

Consumer Responses to Controversial Marketing Communications - the case of H&M's "coolest monkey in the jungle" merchandise

Insensitivity to racial issues has long been one of the main causes of controversy in marketing, and its significance has recently resurfaced due to the current political and social climate caused by events such as the American presidential election and Brexit. In the marketing field, current cases such as advertising from Kellogg's and Dove have caused outrage across social media. This has shown that even experienced marketers can still find themselves being accused of insensitivity or even racism. With the help of social media, the cases such as those may lead to negative consumer-generated brand stories online and could damage the brand (Gensler et al., 2013; Grégoire, Salle, & Tripp, 2015). This paper has chosen to address the recent case of H&M, which has faced online criticism and consumer protests due to its UK website showing a boy of African descent wearing a hoodie bearing the words "coolest monkey in the jungle". The aim of this study is to understand consumers' initial responses on social media to this case, in order to provide further recommendations to marketers in today's complex society. A netnography approach was used to collect qualitative data from Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter, and the data was analysed using thematic analysis through Nvivo 11.

The results show that this case has demonstrated the stages of "Hashtag activism", explained by Bonila and Rosa (2015): 1) eyewitness report, 2) hashtag accompanied by the photos of individuals or groups of people, then finally, 3) widely circulated meme. The main discussion on social media focused on individual opinions regarding racism, which can be explained by the assertion that contents on social media are generated by individual users to present and construct new self-identity through social interaction, and politics is becoming a personal expression of ideas (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015; Lindgren, 2017). The results have also raised new questions concerning

several marketing-related themes including the effect of media coverage, brand trust, intentionally controversial marketing, social climate, and direct recommendations for H&M. The findings will provide practical recommendations for marketers, including in relation to managing diversity issues, constantly building a brand image, and identifying and acting upon the sensitive issues within different cultural contexts. As a preliminary study, the limitation of this study lies in the timeline of the research and the amount of data. Further research is recommended to conduct a longitudinal study to gain a more complete view of how the incident may affect consumers and brands over time.

Keywords: racism, marketing communications, branding, consumer responses on social media, netnography

Reference Available upon Request