

Boycott and Beyond: What Morocco's Consumer Protection Rights Reveal

Le boycott comme révélateur : une lecture critique des droits des consommateurs au Maroc

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Abstract

This article presents a critical evaluation of Morocco's consumer protection system, focusing on its legal architecture, institutional framework, and the role of civil society. It analyzes the legislative foundation laid by Law 31.08 (2008, updated in 2014) and complementary developments such as the introduction of e-commerce protections (Law 28.07) and the reactivation of the Competition Council. While these reforms reflect alignment with international norms—including the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection and EU consumer law—important challenges persist. These include vague legal definitions, sectoral gaps (especially in health and finance), inconsistent enforcement, limited regulatory coordination, and the constrained legal and financial capacities of Consumer Protection Associations (CPAs).

The article further reflects on the 2018 nationwide boycott as a critical episode that exposed institutional visibility, public dissatisfaction, and the role of informal civic protest in shaping perceptions of market fairness. Rather than attributing causality, the article uses this moment to reflect on the broader challenges of regulatory legitimacy, institutional trust, and civic engagement. The conclusion highlights avenues for future interdisciplinary research on trust, economic justice, and consumer-state dynamics in the context of Morocco's evolving regulatory landscape.

Keywords: Consumer rights; Morocco; Boycott behavior; Institutional trust; Consumer associations.

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Résumé

Cet article propose une évaluation critique du système de protection des consommateurs au Maroc, en mettant l'accent sur son architecture juridique, son cadre institutionnel et le rôle de la société civile. Il examine les fondements législatifs établis par la Loi n° 31.08 (adoptée en 2008 et révisée en 2014), ainsi que les évolutions complémentaires telles que l'introduction de la régulation du commerce électronique (Loi n° 28.07) et la réactivation du Conseil de la concurrence. Bien que ces réformes traduisent un alignement avec les normes internationales — notamment les Lignes directrices des Nations Unies pour la protection des consommateurs et les directives européennes — plusieurs défis persistent. Ces derniers incluent des définitions juridiques imprécises, des lacunes sectorielles (notamment dans les domaines de la santé et des services financiers), une application inégale des règles, une coordination réglementaire limitée, ainsi qu'une capacité juridique et financière restreinte des associations de protection des consommateurs (APC).

L'article revient également sur le boycott national de 2018, considéré comme un épisode révélateur des tensions entre légalité, confiance institutionnelle et mobilisation citoyenne informelle. Sans établir de lien de causalité, il invite à réfléchir aux enjeux plus larges de légitimité réglementaire et d'engagement civique. En conclusion, il ouvre des perspectives de recherche interdisciplinaire sur la confiance, la justice économique et les dynamiques entre consommateurs et institutions dans le contexte marocain.

Mots-clés : Droits des consommateurs; Maroc; Comportement de boycott; Confiance institutionnelle; Associations de consommateurs.

Introduction

In recent years, consumer protection has gained renewed significance as a cornerstone of market regulation and civic engagement. In an era of liberalized economies and increasingly complex supply chains, the ability of states to ensure fair market conduct, protect consumer welfare, and regulate corporate behavior is widely regarded as a measure of institutional maturity and social responsiveness (UNCTAD, 2016; World Bank, 2019a). In developing economies, these expectations are amplified by persistent asymmetries in market power, gaps in legal literacy, and the growing influence of digital commerce platforms.

In Morocco, the enactment of Law No. 31.08 in 2008 (updated in 2014) marked a pivotal moment in the country's consumer policy landscape. The law codifies fundamental consumer rights and outlines regulatory obligations for businesses, positioning Morocco as a regional leader in legal alignment with international standards such as the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection, the European Union's consumer directives, and World Trade Organization (WTO) principles (UNCTAD, 2018). Complementary legislation, including Law 28.07 on e-commerce, and institutional developments—such as the reactivation of the Competition Council, expansion of the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MCINET)'s mandate, and operational role of the National Office for Food Safety (ONSSA)—have further shaped the system's evolution.

However, these legal and institutional advancements have not been without friction. Recent analyses and public discourse have raised questions regarding the practical effectiveness, inter-agency coordination, and accessibility of Morocco's consumer protection mechanisms (CESE, 2018; FNAC, 2019). Regulatory capacity, enforcement reach, and the independence of oversight bodies remain contested issues, as do the roles and resources of Consumer Protection Associations (CPAs). Furthermore, public mobilizations—such as the 2018 consumer boycott—have illuminated broader tensions around economic fairness, institutional trust, and civic engagement, prompting renewed interest in the relationship between regulatory frameworks and public perceptions of legitimacy (Bruneau, 2018; Faraj, 2024).

Despite the existence of a formal legal framework and regulatory bodies, the extent to which Morocco's consumer protection system functions as an effective safeguard for citizens remains an open question. *How do institutional arrangements, legal instruments, and civil society actors collectively contribute—or fail to contribute—to consumer trust and access to redress?* This article

engages with this question through a contextual and analytical approach rather than empirical testing.

Anchored in an exploratory paradigm, the article adopts a contextual and institutional lens to map the current architecture of consumer protection in Morocco and to identify its regulatory and civic implications. It does not attempt to explain consumer behavior or assign causality to events such as the 2018 boycott. By mapping the current structure and identifying its functional and institutional constraints, the article establishes a contextual foundation for future interdisciplinary research on trust, regulation, market protest, and institutional resilience in Morocco and comparable settings.

The article is organized into six sections. It begins with a literature review that synthesizes theoretical and empirical contributions on political consumerism, boycott behavior, and institutional trust, establishing the conceptual foundation for the analysis. The second section traces the legal foundations of Morocco's consumer protection regime, focusing on key legislative instruments and their alignment with international standards. The third section outlines the institutional framework and enforcement structures, assessing the mandates, coordination mechanisms, and practical constraints of regulatory bodies. The fourth section evaluates the role and effectiveness of Consumer Protection Associations (CPAs), with particular attention to their legal standing, financial capacity, and visibility. The fifth section examines the 2018 national boycott as a moment of civic mobilization and regulatory critique, providing insight into informal protest as a response to perceived institutional shortcomings. The sixth and final section offers a cross-cutting evaluation of systemic weaknesses, including enforcement gaps, institutional design issues, and access-to-justice barriers, before concluding with policy recommendations and avenues for future research.

1. Literature Review: Political Consumerism, Institutional Trust, and Consumer Boycotts

1.1. Political Consumerism and Its Ethical Dimensions

Political consumerism refers to the deliberate use of market-based decisions—such as boycotting and buycotting—as strategies of civic and ethical engagement (Micheletti, 2003; Stolle & Micheletti, 2005). Unlike traditional political participation through voting or lobbying, political consumerism enables individuals to express values and exert pressure on institutions or corporations via consumption choices. Boycotts involve the refusal to buy goods or services from

companies perceived as unethical, while boycotts entail the active support of firms deemed socially or environmentally responsible (Boström et al., 2004; Neilson, 2010). Together, these practices constitute an alternative form of citizenship that emphasizes individual agency in shaping collective outcomes, often targeting issues like corporate social responsibility (CSR), labor rights, environmental protection, or market justice.

This shift toward market-based political action reflects broader changes in how citizens relate to democratic institutions and globalized economic systems. In this context, consumption becomes a form of "everyday activism," allowing individuals to reward or punish entities based on perceived ethical standards. Political consumerism thus operates as an informal accountability mechanism, especially in environments where formal redress is limited or ineffective. Importantly, it blurs the boundary between private choice and public action, reconfiguring the marketplace as a space of both resistance and reform.

1.2. Institutional Trust and Its Role in Political Consumerism

Institutional trust—defined as citizens' confidence in the competence, fairness, and responsiveness of public institutions like governments, courts, or regulatory bodies—is a key determinant of how people engage with civic and market systems (Zmerli & Newton, 2008). Unlike generalized trust, which pertains to interpersonal relationships, institutional trust focuses on the credibility of systemic actors to uphold public interest and manage societal risk (Rothstein, & Stolle, 2008). In both political science and consumer research, institutional trust is linked to compliance behavior, legitimacy perceptions, and the use of formal mechanisms for dispute resolution.

In the realm of political consumerism, institutional trust does not simply inhibit protest; rather, it conditions its form and timing. Low or declining trust can encourage consumers to bypass formal channels and engage in informal activism, such as boycotts (Forno & Ceccarini, 2006; Hoffmann et al., 2018). However, this relationship is not linear: moderate distrust may actually stimulate strategic forms of civic engagement, where consumers seek to improve institutional performance rather than reject it outright (Boström & Klintman, 2009; Andersen & Tobiasen, 2017). High trust, too, can foster activism—if it coexists with a belief that public institutions are open to public influence and capable of reform (Stolle & Micheletti, 2005). This spectrum challenges the binary view of trust versus distrust and underscores the importance of context in interpreting consumer behavior.

Institutional trust is often assessed via public opinion surveys focusing on perceived capacity (e.g., enforcement strength) and fairness (e.g., impartial treatment), each shaping behavior differently (Hetherington, 1998). Studies show that issue-specific dissatisfaction—such as frustration with corporate impunity or regulatory inaction—can activate political consumerism even when generalized trust remains stable (Hoffmann et al., 2018). In turn, trust can also influence risk perception: individuals tend to rely more on trusted institutions or civil society actors to interpret ethical or safety concerns (Beck, 1997).

Overall, institutional trust functions as both a regulatory filter and a mobilizing force, affecting whether consumers choose compliance, advocacy, or disengagement. Its relevance is particularly pronounced in domains such as consumer protection, where state mechanisms intersect directly with everyday economic behavior. As such, institutional trust not only reflects public confidence in governance but also shapes the boundaries of ethical consumption, resistance, and civic responsibility.

1.3. Synthesis of Existing Research

The literature on political consumerism and institutional trust has developed along complementary but sometimes disjointed lines. Foundational works such as those by Micheletti (2003) and Stolle and Micheletti (2005) conceptualize political consumerism as a form of individual and collective agency enacted through market behavior—specifically, practices like boycotting and buycotting. These acts are viewed not merely as expressions of ethical preference, but as tools of informal governance and accountability. Research in this tradition frames consumption as an extension of democratic participation, where individuals "vote with their wallets" in response to perceived institutional or corporate shortcomings.

Parallel to this, studies on institutional trust—defined as the belief in the competence, fairness, and legitimacy of formal institutions like governments, courts, or regulatory bodies (Rothstein, B., & Stolle, 2008; Zmerli & Newton, 2008)—have examined its role in shaping civic compliance and political engagement. Within consumer studies, institutional trust is increasingly recognized as a key variable that conditions whether individuals pursue formal mechanisms for redress or opt for alternative strategies, such as consumer activism (Forno & Ceccarini, 2006; Hoffmann et al., 2018). Yet, the relationship is not linear: while low trust may encourage boycott participation, research also shows that moderate or issue-specific distrust can catalyze strategic protest rather

than disengagement (Boström & Klintman, 2009; Andersen & Tobiasen, 2017). Conversely, some politically active consumers maintain high trust in institutions but still choose to engage in consumer activism to amplify institutional accountability (Stolle & Micheletti, 2005).

Despite these important insights, the current literature reveals several gaps. Much of the empirical research on political consumerism remains Eurocentric, with limited application to contexts where institutional performance is uneven or in transition. Furthermore, while generalized, market, and institutional trust have each been explored as predictors of consumer behavior, few studies explicitly compare how trust functions across domains or how it shifts in response to specific events, such as economic crises or public scandals. This is particularly relevant in systems with hybrid forms of governance, where legal formalism may coexist with limited regulatory enforcement or fragmented institutional legitimacy.

Additionally, the literature offers contrasting perspectives on whether political consumerism represents a rejection of traditional institutional authority or a complementary form of civic pressure. While some scholars emphasize its oppositional nature, others underscore its capacity to reinforce and democratize institutional functioning through bottom-up engagement. These conceptual divergences call for further contextualized studies that move beyond dichotomies of trust versus distrust, activism versus apathy, or public versus private accountability.

The present article contributes to this scholarly conversation by integrating these debates into a legally grounded, institutionally focused analysis of consumer protection in Morocco. It seeks not only to map the structural components of the system, but also to explore how regulatory capacity, civic engagement, and institutional perceptions intersect to shape the effectiveness—and perceived legitimacy—of consumer rights enforcement. In doing so, it provides a conceptual bridge between abstract models of political consumerism and the situated realities of regulatory governance in emerging economies.

2. Legal Foundations of Consumer Protection in Morocco

The foundation of Morocco's consumer protection regime is anchored in Law No. 31.08, enacted in 2008 and updated in 2014. This law establishes a legal framework for safeguarding consumer rights in a market-oriented economy, aligning with international standards such as the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection (2016), World Trade Organization (WTO) principles, and the EU's consumer protection directives (UNCTAD, 2016, 2018; World Bank, 2019a).

To fully grasp the significance of Law 31.08, it is essential to situate it within the broader historical and legal trajectory of consumer protection in Morocco. This includes not only modern reforms but also earlier legal developments and institutional milestones. The following timeline presents a condensed overview of this evolution.

Table 1. Chronology of Consumer Protection Milestones in Morocco (Pre-1950s–2025)

Period	Key Milestones
Pre-1950s	Traditional Market Norms: Customary and Islamic principles (e.g., <i>bara'a</i>) regulated trade and product quality in souks (Hamelin et al., 2013).
	French Colonial Influence (1912–1956): Civil law institutions introduced formal regulatory concepts (Bennani & Boukhima, 2021).
1956–2000	1958 – Dahir No. 1-58-376: Legalized creation of NGOs, paving way for early consumer groups.
	1976 – Dahir No. 1-75-581: Introduced alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms.
	1990s: Emergence of early CPAs, though limited in recognition and funding (FNAC, 2017a).
2000–2015	2008 – Law 31.08: Defined consumer rights, duties of suppliers, and introduced penalties (UNCTAD, 2018).
	2011 – Competition Council (CC) established in Constitution (Art. 166), though inactive (CESE, 2018).
	2014 – Laws No. 20.13 and 104.12: Strengthened antitrust and competition regulation.
	2016 – Law 28.07: Focused on digital and e-commerce protections (MCINET, 2017a).
2015–2025	2018 – National Boycott Movement: Catalyzed public pressure on institutions; CC reactivated (Faraj, 2024).
	2020 – CC fines three dairy firms MAD 63M for price-fixing (Competition Council, 2020).
	2022 – Digital Consumer Protection Programs launched by MCINET (FNAC, 2022).
	2025 – Ongoing reforms: CPA funding, enforcement upgrades, and digital adaptation (UNCTAD, 2018).

Note: Table developed by the author.

Returning to Law 31.08, it defines the consumer as “any natural or legal person who acquires or uses a product or service for personal, family, or household purposes, excluding professional or

commercial use” (Article 3). The law affirms six fundamental consumer rights: the rights to information, safety, choice, education, redress, and representation (UNCTAD, 2018).

It further mandates obligations on businesses to disclose accurate product information (Article 7), ensure product safety and quality (Articles 14–18), and avoid deceptive practices such as false advertising and unfair contract terms (Articles 11–14, 28–30). Additionally, the law includes alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms, such as mediation and arbitration, to ease the burden on courts and enhance consumer access to redress (Dahir No. 1-75-581, 1976) (UNCTAD, 2018).

To reinforce compliance, Law 31.08 provides for penalties, including fines and imprisonment (Articles 49, 60), and authorizes market surveillance and inspections by designated bodies like the Department of Consumer Protection (DPC) (MCINET, 2019). However, implementation remains uneven; critics have noted that enforcement often lacks the capacity or authority to deter violations effectively (IMF, 2019; World Bank, 2019b).

In 2016, recognizing the digital transition in consumer markets, Morocco passed Law No. 28.07, focused on e-commerce and online transactions (FNAC, 2022). The law mandates transparency in pricing, delivery, refund policies, and cybersecurity for online purchases. Nevertheless, scholars and experts have pointed to ongoing gaps in data protection, platform accountability, and fraud mitigation, particularly in the post-COVID-19 period, where online consumption sharply increased (FNAC, 2022; Zbadi, 2023).

Other relevant laws that intersect with the consumer protection landscape include:

- Law No. 25.08, which governs food safety and is enforced by ONSSA (ONSSA, n.d.);
- Laws No. 20.13 and No. 104.12, which enhance competition policy and empower the Competition Council (Competition Council, 2020);
- Decree No. 2-15-503 (2013), which operationalizes specific elements of Law 31.08 (Official Bulletin No. 6192).

Despite its scope, Law 31.08 has drawn criticism for:

- Its vague definitions (e.g., “defective product,” “misleading advertising”), which create loopholes (UNCTAD, 2018);
- The conflict of interest embedded in MCINET, which simultaneously promotes trade and regulates business practices (CESE, 2018);

- The limited legal standing and capacity of CPAs, who are intended to play an oversight and representational role in consumer litigation but are constrained by legal and financial obstacles (FNAC, 2019; UNCTAD, 2018).

In 2018, Morocco became the first country to undergo a Voluntary Peer Review by UNCTAD of its consumer protection system. The review praised the comprehensiveness of Law 31.08 but recommended more robust implementation tools, improved institutional coordination, and expanded consumer education efforts (UNCTAD, 2018).

While Morocco's legal framework for consumer protection is extensive and aligns with international standards, its practical effectiveness is shaped by the capacity of institutions to implement and enforce its provisions. The interaction between regulatory mandates, enforcement structures, and sectoral gaps requires closer examination. These dimensions are considered in the following section, which evaluates the institutional architecture underpinning Morocco's consumer protection system.

3. Institutional Framework and Regulatory Enforcement

Morocco's consumer protection regime is administered by a constellation of institutions with differentiated but overlapping mandates. These include ministerial departments, autonomous regulatory councils, sector-specific agencies, and civil society organizations. While each plays a role in enforcing consumer protection law, the system is characterized by varying degrees of autonomy, coordination, and operational capacity (MCINET, 2019; UNCTAD, 2018).

3.1. Principal Institutional Actors and Their Mandates

MCINET is the principal governmental actor responsible for developing and coordinating national consumer protection policy. Through its Department for Consumer Protection (DCP), it supervises the application of Law 31.08, manages the national consumer complaints portal, and organizes public awareness campaigns. It also channels limited financial support to certified Consumer Protection Associations (MCINET, 2017a; UNCTAD, 2018).

However, its institutional dual role—as both regulator and promoter of commerce—has attracted criticism for potential conflicts of interest, especially in areas where consumer and business interests diverge (CESE, 2018).

Functioning under MCINET, the DCP serves as the administrative engine of consumer protection enforcement. It processes consumer complaints, coordinates inspections, and provides guidance

on product safety and labeling. However, it lacks regional coverage and suffers from human resource constraints that limit its operational effectiveness (UNCTAD, 2018).

Established as an independent constitutional body under Article 166 of the 2011 Constitution, the Competition Council is mandated to prevent monopolistic practices, investigate price fixing, and issue sanctions in accordance with Law No. 104.12 and Law No. 20.13. The Council remained largely inactive for several years but was reactivated following the 2018 consumer boycott (CESE, 2018; Faraj, 2024). While the Council is structurally independent, its effectiveness is often limited by administrative delays, political interference, and resource scarcity (Competition Council, 2020; UNCTAD, 2018).

Under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture, ONSSA is tasked with regulating hygiene, food labeling, and public health standards for agri-food products, operating under Law No. 25.08. It conducts inspections, tests product quality, and monitors compliance in the food sector (ONSSA, n.d.). Despite its importance, ONSSA has faced criticism from the Court of Auditors for infrequent inspections, limited regional presence, and outdated infrastructure (UNCTAD, 2018; World Bank, 2019a).

Sector-Specific and Overlapping Authorities

Several additional institutions have partial mandates in consumer-related regulation:

- Ministry of Health (pharmaceuticals and medical services),
- Bank Al-Maghrib (banking and financial consumer protection),
- High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA) (advertising standards and consumer messaging).

These actors often operate in silos, without clearly defined coordination frameworks, creating a fragmented regulatory environment (World Bank, 2019b).

3.2.Implementation Challenges and Institutional Design Issues

While Morocco's institutional architecture is legally robust, its practical execution is uneven, with implementation challenges arising at multiple levels. Agencies tasked with enforcement often lack the staffing, autonomy, and logistical tools required for regular inspections, investigations, or consumer engagement (MCINET, 2019; UNCTAD, 2018).

The absence of a unified oversight mechanism exacerbates coordination challenges. Institutions such as MCINET, ONSSA, and the Competition Council frequently act independently, without

shared data systems or formalized protocols for multi-agency interventions (CESE, 2018; IMF, 2019). This hampers swift and coherent responses to market disruptions or systemic violations.

Furthermore, the perceived independence of regulators like the Competition Council remains contested. Although legally autonomous, the Council's budgetary dependence and appointment process are managed at the executive level, raising concerns about its impartiality and capacity to sanction large economic actors (Competition Council, 2020; Faraj, 2024).

In parallel, regional disparities in enforcement remain stark. Most institutions are concentrated in Rabat and Casablanca, limiting access for consumers in rural or semi-urban areas (UNCTAD, 2018). Monitoring mechanisms for product safety and pricing are rarely proactive, and instead tend to rely on consumer complaints after violations have occurred.

These administrative challenges do not necessarily reflect failures in legal design but rather signal the importance of institutional autonomy, resource allocation, and strategic coordination—elements further addressed in the evaluation section of this article.

4. The Role of Consumer Protection Associations (CPAs)

Consumer Protection Associations (CPAs) occupy a legally recognized but structurally marginal space in Morocco's consumer protection ecosystem. Formally enabled by Articles 10, 12, 22, and 24 of Law 31.08, CPAs are intended to represent consumer interests through advocacy, education, legal guidance, and litigation support. In practice, however, their impact is constrained by limited institutional support, financial instability, and insufficient legal standing (FNAC, 2017a, 2017b; UNCTAD, 2018).

4.1. Legal Recognition and Functions

Law 31.08 provides the legal basis for CPA activity. Article 10 establishes that CPAs may assist consumers with complaints and disputes, while Article 12 allows associations to initiate legal action if they have received “public utility” status from the state. Article 22 outlines CPA roles in raising awareness, offering legal consultation, and contributing to the implementation of public protection measures.

In total, more than 90 CPAs operate across Morocco, organized into federations such as: FMDC (*Fédération Marocaine des Droits du Consommateur*), FNAC (*Fédération Nationale des Associations du Consommateur*), and FSAC (*Fédération des Sociétés d'Appui au Consommateur*) (MCINET, n.d.-a; UNCTAD, 2018).

These federations coordinate a network of "guichets consommateurs" (consumer advice centers), which provide legal assistance, complaint handling, and guidance on redress procedures. According to FNAC (2017a), CPAs have facilitated the resolution of more than 72% of consumer disputes outside the formal court system, underscoring their potential role in alternative dispute resolution (ADR).

4.2. Legal Standing and Funding Challenges

Despite their formal recognition, most CPAs lack the legal authority to bring cases to court on behalf of consumers. Only a handful of associations have achieved the status of "association of public utility," which is a precondition for legal standing under Law 31.08 (Article 12). This legal gap significantly curtails their ability to influence enforcement and engage in litigation (UNCTAD, 2018).

Financial instability is another major constraint. CPA funding is derived primarily from: Membership dues, Sporadic MCINET subsidies, and Occasional donor-funded projects (FNAC, 2017a; MCINET, 2019).

This fragmented funding model leaves most associations dependent on short-term grants, limiting their continuity and ability to retain skilled personnel. Although the state released a limited annual support fund for federated CPAs (up to MAD 10 million in certain years), these resources remain insufficient and unevenly distributed (MCINET, 2017a; UNCTAD, 2018).

Additionally, CPAs lack the institutional status to sit on most policy-making boards or advisory bodies. This weakens their advocacy role and reduces the visibility of consumer voices in national policy debates (CESE, 2018).

4.3. Contributions and Public Engagement

Despite these challenges, CPAs have played a visible role in public education and media-based consumer advocacy. During the 2018 boycott, certain CPA federations issued statements urging price transparency, promoted legal awareness via social media, and participated in TV and radio discussions (Faraj, 2024; FNAC, 2019). However, their participation in the national response to the boycott was largely reactive and lacked strategic coordination with institutional actors such as the Competition Council or MCINET.

Some CPAs have also partnered with local universities and municipalities to conduct legal awareness workshops and information campaigns, although these initiatives remain limited in geographical scope (UNCTAD, 2018).

Nonetheless, survey data and internal reports suggest that many consumers remain unaware of CPA roles or how to access their services, particularly in rural areas (FNAC, 2019). The absence of a national consumer helpline, coordinated visibility campaigns, or digital outreach tools has further reduced their reach and potential influence.

In sum, while CPAs hold the formal mandate to act as consumer intermediaries, their effectiveness is contingent on institutional support, legal empowerment, and sustainable financing. The next section will consider these limitations as part of a broader evaluation of Morocco's consumer protection system.

5. Consumer Boycotts as a Lens on the System

The 2018 Moroccan boycott emerged as a unique form of consumer-driven mobilization that challenged dominant narratives about economic protest and regulatory response. While this article does not suggest a direct causal relationship between system failures and the boycott, the event provides an important opportunity to observe how Moroccan consumers responded to perceived market imbalances and institutional silence. It offers a window into emerging forms of civic engagement, regulatory legitimacy, and consumer activism in a digitally connected society.

5.1. Background and Scope of the Boycott

In April 2018, anonymous calls for a national boycott began circulating on Facebook and other platforms, urging citizens to avoid products from three major companies:

- Centrale Danone (dairy),
- Sidi Ali / Les Eaux Minérales d'Oulmès (bottled water),
- Afriquia Gaz (fuel).

The campaign used hashtags like #BoycottDanone and #KhalihaTissadi ("let it spoil") to rally support. The protest gained rapid traction among Moroccan consumers, especially urban youth and middle-income families, who viewed the movement as a collective protest against high living costs, price opacity, and perceived monopolistic behavior (Eljehtimi, 2018; Morocco World News, 2018; Senoussi, 2018a).

What began as a call to resist rising prices soon evolved into a broader conversation about economic fairness, consumer rights, and institutional accountability.

5.2. Chronology and Escalation of Events

The movement's intensity and impact grew throughout the spring and summer of 2018. The timeline below captures major milestones in the campaign's development:

Key events include:

- April 20, 2018: The boycott begins online with viral posts calling to boycott the three brands. A Facebook page titled "*We are boycotting*" is launched (Saleh, 2018).
- April 24–29: Company executives and ministers dismiss the campaign. Public backlash intensifies after statements labeling boycotters as *madawikh* (morons) and *traitors* (Chabaa, 2018; La rédaction, 2018).
- May: Consumer anger grows. Satirical social media pages emerge. Surveys show nearly 80% of respondents support the boycott (Averty, 2018).
- May–June: Centrale Danone apologizes and launches a national dialogue campaign. Public meetings are held. Government expresses concern but emphasizes "dialogue over disruption" (Badri, 2018; Kasraoui, 2018).
- July–August: The boycott's digital presence persists. Centrale Danone organizes open forums to discuss fair pricing.
- September: Centrale Danone announces a price reduction. Boycott leaders declare success, though online engagement continues into fall.

Reports estimated a 50% loss in profits for Centrale Danone, 30–40% in sales losses for Sidi Ali, and significant, though undisclosed, impacts on Afriquia Gaz (Bruneau, 2018; CESE, 2018).

5.3. Institutional Response and Visibility

The early institutional response to the boycott was characterized by ambivalence, delay, and internal division. While some government officials expressed empathy for rising living costs, others dismissed the movement as irresponsible or disruptive. Notably:

- MCINET and other ministries defended business practices or warned against misinformation (Middle East Eye, 2018),

- The Competition Council, legally empowered to investigate price fixing under Laws 104.12 and 20.13, was largely inactive at the outset, having been dormant for years prior (CESE, 2018),
- The Council was reinstated during the boycott and later launched a series of inquiries and price regulation initiatives.

Public reactions to these institutional positions were mixed, with online users and media commentary often interpreting them as evasive or aligned with business interests (Mawas & El Abbadi, 2021). This narrative, whether accurate or not, contributed to a discourse of institutional distance, which became a central element of public frustration.

5.4. Consumer Action Beyond Formal Channels

The 2018 boycott stands out as an example of networked consumer activism, distinct from earlier models of protest mediated through unions or associations. The absence of CPA-led coordination at the movement's outset further underscored a gap between formal representation structures and grassroots mobilization (FNAC, 2019).

Activists also created mobile games, memes, and satirical content to spread awareness and increase participation (Senoussi, 2018b). This creative, decentralized approach proved effective in sustaining public interest and framing the campaign as a patriotic rather than partisan cause.

Attempts by government officials and corporate executives to delegitimize or minimize the campaign's significance often inflamed public opinion and expanded participation rather than deterring it (Guerraoui, 2018).

5.5. Implications and Relevance to Consumer Protection

Although the boycott eventually subsided by fall 2018, its social, political, and economic consequences persisted:

- Corporate actors reevaluated pricing strategies and public relations practices,
- Regulatory bodies faced renewed pressure to demonstrate visibility and independence,
- CPAs began reassessing their roles and communication strategies (FNAC, 2019).

Rather than treating the boycott as evidence of institutional failure, this article considers it a critical juncture in public-corporate-institution relations, pointing to unresolved tensions in perceived market fairness and consumer agency. These themes merit further empirical investigation —

particularly into the role of institutional trust, the efficacy of regulatory enforcement, and the sociopolitical function of consumer protest in hybrid regimes.

6. Evaluation of the Current System (Gaps and Weaknesses)

Despite notable progress in aligning Morocco's consumer protection system with international standards, a number of structural, legal, and operational weaknesses continue to affect its implementation and effectiveness. The system remains ambitious on paper but uneven in practice. Legally, Law No. 31.08 provides a solid foundation by clearly outlining consumer rights and obligations on suppliers, including protection from unfair contract terms, misleading advertising, and unsafe products. The law also enshrines principles such as transparency, the right to information, product quality, and the possibility of redress through judicial or alternative means. The integration of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms and penalties marks a meaningful shift toward market accountability. Similarly, the 2016 Law No. 28.07 on e-commerce demonstrates Morocco's recognition of the digital consumer landscape, introducing rules for online transparency, privacy, and delivery obligations.

However, important legal shortcomings persist. Core concepts in the law remain underdefined, resulting in inconsistencies in interpretation and enforcement. These include vague provisions on product safety, consumer redress, and advertising regulation. More critically, Law No. 31.08 lacks tailored provisions for high-risk sectors such as healthcare, insurance, and financial services—domains where Moroccan consumers remain particularly vulnerable to overpricing, complex contracts, and deceptive practices (UNCTAD, 2018). Comparative examples reinforce this weakness: Chile, for instance, has developed sector-specific consumer rights within financial services and pharmaceuticals, supported by collective redress mechanisms and digital tools under its reformed Act No. 21.081 (UNCTAD, 2021). Thailand also offers a multi-layered legislative approach that includes specialized acts for product liability and unfair contract terms, particularly in digital markets (UNCTAD, 2022). These frameworks illustrate how sectoral differentiation enhances the practical application of consumer protection—something still missing in Morocco's legal architecture.

Institutionally, enforcement remains fragmented. The Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Green and Digital Economy (MCINET), through the Department of Consumer Protection (DCP), holds primary responsibility for market oversight. However, its dual mandate—both to promote trade

and to regulate consumer markets—creates a structural conflict of interest that compromises regulatory neutrality. This concern has been raised explicitly in Morocco’s UNCTAD peer review, which criticized the absence of a fully independent consumer protection authority as a barrier to effective law enforcement (UNCTAD, 2018, p. 15). Although MCINET has made visible efforts through national inspection campaigns and public information tools, its regulatory wing suffers from insufficient financial and human resources to conduct large-scale, sustained enforcement actions (UNCTAD, 2018; CESE, 2018).

The Competition Council (Conseil de la Concurrence), empowered by Laws No. 104.12 and 20.13, was reactivated in 2018 after several years of inactivity, partly in response to widespread public pressure during the national boycott movement. Since then, the Council has taken some notable steps, including the imposition of a record fine of MAD 63 million on three dairy companies in 2020 for cartel practices and price-fixing in the dairy market (Competition Council, 2020). Despite this progress, the Council continues to face criticism for its vulnerability to political interference, limited budgetary autonomy, and staff shortages, which restrict its ability to pursue investigations systematically (UNCTAD, 2018; CESE, 2018).

By comparison, countries like Chile have established more autonomous enforcement bodies. The National Consumer Service (SERNAC) operates independently, with legal authority to issue binding decisions, manage class action lawsuits, and develop digital consumer tools such as the “No Molestar” platform (UNCTAD, 2021). Thailand’s Office of the Consumer Protection Board (OCPB) similarly benefits from institutional clarity and specialization, with its structure legally protected from overlapping mandates and political interference (UNCTAD, 2022). Morocco’s institutional model, by contrast, remains too centralized, underfunded, and legally dependent on executive ministries.

On the ground, enforcement is further weakened by structural limitations in human resources and institutional capacity. Although MCINET has increased inspections in recent years, coverage remains inadequate, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where consumer vulnerability is often highest (MCINET, 2019). The problem is mirrored in other enforcement bodies: for instance, ONSSA had just 1,775 staff members in 2018 to oversee nationwide food safety (Cour des comptes, 2018, p. 211). The situation is aggravated by high retirement rates and minimal replacement—**over 562 staff left since 2013**, leading to **extremely low inspector-to-population**

ratios, such as 1 plant inspector per 500,000 people compared to 1 per 17,000 in France and 1 per 5,000 in Canada (Court of audit, 2018, p. 213).

This human resource shortage significantly impacts digital markets as well. The rapid growth of e-commerce in Morocco has brought new challenges, such as false advertising, unsafe product listings, and misuse of consumer data (MCINET, 2017; UNCTAD, 2018). Enforcement in online markets remains reactive rather than preventive. Violations are often resolved through informal warnings rather than formal procedures, and penalties are rarely applied consistently, undermining deterrence (UNCTAD, 2018).

In this regard, Morocco can draw lessons from Thailand, where proactive surveillance systems, digital enforcement units, and consumer education campaigns are used to track and prevent violations in online marketplaces (UNCTAD, 2022). Gabon's emerging system, though still nascent, reinforces Morocco's relatively advanced position in Africa, but also highlights the urgency for Morocco to lead by example in building stronger regional enforcement mechanisms (UNCTAD, 2023).

The access-to-justice framework for consumers in Morocco remains underdeveloped. Although Law No. 31.08 introduces provisions for alternative dispute resolution (ADR), such as mediation and arbitration, the mechanisms remain underutilized due to insufficient implementation and the lack of enabling decrees (UNCTAD, 2018). As highlighted in the UNCTAD peer review, most ADR initiatives are sector-specific and not generalized across economic domains. Mediation has been piloted in financial services and telecommunications, but broader application is limited by the absence of regulatory coherence and cross-sectoral infrastructure (UNCTAD, 2018, p. 20).

Consumer Protection Associations (CPAs) are legally entitled to represent consumers in judicial processes, yet face major barriers. These include the requirement to hold public utility status—granted only to a small fraction of associations—and the lack of legal expertise and financial means to effectively support litigation (UNCTAD, 2018; MCINET, 2019).

Furthermore, many CPAs report that courts are often unfamiliar with the specifics of consumer law, which results in inconsistent application and prolonged resolution times (Context Chapter, 2025).

Compounding these issues are systemic access barriers. Judicial recourse is costly, slow, and perceived as intimidating by many consumers, especially those in rural or low-income settings.

Consumers are often reluctant to pursue legal claims due to psychological and financial constraints, as the process is seen as inaccessible and ineffective for resolving relatively minor commercial disputes (CESE, 2018).

In contrast, Chile has established online mediation platforms, collective redress systems, and simplified procedures for small claims—all of which reduce consumer reliance on formal litigation (UNCTAD, 2021). Thailand goes a step further by maintaining dedicated consumer courts, which are accessible, procedurally simplified, and specifically designed to hear consumer-related cases (UNCTAD, 2022). These mechanisms ensure greater trust and accessibility—elements that remain weak in Morocco’s current justice framework.

Consumer Protection Associations (CPAs) in Morocco also face significant structural limitations. While more than 90 associations are formally registered and several operate local consumer advice centers (*guichets consommateurs*), their influence in shaping legal outcomes remains limited due to persistent institutional and financial constraints (MCINET, 2019; UNCTAD, 2018). One major challenge is their chronic underfunding: most CPAs rely on small membership fees or occasional government subsidies, which are insufficient to support long-term legal or advocacy work (UNCTAD, 2018, p. 22). Although a national consumer protection fund was established under Article 156 of Law 31.08, the disbursement mechanism remains unclear and often inaccessible to associations that lack national-level recognition or strong administrative structures (MCINET, 2019; UNCTAD, 2018). Furthermore, only a few CPAs have been granted “public utility” status, as required by Article 157 of Law 31.08 to enable them to bring collective legal action. Without this status, their legal standing is constrained, and they may only act with express authorization from affected consumers—a workaround that lacks implementing regulations from the Ministry of Justice (UNCTAD, 2018, p. 23). By comparison, consumer associations in Chile and Thailand are empowered by law to engage in collective litigation and benefit from structured public funding (UNCTAD, 2021, 2022), underlining how Morocco’s legal architecture limits CPAs’ strategic litigation potential (UNCTAD, 2018).

Moreover, digital literacy remains uneven, especially in rural areas, impeding equitable access to information and weakening the system’s ability to empower consumers (UNCTAD, 2018). The *Khidmat Almostahlik* platform, launched by the Department of Consumer Protection, was designed to centralize complaint procedures and provide legal resources (Khidmat Almostahlik, n.d.).

However, it has been critiqued for limited interactivity and public visibility. In 2017, it registered only 41,770 visits, reflecting modest national engagement relative to population size and growing demand for consumer recourse (MCINET, n.d.-b, 2017b; UNCTAD, 2018).

These limitations are compounded by low levels of legal awareness among the public. As shown by Bennani and Boukhima (2021), a large proportion of Moroccan consumers are unaware of their rights under Law No. 31.08 and do not understand how to access legal or institutional remedies. Their empirical findings reveal a significant disconnect between legal protections and the population's ability to exercise them, particularly in under-resourced areas.

Similarly, while National Consumer Days have helped improve stakeholder visibility and policy dialogue, their outreach beyond major cities remains limited, and most activities lack long-term follow-up or systematic engagement (FNAC, n.d., 2017b, 2019).

By contrast, Chile and Thailand have implemented broader public-facing digital tools—such as SMS complaint alerts, price comparison portals, and integrated consumer education platforms—which help translate legal rights into civic participation (UNCTAD, 2021; UNCTAD, 2022). These examples highlight the importance of coupling regulatory efforts with widespread, accessible public education strategies to build an inclusive consumer protection system.

In sum, Morocco has succeeded in laying the legislative and institutional foundations for a modern consumer protection system. However, the implementation of this system remains partial, uneven, and insufficiently responsive to new consumer realities—particularly in digital markets and rural contexts. The key weaknesses—legal vagueness, institutional conflicts, enforcement gaps, underfunded civil society, and weak access to justice—are not merely technical issues; they reflect broader challenges in building trust, ensuring participation, and redefining the role of the state in market regulation. Lessons from peer systems reviewed by UNCTAD (2018) offer Morocco not a blueprint, but a menu of tested practices for strengthening and democratizing its consumer protection regime.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has critically examined Morocco's consumer protection system by analyzing its legal foundations, institutional structures, civil society components, and recent stress-tests such as the 2018 boycott. While the country has made significant strides—most notably through Law 31.08,

the expansion into e-commerce regulation, and the reactivation of the Competition Council—important limitations remain.

The current framework is robust in form but inconsistent in function. Enforcement remains uneven, with inspection regimes under-resourced, key regulators suffering from coordination gaps, and institutional conflicts of interest undermining the credibility of oversight bodies. Legal gaps persist, particularly regarding sector-specific protection (e.g., health and finance), operational clarity in ADR, and protection for online consumers. Furthermore, Consumer Protection Associations (CPAs), despite their legal mandate, face structural and financial constraints that limit their reach and influence.

To address these challenges, a number of targeted reforms are necessary:

- Strengthen regulatory independence and coordination. This includes insulating the Competition Council from executive interference, clarifying the roles of MCINET, ONSSA, and sectoral agencies, and creating a unified national enforcement strategy.
- Modernize and expand legal protections. Legislative revisions should clarify vague provisions in Law 31.08, operationalize ADR frameworks, and create sector-specific protection regimes for finance, insurance, healthcare, and digital markets.
- Enhance market surveillance and enforcement capacity. Resources must be allocated to improve inspection frequency, regional coverage, and digital monitoring—especially in the informal and online sectors.
- Institutionalize support for CPAs. This means formalizing the legal standing of associations, streamlining access to public utility status, and providing stable and transparent funding mechanisms to support litigation, awareness campaigns, and legal assistance.
- Invest in civic education and public awareness. Consumers must be made aware of their rights through multilingual campaigns, local workshops, and digital platforms. Particular attention should be paid to rural populations and underserved groups.

Taken together, these reforms aim not only to enhance the technical effectiveness of the system but also to rebuild public confidence in consumer governance. Consumer protection is not simply a regulatory obligation; it is a core component of economic justice, institutional legitimacy, and social trust.

Avenues for Future Research

While this article focuses on mapping and analyzing the structural and legal contours of Morocco's consumer protection system, the findings suggest several promising directions for future inquiry. One important research avenue concerns the role of *trust*—especially institutional trust—in shaping how Moroccan consumers perceive, access, and engage with formal protection mechanisms. The evaluation has shown that despite the adoption of advanced legal frameworks such as Law No. 31.08 and Law No. 28.07, consumer engagement with regulatory institutions like MCINET, CPAs, or the judiciary remains limited (UNCTAD, 2018; Bennani & Boukhima, 2021). This gap is not only institutional but perceptual: qualitative evidence points to low confidence in the efficacy and independence of consumer associations and administrative enforcement channels. Trust is widely recognized in the literature as a critical determinant of consumer behavior and civic engagement. Theoretical distinctions have been made between **generalized trust**, **market trust**, and **institutional trust**—each with varying impacts on political consumerism (Uslaner, 2002; Stolle & Micheletti, 2005; Zmerli & Newton, 2008). While generalized trust in society may foster social cooperation, low *market trust* is often a precursor to boycott participation, as consumers seek to correct corporate misconduct through market withdrawal (Neilson, 2010; Hoffmann et al., 2018). *Institutional trust*, in turn, mediates whether consumers choose formal complaint systems or resort to informal civic protest. Empirical data from Morocco confirms a generally low level of confidence in political institutions and a fragmented pattern of trust across different state and non-state actors.

The Moroccan context is particularly conducive to exploring these dynamics. The 2018 national boycott, which saw mass withdrawal from products of three major companies, exemplified a case where citizens bypassed formal legal recourse in favor of symbolic protest. As your findings show, this movement occurred despite the formal availability of consumer complaint channels, suggesting a disconnect between legal provision and perceived legitimacy. A study of trust in this setting could illuminate whether consumers *actively distrust* regulatory bodies or simply lack the awareness and motivation to engage with them. Additionally, survey data from the World Values Survey Association (2011) shows that while trust in family and close networks is high, confidence

in the judiciary, government, and corporations is considerably lower—pointing to a broader trust asymmetry that may inhibit legal mobilization.

Future research could empirically examine how varying levels of trust in public institutions (e.g., courts, MCINET, CPAs) influence consumers' decisions to pursue legal complaints, turn to CPAs, or abstain altogether. Additionally, it would be relevant to explore how demographic variables—such as rural vs. urban location, digital literacy, and prior dispute experience—mediate the relationship between trust and participation in consumer redress systems. The conceptual framework offered by Boström et al. (2004) and Micheletti (2003) on political consumerism could be adapted to this context, framing Moroccan consumers as "sub-political agents" navigating weak institutional terrain with strategic skepticism. Moreover, contextual insights from the peer-reviewed literature highlight that trust is not always unidirectional: moderate levels of distrust may actually catalyze civic mobilization, while extreme distrust risks generating apathy (Gamson, 1968; Zmerli & Newton, 2008).

Understanding these mechanisms would not only contribute to academic debates on trust and regulatory legitimacy but also offer actionable insights for policymakers aiming to improve consumer engagement. In short, trust is not just a social variable—it is a regulatory asset or liability. Exploring it in the Moroccan context would advance both theory and practice on the link between governance quality, civic behavior, and institutional effectiveness.

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