LESSONS FROM THE VOLKSWAGEN EMISSIONS SCANDAL: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

The Volkswagen emissions scandal, often referred to as "Dieselgate", has become a pivotal case study in corporate ethics, regulatory compliance, and crisis management. This literature review explores the academic discourse surrounding the scandal, identifying key lessons for businesses, regulators, and policymakers. The review categorizes insights into five themes: 1) corporate governance failures, 2) ethical lapses, 3) regulatory implications, 4) consumer trust, and 5) long-term reputational damage. Beyond synthesizing existing findings, this paper contributes to the literature by framing the scandal through the lens of responsible business. In particular, it emphasizes how fostering a culture of accountability, embedding ethical decision-making into corporate strategy, and aligning compliance practices with broader societal responsibilities can help firms prevent similar crises. The review concludes with a discussion of how companies can build transparency, integrity, and resilience in the aftermath of misconduct, offering actionable implications for the advancement of responsible and sustainable business practices.

Keywords: Volkswagen Scandal, Business Ethics, Regulatory Compliance

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Volkswagen emissions scandal emerged in 2015 when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) revealed that the automaker had installed software to cheat emissions tests in millions of diesel vehicles. This revelation sent shockwaves through the global automotive industry and raised urgent questions about corporate ethics and regulatory oversight. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize existing research on the Volkswagen scandal and derive lessons that can inform future corporate practices and governance models.

This review contributes to the existing literature by providing an integrative analysis of scholarly work related to the scandal, including governance, ethics, regulation, consumer response, and strategic recovery. While several papers have examined individual dimensions of the crisis, this review seeks to consolidate findings to offer a multidimensional perspective. It also provides a reference framework for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to better understand the interrelated factors behind such corporate misconduct. Accordingly, the main research question guiding this paper is:

RQ: What key lessons does the Volkswagen emissions scandal provide for advancing responsible business practices in terms of corporate governance, ethics, regulatory compliance, and long-term stakeholder trust?

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 presents the literature review, which combines the methodology and thematic analysis. This section begins with a description of the integrative review approach and then discusses the scandal across six main themes: 1) corporate governance and leadership failures, 2) ethical culture and organizational behavior, 3) regulatory failures and policy implications, 4) consumer trust and market response, 5) financial and legal repercussions, and 6) long-term strategic shifts. Section 3 synthesizes the key lessons learned and best practices suggested by scholars. Section 4 provides the conclusion, highlighting the main results in relation to responsible business while also noting the limitations of the paper and directions for future research.

2. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This literature review adopts an integrative approach, drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, case studies, and policy reports published primarily between 2015 and 2024. Sources were identified through academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using keywords including Volkswagen scandal, "Dieselgate", corporate governance, business ethics, regulatory compliance, and consumer trust. Studies were selected based on their relevance to the ethical, regulatory, and governance dimensions of the scandal, while opinion pieces without scholarly grounding were excluded. The review then organizes the findings into thematic categories that capture the major debates and lessons learned.

The Volkswagen emissions scandal, also known as "Dieselgate", erupted in September 2015 when the EPA issued a notice of violation against the company for installing illegal software in diesel vehicles to manipulate emissions test results. According to Ewing (2017), the software commonly referred to as a "defeat device" was capable of detecting when a vehicle was undergoing emissions testing and temporarily reducing engine performance to lower nitrogen oxide emissions. However, in normal driving conditions, these vehicles emitted pollutants up to 40 times above the legal limits. The scope of the deception was vast, affecting approximately 11 million vehicles worldwide, including nearly half a million in the U.S. Regulatory bodies, such as the EPA, the California Air Resources Board (CARB), and various European and Asian agencies led investigations that uncovered long-term, deliberate misconduct involving senior executives and technical teams. The fallout was immediate and severe: Volkswagen faced billions of dollars in fines, settlements, and compensation payouts, along with multiple criminal charges and the resignation or prosecution of top-level executives. The scandal also led to a sharp decline in the company's market value and severely tarnished its global reputation. More broadly, the incident ignited debates on the reliability of corporate self-regulation and the adequacy of emissions testing protocols. It also served as a wake-up call for the automotive industry to reevaluate environmental compliance and corporate accountability, leading to increased investment in cleaner technologies and more robust governance frameworks. The subsequent literature review will, therefore, be discussed across six main themes: first, corporate governance and leadership failures; second, ethical culture and organizational behavior; third, regulatory failures and policy implications; fourth, consumer trust and market response; fifth, financial and legal repercussions; and sixth, long-term strategic shifts.

2.1. Corporate governance and leadership failures

Numerous scholars, including Palmer (2012) and Langevoort (2018), highlight that weak corporate governance structures at Volkswagen enabled the scandal. A highly centralized decision-making system and a culture of obedience suppressed dissenting voices. Volkswagen's supervisory board failed in its oversight role, allowing executives to operate with impunity. The literature points to the need for independent board members, transparent reporting lines, and mechanisms that encourage whistleblowing and ethical discourse.

Other researchers have noted that Volkswagen's governance model suffered from a lack of transparency and accountability, exacerbated by the company's dual-board system and strong influence of labor unions and political stakeholders (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2018; Volkswagen Group, 2024). The failure to establish effective checks and balances allowed unethical decisions to go unchallenged, highlighting the need for governance frameworks that support critical questioning and internal dissent. Mayer (2021) argues that effective corporate governance must integrate ethical purpose at the core of business strategy rather than treating compliance as a formal obligation. Additionally, Li (2016) emphasizes that board diversity and independence are crucial in preventing groupthink and enhancing strategic oversight. In the case of Volkswagen, these structural and cultural deficiencies created a permissive environment for misconduct, revealing the pressing need for reforms that emphasize accountability, stakeholder inclusivity, and ethical leadership.

2.2. Ethical culture and organizational behavior

The scandal has been widely discussed in the context of business ethics. According to Kellerman (2024), Volkswagen's culture prioritized performance and market dominance over ethical considerations. Employees were reportedly aware of the cheating software but feared retaliation for speaking up. This finding is consistent with Trevino and Nelson's (2017) argument that organizational culture is a critical determinant of ethical behavior. Ethical training, tone at the top, and employee empowerment are frequently recommended reforms.

Further studies, such as those by Kaptein (2015) and Sims and Brinkmann (2003), underscore that organizational ethics are not only shaped by formal codes of conduct but also by informal norms and leadership behavior. At Volkswagen, a results-driven culture combined with rigid hierarchies created an atmosphere where employees felt pressured to meet unrealistic goals, even at the cost of violating ethical standards. Bird and Waters (1989) observed that in many corporations, managers often discuss ethics only when prompted, which reinforces the notion that ethics is secondary to performance. Moreover, ethical fading — where individuals unconsciously disregard ethical dimensions of decisions — appears to have played a role at Volkswagen (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). This highlights the importance of embedding ethics into everyday decision-making processes and performance metrics. Ethical lapses at Volkswagen were not the result of a single failure but the culmination of systemic cultural weaknesses.

Addressing such issues requires long-term commitment to fostering integrity, encouraging moral courage, and aligning incentives with ethical outcomes across all levels of the organization.

2.3. Regulatory failures and policy implications

The role of regulators is another central theme in the literature. Critics argue that regulatory agencies were slow to detect the fraud due to a lack of rigorous testing and excessive reliance on automakers' self-reported data (Balleisen, 2017). The scandal has led to calls for stricter emissions testing, real-world driving condition assessments, and more robust whistleblower protections. Scholars advocate for cross-border regulatory cooperation and the strengthening of institutions tasked with enforcing compliance.

Additional research suggests that regulatory capture and insufficient inter-agency coordination may have further hindered timely detection and enforcement (Bennear & Stavins, 2007; Carpenter & Moss, 2013). In the European Union, fragmented regulatory authority and the lack of centralized enforcement allowed Volkswagen to exploit gaps in oversight mechanisms (Vanderkolk, 2017). Furthermore, the scandal highlighted deficiencies in transparency requirements and the effectiveness of deterrence-based approaches. According to Fiorino (2020), modern regulatory systems should move beyond compliance monitoring to include proactive risk assessment and continuous industry engagement. Baldwin et al. (2012) argue for a more responsive regulation model that is flexible, context-sensitive, and inclusive of stakeholder participation. In light of the Volkswagen case, these insights support the adoption of integrated, well-resourced regulatory frameworks that balance enforcement with preventive strategies. There is also growing advocacy for the mandatory use of independent third-party testing and data verification, which could reduce the risk of conflict of interest and fraud. Strengthening legal protections for whistleblowers, improving inter-agency data sharing, and deploying real-world emissions testing are further recommended policy enhancements that can restore public trust and accountability in environmental governance.

2.4. Consumer trust and market response

The breach of consumer trust was immediate and far-reaching. The study by Aichner et al. (2021) demonstrates that Volkswagen's brand equity plummeted after the scandal, although long-term effects varied by region and consumer segment. Some customers remained loyal due to brand affinity or lack of alternatives, while others shifted to competitors. The literature suggests that rebuilding trust requires transparency, accountability, and demonstrable changes in business practices.

Subsequent research has reinforced the significance of ethical brand perception in consumer behavior. According to Tanner and Mansell (2025), brand recovery in the wake of corporate misconduct is contingent on swift and genuine efforts to acknowledge wrongdoing and implement corrective actions. Similarly, Laufer and Coombs (2006) argue that companies must adopt a victim-centered approach and communicate clearly with stakeholders to mitigate reputational damage. In Volkswagen's case, the company's initial response was perceived by many as evasive and inadequate, contributing to skepticism and prolonged public backlash (Che et al., 2023). Furthermore, KPMG (2016) reported a decline in consumer confidence not only in Volkswagen but in the diesel automotive segment overall, signaling wider implications for the industry. Scholars such as Lyon and Montgomery (2015) emphasize that greenwashing, misleading claims about environmental performance, can have enduring negative effects on brand integrity if uncovered. Rebuilding trust requires sustained efforts, including product recalls, fair compensation, transparent sustainability commitments, and a shift toward corporate social responsibility. The Volkswagen case illustrates that trust, once broken, demands not only financial reparation but also cultural and operational transformation to win back consumer loyalty and restore credibility.

2.5. Financial and legal repercussions

The scandal resulted in more than $30 billion in penalties and settlements, according to various reports (Hotten, 2015). Legal scholars such as Coffee (2020) argue that punitive damages serve as both a deterrent and a necessary consequence for misconduct. Volkswagen's legal troubles extended to shareholder lawsuits, criminal charges, and class actions. The case underscores the high cost of ethical lapses and the importance of compliance frameworks.

Further legal analysis reveals the complexity and global scope of the financial consequences faced by Volkswagen. According to Bertelli (2021), the company faced multi-jurisdictional litigation that included environmental fines, consumer fraud settlements, and investor claims under securities law. In the U.S. alone, Volkswagen agreed to pay over $14.7 billion to settle claims with the U.S. Department of Justice, the Federal Trade Commission, and affected consumers (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). In Germany, top executives, including former chief executive officer (CEO) Martin Winterkorn, faced criminal indictments for fraud, market manipulation, and breach of fiduciary duty (Office of Public Affairs, 2018). Additionally, the scandal prompted several countries to revise their legal frameworks for corporate liability, with the European Commission (2017) proposing tighter rules on vehicle certification and emissions reporting.

Academic literature emphasizes the role of robust internal controls and risk management systems in mitigating legal exposure (Kraakman et al., 2017). The Volkswagen case demonstrates how regulatory non-compliance can trigger cascading legal and financial consequences, including reputational harm, share price volatility, and loss of investor confidence. Moreover, the scandal has contributed to broader discussions about executive accountability and the ethical obligations of multinational corporations. As Jung and Sharon (2019) note, financial penalties must be complemented by structural reforms to corporate governance and compliance in order to prevent recurrence. In sum, the legal and financial aftermath of "Dieselgate" serves as a powerful reminder of the intersection between law, ethics, and sustainable business strategy.

2.6. Long-term strategic shifts

In response to the scandal, Volkswagen announced strategic changes, including a shift toward electric vehicles and a renewed commitment to sustainability. Scholars like Oosthuizen (2019) argue that such moves are essential for reputational repair and competitive positioning. However, skepticism remains about whether these initiatives represent genuine transformation or merely symbolic gestures.

Following "Dieselgate", Volkswagen launched its "Together — Strategy 2025" plan, which aimed to transition the company into a global leader in sustainable mobility. This strategy included a €35 billion investment in electric vehicle development, the introduction of the ID. series, and efforts to reduce carbon emissions across its production chain (Volkswagen AG, 2019). The company also pledged to become carbon-neutral by 2050, aligning with broader environmental and regulatory expectations within the European Union (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2021).

Scholars such as Lundgren and Viganò (2024) highlight that such transitions can enhance corporate legitimacy, particularly when accompanied by measurable performance indicators and transparent reporting. Nevertheless, critics warn that post-crisis sustainability commitments can sometimes mask ongoing unethical practices — commonly referred to as greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). In the case of Volkswagen, media coverage and stakeholder skepticism have persisted, questioning whether its corporate values have genuinely evolved or simply been rebranded for reputational gain (Boiral et al., 2022).

Moreover, the strategic shifts initiated by Volkswagen reflect a broader trend of environmental, social, and governance integration into business models following major ethical lapses. Eccles and Klimenko (2019) suggest that companies under public scrutiny often undergo a reevaluation of risk, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability goals. However, they stress that meaningful change is contingent upon embedding these values at all organizational levels, not merely within corporate communications or investor relations. The Volkswagen case, therefore, underscores both the opportunity and challenge of crisis-driven transformation. To sustain credibility, organizations must ensure that their strategic shifts are authentic, embedded in corporate culture, and subject to ongoing stakeholder dialogue and independent oversight.

3. LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

The reviewed literature identifies several important lessons and best practices that organizations and regulators can adopt to prevent and mitigate the risks of corporate misconduct. Strengthening corporate governance by establishing independent oversight, clear accountability structures, and functional whistleblowing channels is fundamental. Equally vital is fostering an ethical corporate culture, which can be achieved through ethical leadership, transparent decision-making, and employee empowerment. On the regulatory front, enhancing the independence, capacity, and enforcement powers of watchdog agencies can facilitate the early detection and deterrence of corporate fraud. From a reputational standpoint, companies must prioritize transparency and sincerity in their communications during and after crises to rebuild consumer trust. Finally, embracing genuine, long-term strategic changes, such as investing in sustainability and compliance, can help restore organizational credibility and ensure resilience. These lessons highlight the interconnected nature of governance, ethics, regulation, and communication in safeguarding both corporate integrity and public trust.

4. CONCLUSION

The Volkswagen emissions scandal serves as a powerful case study in what can go wrong when corporate governance, ethics, and regulation fail simultaneously. The academic literature provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the causes and consequences of the scandal and offers actionable insights for corporations and regulators alike. A major result highlighted in this review is that responsible business practices, such as embedding ethical values into corporate culture, strengthening governance structures, ensuring regulatory compliance, and maintaining transparency with stakeholders, are essential to restoring trust and preventing similar crises in the future. The scandal demonstrates that long-term corporate resilience depends not only on financial recovery but also on a genuine commitment to accountability and sustainability.

At the same time, this paper is not without limitations. The review is limited to published scholarly sources between 2015 and 2024 and does not include primary empirical research, which may constrain the depth of analysis. Additionally, while the paper synthesizes key themes from the literature, it cannot cover the entire breadth of ongoing debates in business ethics, regulation, and corporate accountability. Future research should, therefore, build on this foundation by incorporating empirical studies, cross-industry comparisons, and longitudinal analyses of reforms to better assess the effectiveness of responsible business practices in the aftermath of corporate misconduct.

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