

# Editorial 30.5: Inclusive marketing

In 2017, Pepsi released a new campaign, featuring Kendall Jenner handing a can of Pepsi to a police officer during protests to ease the tension. The ad caused a backlash due to accusations of trivialising the social justice movement (Smith, 2017). Criticism of the ad was also expressed by Bernice King, daughter of Martin Luther King Jr, who said that the brand is tone-deaf in its position towards social justice (Ceron, 2017). Pepsi was forced to pull the ad and issue an apology (Smith, 2017; Ceron, 2017). Next year, in 2018, Nike released a “Dream Crazy” campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, Serena Williams and LeBron James, which triggered a backlash and consumer response, including burning Nike gear due to Kaepernick’s kneeling during the national anthem at American NFL football matches to protest racism. However, Nike still saw an increase in sales and a rise in their stock price. The campaign ad also won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Commercial (Vera, 2019).

A global Kantar survey argued that progressive advertising drives sales because 75% of consumers make their purchase decisions based on brand diversity and inclusion reputation, which makes inclusive marketing a driver of growth. These views are particularly prevalent among Millennials and Gen Z consumers who prioritise diversity and inclusion, and as these two groups grow in size and purchase power, their values are expected to shift the dynamic in the market further (Kantar, 2024). The Kantar survey confirmed findings from the McKinsey survey of 2022, which also argued that consumers are becoming more inclusive. McKinsey (2024) presented findings showing that two out of three American consumers say their social values shape their shopping choices. Academic studies continue to confirm these findings, too. For example, in a systematic literature review of diversity and inclusion in consumer research, Branca *et al.* (2024) argued that scholarship consistently shows that inclusive marketing matters because it influences trust and purchase behaviour. Research from the American Marketing Association has shown that consumers want “brands to commit and not back down from diversity and inclusion practices” (AMA, 2023, n.p.). What is more, according to the same study, “Consumers Don’t Want Brands to Backtrack on DEIB Positions: For every 1 consumer rewarding brands that back down from DEIB positions due to criticism, there are 4–5 consumers who would reward brands that uphold their DEIB values in the face of criticism” (AMA, 2023). Going back to campaign examples from the beginning of the editorial, this explains why one social justice campaign backfired and caused brand damage, while the other one paid off. Nike has a history of positioning themselves at the forefront of sports marketing advocacy starting with an iconic *Just Do It* empowerment campaign from 1988, and *If You Let Me Play* advocacy campaign from 1995 that advocated for an inclusion of girls into sport, as well as many other campaigns tackling social issues such as normalising AIDS in sports, paralympic (Tyler, 2018), etc. Nike’s campaign upset only conservative consumers while progressive consumers awarded the brand, recognising also their persistent social activism and resistance to backlash. Pepsi, on the other hand, was perceived as exploiting social justice protests to sell a product (Smith, 2017).

In *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* (CCIJ), we have published many studies analysing consumer behaviour with respect to corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate social advocacy (CSA) and brand activism against consumer responses. Most studies have shown that consumers support brand efforts if they perceive them as genuine and authentic. Accompanied by studies showing that consumers, particularly younger generations, expect inclusion, we can argue that brands not only need to be inclusive but also need to be authentic in their efforts. A global advertising study conducted by the University of Oxford revealed that “when an advert can authentically and positively portray a full range of people – devoid of stereotypes – it can provide an edge in the marketplace when it comes to consumer preferences and long-term sales figures” (Thorpe, 2024, n.p.). Stephen and Thomaz (2025)



argued that the Oxford study, which they co-authored, unequivocally showed that “inclusive advertising leads to significant commercial and brand equity benefits. Brands with better inclusive advertising practices when compared to brands with less-inclusive advertising practices had: Higher sales: 3.46% higher short-term sales and 16.26% higher long-term sales. Greater customer loyalty: 23% lower abandonment rates after trial and 15% higher customer loyalty. Stronger brand consideration: 62% higher likelihood of being a consumer’s first choice in a given product category and 33% higher strong brand consideration. Enhanced pricing power: 54% higher pricing power, indicating that consumers were willing to pay a premium for brands they perceived as inclusive . . .” (n.p.).

Inclusive marketing is an intentional practice of ensuring marketing materials are respectful, accessible and reflective of a wide range of experiences and identities, which means that inclusive marketing is different from a diversity effort (that focuses on representation of different groups), multicultural marketing (that targets specific cultural issues) or corporate social responsibility (that focuses on business ethics, which should then feed into communication, not be a sole reason for it). Inclusivity needs to be embedded into organisational policies for the inclusive communication to work, and it needs to be more than a feel-good initiative to create a competitive advantage for the brand or at least for inclusive marketing communication to be accepted to the point it does not cause a backlash.

This special issue of the CCIJ focuses on inclusive marketing. The guest editors compiled an issue tackling several important topics covering trust and attitudes of Gen Z consumers, sponsorship in sports, brand loyalty collaborations with diverse influencers, inclusive branding, inclusive marketing communication and femvertising. The articles provide a good overview of existing practices in the field of inclusive marketing and open new avenues of research. While CCIJ is a journal listed in the field of marketing, we mainly receive papers from public relations and communication management scholars, whereas this special issue expands our focus to marketing further. The issue also goes in line with our increased focus on publishing equality and diversity scholarship since 2020 (Topic, 2024), which will continue in the years ahead.

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