

The 2023 Freia ‘Boycott’ that Melted Away: Framing Iconic Brands and Contagion

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Abstract: In 2023, a boycott of Freia Chocolate – one of Norway’s most ‘beloved’ companies and brands – was called for because its parent company, Mondelez, still had business operations in Russia. A handful of companies joined the boycott, refusing to sell Freia products. However, none of those companies were major grocery store companies like Coop or Norgesgruppen, and in the warm summer months, support for the boycott melted. On its face, by applying contagion theory, we might have expected that the boycott would have been successful because all of the pre-conditions for a contagion of boycotts of Russia and companies supporting them existed: (1) the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a rare crisis in Europe; (2) there is substantial fear and apprehension in Europe regarding the invasion; (3) the invasion has significantly affected policy with many countries implementing various sanctions, for example boycotting Russian products; and (4) there has been a broad re-evaluation of risk in relation to the threats posed by Russia [1]. However, media framing, iconic branding, and Norwegian cultural values explain the boycott’s unsuccessfulness.

Keywords — reputational crisis, Freia, culture, contagion, iconic brand, framing

SUGGESTED CITATION: Conings-Vanvik, E. Johannessen, M., Diers-Lawson, A. (2024). The 2023 Freia ‘Boycott’ that Melted Away: Framing Iconic Brands and Contagion. *Proceedings of the International Crisis and Risk Communication Conference, Volume 6* (pp. 58-61). Orlando FL: International Crisis and Risk Communication Association. <https://www.doi.org/10.69931/ZBWZ4989>

INTRODUCTION

Founded in 1889, Freia is Norway's most bought chocolate, and deeply ingrained in modern Norwegian identity. Freia’s iconic brand is deeply rooted in the visionary principles of its most prominent owner and manager, Johan Throne Holst, who viewed chocolate as a pleasure that should be accessible to all. Holst championed his chocolate, catering to various tastes, and embraced advertising to engage consumers directly. Consequently, Freia became synonymous with ‘joy’; for example, Kvikk Lunsj (pronounced roughly Quick Lunch) has been symbolically associated with the very traditional Norwegian pleasure of hiking in both winter and summer thanks to its collaboration with the Norwegian Trekking Association and its original marketing as a snack on the go. In fact, Kvikk Lunsj is so commonly associated with outdoor activities that it is often used as a cultural shorthand for ‘Norway’ in Norwegian film, literature, and television and is therefore associated

ISSN: 2576-9111

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<http://www.doi.org/10.69931/ZBWZ4989>

with fond memories of outdoor activities are quintessentially Norwegian; therefore, as an iconic brand Freia symbolizes Norwegian values themselves [2]. Strategic alliances like this solidified cultural and emotional ties with Norwegian consumers and built on both organizations' brand heritage and symbolism to complement and strengthen each other [3].

The quality of Freia's brand heritage, no doubt, was part of what made it appealing for acquisition [3]. Freia was acquired by US-based Mondelez International in 2012, but for Norwegians it remains an authentic and iconic Norwegian brand [2]. However, in 2023 Mondelez found itself blacklisted on Ukraine's "International War Supporters" list because the group still maintains factories in Russia with 3,000 employees, generating a turnover of roughly \$1.46 billion annually and thus 'indirectly contributing to war financing' through payments of approximately \$109 million to the Russian treasury [4]. This caused several companies like SAS Airlines, Norwegian Airlines, SJ Railway Group, hotel chain Strawberry, and electronics retailer Elkjøp to stop selling Mondelez products – including Freia. However, major food retailers – like the grocery chains connected with Coop Norge and Norgesgruppen did not back the boycott, instead they called for the Norwegian government to offer advice on the situation. Ultimately, the Norwegian government did not back the boycott of Mondelez and Freia, with the State Secretary confirming that neither Freia nor Mondelez are officially sanctioned by either the EU or Norway, identifying a difference between the blacklisting and official sanctioning and that consumers should determine for themselves whether to purchase Mondelez and Freia products.

Given that several of the companies originally boycotting Freia hold firm to their position and the government acknowledged that while Mondelez was blacklisted, the company was not sanctioned, the question is why did consumers not follow suit with the public anger and strong government position about the Russian invasion of Ukraine? Contagion theory would suggest that in June 2023, as the number of companies joining the boycott and Norwegian media coverage of the controversy grew with companies inviting consumers to join them in the boycott, there would have been more impact for the rare event [1]; yet by January 2024, the boycott had largely melted away from media and consumer attention. The present research works to make sense of this failed boycott by exploring the intersection of crisis contagion and iconic brands in the media coverage of the 2023 Freia boycott – an event-based crisis where material blame is ambiguous [5].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Entman [6] argues that media framing involves both the selection and salience of stories that define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies to the problems identified. Essentially, it functions as a sensemaking tool that during crises allows the media to assign blame, provide situational context, and align the context with the dominant culture [7]. Yet, on its own, framing can offer an incomplete understanding of media coverage, which is why framing analyses need to answer the question, 'framing about what' [8]. In the context of the Freia boycott, we must consider the juxtaposition of the power of iconic brands and their recognizability, memorability, consistency, and cultural authenticity [7]. This can then be compared to the situational challenge of crisis contagion, which suggests that contagion is an emotional reaction to a situation that can produce a domino effect, which is heightened when the primary organization affected is an important one and in circumstances where numerous organizations can be linked to the controversy, as is the case with a large multi-national conglomerate organization like Mondelez [1].

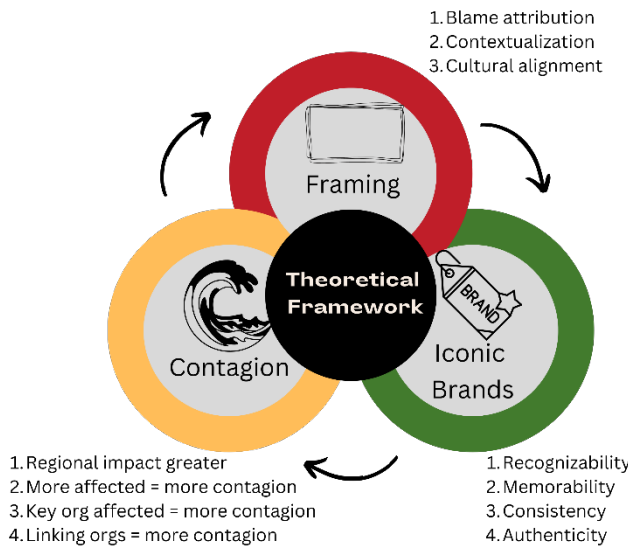
Therefore, the present study analyzes the Norwegian media's framing of the Freia boycott to better understand how framing, iconic brands, and contagion may help to understand when and why some events may lead to stakeholders acting against an organization in crisis (see Figure 1). Events are understudied but interesting because blame is ambiguous, unlike transgressions where the organization is at fault or reputational threats where there might not be an underlying issue beyond the complaint against the organization [5]. Yet, even crisis type can be in the eye of the beholder as well – though we can apply definitional standards to classify crises, framing analyses in crisis suggests that blame attribution is one of the central indicators that journalists use to communicate sensemaking to their readers, viewers, and listeners and may vary depending on tone and attitude towards the organization [8].

METHODS

To make sense of the failed 2023 Freia boycott, we collected 147 news articles from June 2023, when the boycott first emerged, to January 2024 from the Norwegian news database – Retriever. Duplicates were removed and only articles with content were kept, which led to a study sample of 73 articles primarily from the top 10 publications in Norway including VG (N = 10), Aftenposten (N = 7), Klassekampen (N = 8), Nationen (N = 10), Finansavisen (N = 6), Dagsavisen (N = 6), Dagbladet (N = 3), Dagens Næringsliv (N = 10), and all others (N = 13). The articles were coded using a two-part process. First, qualitative thematic analysis included open coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding [9], to identify the top primary and secondary themes communicated in the articles. Second, theoretically grounded quantitative coding operationalized framing, contagion, and iconic brands (see Figure 1), including tone of media coverage towards Freia, Mondelez, and other brands mentioned.

One-way ANOVAs were run to identify significant predictors of tone, contagion, and iconic branding. Data were also analyzed based on how journalists framed the type of crisis to better meet the study’s objectives.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework Applied



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ten primary themes were identified: corporate leadership, business and conflict (e.g., the influence of war on business), political leadership, Mondelez and Mondelez’s behavior, Freia’s reputational damage by association with Mondelez, the Freia boycott, morality and moral action evaluations, the economic impact of the boycott on Freia, the impact of the boycott on Freia employees and trade unions, and the SAS Airlines boycott of Freia. In addition to the primary themes identified in the articles, five recurring secondary themes emerged: (1) social responsibility (including authenticity evaluations of the social responsibility

of the boycott itself); (2) the need for government interventions about the boycott; (3) with a theme in coverage that the boycott was merely ‘symbolic politics’; (4) framing Freia as a victim; and (5) singling out the SAS boycott of Freia. In the combination of the primary and secondary themes, a clearer picture of the media framing of the Freia boycott emerged – one that was very critical of the boycott, expressing skepticism about the quality of the motivations of those companies joining the boycott before the government had offered guidance. In this way, the iconic branding associated Freia with a Norwegian identity, which also seems to activate other Norwegian values like institutional trust, transparency, fairness, openness, and cultural unity [10].

In fact, a fundamentally neutral media ecology about the Freia boycott emerges, with 52% of the articles framing the whole situation as an event (blame ambiguous), a reputational crisis (relatively neutral on blame attribution), or an event outside the organization's control. However, 38% of the articles framed the situation as a transgression on Freia’s part –placing blame attribution on the company. For these articles, journalists portrayed Freia as having done something wrong, and these articles stood out for their clarity and coherence in narrating Freia’s alleged wrongdoing. To delve deeper, ANOVAs revealed how these articles combined framing the crisis as a transgression with other situational factors like tone, portrayal of Freia’s brand image, and the degree to which the emergent narrative reflected the rhetoric of contagion (see Figure 2).

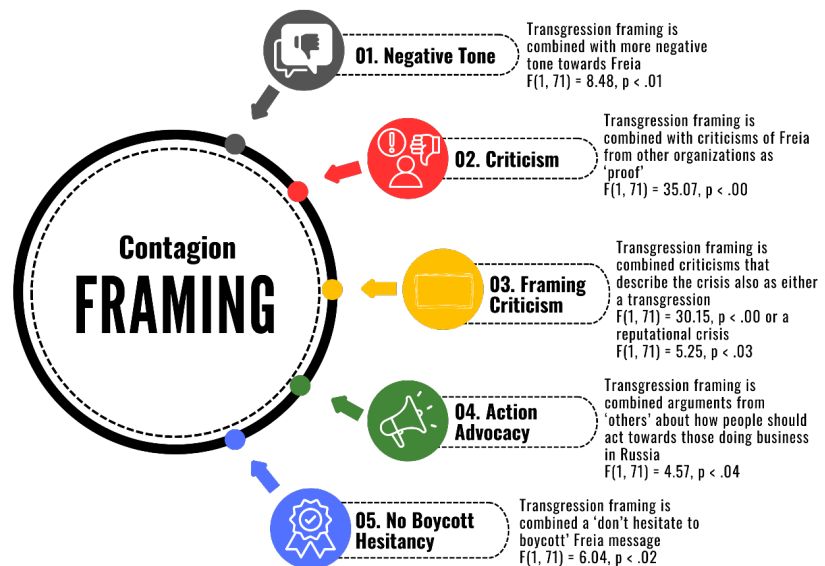


Figure 2. Contagion in Articles Framing the Freia Boycott as a Transgression

We discovered that how Freia was portrayed significantly affected the articles’ tone, perceived contagiousness of the situation, and how Freia’s brand was depicted. This finding provides deeper insights into the media’s role in contagion framing during a crisis to amplify the risk for the organization. These findings highlight the structure of contagion framing within an organizational event to drive media sensemaking, encouraging blame attribution and action against an organization. There are five parts of contagion framing that can be identified if the media’s narrative is ‘activist’ against an organization in crisis: (1) a negative tone; (2) direct brand criticism; (3) framing criticism to attribute blame; (4) action advocacy within the stories; and (5)

communicating that there is no need for hesitancy in acting. Clearly, contagion framing in the Norwegian media is in contrast to the dominant media approach to the Freia case; however, this provides a new and useful heuristic for understanding and interpreting negative media coverage of an organization in crisis.

CONCLUSIONS

Given that contagion framing represented a significant and coherent part of the media framing of the 2023 Freia boycott, how do we explain its ultimate failure? Together, the findings offer four valuable insights. First, iconic brands are culturally powerful. Therefore, journalists' sensemaking about the crisis is inextricably linked to the cultural currency of the iconic brand. Second, a culture of fairness suggests societal values and norms influenced the reception and spread of the boycott. Third, media framing was predominantly neutral. Because more than half of the coverage was neutral, the media ecology for Freia and Mondelez served as a roadblock to the minority of the coverage that used a clear contagion framing. Fourth, trust in government serves as an essential cultural factor guiding the sensemaking about crises in Norway and the rest of the Nordics. When that evaluation was that Mondelez and Freia were not sanctioned by either the EU or Norway, the government served as an arbiter of 'fact' influencing how the public perceived and responded to the crisis. Collectively, these factors shed light on the complexities of contagion dynamics and emphasize the multifaceted nature of crises like the Freia boycott, which require more complex models to understand and manage events like these in the future.

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