

Breaking the Single Image: Fashion Brands Take a Stand on Inclusivity

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ABSTRACT

The corporate social responsibility (CSR) of fashion companies in terms of inclusion and its effect on consumer behavior is investigated in this article. According to the study background, especially in terms of inclusiveness, modern consumers want brands to stand on social problems. Examining how companies may establish good relationships with the public by using real and consistent marketing messaging forms part of the study materials. Mostly on literature review and case analysis-especially the comparison between Aerie and Victoria's Secret-the study approach is Through the #AerieReal campaign, Aerie has effectively enhanced its brand image and sales; Victoria's Secret has suffered a crisis of confidence because of its lack of real diversity. The study's conclusion underlines how firms must keep authenticity and openness in social campaigning if they are to win consumers' trust and loyalty.

KEYWORDS

Inclusivity; Corporate Social Responsibility; Consumer Psychology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, corporate social responsibility is a topic that cannot be ignored, it refers to the management obligation to act to protect and improve the welfare of society as a whole and the interest of organisations [1]. It is based on the concept that corporates should be responsible for the larger society, and previous research has also demonstrated that joining social advocacy has greater positive returns than other types of sponsorship [2,3]. So, more and more corporates are now taking action on social advocacy. Inclusivity remains a serious social issue in today's society. Some groups are excluded for various reasons and become marginalised groups [4]. The fashion industry has been criticised for its lack of inclusion in its internal organisational structures and external marketing strategies. In addition, today's consumers not only want brands to take a stand on social issues, but also strongly care about inclusivity in marketing communications [5]. Therefore, this paper will conclude the opportunities and challenges for brands to take a stand on social issues and discuss how to build a positive relationship with the public and society in today's marketing and media environment.

2. CURRENT SITUATION

Understanding consumer psychology and purchasing intention is an essential step in marketing. A survey of American consumers showed that 81% believe brands need to earn their trust, and 66% think brands should take a stand on social and political issues [5]. While satisfying consumers' needs, if the purchase behaviour or brand commitment is linked to a positive impact on society, it will increase consumer satisfaction. The public has high expectations for responsible business practices

[6]. However, according to the 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer, the current situation is that global consumer grievance is increasing, with those respondents who are highly dissatisfied thinking that companies are not doing enough to address social issues including discrimination and inclusivity. Meanwhile, as the purchasing power of Generation Z continues to increase, their willingness to consume now has a greater impact on the market. Gen Z is more inclined to support brands that value authenticity, transparency and social responsibility [7]. Therefore, as more consumers want to see socially responsible corporates, more brands are now increasing their concern for social responsibility in marketing communications.

The fashion industry is highly competitive and has a high threat of new entrants and substitutes. Despite the huge global market and potential consumers, the fashion industry has difficulty establishing strong brand loyalty and long-term connections due to the easy search for substitutes and rapid fashion trends [8]. Whether it is a fashion week runway, a magazine cover or a fashion icon on social media, the presenters of fashion products seem to all have slim figures, perfect body curves and exquisite appearance [9]. Although plus-size people and people with disabilities are consumers of the fashion industry, they seem to be overlooked in marketing communications [10]. According to the Representation and Inclusion in the Fashion Industry Report published by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Textiles and Fashion (2021), 94.4% of respondents, including fashion industry practitioners, students and consumers, believe that it is important to see body shapes similar to their own in media images. 90.5% of respondents said that if a fashion brand had a good reputation for inclusivity, this would motivate them to buy from it.

Growing criticism of the fashion industry's single "white, thin, tall and young" aesthetic has forced it to make changes, but the truth is that the practice of "sometimes putting non-white faces on magazine covers" is no longer enough, and never has been [10]. Therefore, true and realistic inclusion and diversity are what consumers want and expect to see. Diversity means "individuals and groups that reflect distinct traits related to age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and physical ability" [11]. Inclusivity refers to engaging with diversity and emphasising how to value the presence and ideas of different groups of people and integrate them into the environment [12]. Now, although there is evidence that progress is being made, inclusion in the fashion industry is superficial and not a priority (The MBS Group, 2022).

3. OPPORTUNITIES

A positive image is important for a brand, because it differentiates it from its competitors in a highly competitive market and encourages consumers to make purchases [13]. Aerie, a sub-brand of American Eagle Outfitters, is a close-fitting clothing and lifestyle retailer whose products focus on women's underwear and sportswear [14]. At the launch period, Aerie incorporated inclusivity and body positivity into the brand value and philosophy [15]. In 2014, Aerie launched its #AerieReal campaign and announced that it would ban the use of Photoshop to retouch models [14]. In an industry that is competing to publish sophisticated and beautiful posters and videos, Aerie's change is pioneering. #AerieReal campaign is focused on social media and aims to convey diverse and unvarnished beauty and encourage the public to share their own stories [14]. Every time a user posted an unretouched photo on the #AerieReal hashtag page, the brand would donate \$1 to the National Eating Disorders Association [16]. Eventually, Aerie stimulated user-generated contents on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok and built its own online community [17]. Data from Statista (2024a) shows that the net revenue of Aerie has shown an increasing trend year by year from 2019 to 2022. This proves that Aerie's marketing strategy had a positive impact on brand revenue and promoted consumer purchases.

Consumers think that the delicate and sexy images of women displayed in most underwear advertisements are not representative and are worried that it will increase viewers' anxiety and self-doubt and cause aesthetic deformity among the younger generation [18]. Consumers expect to see a

wider range of images of women, including diversity in age, body shape and race [19]. A study by Rodgers et al. confirmed that the visual elements and emotional appeal of Aerie's inclusive images, including people with disabilities, contribute to the viewer's self-confidence and self-acceptance, and enable the viewer to have a positive impression of the brand and a strong purchase intention [19]. Accordingly, Aerie's first and active action of showing commitment and making changes in the social advocacy of inclusivity enables the brand to establish a positive image that can win the trust of consumers. Consumers' recognition of brand attitudes can also promote the establishment of brand loyalty [13].

Almost all underwear brands in the market have similar product lines including underwear, swimwear, pyjamas and sportswear, and their target customers are all female consumers. However, these brands show almost the same image of young and sexy women, which is a backward stereotype [10]. This leads to the issue of under-representation, leaving many consumers feeling excluded and experiencing negative emotions [20]. The image of "ordinary people" is based on standardisation and cannot show the differences of consumers and reflect their individuality [20]. Research shows consumers experience greater happiness and develop positive associations with brands after watching advertising that is inclusive rather than stereotypical [11]. Aerie's display of inclusive images allows more consumers to see their own image projected, not only bringing the wider public into the brand's audience, but also increasing engagement and loyalty. Taking a stand on social issues allows a brand to connect with specific target groups. Additionally, it allows brands to effectively demonstrate values and commitments related to social responsibility, thus resonating with the target audience [13].

4. CHALLENGES

Hickman's research showed that up to 80% of respondents will stop buying a product or service if they disagree or are dissatisfied with a brand's response to the selected social issue [21]. Therefore, taking a stand is risky and may lead to resistance and negative review from some consumers, usually those who hold the opposite attitude and opinion towards the social issue. Meanwhile, consumers are usually wary and sceptical of brands using social issues as part of their marketing [22]. A study by Taylor and Knibb found that consumers will resist and feel angry if they find that brands are just showing inclusivity without substantial action [19]. The public generally holds tighter scrutiny of brands' actions on social issues. Superficial inclusivity not only poses a serious threat to brand image, but also leads to consumer boycotts and reputation damage when exposed [22].

Victoria's Secret is an American underwear, clothing and beauty brand whose Victoria's Secret Fashion Show has brought it worldwide awareness and discussion. It designs a variety of wings and dresses the models as sexy, romantic and fantastical angels [23]. However, the brand's depiction of models as overly sexualized and full of stereotypical male fantasies triggered discomfort and resistance from consumers. Compared with the "angel" image, most female consumers feel excluded [24]. Its promotion of so-called ideal appearance has been criticised as having a negative impact on female self-identity [24]. Under the crisis of sales drop and fashion show cancellation, Victoria's Secret began a shift towards inclusivity.

However, the negative press has seriously damaged Victoria's Secret's brand image, which has led consumers to question the brand's motivation when it launched the inclusive campaign [25]. Critics argue that brands are changing because of boycotts, and it is for the sale instead of really caring about inclusivity [26]. Although Victoria's Secret has published more inclusive advertisements, what consumers see in offline stores are still small-size clothing and sexy models [27]. Furthermore, Victoria's Secret was revealed to have retouched, sexualized and stylized its advertisements of inclusivity [28]. Vague and commercialised messages may confuse the public, who may delay or abandon their purchasing decisions and lose trust in the brand [29]. It can be seen that if the brand is only for marketing, rather than a real and substantive stance and action, it will lead to a crisis of trust and consumer boycott [29]. Consumers' attitudes are reflected in sales. Compared with Aerie, net

sales of Victoria's Secret worldwide fluctuated significantly during 2019-2022 and showed a downward trend year by year during 2021-2023 [30].

5. DISCUSSION

When a brand is trying to take a stand on a social issue, it first needs to deliver true, compelling and consistent messages in its marketing communications. Some corporates try to change their brand image through marketing, but in fact it does not really benefit society, which leads to the public becoming more and more strict and picky about the authenticity of messages [29]. If consumers perceive manipulative intent, their trust in the brand and the credibility of the messages that the brand is trying to express will be significantly reduced [6]. This illustrates the importance of authenticity and transparency. If marketing messages confuse consumers, suspicion usually increases, and confidence decreases [29]. In addition, a good practice needs to be consistent with brand values and mission to create a strong, consistent and positive brand image. Although Victoria's Secret emphasises its value of inclusivity, its modification and beautification of models' bodies clearly does not truly embrace diversity and has put the brand into new controversy [28].

False and exaggerated messages are another point where marketing communications are questioned by the public. Like greenwashing, which means companies publicise their environmental protection actions, but it is actually an exaggeration of their efforts or even just a claim, brands' inclusive publicity has also been questioned as misleading and false publicity [31]. When Victoria's Secret launches its inclusive campaign, scandals of sexual harassment and assault within the company continue to be revealed [32]. The brand is trying to shift its image through marketing to talk about female empowerment from a more current perspective, but at the same time, there are serious issues of misogyny, bullying and harassment within the company [33]. In this situation, there is no doubt that Victoria's Secret's claims of diversity and inclusivity are not persuasive. It will not only fail to convince female consumers, but also cause their aversion and resistance to the brand. Therefore, brands need to conduct a deep and thorough research of consumers and the market before expressing their attitudes. Only by making real changes can the brand present value and marketing messages that resonate with consumers.

Building a positive relationship with the public means the brand needs to convey messages that align with the expectations of target consumers. When consumers identify with the brand's attitudes and actions, it is more conducive to establishing trust, credibility and positive brand perception, promoting purchase intention and increasing brand loyalty [13]. The brand needs to constantly understand consumer psychology and adjust marketing strategies in time to maintain a long-term and effective relationship with the public. When Aerie initially announced its refusal to Photoshop, the model in its advertisements still appeared in a sexy and staring image (see Appendix 1). However, with the development of the #AerieReal campaign, Aerie has now formed a unified cosy, healthy and lively brand image and style (see Appendix 2 & 3). Lastly, brands can interact with online and offline communities. This not only helps brands gain a deeper understanding of public opinions, but also builds their own consumer communities that can increase brand loyalty and enhance consumer activity and participation.

6. CONCLUSION

Modern digital technologies enable marketing communications to reach a wider range of market segments, so the public has placed an increasing emphasis on inclusivity. Inclusion is an important social issue that emphasises a way of thinking that values and welcomes individuals from different backgrounds. Today, consumers in the 21st century hope and expect to see and value brands' stand on social issues. So, when a brand meets these expectations, it can gain a good and positive impression from consumers, stimulate purchase intention and increase follow-up interactions and brand loyalty.

However, brands may lose some consumers who hold opposite attitudes to the social issue, and the public usually examines the behaviour of marketing communications with suspicion and a more critical attitude. Therefore, despite the potential threats of taking a stand on social issues, when a brand participates in social advocacy with a sincere attitude and authentic and compelling messages, and ensures the unity of brand value and mission, it can effectively establish a positive relationship with the public and society.

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