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Inspecting Zara's Advertisement Campaign amidst Gaza Conflict and Its Global Backlash

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Abstract

This study investigates the controversial Zara advertisement campaign released during the Gaza conflict and analyzes its global backlash. Using Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual theory, the research explores its representational, interpersonal, and compositional dimensions. Text findings reveal that representationally, the advertisement features culturally significant symbols: a white cloth signifying death in Palestinian culture and a kaffiyeh symbolizing resistance. Interpersonally, it positions viewers as passive observers, evoking discomfort, and pity, while textually, it emphasizes symbolic representation with stark contrasts and strategic framing. The advertisement's release during heightened tensions led many to perceive it as exploitative and culturally insensitive, despite some defenses of artistic expression. Public reactions, particularly on social media, highlighted the ethical challenges of such campaigns. The study questions the campaign for violating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) principles by disregarding ethical considerations and societal well-being. It underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity in global marketing, advocating for ethical advertising that respect global diverse audiences.

Keywords: *Gaza Conflict, Global Backlash, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Visual Analysis, Zara Advertisement.*

Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has long historical roots, dating back to when Palestine came under British control after the World War I. In 1917, Britain supported the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, which led to increased Jewish immigration and clashes with the local Arab population who wanted independence. Israel argues that Palestine was originally an uninhabited land, but the existence of a thriving Palestinian society before 1948 disproves this "land without people" narrative, as evidenced by oral history and testimonies (Hawari, 2023, p.100). In 1947, the UN proposed the division of the territory into Jewish and Arab states, which was agreed to by Jewish leaders but rejected by Arab leaders (Martins and Pagliaro, 2020, p.15). This triggered Israel's declaration of independence in 1948, war, and the displacement of many Palestinians, known as the Nakba. The conflict is very complicated with conflicting historical, religious, and nationalistic claims, so the Palestinians' testimonies are crucial to understanding their perspective. Recently, the Palestine-Israel conflict heated up



again on 7 October 2023. Hamas violated Israeli security, causing attacks on air, sea, and land. On October 8, 2023, Israel launched a military assault, resulting in numerous deaths and destruction of residential settlements in Gaza (Oktavina et al, 2024, p.939). Since then, the issue has spread to all parts of the world.

The issue attracted huge attention, which became very sensitive. At the same time, in December 2023, Zara published an advertisement that became controversial. A controversial product is defined as a product, service, or concept that can potentially create a precarious situation when in contact with customs morality. In certain instances, morality can even elicit a negative emotional response, including hatred and rejection (Khairawati & Murtadlo, 2020, p.15). This Zara advertisement was published on several platforms on the internet. According to Majeed, the advent of the Internet provided a novel avenue for advertisers to engage with the public, leading to the emergence of Internet advertising. The first banner advertisement were sold in October 1994, marking the inception of this new form of advertising (Hotwired). The first commercially available Web browser, Netscape Navigator 1.0, was released in November 1994 (Netscape) (Majeed, 2021, p.289). Based on the advertisement, Zara features a model wearing a white cloth that resembles a shroud, situated amidst the ruins. The white cloth or shroud is frequently associated with death in numerous cultures, including in Palestine.

The context of the advertisement has been the subject of controversy, with some interpreting the ruins as a representation of the destruction and devastation in the conflict zone between Israel and Palestine. In many interpretations, the ruins are evocative of the devastation experienced by the Palestinians because of the protracted conflict. The advertisement has been the subject of considerable criticism, with many observers deeming it insensitive and exploitative to the suffering and misery experienced by many people in the region. The context and delivery chosen by Zara have been deemed inappropriate. Advertising is a persuasive medium designed to persuade and influence the public (Pricilia and Suyudi). Hence, it is expected of large companies such as Zara to exercise caution in the use of symbols and contexts that could potentially trigger political and humanitarian sensitivities. The public response to this advertisement serves to illustrate the importance of global brands considering the social and political impact of their marketing materials.

This research examines the Zara advertising campaign in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and global reactions, utilizing Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal theory to enable an in-depth examination of how different modes of communication image, layout – interact to create meaning as a framework for analysis. This concept provides a systematic methodology for the interpretation of visual messages, taking into account the cultural and social context. It is applied to the Zara campaign, which is then dissected to uncover its message and impact on public perception.

Two previous studies have explored multimodal discourse analysis in various contexts, highlighting its effectiveness in examining the interplay between linguistic and visual elements. However, each study offers a distinct focus and methodological approach, contributing unique insights that inform the foundation of this research. The first previous study has explored multimodal discourse analysis in the context of beauty product advertisements. Marcella Pricilia and Ichwan Suyudi (2023) conducted a



multimodal critical discourse analysis on “Garnier Sakura White” product advertisements, using Halliday's functional grammar theory to analyze linguistic features, as well as Kress and Van Leeuwen's theory to analyze non-linguistic features. Meanwhile, the second previous study conducted by Hussein and Fattah (2020) examined multimodal discourse analysis of the use of visual images in UNHCR reports on Iraqi refugees. Although the two previous research used the same theory as this research, the theory of Kress and Van Leeuwen, the data they took was different from this research. However, both studies have not specifically linked multimodal discourse analysis to the broader social context, such as political social issues. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by conducting a multimodal discourse analysis of Zara's advertising campaign in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Given this perspective, this research aims to analyze Zara's controversial advertisements in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict using Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal theory. Zara's controversial advertisement is a subject of debate amidst the complicated and historically, politically, and religiously sensitive Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The presence of symbols that are considered insensitive, such as shrouds associated with death, as well as the background of destroyed buildings, are interpreted by the public as exploitation of the suffering and misery experienced by the Palestinian people due to the prolonged conflict. Multimodal discourse analysis based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's theoretical framework proved to be an effective tool to uncover the meaning and impact of the Zara advertising campaign in the context of a complex regional conflict. The findings emphasize the importance of global sensitivity and social responsibility for large corporations in the use of symbols and contexts that can trigger political and humanitarian sensitivities.

Method

The study employs qualitative research methodology which is defined as a study of the nature of phenomena. This includes an examination of the quality, different manifestations, context, and perspectives associated with these phenomena. It does not, however, include an investigation into the range, frequency, and place within an objectively determined causal chain (Busetto et al, 2020, p.1). The choice of qualitative approach is based on their ability to investigate intricate phenomena, such as the meaning and significance of textual and visual components in advertisements. Qualitative research allows for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the perceptions of Zara's advertisement campaign during the Gaza conflict.

This study employs a particular approach, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), which draws on the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006). MDA is a technique for analyzing ideologies embedded within communication discourses comprising a combination of visual and verbal elements (Azizah and Irawan 491). As cited in Ferry (2022), Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is defined by O'Halloran (2011) as "the study of language in combination with other resources, such as images, scientific symbolism, gesture, action, music, and sound." This definition suggests that various discourse analysis frameworks can be combined to improve discourse interpretation (Hadriyan et al, 2022, p.642). The primary research instrument in this study is Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar, which is used to systematically examine the



advertisement's visual components through three key dimensions: representational, interpersonal, and compositional aspects. Representational analysis focuses on the symbolic elements within the image, such as the white cloth, ruins, and kaffiyeh, to uncover their cultural and political significance. Interpersonal analysis evaluates how the advertisement engages or distances viewers emotionally, considering aspects like gaze, perspective, and viewer positioning. Compositional analysis examines the compositional arrangement of these elements, emphasizing the cohesion and prominence of the key symbols. Therefore, The MDA is chosen for its comprehensive approach to examining the interrelationship between diverse modes of communication, including images, text, and spatial design, within a single advertisement. Furthermore, visual grammar principles are employed to analyze the structural elements of the campaign in detail, thus allowing for a comprehensive examination of how the elements work together to convey meaning.

Several steps are included in the data collection process of the research. Data collection is defined as the process of collecting, evaluating, and analyzing exact understandings for study using standard, validated techniques (Mazhar, 2021, p.6). Data collection involved gathering visual and textual data from X, including advertisement photographs and relevant public responses. Using Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), based on Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, the study analyzed the representational, interpersonal, and compositional aspects of the advertisement. Additionally, a contextual analysis situated the advertisement within the socio-political and cultural landscape of the Gaza conflict to interpret its broader implications, providing a comprehensive understanding of its reception and the cultural sensitivities it evoked. All the data collected was then summarized. Focusing on the information needed to answer the research questions, the research conducted a thorough analysis of the data.

Results and Discussions

Message behind Visual Element of Zara's Mocking Conflict in Palestine Advertisement

The image is a concept that encompasses a multitude of meanings. It can be expressed in the form of affirmative responses, such as support, participation, and active roles, as well as negative responses, including rejection, hostility, and hatred. The image itself can be attached to an individual or an object, and the nature of the response is contingent upon the formation process and the object's meaning (Kasni et al, 2022, p.25). Image advertisements use a combination of visual or text elements to convey a compelling message to the audience. Every visual component of an advertisement is carefully chosen to express a message and evoke the intended feelings. The choice of colors, for example, may influence mood, perception, and the desired response. Bright colors like red or yellow might evoke excitement, urgency, and action, while blues and greens may convey calmness, trustworthiness, and reliability (Gupta). Imagery and symbols are carefully selected to resonate with the target audience, frequently reflecting their aspirations, values, and lifestyle.





Figure 1. Olesya Dmitracova, *Zara pulls controversial ad campaign that critics said evoked Gaza war*, 2023, CNN Business, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/12/business/zara-ad-gaza-controversy>.

Pictured above is the image from an advertisement of the company ZARA, which has caused a lot of controversy on the internet. These photos were taken from @CNN website that also discussed this advertisement. This Zara advertisement invites many interpretations and reactions from its viewers, especially when analyzed through Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual theory. The elements in this advertisement, from the dominant white fabric to the dark abstract background, have deep and complex symbolism. When these elements are connected to the wider cultural and social context, they can reflect issues relevant to conflict situations such as in Gaza. By understanding this advertisement through representational, interpersonal, and compositional analysis, we can delve deeper into the messages that Zara may be trying to convey, whether intentional or not. This interpretation depends not only on the visual elements but also on the context of when and where the advertisement was released as well as the background and perspective of the audience (Agustian et al, 2023, p.2). As we can see in table 1.

Table 1:
Multimodal Conceptual Framework by Kress and Van Leeuwen in ZARA's Controversial Advertisement.

Representational Analysis	Narrative	The image shows a single participant in what appears to be a fashion shoot. The person is holding an object wrapped in white fabric, which some interpret as representing



		deceased individuals from Gaza. The background, which includes rubble, is seen as symbolizing destruction in Gaza.
	Reaction	The person's direct gaze at the camera creates a sense of interaction with the viewer.
Interpersonal Analysis	Social Distance	The medium-long shot permits the viewer to observe the subject in greater detail, thereby establishing a proximate social distance that serves to enhance the perceived insensitivity. This proximity can intensify the emotional response of the viewer to the controversial elements.
	Contact	The direct gaze of the individual depicted in the photograph evokes a confrontational sentiment as if challenging the viewer to interpret the scene. This direct engagement can be perceived as provocative in the context of the sensitive subject matter.
	Gestures	The individual's posture and the act of holding the white-wrapped object can be interpreted as a form of mockery or trivialisation of the death and destruction in Gaza, which may contribute to the emergence of a backlash.
Compositional Analysis	Information Value	The central positioning of the figure, coupled with the controversial element (the white-wrapped object and the rubble), situates the contentious symbolism at the forefront. This compositional choice serves to accentuate the perceived lack of sensitivity.



	Salience	The stark contrast between the individual's dark attire and the white object, set against the backdrop of rubble, immediately draws attention to the contentious symbols. The image's visual prominence serves to amplify the controversial nature of the image.
	Framing	The composition and framing serve to accentuate the controversial elements, resulting in a direct and unavoidable confrontation with the interpreted symbols of death and destruction. This framing choice contributes to the global backlash by rendering the controversial elements unmistakable.

In the multimodal conceptual framework developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen, there are three main functions or meta-functions that are interrelated in analyzing meaning in multimodal texts, including the interpretation of advertising images (Abdullah et al, 2020, p.256). The representational function relates to how visual and linguistic elements are used to construct and interpret experiences, objects, and events in the text. Meanwhile, the interpersonal function focuses on how multimodal elements are utilized to create social interactions, relations, and positions between the text creator, the text itself, and the reader. The compositional function relates to how the linguistic and visual elements are organized, combined, and composed to form a coherent and meaningful text. These three functions are interrelated and work simultaneously in building a complete multimodal meaning in a text, including in the context of advertising analysis.





Figure 2. Kory Grow, *Tragic photo of Gazan woman holding child's body wins world press photo of the year, 2024*, RollingStone, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/mohammed-salem-world-press-photo-of-the-year-israel-hamas-war-1235006582/>

Based on Figure 2, the image above shows two contrasting images, where the top image shows a model in a dramatic pose that is part of the Zara advertisement, while the bottom image shows a woman who appears to be grieving, which may represent the tragic situation in Palestine. The Zara advertisement seems to poke fun at the suffering experienced by the Palestinian people, given how the model is holding something like a cloth-wrapped body, which is often seen in the context of death and funerals in conflict zones. This creates the impression that the advertisement is insensitive to the real, sad, and profound situation in Palestine, which involves loss of life and suffering. This comparison highlights the fashion company's indifference and insensitivity to serious global issues, which in turn sparked outrage and criticism from the public who saw it as highly inappropriate and insulting.



Figure 3. David Bearnie, *Keffiyeh Pattern, 2023*, David Bearnie, <https://davidbernie.com/print-keffiyeh-pattern-free-palestine/>



Based on Figure 3, the image above shows a model in a Zara advertisement wearing a jacket with a collar designed to resemble a Palestinian Kaffiyeh fabric motif. Kaffiyeh is a symbol of the cultural identity and struggle of the Palestinian people, often worn as a form of solidarity and resistance to colonization. However, in the context of this advertisement, the use of the motif appears to be an attempt to exploit a symbol of the Palestinian struggle for commercial purposes, without considering its sensitivity and historical significance. This can be considered a form of insult and abuse to the suffering of the Palestinian people, especially given the ongoing conflict situation in the region. Many see Zara's move as highly inappropriate and unethical, showing their indifference to deep social and political issues. Public criticism and outrage arose as the advertisement was deemed not only insensitive, but also exploited a symbol of resistance that should be honored.

The representational analysis of this Zara advertisement shows how the visual elements convey a story rich in meaning. The white cloth used in the advertisement can be interpreted as a shroud, which holds profound significance in Palestinian culture as a symbol of death and loss. This symbolic use of the white cloth evokes a narrative of grief, referencing the lives lost and the ongoing sorrow within the community. Additionally, the advertisement features a kaffiyeh on the collar of the model's jacket. The keffiyeh, a traditional Arab head and neck covering, has transcended its functional use to become a powerful emblem of resistance and solidarity with Palestine (Zulaihah, 2023, p.137). Its presence in the advertisement adds a deeper layer of meaning, directly linking the visual to pertinent political and cultural issues. The combination of the white cloth and Keffiyeh tells a poignant story of the grief and loss resulting from the conflict, vividly depicting the atmosphere of sorrow experienced by those affected in Gaza. The dark, abstract background further enhances this narrative, adding depth and reinforcing the association with destruction and suffering that often accompany armed conflict. The interplay of these elements—the white cloth, the keffiyeh, and the abstract background—creates a powerful and evocative visual image, portraying a tense and sorrowful atmosphere that resonates deeply with the themes of loss, resistance, and enduring hope amidst turmoil. The visual elements in the Zara advertisement work together to evoke strong emotional responses, drawing the viewer into a story that is both personal and political. The white cloth as a shroud symbolizes the finality of death, while the keffiyeh on the collar serves as a reminder of ongoing resistance and the fight for identity and justice. The background, abstract yet dark, suggests the chaos and destruction that loom over the lives of those caught in the conflict.

Through these carefully chosen symbols, the advertisement transcends mere fashion imagery, becoming a powerful statement on the human condition in the face of political strife. The white cloth's purity starkly contrasts with the dark background, highlighting the innocence lost and the pervasive grief. The keffiyeh, with its historical and cultural connotations, grounds the image in a specific socio-political context, urging viewers to acknowledge the struggles and resilience of the Palestinian people. This advertisement not only showcases Zara's clothing but also invites contemplation on deeper issues, making it a compelling piece of visual storytelling.

Using Interpersonal analysis, this advertisement interacts with its audience in a very specific way (Xiuye and Wencheng). The white cloth, as the dominant visual



element, draws the viewer's immediate attention, creating a strong connection between the symbol and the viewer. It forces the viewer to contemplate the meaning behind the white cloth symbol, perhaps evoking empathy towards the suffering it symbolizes. The position and angle of the model in the advertisement, if it depicts sadness or vulnerability, can strengthen the emotional connection with the viewer, creating the impression that this advertisement is not just a product promotion, but also contains a deeper message. The minimalist design of the advertisement, with its simple and uncluttered visual elements, allows full focus on the core message, creating an atmosphere of loneliness and emptiness that invites deep reflection on the themes of death and conflict. The stark contrast between the white cloth and the background further emphasizes the symbolism, making the imagery more poignant and impactful. The use of lighting and shadows can also play a significant role in accentuating the mood of the advertisement, enhancing the overall effect on the audience. The careful composition of the visual elements ensures that the message is conveyed effectively and resonates deeply with the viewers, prompting them to consider the broader implications and underlying themes of the advertisement.

The compositional structure and visual composition of the advertisement become evident that every element is meticulously arranged to convey a unified message. The predominant use of white fabric establishes a commanding visual presence, guiding the viewer's attention towards the core symbol intended for communication. This central motif is complemented by an abstract background that adds a layer of emotional resonance, offering a contextual backdrop that reinforces the advertisement's overarching narrative. The deliberate contrast between the purity of the white fabric and the darker hue of the background serves not only to highlight the main element but also to imbue the composition with a sense of depth and visual intrigue. The minimalist design approach enhances the advertisement's ability to evoke a serene yet thought-provoking response from its audience. By strategically employing contrasting colors and carefully curated design elements, the advertisement effectively constructs an atmosphere that encourages introspection and contemplation. Viewers are invited to delve deeper into the themes suggested, which may touch upon subjects such as mortality, conflict, or broader societal issues. However, the interpretation of these themes remains highly subjective and contingent upon the viewer's individual background, experiences, and perspectives. For those familiar with the complexities of the Palestinian situation, the advertisement may subtly evoke social or political commentary, whereas others may perceive it purely as an artistic expression with aesthetic appeal. Ultimately, the advertisement's ability to resonate on multiple levels underscores its effectiveness in engaging audiences and stimulating meaningful discourse.

The interpretation of this Zara advertisement not only depends on visual elements such as the white fabric, kaffiyeh, and abstract background but is also heavily influenced by the context of the time and place in which it was released, as well as the background and perspective of the viewer. If the advertisement was released during times of heightened tension or violence in Gaza, the interpretation as a social or political commentary would be stronger and more controversial. Viewers who have an awareness and understanding of the situation in Palestine might see this ad as a



reflection of the suffering and loss experienced by the people there, while viewers who do not have this background might see it as an artistic aesthetic without any deep meaning. Reactions and interpretations of this advertisement will vary greatly depending on everyone's personal experience, knowledge, and sensitivity to such complex social and political issues.

Public Perceptions toward the Campaign

The public reaction to Zara's controversial advertisement amidst the Gaza conflict was diverse and intense, with social media, news articles, and blogs reflecting a spectrum of sentiments. On social media platforms like X, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, hashtags such as #BoycottZara and #ISupportZara revealed themes of outrage and support. Many users condemned the advertisement for cultural insensitivity and exploitation, while others defended it as a form of artistic expression. Mainstream media outlets, including CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera, provided coverage that ranged from neutral to critical, with articles highlighting the advertisement's insensitivity and potential to exacerbate tensions. The objective is to gain insight into how brand criticism affects individual perceptions and intentions. This will be achieved by examining the moderating effect of brand criticism from external sources and the household life cycle on these perceptions and intentions (Marzano, 2023, 45). Blogs and opinion pieces further explored these themes, some defending Zara's creative freedom and others criticizing the brand's perceived lack of sensitivity. An account name @Islamchannel in X posting a thread with a title *Calls to boycott Zara over its jacket campaign that makes a mockery out of Gaza genocide* that criticize this Zara controversial advertisement, in their account they said:

Why is #BoycottZara trending?

Spanish clothing retailer Zara is facing a huge public outcry for image of its latest campaign resembling those of the genocide in Gaza

Zara claims that its campaign, called "The Jacket," wants to show the garment's durability. However, the ad's images illustrated unsettling portrayals, such as bodies wrapped in a white body bag close to the Islamic burial shroud (kafan). It also features rocks and rubble very similar to the destruction in the besieged enclave, plus a cardboard cutout very eerily close to an upside-down map of Palestine.

Share your thoughts.

#news#zara#thejacket#boycott

This thread by @islamchannel highlights the social media backlash against Zara's controversial advertisement campaign. The thread explains that Zara is facing a significant public outcry for images in its campaign, which many perceive as resembling scenes from the genocide in Gaza. The campaign's imagery includes unsettling portrayals like bodies wrapped in white shrouds, which are culturally and religiously significant as Islamic burial practices, and scenes of destruction reminiscent of the besieged enclave. This tweet aligns with the research findings that public reactions on social media were overwhelmingly negative, with hashtags like #BoycottZara trending and users expressing outrage over the perceived insensitivity and exploitation of serious humanitarian issues for commercial gain. This example underscores the theme of



cultural insensitivity and the swift mobilization of social media users to criticize the brand.

Demographic analysis showed significant variations in reactions. Younger audiences (18-35) were more vocal on social media, organizing and participating in online campaigns both for and against Zara. Older demographics (35+) expressed their views more through comments on news articles and blog posts. Geographic differences were pronounced, with Middle Eastern audiences predominantly viewing the advertisement as offensive, while Western audiences were more divided. Political affiliation also influenced perceptions, with left-leaning individuals and groups more likely to criticize the advertisement, focusing on issues of cultural appropriation, whereas right-leaning groups emphasized free speech and artistic expression. In this perspective, the act of "cancelling" can be conceptualized as a deliberate choice to withdraw attention from an individual or entity that is perceived as morally reprehensible. It can be considered a form of social pressure for those who are perceived to be violating ethical standards (Norris, 2023, p.149).

The @adviceummah account on Instagram posted the second piece of proof, which depicts a protest inside a Zara store in Montreal, Canada, with people holding flags and likely planning a boycott. In a 17-second video uploaded on Instagram account @adviceummah with the caption "*boycottzara* 🍉🍉", people shout repeatedly "*SHAME ON YOU!*". The comments on the post indicate support for the protest and highlight broader generational respect for social justice issues. As a comment written by account @rumanak6 "*👏👏am having a new found respect for this generation- a generation that I thought was lost and selfish. May Allah continue to guide them all. ❤️❤️*". This visual evidence supports the research's demographic analysis, which noted that younger audiences (18-35) were more vocal and active in organizing online and offline campaigns against Zara. The image also illustrates the geographic differences in reactions, with Western audiences, particularly those in Canada, participating in solidarity protests. Furthermore, it highlights the impact of influential figures and advocacy groups in amplifying public sentiment.

The influence of media coverage was significant, with critical reports correlating with heightened public outrage. Statements from influential figures like Malala Yousafzai and Bella Hadid, who condemned the advertisement, played a pivotal role in amplifying public sentiment and driving boycott campaigns. Human rights organizations and cultural advocacy groups, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, issued statements condemning the advertisement, further shaping public discourse. The backlash had tangible impacts on consumer behavior, with organized boycotts and protests, and potential dips in sales in regions where the backlash was most intense. Surveys and consumer feedback indicated shifts in brand loyalty, with many customers reconsidering future purchases from Zara. The case of Zara's advertisement amidst the Gaza conflict underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and the significant role of public perception in shaping corporate actions and brand reputation.

The importance of cultural sensitivity in marketing, emphasizes that brands must understand historical contexts and the potential repercussions of appearing to trivialize or commercialize them. The controversy surrounding Zara's advertisement demonstrates the power of visual media in shaping public sentiment and highlights the



ethical responsibility of brands to consider the psychological impact of their advertisements. This incident illustrates the growing importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in modern business practices, as consumers increasingly hold brands accountable for their actions and demand higher ethical standards. In recent years, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a crucial aspect of business strategy. As companies face increasing pressure to address social and environmental issues, integrating corporate social responsibility (CSR) into their core business operations has emerged as a key approach to creating sustainable value (Ardiansyah and Alnoor 28).

The economic implications of the controversy for Zara and the broader fashion industry are significant. The backlash may lead to shifts in consumer preferences towards brands perceived as more socially responsible and culturally sensitive. Consumers are increasingly making purchasing decisions based on a brand's ethical stance and social values. The variable consumer behavior exerts a positive and significant effect on the purchasing decision process. To enhance the efficacy of purchase decisions and cultivate customer loyalty, companies must adapt to the ever-evolving digital landscape. In the current era, characterized by instant connectivity and the prevalence of online transactions, companies must demonstrate a commitment to aligning their strategies with the latest developments (Wardhana et al, 2021). This trend emphasizes the need for brands to align their marketing strategies with the evolving values of their target audience. Additionally, other brands in the fashion industry may invest more in cultural research and sensitivity training to avoid similar controversies, highlighting the potential financial risks associated with cultural insensitivity and the importance of incorporating ethical considerations into business decisions.

The broader academic and practical discussions about the impact of brand criticism on consumer behavior and market trends. By examining the public reaction to Zara's advertisement, the paper provides insights into several critical areas. Firstly, it explores the role of social media in amplifying public outrage or support, thereby influencing consumer perceptions and behaviors. Secondly, it examines the impact of mainstream media and influential figures on shaping public discourse and intensifying brand criticism. Those who exert influence on social networks are not always celebrities or public figures. They are often ordinary citizens who have gained influence through content production and diffusion. The intimate relationship between influencers and their followers, along with the strategic incorporation of their influence, can potentially engage the silent but salient citizen group in co-creating a nation's brand (Li and Feng, 2022, p.221). Furthermore, the importance of understanding cultural and historical contexts in marketing to avoid public backlash, highlights the significance of cultural sensitivity. It also discusses the growing demand for brands to demonstrate ethical behavior and the implications of corporate social responsibility (CSR) for brand loyalty and consumer trust. Lastly, it analyzes the potential financial risks for brands associated with cultural insensitivity and the broader economic implications for the fashion industry. By analyzing these aspects, this research contributes valuable insights into the dynamics of public perception, the significance of cultural sensitivity in marketing, and the importance of CSR in maintaining consumer trust and loyalty. It also provides practical recommendations for brands to navigate cultural and ethical challenges in their



marketing strategies, ensuring they align with the evolving values of their target audience.

Corporate Responsibility and Ethical Marketing

The concept of corporate responsibility and ethical marketing represents a crucial component of a company's overall strategy, particularly in the context of the contemporary global environment and the heightened social awareness that it has fostered. Ethical marketing is defined as the promotion of products and services in an honest, transparent, and respectful manner, considering cultural, social, and political sensitivities. It is of the utmost importance for companies to be fully cognizant of the contexts in which they operate, to prevent any unintentional offence or controversy. All ethical marketing practices undertaken by a company are inextricably linked to consumer purchasing behaviors, regardless of whether the company is cognizant of the nuances of consumer purchasing power (Lee and Jin, 2019, p.2). For example, when a big company like Zara decides to advertise, it is responsible for ensuring that the content is not only appealing, but also sensitive to different audiences and potential sensitivities. This means that they need to understand and respect the historical and cultural backgrounds that may be affected by their marketing messages. In the event of a backlash, as seen with Zara's advertising during the Gaza conflict, the response of the company is crucial. This is because how organizations respond to these situations can have a significant impact on customers' cognitive and behavioral responses to the organization, while product failures can threaten customer trust (Ajibola). Companies need to address concerns promptly and sincerely, demonstrating accountability and a willingness to make amends.

In response to the backlash, Zara issued an apology, but it was seen by many as insincere, as Zara made several mistakes in its use of apology language.

“After listening to comments regarding the latest Zara atelier campaign "The Jacket", we would like to share the following with our customers:

the campaign, that was conceived in July and photographed in September, presents a series of images of unfinished sculptures in a sculptor's studio and was created with the sole purpose of showcasing craftmade garments in an artistic context.

Unfortunately, some customers felt offended by these images, which have now been removed, and saw in them something far from what was intended when they were created.

Zara regrets that misunderstanding and we reaffirm our deep respect towards everyone.”

Zara's made an apology statement posted on Instagram. Zara insists that the campaign was designed with the sole purpose of presenting clothes in an artistic context and that any offense was unintentional. This can be interpreted as a way of deflecting blame and not fully acknowledging the potential insensitivity of the content. The statement, which can be seen as downplaying the wider public reaction, minimizes the impact by referring to 'some customers' feeling offended. The statement says that the offensive pictures are being taken down, which is a positive step, but there is no clear commitment to understanding why the pictures are offensive or how to prevent similar problems in the future.



The statement "saw in them something far from what was intended when they were created" implies that Zara believes the public misinterpreted the artist's original intent. However, when contextualized within the context of Gaza, this interpretation risks overlooking the nuances of the conflict's reality. Zara asserts that the images were created with purely artistic intent, meant to showcase craftsmanship in a sculptor's studio, and that they were not designed to convey any political or controversial interpretations. However, even images that are seemingly innocuous or artistic can be loaded with unintended meanings in conflict-sensitive areas like Gaza. This highlights a potential lack of awareness or foresight on Zara's part regarding how their images could be interpreted given the current events in Gaza. By claiming that the images were perceived as being incongruous with their intended meaning, Zara appears to shift the responsibility for misinterpretation onto the audience, which may be perceived as dismissive of legitimate concerns and emotions related to the Gaza conflict. This phrase suggests a disconnection between Zara's internal perspective and the external sociopolitical context.

This response underscores the importance of companies being hyper-aware of the possible interpretations of their content in different cultural and political contexts. Because under the CSR (corporate social responsibilities) aspect companies are required to create campaigns that pay attention to ethics in highlighting sensitive issues (Chen. 8275). This highlights the necessity for genuine accountability and sensitivity, as Zara's response, which minimizes the offence taken by implying that the misunderstanding lies with the viewers, can harm its reputation and erode trust. Effective corporate responsibility involves not only issuing a heartfelt apology but also taking concrete steps to prevent future missteps, ensuring better oversight of marketing content, and being attuned to the sociopolitical contexts in which advertisements are released. Zara acknowledges that there was a "misunderstanding" rather than apologizing directly for the content. This phrasing may suggest that it was the audience's interpretation that was at fault, rather than the content itself. While the statement reaffirms respect for all people, it does not provide a detailed plan for how Zara will ensure this respect in future campaigns. This type of response may have an impact on the image of the Zara brand, as it may be perceived as insufficient or insincere by some customers. It would have been more effective in rebuilding trust to acknowledge the issue more directly and provide a clearer plan for future action.

Conclusion

Zara's controversial advertisement during the Gaza conflict stands as a stark reminder of the profound impact that marketing decisions can have on public perception and brand reputation. The advertisement use of imagery evoking themes of death, mourning, and conflict sparked immediate and widespread backlash, illustrating the sensitivity required when navigating socio-political contexts in global marketing campaigns. The public response, amplified through social media and mainstream news coverage, reflected a diverse spectrum of outrage, with critics accusing Zara of cultural insensitivity and exploitation for commercial gain. This incident underscores the growing expectations for brands to uphold ethical standards and demonstrate cultural awareness in their messaging. Zara's subsequent apology, though issued promptly,



faced criticism for its perceived lack of genuine empathy and accountability. Many viewed the apology as deflecting responsibility rather than acknowledging the impact of the advertisement's imagery on affected communities. This highlights a broader challenge faced by companies in effectively addressing public concerns while maintaining brand integrity.

The controversy also illuminated shifts in consumer behavior and expectations, particularly among younger demographics who prioritize ethical considerations in their purchasing decisions. The widespread use of social media to organize boycotts and protests against Zara further underscored the power of digital platforms in shaping corporate reputations and influencing consumer sentiment. Looking ahead, the Zara case serves as a pivotal example for marketers and businesses worldwide. It underscores the importance of cultural competence, ethical marketing practices, and proactive crisis management strategies. By fostering a deeper understanding of diverse cultural contexts and integrating ethical considerations into their operations, companies can not only mitigate risks of public backlash but also build stronger relationships with consumers who value authenticity and social responsibility. Ultimately, the Zara controversy highlights the evolving landscape of corporate accountability in a globalized world, where ethical conduct and cultural sensitivity are integral to maintaining trust and sustainability in business practices.

This research's limitation is that it focuses solely on a single commercial, which limits the findings' wider relevance to Zara's overall marketing plans or other business initiatives. Examining a single advertisement makes it more difficult to spot reoccurring trends or structural problems with the way the business handles politically and culturally sensitive subjects. Future research can use the comparative methodology to examine several advertisements from Zara or other international firms that have had comparable issues to overcome this constraint. This would make it possible for scholars to spot recurring themes, tactics, or errors in the use of political or cultural images in advertising. Comparative research could also reveal variations in how companies handle sensitive topics and provide a deeper understanding of moral marketing strategies and how they relate to CSR (corporate social responsibility) values. Extending the scope might provide a more comprehensive and nuanced knowledge of the relationship among consumer perceptions, cultural symbolism, and marketing.

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