Sorry Not Sorry – Consumers React: Controversial Fashion Advertisements &

Corporate Apologies

Camilla Würtz Kobborg

Department of Culture and Learning, Aalborg University

Culture, Communication and Globalization, Master's Thesis

John G. McClellan

May 31, 2024

Abstract

This study examines consumer reactions to controversial advertisements from clothing brands H&M, ZARA, and Balenciaga, and how these brands' subsequent apologies affect these reactions. Using thematic analysis on transcripts from three focus group interviews with 11 participants identified as regular clothing shoppers, the results reveal that some consumers experience strong emotional responses ranging from despise and disappointment to feelings of neutrality and indifference, indicating a personal investment in the brands' actions and behavior. Participants emphasized the importance of sincere and well-formulated corporate apologies, noting that inadequate or insincere corporate apologies led to heightened negative reactions. The study found that effective apologies typically included clear acknowledgement of wrongdoing, expressions of genuine remorse and concrete steps and actions to prevent similar future occurrences. Conservely, corporate apologies perceived as superficial or defensive intensified negative connotations towards the brands, pinpointing that some of the apologies were not meeting the participants satisfactory level. Participants noted that inadequate apologies not only failed to address their concerns but sometimes also worsened the brands' identities. The study's findings accentuate the importance of proactive and well-considered communication strategies in the face of public relations, stakeholders and crises. Brands are encouraged to invest in advertising that find commonalities with their stakeholders, such as identities that the stakeholders identify themselves like price, style, size and convenience in contrast to sensitive subjects that the controversial advertisements revolved around. By doing this, the brands can develop good crisis management strategies that emphasize genuine engagement with the brands' stakeholders. This includes training and commitment to ethical business practices. In conclusion, this study highlights the dual impact of controversial advertisement and subsequent corporate apologies on consumer attitudes. While strong emotional responses to the controversial advertisement and a rigor assessment

of the apologies play a significant role in shaping consumer perceptions, they do not necessarily lead to changes in the participants' shopping behaviors. Brands that navigate through these crises effectively can reduce the reputational damage from a crisis that comes from controversial advertisements and maintain a good relationship with their stakeholders, even if it does not influence their purchasing behaviours. These insights provide valuable guidance for brands aiming to enhance their advertising and communication strategies to better align with the stakeholders' values and expectations, thereby promoting a more resilient brand and consumer relationship.

Keywords

Advertising Controversy, Communication Strategy, Corporate Apologies, Crisis Management, Focus Group Interview, Marketing Strategy, Thematic Analysis

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, John G. McClellan, for his incredible availability, kindness and professionalism during the creation of this research project. His encouragement has been an important factor for me during this research project. Thank you, John.

I am thankful for my friends who have encouraged me throughout my academic years. The late night studying and constant revising has been well worth it. Thank you – we did it!

A special thanks to my incredible family who has always supported me. Throughout my academic years I have learnt that a solid support base is crucial for succeeding, and I am beyond grateful for your unconditional love for me. I love you.

At last, a heartfelt thank you to my partner, Daniel, for supporting me throughout intense years of being a graduate student. Your support and endless patience are unmatched.

Sorry Not Sorry – Consumers React: Controversial Fashion Advertisements &

Corporate Apologies

We are currently in the times that are dominated by technology and the world of advertising has become a massive industry where brands strive and aim to always stand out from other brands (Fischer, 2021). In this pursuit of attention and acknowledgement to their brands, organizations are taking their marketing strategies to new levels in the attempt of making the perfect piece of advertisement to maximize their revenue (Kalaignanam, Tuli, & Gal, 2020). These attempts make some advertisers of organizations dive into the world of controversy, creating controversial advertisements and campaigns that challenge not only societal norms but also spark debates that balance just on the fine line of provocation and polarization – jeopardizing the organizations reputation, stakeholders and their consumers' desire to consume from the organizations again (Chan & Yeung, 2017, p. 69).

This thesis research project investigates into the complexities of controversial advertisements, consumers and corporate apologies, aiming to understand and enlighten the interplay between consumers and organizations. Furthermore, the thesis also investigates how consumers react to the controversial advertisements from the organizations and the corporate apologies that follow. The all pervasive presence of social media, ads, television, newspapers, screens, advertisement boards all fill us with the latest news, fashion, new products, concerts etc. All advertisements serve a purpose: sell a product and make a profit – and sometimes the organizations choose to be very creative (Gannon & Lawson, 2010, p. 4). Organizations are finding new and innovative ideas to gain the most exposure in order to make profit. This can sometimes result in advertisements that are questionable and controversial. Organizations must brace themselves for possibly finding themselves in a situation where they may receive backlash if they publish a controversial advertisement – it has happened multiple times before and there is a likelihood of it happening again (Cornelissen, 2023). It may be a difficult

situation for an organization to navigate in using advertising as a medium to consumers and it may even be more difficult to be able to please all of the desired consumers they try to reach. Therefore, when the situation happens and an organization ends in a crisis based on an advertisement they have published, crisis management is needed (Cornelissen, 2023). This can be in the form of a public apology, taking down the advertisement, but sometimes also the action of inaction and letting the situation diffuse (Cornelissen, 2023). The topics of consumers and advertisement; advertisement controversy; corporate apologies and crisis management are not only interesting but also very important as I believe that organizations are in need of a structure when it comes to creating an advertisement that can potentially become controversial but also when controversial advertisements is published and then leads the organizations into a possible crisis.

By scrutinizing the dynamics of consumer responses to controversial advertising and corporate apologies, I truly want to deepen my understanding of the world of marketing strategies, advertising and consumer behavior based on controversial advertisements and contribute into the existing field within the topics. When exploring consumers' reactions to these controversial advertisements and apologies, it can give an insight into whether consumers are affected by these controversial advertisements and apologies – and based on that, how the consumers' habits may stay static or change. It may become a problem for the organization if the media picks up on the controversial advertisement and brings negative attention towards the organization. For that reason, it is important for the organization to consider its next action when they find themselves in the middle of a crisis (Cornelissen, 2023). Therefore, this thesis aims to do a nuanced investigation on the dynamic interplay between consumers and their perception of the clothing brands H&M, ZARA and Balenciaga, seeking to unravel how the consumers react, perceive and understand what are collectively

considered as provocative and controversial advertisements and assess corporate apologies from the respective brands.

My rationale is based on the fact that recently we have seen more controversial advertisements from clothing brands that have received the public's attention. Many of which seem to be pushing the limits morally when it comes to how and what they advertise. At this point, the literature indicates that consumers are highly prone to be affected by the advertisement that they are exposed to. Moreover, scholars within the fields have already given advice to the organizations who make use of the strategy of controversial advertisements, for example, instead of focusing on a controversy, the organizations should find mutual goals and interest with their stakeholders. What is not thoroughly researched yet is how regular consumers react to these controversial advertisements and how their attitudes towards the clothing brands are affected. Therefore, this thesis is looking into regular everyday clothing consumers and how they and their shopping habits are affected by these controversial advertisements and apologies from clothing brands. Conducting this research, I found that the subjects on consumers, advertising and corporate apologies are rich in the field, although not fully saturated, but I want to investigate further in the fields, contribute with my research and fill existing gaps in the literature by researching the how consumers react to controversial advertisements and apologies from clothing brands, which leads me to present this thesis' research question:

How do consumers react to controversial advertisements by clothing brands H&M, ZARA, and Balenciaga, and how do the brands' subsequent apologies influence these reactions? What impact do these controversies and apologies have on consumer's attitudes and purchasing behaviors towards these brands?

Literature review and Theory

This chapter accounts for the current literature that exists in the fields that I am approaching and participating in as well as an account for the saturation of the current fields. The chapter investigates and researches the topics of consumers and advertisement; advertisement controversy and corporate apologies and how my research can contribute to the current fields with new perspectives. Lastly, this chapter accounts for the theory that grounds this thesis' research. I find that it is valuable to structure and research aforementioned fields as they can optimize and help the organizations to be in a better position before, during and after being in a crisis. I also find it essential and valuable to contribute my own study to these fields, because I believe that there are always ways that organizations can both prevent a crisis but also optimize their marketing strategy and prevent offending consumers and overstepping ethical boundaries when it comes to advertising. Therefore, I want to delve into the first topic of consumers and advertising and account for the findings that scholars have researched thus far and what they are currently saying about the field.

Consumers and Advertising

The current state of the field suggests that multiple questions arise in the mind of consumers before consuming a product and that the reason can be either personal or product related. Similarly, advertising also has an important role in the decision making progress when choosing to consume a product (Adhikary, 2014). This statement is interesting in my thesis, as I am investigating how consumers react to controversial advertisements, because if other scholars suggest that advertisements are an important factor for consumers in order to purchase a product, then I find it especially interesting to dive into consumer reactions to controversial advertisements and their impact on consumption behavior. In addition to that, Adhikary (2014) also states that advertising functions as a medium of for organizations, which influences the consumer's decision making process and more (Adhikary, 2014).

Another study contributes to the argument that advertisements function as a medium for organizations by stating that "the rapid proliferation of mobile phones and other mobile devices has created a new channel for marketing" (Tsang, Ho, & Liang, 2004). Vakratsas and Ambler (1999) also suggests that advertising effects can be classified into intermediate effects, to explain consumer belief, attitudes and behavioral effects, which are all related to the consumers' purchasing behavior and brand choice (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999). This is interesting, as they suggest that there is an interplay of certain factors that explain how consumers choose to consume and what they choose to consume. Comprehensively, the aforementioned articles state that advertisements are an important medium for organizations. With the understanding there is an important communication between organizations and consumers which are advertisements, it becomes interesting to understand what happens when the advertising from the organizations become questionable, which leads to the next topic of controversial advertising.

Controversial Advertising

The field of controversial advertising also agrees with the topic on consumers and advertising that consumers are highly affected by the advertisements that they are exposed to. Other scholars are saying that the manipulation through advertising is becoming an issue that consumers are facing on a regular basis. Danciu (2014) says: "Many of the manipulative advertisements are difficult to prove because of their controversial nature and content" (Danciu, 2014). Danciu (2014) argues that the relationship between the organizations and consumers need to find mutual goals and interests to balance in harmony and abstain from manipulative techniques in marketing and. From a more positive angle, Madni, Hamid & Rashid (2016) say that mass media advertising is a very useful tool to influence consumer behavior on a large scale. Although the study states that in a positive manner, the study also suggests that there is an issue related to mass media being a useful tool – and that is

controversial advertising. Madni, Hamid and Rashid (2016) claim that controversial advertisements create a negative effect that affects not only the product and brand but also the organizational behavior. The authors say that it is evident that there is a relationship between advertisements and consumer behavior, but there is a lack of studies within this field of consumer behavior and controversial advertisements (Madni, Hamid, & Rashid, 2016). I find it uplifting to be able to contribute to the same field as the relationship between consumer behavior and controversial advertisements is an extremely interesting topic and they are also calling for assistance to other scholars to contribute to the field. Waller (2004) states: "As society becomes more complex, as we become more aware of the harmful effects of some products and as agencies try to become more creative to "cut through the clutter" to gain awareness, there will be more advertisements which the general public perceive as "offensive"" (Waller, 2004). The study suggests it can be used by advertising agencies to understand how advertising is perceived by consumers – I find it extremely helpful and gripping that the article provides information on how organizations can prevent controversial advertisements. Another article, Bachnik & Nowacki (2018) say that organizations go through different efforts and find new and innovative ways to make their message more attractive to the consumers – and therefore the organizations experience controversial advertisements as a marketing strategy (Bachnik & Nowacki, 2018). Contrary, this marketing strategy does not always work well for the organizations as Waller (1999) states that some controversial advertisements have been very successful, but some have also been damaging to the organization. Waller (1999) discusses why some products may be offensive to some consumers and therefore Waller (1999) conducted a survey consisting of 150 consumers and their perceptions of certain products. I believe that it is nearly impossible to achieve findings that fully agree that something is offensive or controversial, which is what my study also aims to uncover in terms of fashion brands.

Collectively, the scholars in the fields all agree that controversial advertising is a functional strategy for organizations and I experience that the scholars perspective on it is that it happens frequently that organizations choose to use this particular strategy to attract consumers to their brands. Therefore, some scholars also offer various strategies for the organizations to have had or may fear backlash from a controversial advertisement. The general rhetoric in the field looks into the topics with the approach of that there is something wrong and someone is going to be offended. Offering help to these organizations and researching how consumers perceive, react and act based on controversial advertisements from organizations give an enormous insight into how frequent organizations can find themselves in a crisis situation from a controversial advertisement. But how does an organization who has experienced backlash for a controversial advertisement react? The next topic in this literature review delves into the topic of corporate apologies.

Corporate Apologies

Corporate apologies look into consumer responses to organizations who already have received backlash to a controversial advertisement and then choose to give a public apology in the form of text, video, statement or other. Falco (2021) demonstrates a controversial advertisement from Volkswagen who had a diesel scandal, how they followed up with their backlash and gave an apology. The study shows that the consumers tended to react with anger, disappointment and irony to the communication in the form of an apology from the Volkswagen management (Falco, 2021). Truly interesting, because there is a chance that the consumers react in not just a negative way, but also in a mocking way, which also can be perceived as a negative impact on the organiztion.

Apologia, a formal defense of position, action and more – why is it an important strategy for an organization and how is the state of the field? Richards (2017) says: "Apologias are a common way to repair one's image amongst those in public leadership

positions, like politicians. However, these orated defenses are not limited to politicians"

(Richards, 2017). Since it is not limited, apologia is to be found in many realms. Richards

(2017) also states something important that differs *apologia* from an *apology*: "… what

differentiates an apology from apologia is that apologia is often done in public, and an

admission of guilt is not required, whereas an apology can be public or private and an

admission of guilt is required" (Richards, 2017). But what is the phenomenon of corporate

apologies? Page (2014) states that:

> Corporate apologies are distinctive for their relatively infrequent use of Explanations
>
> (as a form of mitigation) and their comparatively greater use of Offers of Repair (as a
>
> type of corrective action), which are typically combined with follow up moves such as
>
> imperatives and questions (Page, 2014).

Generally scholars' approach to this field is that there is a lack of explanations from the

organization as the apologist and that it sometimes can have positive consequences for them

(Patel & Reinsch, 2003). Although some scholars state that it can have a positive

consequence for the apologist, Lee & Atkinson (2019) firmly say that: "No corporation or

brand should think of itself as immune to a crisis" (Lee & Atkinson, 2019). Therefore,

apologia may not only revolve around apologies and excuses, but there is also a background

efficacy in terms of a crisis response strategy (Lee & Atkinson, 2019). Coombs (1995) says:

"The description and silence strategies do not repair the organizational image. The

descriptive strategy is a given in any crisis situation. Failure to provide publics with

information would damage an image even more, but just providing information does not

repair an image" (Coombs, 1995). Overall, in the field of corporate apologies, there are few

studies that have studied how corporate apologia function in praxis, both seen from the

consumer's side and how they are affected, but also from the corporate side of creating a

public apology as an effective communication strategy.

Despite the limitations of the existing research within all the topics above, the literature suggests that there is an interesting dynamic between the consumers and organizations that needs attention. The interplay between the two is important as I believe that it happens frequently enough that organizations overstep collective and societal boundaries when it comes to advertising. It seems as if there is a race in the realm of advertising of who can achieve the most exposure from advertisements. By all means, I do not believe that all cases of controversial advertisements falling through and becoming a central element of a crisis, as well as receiving backlash, initially had the intention to become so. Therefore, I believe that it is interesting to research the interplay between the consumers and organizations to effectively investigate how much consumers care about controversial advertisements and most importantly, how the consumers react. Additionally, advertisement controversies is a phenomenon that happens frequently enough for consumers to know that it has happened and it will happen again. So what can the organizations that find themselves in a situation like this do? I found that in the field of corporate apologies and crisis management that some scholars have effectively created models and strategies for organizations to follow and learn from to properly handle a crisis in case they end in such a situation. Interestingly enough, the field generally seems to fall within the category of that organizations some time will find themselves in a situation of crisis – resulting in many scholars offering a solution and guidelines to organizations to be preventable. To conclude this chapter of literature review, I want to present this thesis' theoretical approach, that adds to the current fields that have been reviewed in this literature review chapter. A theory of Corporate Identity can help provide insights into this thesis' problem formulation. Following the literature review chapter, this next section accounts for the theory and its main ideas that are the basis of this thesis and will aid me in the findings chapter. My aim is to make the research clearer and lay a groundwork for the thesis as well as provide a strong base for my research.

Corporate Identity Theory

Having researched the fields of consumer and advertising; controversial advertising and corporate apologies, I want to present this thesis' theory section. This section accounts for the theories used in the thesis to answer the research question of how consumers react to controversial advertisements and apologies from clothing brands. The preceding literature review has provided a strong base for the current literature there is within the fields and I want to further expand by accounting for Corporate Identity theory. Within the field of corporate identity, I want to highlight the aspects of corporate identity; branding; corporate reputation and crisis communication, which are all topics that create a strong point of departure for the thesis and especially in the findings chapter.

Corporate identities are created in communication and Cornelissen (2023) states the concepts of corporate communication are: corporate identity, corporate image and corporate reputation. The field within corporate identity suggests that one of the primary ways that organization can maintain a good relationship and a good reputation with their stakeholders is to consistently communicate an authentic, unique and distintive corporate identity towards their stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 91). For organizations it is crucial for them to maintain a good reputation as a good reputation equals a larger acceptance and support from stakeholders and especially stakeholder like the customers. For the customers, an organization's reputation signals a form of an underlying quality of the organization's products, services and more (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 91). Generally, it is understood that customers but also employees tend to commit to highly reputable organizations. Cornelissen (2023) has five important terms that I want to highlight and account for in this table:

Distinctiveness	A corporate image can help stakeholders recognize an organization. When consistently communicated, a corporate

	image creates awareness and may instill confidence in stakeholders and give a clearer picture of the organization.
Impact	A corporate image provides a basis for being favored by stakeholders. This can have an impact on the organization's performance. For example, the stakeholders investing in the organization, buying products etc.
Symbolism	Corporate logos, colors, slogans and more.
Communication	Corporate advertising, publicity and more.
Behaviour	General behavior of the people within the organizations who can leave an impression on stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2023, pp. 92-93).

In addition to this table, Cornelissen (2023) says: "... the image that organizations project through symbolism, communication and behavior is often also the way in which they are perceived by their stakeholders" (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 94). By stating this, it is understood that the organizations are in a position where they are responsible for their own shaping of their outward appearance. To add to this statement, I want to show the Birkigt. & Stadler's (1986) model that demonstrates the three parts that frame corporate personality (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 94).
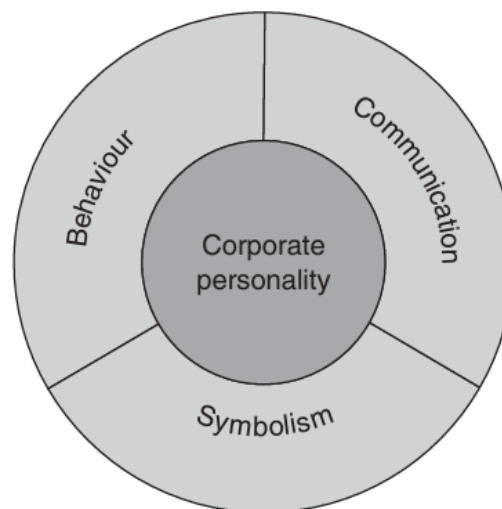
Behavior, communication and symbolism are all elements that frame corporate personality. Here, Cornelissen (2023) says: "Communication practitioners often hold only direct responsibility for corporate symbolism and communication, whilst products and brand managers are responsible for the positioning of products and services…" (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 94). He comments on the Birkigt and Stadler (1986) Corporate Identity model stating that the people within the organization have different roles that have to interplay to create the corporate personality and therefore, in other words, that the corporate identity involves the construction of an image of the organization to stand out in the eyes of the most important stakeholder groups, e.g. the consumers (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 95). In order to stand out in the eyes of the most important stakeholders, the organizations also have to have corporate branding in mind. The notion of corporate branding is that the most reputable brands and organizations are characterized by five factors: *visibility; distinctiveness; authenticity; transparency* and *consistency.* Cornelissen describes the five terms:

Visibility	Corporate values and themes that are visible in internal and external forms of communication from the organization.
Distinctiveness	Corporate identity and positioning of the organization is recognizable.
Authenticity	The organization communicates values that are embedded in the organization's culture.
Transparency	The organization is open and transparent about its behavior .
Consistency	Consistent communication in both internal and external communication channels (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 97)

Therefore, the brands and organizations who are prosperous are likely to have a good mix of these elements, but in order to manage this good reputation, it is strategially important for the organization to have an alignment and a certain amount of transparency not only externally to the stakeholders but also internally (Cornelissen, 2023, pp. 101-102). Here, Cornelissen (2023) states that transparency is "a state in which the internal identity of the firm reflects positively the expectations of key stakeholders and the beliefs of these stakeholders about the firm reflect accurately…" (Fombrun & Rindova, 2007, as cited in Cornelissen 2023, pp. 102). In other words, it is important for the organization to also have an image internally that is transparent for the stakeholders to have a notion that the image also corresponds with the

external image that is presented to the stakeholders. But when things do not go as anticipated within a corporation and the image suddenly contradicts with stakeholders, a crisis may emerge and the organization's reputation is at stake.

Crises have the potential to damage the organization's reputation and the relationships with the stakeholders. To this, Cornelissen (2023) suggests: "It is therefore important that organizations anticipate and plan for probable crisis scenarios and have crisis communication plans in place." (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 231) This is because of modern communication and technology, people are gennerally more aware of potential issues within organizations and their industries (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 231). This directly challenges the organizations and their way to manage their overall organizational health that the organizations need to protect from the increased awareness (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 231). For example, when 9/11 happened, the aftermath of this crisis was that people were concerned about flying, which sparked a crisis in the airline industry (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 231).

The general objective of crisis management and crisis communication is to have the control over the organizations' activities in ways that assure that the stakeholders keep their interest in the organization – in other words, the stakeholder should feel cared for (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 231). In order to have such control within the organization it demands that the organizations prepare themselves for possible crises. The organizations also need communication plans to effectively respond to possible crisis scenarios. Cornelissen (2023) describes: "But being prepared is half the battle. The other half is about having skills in communication effectively and responsibly, an about taking action to contain the crisis and limit any negative consequences for stakeholders and for the compnay and its reputation" (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 231).

But what defines a crisis? Cornelissen (2023) describes a crisis like: "Broadly speaking, a *crisis* is defined as an event or issue that requires decisive and immediate action

from an organization" (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 232). The *immediate* part of a crisis is triggered

by for example the public pressure and the media scrutiny or an actual danger caused by a

product. So how does a crisis emerge? Cornelissen (2023) says: "Crises may involve

accidents or natural disasters, but may also stem from actions and failures from within the

organization. A crisis may, for example, stem from a 'cultural' problem which escalates into

a crisis" (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 232). Cornelissen also states: "Nowadays in particular, many

critical issues emerge online, such as online criticisms of a company's ad (Groupon, Pepsi) or

discussion of company practices that, without a proper response from the organization, may

evolve into full-blown crises for a company" (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 233). In our fast paced

world, it is important to be aware of how an organization presents themselves, but whilst it

may not be possible to oversee every possible crisis that may affect an organization, there are

crisis contingency plans to have in advance in case of a possible crisis – here, communication

practitioners play an important role in the contingency plan making (Cornelissen, 2023, p.

233). Which impact does a crisis have on an organization's reputation? There are the obvious

threats on the reputational and financial aspects, which can damage the organization's

income. In case of a crisis where the stakeholders choose to not favor the organization

anymore because of a crisis, it can make an enormous impact on the financial part of the

organization (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 235). Here, Cornelissen (2023) explains:

> If, as a result of the crisis, the company's reputation shifts from favorable to
>
> unfavorable, stakeholders are likely to change how they interact with an organization.
>
> Customers may walk away or boycott a firm and investors may decide to invest
>
> elsewhere (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 235).

If that happens, it is important for the organization to demonstrate responsibility for their

stakeholders, but if the organization mishandles the communication following the crisis, it

may potentially lead to the stakeholders breaking off any ties with the organization and damaging the organization by spreading negative words (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 235).

Not everyone is affected equally when a crisis strikes in an organization. If an organization happens to be affected by a crisis that can damage the organization's reputation, they may have a buffer or a shield to protect the organization from a lasting negative impact from the crisis (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 235). It is called reputational capital and it is the organization's stock of perceptual and social assets – in other words, the quality of the relationship the organization has established with their stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 235). So based on the past performance and communication, organizations can accumulate a reputational capital from their stakeholders over time. A crisis will inflict some quantity of reputational damage, but depending on how much reputational damage has been done in a crisis, some goodwill may remain (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 236). In other words, organizations with more favorable reputation prior to a crisis are also likely to have a stronger reputation after a crisis, because the organization has more reputational capital to spend contrary to an organization with a bad reputation prior to a crisis. As a result of this, the organizations with the best pre-reputational capital will likely have better rebound opportunities as well as less suffering during and post crisis (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 236).

For an organization to recover from a crisis, there are some key objectives for the organization to follow. The corporate communication practitioners can protect an organization's reputation following a crisis and limit the damage to its image. The organization should be aware that the communication practitioners do not only focus on crisis communication only from the organization's perspective. The stakeholders play an important role when it comes to recovering the organization's image during and after a crisis. Cornelissen suggests: "Instead, the crisis situation demands that communication practitioners begin their efforts by releasing information to the media and by using communication to

address the physical and psychological concerns of those directly affected by the crisis"
(Cornelissen, 2023, p. 236). Cornelissen (2023) describes that it is a crucial first step and then
the organizations can proceed to turn their attention to communicating more broadly with the
stakeholders and focus on their reputational capital (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 236). The second
crucial step is to determine the organization's responsibility in the crisis – and here, the
organizations have to communicate this to a broad range of the organization's stakeholders.
The organization needs to look towards the stakeholders and determine how much the
stakeholders attribute the responsibility to the organization. Then, the communication
practitioners can frame the crisis and give an explanation about the organization's action to
minimize the damage to the organization's image and reputation (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 237).
In terms of framing possibilities, an organization can choose to frame themselves as victims
if there is a weak perception of responsibility in the eyes of the stakeholders. On the other
hand, if the organization is perceived to be in the wrong and is directly to blame in a crisis,
Cornelissen describes:

> ... the appropriate communication strategy would be one of the steps to resolve the
> crisis. In this way, by owning up to a crisis, a company may minimize feelings of
> anger and frustration amongst stakeholders and may be seen to be doing something
> about it in a determined and potentially positive way (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 237).

This theory section has accounted for corporate identity theory and I want to provide a brief
summary before continuing to the upcoming methods chapter. Conclusively, crisis
communication is an important discipline within corporate communication. Managing crises
starts with developing a crisis contingency plan for the most probable crisis scenarios that an
organization can encounter. The communication practitioners play an important role in
developing these and working out the details of the crisis communication. Lastly, an

important part of crisis communication for an organization is to maintain the relationship

with their stakeholders pre, during and post crisis.

Methods

This chapter accounts for the methodological approach in this thesis. Here, I account for this

thesis' philosophical framework of my research, method of data collection, ethical

considerations, research design and method of analysis. I have divided all of the topics into

sections with headlines to ensure better readability and coherency. Firstly, I would like to

present this thesis' philosophical framework.

Philosophical framework

In this section, I want to account for the philosophical framework that grounds my reasons for

embracing these philosophical approaches.

In framing this research, I want to highlight the ontological and epistemological

principles that create the foundation of our understanding of reality and knowledge. In this

thesis, I am grounding my work in the ontological and epistemological approaches of social

constructivism and interpretivism. Social constructivism points to the view that we learn

through social interaction and that our understanding of each other is shaped through this

social interaction (Bryman, 2012, pp. 33-34). To clarify my interpretivism approach, it is

based on the assumption that reality is subjective and socially constructed – in which we only

can understand someone's reality and their sense of worldview through their experience of

said reality. Interpretivism suggests that we view reality subjectively and therefore

individually (Bryman, 2012, pp. 28-29). By embracing social constructivism and

interpretivism, the framework offers a rich and nuanced perspective on reality. To apply this

to this thesis' research question, I believe that understanding, by working by the social

constructivism and interpretivist principles, I can confidently delve into the consumers'

reactions, attitudes and habits towards clothing brands' controversial advertisements and

apologies. The principles enable me to choose the right analytical methods and tools to obtain

the best findings to contribute to the current fields of the topics of advertisement; consumer

behavior and corporate apologies.

In terms of how I work as a research scholar, I am drawn to the qualitative approach

in research and unlike quantitative methods, which delves into bigger quantitative data and

less personal data. I enjoy qualitative research as I get the opportunity to work with elements

like human experiences and social interactions. This study employs an inductive research

approach – unlike deductive research, I am starting with my observations through conducting

focus group interviews to obtain specific observations that will lead to broader

generalizations. I find the inductive approach to be the best approach for me in this research

because my goal is to uncover patterns and themes within the data (Bryman, 2012, p. 27).

Therefore, through methods of data collection, which is the upcoming section, I have chosen

to conduct focus group interviews, which gives me the ability to explore multiple people's

diverse perspectives and uncover their opinions, reactions and thoughts on the three brands'

controversial advertisements and apologies that I have chosen for the participants to react to.

By committing to qualitative research, I am confident in being able to produce a nuanced

insight into how consumers react to clothing brands' controversial advertisements and

apologies and contribute with a fresh, innovative perspective on this field. If I were to do

quantitative research on the topic of consumer reactions towards controversial advertisements

in the form of, for example, questionnaires, I am certain that the short answers in the form of,

for example, a questionnaire may not be sufficient and saturated enough for an in-depth

research in the fields. Therefore, I believe that my philosophical stance and my reasoning for

being a qualitative scholar will provide me with the best circumstances for delivering the best

findings to contribute to the topics' current fields.

Method of Data Collection

This section of my methodological approach chapter accounts for the method of data

collection and ethical considerations during the process of collecting my data for this project.

For my data, I have decided to conduct focus group interviews consisting of three groups of

five people. My reasoning for conducting focus group interviews is that I believe this is a

great method to achieve a broad understanding of a demographic that see themselves as a

general clothing consumer and give an insight into everyday people who like to shop for

clothing. A focus group interview is defined as a method of group interview in which there

are several participants and there are questions on a particularly defined topic. Here, the

interaction within the group is important and constructs the meaning of the interviews

(Bryman, 2012, p. 502). By doing focus group interviews, I am able to obtain an

understanding about why the participants feel the way they do. If I were to do one-to-one

interviews, the participants' view and opinions would be limited to what they think at the

moment. In a focus group interview, the participants' can probe each other's reason for

holding a view, but also get inspired by the other participants (Bryman, 2012, p. 503). What

makes focus group interviews particularly interesting is the fact that it is not just interesting

to learn what the participants say, but *how* they say it – allowing multiple facets and nuances

of the language to emerge from the participants (Bryman, 2012, p. 503).

My initial demographic was open to all genders, but it was only women who

contacted me to participate in the focus group interviews. Prior to inviting people to the focus

group interviews, I had already made thoughts about who the demographic was going to be,

which was a larger quantity of women, which I looked into and discovered an August 2022

survey in the U.S., UK, France, Germany, and Australia that revealed that more women than

men shop for fashion products online. Up to 82 percent of female digital buyers had

purchased clothing via the internet in the previous 12 months before the survey, while only

73 percent of the men surveyed had done so. This graph demonstrates the distribution of each gender and their online shopping habits, which resulted in women shopping online more than men.
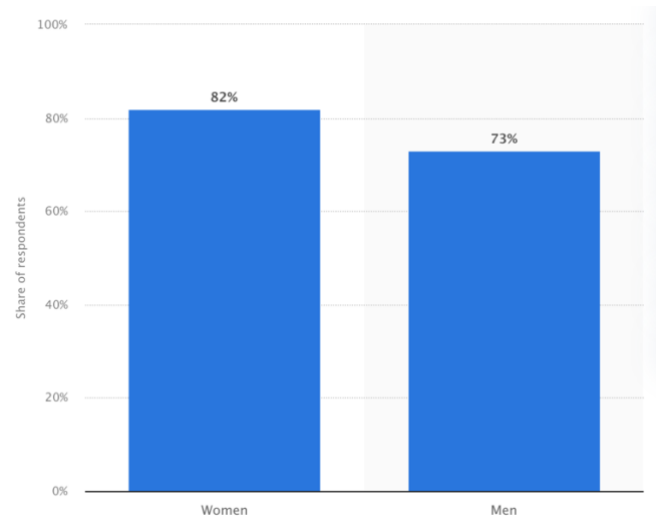
I find this statistic interesting as it confirmed my assumptions on the dominant gender in clothing shopping. Looking aside from this statistic, I still remained open to all genders to participate in the interviews. I decided not to specify how many participants I needed, because I wanted as many participants as possible to participate in the focus group interviews. When writing the invitation to the interview, I remained as neutral as possible to make sure that everyone felt welcome to participate in the interviews. Therefore, I have not specified gender, age, background, location or other. My only condition for participating in the interviews was that the possible participants had to see themselves as clothing shoppers.

I decided on inviting participants through my personal Facebook account with almost 800 friends and the invitation is written in both Danish and English below as my primary Facebook friends are Danish, but I also have international friends that I wanted to reach as well as their possible international friends. I decided on writing a Facebook post, inviting

---

[1] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1375959/share-e-commerce-fashion-buyers-gender/

participants. The invitation I posted on my Facebook searching for participants for three

focus group interviews is:

ENGLISH BELOW 👇🏼

Hej netværk!

Jeg er i gang med mit kandidatspeciale og jeg vil rigtig gerne have din hjælp! 😊

Er du en person, der shopper tøj både online og i fysiske butikker, og ser du reklamer

fra tøjmærker, som du shopper?

Så kan du hjælpe mig ved at deltage i et interview på engelsk omhandlende reklamer

fra bestemte tøjmærker, og så kvitterer jeg med en kaffe fra din yndlingskaffebar! ☕

Interviewet varer cirka 1 time og vil blive afholdt primo april online på Teams. Skriv

en besked til mig her på Facebook, i kommentarsporet eller på mit tlf. nr. via SMS

eller WhatsApp på +45 xxxxxxxx.

Må meget gerne deles — tak på forhånd! 🌷

_____

ENGLISH:

Hello network!

I am working on my master's thesis and I would really like your help! 😊

Are you a person who shops for clothes online and in physical stores, and do you see

advertisements from the clothing brands you shop?

You can help me by participating in an interview in English about advertisements

from certain clothing brands, and in return, I'll give you a coffee from your favorite

coffee shop! ☕

The interview lasts approximately 1 hour and will be conducted in early April online on Teams. Write me a message here on Facebook, in the comments section or to my phone number via SMS or WhatsApp +45 xxxxxxxx.

Feel free to share — thanks in advance! 🌷

I found it essential to make the process of contacting me as easy as possible, so instead of the possible participants being encouraged to only send me a Facebook message, I chose to also write my personal telephone number, which I have chosen to anonymise in this thesis to protect my personal information. By sharing my phone number, which also was able to reach out to my friends' friends, I ensured that everyone could contact me, given that possible participants were not able to reach me through Facebook Messenger.

Furthermore, I also offered a form of compensation as a "thank you for your help" to any possible participants. I chose to include this because I wanted as many participants as possible to ensure saturation in my focus group interviews. Therefore, in my invitation in the Facebook post, I offered a coffee from their favorite coffee shop in return for their participation in my focus group interviews. I am highlighting this, as I believe that it is a good strategy to draw attention towards my research, as well as a symbolic gesture for anyone who wants to participate in an interview as the participants are giving me a piece of their time, essentially for free to help me, which I am extremely grateful for.

The invitation was posted on Tuesday, March 26th 2024 at 02.25 PM and I made sure that the post was shareable and commentable, so everyone who wanted to participate could reach me by the post, through my personal messages on Facebook and by my telephone number as well. I also encouraged everyone to share my post and it received two sharings, reaching out to a broader demographic and ensuring that all of the participants are not my personal friends. When I received messages from people wanting to participate, I asked them to ask in their network if anyone wanted to participate. This resulted in 3 more people

participating in the focus group interviews. The overall invitations resulted in creating three focus groups with initially five participants in each group, but due to cancellations, the three focus group interviews that I conducted resulted in a total of 11 participants, all women between the ages of 21 and 31.

Prior to actually conducting the focus group interviews, I created groups of the initial 15 participants that wanted to participate in the focus group interviews. The way that I chose to form the groups was based on my connection to them. Initially, my intention was to place the participants in groups based on the order of when the participants signed up to participate in the interviews, but when all 15 of the participants had signed up, I found it interesting to place them in groups based on my relation to them as well as their relations to each other. I base this on my own experience in a focus group interview that I participated in. The focus group that I have participated in consisted of 6 people from my bachelor's degree, and I fondly remember feeling safe and wanting to share more details rather than if I were to participate with a number of people I did not know. So based on this experience, I saw it as a major advantage to put people together in a group depending on my relation to them and their relation to each other. At this point, when creating the groups, I was really intrigued by their possible answers to the questions that I had prepared for the interviews as the respective groups have very different backgrounds. To put it simply, the first group consisted of my co-students who also study Culture, Communication & Globalization. Of the four participants in focus group 1, three of the participants are currently studying CCG and the last participant has a Master's degree in Communications, which is closely related to CCG. This resulted in an entire focus group being participants of an academic background. The second group were participants from my hometown, Holstebro in West Jutland. None of them have academic backgrounds and are primarily working in the public sector. Being that they are all 'old' school friends from my hometown created a homely setting and I perceived this as an

advantage because the participants felt free and safe to express themselves however they wanted. The last group, focus group 3, consisted of newer Aalborg friends and new colleagues from my job at a local marketing bureau. In this group, two of the participants have academic backgrounds and the other participants are non-academics. I found that focus group 3 was a mix of the two prior groups. It is also intentional that I chose to conduct the interviews in this order as I want to see if the results of focus group 3 may be a mixture of focus group 1 and 2, which I found it to be. The dynamic of all groups performed really well and I found that deciding on putting the groups together by relations worked really well in terms of safety and comfortability.

After forming the groups, I created a Facebook Messenger group chat with the participants in the respective groups, giving them a short introduction to them to make them feel safe before, during and after the interview was conducted. Since all the participants are Danish, I corresponded with them in Danish. I sent all the groups a message that reads something like this:

Danish:

Hej piger 🤍

TAK fordi I vil være med i et interview med mig — det hjælper gevaldigt på specialet

Interviewet er på engelsk og på Teams (som kan transskribere hele interviewet). Vi skal snakke om reklamer — super simpelt og varer cirka 1-1,5 time. Jeg stiller nogle spørgsmål og I må svare lige præcis hvad I vil 😍 der er ingen rigtige eller forkerte spørgsmål og I må spørge alt det I vil både før, under og efter interviewet. I er anonyme hele vejen igennem

Vil I være med til det på onsdag d. 17. kl. 19.00/19.30? Jeg er fleksibel, let me know!

Hvis I stadig er med på den, vil I så ikke sende jeres mail til mig, så kan jeg sende en invitation til mødet 🤍

———————

English:

> Hey girls ♡
>
> THANK YOU for taking part in an interview with me — it will help the thesis
> tremendously
>
> The interview is in English and on Teams (which can transcribe the entire interview).
> We are going to talk about advertising — super simple and lasts approximately 1-1.5
> hours. I will ask some questions and you can answer exactly what you want 😍 there
> are no right or wrong questions and you can ask anything you want before, during and
> after the interview. You are anonymous throughout the interview.
>
> Will you join us on Wednesday the 17th at 19.00/19.30? I'm flexible, let me know!
>
> If you're still ready, please send me your email and I'll can send an invitation to the
> meeting ♡

By sending the participants a message like this prior to the interviews, I believe that I was able to set a relaxed and safe environment for the participants, which I found extremely important not just for the participants, but also for myself. I received some questions prior to the interviews which included questions about anonymity, if there are more interviewers other than me and how long the interview was going to last. I answered the questions to the best of my ability and there were no further questions before, during or after the interviews, which also can be seen in all of the transcripts in appendix 1.

Once the participants accepted the invitation and provided me with their emails, I invited them to a meeting on the agreed date on Microsoft Teams. About an hour before each interview, I messaged the participants in the Facebook Messenger group to let them know that we were about to start in an hour and if they had any questions. I made sure to stay open

to questions all the time, but it seemed as if the participants felt fulfilled with the information that I already had provided them.

I conducted the three focus group interviews on the online communication platform Microsoft Teams because three of the participants were located elsewhere than Aalborg, where I am located. I found it to be an advantage for me to conduct the interview on Microsoft Teams because it has a transcribing tool that makes transcribing a simpler process than by transcribing manually. If I were to transcribe the focus groups interviews manually, it would take a great deal of time, which I do not mind. I decided that using the transcribing tool on Microsoft Teams works extremely well because it puts a timestamp as well as the participant's name when someone speaks. I am aware that although it is a great tool, it is not perfect. Therefore, it was also a part of the process to go through each interview manually, listening and watching the video recordings again to perfect the transcripts and ensure that the names and transcripts were correct. By doing so, I also ensured to familiarize myself with the participants, answers and discussions. Whilst rewatching and familiarizing myself with the video recordings and transcripts, I prepared myself to utilize the method of analysis in the findings chapter. I found it to be an excellent method to revisit and retrieve the best segments to highlight in the findings chapter to answer this thesis' research question.

I conducted a total of three focus group interviews. Focus group 1 was conducted on Monday, April 8th at 7 PM. The interview lasted 1 hour and 15 minutes and there were 4 participants. Focus group 2 was conducted on Wednesday April 10th with a total of 3 participants at 8.30 PM and lasted 49 minutes. The last focus group 3 was conducted on Wednesday April 17th at 7 PM with a total of 4 participants and lasted 1 hour and 41 minutes. I encountered multiple last minute cancellations, so the initial 15 people were reduced to 11 people. After finishing conducting three focus group interviews, I considered if I had gathered sufficient data for the findings chapter and reflected on if I needed to conduct

more focus group interviews – here I decided that I felt satisfied with the three focus group interviews that I had conducted and that the topics of the interview were saturated. I base this on the fact that I experienced a rich amount and varieties of answers, discussions and questions. Additionally, I experienced that multiple answers, discussions and questions were continuous throughout the focus group interviews, which led me to believe that the three focus group interviews were sufficient and saturated enough for me to use in my research. I obtained a total of 176 pages of transcripts from the three focus group interviews. These collaborative meetings that have been transcribed will be used as the data in this thesis.

In terms of technical issues, there was only one technical difficulty in focus group 1, where one of the participants had a problem with their webcam and watching everyone else's webcams. This also resulted in, when I had to share my screen to show the participants the material I had brought for them to discuss, that I had to send the material to the participant. This caused no issues at all, as I sent the material via Facebook Messenger and the participant was then able to see the materials and participate in the interview without further issues.

Ethical Considerations

Before starting the recording and transcribing, I greeted them all in Danish, asking them if they felt ready. I followed this by letting them know about their GDPR rights, that this interview is being recorded and transcribed, and that the material will only be available for my supervisor and I. I also let them know that the video recording and transcription are stored on my private computer with a password. Furthermore, I let them know that the examiner at my exam will only have access to the transcriptions and that the video recording will be deleted after the exam has taken place in June 2024. At last, I asked all of the participants if I had their consent to store the material accordingly, which all of the participants consented to. I later realized that I forgot to inform focus group 1 that they are always able to withdraw their consent, so I sent them a message on Facebook Messenger in the group informing them

and they reacted to the message and agreed. In the other two focus groups, I made sure to tell them during the interview.

At last, as a part of my ethical consideration, I have come up with pseudonyms for each of the participants. By doing this, and not calling them participant 1, participant 2, etc., it gives a better coherence when reading and it also gives the participants more personality and makes the participants more human like. Here is a demonstration of the groups, descriptions of the groups and the participants' pseudonyms.

Focus group 1 Fellow academics	Participants Hanne Kirsten Janna Caroline
Focus group 2 Hometown friends	Participants Jessica Irene Mary
Focus group 3 Mix of colleagues and new friends	Participants Maria Sofie Kamilla Simone

H&M, ZARA and Balenciaga

For better coherence and understanding the material used in this study, I want to account for the three brands the focus groups discussed during the interviews. I have specifically chosen these three brands because these three brands have each published an advertisement that has received backlash from the public and gained enormous attention. Furthermore, all three of the clothing brands have also made an apology following their controversial advertisements that have received backlash. My reasoning for specifically choosing these brands is based on the publicity that they received because of their controversial advertisements. They are all brands of a substantial size and are vastly represented in most countries – in order words, they are extremely accessible for everyone. These are all brands that I personally know and have consumed, therefore there is also a personal interest in each brand from my side. Therefore, I felt drawn to look into these brands and possible consumers of these brands to gain an insight into how consumers perceive these brands after seeing and discussing their controversial advertisements and apologies.

H&M[2]

H&M, also known as Hennes & Mauritz, was founded in 1947 in Sweden by Erling Persson with the first store in Stockholm, Sweden in 1952. H&M quickly grew and by 1969 H&M had opened 42 stores and started globalizing by opening stores in Norway, Denmark, the UK and Switzerland, with a fast pace of opening 5-6 new stores every year. Initially, H&M sold women's clothing, but quickly expanded and started selling clothing for the whole family, branding themselves as a clothing store for the whole family. By then, H&M had a tight grip on the European countries and continued to expand into four new markets with a new flagship store on Fifth Avenue in New York, which marked the start of H&M going global in the year 2000. This kickstarted the new world of opportunities, expanding even more and

---

[2] https://hmgroup.com/about-us/history/

buying other brands like Weekday, Monki, Cheap Monday and many more, making them a part of H&M group. In January 2018, H&M posted a campaign showcasing their new hoodies and sweatshirts for children, where one of the hoodies has the text *Coolest Monkey in the Jungle* (appendix 2). The talent wearing the hoodie for the campaign is called Liam Mango and he was, at the time, a 5 year old black boy (Flores, 2021) This post quickly received backlash for being of racist character. According to The Washington Post: "This scandal drew accusations of racism all over social media, including from The Weeknd[3] and G-Eazy[4], who both cut ties with the company" (West, 2018). H&M followed up on the scandal with an apology (appendix 2) where they apologized to whomever this advertisement may have affected and removed the advertisement as well as the hoodies and sweatshirts.

ZARA[5]

ZARA is a Spanish clothing brand and one of the biggest international fashion companies owned by Inditex. Inditex also owns Pull&Bear, Massimo Dutti, Bershka, Stradivarius, Oysho and ZARA Home. ZARA was founded in 1975 by Amancio Ortega and Rosalía Mera and one dress factory in 1963 in Spain became the beginning of what was going to become one of the biggest fashion brands. ZARA's first store was in A Coruña in Galicia and slowly expanded across the world. ZARA got its first clothing store in the United States of America in 1989 (Kala, 2018). From then, ZARA has expanded to all parts of the globe with nearly 3000 stores across 96 countries and Ortega is now one of the top 5 richest men in the world and ZARA is considered one of the largest international fashion companies today. In December 2023, ZARA posted a series of pictures to their social media platforms, presenting

---

[3] Musician

[4] Musician

[5] https://theenterpriseworld.com/zara-a-success-story/

their newest campaign called *The Jacket* (appendix 2). The campaign showcases a talent

wearing a jacket and the background seems to be rubble, statues and body bags. People on the

internet quickly attacked ZARA, demanding boycotting and starting the hashtag

#BoycottZARA on the social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter, as they believed

that ZARA was mocking the current war in the Gaza Strip. ZARA responded to the criticism

by saying that the campaign was planned in advance and before the war started in early

October 2023. ZARA also responded to the criticism by posting a public apology (appendix

2) stating the above and noting that the set is an atelier that was used and it was not meant to

resemble the current war (Sachdeva, 2023).

Balenciaga[6]

Cristóbal Balenciaga started the brand Balenciaga by opening a boutique in San Sebastián in

the north of Spain and quickly became famous as the Spanish royal family were customers of

Balenciaga. Soon, the Spanish Civil War began and Balenciaga closed all stores in Spain and

moved the couture house to Paris in 1937 and was also allowed to keep the boutique open, as

some believe that an ally of Adolf Hitler had a good relationship with Balenciaga. Postwar,

Balenciaga became a big name, showing off on the runways of fashion shows. Since the

beginning of the brand Balenciaga, it was known to be a high-end brand and it continued to

stay like that, as Balenciaga continued to design clothes for big celebrities – big names like

Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly.

   In 1969, Balenciaga closed the doors to his atelier in Paris and he retired shortly after.

Just a couple of years later, Balenciaga passed away at age 77 from heart failure. It took two

decades before someone revived the brand Balenciaga and that person was Jacques Bogart

SA and Michel Goma. Going through multiple people who tried to make Balenciaga a big

---

[6] https://glamobserver.com/the-history-and-evolution-of-balenciaga/

brand again, the high-end brand Gucci took over and acquired Balenciaga, making Balenciaga a part of their portfolio under the big French luxury group called PPR – later called Kering, and the brand Balenciaga was once again revived to stay. Pairing up with a new CEO of the brand in 2016, Balenciaga grew rapidly and was on the runway in Paris again. The brand Balenciaga was to become even more popular soon, as the well-known celebrity, Kim Kardashian, became the new brand ambassador, walking the red carpet multiple times fully dressed in Balenciaga and promoting their special style.

In 2023, Balenciaga met resistance and criticism from the public, as they posted a new campaign, advertising children with adult accessories like bondage equipment (appendix 2). The public claimed that Balenciaga was supportive of child exploitation, leading the brand into a storm of criticism. Balenciaga quickly evaluated their campaign and came out with a public apology, stating that they will take responsibility (appendix 2). Shortly after, Balenciaga began a three-year partnership with the National Children's Alliance, which is an organization that offers mental health support of survivors of abuse and education on child protection, safety and well-being (Malach, 2023)

These three organizations are connected by their industries as they are all clothing brands. I deliberately selected these three brands because each represents a distinct financial tier within the fashion industry. H&M is considered accessible and cheap, where ZARA is more expensive but still accessible for most people. Balenciaga is a high end fashion brand that is considered more expensive. Furthermore, another reasoning for choosing to investigate H&M, ZARA and Balenciaga is because they all have an apology connected to their controversial advertisements.

Discussions in Focus Groups

In the interviews amongst many topics, we discussed what clothing shopping meant for the participants to which multiple of the participants talked about identity, being able to express

themselves how they want and style themselves in different ways for different occasions.

Furthermore, we discussed the stores and brands that the participants like to shop. Here,

many brands surfaced such as H&M; ZARA; Cider; Vero Moda; Shein; Hunkøn; Shaping

New Tomorrow etc. I was intrigued that some of the participants mentioned H&M and

ZARA as the participants did not know at this point in the interview that these were some of

the brands that we were going to discuss later in the interview. The next topic the participants

discussed was the appeal of the clothing brands that they shop and if they notice any of their

advertisements. The participants generally were attracted to the price of the brands that they

shop for. Others mentioned that they like the quality of the clothes that they like – these

comments were made about the brand Shaping New Tomorrow. The two main factors that

were widely popular between the participants was the look and the price of the clothes that

they shop for. In terms of advertising, the majority of the participants expressed that they pay

little to no attention to the advertisements from their favorite clothing brands. The overall

reason for that was that the participants expressed that their everyday lives are filled with

advertisements, so they tend to ignore advertisements in general. If something special caught

their attention, they may have briefly been interested in that specific item.

      At this point, I informed the participants that we were going to look at the

advertisements that I picked for them to discuss. I showed the following in the same order in

each focus group:

1. H&M advertisement and apology

2. ZARA advertisement and apology

3. Balenciaga advertisement and apology

I chose to put them in this particular order based on the financial tier for the brands' products,

which is also how the order is in the rest of this thesis for best coherence. When I presented

the participants the advertisements, I asked them to look at the advertisement and gave them

approximately 30 seconds to gather their thoughts. Afterwards they discussed what they

noticed about the advertisement and I asked the participants if they have ever seen the

advertisement before. Between all the focus groups, the majority had seen the H&M

advertisement before, contrary to the ZARA and Balenciaga advertisements where most of

the participants had not seen the advertisements before. The same applied to the apologies,

where the majority of the participants had not seen the apologies from the respective brands

before. Conclusively, the participants had many discussions and statements about each

brand's controversial advertisement and apology. Multiple of the same topics were discussed

across the focus groups which resulted in rich findings that will be presented in the findings

chapter. Now, I present the next section which accounts for this thesis' research design.

Research Design

This research design chapter accounts for the method of conducting the focus group

interviews, which questions I prepared and the overall strategy in conducting focus group

interviews.

The research design in this study is based on a prompting technique based on the

controversial advertisements and apologies from the brands H&M, ZARA and Balenciaga

that have received backlash as well as a set of 13 questions to support the visual material for

the participants. By doing a unique prompting technique that is based on the controversial

advertisements and apologies from the respective clothing brands, I was able to obtain the

participants' past, current and surprised attitudes towards the advertisement and apologies that

I showed them during the interviews. The element of surprise is based on the fact that none of

the participants know what is shown during the interview. This secures an unbiased opinion

beforehand the interview and none of the participants are able to gather thoughts or prepare

themselves for the interview. The development of the interview questions are based on the

advertisements and apologies that I have selected for the participants to talk about in the

focus group interviews. Therefore, I created some general guiding questions for the participants to get started in the interview and open their minds to talk shopping, brands and advertisements – creating an open-ended way for the participants. I made sure to stay open minded for also deviating from the questions and ask questions that were fitting and appropriate in the interview to ensure a smoother interview as well as better coherence. This means that I prepared myself to be able to deviate from other questions that were related to the topic, but not necessarily on my list of questions. All of the interviews deviated from the questions and can be seen in the transcriptions. I see it as a positive element that the interviewees and I were able to deviate from the questions as it let the participants unconstrained of the questions leading to more liberty in their thoughts, reactions and answers. This has contributed to this thesis in a positive way, giving it more depth, information and thoughts to further research in my findings chapter later in the thesis. An important element to doing these interviews is also the act of staying silent and letting the participants think for themselves. I did not want to try and put words in any of the participants' mouths as it would have resulted in a biased interview and that would have damaged the genuinity of the results for my data.

Afterwards, I moved on to the more specific and structured questions about the advertisements and apologies, which I chose to do to ensure comparability when analyzing the data together. I chose to combine both a semi-structured part and completely structured part in the interview questions to ensure that the participants could speak freely and have interesting discussions, perhaps leading to unexpected insights into the topics. Contrary, I also needed the participants to answer questions about the advertisements and apologies that I showed them in the focus group interviews. I found it to be a great method as I felt as though the participants felt inspired by talking about shopping, brands and advertisements openly and with spontaneity in the first part of the interview and afterwards moving on to a more

structured approach to the questions about the actual controversial advertisements and apologies. I want to present the 13 questions I used as guiding questions in the focus group interviews here:

1. In regards to clothes shopping – what attracts you when you shop?

2. You were all selected because you like to shop for clothes – tell me why do you enjoy shopping for clothes?

3. Which stores and brands do you like the most?

4. What is appealing about them?

5. Do you pay attention towards how the stores you like the most advertise or how they advertise?

6. In regards to shopping clothes – what attracts you when you shop?

   Interviewer: "I am going to show you an advertisement from the brand X. I will give you 20-30 seconds to look at it and gather your thoughts about the advertisement".

7. Have you seen this ad before?

8. Tell me about your reaction to this advertisement.

9. What do you notice about this advertisement?

10. What are your thoughts about the advertisement? Which feelings does it evoke in you?

    Interviewer: "I am going to show you an apology from the brand. Read it and tell me about your reaction to this apology".

11. Do you think it is important that brand X made an apology?

12. How does the apology make you feel?

13. Does it change your shopping habits at brand X?

As I am conducting the focus group interviews with a unique prompting technique, this allowed me to deviate from the questions in case the participants steered away from the

premade questions. If the participants were to do so, I quickly tried to interject on their answers, stories etc. and let them elaborate further. By doing this, I got the opportunity to get more in depth and rich content for my findings chapter. This also allowed the participants to not stay strictly to the questions for the interview, but instead they used the questions to gain inspiration to further elaborate. I experienced that the participants were good at answering the questions, but also further expanding their opinions with experiences, stories and knowledge. I want to note that none of the participants received any of the advertisements, apologies or questions beforehand. This allowed the participants to be unbiased and uninfluenced before the interview. By doing this, the surprise element and getting natural, real and raw answers were possible.

Method of Analysis

This section gives an account for the method of analysis that I have chosen to utilize in this study and why this specific method is fitting and appropriate for the type of data and the type of scholar I am. For my method of analysis, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data for this study. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used for identifying, analysing and giving an account for patterns – also called themes – within data, for example, very descriptive data like interviews (Naeem, Ozuem, & Ranfagni, 2023). Thematic analysis aligns with the qualitative nature of this research study and I find thematic analysis to be a flexible way to analyze my collected data in the form of transcripts from my three focus group interviews. By conducting a thematic analysis with the data I have collected, I manage to preserve the richness of my qualitative data. I find thematic analysis to be a good approach as I can analyze the data in detail and capture the depth of the participants' personal experiences, perspective and narratives. Using a thematic analysis is an iterative way of researching my data – this is positive in this thesis as I am analyzing the participants' responses to three different clothing brands and the clothing brands' apologies. So being that

thematic analysis is an iterative process, I can ensure a rigorous and more in depth way of analyzing in the findings chapter, which results in a very detailed answer to the thesis' research question. Furthermore, the thematic analysis generally enhances more aspects in terms of context. This could be of the social and cultural context, which also contributes to a richer result and uncovering meaningful insights from the collected data.

According to Clarke and Braun (2015), thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns of meaning – also known as themes (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 1947). The method is used with qualitative data and provides an accessible and systematic procedure for creating codes and themes. The codes capture the interesting features of the data that is relevant to the research question and make up the building block for the themes. The themes provide a framework for organizing and reporting my analytical observations, and the aim of the thematic analysis is to identify and interpret the features of the data, guided by the research question, producing a rigorous and high quality analysis. (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 1948). Clarke & Braun (2014) say that within thematic analysis there is a six-phase process which includes familiarizing oneself with their data, reading and rereading the data, which should be accompanied by noting the initial analytic observations about the data and its possible development for further explorations (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 1950). Phase two involves a rigorous and systematic coding of the data, because this is where the codes can evolve and captures the features of the data that is relevant to the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 1951). Phase three consists of possible themes and this is where the codes are examined to discover similarities within the codes – looking for a pattern. When the codes are clustered together, they form together into themes (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 1951). It is crucial that the themes work together to tell a rich story about the data in relation to the research question. Phase four is reviewing the themes to ensure a good match between the themes and the coded data in order to be able to show coherent and

relevant findings (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 1951). Phase five is the process of writing theme definitions to facilitate the development of a rich analytic narrative (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 1952). As Clarke & Braun (2014) describe: "The definitions should tell the story of each theme, its central concept, scope and boundaries and how it relates to the other themes and to the research question" (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 1952). Therefore, the themes need to encapsulate the essence of the themes (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 1952). The last phase is writing up, which involves assembling, editing, further analyzing and organization of the themes in order to provide clear findings to support the analytic claims (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 1952).

The first step in the process of using thematic analysis with my data, I familiarized myself with my data, the transcripts, again and read them carefully whilst listening and viewing each recording of the interviews multiple times. In the second step I coded the discussions the participants had during the interviews, focusing on the topics that were very saturated, as I believe that if the certain topics were spoken about a lot, they became focus points for the findings chapter. When understanding what the central points of the discussions were, I wrote them down and started building and combining the codes. I looked for similarities, patterns in topics that were discussed a lot. I also looked for statements that said the same, indicating that the participants agree on something and therefore are saturated. A central topic within the codes was, for example, the participants' shopping habits, where multiple participants expressed many of the same opinions. Consecutively, a pattern started to show, which I then turned into themes that I named according to what the participants discussed in the codes. This resulted in a total of four themes that I will present in the findings chapter. The way that I am structuring the themes in the findings chapter is by starting with each theme that has emerged from the coding process, showing the findings from each brand in the order of H&M, ZARA and Balenciaga. I then summarize each theme

at the end. By doing so, I want to ensure that there is coherence and the best readability. By the end of the findings chapter, a collective summary is provided before continuing to the discussion chapter.

      To summarize this methods chapter, the chapter accounts for the philosophical approach being social constructivism and interpretivism as well as accounting for my rationale for being a qualitative scholar. Furthermore, the chapter accounts for the method of data collection which consists of three focus groups interviews that resulted in 176 pages of transcriptions that are utilized as this thesis' data. Additionally, the chapter also looks into the ethical considerations in conducting focus group interviews and the protection of the participants' data. A statement on the three brands and their controversial advertisements and apologies were made as well as a brief overlook on the discussions from the focus group interviews. Lastly, this methods chapter has also provided a research design accounting for the technique that is used in this thesis as well as method of analysis that demonstrates how a thematic analysis will efficiently show the findings in this upcoming findings chapter.

Findings

This findings chapter I present the findings of my study on the participants' reactions to controversial advertisements and apologies. As I conducted thematic analysis, I present the data through the themes that emerged to be able to answer my research question. My research aims to unfold how the controversial advertisements and apologies affect the consumers' attitudes towards the clothing brands that were discussed in the three conducted focus group interviews. During the process of coding the transcriptions, four themes emerged which are named *Despise; Neutrality and Indifference; Assessing Corporate Apologies; Future Shopping Habits.* The themes work together to answer the thesis' research question. I chose two themes to assess the controversial advertisements following by a theme that assesses the corporate apologes and the last theme reveals the participants' future shopping habits as the

interplay of these themes is essential to answer the research question. I find the themes to cover all the important aspects of the transcripts, uncovering the material that can confidently answer the research question. Now, I want to introduce the first theme that emerged during coding which is *Despise*.

Despise

The theme of *despise* represents the reactions from the participants to the advertisements. The advertisements reflect this particular theme by evoking feelings in the participants that make them express themselves with the use of words and statements that are similar and correlate to the theme's name. Multiple of the participants felt repulsed by the controversial advertisements that I showed them. Some of the participants found the advertisements to be racist and with indication of child exploitation whereas some of the participants found the advertisements unfortunate and provoking.

Reacting to the first advertisement from H&M, in focus group 1, the initial reaction expressed by a participant was: "Well, I find it incredibly racist." Which was immediately followed by another who said: "Because of the ethnicity of the boy they chose and the script on the shirt." Another participant, Kirsten, summed up the collective sentiment when she said:

> Hmm, I think that, when I saw the ad, it was in relation to the shitstorm that it had.
> Uh, and I think, uh, obviously I, I agree with it, that it is an unfortunate kind of
> connotation between like pictures and the text on it. And I still agree with that. But I
> agree as well, if I had just seen it, I maybe would not have given it that much thought
> as well or maybe not given it the same kind of, umm, connotations as I've seen online.

Hanne echoed the feeling of despise when she followed up by saying:

> It feels very provoking and not just the text and the ethnicity, but the way the posture
> of the child and the set up of everything, and the fact that they selected such a young

child to do this campaign as well. If I think I would have looked at it differently if it

had been an adult model, but not that differently, but a bit differently, but yeah, it's

definitely provoking.

The participants felt a general despise towards the advertisement from H&M, discussing

topics like racism and child exploitation. The participants felt uneasy seeing that there is a

child involved in the advertisement. Janna from focus group 1 expressed her concern about

the child in the advertisement: "I was, like, Hanne made a good point with the age of the

child, because now it actually makes me more sad." as well as: "So now I am just really sad

for the child to be exploited in that way." There is a focus point on the fact that there is a

child involved and the participants feel as if they would have thought differently if it was an

adult that was in the advertisement from H&M. Sofie from focus group 3 also stated: "It is

fairly problematic…" And some of the other comments on the advertisement are: "Kind of

uneasy.", "I do not know but… Kinda second hand embarrassment, yeah." and "A little

uncomfortable."

The same theme of *despise* continued with the ZARA advertisement, yet with a focus

on war and genocide. When the advertisement from ZARA was shown the initial reaction

from the focus groups was shared by Janna, with unease, who said: "...I cannot help to notice

how Aryan she looks. And I think about genocide and Holocaust as well into it, which is kind

of disrupting." To which another participant expressed: "I think that the timing, I don't see it

being coincidental with the timing." From focus group 2, Jessica expressed in shock and said:

"So if anything, I am shocked that they did decide to publish an advertisement that gives

people these connections." The aforementioned comments on the ZARA advertisement

generally gives the connotations of connecting World War II and genocide to the

advertisement and feeling uneasy about it as well as it being an intentional advertisement that

is supposed to evoke feelings and connotations to war. Simone from focus group 3 followed

with her opinion and said: "I think, in my opinion, I think… knowing the world today, I do not think it is tasteful to put it in a body bag at any time. Because of the message it sends." Here, Simone is implying that there is never an appropriate time to put out advertisements that are showcasing a bodybag and she also indicates that the world is perhaps more aware of sensitive subjects, when she said "… knowing the world today". To this, Kirsten from focus group 1 also independently agreed: "That it is completely unnecessary to advertise a piece of clothing, uh, with the body bag in the background."

Continuing in the theme of *despise*, multiple of the participants expressed deep concern towards the advertisement from Balenciaga which revolves around child exploitation and sexualisation of children. For example, Caroline from focus group 1 argued her concern about these topics:

> I think it is disgusting, but I kinda knew my opinion beforehand because I know about
> the case and it kinda gives connotations to the BDSM-like, thing, when a child is
> standing on the bed with the teddy bear like that clearly dressed in some sexual stuff,
> so it is deeply inappropriate and disgusting, I would say.

And Hanne followed up by saying: "Yeah, I agree, the exploitation and sexualization goes hand in hand and it is very disturbing." and "I think it is kind of giving me a sense that they might be taking away her innocence." Mary from focus group 2 also expressed her concern about the child in the Balenciaga advertisement: "'Cause the toy is kind of sexual in nature, and then there is this little kid holding it." to which Irene also said that it made her feel: "Uncomfortable". The participants generally feel uneasy when looking at the advertisements from Balenciaga because of the placement of the child and the accessories that have connections to the BDSM world, which includes items like a leash, fishnet clothing and other adult related items.

The theme of *despise* is continuous throughout the different brands to which the participants felt repulsed by the controversial advertisements' display of racism, war, genocide and sexualization of children. The advertisements struck a chord with the participants but for different reasons. Collectively, however, they were all shocked by what they saw in the controversial advertisements. Especially participants from focus group 1 were extremely touched by the child's age and the connotations connected to the child's ethnicity in the advertisement from H&M. Conclusively, some of the participants across the focus groups found links between the difficult topics of racism, war and child exploitation to the advertisements and found it generally disturbing and unfortunate. While the theme of *despise* emerged, there was also a sense of neutrality and indifference, which is the next theme.

Neutrality and Indifference

The second theme that emerged in the discussion is *Neutrality and Indifference* which can be viewed as a contrary of the previous theme *Despise*. Here, one participant started the discussion about the H&M advertisement with a blunt statemet: "To be honest, nothing special." followed by another comment by Mary from focus group 2: "A little uncomfortable. Also a little bit of a boring ad before I notice the text." Jessica, from the same group suggested expressed her neutrality by expressing what she think H&M could have done instead: "I believe that they could have prevented all the backlash that did come from this advertisement by, in this situation, choosing a different model." The participants in this theme do not necessarily feel any tough evoked feelings towards the advertisement. Some of their opinions are based on knowing that there is an aspect of racism, but they do not necessarily believe that there is a vast amount of harm done in the advertisement from H&M. Continusouly, Simone from focus group 3 argued: "Well, I think it was an unfortunate mistake, but it does not make me personally feel, like, angry with H&M, I think it was a mistake." To which another participant expressed their feelings by saying:

> Well, I think it was an unfortunate mistake, but it does not make me personally feel, like, angry with H&M, I think it was a mistake. I do not think they thought it through because… probably a poor stylist was going through it fast, and was having a rough day and just put the boy in the shirt. I do not think the person who did it thought anything about it.

Interestingly enough, Maria from group 3 followed up with her opinion and sparked the interest and transition to H&M's apology by saying:

> I agree. I do not think it was intentional. I do not know why H&M would do that. It was really bad publicity, but I do not recall how they reacted to the criticism and I think that is actually maybe the most interesting part if they, like, defended themselves or they just well, yeah, went with it and apologized. I do not remember that.

The fact that Maria showed interest in criticism that the H&M advertisement received is very fascinating, because she wants to know how H&M is able to handle a crisis like this. Although this is the theme of *Neutrality and Indifference*, there is still a curiosity for the possible consequences and crisis management for H&M. Maria also stated: "I do not know what to say about it. I think it is… it was really… it is just unfortunate and not that thought through I think, yeah." as well as:

> They are such a big company that they do not have any incentive to do something like this from a racial perspective. I do not think it was intentional at all but I cannot imagine they doubled down and were like "yes this was very intentional to get into the monkey shirt", but yeah I do not remember either their handling of it.

Continuing with the ZARA advertisements in the theme of *Neutrality and Indifference*, Hanne from focus group 1 did not understand the ZARA advertisement's message: "Yeah, a bit indifferent, to be honest, because I do not, I really do not get it." There was generally a

large amount of confusion with the ZARA advertisement to which the participants were not able to pinpoint the controversy, which is an interesting element in this thesis and will be further discussed in the discussion chapter. Maria from focus group 3 also expressed her confusion: "I really just do not understand the message." and Kamilla from the same group said: "I would never have thought of it." indicating that she does not see the controversy in the advertisement from ZARA and the backlash it has received.

Summarizing the theme, the overall discourse of the theme *Neutrality and Indifference* is that there are no particularly charged emotions towards the advertisement from the brands. At this point, half of the participants have negative feelings and opinions towards the advertisements, acknowledging that they believe that there was some form of wrongdoing from the brands. The other half of the participants do not see a bigger issue related to the advertisements and believe that some of the advertisements were unintentional and therefore not controversial in their nature. I find it important to show the neutral part of the data as well because it is also a valid attitude to have towards the advertisement although they are collectively deemed as controversial.

Assessing Corporate Apologies

Transitioning to the apologies from the brands, I told the participants to look at the apologies from the brands and share their thoughts. When coding these discussions, the theme of *Assessing Corporate Apologies* emerged and it revolves around the apologies that the different brands have published on their platforms after receiving criticism for their controversial advertisements and the participants' reactions to them. Assessing the H&M apology first, Sofie and Simone from focus group 3 said: "Yeah, I think it is fine" and "I think it is fine" indicating that they did not feel strongly towards a positive or negative side when seeing the apology from H&M. Sofie further elaborated on the H&M apology: "... but it is very politically correct I think. So it is not acknowledged in deep issues, but it is fine. It

is strategic." Here, Sofie indicates that she thinks it is a politically correct answer from H&M, stating somehow that H&M did in some ways do something right by apologizing openly to their stakeholders. According to Cornelissen (2023) this is one of the crucial steps to recovery for an organization, which Sofie also highlights the apology from H&M as strategic. Here, Kamilla expresses what she thinks H&M should have done in this crisis:

> I just think if they had put a white boy in the hoodie, it would not have been a
> problem at all. So I also think it is the right thing for H&M to do to just apologize and
> say no more about the racism part of it, just to let it be as it is.

Sofie from focus group 3 followed up by saying: "I think if they had done more, they would have been… They would have risked, maybe, triggering the part of the population that has the problem with the woke narrative." To which Kamilla added "I think every company would have done the same." A general discourse within the theme of *Neutrality and Indifference* is that H&M could easily have prevented this crisis by either choosing another model for the advertisement, reconsider the outcome of the advertisement and putting more effort into the apology, but it does not immediately affect the participants. However, there are some of the participants who believe that an apology is necessary. Hanne from focus group 1 shares her opinions towards the H&M apology but also what she believes that brands should do when they end up in a crsis situation:

> I think it is always important to apologize, but this does not seem to have any
> consequences or any, like, real apology in it. So it is a bit like I said before, it only
> makes it worse, more or less. But in terms of like in general, I think it is very
> important that the companies put out an apology or something like that when these
> things happen.

Expressing that Hanne thinks that it is important that companies assess and apologize correlates with Cornelissen's (2023) statement by owning up to a crisis and determining the

question of responsibility (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 237). In this case, the participants express

that H&M's apology is not sufficient. It was also expressed:

> What I needed from the apology would be, like, a direct apology for example, I do not
>
> know, "we are supportive of black life matters", or something like that or saying
>
> straight out that "we made this, and this has racist tones in it and all that".

The participants found that the H&M apology was not sufficient and suggested that if H&M

made a more detailed apology including the people who may have been affected by the

advertisement, indicating that the right approach to communication strategy could help

resolve the crisis, as Cornelissen (2023) stated. Generally, the participants do not perceive the

H&M apology as taking the full responsibility. Therefore, Cornelissen (2023) says that H&M

put themselves in a position to be perceived as being in the wrong and directly to be blamed

in a crisis. If they were to own up to this crisis, H&M could have minimized the feeling of

anger and frustration amongst their stakeholders, which is very clear in the statements from

the participants in all of the groups.

Moreover, Hanne states: "And it is just because they are of this size and this economy

that they can keep going after this." She is indicating that the brands are of such a substantial

size, that they are not affected enough by a controversial advertisement to experience any

severe consequences, to which Kirsten followed up: "I agree. I think it kinda shows that, like,

that cancel culture does not apply to billion dollar companies." emphasizing the magnitude of

these brands. Jessica says: "I think it is a good thing that H&M acknowledges that they have

made a mistake and that they were misunderstood for that. They just messed up." and follows

with: "They mentioned certain routines that have not been followed properly, which shows

that they try to avoid these things, but they somehow just messed up on this one." She

believes that there has been a misunderstanding from H&M. Jessica's statements are

interesting because she mentioned during the interview that she worked at H&M when the

controversial advertisement was published and how she was instructed to crisis manage

during her shifts at H&M which she was told to do by her manager during an arranged staff

meeting. Here, Jessica, who worked at H&M was told to inform the customers who had any

concerns with the advertisement that they did not stand by the advertisement nor condone it.

So effectively, the individual H&M stores did dissociate with the advertisement as a form of

strategy of handling this crisis, including micromanagement from the employers at the

individual stores. The participants find it important to assess the issue to which Jessica says:

"I think it could be important. Because scrolling through social media, you see a lot of people

talking about the situations and demanding that a lot of brands do certain things and take

certain steps, otherwise it will just… Cancel them." to which Jesicca continues with: "... I

think this apology seems sincere." Assessing the H&M apology resonates a general feeling of

the apology not being sufficient enough. As a bonus for this interview, Jessica brought insider

knowledge from H&M, explaining that they had to be who worked at H&M whilst the

advertisement received backlash.

Moving on to the apology from ZARA, the participants had a in depth discussion

about the right and wrong time for advertising with body bags, to which Sofie from focus

group 3 stated:

> Russia war started, or the conflict in Africa. One of the conflicts in Africa. There are
>
> so many wars and so many perspectives. I do not know if there is a time and a place in
>
> the world right now that you can do an advertisement with a body bag and it not be
>
> linked to something. And I do not know, maybe it is just not in good taste to do it
>
> anymore. In general, I do not know, but I just think it is complex.

And a simple short statement from Kamilla: "And the ZARA apology… I would not even

call it an apology. It is just accusing someone else of the problem." This statement discussed

the advertisement from ZARA involving body bags in their advertisement and I think Sofie

made an important point in commenting on when there is a right time to challenge

stakeholders because of the so many individual situation on a global scale – which

conclusively is a difficult question and perhaps also a rhetorical question.

The theme of *Assessing Corporate Apologies* demonstrates the participants' natural

and intuitive ideas on how the brands could have handled the crisis both before and after

publishing their advertisements and apologies. All of the participants' statements give an

unique insight into what they would have liked to see the brands do instead, which gives a

great insight in the consumers' thoughts for the brands to learn from. From the topic of

consumers and advertising in the literature review chapter, Danciu (2014) argued that the

companies and consumers need to find mutual goals and interests to balance in harmony in

order for the brands to abstain from manipulative techniques. Therefore, learning the

consumers' recommendations and critique can be a valuable element for future

advertisements and apologies. According to the participants, the apologies lack responsibility

from the brands as well as they find that there is an aspect of blaming someone else rather

than the brand itself. Transitioning to the discussion about Balenciaga's apology, Hanne

expressed:

> Well, for starters, it is overall better, so to say, discursively, than the one H&M and
>
> ZARA in the point that they are actually mentioning what they have done wrong, they
>
> are saying child abuse and as well as BDSM, and they are also providing resources to
>
> what they are going to do with this problem, which I find to be way more responsible
>
> and, well, I do not shop at Balenciaga, but if I did, I would not forgive them, but I
>
> would… I would not look at them as harsh as I would with ZARA and H&M
>
> afterwards.

To which Hanne continued with her opinion:

I think for me, like if we talk about all the three campaigns and in general it really shows how little ethics and culture and communication and discursive knowledge is affecting the fashion brands and how much more that economy and publicity means to them.

An Kirsten, who expresses her dilemmas of the apologies said:

I feel like it is a bit of a dilemma, maybe because I would have been furious if they had not put out any apologies, but as we have spent the last hour talking about, none of us are really satisfied with what they're saying. So it is also, what could you have said, that you could not have said… anything that made-up for that?

But without much hesitation, Kirsten added: "So I think it is a necessary apology, but it will never be a sufficient apology." Here, Janna joins in on the debate of ethics that Hanne started and made her point:

I agree with all that being said, and especially the part where Hanne said or it is more like where does their integrity lie? I can not help but think negatively about it and think that if they can exploit someone because you know all publicity is good publicity, like where, where does the ethic lie in this? Are they really upset or like I said with H&M, it is not the only time they have done it. They have done it where they, I think, made fun of transgender people in one as well. I can not help but think it is just because they want to get publicity, they do it. And they do not care about the people they are hurting because they will make their money either way.

And to these thoughts from Janna, Kirsten nodded agreeingly and stated: "I agree. I think it kinda shows that, like, that cancel culture does not apply to billion dollar companies." and continued in the trails of how a brand like ZARA works with advertising

But when you can pin the blame on one person, like a musician or an actor, it is easier to kind of get them involved in the cancel culture. But it is a company, you can

always blame the photographer. You can always blame the set design. You can

always blame the creative department.

Making a point like Kirsten did stipulates that there is a bigger unequal hierarchy where it is

easy to blame people on the different levels. This could be seen as a strategy of blaming

someone who is less important within the brand to take away the attention from the overall

brand. Perhaps, it is easier to forgive one person rather than the entire brand. Although this

may seem like a possible strategy, the participants still felt that the ZARA apology is

inadequate for their liking, to which Jessica simply stated: "I agree, even though they are

saying a lot in the apology, it feels really empty."

As the discussion progressed of assessing the apologies, the participants started

comparing the apologies that they had read so far. Therefore, the Balenciaga apology was

compared heavily to the H&M and ZARA apologies. To this, Simone promptly compared the

Balenciaga apology to the other two:

I think, comparing it to two other apologies, this is more direct. They mentioned the

issue, they mentioned they are not afraid to say what they say, what people are

thinking, and take full responsibility that it was their mistake. And I kind of like that.

Simone further elaborated:

If people were having this view or the thoughts of it being connected with child abuse

or child pornography, I think it is very important to talk about the issue knowing that

their customers or the people around them were having these kind of thoughts and

criticism of the brand.

But Maria were quick to disagree with Simone and stated:

I do not think they have to. I think major companies are fucking up all the time

without mentioning it. I think people would still buy all this stuff if they did not

apologize. But I think it's definitely good. And again, I think it is a good strategy to do

it, but I think they could as well just not have.

I am surprised to learn that Maria believes that people will continue to consume from the

brands. Furthermore, it is in her beliefs and experience that there are brands that are

positioning themselves in crises all the time but do not experience any consequences of their

actions. Although Maria does not condone this type of advertisement, she does not believe

that they had to make this apology but still find it to be a good strategy for Balenciaga to

pursue which she bases it on the fact that these crisis situations happen all the time. As Maria

believes people will still continue to consume, I want to transition to the theme of *Future*

Shopping Behaviors where we explore the participants' possible shopping habits after seeing

and reading the controversial advertisements and apologies.

Future Consumer Shopping Behaviors

The last theme is named *Future Shopping Behaviors* and demonstrates the findings on the

participants' shopping habits and behavior after reviewing the brands' advertisements and

apologies, starting with opinions on H&M and how the participants were affected by their

controversial advertisement and apology. Hanne started this discussion by asking herself:

"Will it stop me from buying cheap stuff from H&M? Probably not, but trying to direct my

shopping habits in another direction could be, yeah." Kirsten explained her future shopping

habits with:

> I do not think my H&M habits have kind of changed because I knew what they had
>
> done in advance and it has not really changed anything for me in my personal… I
>
> mean I agree with the fact that the ad is completely wrong and I do not think the
>
> apology is making up for that.

Generally, the participants acknowledge within the groups that there is a problem with the

advertisement from H&M, but there is an emphasis on price being a factor for continuing to

consume from H&M. Here, Caroline also shares her thoughts on why it may be a difficult position to be in when deciding whether or not to change one's shopping habits:

> I would say that it is a good thing that they are apologizing. I do not really know how they could apologize so I would have a feeling like they really need it. I think it is hard, but at the same time it does not really, I think, hurt H&M as a brand because it is such a big brand and for me, I still have seen it, but I still buy clothes from H&M, so it is a well known brand. Therefore, I think it is hard for people to stop buying, even though it might compromise with some of their values, maybe.

I also asked some of the participants from focus group 2 if H&M's advertisement and apology changed their shopping habits, to which they wittily answered: "To be honest, probably not.", "I have proof that it did not" and "I doubt it." The blunt and witty answers made me believe that the participants are not affected and actually find the advertisement to be unserious as well as the attention it has received being out of proportion. Summarizing H&M and the participants' future shopping habits, I believe that the participants find the convenience, price and style of H&M to be such big factors for a good shopping experience that a controversial advertisement will not prevent them from continuing to consume.

> Continuing with ZARA, the participants expressed: "Yeah. I think for me, I never really liked ZARA and the way they do advertisements and their clothes and their prices. So it does not really change anything for me because I do not use it as a consumer." And:

> I still buy from them, honestly. Because I like their brand and I like their clothes. So even though, and that is a conflicting feeling of maybe not agreeing with the campaign I would probably still buy, because it is cheap and I like their clothes.

Concluding the theme of *Assessing Corporate Apologies*, multiple of the participants had already expressed their future shopping habits when discussing H&M and ZARA, to which Kirsten simply exclaimed when I asked about their future shopping habits with Balenciaga:

> I mean, realistically, it is not gonna stop me from buying ZARA, H&M, uh,
>
> Balenciaga. I was not a customer beforehand. And will not be in the near future, so,
>
> but realistically it is not gonna… I might think about it, but also press add to cart at
>
> the end of the day.

And as a final note to the assessing the apologies, Caroline brought a message that will frame the upcoming discussion chapter:

> Like I would maybe think about this for a week or two, but that is also it with the
>
> fashion industry. They can push out so many ads, like, in no time. So you will forget
>
> about the problematic ones and then just remember the newest ones.

The theme of *Future Shopping Habits* is paramount in this research as the results show how the controversial advertisement and apologies affect the consumers and their shopping habits. Conclusively, the participants do not see themselves changing their shopping habits based on the controversial advertisement and apologies from H&M, ZARA and Balenciaga. Some of the participants expressed their opinions on future shopping by instantly knowing that the advertisements and apologies do not have any effect on them. Some of the other participants found it rather conflicting, but did not see themselves changing their actual shopping habits based on the advertisements and apologies. The pervasive arguments for not changing their shopping habits are based on the convenience, style and price and the advertisements and apologies will therefore not stop the participants from achieving these.

Conclusively, the four themes of *Despise; Neutrality and Indifference; Assessing Corporate Apologies; Future Shopping Habits* demonstrate the different discussions within the focus groups. The answer to my research question, which I want to remind of again:

> How do consumers react to controversial advertisements by clothing brands H&M,
>
> ZARA, and Balenciaga, and how do the brands' subsequent apologies influence these

reactions? What impact do these controversies and apologies have on consumer's

attitudes and purchasing behaviors towards these brands?

I found it important to show a big palette of emotion through *Despise* and *Neutrality and Difference* because whilst some of the participants were quick to feel repulsed by the controversial advertisements, some of the other participants also showed a more neutral and vague opinion. Together with the themes of *Assessing Corporate Apologies* and *Future Shopping Habits*, there is a distinct link between all four as the theme of *Assessing Corporate Apologies* demonstrates how the participants deem the brands after learning about their controversial advertisements. This is a crucial find to understand if there are consequences for the brands to learn from. The findings within that theme show that even if the apology reaches a sufficient satisfactory level amongst the participants, some still find the advertisements offensive and unacceptable. As a consequence of insufficiency, it would be possible to be under the impression that the participants do not wish to continue consuming from the brands – the findings show otherwise. Within the theme of *Future Shopping Habits*, the participants expressed that regardless of the outcome, opinions, discussions and severity of the controversial advertisement as well as the apologies, they do not wish to change their shopping habits. I base these opinions and statements on the fact that the majority of the participants expressed that they highly value the brands' prices, style, fit and convenience – therefore, I believe that a controversial advertisement revolving around the topics racism, war, genocide, child exploitation and sexualizing children will **not** change their current and future shopping habits. I now want to transition to the discussion chapter to further discuss the findings and main points and how they contribute to the field.

Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings on how the participants react to and how their shopping

habits are affected after reviewing controversial advertisements and apologies from H&M,

ZARA and Balenciaga.

Some of the participants found the advertisements distasteful, but the majority of the

participants also found it difficult to understand the advertisements and their purpose,

resulting in not understanding the controversy revolving around the advertisements resulting

in dismissing the concerns portrayed in the media. Following the discussion on the

advertisements, once the participants understood and gained knowledge on background

context, the opinions started flowing resulting in despise and a feeling of wrongdoing by the

brands. I found that the advertisement from H&M was the advertisement that the participant

had the strongest negative feeling towards because of the child and his ethnicity. Moreover, I

think this specific advertisement was the most discussable advertisement because there were

so many of the participants who had already seen it before. Contrary to the H&M

advertisement, I noted that only a few participants knew of the other advertisements. This

resulted in the participants coming into this interview with biased opinions based on their

earlier experience with this specific advertisement from H&M. I do not see it as a limitation

for this research because the participants were able to express themselves in detail, recalling

back to when they first saw the advertisement and then share these experiences in the focus

group interviews. As for ZARA and Balenciaga, I found that the discussions decreased

because more of the participants had not seen the advertisements before or because they did

not shop for either brands. However, I found that the discussions were still rich and saturated.

In regards to the apologies, the majority of the participants found the apologies

connected to the controversial advertisements insufficient and expressed that the brands could

have optimized and revised their apologies, opting for taking more responsibility and taking

action of maintaining and properly apologizing to stakeholders.This was an interesting insight into the consumers' reactions and when investigating further I discovered that if any of the participants had heard of or seen the advertisement before, it was through social media and articles on the internet. I asked the participants if any of them had seen any of the advertisements and apologies organically from the actual website where the advertisements were published, to which they all answered "no". This sparked an interest in the power of news articles and social media platforms that use these as mediums to bring out any messages desired and make people aware that there are brands who have positioned them badly in terms of publishing a controversial advertisement. This also confirms my study as I have stated that we currently live in a very technological world with advertisements occupying a lot of the space in everyday lives. I believe that there may be a vicious cycle of news platforms being extremely observant of big brands and their advertisements because they know that the brands have stakeholders on a large scale and could be interested in the news platforms' articles, generating revenue from these stakeholders reading the articles.

I also found it interesting that many of the participants found it difficult to decipher the meaning and message of some of the advertisements. I was supported by the fact that, if the participants had seen the advertisements before, the participants would have formed their opinions based on the articles they had read on the internet. In case the participants never have encountered the advertisements, they found it difficult to understand the advertisement and did not see the elements that categorized the advertisements to be controversial. This is extremely interesting in this study because this means that the formed opinions were based on articles – imagine the articles did not exist, then I find it highly unlikely that the controversial advertisements from the brands would have gained as much negative attention as they did.

Based on the theory provided in this study, H&M, ZARA and Balenciaga all had a response to their controversial advertisements in the form of an apology and I expected that

the participants would deem multiple of the apologies to be insufficient. Of the combined apologies, the apology that seemed to be the most in favor amongst the participants was the apology from Balenciaga. What drew the participants towards this apology from Balenciaga was the detail of it. What the participants favored in this apology was the fact that there were multiple people that were apologized to as well as an element of learning from their own mistakes and donating money towards a good cause. The question of guilt was also addressed in the apology to which Balenciaga took the full responsibility and I experienced that this was an element that the participants favored. The most unfavored apology came from H&M, to which the participants expressed that the question of guilt was not there. H&M chose to not take on the blame entirely for their mistake. Instead, the participants expressed that they felt as if they blamed just some of the people involved in creating and publishing this advertisement. The participants found that the apology was insufficient and not sincere enough, which created a negative attitude towards the apology from H&M. Through the theory of Corporate Identity (Cornelissen, 2023) it is suggested that the organizations keep a good relation to their stakeholders, which also includes their consumers, and handle a crisis in a manner that gets the organization on the other side of the crisis with least damage done both internally as well as externally. Here, I am discussing the element of reputational capital. I believe that all of the brands are such big corporations that they almost have near to unlimited reputational capital. I state this based on the fact that they are all strong organizations that have existed for decades and are established globally. I find it difficult to believe that a crisis based on controversial advertisements can majorly affect organizations of this size. This does not necessarily mean that there is not a short term effect and bad reputation for a while – and as one of the participants stated: "bad reputation is also reputation", which is an element in the superiority of this study that is extremely interesting and should definitely be further investigated. For those scholars interested in this field, it would be possible to extend this

theory and look into the strategies behind the controversial advertisements. Here, one may be able to contact the clothing brands and conduct interviews with their marketing team who may want to enlighten on their strategies when creating advertisements and ask how they prepare, handle and recover from a possible crisis. For the organizations and brands that choose to advertise with the strategy of using controversial advertisements, I would advise that putting the brands' reputation at stake is not a safe way of advertising. If one wishes to avoid any potential crisis, I would not choose to focus on identities of racism, war and child exploitation but rather focus on being able to identify with what the consumers wish for. This could for example be the quality, price, inclusivity in the form of sizes and accessibility. I experienced that many of the participants looked for the aforementioned and this could be a positive approach for the brands to take in order to align more with their stakeholders as the literature confirms that maintaining a good relationship with stakeholders is an important factor to maintain a good reputation within the organization. This includes the image that the organizations project is often how they are perceived by their stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2023). Multiple participants had already heard about or seen the advertisements reviewed in this thesis from the respective brands and formed an opinion about them. They expressed that they already had knowledge about earlier crises that the brands have experienced and therefore already perceived the brands with somewhat negative connotations. Although this is the case, the participants still found the convenience and price of some of the brands to be their reason for still shopping the brands – and therefore the participants did not feel as if their shopping habits were going to change based on the controversial advertisements from the respective brands. As mentioned before, we live in a fast paced world and as discussed within the focus groups: People will think about these advertisements for a week and then they forget. I am certain that the notion of convenience, price and fit will be superior over any controversial advertisement and the least sincere apology from a brand. However, I will take

into account that there are certain cases where consumers choose to boycott brands because of their e.g. political beliefs, but in this research, this is not the case. Boycotting could also be an interesting topic to further discuss and which consequences boycotting can have for an organization.

Conclusively, based on the literature and theory of Corporate Identity in this study, I believe that my contributions to the fields are unique as I have not yet discovered any qualitative studies on the consumers' reactions to controversial advertisements and corporate apologies. I believe that this study gives a distinctive insight into consumers' attitudes towards clothing brands post crisis as the participants' responses were extremely detailed and rich and gives a good insight into regular everyday consumers of these brands.

Conclusion

Clothing brands risk facing significant crises when they choose to publish controversial advertisements. As this thesis has demonstrated, resolving such crises requires brands to maintain strong relationships with their stakeholders. This study examined consumer reactions to controversial advertisements and subsequent apologies from H&M, ZARA, and Balenciaga. The findings revealed that brands employ varying communication strategies, which evoke both negative and neutral emotions among participants. Notably, more elaborate and sincere apologies tended to receive more favorable responses from participants. Despite experiencing strong emotional reactions, participants generally did not foresee changing their shopping habits based on their reactions to the advertisements and apologies.

Understanding that brands may frequently find themselves in crises due to controversial content, it is vital for them to have well-prepared strategies in place. Scholars suggest a range of tools and strategies that brands can adopt to better prepare for and withstand future crises. Effective crisis management, particularly through well-argued public apologies, is essential for brands to not only prevent potential future crises but also navigate through them

successfully. Future research should explore the communication strategies employed by brands before they release advertisements, for example, conducting interviews with the respective brands' marketing department to understand their current strategies and why they choose their current strategy. Analyzing these strategies can provide valuable insights into how brands can circumvent controversy and maintain public trust. Additionally, it is important for brands to understand the detrimental elements of publishing controversial advertisements and to execute robust communication strategies when offering public apologies. This proactive approach is crucial for brands to persevere and recover from crises. In our modern world, where advertisements are inevitable, the relevance of this study is particularly important. Organizations are in a constant race to capture consumer attention to obtain profit through advertising. However, it is crucial that they maintain a good relationship with their stakeholders to prevent crises and uphold their reputation. This involves a careful examination of their communication practices and a commitment to collaborating with professional communication practitioners both internally and externally. By investing in good communication strategies and aligning themselves with experts in the field, organizations can ensure that they do their utmost to maintain strong relationships with stakeholders. This proactive stance not only helps in preventing crises but also minimizes harm to all parties involved when a crisis eventually will occur. Ultimately, a well-thought-out communication strategy is essential to the overall health and reputation of any organization. Moreover, scholars collectively agree that crises are likely to recur, emphasizing the need for continuous improvement in communication practices. Organizations must be equipped with the necessary expertise to prevent, prepare for, and recover from crise. This study contributes to the existing knowledge by highlighting the importance of strategic communication in crisis management. It serves as a call to action for brands to prioritize their relationships with stakeholders and to be cautious and careful in their advertising practices.

Conclusively, as advertisements continue to play a central role in our daily lives, brands must navigate the balance between capturing the consumers' interest and avoiding controversy. By implementing comprehensive communication strategies and fostering positive stakeholder relationships, brands can avoid the risks associated with controversial advertisements. This approach not only enhances their resilience when facing crises but also ensures their long-term success and reputation in the competitive market.

References

Adhikary, A. (2014). Advertising: A Fusion Process between Consumer and Product. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 230-238.

Tsang, M. M., Ho, S.-C., & Liang, T.-P. (2004). Consumer Attitudes Toward Mobile Advertising: An Empirical Study. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 65-78.

Vakratsas, D., & Ambler, T. (1999). How Advertising Works: What Do We Really Know? *Journal of Marketing*, 26-43.

Danciu, V. (2014). Manipulative marketing: persuasion and manipulation of the consumer through advertising. *Theoretical and Applied Economics*, 19-34.

Madni, A. R., Hamid, A. N., & Rashid, S. M. (2016). Influence Of Controversial Advertisement On Consumer Behavior. *The Journal of Commerce*, 14-24.

Waller, D. S. (1999). Attitudes towards offensive advertising: an Australian study. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 288-295.

Bachnik, K., & Nowacki, R. (2018). How to Build Consumer Trust: Socially Responsible or Controversial Advertising. *Sustainability*.

Waller, D. S. (2004). WHAT FACTORS MAKE CONTROVERSIAL ADVERTISING OFFENSIVE?: A PRELIMINARY STUDY.

Falco, G. (2021). What consumers really feel about corporate apologies. A discourse analysis of reactions to apologies on economic and financial scandals in tweets. *Lingue e Linguaggi*.

Richards, J. E. (2017). Accusatory Based Discourse Strategies: Apologia, Kategoria and Strategic Image Repair Discourse Strategic Image Repair Discourse . *Critical Reflections* .

Page, R. (2014). Saying 'sorry': Corporate apologies posted on Twitter. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 30-45.

Patel, A., & Reinsch, L. (2003). Companies Can Apologize: Corporate Apologies and Legal Liability. *Business Communication Quarterly, 66*(1), 9-25.

Fischer, S. (2021, December 7th). *Ad industry growing at record pace*. Retrieved from Axios: https://www.axios.com/2021/12/07/advertising-industry-revenue

Lee, S. Y., & Atkinson, L. (2019, March). Never easy to say "sorry": Exploring the interplay of crisis involvement, brand image, and message appeal in developing effective corporate apologies. *Public Relations Review, 45*(1), 178-188.

Coombs, T. W. (1995, May). Choosing the Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the Selection of the "Appropriate" Crisis-Response Strategies. *Management Communication Quarterly, 8*(4).

Cornelissen, J. (2023). *Corporate Communication: A Guide to Theory & Practice.* London, United Kingdom: Sage.

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Flores, S. C. (2021, May 21st). *H&M's Coolest Monkey in the Jungle-PR Analysis.* Retrieved from LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/hms-coolest-monkey-jungle-pr-analysis-samanta-castro/

West, S. (2018, January 19th). *H&M faced backlash over its 'monkey' sweatshirt ad. It isn't the company's only controversy.* Retrieved from Washington Post: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2018/01/19/hm-faced-backlash-over-its-monkey-sweatshirt-ad-it-isnt-the-companys-only-controversy/

Kala, K. (2018, December 24th). *Fashion History - ZARA*. Retrieved from Medium: https://medium.com/@kalyanii8927/fashion-history-zara-19ac531d9ab1

Sachdeva, M. (2023, December 12th). *Zara faces boycott calls over campaign 'mocking' Gaza victims*. Retrieved from Independent: https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/zara-the-jacket-campaign-gaza-boycott-b2462420.html

Malach, H. (2023, December 7th). *The History of Balenciaga: Groundbreaking Couture, Controversies, 'Cancellation' and Demna's Reinvention*. Retrieved from WWD: https://wwd.com/feature/balenciaga-history-controversies-1236003483/

Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., & Ranfagni, S. (2023, November 8th). A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*.

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2014). Thematic Analysis. *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, 1947-1952.

Kalaignanam, K., Tuli, K. R., & Gal, D. (2020, September 14th). Marketing Agility: The Concept, Antecedents, and a Research Agenda. *Jorunal of Marketing, 85*(1).

Chan, K., & Yeung, D. (2017). *Social Issue of Advertising.* Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press.

Gannon, Z., & Lawson, N. (2010). *The Advertising Effect.* London: Compass.