

## **Anti-brand virtual communities:**

# **Analysis of the influence of the organisation, social links and discourse of members of two communities on their felt hatred and behaviours**

### **Abstract :**

This research aims to provide a better understanding of: the content of exchanges between members to decipher the nature of their hatred, the organizational and social structure in place to identify influence games and the strength of ties between members, and the intensity of members' hatred and the behaviours corresponding to each level. A netnographic approach was implemented within two French anti-brand virtual communities. A total of 1,000 verbatims from each community were analyzed. Beyond the categorisation of members' publications into four categories, based on the work of Fetscherin (2019) and Granovetter (1973), we highlight, on the one hand, a new level of hatred (frozen hate) which translates into grumbling in silence, and, on the other hand, that the strength of the social links depends on the sector of activity of the targeted brand. The fundamental interest of this research lies in its ability to demonstrate that virtual anti-brand communities are self-organizing, developing a form of propaganda that concomitantly fosters members' hatred of the brand, but also building up solidarity between them to compensate for brand failures. By the way, these communities could act as whistleblowers and call on public authorities to force companies to improve their quality of service.

**Keywords:** *anti-brand communities; brand hate; social networks; brand relations; netnography.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite their best efforts, brands can find it difficult to honor promises made to customers (Roy *et al.*, 2022), thus undermining the contract of trust (Menvielle *et al.*, 2018) on which the customer relationship is based. Whether or not they are brand consumers (Perrin-Martineng and Hussant-Zébian, 2008), negative past experiences (Bryson *et al.*, 2021), symbolic incongruence (Zhang and Laroche, 2020), or ideological incompatibility (Hegner *et al.*, 2017) can lead people to experience negative feelings towards brands ranging from disappointment to hatred, and to adopt passive or active attitudes and behaviors (Bayarassou *et al.*, 2020) that may be harmful to brands. Brand hate is the most extreme negative emotion that consumers feel toward a brand (Bryson *et al.*, 2013; Dessart *et al.*, 2020; Fetscherin and KC, 2021). A consumer can go through different emotional states, from weak to strong, and it may evolve over time (Fetscherin, 2019). Yet with the democratization of Web 2.0 (Manceau, 2020), the massive use of social media has enabled the “anti-brand activities” (Kucuk, 2018, p. 566) that are its external expression to grow virally. This is all the more so as, unlike Web 1.0, which only allowed its users to consult content, the social Web also offers opportunities for creation, dissemination, and sharing (Poncier, 2009). Beyond the individual level, these new capabilities are also used collectively by consumers who come together in virtual communities. Originally created by brand fans wishing to share their passion or even love for a given brand (Bourdaa, 2016), a new type of community has recently appeared bringing together not Lovers but Haters, with hatred for a brand as their focal point (Awashi *et al.*, 2012). The main aim of these antibrand virtual communities is to bring together individuals to express their displeasure, anger, and hatred towards a given brand (Krishnamurthy and Kucuk, 2009). For companies, taking an interest in consumers’ negative emotions is essential, particularly in terms of brand management (Walter *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, more and more companies are using brand management as a means of differentiation to gain a competitive advantage (Vieira and Sousa, 2020). And negative consumer emotions can have far-reaching consequences: complaints, avoidance, negative word of mouth, boycotts, etc. (Wu *et al.*, 2018). In this context, we asked ourselves about the relationships and/or the ties maintained between members, and what roles they play within the virtual anti-brand communities. In order to provide answers to this question, we have set out to: 1. analyze the content of exchanges (posts and comments) between members to understand the nature of their hatred, 2. determine the organizational and social structure in place to identify influence games and the strength of ties between members, and 3. define the intensity of members’ hatred and the behaviours corresponding to each level. To this end, we carried out a netnography within two French anti-brand online communities, one centered around the SNCF, a rail transport company, and the other bringing together detractors of SFR, a telecommunications operator.

From a theoretical point of view, while Dessart *et al.* (2020) were interested in the evolution of negative emotions and behavior of individuals leading to participation in collective action by joining virtual anti-brand communities, this research focuses on the ties between members of virtual anti-brand communities based on Granovetter’s theory of weak links (1973) and individual manifestations of their hatred in these communities (Fetscherin, 2019). It offers a categorization of the discourses and roles assumed by members of virtual anti-brand communities. Based on the components of hatred identified by Fetscherin (2019), our work has highlighted a graduated continuum of manifestations of this hatred, which is represented in the identification of the behaviors observed among members. Moreover, we have identified a new form of hate that we propose to call ‘Frozen Hatred’ and which is characterised in terms of behavioral outcomes by silent complaining.

For managers having to deal with hateful comments online, the questions broached here represent a real challenge. Indeed, with 60% of the French population actively using social networks<sup>1</sup>, negative emotions, including hatred, can spread rapidly<sup>2</sup>, especially since consumers are more likely to post negative comments following dissatisfaction or a negative customer experience (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2021) than positive ones (Hegner *et al.*, 2017). It therefore seems necessary for brands to monitor these communities in order to know and if possible to understand the reasons for hatred. In the first part, we present the theoretical framework of the research; then in the second part we detail the netnographic methodology implemented, before outlining the main findings of our study. Finally, theoretical contributions and managerial implications are offered in the light of the results.

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<sup>1</sup> Les réseaux sociaux en France : les statistiques d’utilisation en 2023 (digimind.com)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ouest-france.fr/editionousoir/2022-11-03/pourquoi-les-consommateurs-se-mettent-ils-a-hair-certaines-marques-2133c7e2-0f6d-441e-b936-36f6b7688557>

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### ***From virtual communities to anti-brand communities***

In the primary sense of the term, a community is a group of individuals who maintain reciprocal social relationships. In addition to this aspect, Weber et al. (2019) emphasize that community members enjoy a certain freedom of opinion and action. The arrival of the Web has offered communities a new arena for expression, enabling them not only to transcend the geographical and temporal boundaries of the physical world, but also to escape—at least partially—from state regulation by inventing a new social contract based on self-management (Barlow, 1996). While there are many different types of community (self-help, practice, brand), they all share structural characteristics, such as a common will to act, a shared interest, or the acceptance of common standards (Casaló *et al.*, 2008). The ‘glue’ of a community can therefore be a passion (Tolunay and Veloutsou, 2025), or indeed a shared feeling of hatred, for a brand. In fact, it is this very element that has contributed to the emergence of anti-brand virtual communities, which some refer to as Haters’ virtual communities (Rodriguez and Buffaz, 2023). These thrive on Web 2.0 thanks to the ubiquity of User-Generated Content (UGC) (Daugherty *et al.*, 2008), which enables each Hater to express their negativity towards brands (Fournier and Avery, 2011), to share it (Awashi *et al.*, 2012), to interact with others with related sentiments, and to be socially approved as a member of the group (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009), to translate their ideological incompatibility with brands into negative engagement and activism in order to destroy the image and reputation of the hated brand (Buffaz, Perraud and Rodriguez, 2025). Consumers use UGC platforms as sites of interactive engagement focused on the hated brand (Dessart *et al.*, 2020). All these interactions gradually build up a toolbox or thesaurus (Wasko and Faraj, 2000) that then becomes useful to members in dealing with brand failures. Thanks to the Internet, anti-brands communities proliferate online in numbers, which is harmful for brands (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006). That’s why it’s important to understand the ties between members and to identify the manifestation of their hatred. Joining an anti-brand community is a way for consumers to assert their identity as brand haters (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).

### ***Organization and member roles in anti-brand virtual communities***

Like other types of virtual communities, anti-brand communities (Buffaz and Rodriguez, 2023) have an organizational structure, consisting of a hierarchy of influences and roles that are well defined (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). The allocation of roles, such as for example that of administrator, as well as the disposition of influences, can be historical—linked to the creation of the community—or depend on other criteria such as the social involvement of members, their investment (frequency of visits to the community, time spent) and intensity of participation, their behavior, and indeed their manner of participating (Raies, 2009). Member participation is a decisive factor which determines the pattern by which a community may develop as well as its sustainability (Casaló *et al.*, 2008). A well-known principle in cyberculture proposes a pattern of participation with proportions that are commonly accepted and empirically verified, the “90–9–1” (Hill et al., 1992): ~90% “lurkers”, ~9% active and ~1% fans. “Lurkers” are members who participate in the community passively, what some refer to as “Quiet membership” (Hammond, 2000). Their activity consists, on the one hand, in reading posted messages without responding to them, and, on the other, in obtaining functional and social benefits (Bateman *et al.*, 2011). Active members, and a fortiori fans, actively participate in the community by posting content and interacting with other members: this is known as “Communicative membership” (Hammond, 2000). To refine the portrait of members of virtual communities, particularly brand communities, researchers have proposed successive typologies that seek to categorize them on the basis of the nature and intensity of their participation in community activities (Appendix 1). As yet, however, there seems to be no analysis of the typology of members of an anti-brand virtual community.

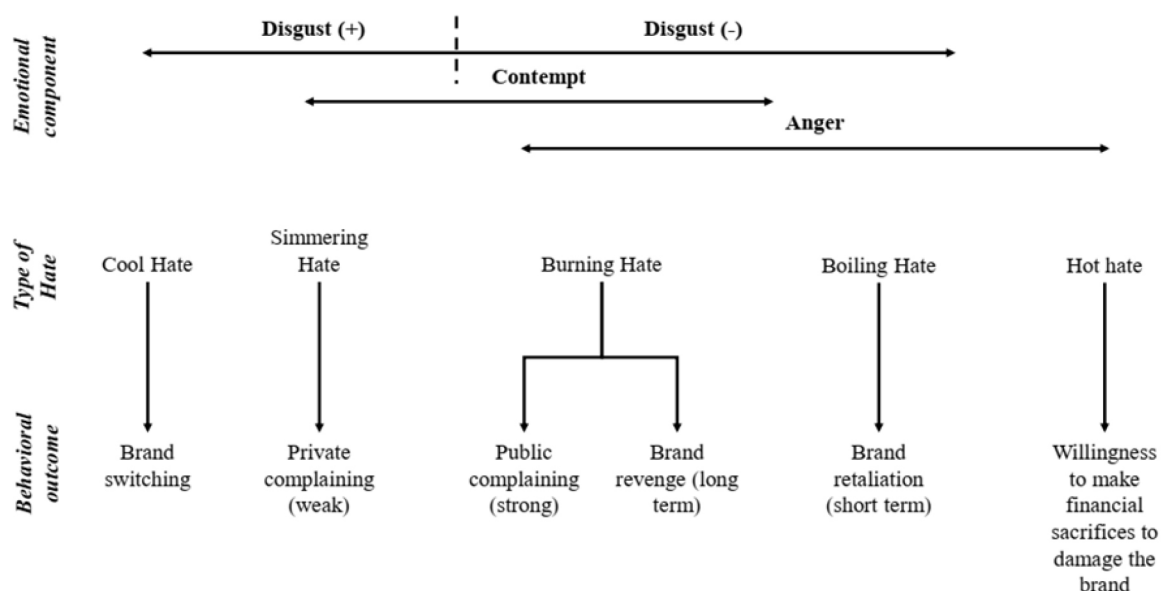
Granovetter’s (1973) theory of weak links also studies the links between members of communities. This theory looks at the spread of information within communities and the strength of the ties (weak or strong) between members. The strength of the ties can be characterised by a combination of time spent together, emotional intensity, intimacy and reciprocity. In the context of anti-brand virtual communities, this theory could make it possible to characterise not only the nature of the content of the exchanges, but also the strength of the links between members, and could give us an idea of the roles and actions carried out by members within these communities.

### ***A growing aversion to brands, to the point of hating them***

Until now, research on brand relationships has focused mainly on positive consumer emotions (brand attachment, brand passion, brand commitment, brand loyalty, and brand love), and very rarely on negative consumer emotions towards

the brand (Curina *et al.*, 2021). Yet the latter are likely to have an impact on customer satisfaction, particularly when the service relationship fails or breaks down (Gonzalez-Gomez *et al.*, 2021). Thus, brands that fail to meet their customers' expectations can generate a variety of negative emotions such as frustration, regret, anger, or even hatred (Roy *et al.*, 2022). Hegner *et al.* (2017) highlighted three determinants at the root of customer hatred: (a) product-related determinants due to unmet expectations and poor performance; (b) consumer-related determinants due to incongruence between their own identity and the brand, which might be seen as too far removed from their own personality, or as inauthentic; and (c) context-related determinants due to inappropriate behaviors or actions on the part of brands. This concept of brand hatred has been defined in several ways, but to date no consensus has been reached (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2021). For Kucuk (2016), brand hatred corresponds to "consumers' detachment from a brand and its associations as a result of consumers' intense and deeply held negative emotions such as disgust, anger, contempt, devaluation and diminution", while for Bryson *et al.* (2013), it is "an intense negative emotional affect toward the brand", specified by Hegner *et al.* (2017) as "a more intense emotional response consumers have toward a brand than dislike". In psychology, there are two schools of thought on hatred: the first postulates that hatred is a single, simple emotion (Shaver *et al.*, 1987), while the other maintains that hatred is made up of multiple emotional components (Sternberg, 2003), making it more complex (Yadav and Chakrabarti, 2022). Concerning the second school, Sternberg (2003), in his Duplex theory of hate, stipulates the existence of an "actions" triangle and a "feelings" triangle, both of which are superimposable. Thus, each dimension of the "actions" triangle corresponds to an emotion: the denial of intimacy raises feelings of disgust, passion transforms into anger or fear, and finally commitment corresponds to contempt. Fetscherin (2019) has taken up Sternberg's elements by categorizing hatred into seven levels and associating the corresponding consumer behavior with each level (Cf. Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
Components of brand hatred according to Fetscherin (2019)



Thus, consumers' negative emotions towards brands, including hatred, can be of different intensities depending on the degree of passion felt (Fetscherin, 2019) and can also evolve over time (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2018). Manifestations of hatred can be passive or active (Bayarassou *et al.*, 2020), and are likely to vary according to the intensity of the feelings experienced by the consumer. Bayarassou (2019) identifies two trajectories of hatred: avoidance and revenge, two possible manifestations of resistance among many others. Passive brand haters will engage in non-aggressive behavior such as brand avoidance (Bryson *et al.*, 2013), reducing or ceasing to patronize the brand, with the aim of escaping the brand

relationship (Hegner *et al.*, 2017). Active brand hatred will take the form of negative consumer word-of-mouth (Kurtoglu *et al.*, 2021), private complaints to the consumer's social circle (friends, family, work colleagues) or public complaints (social networks), protests, the creation of an anti-brand community (Mednini and Hmida, 2023), or even retaliation, the consumer's aim being to take revenge on the brand through activism (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016). The publication of several literature reviews in recent years demonstrates the growing interest in this concept of hate (Kesse *et al.*, 2021; Yadav and Chakrabarti, 2022; Aziz and Rahman, 2022; Kumar *et al.*, 2023 and Mushtaq *et al.*, 2024).

This interest stems from the fact that the consumers who hate a brand are also the ones who cause it most harm (Do *et al.*, 2024). Anti-brand virtual communities can be perceived as being created solely to express and share highly negative judgments about a brand (Dessart *et al.*, 2016), with the ultimate aim of taking revenge on or harming the brand, thereby degrading its brand equity and reputation (Krishnamurthy and Kucuk, 2009; Kucuk, 2008; Romani *et al.*, 2015). A better analysis of the various dimensions of brand hatred could enable practitioners to devise preventive strategies or better manage such hatred, in order to limit potential customer loss (Aziz and Rahman, 2022).

In the light of this existing work, we felt it would be useful to expand our knowledge of the construction of relationships between members within anti-brand virtual communities, and to document the evolution of the roles occupied by these members within these same communities.

## **METHOD**

### ***Explanation of the choice of method***

Netnography is a "qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the culture and communities emerging through computer-mediated communications" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). Several advantages inherent in netnography influenced the decision to apply this methodology in the present case. Indeed, previous studies have chosen netnography to tackle fields similar to our own, namely that of online communities (Cova and Carrère, 2002). Moreover, as Kozinets (2002) points out, the observation of language data is the essential purpose of netnography, and this corresponds to the core aim of our research. Netnography also makes it possible to capture all the other data present in the virtual community under study, such as norms or traditions, which constitute both the context of the data and the socio-cultural foundations of the community under study. Netnography is also a suitable means to collect a large amount of high-quality data: in particular, thanks to the pseudonym-based anonymity conferred by the Internet (Bernard, 2004), community members' expressions are freer and more authentic and are moreover continuously accessible.

### ***Compliance with methodological guidelines***

First, the researchers engaged in an exercise of reflexive introspection (Gould, 2012), in order to bring out the structural elements of their subjectivity, i.e., their presuppositions and prior knowledge of the brands at the center of the fields to be observed (Renahy and Sorniguet, 2006), as well as the situational elements, i.e., the reactions the researchers would have when they arrived 'in the field' (Cova and Cova, 2002). As a matter of fact, the researchers were users of the SNCF but not of the RER E line, and were familiar with the SFR operator although they had never been customers. Subsequently, the researchers continued their preparation by defining the posture and behavior they would adopt in the field (Arborio and Fournier, 2005). Among the ethical principles defined by Kozinets (2002), the researchers took particular care to guarantee the confidentiality and privacy of the members of the communities observed (Chouk and Mani, 2016) by systematically anonymizing the data collected. However, it was not possible to comply with the usual practice of requesting permission to use verbatims published within the communities, due to the lack of response from a large number of community members. Finally, a methodological protocol was defined which provided for ex ante observation prior to community integration. This involved selecting the communities to be observed, carrying out ex ante observation, followed by community integration, floating observation, and then non-participant observation (Pothin *et al.*, 2022). The latter was motivated by the researchers' desire not to disturb the community environment, nor to bias the results by interacting with members of the communities observed (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry Jr, 2003).

### ***Presentation and justification of the choice of communities observed***

The two virtual communities studied were selected in three successive phases. First, the researchers identified two brands associated with French companies that could give rise to the creation of anti-brand virtual communities, due to

recurrent criticism from their customers<sup>3</sup>. These brands were also selected in view of the utilitarian nature of the products and services they offer—the utilitarian aspect being more open to criticism in the event of brand failure. The SNCF and SFR brands were chosen. The SNCF - which stands for Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français - is France's public railway company, created on 1st January 1938 by agreement between the State and the pre-existing railway companies. Even though the French market is beginning to open up to competition, the SNCF remains a virtual monopoly, transporting ~5 million passengers a day, including 3.5 million in the Île-de-France region thanks in particular to the RER. An integral part of France's cultural heritage, the SNCF is also hated by most French people, who criticise it for its high fares, poor quality of service and repeated strikes<sup>4</sup>. SFR - which stands for Société Française du Radiotéléphone - is a French telecommunications operator founded in 1987. Now a subsidiary of Patrick Drahi's Altice France group, SFR is historically the second of France's four national telephone operators. Like SNCF, SFR is hated by many French people. In December 2017, the association 60 millions de consommateurs awarded its Golden Cactus to SFR for having the worst consumer service in France (ineffective hotline, endless breakdowns, haphazard re-engagements, complicated cancellations, all seasoned with rate hikes passed in the middle of summer...). According to a survey by 60 million, 38% of SFR customers were dissatisfied with the service, compared with 12% at Orange and 7% at Free<sup>5</sup>. Thus, SNCF and SFR have as a common denominator that they both provide a service, but differ as regards their status in their respective markets—the former being a monopoly, the latter monopolistically competitive. Then, we had to select the appropriate social media host. Given that Facebook is the most widely used social network in France<sup>2</sup> and is a space with a reputation for hosting hateful and/or aggressive content<sup>6</sup>, the choice was made to search for two communities within this space. Finally, the researchers drew on the work of Buffaz and Isséki (2022) to build and employ a grid of qualitative (e.g., diversity of topics covered) and quantitative (e.g., number of members) criteria (Appendix 2), the two anti-brand virtual communities capable of generating the most reliable and valid results. The communities selected were two private French-speaking groups, “Les Râleurs en ColRER E” and “Les mécontents de SFR”.

#### ***Data collection, coding and processing: a thematic qualitative analysis***

Within the “Les Râleurs en ColRER E” community, 1,008 online conversations were collected, of which 500 were posted in the period 11–20 October 2022, and 508 in the period between 30 November and December 19, 2022 (to avoid bias in conversations induced by SNCF strikes). For the “Les mécontents de SFR” community, 1,004 publications and comments were collected, posted between May 20 and June 27, 2023. The collection of language data was accompanied by any accompanying non-language data. These elements, such as emoticons, photos, and videos (Dooley, 2012), also convey meaning and emotions, and were therefore analyzed. We carried out a Textual Data Analysis (TDA), for which numerous tools and methods are now available (Fallery and Rodhain, 2007). The approach to analysis proposed by Bardin (2013) was followed in its entirety, providing for: a pre-analysis phase (floating reading, formulation of hypotheses and objectives, dimensions and directions of analysis), an in-depth data analysis phase, and a results processing and interpretation phase (statistical operations, synthesis and selection of results, inference and interpretation). For the pre-analysis phase, the floating reading of online conversations, i.e., publications and comments—which we refer to as “discourses”—made it possible to draw up a taxonomy of discourse composed of 4 macro-categories, 16 meso-categories, and 29 micro-categories (Table 1), and thus to categorize all conversations using the latter during the in-depth data analysis phase. This taxonomy forms our preliminary theoretical analysis grid, which we used as a coding guide for the qualitative analysis.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lesechos.fr/industrie-services/automobile/remplace-par-sfr-la-sncf-nest-plus-derniere-du-classement-des-marques-1299350>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.quechoisir.org/billet-du-president-sncf-un-train-de-retard-sur-le-reseau-quotidien-n44608/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.60millions-mag.com/2017/12/21/60-millions-decerne-ses-cactus-de-la-conso-2017-11504>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nouvelobs.com/societe/20190428.OBS12212/sur-facebook-un-commentaire-sur-sept-est-haineux-ou-agressif.html>

**Table 1**  
Taxonomy of discourses identified in the two anti-brand virtual communities studied  
(Source: Authors own work)

| Macro-category      | Meso-category                                                               | Micro-category                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cognitive discourse | I look for information.                                                     | SNCF : I look for information on traffic, timetables, etc.<br>SFR : I look for information on telecommunications equipment, Internet connections, after-sales service, etc.                                                                                                   |
|                     | I ask for help.                                                             | I need to solve a complex problem (subscription, etc.).                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                     | I ask for testimony.                                                        | I ask the other members if they have ever experienced a situation similar to mine.                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Normative discourse | I share some information.                                                   | I share information on telecommunications equipment, Internet connection, after-sales service, etc.                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                     | I offer to help.                                                            | I answer questions or help solve a complex problem (subscription, etc.).                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                     | I share my experience.                                                      | I tell the other members how I've experienced such and such a situation.                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Affective discourse | I contribute to the good atmosphere in the community.                       | I make jokes.<br>I laugh.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                     | I express my feelings about the brand.                                      | I criticize the brand.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                     |                                                                             | I express my weariness or hatred of the brand.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                     | I take part in the debates.                                                 | I state my point of view.<br>I agree/disagree with what other members say.                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                     |                                                                             | I feel understood.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|                     | I express my feelings towards the community.                                | I feel supported.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|                     |                                                                             | I have empathy for the members of the community.                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                     |                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Mixed speech        | I share information and express my feelings about the brand.                | I share information about telecommunication devices, Internet connection, after-sales service, etc., and I criticize the brand.                                                                                                                                               |
|                     |                                                                             | I share information about telecommunications devices, Internet connection, after-sales service, etc., and express my weariness or hatred of the brand.                                                                                                                        |
|                     | I share information and contribute to the good atmosphere of the community. | I share information about telecommunication devices, Internet connection, after-sales service, etc., and make jokes.<br>I share information about telecommunication devices, Internet connection, after-sales service, etc. and laugh.                                        |
|                     | I share my experience and express my feelings about the brand.              | I tell other members how I've experienced such and such a situation, and I criticize the brand.                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                     |                                                                             | I tell other members how I've experienced such and such a situation, and express my weariness or hatred of the brand.                                                                                                                                                         |
|                     | I offer help and express my feelings about the brand.                       | I answer questions or help solve a complex problem (subscription, etc.) and criticize the brand.                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                     |                                                                             | I answer questions or help solve a complex problem (subscription, etc.) and express my weariness or hatred of the brand.                                                                                                                                                      |
|                     | I look for information and express my feelings about the brand.             | SNCF : I look for information on traffic, schedules, etc., and I criticize the brand.<br>SFR : I look for information on telecommunications devices, Internet connection, after-sales service, etc., and I criticize the brand.                                               |
|                     |                                                                             | SNCF : I look for information on traffic, schedules, etc., and express my weariness or hatred of the brand.<br>SFR : I look for information on telecommunications devices, Internet connection, after-sales service, etc., and I express my weariness or hatred of the brand. |
|                     |                                                                             | I express my point of view and criticize the brand.                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                     | I take part in debates and express my feelings about the brand.             | I state my point of view and express my weariness or hatred of the brand.                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                     |                                                                             | I agree/disagree with what other members say and I criticize the brand.                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                     |                                                                             | I agree/disagree with other members' comments and express my weariness or hatred of the brand.                                                                                                                                                                                |

Coding was carried out twice—by each researcher independently—before being pooled to reach a consensus, and was also the subject of a combination of an inductive and deductive approach, allowing for a back-and-forth between the data collected and successive interpretations. Finally, to process and interpret the results, the four bodies of texts, corresponding to the four discourse types, were downloaded into the IRaMuTeQ software (Marghobi, 2019). These were processed through a top-down classification of text segments (“Reinert method”), bringing out thematic nodes. This operation was carried out twice, once for each community studied. Descriptive statistics of the coded data set were also entered into an Excel spreadsheet, in order to assess the frequency and prevalence of each category and sub-category of discourse within the two anti-brand virtual communities studied.

### **Study of the lexical field of hate**

To confirm our choice of communities and ensure that they were indeed anti-brand communities comprising disgruntled customers and Haters, we set out to reconstitute the lexical field of hatred from the collected verbatims. A lexical field can be defined as “a set of lexical units covering an area of meaning”<sup>7</sup>. To do this, we carried out a floating reading of the verbatims, to check that the emotional components of brand hatred identified by Yadav and Chakrabarti (2022) were indeed present in our verbatims. We then listed the semantic cues characteristic of online hate speech, namely: “the use of capital letters and/or exclamation marks, the use of suspension points, the use of emoticons (e.g. angry face)” (Bailly and Moïse, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> LEXICAL : Définition de LEXICAL (cnrtl.fr)

## RESULTS

***Different discourses reveal a chromatic spectrum of hatred that is not identical from one community to another***

In order to ascertain the anti-brand nature of the communities studied, we carried out a semantic analysis of the verbatims collected. This enabled us to identify some of the emotional components of hatred listed by Yadav and Chakrabarti (2022). Combined with the semantic indices collected, we can confirm that we are dealing with hatred felt by members, and consequently with anti-brand virtual communities. Indeed, we can see in the posts and comments the presence of numerous negative emoticons that resemble graduated forms of hatred (exhaling smiley, angry, red-faced, swearing, crying, desperate, vomiting, etc.). What's more, when positive emoticons, smileys, or pictograms appear (Halté, 2016), they are generally used in an ironic sense. Punctuation is used in an exaggerated way, so as to accentuate the discourse: *"It's clear, it's an obstacle course!!! and a new test every day!!! I wonder what we can win!!! (+2 smiley angry)"*, *"common sense???? Naaaaaannnn"* (S.H. – no. 53.1)<sup>8</sup>. The most prevalent emotional components are anger (*"I'm sick of it too!!!"* – C.C. no. 48.4)<sup>9</sup>, aversion (*"They cancel the trains, and then they want to increase the Navigo pass! (+2 angry red smiley faces) Every day it's shit!"* – M.L. no. 47)<sup>10</sup>, contempt (*"This operator is deplorable after all, it's normal, it's a Mauritian group that runs this company, and most of them don't speak French very well, so how do you expect them to deal with customer problems"* – J-C. I. no. 48.11)<sup>11</sup>, indignation (*"But it's too much! Meeting at 11am this morning at Daumesnil, leaving Le Raincy at 8.30am to make sure I wouldn't be in the shit ... it's a real shame it's come to this"* – C.C. no. 71.8)<sup>12</sup>, frustration (*"It's better to laugh at this sh...t line so as not to go crazy. You can never rely on the RER or on the timetables advertised. The management of this line, which resembles third-world transport, is frankly lamentable..."* – A.S. no. 71.6)<sup>13</sup>, and sometimes fear (*"That's really my drama ... my worry is the imminent threat of the bailiff and I have no intention of paying for their vacations!! I have no more hours to waste in the 4 digits ...."* – K.F. no. 52.5)<sup>14</sup>. We note, however, the absence of the following components: humiliation and shame.

Analysis of the posts and comments of the "Les Râleurs en CoIRER E" community and the "Les mécontents de SFR" community using the IRaMuTeQ and Excel tools revealed four dimensions characterizing the nature of the exchanges: a normative dimension referring to members' altruistic and self-help behaviors; a cognitive dimension expressed through the group's solicitation to meet a need; an affective dimension comprising the expression of members' feelings and emotions; and a mixed dimension relating to discourses mixing normative and affective tones. However, the distribution of these dimensions diverges between the two communities observed. While the cognitive dimension remains low and the mixed dimension average in both communities, we note that the most common discourse among "Les Râleurs en CoIRER E" is affective (48%), while the normative discourse (43%) is the most frequent among "Les mécontents de SFR". In terms of meso-categories of discourse, we note that verbatims similar to "I take part in debates" (20%), "I contribute to the good community atmosphere" (13%), and "I share information" (19%) are in the majority among "Les Râleurs en CoIRER E", while verbatims of the type "I offer help" (22%) and "I take part in debates" (17%) are the most represented among "Les mécontents de SFR".

These results seem to demonstrate the influence not only of the community's organizational structure, but also of the brand's economic situation, on the way hate is expressed. In the case of "Les Râleurs en CoIRER E", the SNCF has a monopoly on the RER E line, and its users often have no choice but to subscribe to the company's offer and suffer its service failures. As a result, members of this rather democratic community tend to use this forum as a cathartic outlet, grumbling in silence, even as they help each other by sharing information. The "Les mécontents de SFR" group, on the other hand, revolves around a telecoms company in monopolistic competition. As a result, its members express hatred of the brand in a way that is less recurrent and more violent than in the other community. As SFR's products and services are complex, members give precedence to mutual support over hatred.

<sup>8</sup> *"C'est clair, c'est le parcours du combattant !!! et une nouvelle épreuve chaque jour !!! Je me demande bien ce que l'on peut gagner !!! (+2 smiley colère)"*, *"du bon sens chez eux ???? Naaaaaannnn"*.

<sup>9</sup> *"moi aussi j'en ai PLUS QUE MARRE!!!"*

<sup>10</sup> *"Ça supprime les trains, et après ça veut augmenter le pass navigo! (+2 smiley rouge de colère) Tous les jours c'est la merde !"*

<sup>11</sup> *"Cette opérateur est déplorable après c'est normal c'est un groupe Mauricien qui gère cette entreprise la plupart ont dû mal en langue française comment voulez vous ils arrivent à régler les problème des clients"*.

<sup>12</sup> *"Mais c'est trop ça!! Rdv à 11h ce matin a Daumesnil partie du Raincy à 8h30 pour être sûre de ne pas être emmerder .. c'est grave d'en arriver a ça quand même"*.

<sup>13</sup> *"Mieux vaut en rire effectivement de cette ligne de m...de pour ne pas devenir dingue. On ne peut jamais compter sur ce RER et sur les horaires annoncés. Gestion franchement lamentable de cette ligne qui ressemble à des transports du tiers-monde..."*.

<sup>14</sup> *"Effectivement c'est bien mon drame .. mon souci la menace imminente à l'huissier et je n'ai pas l'intention de payer pour leurs vacances !! je n'ai plus d'heures à perdre aux 4 chiffres ...."*.

***A different organizational and social structure from one community to another, but a common goal: to revile the brand***

The “Les Râleurs en ColRER E” community and the “Les mécontents de SFR” community share the same goal: to vilify the brand. However, observation of the language and non-language data shows that these acts of hatred are not organized and perpetrated in exactly the same ways in each group. In the “Les Râleurs en ColRER E” community, all members hate the SNCF, but in a desperate and tragic way, since, as Albert Camus explains in his essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), every day they have to face up to the disruptions affecting their transport line, the RER E, all over again. Although these disruptions seem absurd to them, they still have to accept them, and so they organize themselves into a community to mitigate them by helping each other. In the “Les mécontents de SFR” community, apart from a very few dissenting voices, all members agree in making SFR a scapegoat, as described by anthropologist and philosopher René Girard in his essay *La Violence et le Sacré* (1972), in the sense that the operator is held responsible for all their setbacks and must pay for them. This visceral hatred of SFR, marked by the use of many vulgar words, is the glue that holds the community together. In terms of community participation, the “Les Râleurs en ColRER E” community is more mobilized than “Les mécontents de SFR”: 220 members of the 2,168 members of the former community spoke out against the brand in the verbatims recorded, equivalent to 10% of all members, and 31 of them (1% of the total) did so at least 10 times. Thus the “90–9–1” rule for community participation has been verified. On the other hand, in the “Les mécontents de SFR”, only 249 of the 7,850 members speak out against the brand, representing just 3% of the total, and only 18 do so more than 10 times. Haters of the SFR brand are thus much quieter and more passive than those of the SNCF brand. There are also differences in terms of community management. The “Les Râleurs en ColRER E” community seems more balanced and democratic than the “Les mécontents de SFR” community. The former is managed by 3 administrators and 1 moderator who are the main contributors, supported by a dozen or so very active members. The second, on the other hand, is run by 1 administrator who is also the community moderator. She shares her power with only one other member, designated as a group specialist, both of whom converse regularly and influence the mood of the community. In the “Les mécontents de SFR” community there is a kind of one-party rule, in the sense that dissenting voices promoting SFR are systematically disavowed and expelled from the community by the administrator. Conversely, in the “Les Râleurs en ColRER E” community, impromptu debates sometimes take place, and petitions are launched in an attempt to change the situation of users. This may also explain why community participation is lower in the “Les mécontents de SFR” community: Haters need to express themselves; if they are repressed or crushed by the participation of a few, their commitment against the brand diminishes. As for the roles occupied by community members, we note a dichotomy between official and unofficial roles that is common to both communities observed (Cf. Table 2). Official roles are those that are de facto assigned or obtained by community participants, i.e., administrator, moderator, group specialist, and member. These roles grant rights to their actors, and can be recognized by mentions attached to profiles and/or by pictograms. On the other hand, participants can also create unofficial roles, which give them a special place in the community structure and a definite influence on the direction taken by the community. For example, at “Les Râleurs en ColRER E”, a trade unionist regularly intervenes to defend the SNCF brand and railway workers when he feels that the hatred expressed by the community goes beyond the brand’s shortcomings in service delivery. These roles, particularly unofficial ones, could thus be a key variable determining the character of the hatred expressed against the brand, whether in terms of its vigor or its manifestations. Drawing on the work of Buffaz and Rodriguez (2023), it seems that silent grumbling is more than a manifestation of hatred, it is a full-fledged role in anti-brand communities.

**Table 2**

Roles and status within the two anti-brand virtual communities observed (Source: Authors)

| Role status | Role                 | Description (rights, duties, powers, etc.)                                                                                                                                                     | « Les Râleurs en ColRER E » community                                                                                                                                       | « Les mécontents de SFR » community                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Official    | Administrator        | Role obtained from the outset by the community creator or assigned by him to other members. Gives full community management rights and legitimate authority.                                   | 3 administrators                                                                                                                                                            | 1 female administrator                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Official    | Moderator            | Role obtained by the community creator or assigned by him to other members. Gives the right to moderate comments made by members, as well as legitimate authority.                             | 1 moderator                                                                                                                                                                 | 1 female moderator, who is also the female administrator                                                                                                                                                  |
| Official    | Group specialist     | Role conferred by community administrators. Denotes expertise in the subjects dealt with within the community, and <i>de facto</i> legitimate authority.                                       | 2 group specialists, who are administrators                                                                                                                                 | 1 group specialist                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Official    | Member               | Basic role for all participants in the virtual community. Gives the right to create, comment, link and share publications.                                                                     | 2,168 members, including 220 who expressed themselves through the 1,000 verbatims collected                                                                                 | 7,850 members, including 249 who express themselves through the 1,000 verbatims collected                                                                                                                 |
| Informal    | Brand critic         | Informal role, acquired and used by members of the virtual community, users/customers of the brand. Allows them to criticize the brand, but also to request and offer information and support. | The vast majority of members who speak out criticize the brand. The speeches are not neutral, but full of hatred.                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Informal    | Brand counter-critic | Informal role, acquired and used by members of the virtual community, brand staff. It's as much about defending the brand as it is about requesting and offering information and support.      | Presence of at least 1 SNCF trade unionist trying to set the record straight about the company. Presence of several drivers, appreciated by the brand's critical members.   | Several SFR technicians present to explain the services. Defense of the brand by a member (who doesn't understand the hatred of the brand), who is booed by the administrator and the group's specialist. |
| Informal    | Relay                | Informal role, acquired and used by members of the virtual community, politicians. Used to showcase the political actions taken to help the brand's users/customers.                           | The mayor of a commune served by the RER E explains his actions to the SNCF, but is booed by the community.                                                                 | No relay observed.                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Informal    | Silent complainer    | Informal role, acquired and used by members of the virtual community, passive members. Allows them to see what active members publish and to support them in silence.                          | They represent a significant proportion of the communities studied. Their support is generally limited to emotions translated by reactions added to publications of haters. |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

**From frozen hatred to hot hatred: a graduated continuum of manifestations**

As indicated above, members of anti-brand virtual communities may become involved because they are consumers of these brands and have had a negative past experience with them (Bryson *et al.*, 2021), or because they reject the values upheld by these brands, even if they are not consumers (Hegner *et al.*, 2017; Perrin-Martinénq and Hussant-Zébian, 2008). These community engagement factors appear to be as much vectors of hatred as they are antecedents of the self-help behaviors, potentially harmful to brands, observed within the anti-brand virtual communities studied. Thus, the hatred observed among the members of these anti-brand virtual communities varies in intensity and can be expressed in different ways. Using Fetscherin's (2019) components of hatred, we were able to define a continuum of manifestations of hatred by members of the anti-brand virtual communities studied (Cf. Table 3). Our analysis also reveals a level of hatred. This is a frozen hatred that is reflected in the role played by members of the community who grumble in silence. Beyond the 'temperature' of the hatred to which they are linked, the nature of these manifestations also varies according, on the one hand, to the type of goods and services marketed by the brand, and, on the other, to the irritability of the community (Cf. *supra*). For example, hot hatred, which Fetscherin (2019) describes as a willingness to make financial sacrifices in order to damage the brand, can take the form of refusing to pay one's fare for Haters in the "Les Râleurs en ColRER E" community, which could result in a simple fine for the offender, while for Haters in the "Les mécontents de SFR" community it could take the form of a refusal to pay bills, which could lead to far more serious consequences for delinquent customers facing a bailiff. Thus, because of its more radical hatred, the "Les mécontents de SFR" community seems to generate more violent and damaging behavior towards the SFR brand than the "Râleurs en ColRER E" community does towards the SNCF brand.

**Table 3**

Manifestations of hatred within the two anti-brand virtual communities observed  
(from Fetscherin, 2019; Source: Authors own work)

| Type of hate       | Frozen hate                                                   | Cool hate                                                                                                                             | Simmering hate                        | Burning hate                                                                                                                   | Boiling hate       | Hot hate                                                        |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Behavioral outcome | Silent complaining                                            | Brand switching                                                                                                                       | Private complaining                   | Public complaining or Brand revenge                                                                                            | Brand retaliation  | Willingness to make financial sacrifices to damage the brand    |
| SNCF manifestation | Membership of the community, but without active participation | Not applicable due to SNCF monopoly. Except in exceptional cases: using the car to be on time for a medical appointment, for example. | Active participation in the community | Complaints to the Mayor of one of the towns served by the line<br><br>Letter to SNCF management<br><br>Relay and sign petition | Not applicable     | Refusal to pay their fares, even if it means risking a fine     |
| SFR manifestation  | Membership of the community, but without active participation | Operator switching                                                                                                                    | Active participation in the community | Sending registered letters with acknowledgement of receipt<br><br>Use of consumer rights associations                          | Filing a complaint | Refuse to pay their bills and find themselves facing a bailiff. |

## DISCUSSION

### *Theoretical contributions*

This research makes several theoretical contributions related to the study of brand hatred—still a rather novel concept but one that is gaining momentum, since it is one of the most studied negative emotions in the consumer/brand relationship (Khatoon and Rehman, 2021)—and anti-brand virtual communities. In our opinion, the main theoretical contributions lie, on the one hand, in the typology of manifestations of hatred within communities (Table 3), but also in the categorisation of publications according to four dimensions: affective, cognitive, normative and mixed. Firstly, our work offers a categorization (affective, normative, mixed, and to a lesser extent cognitive) of posts and comments within two anti-brand virtual communities. The predominance of one type of discourse over another seems to determine the orientation of hatred in terms of members' actions and passive manifestations. While avoidance, change, separation, contempt, and boycott are already documented in the literature as passive manifestations of hatred (Yadav and Chakrabarti, 2022), this research tends to complete this bestiary with silent grumbling and the desire to help each other beyond merely hating. Our work makes it possible to enrich the model proposed by Fetscherin (2019) with the addition of a new level of hatred, 'frozen hate', which is reflected in this manifestation: the fact of silently grumbling. What is more, the identification of a lexical field of hate in the observed communities proves that the hateful nature is expressed and recognized above all through linguistic—and also non-linguistic—semiology. Secondly, with regard to organizational structure, anti-brand virtual communities, like other types of virtual communities, present a well-defined hierarchy of influences and roles. Indeed, our work seems to demonstrate that, beyond the unifying barycentre that is brand hatred, anti-brand communities are not all organized in the same way, and that this structure influences the preponderance, nature, intensity, and manner of expression of hatred. Our study also revealed that the organisational dynamics of anti-brand communities are more complex than they appear: on the one hand, some members tend to hold nuanced or even positive hate speeches towards the brand, and on the other hand, the verbal expression of hatred seems to be a necessary but insufficient condition for large-scale action against the brand. The analysis carried out has enabled us to define a typology of anti-brand virtual community members, a typology which has hitherto been lacking in the literature. Moreover, few studies have been devoted to understanding the direct effects of

brand hatred on consumer behavior (Walther, 2022). Our work, based on the components of hatred identified by Fetscherin (2019), has highlighted a graduated continuum of manifestations of this hatred, which is represented in the identification of the behaviors observed among members of the anti-brand virtual communities studied. Drawing on Granovetter's (1973) theory of weak ties, it appears that the ties between members of the SNCF community are rather strong because of the daily renewal of hatred (since train cancellations and delays occur every day), whereas the ties between members of the SFR community are rather weak because of isolated and individual problems or incidents (since an Internet box problem can affect one person at a time). Finally, it appears that the benefits sought by participants in anti-brand virtual communities are similar to those of members of communities of Lovers of the same brands, namely information, social relations, help, and visibility (Raïes, 2006).

### **Managerial benefits**

Several recommendations can be made for brands that arouse the ire and even hatred of some of their customers. It is now recognized that brand hatred grows online through websites and social media groups, and can be expressed instantaneously and virally (Kucuk, 2019), leading to consumer empowerment in the customer relationship (Kucuk, 2014), and giving anti-brand communities a strong potential to cause a nuisance (Kucuk, 2008). A brand can "lose numerous existing customers and alienate innumerable potential customers, which can result in millions of dollars of damage to a brand" (Kähr *et al.*, 2016, p.25). The marketing strategy to adopt with regard to anti-brand virtual communities could be twofold, irrespective of the status of the company (SME, MSC, MNF). On the one hand, an offensive strategy could be implemented with the aim of stifling hatred. This would involve community management when the brand is attacked directly on its networks, with responses that oscillate between *mea culpa*—through "hate-acknowledging advertising"<sup>15</sup>—humor, and entering into exchanges with the haters, for example offering them the chance to modify their posts for the better in exchange for free products or services<sup>16</sup>. This would also involve lighting 'counter-fires' by joining existing Lovers' communities, or building new ones if they do not exist, in order to create a network of brand ambassadors and offer customers the chance to contribute to improving the brand's products and services (brainstorming workshops, co-creation, etc.). From this perspective, haters' comments can be a source of improvement or optimization for brands' products or services, as part of a co-construction process (Cova & Dalli, 2009). On the other hand, a defensive RICE (Research, Integrate, Understand, Exchange) strategy could also be carried out, aimed at identifying anti-brand virtual communities, monitoring their activity, understanding their criticisms, and implementing remedial actions and/or dialogue with the most virulent Haters in an attempt to defuse their hatred—if at all possible. Given that the key to successful brand management is in-depth knowledge of consumers, brands have every interest in identifying the reasons behind their negative emotions, so as not to lose current and/or potential customers (Haase *et al.*, 2022).

We propose below to detail the stages of a defensive marketing strategy. Detecting anti-brand virtual communities should be the starting point for any marketing-communication strategy aimed at countering their negative influence. Above all, we need to distinguish between the isolated whistle-blower and the structured, organized community. A whistle-blower is an isolated individual who spontaneously publishes a hateful comment about a brand, which, through the viral effect (the 'hashtag' on X), will temporarily rally other disgruntled individuals. This is more of a temporary crisis. Anti-brand virtual communities, on the other hand, may be less visible, but are more enduring, sustaining an ongoing fire that does lasting damage to brands. Anti-brand virtual communities can be identified by using keywords associated with the brand name in the social media search bar. In this way, anti-brand groups and communities can be brought to light. Following this identification, it would be important to observe these communities to assess their level of danger to the brand, which would depend on the number of members, the number of publications, and the nature of the haters' intentions and activities. Communities deemed to be non-dangerous would not be investigated, whereas the investigation of communities deemed dangerous would involve integrating into these communities, then understanding their organization, how they function, and the criticisms they level at the brand. Criticism could be understood in a number of ways: by simply reading the publications, by public or private exchanges with the authors of posts, or by semi-directive interviews. The challenge for a brand that is being subject to vehement criticism is to decide whether or not to reveal itself to its Haters within the community. If it does reveal itself—and this may indeed be necessary in order to conduct interviews—it runs the risk of being expelled and losing all marketing intelligence on these communities. Once the reviews have been collected and understood, both Haters and their critiques can be classified into typologies, in other words, segmented, targeted, and positioned. The least virulent Haters could potentially be converted into neutral customers or even brand promoters. The most realistic and constructive criticisms should be remedied by the brand.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://theconversation.com/quest-ce-qui-conduit-le-consommateur-a-ha-r-certaines-marques-193232>

<sup>16</sup> <https://creapills.com/funky-veggie-haters-20231129>

More generally, anti-brand virtual communities seem, sometimes despite themselves, to achieve their objective of forcing brands to improve their quality/price ratio by provoking legislative changes. Indeed, the members of these communities are comparable to whistleblowers who use the virality of social networks to call on public authorities and put pressure on brands. In France, the law of March 21, 2022 strengthens the protection of whistleblowers, enshrined in the so-called "Sapin 2" law of 2016<sup>17</sup>. It transposes a European directive of October 23, 2019 and goes even further. Thus, faced with consumers suffering less from information asymmetry than before the Internet and benefiting from a protective legal status, brands have no other choice but to take their demands into account, otherwise at the risk of seeing their reputation permanently damaged. For example, by organizing themselves within an anti-brand community on Facebook called "Les Usagers du Train Clermont-Paris" and by summoning the press, users of this stricken line managed to make themselves heard by the French state which forced the SNCF to invest massively to renovate the railway line<sup>18</sup>. In addition, to respond among other things to the discontent of users, the French State has also decided to partially end the monopoly situation of the SNCF.

### **Limitations**

Despite its many contributions to the literature, this research project is not without limitations. The first limitation is one that is inherent to all netnographic research, and concerns its exploratory nature. As such, further studies are required to confirm, and possibly adjust, the initial results obtained. New language data from time periods other than those chosen for this study could be collected, in order to obtain more extensive and therefore theoretically more reliable text corpora, and to dispel any biases due to the respective contexts of the companies studied, SNCF and SFR. The second limitation, in line with the previous one, is that we need also to explore other communities of Haters to find new points of comparison, such as a community of Haters centered around a public company that is also a monopoly, such as RATP, or centered around other service sectors such as air transport or insurance. We might also ask whether the results we found could be applied to less utilitarian products, such as luxury goods or ready-to-wear brands. The third limitation of this research is linked to the semiological analysis of the non-language data collected within the two communities observed, which can always be improved. The visible signs, known as "surface" signs, were analyzed by the authors of this research; the invisible or "latent" signs, however, were not. Yet the meaning of these elements can be likened to an iceberg, whose submerged side needs to be analyzed using appropriate tools, so as to understand the broader narrative structure and associated values which would then influence our interpretations.

### **Further Research**

Several avenues of further research could be explored. Firstly, the results obtained should be triangulated in order that they can be generalized. This could be done through two non-exclusive prisms: by changing the site where the field is hosted online, and by changing the method of data collection. It might also be interesting to study some other SNCF and SFR anti-brand communities on at least one social network other than Facebook. Data collection, meanwhile, could be modified by adopting other qualitative forms such as semi-directive interviews with members of online communities or with SNCF users and SFR customers in situ, i.e., in stations and stores during field visits. We could also join and observe online communities that are "false twins" of the SNCF and SFR anti-brand communities, namely communities of Lovers, to verify our results in the light of Granovetter's theory of weak links (1973). Our results seem to show that hatred is a factor in engagement and community structuring, as well as an engine of servuction, encouraging customers to carry out elements of the SNCF and SFR service provision themselves, to make up for their shortcomings. It would therefore be interesting to know whether brand love is as engaging, structuring, and creative as brand hate, in line with the work of Cova & Dall'i (2009).

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/282472-loi-21-mars-2022-waserman-protection-des-lanceurs-dalerte>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.lefigaro.fr/conjoncture/ligne-paris-clermont-comment-la-sncf-et-le-gouvernement-veulent-limiter-les-innombrables-retards-20240223>

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## APPENDIXES

## Appendix 1.

Typologies of virtual community members identified in the literature

| Authors and years                               | Member types           | Authors and years              | Member types              |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Rheingold (1993),<br>Brown <i>et al.</i> (2002) | Contributors           | Ozbülük and Dursun<br>(2017)   | Learners                  |
|                                                 | Passives               |                                | Pragmatics                |
| Kozinets (1999)                                 | Devotees               |                                | Activists                 |
|                                                 | Insiders               |                                | Opinion Leaders           |
|                                                 | Tourists               |                                | Evangelists               |
|                                                 | Minglers               | Veloutsou and Black<br>(2020)  | Talent Scouts             |
| Kim (2000)                                      | Visitors               |                                | Greeters                  |
|                                                 | Novices                |                                | Catalysts                 |
|                                                 | Regulars               |                                | Guides                    |
|                                                 | Leaders                |                                | Hosts                     |
|                                                 | Elders                 |                                | Accountants               |
| Preece (2000)                                   | Moderators             |                                | Mentors                   |
|                                                 | Mediators              |                                | Partners                  |
|                                                 | Commentators           |                                | Historians & Storytellers |
|                                                 | Provocateurs           |                                | Heroes and Hosts          |
|                                                 | Participants           |                                | Professional working      |
| Äkkinen (2005)                                  | Passives               |                                | Consumers                 |
|                                                 | The onlookers          |                                | Strategists               |
|                                                 | The simple users       |                                | Facilities Managers       |
|                                                 | users                  |                                | Boundary spanners         |
| De Valck <i>et al.</i> (2009)                   | The leader users       | Buffaz and Rodriguez<br>(2023) | Brand Liaison             |
|                                                 | The functionalists     |                                | Ambassadors               |
|                                                 | The opportunists       |                                | Administrator             |
|                                                 | The hobbyists          |                                | Moderator                 |
|                                                 | The informationalists  |                                | Group specialist          |
|                                                 | The conversationalists |                                | Member                    |
| Sonnenbichler (2010)                            | The key members        |                                | Brand critic              |
|                                                 | Visitors               |                                | Brand counter-critic      |
|                                                 | Novices                |                                | Relay                     |
|                                                 | Actives                |                                |                           |
|                                                 | Leaders                |                                |                           |
|                                                 | Passives               |                                |                           |
| Portilla et Perez-Vega<br>(2016)                | Trolls                 |                                |                           |
|                                                 | The feeling seekers    |                                |                           |
|                                                 | The brand-lovers       |                                |                           |
|                                                 | The serial shares      |                                |                           |
|                                                 | The thinkers           |                                |                           |
|                                                 | The pragmatics         |                                |                           |
|                                                 | The social             |                                |                           |

**Appendix 2.**

Selection criteria for the two anti-brand virtual communities studied (Source: Authors own work)

| Macroscopic criteria |                                                                        |
|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Criterion n°1        | French-speaking virtual community                                      |
| Criterion n°2        | Community centered around the SNCF or SFR brand                        |
| Criterion n°3        | Community of Haters                                                    |
| Criterion n°4        | Openness of the virtual community                                      |
| Mesoscopic criteria  |                                                                        |
| Criterion n°5        | Number of virtual community members                                    |
| Criterion n°6        | Number of daily publications on the virtual community                  |
| Microscopic criteria |                                                                        |
| Criterion n°7        | Population composed solely of users/customers in the virtual community |
| Criterion n°8        | Level of variety of topics discussed in the virtual community          |