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Revisiting consumer boycott behavior through the lens of Fire Alarm Theory: a systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Consumer boycott behavior has increased to attract attention among the scholars and industry practitioners over the years due to existing geopolitical conflicts, ethical concerns, religious values, and digital activism, creating significant consequences on corporate reputation and market performance. Despite extensive research, boycott literature remains fragmented across different contexts and theoretical perspectives, limiting the understanding of how boycott behavior emerges and evolves. To address this gap, this study develops Fire Alarm Theory through a PRISMA 2020-guided systematic review and thematic synthesis of 14 published articles between 2000 and 2025. The proposed framework conceptualizes boycott behavior as a dynamic escalation process comprising four interconnected phases, which are Fire Alarm (early warning signals), Fire Event (active and passive boycott behavior), Fire Extinguisher (organizational responses), and Survival (long-term outcomes and recovery). By integrating fragmented insights from consumer boycott studies, Fire Alarm Theory explains how boycott behavior emerges, escalates and evolves through signal interpretation, response timing, and organizational sensemaking. The study contributes to boycott literature by introducing a process-oriented framework that extends beyond static explanations of boycott participation. The findings offer practical guidance for organizations seeking to identify and manage emerging boycott risks while providing a foundation for future research on boycott dynamics, consumer activism, and crisis management.

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Consumer Psychology; Business, Management and Accounting; Public Relations

1. Introduction

Consumer boycotts have become an increasingly significant challenge for firms and brands worldwide due to the rise of consumer activism, geopolitical tensions, ethical concerns, and digital mobilization. For instance, McDonald's Egypt reportedly experienced a 70% decline in sales during the boycott movement associated with the Israel-Palestine conflict, while Starbucks in Malaysia recorded a sales volume reduction of between 36% and 46%, resulting in significant financial losses for its franchise operator (Elshaer et al., 2025; Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). In addition, Target Corporation lost approximately USD 12.4 billion in market value within a month following consumer backlash against its diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. This demonstrates how consumer boycotts can directly affect corporate performance, brand equity, and long-term sustainability.

In recent years, boycotts have rapidly expanded due to consumer activism worldwide. According to Mulyono and Rolando (2025), a consumer boycott refers to consumers' refusal to purchase products or services from a firm, company, industry, or country due to dissatisfaction, political issues, or religious-related issues. Consumer boycotts occur across a wide range of contexts. Political boycotts are often triggered

by geopolitical conflicts and diplomatic disputes (Anwar et al., 2026), whereas religious boycotts are motivated by perceived violation of religious values and beliefs (Ramkissoon et al., 2025; Ridwan et al., 2025). Ethical and CSR-related boycotts emerge when firms are accused of labor exploitation, human rights violations or irresponsible corporate practices, and greenwashing has increasingly prompted consumers to withdraw their support from brands (Andreoli et al., 2025; Mady et al., 2025; Zervoudi et al., 2025). Boycotts may also be driven by consumer ethnocentrism, where consumers intentionally avoid foreign products in favor of domestic alternatives to support national interests (Lu Wang & Xiong Chen, 2004; Małacka & Pfajfar, 2025; Sudie et al., 2025). In marketplace decisions, boycott participation is essentially value-laden, socially coordinated, and increasingly global. For example, Indonesia and Malaysia boycott Israeli brands and products due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, demonstrating how boycotts have evolved into powerful mechanisms for public expression, moral signaling, and social influence (Rosinta et al., 2025).

In recent years, the prevalence and intensity of consumer boycotts have increased markedly owing to the rise of geopolitical conflict, digital activism, moral consumption, and heightened expectations of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Song, 2020). This phenomenon is partly driven by negative word-of-mouth, particularly through social media (Avci, 2024). Geopolitical conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian and Russia-Ukraine conflicts, have motivated consumers to punish foreign brands associated with perceived injustices (Ahn et al., 2022; Suhud et al., 2024). Simultaneously, consumers have increased the incorporation of moral considerations such as fairness, harm avoidance, environmental sustainability, and social justice into their purchasing decisions (Lim & Shim, 2020; Zeng et al., 2021). In digital activism, which further accelerates boycott mobilization, social media platforms enhance perceived behavioral control and amplify collective efficacy (Mady et al., 2025; Avci, 2024). This proposition is also supported by other studies that argue boycotts occur due to consumers' negative thoughts influenced by trends on digital platforms like Facebook and TikTok, which can be shared repeatedly, encouraging other audiences to follow these trends (Kuhzady et al., 2024). Under these dynamics, consumers may expect corporations to demonstrate strong CSR commitments, and violations of this expectation can frequently provoke punitive responses, including boycotts of brands and products in any situation (Deng & Long, 2019; Kim & Kinoshita, 2023).

It is important to distinguish consumer boycott from other forms of negative consumption, particularly voluntary simplicity. While both behaviors involve the reduction or avoidance of purchasing activities, consumer boycotts are primarily motivated by the intention to express dissatisfaction, protest perceived wrongdoing, or pressure firms to change their practices (Hoffmann et al., 2018; Zheng & Alias, 2025). In contrast, voluntary simplicity reflects a lifestyle-oriented choice in which consumers reduce consumption for personal, environmental, or anti-materialistic reasons rather than to influence a specific company or brand (Sanusi et al., 2025). Therefore, boycott participation can be regarded as a form of collective consumer activism, whereas voluntary simplicity is largely driven by individual consumption values and preferences (Güner et al., 2025).

Despite the growing body of boycott literature, research remains fragmented across multiple streams, including political, religious, ethical, CSR-related, environmental, greenwashing and ethnocentric boycotts (Delistavrou et al., 2020; Deng & Long, 2019; Zeng et al., 2021). These streams have largely evolved independently and often rely on different theoretical perspectives and contextual explanations, resulting in limited integration of the mechanisms underlying boycott behavior (Blomstervik & Olsen, 2022; Lavorata, 2014; Senan et al., 2025). Beyond this fragmentation, some studies have predominantly conceptualized consumer boycotts through isolated antecedents and static decision-making frameworks that treat boycott participation as a rational or intention-driven outcome (Ateş, 2025; Shin & Yoon, 2018). Prior studies identify a wide range of influencing factors, including social capital, generalized trust, message credibility, perceived effectiveness, and expected participation, as well as different mobilization pathways ranging from top-down incentivized initiatives to bottom-up grassroots movement (Fischer, 2023; Shin & Yoon, 2018; Zasuwa, 2019). This rise in digital and social media has further been shown to intensify boycott mobilization through extensive information on diffusion, emotional contagion, and shared signaling, with significant reputational and financial consequences for brands (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). However, these insights remain insufficiently integrated because they offer a limited explanation of how boycott behavior unfolds dynamically,

particularly in response to triggering events that activate emotional, moral, and identity-based reactions.

Consequently, the literature lacks an integrated, multilevel theoretical framework capable of explaining why some boycott calls fade quickly, while others continue to escalate into sustained, large-scale collective actions with profound implications for firms and markets (Elshaer et al., 2025; Fischer, 2023). Specifically, existing models rarely account for the sequential and interactive processes through which cognitive appraisal, emotional arousal, identity alignment, and social amplification combine to intensify boycott behavior over time (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025; Zasuwa, 2019). This theoretical limitation highlights the need for a process-oriented and escalation-sensitive perspective that reconceptualizes boycott behavior not merely as a discrete consumer decision but as a dynamic system.

In view of the above, Fire Alarm Theory was developed to address this gap by conceptualizing consumer boycott behavior as a dynamic process initiated by early warning signals and shaped by subsequent consumer and organizational responses. Evidence from political, ethical, religious, eco-innovation, and digitally mediated boycott contexts supports this perspective (Ahn et al., 2022; Kim & Kinoshita, 2023; Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). Hence, the Fire Alarm Theory of Boycott Behavior was developed to explain how early moral signals and their triggering events activate escalating cognitive, emotional, and social responses. Therefore, this theory clarifies how failures to recognize early-stage escalation dynamics result in ineffective organizational responses and fundamentally different recovery trajectories across boycott events.

To develop this framework, the present review synthesizes 14 key scholarly articles that cover political boycotts, ethical and CSR-related boycotts, religious boycotts, eco-innovation tensions, and social media-driven boycott movements. By consolidating insights across these diverse contexts, this study advances a unified process model that explains boycott participation from initial triggers (Smoke → Heat → Fire) and moral appraisal to emotional activation, collective mobilization, and subsequent market and corporate outcomes (Niu et al., 2025). This study makes three main contributions to literature. First, it integrates and extends previous disconnected streams of boycott research into a coherent, multi-stage theoretical framework. Second, it shifts the theoretical attention from boycott intensity alone to the importance of timing, interpretation, and stage-contingent dynamics. Third, it provides a generative foundation for future research from consumer, governance, and academic perspectives, enabling scholars to examine how boycott dynamics shape consumer behavior, organizational decision-making, and broader market governance devices.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: [Section 2](#) outlined the research methodology. Next, [section 3](#) is based on the theoretical perspectives of consumer boycott. Additionally, [section 4](#) introduces the Fire Alarm Theory on consumer behavior, including the integrated framework and proposition development. [Section 6](#) will outline future research directions. Finally, [section 7](#) concludes the paper.

2. Methodology

2.1. Risk of bias assessment

As this study adopts a narrative conceptual review approach, a formal risk of bias assessment tool was not applied, such as the Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool. However, to maintain the quality and credibility of the included studies, only peer-reviewed journal articles were selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Additionally, the screening and selection process was conducted systematically, and the included studies were carefully evaluated based on their theoretical relevance, methodological rigor, and contribution to understanding consumer boycott behavior and supporting the development of the proposed theoretical framework.

2.2. Reporting bias assessment

Given the nature of this conceptual review, formal statistical methods to assess reporting bias were not conducted. However, efforts were made to minimize potential bias by applying systematic search procedures that have clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Additionally, this review focuses

exclusively on journal articles that are relevant to the topic. The use of a single database, namely Scopus, may introduce selection bias. But it was chosen due to its coverage and relevance to high-quality academic publications.

2.3. Certainty of evidence

As this study does not involve quantitative synthesis or meta-analysis, formal certainty assessment methods were not applied. Instead, the certainty of evidence was inferred based on the consistency of findings across the included studies, the strength of the theoretical foundation, and the relevance of empirical knowledge to the consumer boycott behavior. The synthesis prioritizes conceptual coherence and theoretical integration rather than statistical generalization.

2.4. Risk of bias in included studies

Given that the present study aims to develop an integrated conceptual framework, which is Fire Alarm Theory, through narrative synthesis, a formal risk of bias assessment for individual studies was not undertaken. This review is focused on theory integration rather than comparative evaluation of empirical effect, and therefore the included studies were utilized to inform conceptual development rather than to assess causal validity. Nevertheless, all selected studies were peer-reviewed and evaluated based on their theoretical relevance and conceptual contribution and aligned with the objectives of the review.

2.5. Review approach

A systematic review approach was adopted because research on consumer boycott behavior remains fragmented across political, religious, ethical, environmental CSR-related, and identity-based contexts (Aji et al., 2026; Garima et al., 2025; Mirza et al., 2020; Sen, 2024). Existing studies are dispersed across different theoretical perspectives and disciplinary domains and make it more difficult to develop a coherent understanding of how boycott behavior emerges, escalates, and evolves over time (Ateş, 2025; Braga et al., 2026; Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). Therefore, a systematic review was considered appropriate to synthesize existing knowledge, identify conceptual gaps, and support the development of an integrated theoretical framework.

This review adopted a narrative–conceptual synthesis approach supported by a structured analysis of the 14 included studies. The purpose of this method is to integrate fragmented research on consumer boycott behavior across political, ethical, environmental, religious, and social contexts. This method is suitable for theory development because it integrates conceptually rich findings that are dispersed across different contexts and knowledge domains.

To ensure transparency, thoroughness, and reproducibility of this review, a structured search strategy was used. As shown in Figure 1, the PRISMA 2020 framework was used to guide the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies. PRISMA was selected because it provides a widely recognized and transparent protocol for identifying, screening, assessing eligibility, and reporting the study selection process (Boaye Belle & Zhao, 2023; Carlo Torres et al., 2024). Unlike frameworks such as SPAR-4-SLR, which primarily guide the reporting and structuring of review articles (Paul et al., 2024), PRISMA provides a detailed framework for enhancing transparency in literature identification and screening decisions (Carlo Torres et al., 2024; Sohrabi et al., 2021).

This review followed the four PRISMA 2020 stages which included identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. This search was carried out in July 2025 by methodically combining pertinent keywords using Boolean operators “AND” and “OR”. The search therefore captured studies examining consumer boycotts arising from political issues, moral or ethical transgressions, brand-related issues, religiosity, negative emotions, and identity-based motivations. To ensure the theoretical analysis, both conceptual and empirical articles were included.

The primary objective of this systematic literature review is theory development rather than descriptive literature mapping or bibliometric analysis. Accordingly, this study adopts a concept-centric synthesis approach, which systematically integrates concepts, themes, and theoretical mechanisms across the

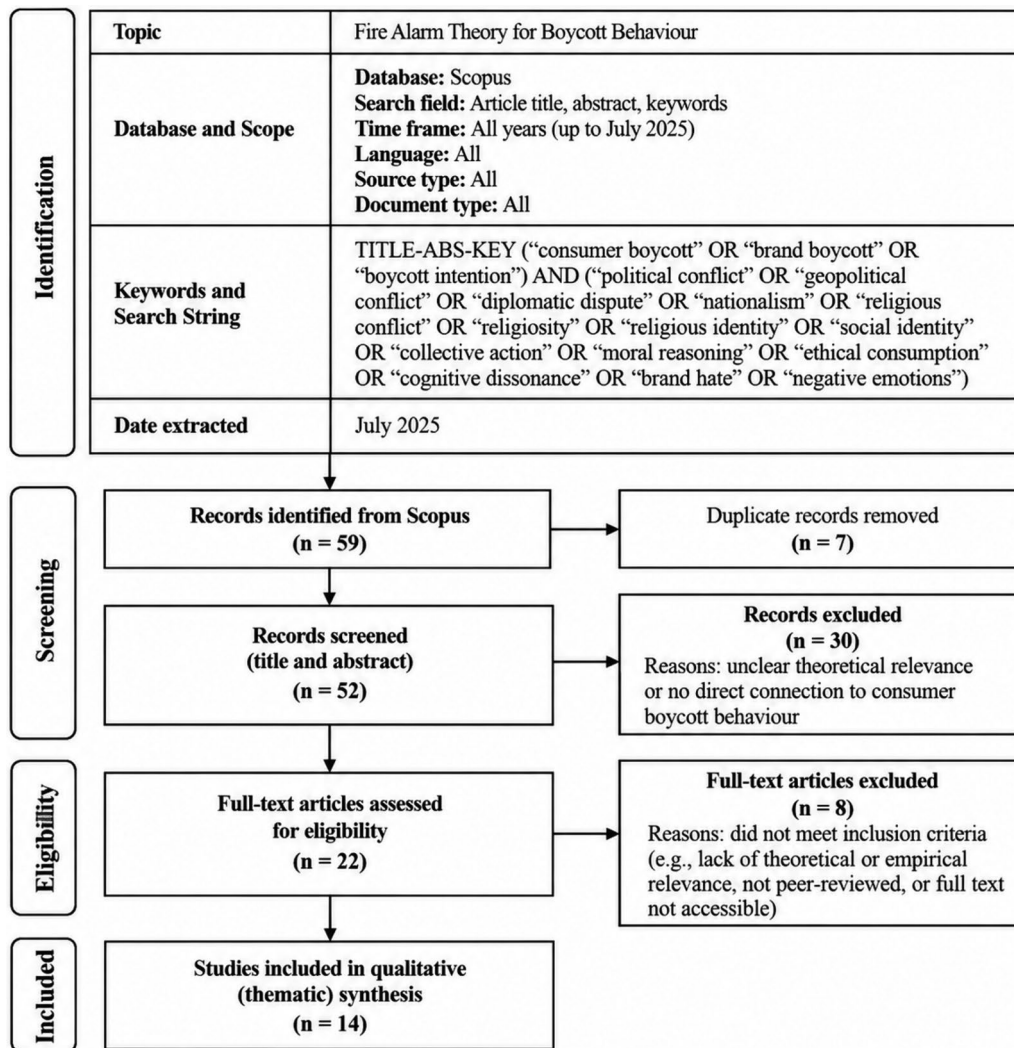


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process. *Source:* Adapted from Page et al. (2021) format.

selected studies to develop the proposed Fire Alarm Theory. This approach is consistent with the recommendations of Webster and Watson (2002), who emphasized that effective literature reviews should synthesize knowledge around concepts rather than individual studies. Furthermore, Paul et al. (2024) argued that the selection of a systematic review framework should align with the review's primary objective. Since the present study seeks to develop a new theoretical explanation of consumer boycott behavior through conceptual synthesis, a concept-centric thematic synthesis guided by the PRISMA 2020 reporting framework was considered more appropriate than literature classification frameworks such as TCCM, ADO-TCM, or IMO, which are primarily designed to organize and categorize existing research rather than generate new theoretical propositions.

Only English-language peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2025 were considered. This timeframe captures both foundational and contemporary developments in boycott research, including digital activism and identity-driven boycott. Studies that did not investigate boycott intention or behavior, lacked theoretical relevance, or were not peer-reviewed were excluded.

Although the final sample consisted of 14 studies, the objective of this review was theory development rather than exhaustive bibliometric mapping. The selected studies were retained because they provided direct insights into consumer boycott behavior across political, religious, ethical, environmental, and identity-based contexts. While the number of included studies is relatively limited, these articles were relevant to the study objective and offered sufficient conceptual depth to support the development of the proposed Fire Alarm Theory. In addition, supporting literature from related domains, including consumer activism, crisis management, social identity, and consumer behavior, was incorporated to

strengthen the theoretical foundation of the framework. The studies were analyzed thematically to identify key theories, variables, and contextual insights that informed the four phases of the framework, including triggers, consumer responses, organizational actions, and subsequent reactions or feedback.

2.6. Effect measurement

As this study adopts a narrative conceptual synthesis approach, there are no quantitative effect measures that were employed, such as risk ratios, odds ratios, mean differences, standardized mean differences, regression coefficients, or correlation coefficients. As an alternative, the review integrated insights from established studies published in reputable journals to develop a new theoretical framework. Nevertheless, several studies provide important empirical and theoretical foundations for understanding consumer boycott behavior in political, ethical, and social contexts. (Ahn et al., 2022; Alyahya et al., 2023; Deng & Long, 2019; Kim & Kinoshita, 2023; Lim & Shim, 2020; Mady et al., 2025). Therefore, the analysis focuses on synthesizing theoretical perspectives and recurring conceptual patterns rather than estimating statistical effects.

2.7. Search strategy

The Scopus database was used because it has a wide coverage of academic journals (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Zakaria et al., 2020) and is popular among researchers (Baas et al., 2020; Martínez-López et al., 2018). Although using more than one database would increase the likelihood of obtaining more relevant publications, screening for redundant publications would be time-consuming.

2.8. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

This review paper applied two levels of screening, namely, inclusion and exclusion criteria, to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected literature. As shown in Table 1, the inclusion criteria consisted of (i) examining consumer boycott behavior or boycott intention as a primary focus, (ii) providing theoretical, conceptual, or empirical insight into the antecedents, mechanisms, or outcomes of consumer boycotts, and (iii) contributing to understanding political, religious, ethical, environmental, CSR-related, social media-driven, or identity-based boycott contexts. On the other hand, the following exclusion criteria were applied: studies that (i) did not focus on consumer boycotts as the primary research topic, (ii) lacked theoretical or empirical relevance to the objectives of this review, (iii) had not undergone peer review, or (iv) were inaccessible in full text through academic databases or open-access sources.

2.9. Study selection and screening process

A total of 59 records were obtained during the initial search. After seven duplicate entries were removed, 52 studies remained for title and abstract screening. Thirty articles were not eligible at this stage because of their unclear theoretical relevance or lack of direct connection to consumer boycott behavior. The remaining 22 studies were fully evaluated to ensure that the article offered significant conceptual, theoretical, or empirical insights into the identity, cognitive, affective, or social mechanisms that underlie boycott behavior. Eight more articles were eliminated after full-text review, leaving 14 studies for the final synthesis. The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram provides a summary of the selection process (see Figure 1).

Table 1. The search string.

	Database search string
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("consumer boycott" OR "brand boycott" OR "boycott intention") AND ("political conflict" OR "geopolitical conflict" OR "diplomatic dispute" OR "nationalism" OR "religious conflict" OR "religiosity" OR "religious identity" OR "social identity" OR "collective action" OR "moral reasoning" OR "ethical consumption" OR "cognitive dissonance" OR "brand hate" OR "negative emotions")

Source. Developed by the authors.

Based on the extracted data, the 14 studies included in the review were systematically compared after data extraction to identify recurring concepts, mechanisms and relationships related to the development of consumer boycott behavior. The synthesis was centered on the development of boycott-related triggers, the interpretation of triggers by consumers through cognitive, emotional and identity-based processes, the transformation of consumer concerns into active or passive boycott behavior, organizational responses and the influence of these responses on longer-term outcomes. Subsequently, these recurring concepts were grouped into broader thematic patterns, based on the conceptual similarity and their role in the development of boycott behavior.

3. Review findings and theoretical perspectives on consumer boycott behavior

3.1. Overview of the included studies

This section presents an overview of the studies included in the systematic review before synthesizing their theoretical contributions. Although the primary objective of this review is theory development rather than bibliometric mapping, a brief descriptive overview is provided to contextualize the evolution of consumer boycott studies. The broader Scopus dataset provides a contextual overview of the development of consumer boycott research across publication periods and geographical settings, while the 14 included studies provide the evidence base for the subsequent thematic synthesis and theoretical development. For contextual descriptive analysis, a broader Scopus dataset comprising 180 publications was examined to illustrate the overall development and geographical distribution of consumer boycott research. This dataset was distinct from the 14 studies that met the predefined inclusion criteria and were subsequently used for the theory-building synthesis. The 180 publication dataset was used only to provide a broader overview of publication trends, citation growth, and geographical distribution, whereas the 14 included studies formed the evidence base for the thematic synthesis and development of Fire Alarm Theory.

3.2. Publication trajectory of consumer boycott research

As shown in Figure 2, the publication trajectory demonstrates a clear upward trend in research on consumer boycotts from 2015 to 2025. In earlier years, the number of publications was relatively modest, suggesting limited and somewhat fragmented scholarly attention to boycott studies. A gradual increase can be observed beginning in 2017 (12 publications), followed by a brief decline in 2019, when six publications were recorded. From 2020 onwards, research output began to rise steadily, with a notable acceleration after 2022 (15 publications), ultimately reaching a peak in 2025 (51 publications). This trend reflects growing academic interest in consumer boycott research across different brands, issues, products, and contexts.

3.3. Citation growth of consumer boycott research

As shown in Figure 3, citation growth over time indicates a significant increase in scholarly influence within consumer boycott research. Citation counts remained minimal in the early period, with only 2

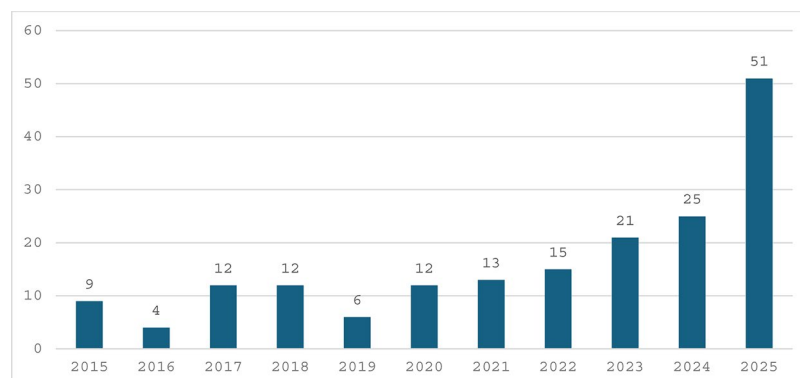


Figure 2. Publication trajectory. Sources: Authors' analysis based on Scopus data.

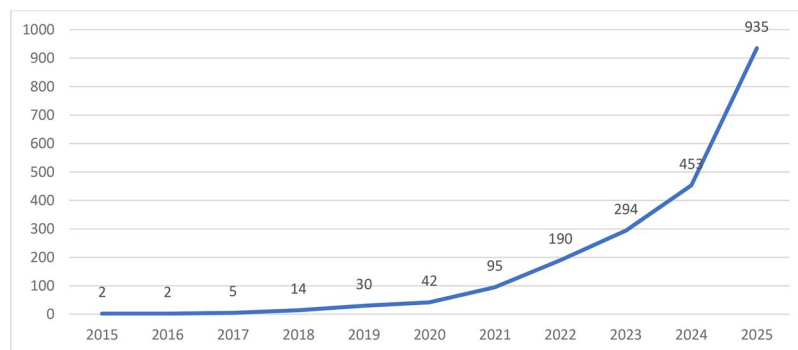


Figure 3. Citation growth over time. *Source: Authors' analysis based on Scopus data.*

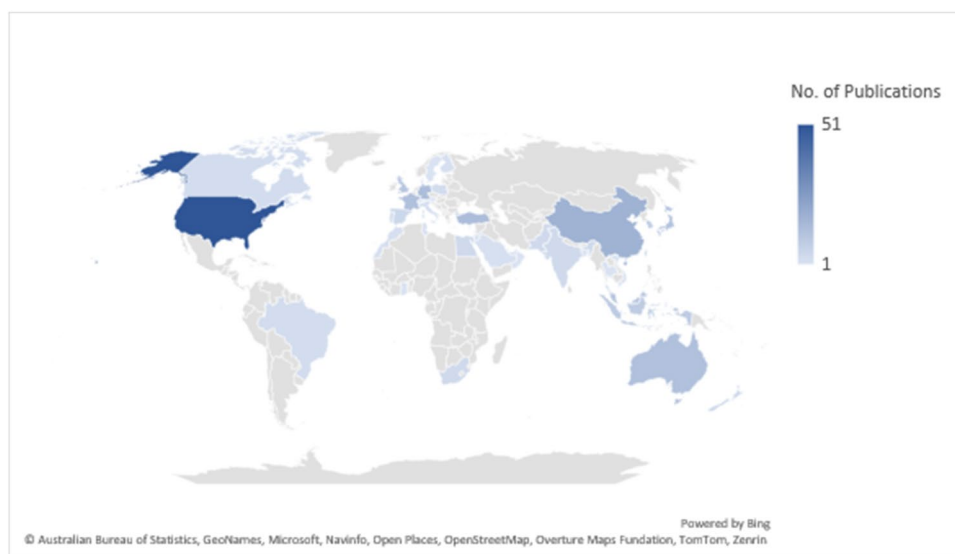


Figure 4. Total publications by country. *Source: Authors' analysis based on Scopus data.*

citations in both 2015 and 2016, and then increasing modestly to 5 in 2017 and 14 in 2018. The citation growth accelerated after 2019 with 30 citations and became more pronounced from 2021 onward, rising from 95 citations in 2021 to 190 citations in 2022 and 294 in 2023. A sharp rise is observed recently, with citations increasing to 453 in 2024 and peaking at 935 in 2025, indicating rapidly expanding academic impact and consolidation of the field.

3.4. Geographic distribution of consumer boycott research

As shown in Figure 4, consumer boycott research is geographically distributed across countries, with the United States having the highest publication output, followed by China, Germany, Australia, and France. Research on consumer boycotts involved authors affiliated with more than 44 countries. The leading countries based on publication output were the United States (51), China (18), Germany (14), Australia (13), France (13), Japan (12), the United Kingdom (11), South Korea (9), New Zealand (5), and Spain (5).

However, using bibliographic coupling citation analysis at the country level, with a minimum threshold of five publications and 50 citations, the most influential authors are affiliated with New Zealand, Germany, Japan, Australia, the United States of America, France, the United Kingdom, China, South Korea, and Malaysia. The United States produces the most articles (51) and most citations (689), highlighting the country's central role in advancing consumer boycott research. In contrast, although New Zealand contributed only five (5) publications, it achieved the highest average citation impact (18.2 citations per article), followed by Germany (17.9) and Japan (15.1). While China (18) and South Korea (9) show

increasing research facilitation, their relative lower average citation scores (12.0 and 11.7, respectively) indicate that a higher number of publications does not necessarily translate into greater research influence. As presented in Table 2, the United States has the highest number of publications and citations, while New Zealand records the highest average number of citations per article among the leading countries.

3.5. Summary of prior boycott studies

Table 3 summarizes the core characteristics of the 14 included studies, providing a structured overview of literature. These include the authors, article title, journal outlet, citation count, and primary theories or models employed. This table helps establish theoretical diversity and conceptual foundations across political, ethical, religious, and environmental boycott contexts.

The synthesis of the 14 included studies identified four recurring thematic patterns that provided the conceptual basis for the proposed four phases of Fire Alarm Theory. The first phase is the Fire Alarm, which reflects external triggers, weak signals, moral appraisal, and initial cognitive and identity-based evaluations. The second phase is Fire Event, which captures emotional activation, social influence, identity alignment, and perceived efficacy leading to active or passive boycott participation. The third phase is Fire Extinguisher, which concerns organizational responses, CSR, crisis communication, and response timing that may reduce or intensify consumer reactions. The fourth phase is Survival, which reflects longer-term consequences such as reputational damage, trust, legitimacy, and the persistence or decline of boycott participation. Accordingly, the four phases were conceptually derived through the extraction and cross-study comparison of recurring concepts, their grouping into thematic patterns, and their integration according to temporal and conceptual relationships, thereby establishing a clear link between the reviewed literature and the proposed Fire Alarm Theory.

The synthesis presented in Table 3 shows how consumer boycotts emerge in political, ethical, religious, and cultural contexts. Macro-level triggers, such as geopolitical conflicts (Ahn et al., 2022; Misiewicz & Stepaniuk, 2024), consistently activate boycott behaviors across these studies. Diplomatic disputes (Weiss et al., 2023), corporate social responsibility (CSR), ethical violations (Alyahya et al., 2023; Deng & Long, 2019), and religious tensions (Abdullah et al., 2024; Roswinanto & Suwanda, 2023) are all factors that contribute to consumer boycotts. The reviewed studies indicate that disruptions in consumer–brand relationships can initiate a sequence of psychological and social responses that shape boycott motivation.

In addition, a dominant pattern identified across the reviewed studies was the role of moral appraisal and cognitive evaluation in shaping consumers' initial responses to boycott-triggering events (Niu et al., 2025; Xie et al., 2023). Consumers assess whether a brand has engaged in moral wrongdoing, resulting in perceptions of injustice, blame attribution, or cognitive dissonance (Kim et al., 2022; Park & Jang, 2024). These evaluative judgments represent an initial response to different macro-level triggers and provide a foundational framework for emotional activation and subsequent development of boycott behavior (Song, 2020).

Emotional activation emerges as another important component of the boycott process (Mednini & Damak Turki, 2024). Recent studies have identified several emotions associated with the boycott process, including anger, contempt, and moral outrage, that strongly predict boycott intention, particularly during political and ethical crises (Alyahya et al., 2023; Lim & Shim, 2020). Brand hate can also be expressed

Table 2. Top 10 countries by publication output and citation impact.

Countries	No. of publications	Citations	Avg. Citations
New Zealand	5	91	18.2
Germany	14	250	17.9
Japan	12	181	15.1
Australia	13	176	13.5
United States	51	689	13.5
France	13	175	13.5
United Kingdom	11	146	13.3
Spain	5	65	13.0
China	18	216	12.0
South Korea	9	105	11.7

Source. Authors' analysis based on Scopus data.

Table 3. Characteristics and summary of included studies.

Authors (s)	Article title	Journal	No. of citation	Theory/model	Key concepts/variables
(Alyahya et al., 2023)	A cross-cultural investigation of the relationship between eco-innovation and customers boycott behavior	<i>Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services</i>	55	Ethical Consumer Behavior Theory; Green Consumerism Model; Cross-Cultural Value Framework	DV: boycott tendency. IVs: eco-innovation perception, environmental concern, ethical awareness. Moderators: cultural values.
(C. Kim & Kinoshita, 2023)	Do you punish or forgive socially responsible companies? A cross-country analysis of boycott campaigns	<i>Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services</i>	42	S-O-R Theory	DV: severity of punishment vs. forgiveness. IVs: CSR history, firm response. Moderators: cultural norms, crisis type.
(Mirza et al., 2020)	The Impact of Religiously Motivated Consumer Boycotts on Product Judgment, Brand Image and Loyalty	<i>International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences</i>	36	Religiosity–Consumer Behavior; Moral Judgment	DV: product judgment, brand image, brand loyalty. IV: religiosity-motivated boycott participation; implied. Mediators: moral obligation.
(Wang et al., 2021)	The Brand Sustainability Obstacle: Viewpoint Incompatibility and Consumer Boycott	<i>Sustainability</i>	23	Self-congruity theory	DV: boycott intention. IVs: viewpoint incompatibility, ideological misalignment. Moderators: attention to social comparison information (ATSCI).
(Ahn et al., 2022)	Political conflict and angry consumers: Evaluating the regional impacts of a consumer boycott on travel services trade	<i>Journal of The Japanese and International Economies</i>	18	Trade diversification theory	DV: travel service exports (visitor-nights), total exports. IVs: Post (boycott), Korea dependency, KOR dummy; interactions; fixed effects.
(Song, 2020)	South Korean Consumers' Attitudes toward Small Business Owners Participating in the 2019 Anti-Japan Boycott	<i>Social Science</i>	18	Attitude–Behavior Congruence; Moral Judgment & Consumer Activism Logic	DV: attitudes toward small business owners; intention to visit stores. IVs: national identity, moral obligation, perceived fairness. Mediators: blame attribution.
(Jedicke et al., 2025)	The dynamics of consumer boycott intention: Examining the roles of moral reasoning, cognitive dissonance, and self-congruence	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	10	Moral Reasoning Theory; Cognitive Dissonance Theory; Self-Congruity Theory	DV: boycott intention. IVs: moral reasoning, perceived wrongness; mediators: cognitive dissonance, negative emotion. Moderators: self-congruence.
(Weiss et al., 2023)	Commercial Casualties: Political Boycotts and International Disputes	<i>Journal of East Asian Studies</i>	8	Political Conflict Theory; Hostility–Consumption Link	DV: product/country sales declines, firm performance. IVs: dispute intensity, boycott calls, media coverage. Moderators: animosity, identity.
(DiGiuseppe & Barry, 2022)	Do Consumers Follow the Flag? Perceptions of Hostility and Consumer Preferences	<i>International Interactions</i>	6	Animosity Theory; Hostile Country Perception Model	DV: purchase likelihood, brand choice. IVs: perceived hostility, threat perception. Moderators: ethnocentrism, national identity.
(Niu et al., 2025)	How Moral Appraisals Function in Sticky Crises: Theorizing Within the Triadic Appraisal Framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory	<i>Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management</i>	6	Triadic Appraisal Framework (SCCT); Moral Appraisal Theory	DV: crisis responsibility judgment, organizational evaluation. IVs: perceived intent, negligence, fairness. Mediators: moral emotions.

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued.

Authors (s)	Article title	Journal	No. of citation	Theory/model	Key concepts/variables
(Avci, 2024)	Factors Influencing the Boycott Intentions of Turkish Consumers amid the Israel-Palestine Conflict	<i>Revista Brasileira De Gestao De Negocios</i>	5	Consumer Boycott Model; Social Influence Theory; Perceived Efficacy Theory; Social Media Mediation Framework	DV: boycott intention. IVs: perceived efficacy, social pressure. Mediator: social media. Moderator: discount sensitivity; controls: demographics.
(Mulyono & Rolando, 2025)	Consumer boycott movements: Impact on brand reputation and business performance in the digital age	<i>Multidisciplinary Review</i>	3	Digital Activism Theory; Stakeholder Theory; Social Media Amplification Model	Key constructs: social media activism, influencer amplification, online collective action, brand reputation, corporate response.
(Sari & Games, 2024)	Investigating young consumer's boycott behavior in an emerging market	<i>Cogent Business & Management</i>	2	Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) Model; Moral–Emotional Framework; Social Influence Theory	DV: boycott intention. IVs: religiosity, religious duty, boycott efficacy, nation image, justice perception, social media influence; controls: demographics.
(Misiewicz & Stepaniuk, 2024)	Consumer Activism on social media During Geopolitical Conflict	<i>Scientific Papers of Silesian University of Technology – Organization and Management Series</i>	1	Social Media Engagement Theory; Hedonic Adaptation Theory; Image Restoration Theory (IRT); Contingency Theory of Accommodation (CTA)	DV: engagement, sentiment, boycott-related engagement. IVs: social media activism, conflict triggers, brand communication strategies.

Source. Developed by the authors based on a synthesis of the reviewed literature.

through anger, disgust, and contempt, further intensifying boycott behavior when corporate violations are perceived as deliberate, repeated, or fundamentally threatening to consumers' moral values (Farhat & Chaney, 2021; Mednini & Damak Turki, 2024; Woodside et al., 2023). The literature consistently suggests that these negative emotions can strengthen boycott intensity and persistence rather than merely generating negative word-of-mouth (Wang et al., 2021).

Identity-based processes also play an important role in shaping boycott behaviour, as reflected in Table 3. Political identity influences retaliatory boycotts during geopolitical conflicts (Kır & Nasir, 2025; Lee & Cherrier, 2022), whereas religious identity and levels of religiosity shape sacred-value consumption and faith boycott participation (Roswinanto & Suwanda, 2023). Cultural and ideological identities similarly motivate sustainability- and ethics-driven boycotts (Alyahya et al., 2023). This alignment strengthens consumers' commitment to boycott participation as an expression of deeply held values (Park & Jang, 2024).

In addition, many studies have highlighted the importance of individuals' cognition, emotion, and identity for social and digital mobilization mechanisms. This alignment can be reinforced through social mobilization mechanisms. Social norms, online activism, and perceived collective efficacy facilitate the transformation of personal grievances into coordinated collective boycott behavior (Abdullah et al., 2024; Ali, 2021). In terms of digital mobilization mechanisms, digital platforms such as Facebook and Instagram amplify moral outrage that enables rapid coordination and strengthens the perception that boycott participation can generate meaningful social, reputational, and economic impacts on targeted products, services, and brands (Cheng et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2024; Kuhzady et al., 2024).

Despite these insights in the related article, existing literature remains fragmented. In a single analytical framework, political, ethical, and religious boycotts have often been examined independently, while others, such as cognitive, affective, and identity-based processes, have rarely been integrated. Moreover, few studies have explicitly examined the sequential progression through which boycott behavior evolves (Ateş, 2025; Kim et al., 2025; Legendre et al., 2022). As a result, no existing model combines macro-level triggers, moral-cognitive, emotional activation, identity alignment, and social mobilization into a coherent. Thus, based on these recurring patterns, this study proposes the need for a multilevel, process-based understanding of boycott behavior.

4. Fire alarm theory of boycott behavior: integrated framework and proposition development

4.1. Overview of Fire Alarm Theory

Based on the recurring patterns identified in the review, this study proposes Fire Alarm Theory as a process-oriented theoretical framework for explaining how consumer boycott behavior emerges, escalates, and evolves over time. This framework was developed through the systematic synthesis of prior consumer boycott studies, which were specifically analyzed in political, religious, ethical, environmental, CSR-related, and identity-based boycott contexts to identify recurring patterns, mechanisms, and processes underlying boycott behavior. Through iterative comparison and conceptual integration, these fragmented insights were organized into a unified process-oriented framework comprising four interconnected phases, which are Fire Alarm, Fire Event, Fire Extinguisher, and Survival.

Accordingly, Fire Alarm Theory is proposed as an integrated model that explains how boycott behavior emerges, escalates, and evolves over time. Unlike traditional boycotts model, which mainly focus on individual motivations or fixed predictors of participation, Fire Alarm Theory views boycotts as a dynamic process that develops and evolves over time. This theory explains how early warning signals shape boycotts by influencing consumers' interpretations through their emotions and identities, and it also clarifies the responses at different stages.

In addition, a process model is important and essential because some existing research in boycotts assumes that escalation is simply reflected in increasing severity and that visible mobilization is the most critical moment for intervention. Empirical evidence suggests that organizational outcomes depend not only on the availability of response strategies but also on the timing and appropriateness of those responses. Failures may therefore stem from the misinterpretation of early warning signals and delayed responses. These timing gaps are difficult for traditional fixed models to capture, particularly when early cues are subtle, fragmented, and difficult to detect, yet they carry significant long-term consequences.

To overcome this constraint, Fire Alarm Theory separates boycott dynamics into four analytically connected stages. Through consumer affective and identity-based processing of external triggers, Phase 1 (Fire Alarm), which represents the emergence of boycott risk through the accumulation and interpretation of weak signals. Depending on the time of response, Phase 2 (Fire Event) represents the active or passive manifestation of boycott behavior. Next, for Phase 3 (Fire Extinguisher), organizational intervention is the main source that emphasizes how the efficacy of corrective measures is contingent upon their consistency with the consumer decision-making process. Finally, long-term results and feedback effects are captured in Phase 4 (Survival), which acknowledges that the survival of an organization includes positive recovery or persistent reputational damage.

The integrated process model, referred to as Fire Alarm Theory, links the emergence and development of boycott behavior. As shown in [Figure 5](#), the integrated process model illustrates the emergence of boycott behavior, organizational responses, and long-term survival outcomes. Although the model illustrates escalation as a linear progression, the model highlights how early interpretive failures carry forward across phases, which influences the form of boycott behavior, the efficacy of organizational reactions, and the ultimate outcomes. Fire Alarm Theory offers a unique viewpoint on why boycotts are intensified, why businesses frequently react insufficiently, and why seeming survival may mask unsolved structural and reputational vulnerabilities by focusing on time and the interpretation of weak signals.

4.2. Phase 1: Fire Alarm

Phase 1 represents the earliest stage of Fire Alarm Theory, in which boycott risk begins to emerge through weak and ambiguous signals that require detection, interpretation, and evaluation. Weak signals are subtle indicators of significant events or shifts in complex systems and often appear fragmented, ambiguous, or easily dismissed (Bredikhin, 2020; Yu et al., 2022). Although their visibility is low, these signals carry high indicative value, as they reveal emerging risks long before stronger behavioral indicators such as coordinated boycott participation become visible.

The processing of weak signals involves multiple interrelated processes, including detection, interpretation, transmission, and priority setting (Brizon & Wybo, 2009). In the consumer boycott context,

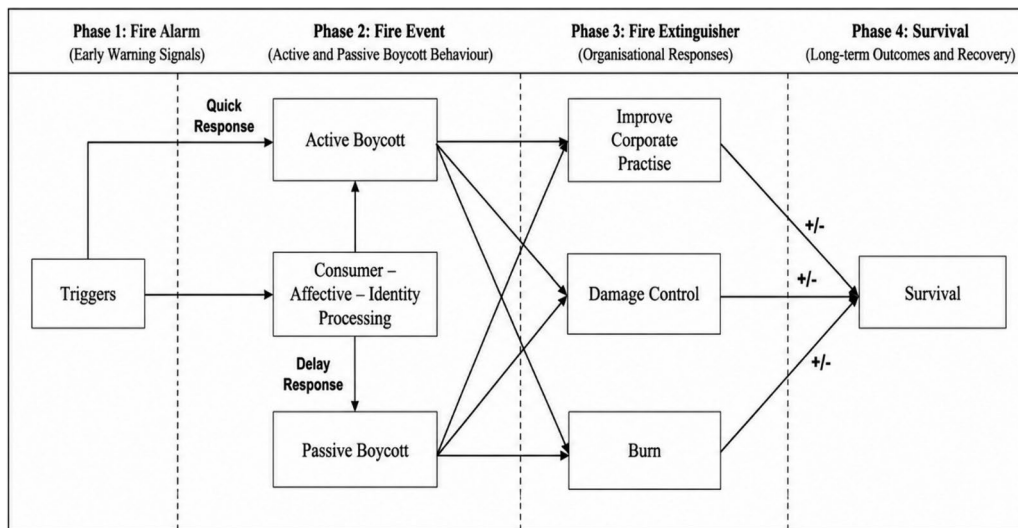


Figure 5. Fire Alarm Theory of boycott behavior. *Source: Developed by the authors.*

detection refers to recognizing early indicators of dissatisfaction, whereas interpretation involves the process of analyzing the situation in which consumers, firms, or event organizations try to understand the signal through word-of-mouth, social media, and news (Avci, 2024). As a result, Phase 1 can therefore be understood as an interpretive and evaluative stage rather than a stage of overt behavioral mobilization.

Fire Alarm Theory departs from conventional boycott models by arguing that the most consequential moment in the boycott process often occurs precisely when behavioral indicators are absent. At this stage, the boycott primarily has a hidden meaning embedded in dispersed moral discourse, perceived value incongruence, and identity-based concern rather than explicit calls for action. This is because some studies indicate that signals do not yet manifest as visible behavior; they are frequently overlooked or dismissed as inconsequential noise, although their strategic importance may be overlooked (Bredikhin, 2020; Yu et al., 2022).

The central part of this phase is what Fire Alarm Theory conceptualizes as the Smoke Paradox, in which early boycott signals are low in visibility but high in diagnostic value. This is because they lack mobilization, and firms often interpret them as isolated complaints, transient dissatisfaction, or marginal activism. However, these early cues perform a critical framing function by shaping moral and identity-based lenses through which subsequent firm actions are interpreted. Once this interpretation becomes established, organizational responses may be perceived as corrective or defensive depending on how the initial issue was framed.

Unlike escalation models that assume outrage gradually intensifies over time; Fire Alarm Theory emphasizes that interpretive commitment leads to behavioral mobilization. Once consumers cognitively anchor firm behavior to moral or identity violations, subsequent information is filtered through frames, thereby reducing managerial flexibility and diminishing the effectiveness of corrective responses. In this case, boycott escalation is not driven by an increase in emotional intensity but by failures to recognize early signs or signal failures that allow negative interpretations to become established before engagement occurs.

Furthermore, this phase for Fire Alarm Theory conceptualizes escalation as a progression of weak signals that are analogous to fire detection systems, which are 'smoke,' 'heat,' and 'fire.' The definition of fire detection in this theory is that smoke represents the earliest warning signs of dissatisfaction, such as subtle shifts in sentiment, moral discourse, or identity-based concern. These signals are commonly detected through social media, customer feedback, word of mouth, and emerging market narratives. At this stage, the signals primarily activate awareness and interpretation, rather than action (Avci, 2024). Additionally, this signal indicates to consumers that a boycott may occur depending on the circumstances.

Next, heat represents an escalation stage in which the situation intensifies as more consumers become aware of and concerned about the issue. This stage involves increasing dissatisfaction and vocal complaints. In addition, monitoring the frequency, emotional tone, and coordination of negative sentiment

helps to identify issues at this stage, such as heat sensors detecting the rising temperatures (Ali et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2021). For example, a series of negative events or revelations increases public scrutiny and criticism of a company (Swaminathan et al., 2022). The next signal is fire, representing critical escalation, which represents the peak of the crisis where consumer outrage leads to organized boycott actions. This stage involves coordinated efforts to pressurize the company through collective action. For example, large-scale protests, widespread media coverage, and significant drops in sales occur as consumers actively boycott the company. Hence, in Fire Alarm Theory, this stage reflects the outcome of earlier interpretive failures, rather than a sudden shift in consumer sentiment.

Phase 1 also aligns with the insights from Panic Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior, in which Panic Theory explains how unresolved threats can trigger rapid and widespread behavioral responses once a tipping point is reached, explaining why ignored weak signals may culminate in sudden mass boycotts (Cham et al., 2023; Oluwafemi Onibonoje et al., 2019; Santhanam & Venkatesh, 2015). In contrast, the Theory can be clarified as how early-stage signals shape attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control during the smoke and heat stages, thereby influencing that which later translates into collective boycott participation (Ali et al., 2025; Elshaer et al., 2025).

4.3. Phase 2: Fire Event

This phase represents the stage at which boycott risk transitions from latent interpretation to observable behavior. Interpretations formed during Phase 1 crystallize into behavioral commitment, making boycott participation increasingly visible, social, and contagious. In Fire Alarm Theory, this phase is not defined by the severity of consumer grievances but by whether early warning signals are recognized and engaged. Once the threshold is crossed, boycott behavior is enacted either publicly or privately, thereby constraining managerial discretion and altering the meaning of subsequent responses. A defining feature of this phase is the translation of intention into action, which includes both active and passive boycott forms.

Active boycotts are characterized by visible, expressive actions such as public calls for boycotts, online mobilization, and symbolic protests. Active boycotts are also characterized by consumers' immediate decisions to participate. Passive boycotts involve quiet withdrawal, avoidance, or refusal to purchase without overt expression or immediate public participation. Consistent with the theory of planned behavior, boycott participation at this stage reflects the alignment of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, whereby cognitive and affective evaluations formed at an earlier stage translate into actual behavioral commitment (Maseeh et al., 2022; Patiro et al., 2025). As participation becomes observable, boycott behavior is no longer hypothetical but enacted through purchase withdrawal, online advocacy, and public signaling, marking the ignition point of escalation.

Social influence plays a central role in accelerating mobilization during Phase 2. Individuals' decisions are strongly influenced by the perceived participation and approval of others, making boycott behavior socially contagious (Babu et al., 2025). Social validation can strengthen perceptions of legitimacy and effectiveness, thereby influencing boycott participation (Hendarto et al., 2018; Pan & Lee, 2025). Nowadays, social media platforms, such as Facebook and TikTok, which are widely used by consumers, further intensify this process by improving exposure, coordination, and perceived influence, turning individuals into group movements (Hefny, 2025; Mady et al., 2025).

In terms of emotions, Phase 1 (Fire Alarm) is still deterrent, while Phase 2 (Fire Event) is distinguished by the predominance of anger, outrage, betrayal, and brand hate, which spur in the action-oriented reactions or responses (Babu et al., 2025; Hoffmann, 2022). In terms of emotional escalation, this phase's mobilization is largely driven by this structure. These feelings strengthen commitment and accelerate engagement through an emotionally driven process (Eniayejuni, 2023). In this situation, what once "heated" turns into behavioral "fire," as it effectively encourages both visible mobilization and ongoing action.

Phase 2 also saw a qualitative change in the identity processes. By participating in boycott activities, consumers can express their public identities and demonstrate their moral, political, or religious beliefs through actions (passive or active) (Sari & Games, 2024; Zejjari & Benhayoun, 2025). Boycott behavior

signals alignment with some social groups, while non-participation may incur social costs, including criticism or exclusion. As identity moves from internal reflection to public expression, boycott participation becomes embedded in social signaling and collective meaning-making (Patiro et al., 2025).

From a managerial perspective in Phase 2, this marks a significant shift in Fire Alarm Theory. This is because boycott behavior becomes visible and measurable, which allows firms to track participation and sentiment, yet response options are increasing considerably under constrained conditions. This turning point of symbolic or defensive response frequently backfires when perceived as askew with the moral framing driving mobilization (Hoffmann, 2022; Lasarov et al., 2023). Once boycott behavior has materialized, organizational interventions are interpreted less as corrective engagement and more as reactive justification, limiting managerial effectiveness.

To summarize, Phase 2 reinforces the core premise of Fire Alarm Theory. Once boycott behavior becomes visible, it compromises managerial control. The form that boycotts behavior takes, which is active or passive, is not accidental but the consequence of earlier interpretive failures and delayed engagement. While prior research has treated active and passive boycott participation as behavioral variations, Fire Alarm Theory reconceptualizes them as outcomes of timing and signals misinterpretation rather than differences in objection intensity.

4.4. Phase 3: Fire Extinguisher

Phase 3 represents the organizational response stage, in which firms attempt to manage, suppress, or resolve boycott behavior once it materializes. In Fire Alarm Theory, this phase is defined not by the availability of response tools but by the degree of alignment between intervention timing and consumer interpretive states. Contrary to the dominant crisis management assumption, Fire Alarm Theory argues that boycott failures rarely arise from the absence of response strategies; rather, they result from responses deployed after interpretive meanings have already stabilized. At this stage, firm and organizational responses are no longer evaluated based solely on their technical adequacy or informational accuracy. Instead, they are assessed symbolically based on whether they align with the moral, emotional, and identity-based frames established during earlier phases. Once boycott behavior becomes visible, managerial discretion is reduced, and responses are interpreted less as engagement and more as moral positioning (Antonetti et al., 2026). As a result, errors or misalignments are amplified rather than absorbed.

Firms typically follow one of three broad response paths: improving corporate practices, implementing damage control, or failing to respond adequately, resulting in continued 'burning'. The first involves improving corporate practices through corrective and improvement-oriented actions, such as revising corporate policies, strengthening CSR practices, and directly addressing ethical violations. Some studies mentioned that significant changes in corporations or policies aimed at realigning corporate behavior with consumer expectations can partially restore trust when perceived as timely, sincere, and proportionate (Janssen et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2025; Tao & Tang, 2025). Moreover, effective CSR initiatives, together with high service quality, may enhance firm reputation, customer loyalty, and organizational performance (i.e. Cham & Easvaralingam, 2012; Tan et al., 2019), yet this same initiative can intensify the reaction if stakeholders perceive them as insufficient or insincere (Janssen et al., 2015). In this situation, timeliness and sincerity are critical, as delayed or performative responses often undermine recovery efforts (Nam et al., 2023).

The second response path is damage control, which involves symbolic or defensive responses in the Fire Alarm Theory, which includes denial that explains the rejection of responsibility for the crises, which is boycott (Arendt et al., 2017); justification, providing reasons for the actions leading to the crisis (Arendt et al., 2017); reputation repair, involving campaigns to restore the firm's image, including transparency and storytelling (Harriott, 2025); or surface-level CSR initiatives, which involve superficial CSR efforts intended to create an appearance of responsibility (Norman et al., 2017). These strategies prioritize image management over significant changes and are particularly vulnerable to failure under Fire Alarm Theory. Kodapanakkal et al. (2022) mentioned that once moral and identity frames are established, symbolic gestures are frequently interpreted as opportunistic or hypocritical, reinforcing rather than reducing hostility. In this dynamic theory, defensive responses that deflect responsibility may temporarily delay the reaction but often result in deeper legitimacy erosion when perceived as indirect or insincere.

Lastly, the 'burn' path reflects situations in which firms remain silent, delay their responses, or fail to take appropriate action. When organizations do not respond promptly or adequately during a crisis, stakeholders may interpret this inaction as indifference or avoidance. Over time, this kind of silence can erode consumer trust and deepen reputational damage, making recovery more difficult than when the issue is addressed early and transparently. This phenomenon is related to consumers' attitude and helpful behaviors that may suffer from the use of encouraging strategies or if they remain silent (Park, 2017). According to other research, production operations and consumer relations may suffer greatly if people do not adjust rapidly to changing conditions during a crisis (Kuznetsov et al., 2025). The Fire Alarm Theory for Phase 3 has identified that the lack of response serves as a signal that strengthens beliefs about institutional incompetence, moral failure, or apathy. The dynamics of boycott narratives, consumer activity, and the general survival of boycotts can be greatly affected by corporations' delayed engagement during crises (Akcan & Merdin, 2025; Mulyono & Rolando, 2025).

A central mechanism shaping the outcome in Phase 3 is interpretive lock-in, which constrains the effectiveness of organizational intervention once consumers have publicly committed to boycott participation and identity expression. At this stage, responses are judged less by their substantive content than by whether they affirm or violate established moral and identity meanings, which cause even well-designed corrective actions to backfire if introduced after mobilization. The Fire Alarm Theory identifies this as the timing fallacy, whereby firms assume that stronger visible responses can compensate for delayed engagement. Under conditions of high visibility, intense scrutiny, and emotionally driven interpretation, managerial actions function as moral positioning rather than problem-solving, which makes it a temporal fit rather than a strategic choice in the decisive factor shaping recovery or entrenchment.

4.5. Phase 4: Survival

This phase explains the long-term consequences of boycott escalation and the organizational trajectories that follow the resolution or decline of boycott activity. In Fire Alarm Theory, survival does not denote successful crisis management, nor does the disappearance of boycott activity imply restored legitimacy. Instead, this phase emphasizes that boycott outcomes are path-dependent, shaped by interpretive failures and response misalignment across Phases 1 to 3. Firms or organizations may continue to operate while experiencing residual reputational damage, weakened stakeholder trust, or heightened vulnerability to future mobilization. Empirical evidence supports the assertion that boycotts can impose significant and enduring economic consequences on the targeted firms. Several studies have demonstrated the negative impact of boycotts on shareholder wealth, market performance, and overall firm profitability (Alqatan, 2025; Kim & Kim, 2025). While financially stronger, firms may absorb short-term shocks more effectively, and long-term brand reputation and financial performance often suffer when consumer concerns remain unaddressed (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). Hence, transparency failures and poorly reviewed investment or governance practices intensify these adverse outcomes (Alqatan, 2025).

The Fire Alarm Theory conceptualizes Phase 4 as a distinction between recovery and entrenchment. Recovery occurs when firms successfully realign their corporate behavior with stakeholder moral expectations. This process involves meaning realignment, whereby earlier negative interpretive frames gradually weaken as organizational values, through significant CSR initiatives, become critical to this process (Fleming, 2020). Hence, trust recovery emerges as slow and cumulative and requires sustained sincerity rather than symbolic gestures (Omar et al., 2017). Legitimacy restoration is central to the recovery trajectories. Rebuilding moral and pragmatic legitimacy requires transparency, acceptance of responsibility, and demonstrable corrective actions (Chang & Zhang, 2020; Krettenauer, 2017). Historical and organizational cases show that legitimacy repair is most effective when firms acknowledge wrongdoing, which imposes internal accountability and commits reform (Vives Gabriel & Schrempf-Stirling, 2022). In this context, CSR involves embedding ethical standards and sustainability commitments into organizational routines rather than treating CSR solely as a reputational repair mechanism (Carmona-Garcés & Londono-Correa, 2025; Wickert & Risi, 2019).

Governance reform further supports recovery by signaling organizational learning and self-correction. Structural changes in leadership accountability, oversight mechanisms, and policy reform demonstrate that ethical commitments are operationalized and monitored (Pawlowska et al., 2025; Uzma, 2016).

Araújo et al. (2023) and Castro-González et al. (2025) reported that when governance instruments are integrated with CSR efforts, they can help rebuild consumer trust and reduce the visibility and intensity of boycott activities. In addition, well-implemented CSR initiatives can strengthen a firm's or organization's reputation, credibility, and brand equity, which positively influences consumers' willingness to purchase (Terchilă, 2025). As a result, the combination of governance and CSR can create a reinforcing effect that not only enhances corporate reputation and performance but also supports more sustainable business practices that respond to stakeholder expectations and contribute to broader societal well-being.

Therefore, this stage is often marked by what Fire Alarm Theory describes as the survival illusion of the tendency to equate organizational continuity with genuine crisis resolution. A decline in visible boycott participation does not necessarily indicate restored trust or renewed acceptance. Instead, it may reflect emotional fatigue, shifting public attention, or gradual normalization of purchase avoidance. In such cases, firms or organizations may appear to have recovered, while underlying dissatisfaction and reputational exposures remain unsettled. Firms may misinterpret silence as forgiveness, masking underlying legitimacy deficits and reinforcing managerial overconfidence. This phase contributes to systematic learning failure, as post-crisis evaluations focus on visible Fire Event phase moments while neglecting early Fire Alarm signals that enable escalation. Phase 4 thus completes the Fire Alarm Theory by demonstrating that boycott dynamics do not end with containment. As an alternative, unresolved meaning and mislearned lessons become latent conditions for future crises, embedding vulnerability in organizational routines. While existing research often treats boycott outcomes as endpoints, the Fire Alarm Theory reconceptualizes them as feedback mechanisms that shape future escalation risk and long-term organizational survival. Table 4 shows the summaries of the phases of the Fire Alarm Theory and their core structures.

Although Fire Alarm Theory has been conceptually developed, its core processes are consistently reflected in some empirical findings. Therefore, to develop recurring empirical patterns, Fire Alarm Theory integrates existing findings without reinterpreting them through the proposed framework. Table 5 summarizes the key empirical findings of prior boycott studies that document early moral signals, escalation dynamics, organizational response effects, and outcome persistence.

As this study adopts a narrative conceptual synthesis approach aimed at integrating a new theoretical framework, no statistical meta-analysis was conducted. Therefore, there are no summary effect estimates or measures of accuracy reported. Similarly, a formal assessment of statistical heterogeneity was not performed. This is because the review does not involve quantitative comparison of effect sizes across the studies. In addition, sensitivity analysis was not undertaken, as the synthesis focuses on identifying consistent conceptual patterns rather than testing the robustness of statistical results. Furthermore, the review article did not conduct a formal assessment of the certainty of evidence. As an alternative, the overall findings are based on the consistency of themes across the included studies, the strength of theoretical contributions, and the convergence of empirical insights that are related to consumer boycott behavior.

Table 4. Summary of fire Alarm Theory phases and core structures.

Phase	Phase label	Core question	Theoretical structure	Central insight
1	Fire Alarm	How does boycott emerge before action is taken?	Smoke Paradox	The least visible and weak signals often carry the greatest diagnostic value; inconsistently, escalation risk is highest when the situation appears calm and uneventful.
2	Fire Event	How does boycott behavior become visible?	Visibility Trap	Highly visible boycotts often attract more attention, but they are not always more damaging than quiet, passive boycotts.
3	Fire Extinguisher	Why do organizational responses often fail?	Timing Fallacy	Firms fail not because they choose the wrong response, but it is because of they respond too late, after consumers have already made up their minds.
4	Survival	What are the long-term consequences of boycott?	Survival Illusion	Organizational survival can hide deeper problems and missed learning opportunities. This is because a boycott has stopped does not mean the issue has truly been resolved.

Source. Developed by the authors.

Table 5. Key empirical findings from the 14 included studies.

Author(s)	Context/focus	Core empirical finding
(Alyahya et al., 2023)	Eco-innovation and boycott behavior	Positive perceptions of eco-innovation significantly reduce boycott behavior, while environmental concern and ethical awareness strengthen this effect. Cultural context matters: collectivist consumers show stronger boycott reactions to firms perceived as environmentally irresponsible. Proactive eco-innovation reduces boycott likelihood more effectively than reactive approaches, particularly in developing economies.
(C. Kim & Kinoshita, 2023)	CSR reputation and crisis response	Firms with strong pre-crisis CSR reputations experience less severe consumer punishment during crises, creating a “forgiveness cushion.” However, the strength of this buffering effect varies across countries due to cultural expectations and moral norms.
(Mirza et al., 2020)	Religious animosity and boycott participation	Religious animosity increases boycott participation but does not reduce perceived product quality. Boycotts do not necessarily weaken brand image or loyalty when perceived quality is high and alternatives are limited. Consumer efficacy does not significantly predict boycott participation.
(Wang et al., 2021)	Ideological incompatibility and sustainability	When a brand’s sustainability stance conflicts with consumers’ personal values, negative emotions intensify, eroding trust and increasing boycott intention. Boycotts emerge not only from environmental concerns but from deeper value-based and ideological disagreements.
(Ahn et al., 2022)	Political conflict and tourism boycotts	Political conflict can trigger rapid, large-scale boycotts that severely disrupt discretionary sectors such as tourism. Effects are uneven across regions, with stronger impacts in highly dependent areas and among leisure travelers compared to business travelers.
(Song, 2020)	Nationalist identity and moral judgement	Strong nationalist identity heightens moral expectations for boycott participation and intensifies moral criticism of non-compliant firms. Boycott participation is perceived as a moral duty, shaping social judgement, peer pressure, and willingness to punish or support businesses.
(Jedicke et al., 2025)	Cognitive dissonance and moral conflict	Consumers experience cognitive dissonance and moral conflict when supporting brands involved in wrongdoing, which directly increases boycott intention. This effect is amplified when brand actions conflict with consumers’ identities or values.
(Weiss et al., 2023)	International political disputes	International political disputes rapidly translate into consumer boycotts that harm foreign brands, especially those symbolically linked to the target country. Media intensity and identity salience amplify negative effects, while outcomes vary across regions and product categories.
(DiGiuseppe & Barry, 2022)	Consumer animosity and national origin	Hostility toward a foreign country significantly reduces willingness to buy its products, independent of product quality judgments. Symbolic meanings attached to national origin, ethnocentrism, and national identity magnify boycott intentions.
(Niu et al., 2025)	Moral appraisal and crisis persistence	Consumers rely on moral appraisals (e.g., intent, negligence, wrongdoing) to evaluate firms during crises. These appraisals intensify negative emotions such as anger and contempt, increasing blame and punitive intentions and contributing to persistent or “sticky” crises.
(Avci, 2024)	Social media and boycott intention	Perceived boycott efficacy and social pressure significantly increase boycott intention, with social media partially mediating both effects. Discount sensitivity weakens the influence of social pressure, reducing boycott persistence when price incentives are offered.
(Mulyono & Rolando, 2025)	Digital platforms and online activism	Digital platforms accelerate information diffusion, lower participation barriers, and intensify boycott visibility. Algorithmic amplification and influencer involvement make boycotts more persistent, more visible, and more damaging in the digital environment.
(Sari & Games, 2024)	Youth, religiosity, and boycott motivation	Young consumers’ boycott intentions are strongly shaped by religious obligation, perceived moral duty, perceived efficacy, social influence, and nation image. Religious values and social pressure emerge as the strongest motivators.
(Misiewicz & Stepaniuk, 2024)	Social media activism and geopolitical conflict	Consumer activism during the Russian Ukrainian conflict produced an initial surge in negative sentiment, engagement, and boycott-related activity on social media, followed by a gradual decline and stabilization over time. The findings indicate that geopolitical events can rapidly intensify online consumer activism, while adaptive and responsive brand communication may contribute to reducing negative engagement.

Source. Developed by the authors based on a synthesis of the reviewed literature.

5. Discussion

Fire Alarm Theory offers a process-oriented conceptualization of how consumer boycotts emerge, escalate, and persist over time. Prior research has generated valuable insights into boycott behavior driven by political hostility (Ahn et al., 2022), religious beliefs (Roswinanto & Suwanda, 2023; Sari & Games, 2024), ethical and environmental concerns (Koku, 2022; Zeng et al., 2021), CSR violations (Deng & Long, 2019), and digitally mediated mobilization (Kuhzady et al., 2024). These perspectives have mostly grown

side by side, which has led to different explanations that focus on individual motives, contexts, or variables instead of providing a broader explanation of how boycott behavior develops over time. In response to this fragmentation, Fire Alarm Theory challenges this static view by proposing a dynamic framework that emphasizes sequencing, timing, and escalation as key elements in understanding boycott behavior.

One of the main contributions of the Fire Alarm Theory is the conceptualization of boycott triggers as an escalation-based warning system comprising Phase 1 (Smoke → Heat → Fire). Many studies treat signals, such as CSR failures (Alyahya et al., 2023) or geopolitical conflicts (Jedicke et al., 2025; Suhud et al., 2024), as fixed factors that directly predict whether individuals or consumers will engage in boycotts. By contrast, Fire Alarm suggests that these triggers may function as evolving signals that consumers interpret through cognitive, emotional, and identity-based processes. This perspective may help explain why organizations sometimes underestimate emerging risks and why boycott crises can appear sudden despite underlying dissatisfaction.

Another contribution lies in the integration of cognitive, emotional, and identity-based mechanisms within a single interpretive process. Previous studies examined perceived boycott efficacy (Mady et al., 2025), identity alignment, value congruence (Roswinanto & Suwanda, 2023), and moral feelings (Lim & Shim, 2020) as independent determinants of boycott involvement. Rather than viewing these factors independently, Fire Alarm Theory proposes that they may interact and reinforce one another throughout the escalation process. Consequently, the framework offers a process-oriented perspective that may help explain variations in consumer responses, ranging from inaction to active mobilization.

The distinction between active and passive boycott pathways represents another potentially important contribution. Prior work has disproportionately focused on visible forms of activism such as protests, online campaigns, and public condemnation, implicitly equating visibility with impact (Koku, 2022). Fire Alarm Theory challenges this assumption by demonstrating that passive boycotts are characterized by silent withdrawal and routinized avoidance and may also have a major impact on shaping boycott outcomes. Although this proposition requires empirical validation, it highlights a form of resistance that has received comparatively limited attention in existing boycott studies.

Fire Alarm Theory also contributes to crisis management and legitimacy-based perspectives by embedding organizational responses within the boycott process rather than treating them as exogenous interventions. Consistent with crisis response research, organizational actions such as apologies, CSR reforms, and strategic silence shape consumer evaluations and subsequent behavior (Deng & Long, 2019; Kim & Kinoshita, 2023). The proposed framework further suggests that timing may be as important as response content, especially when consumers have already formed stable interpretations of organizational actions. Nevertheless, this proposition remains conceptual and requires empirical observation and investigation across different boycott contexts.

In conclusion, the Fire Alarm Theory offers meaningful contributions to boycott research. It brings together emotional, cognitive, and identity-based processes into an integrated interpretive framework, distinguishes between active and passive forms of resistance, and situates organizational behavior within an ongoing feedback loop. Different existing theories primarily focus on intentions, attitudes, or isolated motivational drivers. This Fire Alarm Theory has integrated political, ethical, religious, and environmental motivations within a single dynamic process model. By shifting attention from static predictors to timing, sensemaking, and escalation pathways, the theory provides a more comprehensive and generative perspective on boycott behavior, with important implications for future empirical marketing, consumer behavior, organizational or firm strategy, and theory development, including academic.

6. Future research

The review identified several important gaps in the consumer boycott literature. Firstly, some existing studies have mainly focused on boycott intentions, participation, and outcomes, while others pay limited attention to the early warning signals that precede boycott mobilization. Secondly, cognitive, emotional, identity-based, and social mechanisms have often been examined independently, resulting in a fragmented understanding of how boycott behavior develops over time. Thirdly, the literature has largely concentrated on consumer-side drivers, whereas organizational responses and long-term recovery processes remain relatively underexplored. Finally, consumer boycott research has provided limited insight

into escalation dynamics and feedback mechanisms. By building on these findings, Fire Alarm Theory offers several directions for future research across marketing, consumer behavior, organizational strategy, and theory development.

6.1. Marketing perspective

The review revealed that prior studies have focused primarily on boycott participation and outcomes, while relatively little attention has been given to the emergence of early warning signals. Fire Alarm Theory suggests that boycott escalation begins long before visible mobilization occurs, often through subtle shifts in consumer sentiment, value incongruence, and negative interpretations of brand actions. Consequently, future research should investigate how marketing communications, brand narratives, advertising messages, and social media interaction contribute to early boycott signal ("smoke").

Researchers could examine how long before behavioral resistance is apparent, marketing messages carelessly elicit moral or identity-based interpretations. Another promising way to investigate how message wording, tone, and timing affect whether early unhappiness intensifies or subsides is another exciting avenue. Future research can also draw on Fire Alarm Theory how social listening technologies and marketing analytics can be adjusted to identify weak signals instead of just high-volume sentiment points. This perspective encourages a shift from reactive crisis communication to anticipatory marketing decision-making. Therefore, the potential research questions include

- How do marketing communication, brand narratives, and advertising cues contribute to the emergence of early signals in boycott contexts?
- How do the timing, tone, and framing of marketing responses influence whether weak signals escalate into active or passive boycotts?
- How can social listening systems be improved to identify weak signals before large-scale mobilization occurs?
- How does value-based positioning influence boycott vulnerability across different contexts?

6.2. Consumer perspective

The review found that consumer boycott research has extensively examined attitudes, emotions, and participation intentions (Alyahya et al., 2023; Lim & Shim, 2020; Roswinanto & Suwanda, 2023). However, relatively little is known about how consumers move from initial dissatisfaction to active or passive boycott participation. Existing research frequently conceptualizes boycott behavior as a single decision point rather than a dynamic process that unfolds over time. Furthermore, Fire Alarm Theory highlights the importance of understanding how cognitive evaluations, emotional reactions, and identity commitments interact throughout different stages of escalation. Future studies should investigate how consumers interpret weak signals, develop moral concerns, and gradually transform them into boycott actions. Longitudinal research designs may be particularly useful in examining how emotions such as anger, moral outrage, and animosity intensify, stabilize, or decline during boycott episodes (DiGiuseppe & Barry, 2022)

Other than that, religious and cultural identities of the consumer can further strengthen this alignment, particularly when leaders or community figures signal support for boycott action (Kalliny et al., 2018). The review also revealed the importance of the Fire Alarm Theory, which suggests that weak signals may slowly connect with consumers' values and self-concepts, whereas consumers turn concerns into identity-consistent behavior depending on consumer response (active or passive). Future studies should, therefore, examine how these factors influence the speed, intensity, and persistence of boycott escalation. Therefore, the potential research questions include

- How do consumers move from quiet moral concern to active or passive boycott behavior?
- Why do some individuals engage publicly while others withdraw silently?
- How do emotions, attitudes and identity commitments evolve throughout different phases of boycott escalation?
- How do religiosity, political beliefs, and personality influence boycott determination?

6.3. Firm perspective

A recurring pattern identified in the review is the strong emphasis on the consumer-side explanation of boycott behavior, whereas considerably less attention has been devoted to organizational capabilities and responses. Fire Alarm Theory suggests that organizational failures frequently arise from delayed recognition and misinterpretation of early warning signals rather than the absence of response strategies. Future research should therefore investigate how organizations develop sensing capabilities to detect emerging boycott risks. We should focus on the managerial cognition, organizational culture, internal communication systems, and decision-making processes that influence responses to weak signals. Moreover, comparative studies may gain insight into effective response strategies by examining firms that successfully recover from boycott events and those that experience prolonged reputational damage.

The Fire Alarm Theory further implies that interpretive flexibility and temporal decision-making are central to escalation prevention. Firms capable of dynamically updating risk assessments and integrating real-time information into the decision-making process may reduce misinterpretation and delayed intervention (Hui et al., 2025; Zhou & Reniers, 2020). Future research could examine the micro foundations of these capabilities to understand individual-level cognition, incentives, and routines to build collective organizational responses (Kemper & Brettel, 2015). Therefore, the potential research questions include

- How do organizations identify and interpret early boycott signals?
- What organizational capabilities contribute to effective boycott prevention and mitigation?
- How do response timing and managerial decision-making influence boycott outcomes?
- Why do some organizations recover successfully while others experience sustained reputational damage?

6.4. Academic and theoretical perspective

The review revealed that consumer boycott research has been dominated by established theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ali et al., 2025; Patiro et al., 2025), Social Identity Theory (Roswinanto & Suwanda, 2023), attribution-based perspectives (Kim et al., 2022), and consumer animosity frameworks (Ahn et al., 2022). Although these theories provide valuable explanations of boycott participation, they primarily focus on static intentions, attitudes, or individual-level motivations. Comparatively, process-oriented explanations that capture escalation, timing, organizational responses, and feedback mechanisms remain underdeveloped (Schumacher et al., 2021). Fire Alarm Theory addresses this gap by proposing a dynamic framework that integrates triggers, consumer responses, organizational interventions, and long-term outcomes. Future studies should empirically validate the proposed phase structure, examine the relationships among the four stages, and compare the explanatory power of Fire Alarm Theory with existing theoretical frameworks.

Furthermore, methodologically, longitudinal studies, event-sequence analyses, mixed-method approaches, and cross-cultural investigations may provide valuable opportunities to test the robustness and generalizability of the framework. Future research should also explore whether the logic of Fire Alarm Theory can be extended beyond consumers' boycotts to other forms of consumer activism, reputational crises, and stakeholder resistance movements. Therefore, the potential research questions include

- How can a phase structure be rigorously tested using longitudinal, event-sequence, or mixed-method approaches?
- How does Fire Alarm Theory compare with established behavioral and legitimacy-based frameworks?
- Under what conditions can its escalation logic generalize across industries and cultural contexts?
- Can Fire Alarm Theory be applied to other forms of consumer activism and organizational crises?

7. Conclusion

Consumer boycotts are currently one of the most visible and powerful forms of consumer activism. They are often shaped by many crises and tensions such as geopolitical issues, ethical concerns, religious values or beliefs, and the wide spread of information through digital platforms. Although prior research

has offered valuable insights into political animosity, moral identity evaluations, identity processes, and corporate social responsibility violations. As a result, our understanding of boycott behavior remains fragmented. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing insights from 14 key studies and introducing the Fire Alarm Theory of Boycott Behavior. The theory proposes a dynamic, multi-phase framework that explains how boycotts emerge, escalate, and evolve over time, including the progression from smoke to heat and fire within Phase 1.

Fire Alarm Theory contributes to the literature by distinguishing early warning signals from intensifying tensions and the eventual tipping point of boycott escalation. First, by distinguishing these stages, the theory helps to explain why boycott crises often appear sudden, even though dissatisfaction may have been building quietly over time. Moreover, the Fire Alarm Theory integrates emotional, cognitive, and identity-based processes into a unified consumer affective–identity system, which distinguishes rapid, emotionally driven reactions from slower, more deliberate evaluations. Moreover, the theory explains the differences between active and passive boycott pathways that recognize that both public mobilization and silent withdrawal can exert substantial market influence. In addition, Fire Alarm Theory advances the understanding of communication strategies by showing that response effectiveness depends not only on message content but also on timing and interpretive alignment. This communication, which may appear rational or corrective, can fail if it is introduced after meanings have set, whereas early, transparent engagement can prevent escalation. Finally, by embedding organizational responses within a dynamic feedback loop, the theory suggests how corporate actions are timely, aligned, or delayed and defensive, which can either dampen escalation or unintentionally intensify it.

These contributions position Fire Alarm Theory as a potential foundation for advancing boycott research by integrating the dynamics framework. From an academic perspective, the theory offers a process-oriented way of thinking that focuses on timing, interpretation, and escalation, rather than relying solely on a static analysis. From a managerial perspective, it provides a practical framework for recognizing early warning signs and managing risk perception before reputational damage becomes more entrenched. As it becomes more common in political and cultural environments, Fire Alarm Theory offers a timely and useful way to rethink how this boycott behavior can develop and unfold the situation not only politically and culturally but also in the behavior that consumers bring towards a brand, product, and industry before or after they are boycotting. Hence, future research should empirically examine the proposed methods, which can explore cross-cultural differences in increasing the dynamics of the integration framework and investigate how institutions can act and shape the boycott trajectories across every context in the studies.

Despite these contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the review is based on a relatively small sample of 14 studies, which may limit the breadth of perspectives captured. Second, the reliance on a single database, which is the Scopus database, may restrict the comprehensiveness of the literature and introduce potential selection bias. Third, the narrative conceptual synthesis approach involves a degree of subjective interpretation in integrating findings, which may influence categorization and theoretical development. Future research is encouraged to expand database coverage, include a larger body of literature, and apply complementary methodological approaches to further examine and validate the proposed Fire Alarm Theory.

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Author contributions

CRedit: Kumaresan Kumaran: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Janifer Lunyai:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project

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Ethical approval

This research does not involve any human respondents. The authors confirm that this manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not under consideration by another journal. All authors have approved the manuscript and agree with its submission.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Registration and protocol

This review was not registered in any systematic review registry, as the study adopts a narrative conceptual synthesis approach aimed at theory development.

No formal review protocol was prepared or published prior to conducting this study. The review process was guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework to ensure transparency, structure, and methodological consistency.

As no protocol was established, there were no amendments to report during the review process.

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Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data was created or analyzed in this research.

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