**Brand activism and online backlash: The role of advertising message appeal in shaping consumer behaviour around social marketing campaigns from commercial brands**

***Sarkisova Yana Tigranovna***

*Postgraduate, Master of Science*

*University of Birmingham, Birmingham Business School, Department of Marketing, Birmingham, United Kingdom*

*Email: yanasarkis@yandex.ru*

In the past few years there has been an increase in a specific type of advertisement, the purpose of which is to demonstrate how a company addresses current social or political issues dominating Western society and media today. The companies that have been creating such advertisements with a social purpose element are not charities or any social or political bodies, but commercial multinational brands [3]. This relatively new phenomenon is called brand activism and due to the highly polarised political climate in the Western world and the rise of activism amongst individual members of society in general, activism amongst brands is on the rise, too [5]. However, by engaging in activism through advertisement, brands have put themselves in a compromising position, as it can either strengthen their positioning and the relationship with consumers [2] or result in extensive backlash online and on social media. More often than not, such advertisements have been termed ‘controversial’ [8] and the brands making them have been accused of inauthenticity [7].

The list of brands that received criticism over their attempts to tackle social issues is excessive in length. However, for this study only three commercials were chosen: Nike’s “Dream Crazy” campaign [9], Pepsi’s “Live for now” [10] and Gillette’s “We Believe” [11]. They are one of the most prominent examples of advertisements with a social element that received backlash, as well as the scope of their international exposure online and on social media.

The aim of this project is to explore negative consumer reactions toward social campaigns in more depth through understanding what aspects within these advertisements cause viewers to exhibit negative reactions. This project contributes to marketing and communications literature by bridging the gap between the academic areas of consumer complaining behaviour, social marketing and advertising in the context of the aforementioned advertising campaigns. The research adopts a qualitative approach in order to gain in-depth understanding of emotions viewers experienced when watching the adverts, as well as the elements within those commercials that made them experience those emotions. A total of 14 in-depth interviews were conducted and analysed using thematic analysis [1].

The core component of all advertisements is the appeal, which is the main message being sent to consumers [6]. There are four main types of advertising message appeals that are discussed in this research: emotion-based, action-based, image-based and information-based appeals [4]. A number of previous studies have extensively examined the relationship between types of advertising appeal and advertisement effectiveness. However, no previous study has investigated the role of advertising appeal in shaping consumer behaviour and their reactions toward social marketing campaigns from commercial brands.

In relation to the emotion-based appeal it was found that negative reactions were exhibited when strong emotional elements were used in the narrative, which did not represent reality accurately (Pepsi and Gillette campaigns). In terms of the information-based appeal, the viewers expressed their dissatisfaction with the absence of the product in the advert (Gillette). Moreover, the fact of involvement of these commercial brands in social issues that they have no relevance with caused a lot of backlash, and so did the use of celebrities that had no connection to the issue represented in the adverts (Pepsi). Finally, there was a common dissatisfaction among participants towards commercial brands engaging in social marketing while turning a profit (Nike).

A number of implications for advertising practitioners have emerged from this study, which can be used in strategic communication planning. First and foremost, it was found that the emotion-based appeal causes substantial consumer reactions toward the adverts, both positive and negative. It is therefore advised to take caution when using strong emotional elements in commercials in order to avoid potential negative consumer reactions. Secondly, the information-based appeal showed to be a desired element in the adverts, as its absence caused negative viewer reactions. It can be said that incorporating some form of information-based appeal in adverts (i.e. showing the product) can prove to be beneficial with viewers. Incorporating such elements in future social marketing adverts from commercial brands may elicit positive viewer reactions. Finally, the way in which an issue or message is portrayed needs to be clear and relevant to real life in order to avoid negative reactions. It is also advised to use celebrities with caution, as it can be a source of consumer dissatisfaction if the celebrity is not relevant to the social issue.

**References**

1. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology // Qualitative research in psychology. 2006, №3(2). p. 77–101.
2. Koch CH. Brands as activists: The Oatly case // Journal of Brand Management. 2020, №27(5). p. 593–606.
3. Kotler P, Fox KF. The marketing of social causes: the first ten years // Journal of Marketing. 1980, №44. p. 24–33.
4. Liaukonyte J, Teixeira T, Wilbur KC. Television advertising and online shopping // Marketing Science. 2015, №34(3). p. 311–330.
5. Matos G, Vinuales G, Sheinin DA. The power of politics in branding. Journal of marketing theory and practice. 2017, №25(2). p. 125–140.
6. Mortimer K. Identifying the components of effective service advertisements // Journal of services Marketing. 2008, №22(2). p. 104–113.
7. Vredenburg J, Kapitan S, Spry A, Kemper JA. Brands taking a stand: Authentic brand activism or woke washing? // Journal of public policy & marketing. 2020, №39(4). p. 444–460.
8. The Drum, 7 of the most controversial ads of our time: <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2019/04/08/7-the-most-controversial-ads-our-time>
9. YouTube, Nike “Dream Crazy”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WW2yKSt2C_A>
10. YouTube, Pepsi “Live for now”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqQG4cGl2dI>
11. YouTube, Gillette “We Believe”:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBNWK8BcF38>