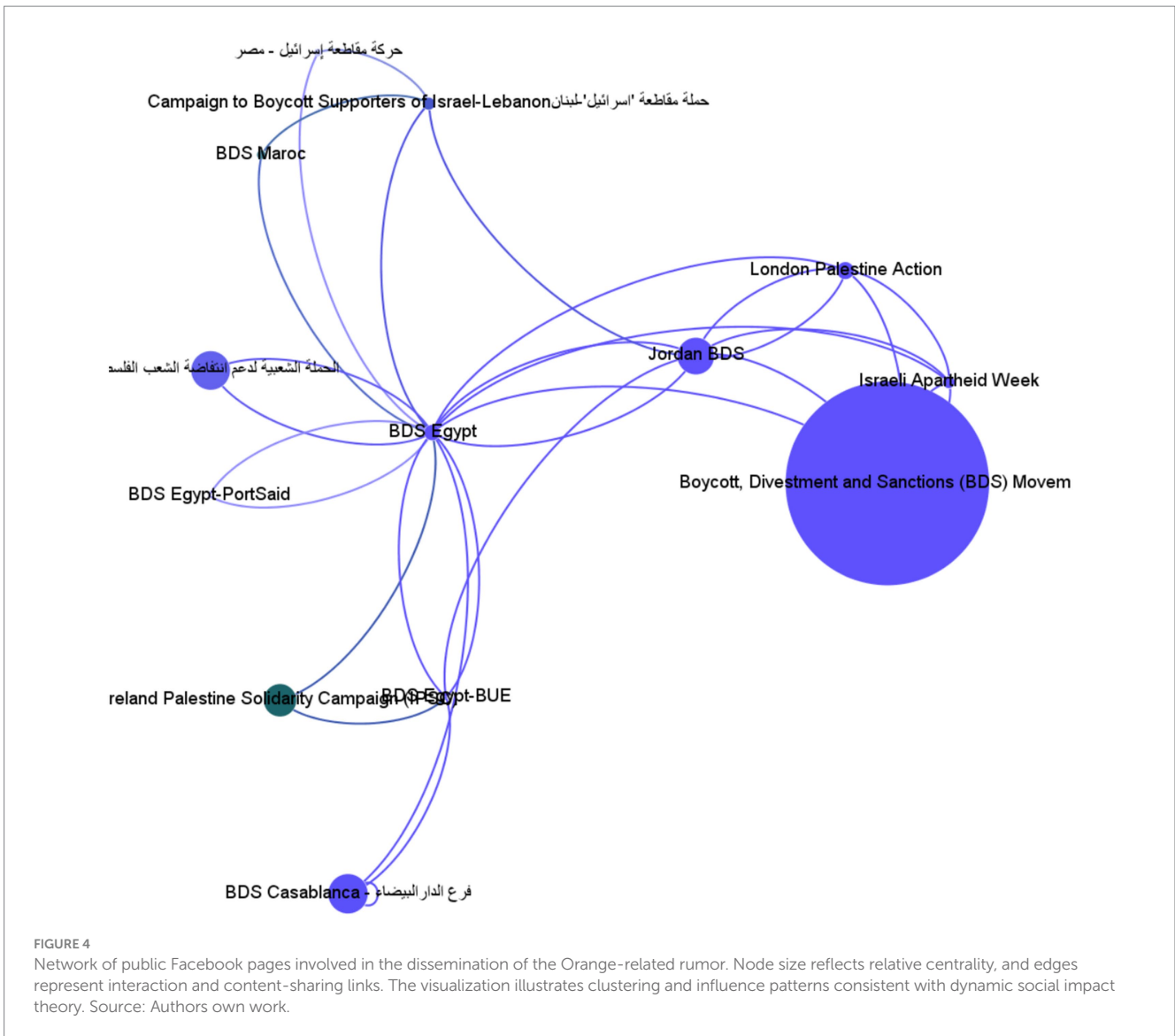
According to DSIT, social influence is a dynamic process shaped by source strength, number of influencing actors, and relational proximity, which over time produces clustering of attitudes and behaviors within connected groups (Latané, 1981, 1996). In digital environments, these mechanisms become visible through network structures in which repeated interactions among ideologically aligned actors generate culturally embedded patterns of collective expression.

Using a traceability approach based on keywords and indexed hashtags associated with the boycott-related rumour, we mapped interactions among public Facebook pages involved in its dissemination. The resulting network visualization (Figure 4), generated using Netvizz and Gephi with the ForceAtlas2 algorithm, reveals a non-random, clustered structure of influence, consistent with DSIT predictions.

Figure 4 shows that BDS Egypt occupies a central position in the network, functioning as a high-strength node with multiple direct connections to other pages. In DSIT terms, this centrality reflects both symbolic authority and organizational legitimacy, enabling BDS Egypt to exert disproportionate social influence and coordinate the diffusion of animosity-laden narratives. The large node representing the official Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement further illustrates the role of high-strength actors in amplifying and legitimizing content circulated by smaller, localized pages.

Beyond centrality, the network reveals clear geographic-cultural clustering. Pages representing BDS groups in culturally and politically proximate contexts, such as Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon, and Egypt, form tightly connected clusters around the BDS Egypt node. This pattern reflects a core DSIT mechanism: individuals and groups who interact frequently and share cultural frames tend to become more aligned over time, producing localized convergence in attitudes and collective behavior. Here, geographic proximity intersects with shared historical narratives and political identities, reinforcing expressions of political and war-related animosity.

At the same time, Figure 4 illustrates that clustering is not limited to regional proximity. The presence of international pages, such as *London Palestine Action*, *Ireland Palestine Solidarity*



*Campaign*, and *Israeli Apartheid Week*, demonstrates ideological proximity operating alongside geographic distance. In line with DSIT, social proximity based on shared beliefs and moral orientations can substitute for physical proximity, enabling transnational diffusion of animosity narratives within culturally aligned networks.

Overall, this network structure highlights a digital infrastructure of social mobilization, in which high-strength nodes, dense clustering, and repeated interactions facilitate the rapid circulation and normalization of rumour-based boycott discourse. Rather than reflecting isolated acts of expression, consumer animosity emerges here as a collective, culturally embedded phenomenon, structured through DSIT mechanisms of influence, clustering, and mobilization.

This mobilizational function of rumor sharing is consistent with recent findings showing that hostile political rumors are often disseminated not primarily for informational purposes, but to activate collective opposition and reinforce group alignment among ideologically connected actors (Petersen et al., 2023). In line with Dynamic Social Impact Theory, repeated exposure to such content within culturally aligned clusters increases normative pressure and strengthens collective

expression, thereby facilitating coordinated mobilization across geographically dispersed but ideologically proximate communities.

## 5 Discussion and key findings

This study examined political animosity as expressed through the propagation of an online rumor targeting Orange Egypt. Rather than reiterating empirical results presented in the previous section, this discussion interprets the findings in relation to the three research sub-questions and situates them within existing theoretical and empirical literature.

### 5.1 Q1: animosity as online rumor expression

The findings indicate that consumer animosity manifests through emotionally charged and action-oriented discourse, confirming that online rumours function not merely as misinformation but as

expressive vehicles for political and moral positioning. The lexical patterns identified in shared content—such as calls for action, emotionally manipulative language, defamatory framing, and conspiracy references—suggest that users actively reshape rumour narratives to align with collective identities and ideological commitments. This supports the view that online rumours operate as symbolic resources through which animosity is publicly articulated and normalized.

These findings extend prior work on electronic word-of-mouth by showing that cultural orientations influence not only the diffusion of content but also its semantic construction in politically sensitive contexts (Lin and Kalwani, 2018).

## 5.2 Q2: platform affordances/ functionalities and animosity amplification

The predominance of sharing and retweeting behaviors highlights the central role of platform affordances and functionalities in amplifying animosity-driven content. Rather than engaging in deliberative discussion, users prioritized actions that maximized visibility and reach, transforming individual expressions into collective mobilization. This supports the argument that social media functionalities facilitate the rapid escalation of political animosity by privileging diffusion-oriented interactions over reflective engagement.

## 5.3 Q3: geographic–cultural proximity and collective mobilization

In this study, cultural dimensions are understood as collectively enacted orientations that become observable through patterns of online discourse, interaction, and mobilization, rather than as directly measured national traits. Interpreted through Dynamic Social Impact Theory, the network patterns observed demonstrate how cultural proximity and ideological alignment shape the collective expression of animosity across digital spaces. The emergence of clustered, transnational networks centered around BDS Egypt illustrates how social influence extends beyond territorial boundaries, driven by shared political narratives and moral frames.

Overall, the findings demonstrate how macro-level cultural orientations shape the collective expression of consumer animosity in digital environments. These orientations emerged empirically across multiple layers of the data: at the lexical level (Table 2), the prevalence of calls for action and emotionally coercive language reflects normative pressure to participate in boycott-related action; at the semantic level (Figure 3), recurrent co-occurrences among terms such as *Orange*, *Israel*, *Boycott*, and *BDS* indicate collective identity alignment and moral framing of political conflict; and at the network level (Figure 4), the clustering of BDS-affiliated pages across culturally proximate and ideologically aligned contexts reflects group loyalty. Taken together, these patterns became visible through coordinated sharing practices, emotionally charged discourse, and the emergence of culturally and ideologically aligned clusters. Interpreted through the lens of individualism–collectivism and DSIT, these findings show that culture operates at a macro level as a socially enacted and digitally observable process, rather than as a static national attribute.

# 6 Theoretical/managerial implications

## 6.1 Theoretical implications

The findings of this study offer several important theoretical contributions. First, we expand on existing research surrounding consumer expressions of animosity by empirically demonstrating that social media serves as a powerful tool for communicating and amplifying such sentiments. Unlike earlier studies that primarily focused on personality traits and individual-level characteristics, our research shifts the lens toward broader cultural dynamics, showing how animosity is shaped, expressed, and circulated in collective digital environments.

Second, our study provides an applied conceptualization of both Dynamic Social Impact Theory (DSIT) and Social Impact Theory (SIT) in the context of social media. Through the case of “Orange Egypt,” we illustrate how influential digital networks are formed and function across national borders, based on cultural proximity and shared ideological orientations. This extends the theoretical scope of DSIT and SIT, demonstrating their relevance in understanding virtual clustering and transnational influence in today’s interconnected online spaces.

## 6.2 Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, our findings underline the importance for multinational companies, especially those operating in politically sensitive or culturally diverse markets, to actively recognize and respond to consumer sentiment. Negative expressions of animosity, particularly when tied to cultural or historical tensions, can rapidly gain traction and evolve into reputational risks if not adequately addressed. As shown in the Orange Egypt case, the spread and amplification of a political online rumour were deeply influenced by pre-existing cultural and political tensions. Consumer responses were not isolated acts, but part of a broader, coordinated reaction embedded within cultural and ideological contexts.

This phenomenon of extra-territoriality, facilitated by digital platforms, demonstrates how cultural clusters can form and mobilize across borders, shaping public discourse and consumer behavior in powerful ways. For managers and brand strategists, this means that ignoring the cultural and geopolitical sensitivities of a market can leave a company vulnerable to organized backlash and rapid rumour propagation.

Based on these insights, this study offers three concrete managerial implications. First, firms should develop rumour mobilization profiling, enabling early detection of lexical and mobilization cues such as calls for action, moral framing, and conspiratorial narratives. These elements often signal that a rumour is transitioning from individual sentiment to collective mobilisation. Second, companies should implement geo-cultural risk mapping to identify how ideological and cultural proximity shape rumour dissemination beyond the country of origin. This approach acknowledges the extra-territorial nature of digital activism and helps anticipate cross-border spillover effects. Third, managers must design affordance-aware intervention strategies that account for the mechanics and functionalities of social media diffusion; where sharing and retweeting accelerate visibility faster than corrective communication. This

includes using rapid clarification formats optimized for platform algorithms and employing trusted community voices to counter misinformation.

Operationally, these implications translate into actionable capabilities such as real-time social listening and rumour detection systems, cultural risk auditing, scenario-based crisis simulations, and pre-emptive communication protocols tailored for politically volatile environments. Together, these measures help multinational firms identify and navigate the invisible, and often intentional, forces that influence consumer perception and can destabilize brand reputation across borders. Understanding the digital cultural landscape is no longer optional; it is essential for brand resilience in an era where political tensions, cultural identities, and platform affordances intersect to shape consumer animosity at scale.

## 7 Limitations and perspectives for future research

This study has a few key limitations. First, it was based solely on observational netnography without direct consumer interaction, such as interviews. Second, the research focused on a single case (Orange Egypt) and only two platforms (Facebook and X), limiting its generalizability. Third, technical constraints restricted deeper network analysis on X.

These limitations point to several future research opportunities, including expanding to multiple countries and platforms, integrating qualitative methods, and exploring how evolving digital spaces influence consumer expressions of animosity and activism.

## 8 Conclusion

This study examined how political and war-related consumer animosity is articulated and mobilized through social media by analyzing the circulation of an online rumour targeting Orange Egypt. Addressing the overarching research question, the findings show that social media platforms actively structure animosity expression across multiple analytical levels, rather than merely hosting isolated reactions.

At the micro level, animosity emerges through emotionally charged discourse, moral framing, and calls for action embedded in users' shared content, revealing how political and war animosity is individually articulated in symbolic form. At the meso level, platform affordances—particularly sharing and retweeting mechanisms—facilitate amplification, coordination, and visibility, transforming individual expressions into collective dynamics. At the macro level, interpreted through Dynamic Social Impact Theory, geographic–cultural proximity and ideological alignment shape clustering and transnational mobilization, enabling political and war animosity to circulate beyond national boundaries within culturally connected networks.

Conceptually, the study contributes to the literature by reframing culture as a socially enacted and digitally observable process, rather than as a static national characteristic, and by extending consumer animosity research to the context of political rumour circulation on social media. Methodologically, the combination of netnography, lexical analysis, and network visualization provides a replicable framework for examining rumour-based mobilization in politically sensitive settings.

Overall, the findings underscore the growing importance of social media as a key arena where consumer animosity is constructed, coordinated, and normalized at scale. These insights offer implications for researchers seeking to better understand digital political expression, as well as for practitioners aiming to anticipate and manage reputational risks in an increasingly interconnected and polarized digital environment.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human data in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was not required, for either participation in the study or for the publication of potentially/indirectly identifying information, in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The social media data was accessed and analyzed in accordance with the platforms' terms of use and all relevant institutional/national regulations.

## Author contributions

MS: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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