

BUILDING BRAND IMMUNITY: HOW TO CREATE RESILIENT CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS IN TURBULENT TIMES

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Abstract

In many markets, volatility has become routine. Brands are increasingly learning that customer affection alone is insufficient to withstand buy-local movements, geopolitical friction, or viral scandals. When disruption strikes, a critical question emerges: which customers will stand by the brand, and how can firms ensure that their efforts are focused where they will have the greatest impact? Drawing on recent work on brand immunity, this paper outlines how managers can apply this concept in everyday decision-making. Brand immunity refers to customers' resistance to changing their brand evaluations when confronted with negative information. We translate this idea into actionable guidance through the Integrated Brand Immunity Process, a continuous four-phase cycle that frames resilience as a strategic capability. Central to the diagnostic phase of this process is the Customer Immunity Management Matrix, which maps customers by value and immunity strength to help managers determine which relationships to anchor, fortify, leverage, or minimize. By integrating this prioritization with an explicit assessment of threat nuance and ongoing renewal, the process converts empirical insight into a practical framework for building customer resilience in turbulent times.

Keywords: brand immunity, customer resilience, high-value customers, value-resilience mapping, continuous capability development

1. Introduction

Brands increasingly operate in environments where volatility is routine. Geopolitical tensions, shifting trade policies, and online outrage have made vulnerability an everyday reality. Even brands with deep reservoirs of customer affection are discovering that attachment alone offers limited protection, as intense brand love can quickly turn into resentment when relationships sour (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013). In recent years, several once-admired firms have found themselves reacting defensively as consumer sentiment shifts overnight in response to events largely beyond their control. Starbucks, for instance, has faced tariff-related cost pressures in Canada amid broader trade uncertainty. Subsequent price increases, combined with heightened “buy-local” sentiment, triggered calls to favor domestic coffee chains, illustrating how macro-level policy shifts can rapidly translate into consumer backlash (Starbucks Coffee Company, 2025).

This example highlights a nagging managerial challenge: when disruption strikes, which customers will stand by the brand, and how do you know which ones are actually worth the effort? Recent research offers a useful lens through the concept of brand immunity—defined as customers’ resistance to changing how they view a brand when confronted with negative information about it (Merlo, Eisingerich & Hoyer, 2024). Brand immunity offers a more accurate indicator of the true strength and depth of customer–brand relationships than traditional constructs such as brand love or commitment.

However, immunity should not be conflated with attachment. Prior research on the volatility of customer sentiment illustrates this distinction clearly. Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp (2015) identify “spite” as a distinct form of social media complaint, in which customers, often reacting to a perceived betrayal following a “double deviation” (a service failure compounded by

an unsuccessful recovery), seek to actively harm the firm. This dynamic underscores that even highly engaged relationships are vulnerable to rupture. Indeed, the impulse to punish a firm through viral complaints suggests that conventional metrics such as brand love capture the intensity of a relationship rather than its resilience. While brand love reflects the depth of current affection, it offers little protection against feelings of betrayal that can rapidly catalyze negative viral spread.

Building on theories of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and the mere-measurement effect (Morwitz & Fitzsimons, 2004), Merlo, Eisingerich, and Hoyer (2024) demonstrate that simply prompting customers to reflect on how they would respond to negative brand information can itself strengthen their resilience. In this sense, brand immunity is both diagnostic and dynamic: it reveals the robustness of customer relationships while simultaneously contributing to their fortification. Yet, although the construct of brand immunity is conceptually and empirically grounded, its managerial operationalization remains underdeveloped, particularly in an environment where even strong customer relationships are repeatedly stress-tested by volatility. While managers increasingly recognize the importance of psychological resilience, they often struggle to translate this insight into concrete, day-to-day relationship management practices. This article addresses that gap by advancing two central questions: which customer relationships should be prioritized for immunization, and how can immunity be deliberately built and sustained over time?

To answer these questions, we introduce the Integrated Brand Immunity Process, a novel managerial framework that operationalizes brand immunity through a unified cycle of diagnosis, prioritization, and intervention. At its core is the Customer Immunity Management Matrix, which enables firms to systematically allocate their efforts by mapping customers along two critical

dimensions: customer value and immunity strength. This approach allows managers to identify relationships that are not only economically valuable but also psychologically defensible, as well as those that require proactive reinforcement. By doing so, the framework moves beyond identifying *who* to immunize and provides a foundation for *how* immunity can be cultivated, through engagement and communication practices that encourage customers to actively reaffirm their beliefs and values (Rust, Lemon & Zeithaml, 2004; Merlo, Eisingerich & Hoyer, 2024).

Once priority relationships are identified, the next step is to manage and strengthen immunity over time. The article outlines a four-phase process—Diagnosis, Threat Nuance, Execution and Renewal—that treats immunity as an ongoing relationship capability. In practice, this means tracking where resilience stands today, reinforcing it where needed, and revisiting it regularly as new pressures arise.

Brand immunity becomes more actionable when managers connect *who* is resilient with *what* threat is emerging, and *how* relationships may shift under pressure—a challenge our matrix and process are designed to address. This framing aligns with prior work distinguishing negative publicity by type (performance-based vs. value-based), source (customers, employees, or the firm), and the corresponding pre- vs. post-negative-publicity strategies (Hettiarachchige, Cabiddu & Moi, 2025). It also aligns with evidence that organization-public relationships shift across crisis stages as stances and relationship modes evolve (Cheng, Jin, Zhang, Bai, Zhang & Shi, 2025), and with the role of internal coordination under ambiguity (James & Minnis, 2004).

By translating empirical insights into practical tools, the article offers a playbook for managers to treat immunity as a capability that must be actively developed and maintained, strengthening customer resilience before disruption hits. The guiding question is therefore simple

but vital: how can managers ensure that the customers who matter most are the ones who continue to defend the brand in turbulent times?

2. Why Brand Immunity Matters in the Age of Volatility

In early 2025, a surge of economic nationalism swept across Canada. The slogan “Elbows Up,” a hockey term meaning to be ready for a fight, became shorthand for supporting local businesses and pushing back against U.S. influence amid heightened tariff tensions. It wasn’t just politics; it became personal. Canadians began boycotting U.S. goods, cancelling travel south of the border, and calling for provincial liquor stores to pull American products off shelves (Paperny, 2025). What might once have remained a diffuse expression of discontent was rapidly amplified through social media, where calls for boycotts, symbolic acts of defiance, and moralised narratives about consumption travelled quickly and widely. For many consumers, what began as a trade policy issue came to feel like a personal betrayal.

Against this backdrop, brands such as McDonald’s and Starbucks were recast as symbols of unwanted foreign influence. McDonald’s responded by foregrounding its local embeddedness through the “Not Without Canadian Farmers” campaign, reminding customers that its supply chain relies on Canadian producers (Look, 2025). Yet in an environment shaped by online outrage and algorithmic amplification, managerial responses could not fully control how brand actions were interpreted, shared, and reframed. Once negative narratives gained traction, outcomes became far less predictable for brands caught in the spotlight.

Starbucks, for example, reported a decline in North American sales in its third-quarter 2025 results, linking part of the weakness to changing consumer preferences and exposure to negative responses such as boycotts and coordinated online criticism (Starbucks Coffee

Company, 2025). Even some of Starbucks' most devoted customers—long-standing members of the Starbucks Rewards program who queued annually for Pumpkin Spice Lattes—began defecting to homegrown chains such as Second Cup (Chan, 2025). These shifts were not driven solely by price or product dissatisfaction, but by rapidly circulating social narratives that reframed consumption choices as expressions of identity and allegiance. The mood found expression in both protest and play, as local cafés jokingly renamed the Americano the “Canadiano,” a small but telling signal that symbolic resistance can spread with remarkable speed (Melnick, 2025).

More broadly, managers across industries increasingly face volatility fueled not only by sociopolitical shocks, but by the ease with which negative information, accusations, and moral judgments can be produced and disseminated online. Social media firestorms enable relatively small triggers to escalate into reputational crises almost overnight, often bypassing traditional gatekeepers and formal complaint channels (Duffek, Eisingerich and Merlo, 2023). In such contexts, brand vulnerability can intensify even under strong stewardship, as social, political, and economic crosswinds intersect with digital amplification. Sustaining competitive advantage therefore depends not only on a brand's ability to generate affection, but on its capacity to cultivate relationships resilient enough to withstand sudden waves of negative information. Brand immunity becomes critical precisely because it helps explain why some customers pause, interpret, and resist viral negativity, while others rapidly join the cascade.

2.1 Exploring Brand Immunity

Even well-managed brands can quickly become exposed when customers encounter conflicting or negative information (Grégoire, Tripp & Legoux, 2009; Giuffredi-Kähr,

Nyffenegger, Hoyer, Khamitov & Khromer, 2021). Customers who once expressed strong attachment may withdraw support or remain silent under pressure. This distinction between *liking* a brand and *standing by it* when tested lies at the heart of the brand immunity construct (Merlo, Eisingerich & Hoyer, 2024).

As discussed earlier, brand immunity describes customers' resistance to changing how they view a brand when confronted with negative information. It captures the ability to process unfavorable cues without discarding prior judgments. Rather than reacting impulsively, customers with high immunity weigh new information against accumulated experience, acting as a psychological and behavioral buffer that protects the relationship from external shocks. In parallel, a systematic review in the negative publicity domain emphasizes pre-negative-publicity strategies, such as proactive reputation management, that can shape how stakeholders interpret negative events and firm responses, particularly under ambiguity (Hettiarachchige, Cabiddu & Moi, 2025).

The construct draws on two theoretical pillars. First, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) explains that when people encounter information inconsistent with their beliefs, they feel discomfort and seek to restore balance. Customers with meaningful brand relationships strive for coherence between how they see themselves and how they see the brand, interpreting negative information in ways that preserve that alignment (Ahluwalia, 2000; Fitzsimons & Morwitz, 1996; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Second, the mere-measurement effect further suggests that prompting customers to reflect on their relationship with a brand heightens the salience of their attitudes, making subsequent behavior more consistent with them (Morwitz, Johnson & Schmittlein, 1993; Dholakia & Morwitz, 2002). When customers are reminded of what a brand

means to them, they engage more thoughtfully with negative information and are less prone to immediate rejection.

For managers, these insights translate into a concise diagnostic tool: the immunity scale. Traditional brand metrics (such as brand attitude, commitment, or love) capture the *strength* of current evaluations but overlook how those evaluations might change when challenged. Research shows that highly committed or emotionally attached customers can react strongly, and sometimes more negatively, when confronted with brand transgressions (Trump, 2014; Wan, Hui & Wyer, 2011). The immunity scale introduces a forward-looking perspective by asking customers how they would respond if negative information were to emerge.

The scale comprises four items assessing resistance to changes in brand perception and behavior under hypothetical negative information: (1) “My relationship with X is not affected by negative information about the business.” (2) “Negative information about X changes the way I think of the business.” (3) “Negative information about X does not change my general view of the business.” (4) “I change the way I do business with X based on negative information about the business.” (Anchored by 1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree”).

Interpreting results is straightforward: higher scores signal greater resistance, lower scores greater susceptibility. These insights help managers anticipate which relationships are likely to remain stable if the brand is challenged and which may need proactive reinforcement. The items can be integrated into existing brand tracking surveys, CRM systems, or customer reviews without presenting any actual negative content. By explicitly introducing the possibility of future negative information, the measure captures differences in resistance that remain invisible when customer relationships are assessed only under favorable conditions.

Importantly, according to Merlo, Eisingerich & Hoyer (2024), the scale does more than diagnose: it can also *strengthen* customer resilience. By prompting customers to reflect on how they would respond to a hypothetical threat, the mere act of measurement itself can surface supportive beliefs and keep them cognitively accessible. This dual effect makes brand immunity both a diagnostic and developmental tool: it reveals where vulnerability lies while helping to fortify customer relationships before disruption occurs.

3. Diagnosing and Mapping Customer Resilience

When markets become volatile and information circulates at speed, managers face an acute resource allocation dilemma. The instinct to protect the entire customer base often results in diluted, ineffective responses, while arbitrarily narrowing the focus risks exposing the firm to long-term churn. This dilemma is amplified in digital environments, where negative information can be produced, shared, and escalated by customers themselves, often in real time. A single incident can trigger online criticism or coordinated backlash that rapidly reshapes customer sentiment far beyond the initial trigger. To respond effectively, managers require a diagnostic tool that distinguishes stable relationships from vulnerable ones before volatility translates into widespread defection.

We propose the Customer Immunity Management Matrix, a framework that maps the customer portfolio across two distinct dimensions: Value (the consequence of relationship loss) and Immunity (resilience to negative information). By explicitly incorporating customers' susceptibility to externally generated narratives, including social media criticism and online firestorms, the matrix moves beyond traditional segmentation based solely on economic contribution.

3.1 Identifying Drivers of Customer Value

In a perfect world, firms would immunize every customer. But resources are finite. Therefore, immunization efforts must be directed toward relationships that carry significant consequence if lost. While “high-value” is frequently treated as a monolithic concept in managerial practice, the academic literature suggests that value is multidimensional. To accurately diagnose risk, managers must look beyond simple revenue metrics and identify the specific source of value a customer provides.

The most traditional measure is *economic value*, best defined by Customer Lifetime Value (CLV). This perspective prioritizes customers based on the accumulated, discounted net contribution margin achieved over time (Berger & Nasr, 1998; Gupta, Lehmann & Stuart, 2004). For firms in recurring revenue sectors (such as telecommunications or banking, for example) the primary risk is financial volatility. The loss of economically valuable customers destabilizes predictable cash flows and undermines the financial foundations of the firm.

In high-involvement categories such as luxury fashion or automotive, value often takes the form of *psychological value*, reflected in strong brand attachment. These customers do not merely purchase the brand; they integrate it into their self-concept (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich & Iacobucci, 2010). Here, the risk is existential rather than purely financial. As Park et al. (2010) show, such customers exhibit high brand prominence, driving share of wallet and behavioral exclusivity. Losing them signals an erosion of relevance and creates openings for competitors to disrupt the emotional exclusivity that sustains the brand’s positioning.

Furthermore, in connected markets, value is increasingly derived from *social value*, or advocacy. These customers are market-makers, driving organic acquisition through word-of-

mouth (Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009). Losing this segment means losing the firm's primary defense mechanism. Committed advocates can act as firewalls against negative narratives, and without them, it exposes the brand to viral toxicity and reputational contagion (Duffek, Eisingerich & Merlo, 2023).

Finally, in adaptive sectors such as technology or wellness, value increasingly stems from *innovation value* through co-creation. These customers engage in dialogue, experimentation, and transparency to help shape the offering itself (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). The risk here is stagnation. When co-creators disengage, firms lose critical feedback loops, reducing their ability to learn and respond to shifting market needs.

By identifying which of these four value drivers a customer represents, managers can align immunization strategies with the specific assets at risk. Rather than protecting "loyal customers" indiscriminately, firms can deploy targeted immunity-building efforts that preserve financial stability, psychological relevance, social defense, and innovative capacity.

3.2 Customer Immunity Management Matrix

Protecting the customer relationships that matter most requires more than knowing who brings value today. Managers also need a sense of which relationships are likely to hold steady if the brand comes under pressure. The Customer Immunity Management Matrix pairs value with resilience. Categorizing customers on this matrix helps managers see more clearly which relationships are both valuable and likely to endure, and which may need more urgent attention to avoid potential risk. In essence, the matrix helps managers answer a practical question: which high-value customer relationships are most critical to immunize, because losing them would undermine the firm's strategic priorities?

Once customers are mapped, the matrix prescribes four distinct strategic imperatives. The prescribed managerial interventions are grounded in established literature regarding how individuals process information under threat.

Customers with high immunity possess the motivation and cognitive framework to process negative information defensively; they counter-argue against attacks to maintain cognitive consistency. Conversely, low-immunity customers lack this motivation, engaging in diagnostic processing where negative cues are perceived as having higher diagnosticity regarding the firm's true quality (Ahluwalia, 2000). Therefore, the managerial interventions are designed to either sustain existing biases (where immunity is high) or mitigate the lack of attachment (where immunity is low).

3.2.1 Anchor (High Value, High Immunity)

Customers in this quadrant represent the firm's most valuable and stable assets. Theoretically, their resilience is underpinned by attitude certainty. Because their positive view of the brand is held with high confidence, they naturally engage in biased assimilation, discounting negative news to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and avoid attitude accommodation (Ahluwalia, 2000). For these customers, the managerial task is to anchor, ensuring they have the cognitive resources to keep that defense mechanism active.

For economic-value customers, firms can leverage the mere-measurement effect (Morwitz & Fitzsimons, 2004). The literature suggests that the simple act of asking a customer to reflect on their relationship history (for example, acknowledging a milestone or a warm greeting for recurring visits) keeps the positive bond salient without requiring heavy transactional incentives. Conversely, for customers valued for advocacy, anchoring requires equipping them

with the means to defend the brand. Since committed individuals actively counter-argue negative information (Ahluwalia, 2000), firms should provide these advocates with verified facts and insider context during a crisis. This can facilitate the knowledge sharing required to validate their stance and helps them reduce dissonance with their own social networks (James & Minnis, 2004).

3.2.2 Fortify (High Value, Low Immunity)

This quadrant represents the firm's most acute vulnerability: high dependency coupled with low resilience. These customers generate significant value but lack the brand-self connection required to withstand a shock (Park et al., 2010). Without a psychological buffer, customers are prone to rapid churn when performance falters. The goal is fortification, which entails building an emotional 'bridge' before the crisis.

Fortify entails high urgency because of the betrayal effect. As Grégoire, Salle & Tripp (2015) demonstrate, high-relationship customers who feel betrayed often engage in "double deviation", punishing the firm more severely than even a stranger would. Managers must shift engagement from transactional to emotional, linking the brand's values to the customer's self-perception (e.g., framing a coffee purchase as a commitment to craftsmanship). Proactive communication is also critical; warning customers of a problem, such as potential service disruptions from internal systems failure, can prevent embarrassment that triggers betrayal (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp, 2015). For instance, personally notifying customers with a service update email before they find out on social media can prevent the embarrassment that fuels revenge.

3.2.3 Leverage (Low Value, High Immunity)

These customers are steadfast but hold lower strategic weight. While they do not justify the heavy investment of fortification, their consistent sentiment is valuable. Their stability is explained by biased assimilation (Ahluwalia, 2000); they actively discount negative information to maintain cognitive consistency (Festinger, 1957). The strategy is to leverage. Managers should amplify these steady voices in community forums and customer reviews. Their unprompted, stable feedback acts as a sentiment anchor, diluting the toxicity of a visible negative spike. Because these customers naturally engage in biased assimilation, they provide social proof to new entrants without increasing the firm's cost-to-serve.

3.2.4 Minimize (Low Value, Low Immunity)

These customers represent an asymmetric risk: they contribute little value but can generate disproportionate noise. Low-commitment individuals are prone to negative spillover effects, where a single negative data point can be used to generalize brand perception (Ahluwalia, 2000). Without the buffer of commitment, these customers share negative information indiscriminately. The strategy is to minimize. Managers should limit the brand's exposure to this segment during crises. Communications should remain strictly factual, and routed to private channels rather than public forums or social platforms. Managers should build a firewall around these customers to ensure that their cognitive fragility and negativity do not infect the high-value segments.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

4. Understanding Threat Nuance

While the Customer Immunity Management Matrix provides a structure for building resilience, its effective use depends on a clear understanding of the specific threat facing the brand. Customer immunity is not a uniform shield. As Merlo, Eisingerich, and Hoyer (2024) note, the logic of immunization is designed to address the moderately negative information that is common in connected markets, rather than extreme transgressions that fundamentally rupture the contract of trust. To apply the matrix appropriately, managers must attend to the *nature* of the transgression. The type and severity of the event determine whether the appropriate managerial response is reassurance and reinforcement, or more fundamental forms of repair.

4.1 Distinguishing Threat Type and Source

A critical distinction for managers is whether negative publicity is performance-based or value-based (Hettiarachchige, Cabiddu & Moi, 2025). Performance-based negative publicity arises from functional shortcomings, such as service outages, pricing increases, or product failures. These events challenge the firm's ability to deliver utilitarian benefits and are often interpreted through a lens of competence rather than character. Value-based negative publicity, by contrast, stems from social or ethical concerns, including allegations of discrimination, fraud, or environmental harm. Such incidents threaten symbolic benefits and tend to activate moral judgment, making them more psychologically charged and reputationally consequential.

This distinction is crucial when determining the appropriate managerial response. Consider the tariff-related backlash faced by Starbucks, discussed earlier. This episode reflects a performance-based pressure triggered by an exogenous shock. Although customers may experience higher prices, the firm itself is not necessarily viewed as culpable; rather, it is seen as constrained by macro-level forces beyond its control. In such situations, the managerial task

centers on reducing uncertainty and facilitating sense-making (James & Minnis, 2004).

Strategies emphasizing transparency and information disclosure are particularly effective, as they help stakeholders understand cost pressures and external constraints without reframing the firm as morally compromised (Hettiarachchige, Cabiddu & Moi, 2025).

By contrast, value-based transgressions, such as a discriminatory act by an employee, are interpreted as violations of the firm's underlying character. Because these incidents are typically perceived as internally sourced, relying on an existing reservoir of customer immunity becomes both risky and insufficient. In these cases, managerial responses must move beyond strategies aimed at reducing offensiveness, such as denial or justification, and instead focus on corrective actions that signal accountability, reinforce values, and prevent recurrence (Hettiarachchige, Cabiddu & Moi, 2025).

4.2 Adapting the Response

In a low culpability/performance context (e.g., tariffs), the goal is to buffer the shock. Managers should leverage high-immunity customers to stabilize sentiment by stimulating information seeking (Hettiarachchige, Cabiddu & Moi, 2025). By encouraging these customers to examine the facts, firms reduce ambiguity. The immunity established helps customers to interpret events like price hikes as external constraints rather than corporate greed.

In a high culpability/value context (e.g., discrimination), the goal is moral repair. High immunity provides only a temporary suspension of judgment; it will erode quickly without corrective actions. Organization-public relationships are dynamic; a customer's stance can shift rapidly from accommodation to conflict if the firm's response is seen as tone-deaf to the moral

intensity of the crisis (Cheng, Jin, Zhang, Bai, Zhang & Shi, 2025). Consequently, it requires substantive changes to governance or culture, not just communication.

Ultimately, the Customer Immunity Management Matrix identifies *who* to prioritize, but threat nuance determines *what* must be done. When negative information is ambiguous, immunity acts as a buffer allowing transparency to work. But when negative information is severe and value-based, immunity buys the firm just enough time to enact the corrective actions necessary to save the relationship before it snaps.

5. Integrated Brand Immunity Process

Translating brand immunity from a theoretical construct into a managerial capability requires a unified process. We propose the Integrated Brand Immunity Process, a continuous cycle aligning defensive intensity with the driver of customer value. The process operates through four phases—Diagnosis and Mapping, Threat Nuance, Execution, and Renewal—replacing ad-hoc crisis responses with systematic discipline.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Phase 1: Diagnosis and Mapping. The reality is that immunization efforts require resources, and resources are finite. Firms should prioritize immunization for strategically consequential relationships rather than attempting to address the entire customer base (Rust, Lemon & Zeithaml, 2004; Gupta, Lehmann & Stuart, 2004). This aligns with Merlo, Eisingerich & Hoyer's (2024) framing of immunity as a targeted diagnostic tool. Managers must first conduct a strategic value triage. This revisits our earlier drivers of customer value: not merely current revenue, but the specific asset (whether economic, psychological, advocacy, or

innovation) that a customer contributes (e.g., a high CLV bank customer or a social platform creator who drives referrals). Firms must audit relationships against these dimensions to identify their most critical assets. Managers must isolate the primary driver of value. Doing so ensures the firm does not expend defensive resources on customers whose exit represents manageable churn, but instead isolates those where loss constitutes a structural threat to customer equity (Gupta, Lehmann & Stuart, 2004). Intersecting this strategic value triage with the immunity scale determines the customer's placement on the Customer Immunity Management Matrix. Strategies in the top tier (i.e., Anchor and Fortify) command highest priority as these customers represent irreplaceable assets.

Phase 2: Threat Nuance. Diagnosis and mapping determines *who* to protect and *where* to invest; threat nuance clarifies *what* we are protecting them against. The immunization mechanism itself (i.e., the abstract, non-specific negative-information prompt) provides a less harmful fortification than exposing customers to actual negative allegations (Merlo, Eisingerich & Hoyer, 2024). However, managers cannot just immunize and consider the task complete. They should also audit their risk environment to anticipate plausible threats. Is the crisis performance-based (e.g., service disruption) or value-based (e.g., ethical issues)? Performance-based negative publicity casts doubt on a brand's ability to deliver functional benefits, whereas value-based negative publicity alerts social or ethical issues that erode symbolic benefits (Hettiarachchige, Cabiddu & Moi, 2025). Because threat nuance changes what customers expect next, managers should treat it as a core contingency when deciding how to complement immunization.

Phase 3: Execution. This phase deploys the specific imperative (Anchor, Fortify, Leverage, or Minimize) defined in Phase 1, but filtering it through the reality of the threat identified in Phase 2. For Anchor (high-value, high immunity) customers, execution means

validation. If the threat is performance-based, managers should arm them with data to rationalize the failure. If the threat is value-based, managers should use the buffer from immunity and promptly enact moral repairs. For Fortify (high-value, low immunity) customers—a firm’s biggest flight risk—the strategy shifts to heavily emotional. Performance-based threat requires proactive warnings to prevent the betrayal effect, while a value-based threat demands a visible, sincere apology and dedicated rebuild of the moral contract before they churn.

Meanwhile, for the low-value customers, a firm’s priority should be efficiency. Managers should amplify the Leverage (low-value, high immunity) voices to drown the noise, and strictly contain the Minimize (low-value, low immunity) segment to stop them from spreading toxicity. By echoing the diagnostic and mapping logic of Phase 1 and the threat nuances of Phase 2, this phase ensures managers aren’t wasting expensive Fortify strategies on customers who only need to be Minimized.

Phase 4: Renewal. Finally, the process acknowledges that relationships drift, immunity fades, and situations change. Since organization-public relationships are dynamic, a customer’s stance can shift rapidly from accommodation to conflict if expectations go unmet (Cheng, Jin, Zhang, Bai, Zhang & Shi, 2025). Furthermore, while mere-measurement effects can persist (Dholakia & Morwitz, 2002), the specific duration of the immunity effects remains variable. Regular recalibration and renewal are essential to prevent the natural decay of customer resilience over time. This ensures the firm’s most valuable assets remain inoculated against the inevitable next shock.

6. Conclusion

In an environment where consumer sentiment can turn overnight, firms face more than the loss of customers. They face the rapid diffusion of narratives that can erode confidence, legitimacy, and firm value before managers have time to react, or even realize that a problem is unfolding. In such conditions, the central challenge is no longer simply to build loyalty, but to preserve conviction when brands are publicly tested.

This article advances brand immunity as a necessary extension of contemporary relationship management and offers a concrete pathway for operationalizing it. We move beyond the idea that resilience emerges organically from strong relationships and instead show that it can be diagnosed, prioritized, and deliberately cultivated. By introducing the Customer Immunity Management Matrix, we provide managers with a structured way to distinguish relationships that are economically, psychologically, socially, or innovatively consequential, and to recognise that treating all customers as equally worthy of protection is both inefficient and risky. Targeted immunization of high-value, high-consequence relationships yields disproportionate protection, whereas indiscriminate investment spreads resources thin and amplifies exposure.

Importantly, this paper reframes immunity not as a static attribute, but as a dynamic capability. Through the Integrated Brand Immunity Process, we translate the construct into an ongoing managerial discipline that integrates diagnosis, threat nuance, execution, and renewal. This process clarifies not only who to protect, but how responses must adapt depending on the nature and source of negative information. In doing so, the framework bridges previously disconnected literatures on negative publicity, relationship dynamics, and customer value, offering managers a coherent system for navigating volatility rather than reacting to it episodically.

Turbulence is inevitable. What distinguishes enduring brands from vulnerable ones is not the intensity of their crisis response, but the foresight with which they prepare their customers beforehand. Brands that invest in immunity do more than defend against backlash. They cultivate customers who pause, interpret, and stand firm when external pressures mount. In volatile markets and hyperconnected media environments, this capacity may prove to be one of the most enduring sources of competitive advantage.

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Figure 1: The Customer Immunity Management Matrix

<i>Customer Value</i>	<i>High</i>	Fortify	Anchor
	<i>Low</i>	Minimize	Leverage
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
		<i>Immunity Strength</i>	

Figure 2: Integrated Brand Immunity Process



