



YOUTH

Brand Controversy Report

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Introduction

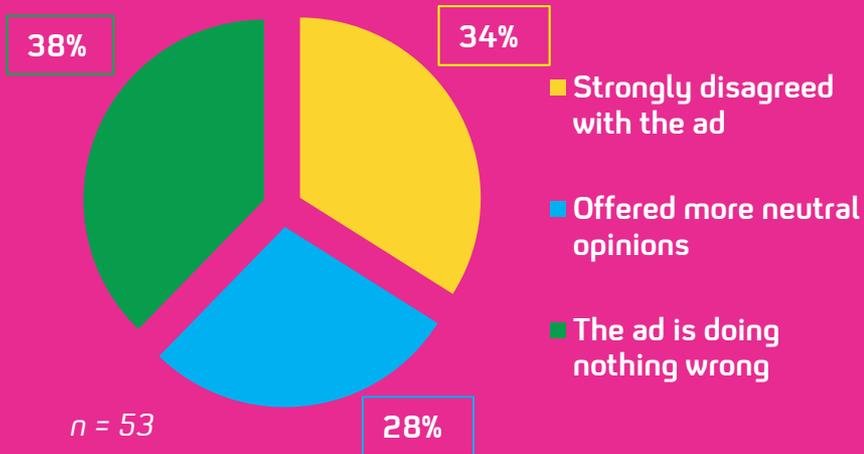
In early January this year, an H&M advert caused huge controversy when a photograph was released of a young black child wearing a green hoodie with the phrase “Coolest monkey in the jungle” emblazoned upon it. In the ensuing public outcry many people took to social media to proclaim their outrage for what was seen as racist advertising. Other critics argued that the deeply inappropriate photograph represented severe negligence of H&M, mainly the advertising team and the board. However, others have contrarily responded that it was just an unfortunate and unintentional mistake, and the subsequent backlash is an overreaction that is highly unnecessary and damaging in nature.

In a qualitative study, we asked 53 of our Tribes how they felt about this recent advertising blunder by H&M, receiving many varied responses.





Divided Opinions



When asked about how they felt towards the controversial H&M advert the Tribes were very divided. Three general themes emerged from their range of responses:

- 1) Those who strongly disagreed with the ad
- 2) Those who acknowledged both sides of the argument
- 3) Those who felt the ad was doing nothing wrong

It was recognised by the Tribes that their personal opinions were a result of their own life experiences, backgrounds and ethnicities. Therefore highlighting one reason behind the considerable variation and spread of responses.

The opinions of our Tribes ranged from finding the advert severely offensive and inappropriate, to critiquing the overreaction of an overly sensitised society, to even claiming that the whole controversy was engineered by H&M itself to generate publicity and drive sales. This report will now look at the three opinion segments in greater depth.

"I don't think that there is anything wrong with it. If the parents are fine and the child wearing it is fine, then everyone is just making a big deal about it for nothing. I think people are just trying to find faults for the sake of it as people always find something wrong with everything in the world right now." **JadeH, F, 22, Mainstream, Solo:Selectives**



Everyone Needs To Chill

The majority of the 38% of Tribes who argued that the H&M advert had done nothing wrong, did so on the basis that if the child and his mother didn't care about it then neither should they. This group frequently commented that the photograph was made into a bigger issue than was necessary, pinpointing the media in particular as being overdramatic and fuelling a larger public overreaction. Many also agreed that the wider contextual backdrop of today's society has been a critical factor in shaping such reactions. Particularly, a common obsession with finding tiny faults, being overly sensitive and stepping on eggshells around issues such as race and gender.

Additionally, these Tribes noted that they didn't believe H&M intended to cause any offense and merely made a big mistake. For this reason, due to a clear lack of motive to deliberately harm, they couldn't see a problem with the photograph and just brushed it aside as an unfortunate occurrence for H&M.

A few Tribes unpacked the photograph in greater depth, highlighting that whilst the phrase was used negatively in the past the jumper was not put purposely on the child to ridicule him. They argued that the insinuation that the photograph was racist is in itself harmful and subsequently causing racism.



"I think that the media and people in general are constantly looking for drama. When people get bored of their own lives they look for things in others to entertain themselves. I believe that there is nothing wrong with this advertisement, and that people are too sensitive and often are just looking for problems." **Domilove1, F, 16**

"I didn't even clock the potential racial insinuation. At the end of the day, if the parents aren't taking offence that's the main issue for me. Cheeky monkey is a very common term for young kids!

J.webster, F, 22, Aspirant, Short:Snaps



Hannahsmith 1611, 22

“I personally wasn’t insulted in the slightest. In the past/present this phrase was/is used negatively and I would totally understand and be insulted if this jumper was purposely put on the boy to ridicule him. However it wasn’t, it was a harmless jumper that if it was any other kid from any other background, people would think it’s sweet. These days it’s like everyone has to step on eggshells around race and gender etc. To a certain degree I agree, but as long as people aren’t being purposely offensive like H&M weren’t, why are people taking it out of context and causing an issue when it is not needed. Bad things in the past happened and still go on today; there are real things to worry about rather than a jumper saying a boy is mischievous.”



It's Just Wrong

34% of our Tribes strongly disagreed with the H&M advert, and believed that it was a serious mistake that should never have happened. These Tribes do not agree that a lack of intention takes anything away from the damaging and offensive nature of the photograph. The majority claim that it is the prominent position of H&M as a global fashion brand, and particularly the responsibility it has when selling clothes to young people, that intensifies the seriousness of the issue.

A number of these Tribes commented that H&M needed to face the backlash and experience a drop in sales as a result of the photograph. They agreed that it displayed a large degree of ignorance, and that H&M were hugely out of touch with their consumer base. One Tribe even likened it to the outrage caused by Pepsi's advert featuring Kendall Jenner.

A few of this group similarly maintained that this blunder showcases the wider issue of the lack of BME people involved at a senior level within the creative process at H&M. They identified that this is incredibly problematic and should be of serious concern, not just within the company, but within the entire industry.

Jumi_96, F, 20, Mainstream, VOD:Bingers

“I think that it’s pretty clear that H&M doesn’t have a single black person on their marketing team, as I feel like anyone who is able to at least identify with that sort of racism, whether you have experienced it first hand or not, could clearly spot this. I think it showcases the wider issue of the lack of BME people involved at a senior level within the creative process. It is likely that this would’ve gone through several sets of people in different teams so the fact that none of them could see what was wrong with this image is incredibly problematic. I know that the boy’s mother has said that it’s no big deal, but I guess she is benefiting from this publicity regardless. Whilst I believe that H&M’s intentions were harmless and that this incident won’t really damage them as a brand in the long run, I feel that it could’ve been easily avoided.”

Grace O, F, 20

“The fact that this was able to come to fruition shows that they either had no black people involved in the decision making or they just weren’t listened to. Someone mentioned that brands nowadays are being outrightly racist and using the backlash from the black community to create more exposure. Honestly, with the amount of things like this happening, they’re not wrong.”

Sophia Miller, 20

“Whether it was intentional or not, I think it’s the effect that was important. The fact that it had racist connotations was not acceptable and I’m glad they apologised.”

Prompting a Wider Debate

28% of the Tribes acknowledged both sides of the debate surrounding H&M's controversial photograph, weighing up the different reactions that had been prompted. A large proportion of this group agreed that the photograph represented a disappointing oversight and lack of due diligence from H&M. However, people had to be careful not to overreact as the photograph was not intentionally racist or malicious, so therefore

wasn't as serious an issue. Of this group, all the Tribes understood why offence had been taken and commented that such a lack in cultural sensitivity and awareness by a major brand is worrying in today's society. Yet they balanced their critique by countering that it was the over-dramatisation of the issue in the media, and its association with racism, that is in fact more detrimental than the image itself.



Monarch, M, 22, Mainstream, VOD:Socials

“I see where the offence was caused, and it seems a bit short sighted for H&M to do it, I mean, did nobody think about it. However, the only way to really eradicate racism is to stop the kids skin colour being a consideration when looking at the ad altogether. Racism will always exist while there are people looking for it. That is a kid wearing a jumper with a typically light hearted statement on it. Society hasn't moved past racism enough yet, but we should aspire to reach the day that a black person can wear this jumper without anyone paying any more attention to it than anything else.”

Ibrahimilyas, M, 20

"I actually think the picture wasn't racist even though I am staunchly anti-racism! I'll explain, by saying the association with a black person to a monkey is racist, in my view, all we are doing is reaffirming this disgusting racist idea that black people are like monkeys and in some way animals. We should totally shun this racist bigotry by saying 'so what if a black person has a picture of a monkey on their shirt'? It has nothing to do with their skin colour because humans are different from monkeys regardless of our colour. I think when we get a bit hyped up and say it's racist that black people are being associated with monkeys, all it does is empowers the racists even further into believing that association is correct even though all decent people know that's nonsense. I wish we can progress into an age where black people are not oppressed because of the colour of their skin. I wish we progress to an age whereby if a black child has a picture of a monkey on his/her shirt, no one takes a second look and even thinks about the association between the two because there isn't!"

Elena, 23, Aspirant, Short:Snaps

“I can’t help but think a little black boy should be able to wear a ‘coolest monkey in the jungle’ hoodie and it not be a problem. I’m sure the brand did it without thinking and I’m glad their brains didn’t go ‘oh wait, can’t suggest black people are monkeys’. I’m glad that it didn’t even enter their heads. But on the other hand, people that go through a lot more pain and hurt and racism than I do say that they are offended by it. And it is not up to me to decide what hurts people. I don’t know their minds. When you remember football hooligans making monkey noises at black players you think – Ok, I get it. And the brand shouldn’t have missed that slip up. Someone should have clocked that there is still a lot of pain and suffering and hurt there, and its not appropriate. But I look forward to the day no one looks at a little black boy in a monkey jumper and thinks anything of it, because all these horrible nasty views and comments and association is a thing of the past.”

Conclusion

Overall, H&M's advertising blunder was divisive amongst our Tribes. Those who responded fell into three equal groups, considering the image from a range of angles and coming to a number of conclusions. What emerges from this engagement task is the level of awareness amongst our Tribes of wider social issues that currently face our modern-day society. In addition to the concern they have for major fashion brands, such as H&M, not appropriately honouring the responsibility they have towards their consumers. Whatever the opinion group the Tribes fell into, the call for progress was strong, whether it be within the public reaction, the creative industry or with racism itself.



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