

Brand transgressions in advertising related to diversity, equity and inclusion: implications for consumer–brand relationships

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Abstract

Purpose – Considering the ongoing discourse on diversity, equity and inclusion, brands aim to develop marketing campaigns that demonstrate respect for all individuals. Despite these intentions, many advertisements still provoke strong negative reactions from consumers due to brand transgressions in social media marketing campaigns that violate these values. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the repercussions that such social media marketing campaigns have on brands, categorizing these campaigns as brand transgressions in social media advertising.

Design/methodology/approach – This research uses a mixed-method design that includes semi-structured interviews (Study 1), a content analysis (Study 2) and an online experiment (Study 3).

Findings – This paper clarifies the elements that qualify as brand transgressions in advertising within the diversity, equity and inclusion discourse. The negative electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) associated with brand transgressions in advertising comprises negative emotions (e.g. anger, contempt, disgust and hate) and behavioural intentions to penalize the brand (e.g. negative word-of-mouth, brand avoidance and protest behaviours). The negative e-WOM stemming from these transgressions amplifies the adverse consequences for consumer–brand relationships by negatively influencing other consumers through sympathy towards the offended parties.

Research limitations/implications – This paper offers brand managers guidelines for preventing and managing negative consumer reactions towards brands based on their responses to marketing campaigns that contradict the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the literature on brand transgressions related to diversity, equity and inclusion values by exploring their impact on consumer–brand relationships and highlighting the pivotal role of sympathy in perpetuating negative consequences.

Keywords E-WOM, Brand relationships, Mixed-method design, Experimental design, Brand transgressions in advertising, Social media

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Contemporary society recognizes the significance of diversity, equity and inclusion values for societal improvement (Viglia *et al.*, 2023; Zayer *et al.*, 2023). Consumers expect brands to embrace these values in advertising, understanding their role in fostering stronger consumer–brand relationships (FacebookIQ, 2021; Ferraro *et al.*, 2023). In the USA, more than 60% of consumers acknowledge the impact of diversity, equity and inclusion in advertising on brand perceptions, with more than one-third expressing increased trust in brands featuring diversity (Petrock, 2020). Brands such as Patagonia, Target and Nike actively incorporate diversity, equity and inclusion into their branding, a strategy that can evoke brand polarization (Milfeld and Flint, 2021; Osuna Ramírez *et al.*, 2019).

Despite efforts towards inclusivity, some brands display insensitivity through advertisements that are perceived as offensive by many consumers. Ads that conflict with diversity, equity and inclusion values trigger immediate negative reactions, exemplified by recent scandals involving major brands (Forbes, 2018). The consequences for consumer–brand relationships are evident in instances such as Victoria's Secret excluding certain models, which lead to backlash and a substantial drop in viewership (Burke, 2019).

Extensive literature on advertising explores the impact of offensive ads, akin to moral brand transgressions (Capella *et al.*, 2010; Khamitov *et al.*, 2020). Given the importance of

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diversity, equity and inclusion values for consumers (McKinsey & Company, 2020), companies must fully comprehend the implications of ads contrasting these values for consumer–brand relationships. This paper focuses on brand transgressions, or social transgressions (Youn, 2022), in social media advertising that neglect diversity, equity and inclusion values. It examines how consumers perceive and react to these transgressions, particularly by exploring negative electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). This research adopts a mixed-method design to explore both the direct and indirect effects of brand transgressions related to diversity, equity and inclusion on consumer–brand relationships. Studies 1 and 2 investigate direct effects, clarifying how consumers perceive and react to these transgressions. Study 2 focuses on negative e-WOM, a prevalent reaction, exploring associated consumer emotions and behaviours. Finally, Study 3 explores the indirect effects of these transgressions on the relationship between consumers and brands, analysing the impact of negative e-WOM on other consumer reactions. This research provides a framework describing the direct and indirect effects of moral brand transgression related to diversity, equity and inclusion on consumer–brand relationships (Fetscherin *et al.*, 2021).

Theoretical background

Diversity, equity and inclusion

Diversity, equity and inclusion are distinct yet interconnected concepts. Diversity encompasses various individual and social differences, including attributes such as ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and physical abilities. Equity, which is often associated with gender equity and female empowerment (Sterbenk *et al.*, 2022), involves ensuring fairness. Inclusion focuses on actively engaging with diversity, emphasizing the integration and appreciation of different perspectives in an environment (Bernstein *et al.*, 2020). These concepts represent a fundamental human right, ensuring that individuals are not disadvantaged but recognized, understood and appreciated based on any attribute (Eisend *et al.*, 2022).

Few studies have addressed the impact of diversity, equity and inclusion on brands (Wilkie *et al.*, 2023). Thus, it is crucial to bridge this gap, as brands that are not aligned with these values often experience weaker relationships with consumers (Liu *et al.*, 2023). For instance, Abercrombie & Fitch faced negative consequences when its brand philosophy, featuring stores with athletic, white and scantily clad models and erotic imagery, breached discrimination laws, leading to consumer indignation and detrimental effects on reputation and finances (Ferraro *et al.*, 2023).

Brand transgressions in advertising

A brand transgression is defined as an “act of violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding consumer–brand relationship performance and evaluation” (Aaker *et al.*, 2004, p. 2). Any action violating implicit norms in the consumer–brand relationship (Schreuder *et al.*, 2024), such as trust and respect, constitutes a brand transgression (Hsiao *et al.*, 2015). Brand transgressions cover a range of issues, from product failure and poor service to companies violating social codes (Lin and Sung, 2014). This paper specifically focuses on violations of social codes, particularly

disregard of diversity, equity and inclusion values, termed moral or ethical brand transgressions (Nichols *et al.*, 2023). Disregarding these values undermines social unity, and this paper concentrates on a specific type known as social transgressions (Youn, 2022; Slater and Demangeot, 2021).

Ethicality in advertising research has often explored specific aspects, such as potential offensive content (Pounders, 2018), but these studies seldom draw from the broader body of research on brand transgressions. Consequently, existing studies have produced perplexing results by examining specific offensive content aspects (e.g. violence, racism and homophobia) without considering that different offensive content may have similar negative effects on the consumer–brand relationship. Therefore, this research aims to provide a comprehensive model explaining the implications of brand transgressions in advertising related to diversity, equity and inclusion for consumer–brand relationships.

Unethical advertising is defined as “any emotion-arousing ad that can cause meaningful, well-defined group viewers to feel extremely anxious, to feel hostile towards others, or to feel a loss of self-esteem” (Hyman and Tansey, 1990, p. 105). This definition aligns with those of moral brand transgressions and social transgressions, as immoral brands act through ads that violate viewers’ expectations and evoke negative emotions, thus trampling social unity.

Negative emotions play a central role in explaining consumer reactions to brand transgressions (e.g. Romani *et al.*, 2015). Studies have shown that emotions such as contempt, anger and disgust (Grappi *et al.*, 2013); moral outrage (Antonetti and Maklan, 2016); shame (Weitzl *et al.*, 2024); and brand hate (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016) harm consumer–brand relationships, leading to brand avoidance (Haberstroh *et al.*, 2017), anti-brand activism (Antonetti and Maklan, 2016) and negative word-of-mouth (WOM) (Huber *et al.*, 2010). Similarly, the literature shows that unethical advertising negatively affects attitudes towards the ad (Tripathi *et al.*, 2022), attitudes towards the brand (Machleit and Wilson, 1988) and consumer behavioural intentions (Pounders and Mabry-Flynn, 2016).

Because the literature has not sufficiently investigated the implications of social transgressions for consumer–brand relationships (Youn, 2022), this paper concentrates on this type of brand transgression related to diversity, equity and inclusion, terming them brand transgressions in advertising.

Negative e-WOM implications for consumer–brand relationships

When examining the effects of brand transgressions in advertising on consumer–brand relationships, it is crucial to consider the impact of negative e-WOM originating from such transgressions on social media. Negative e-WOM involves the social sharing of emotions (Rimé, 2009), and its spread is a contagious process linked to the sender’s emotions influencing the receiver (Berger, 2014). Negative e-WOM can lead to the creation of more negative e-WOM (Hancock *et al.*, 2023; Powell *et al.*, 2022); when e-WOM garners support over a short period, scholars term this phenomenon online firestorms (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2023; Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014). In the branding literature, online firestorms concerning brands involved in negative e-WOM, which significantly impacts

brand performance, have been considered (Azer and Alexander, 2020). However, managers have a limited understanding of how to effectively respond to negative e-WOM and address displeased audiences exposed to such content (Herhausen *et al.*, 2019).

Negative e-WOM influences consumer–brand relationships in various ways. High levels of negative e-WOM lead to unfavourable consumer attitudes and dislikes towards a brand and its products (Suwandee *et al.*, 2020), and contributing to the brand polarization phenomenon (Kennedy and Guzmán, 2021; Osuna Ramírez *et al.*, 2019).

The emotional aspect of negative e-WOM influences repatronage, switching behaviours, brand retaliation (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2020; Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012; Sun *et al.*, 2021), participation in online firestorms as a form of brand revenge (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2021) and the generation of more negative e-WOM (Hancock *et al.*, 2023; Herhausen *et al.*, 2019; Legocki *et al.*, 2022). Table 1 provides a summary of the main contributions regarding the implications of negative e-WOM related to transgressions on consumer–brand relationships.

Research overview

This research explores the direct and indirect implications of brand transgressions in advertising related to diversity, equity and inclusion within the context of social media. This paper uses a mixed-method approach to provide a comprehensive understanding and yield robust findings (Davis *et al.*, 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the overarching structure of the paper and the interconnections between the studies.

Study 1

Study 1 provides a comprehensive understanding of brand transgressions in advertising related to diversity, equity and inclusion, exploring how consumers perceive exposure to these transgressions and how they impact their relationship with the brand. To thoroughly investigate this phenomenon, this study adopts a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews.

Study 1: Methodology

Twelve participants were involved in semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2015; Yin, 2018). The interviews adhered to an interview guide and used saturation criteria (Galvin, 2015). The participants, who were specifically social media users aged 18–44 years (considered the most active users according to Statista, 2022), were purposively recruited (Bell *et al.*, 2018). Each interview lasted approximately 30 min (minimum duration: 25 min; maximum duration: 65 min) and was initiated by prompting the participants to recall and discuss an advertisement that elicited an adverse reaction (refer to the Appendix for additional details about the interviewee sample).

The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for qualitative content analysis (Bell *et al.*, 2018). The researchers used NVivo11 in the coding process (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). In total, the interview texts comprised 29,452 words, with an average of approximately 2,500 words for each interview.

Study 1: results

Main features of brand transgressions in advertising related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Diversity, equity and inclusion embody shared values, yet advertising often promotes values that conflict with these socially conveyed moral principles, leading to negative consumer reactions and implications for consumer–brand relationships. The severity of consumer reactions is contingent on the characteristics of the brand transgression in advertising, which can be categorized into features related to ad content and features related to the brand.

Features related to ad content. Aligned with diversity, equity and inclusion principles, brand transgressions in advertising are associated with racism, general discrimination, offensive stereotypes and violence. Key topics creating a noticeable detachment from the ad are racism and discrimination, with one participant noting, “Any kind of message that individuals condemn are hints of racism or discriminatory contents” (Participant #6, Male, 24 years). The use of offensive or outdated stereotypes is perceived as less severe than racism, but if the stereotype leads to “vulgarity or sexism, the negative reaction is stronger” (Participant #9, Male, 29 years), as it becomes offensive and creates detachment. In other cases, the use of stereotypes is considered “unjust” (Participant #4, Male, 25 years), “inappropriate” or “outdated” (Participant #10, Female, 31 years). Given the ongoing discourse on women’s empowerment, violence towards women emerges as a highly sensitive topic, with four respondents noting it as “one of the most unpleasant things that could be included in an ad” (Participant #11, Male, 26 years), as it perpetuates the gender gap and demeans the role of women in society.

Features related to the brand. The perceived severity of a brand transgression may be influenced by the “positioning of the brand”, as noted by Participant #4, a 25-year-old male. The perceived value of a brand can impact consumers’ forgiveness. Brands that consistently exhibit moral behaviour are more likely to receive forgiveness, while contradictory behaviour can negatively affect the brand’s values, leading to more severe and enduring consumer reactions. Multiple negative reactions to different advertisements have the potential to significantly damage consumer–brand relationships.

Users’ reactions. Affective reactions. Anger, disgust and indignation, coupled with repulsion and fear, emerge as the most commonly identified emotions in consumer reactions to these advertisements. Anger is seen as a primary motivator that drives consumers to react against brands, particularly among those directly offended by the ad (Participant #9, Male, 29 years). Disgust and repulsion are experienced by individuals who find the content of the brand communication inappropriate, especially when negative reactions are triggered by violence (Participant #5, Male, 25 years).

Disappointment arises when there is a perceived incongruence between the advertisement’s content and the brand philosophy (Participant #5, Male, 25 years; Participant #8, Female, 22 years). Negative emotions associated with the ad can easily transfer to the brand, and while aversion or detachment may occur immediately after the ad’s launch, such emotions might be forgotten in the long term (Participant #3, Female, 34 years). Disparaging the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion can cause suffering for those whose rights

Table 1 Literature review table on the effects of negative e-WOM on consumer–brand relationships

Author(s)/year	Journal	Type of research	Goal of the research	Consumer–brand implications considered
Van Noort and Willemsen (2012)	<i>Journal of Interactive Marketing</i>	Quantitative	Testing the effect of negative e-WOM on brand evaluation considering also webcare interventions and platform involved	Brand evaluation
Pfeffer et al. (2014)	<i>Journal of Marketing Communication</i>	Qualitative	Exploring how online firestorm begin	Brand reputation; brand image
Delgado-Ballester et al. (2020)	<i>Spanish Journal of Marketing</i>	Qualitative	Exploring the potential negative consequences of online firestorm on consumer–brand relationships	Brand avoidance; brand switching; brand retaliation
Herhausen et al. (2019)	<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	Quantitative	Exploring the virality of online firestorms in correspondence of specific firm responses	Brand-related negative e-WOM
Scholz and Smith (2019)	<i>Journal of Marketing Management</i>	Qualitative	Discovering how firm may create brand value exploiting negative e-WOM	Brand value
Suwandee et al. (2020)	<i>Young Consumers</i>	Quantitative	Testing the effect of negative e-WOM on young consumers' attitudes	Brand attitude
Delgado-Ballester et al. (2021)	<i>International Journal of Electronic Commerce</i>	Quantitative	Testing the relationship between expressed feelings in the negative e-WOM message and the willingness to take revenge on the brand in the form of online firestorm	Participation to online firestorm as a form of revenge on the brand
Sun et al. (2021)	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	Quantitative	Testing the relationship between negative e-WOM and brand equity, considering the mediating role of consumer ethnocentrism	Brand equity of domestic vs foreign brands
Legocki et al. (2022)	<i>Journal of Consumer Marketing</i>	Quantitative	Analysing and segmenting negative e-WOM to identify which type of message is most likely to be widely shared	Brand-related negative e-WOM
Hancock et al. (2023)	<i>Journal of Product & Brand Management</i>	Quantitative	Identifying the antecedents of online firestorms by testing the relationship between message type and likelihood to share	Brand-related negative e-WOM

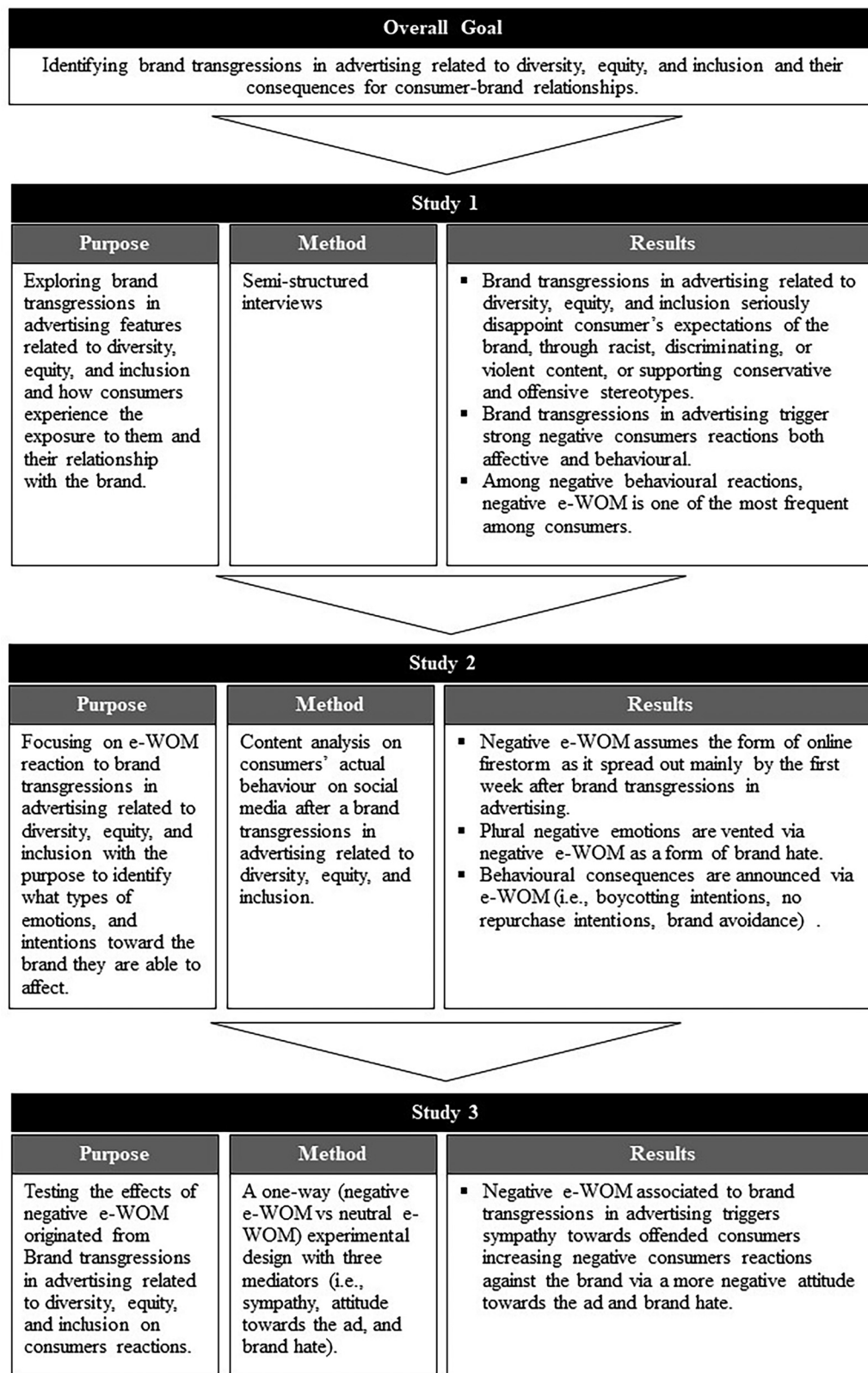
Source: Authors' elaboration

are not recognized or whose identities are offended. Sympathy, an emotion fuelled by concern for the suffering of others, may arise when people feel close to those who are suffering. As noted, “By reading the disappointment of people offended by the ad, people may feel sympathetic towards them, and they are more willing to share their disappointment as well” (Participant #1, Male, 30 years).

Behavioural reactions. Affective reactions often translate into behavioural responses. According to Participants #5 and #6, both 25-year-old males, comments serve as a natural means for people to express disapproval of a brand, particularly when the content is perceived as disrespectful or controversial to the public. Consequently, individuals who feel offended tend to vent their negative feelings through WOM.

In some instances, these emotional responses go beyond verbal expressions, leading to changes in repurchase intentions, brand avoidance or a reduction or cessation of patronage. The impact of a brand transgression in advertising can extend to long-term consequences such as a reduction in patronage and cessation of repurchases. The severity of these consequences is contingent on whether the ad aligns with the “brand philosophy”, as noted by Participant #10, a 31-year-old female. Typically, such long-term consequences occur with repeated brand transgressions in advertising by the same brand, as observed by Participant #5, a 25-year-old male. Conversely, if a brand transgression is an isolated incident, it may result in only short-term consequences, such as negative e-WOM, as indicated by Participant #1, a 30-year-old male.

Figure 1 Research overview



Source: Authors' elaboration

Study 1: discussion.

Study 1 elucidates brand transgressions in advertising concerning diversity, equity and inclusion, exploring how consumers experience them and their impact on the brand relationship. Such transgressions occur when ads significantly fall short of consumer expectations, offending their identities or values and conflicting with the brand philosophy. Typically involving offensive stereotypes, racist, discriminating or violent content that disregards diversity, equity and inclusion values, these transgressions trigger strong negative consumer reactions, both affective and behavioural.

Consumers, who value diversity, equity and inclusion as essential elements of a fair society, expect brands to embrace these principles in their advertising, contributing to a fairer society (FacebookIQ, 2021). Ads contradicting these principles not only evoke strong negative reactions but also impact the consumer–brand relationship. Study 1 affirms that brand transgressions in advertising, particularly those with offensive content, share similar effects with other types of brand transgressions in terms of consumer reactions and implications for the consumer–brand relationship (e.g. Grappi *et al.*, 2013).

In the context of brand transgressions in advertising, individuals not only suffer from feeling discriminated against but also might react affectively or behaviourally against the brand. Moreover, individuals sympathizing with those offended by an ad play a pivotal role in activating negative reactions towards the brand. This highlights the interconnectedness of affective and behavioural responses in determining the consequences for consumer–brand relationships.

Study 2

Study 2 thoroughly evaluates affective and behavioural reactions through an analysis of Facebook comments. This approach enhances the comprehension of consumer responses to brand transgressions in advertising tied to diversity, equity and inclusion, offering a more nuanced perspective on the dynamics of negative e-WOM. The focus on online firestorms provides a unique lens through which to examine the intensity and nature of consumer interactions on social media platforms following brand transgressions in advertising.

Study 2: methodology

The study uses a content analysis to investigate real consumer responses to advertisements conflicting with diversity, equity and inclusion principles. The analysis focuses on Facebook comments related to two case studies (Brands 1 and 2).

The two brands were selected because they met specific criteria. First, both brands were chosen for their transgressions, which infringed upon diversity, equity and inclusion values, particularly involving racial discrimination, identified as a severe transgression in Study 1. Second, the selected transgressions garnered media attention in Europe, aligning with the cultural context examined in Study 1. Third, these brands were selected because they had more than 100 comments on their official Facebook pages, facilitating a broader analysis of consumer reactions and ensuring the spread of transgressions on social media.

Facebook was chosen for analysis due to its extensive user base (over 3 billion monthly active users; Statista, 2023) and rich interaction features (e.g. “likes” and “shares”). A total of

3,463 user comments (1,742 for Brand 1 and 1,721 for Brand 2) were collected within one month after each brand transgression. The data, including posts and comments, were obtained using NCapture, the NVivo browser add-on tool.

A coding schedule was established (Bell *et al.*, 2018) and covered various aspects, such as the timing of comments, sentiment, type of accusation towards the brand, topic of the comment, affective reactions expressed and announced behavioural reactions. The coding process, which ensured internal validity, involved two independent researchers. Interrater reliability, confirmed by Cohen’s kappa coefficient (0.80), validated the consistency of the coding (Cohen, 1960). Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion between the two researchers, with a third researcher being consulted in cases of persistent disagreement (Weber, 1990).

Study 2: results

The findings are methodically presented for each case to delve into the analytical exploration of themes that describe consumer reactions to brand transgressions in advertising and their implications for the consumer–brand relationship. Following this, a concise discussion of the primary evidence sets the stage for the hypothesis development in Study 3.

Brand 1, a European ferry company, faced accusations of racism and discrimination following the release of a social media ad campaign outlining its nationality-based hiring policies. The majority of comments, approximately 82%, surfaced during the first week, with an additional 10% in the second week, indicative of an online firestorm as per its definition.

In general, the prevailing sentiment was neutral, constituting 44% of the responses, as the ad sparked a dialogue among users, indicating the potential influence of negative e-WOM on others. In instances where the direction of comments could be determined (supporting or blaming the brand), negative sentiment accounted for 25% of the comments. Neutral-coded comments were related to specific promotions or customer service and unrelated to the brand transgression in advertising. Negative-coded comments blamed the brand for the transgression or expressed dissatisfaction; these included “you have just lost a customer!” or “You are racists! I will never use your ships again!”. Positive comments made up 31%, but users accused the brand of deleting negative comments, creating uncertainty about the actual impact (for instance, a user commenting on another user stated: “You’d better save your comment that they’re going to delete it soon”. Another comment reads: “Why instead of deleting the comments, don’t delete the post?”). Given the study’s focus on understanding negative reactions in both affective and behavioural terms, subsequent analyses will concentrate on comments classified as negative.

The majority (74%) of the negative comments accused the brand of racism and discrimination. For instance, a user stated, “You have discriminated with your advertising, and what’s worse, you are proud of it!!!! Cowards”. Another asserted, “This is a xenophobic message”. Perceptions of discrimination or racism triggered various emotional responses towards the brand, encompassing contempt and disgust (30%), anger (23%) and disappointment (20%). For instance, many users attacked the brand with rude expressions such as “You are

embarrassing. You suck!” or “You just piss people off!”. These negative emotions prompted individuals to protest against the brand (81%) by expressing additional negative e-WOM. In some instances, users announced their intentions to avoid the brand in the future, particularly when feelings of contempt and disgust were prevalent. For instance, a user stated, “From now on, only people who get along well with you will be traveling together. This way, you can form a nice, united, and compact group”. Similarly, another comment read: “I’d rather prefer a better service. Regardless of the nationality of the person offering it. Congratulations for the advertising campaign. You have just lost another customer!”.

Brand 2, which operates in the food and beverage sector, faced an online firestorm after unveiling a social media campaign celebrating the National Women’s Volleyball Team. The brand was accused of racism due to its use of an image where the two black team players were obscured by the brand logo. This brand transgression in advertising sparked an online firestorm, with more than 84% of the comments expressed during the first week following the incident.

In general, negative sentiments prevailed, constituting 62% of the responses. The perception of a racist advertisement triggered various emotional reactions, including contempt and disgust (39%), as well as anger (31%). Users also expressed feelings of shame (14%) and disappointment (13%). Various comments read as follows: “You’re disgusting! I will certainly be careful not to buy this brand in the future” or “I am disgusted. Shame on you!”. Unlike the other case, negative e-WOM was the predominant reaction (63%). In addition, 35% of the comments indicated intentions to boycott the brand, particularly when associated with contempt and disgust (53%). Many comments read as follows: “I will never buy your products!”, “You have ‘accidentally’ forgotten two girls. I will never buy your water again, and I hope many will do the same”.

Study 2: discussion

The results from the analysis of Brand 1, the European ferry company, and Brand 2, the food and beverage brand, illuminate the profound impact of brand transgressions related to diversity, equity and inclusion in advertising on consumer reactions and the subsequent implications for the consumer–brand relationship.

The emotional impact of brand transgressions related to diversity, equity and inclusion is evident, as users expressed strong emotions such as contempt, disgust and anger (Northey *et al.*, 2020). Through an analysis of negative e-WOM, other emotions were also detected (i.e. disappointment, shame, dehumanization and fear), leading to a discussion of the impact of brand transgressions in advertising on brand hate (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016). Brand hate is a direct implication of brand transgressions in advertising that are in opposition to diversity, equity and inclusion in consumer–brand relationships, aligning with the literature on brand transgressions (e.g. Antonetti and Maklan, 2018). In line with the literature on brand hate (Zhang and Laroche, 2020), the declaration of intentions to boycott brands, especially Brand 2, underscores the potential long-term consequences of such transgressions on consumer–brand relationships. Both cases experienced a surge of comments within a short period, indicative of the online firestorm phenomenon, highlighting the

rapid and intense nature of consumer reactions. The nuances of sentiment and accusations and the call for a boycott underscore the importance of brands responding effectively to such transgressions. Failure to address consumer concerns may lead to sustained negative sentiments and behaviours.

While Studies 1 and 2 explore the direct consequences of brand transgressions in advertising associated with diversity, equity and inclusion in consumer–brand relationships, Study 3 seeks to evaluate the secondary effects of these transgressions in advertising, mediated by negative e-WOM, on consumer–brand relationships. Study 3 contributes to the literature on critical factors and outcomes related to negative e-WOM and online firestorms triggered by brand transgressions (Hancock *et al.*, 2023).

In Study 3, an experimental design scrutinizes the impact of sympathy towards offended individuals as a crucial factor in the indirect consequences of brand transgressions in advertising related to diversity, equity and inclusion through negative e-WOM on consumer–brand relationships. Because sympathy was identified as a significant influencer of consumer reactions to brand transgressions in advertising in Study 1, Study 3 aims to verify its role in the amplification of brand animosity and its behavioural outcomes within social media communities.

Study 3 assesses a model that hinges on the influence of social media comment valence (i.e. neutral vs negative) regarding fictional brand transgression in advertising on consumer behaviour (i.e. brand avoidance, negative WOM and protest behaviour) through the mediators of sympathy, attitude towards the ad and brand hate. The subsequent hypotheses will be elucidated by integrating the findings from qualitative analyses (Studies 1 and 2) with relevant theoretical perspectives.

Study 3

The objective of Study 3 is to explore the indirect consequences (through negative e-WOM) for consumer–brand relationships resulting from brand transgressions in advertising related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Study 3 examines the impact of negative comments from social media users on the sentiments and actions of other users towards the brand following a brand transgression in advertising.

Study 3: conceptual model and hypothesis development

The effect of negative electronic word-of-mouth on sympathy. Sympathy is described as an emotional response stemming from another’s emotional state involving feelings of sorrow or concern for their welfare (Allard *et al.*, 2020). It entails comprehending another person’s emotional state, accompanied by a sense of concern or sorrow (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022).

In the psychological literature, empathy and sympathy are differentiated. Empathy is characterized as involuntary merging with another’s feelings, while sympathy has a cognitive primary component that distinguishes it from empathy, which is characterized by an affective component. Sympathetic individuals can separate their feelings from others, whereas empathetic individuals experience a merging of feelings. Sympathy is associated with other orientations, while empathy is linked to self-orientation. Both concepts impact attitudes (Escalas and Stern, 2003).

Research has linked sympathy to instances of injustice and blameless negative events (Antonetti and Maklan, 2018), consistent with findings from Study 1 about the significance of sympathy towards offended people in shaping consumer reactions. The assertion is that individuals, upon encountering negative e-WOM reactions to brand transgressions in advertising, elevate their levels of sympathy towards the offended parties. Negative e-WOM encapsulates various negative emotions (He *et al.*, 2019; Lee and Suh, 2020), as corroborated by the behavioural analysis in Study 2. Reading negative comments related to brand transgressions in advertising enhances the understanding of the emotional state of offended individuals, fostering feelings of concern or sorrow, in line with the definition of sympathy (Allard *et al.*, 2020). Thus, based upon the literature on sympathy and the findings of Studies 1 and 2, the current paper hypothesizes the following:

- H1.* Negative e-WOM related to brand transgressions in advertising increases sympathy towards offended people.

The mediating role of attitude towards the ad. Attitude towards the ad is characterized as a predisposition to respond favourably or unfavourably “to a specific advertising stimulus during a particular exposure occasion” (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989, p. 49). The valence of attitudes towards the ad, a cognitive construct, is contingent on the positive or negative emotions elicited by the ad (e.g. Scott *et al.*, 2022). More broadly, emotion recognition plays a crucial role in determining ad attitudes (Guzmán and Davis, 2017).

Given that sympathy involves recognizing another person’s emotional state, sympathy is posited to influence the valence of attitudes towards the ad. More simply, understanding the feelings of individuals offended by the ad content may negatively impact their attitude towards the ad. As corroborated by the literature, sympathy is an emotion that shapes cognitive consumer reactions, including attitudes towards the ad. In the realm of brand transgressions in advertising, sympathy assumes a pivotal role in instigating a desire to defend those offended by the ad, potentially prompting actions against the brand (Antonetti and Maklan, 2018). The initial step in this counteraction is often a negative response to the ad content, leading to the development of a negative attitude towards the ad. More formally, it is hypothesized the following:

- H2.* Sympathy towards people who are offended by brand transgressions in advertising has a negative impact on consumer attitudes towards the ad.

The advertising literature has conventionally examined the impact of exposure to advertising stimuli on brand attitudes, often mediated through attitudes towards the ad, using the affect transfer mechanism. The affect transfer hypothesis explains how consumer perceptions of an advertisement shape their attitudes towards the ad, subsequently influencing attitudes towards the brand (Machleit and Wilson, 1988). Previous research has indicated that moral misconduct, deceptive communication, or value inconsistencies by the brand can evoke negative sentiments towards the brand (Hegner *et al.*, 2017). Essentially, ideological mismatch with

the brand tends to result in brand hate among consumers (Zhang and Laroche, 2020).

Building upon the affect transfer mechanism, this study posits that the negative evaluative judgement of an ad, as expressed through attitudes towards the ad and triggered by sympathy towards offended individuals influenced by negative e-WOM, contributes to an escalation in brand hate (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016). The pivotal role of brand hate as a fundamental consumer-brand relationship construct, particularly triggered by brand transgressions in advertising related to diversity, equity and inclusion, aligns with the insights from Study 2. Furthermore, the literature on negative e-WOM and online firestorms identifies brand hate as a primary consumer-brand relationship construct associated with such an online phenomenon. Based on this reasoning, the current paper hypothesizes the following:

- H3.* A less favourable attitude towards the ad increases consumer brand hate.

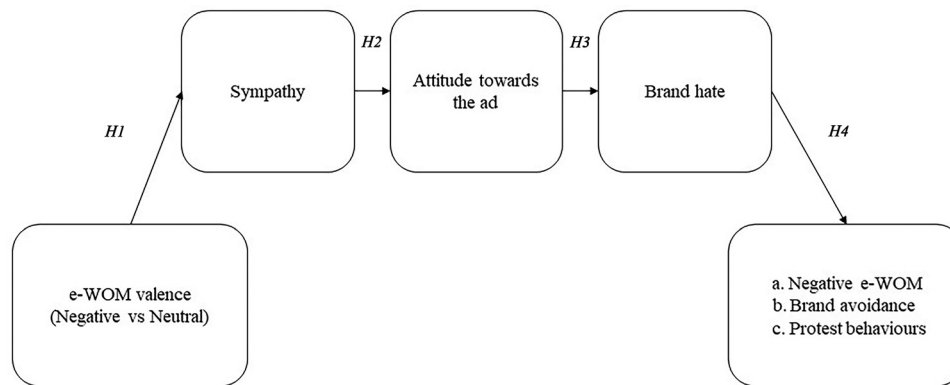
The mediating role of brand hate. Brand hate is defined as a complex of negative emotions directed towards a brand, encompassing feelings such as anger, contempt, disgust, fear, disappointment, shame and dehumanization (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016; Zhang and Laroche, 2020). It has been established that brand hate is significantly correlated with various negative behavioural outcomes targeted against the brand, and these outcomes differ based on the underlying reasons for brand hate (Hegner *et al.*, 2017; Zarantonello *et al.*, 2018; Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Brand hate stemming from corporate wrongdoing and breaches of expectations tends to result in both “attack-like” behaviours (such as negative WOM) and “approach-like” strategies (such as protest behaviours). On the other hand, reasons related to taste preferences are linked to “avoidance-like” strategies, such as brand avoidance. In the context of brand transgressions in advertising, it is posited that all of these reasons for brand hate may be relevant (Bayarassou *et al.*, 2020).

Drawing on the existing research on brand hate, the hypothesis is that brand hate intensifies consumer retaliation towards a brand (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2021). In particular:

- H4.* Brand hate leads to (a) negative e-WOM, (b) brand avoidance and (c) protest behaviours.

The conceptual model and related hypotheses tested in Study 3 are summarized in Figure 2.

Study 3: methodology. Study 3 is designed as a between-subjects experiment featuring a single factor – the valence of e-WOM in the form of social media comments (neutral vs negative). Participants were recruited through Prolific Academic (Peer *et al.*, 2017) and pre-screened based on three criteria: nationality (limited to European participants for consistency with the samples in Studies 1 and 2); active usage of social media platforms; and age range (18–44 years old). The optimal sample size was determined using G*Power 3.1 software (Faul *et al.*, 2009). Calculations were based on an effect size of 0.5 (High), an alpha (α) set at 0.05, two groups and a power of 80%. The results indicated a minimum requirement of 34 participants per experimental group, and

Figure 2 Conceptual model

Source: Authors' elaboration

sufficient data were successfully obtained (negative comment group = 53 participants; control group = 57 participants).

Initially, the participants were exposed to stimuli, namely, a fictitious advertisement accompanied by comments that had been pretested (see the [Appendix](#) [1]). The fabricated advertisement pertained to a non-existent brand named Vade, previously used and validated in other studies (e.g. [Theodorakis et al., 2015](#)). After scrutinizing the stimulus (comprising a careful examination of the advertisement and reading five comments), the participants proceeded to complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire covered assessments of perceived racial discrimination ([Mark and Nesdale, 2001](#)), sympathy towards individuals offended by the ad ([Antonetti and Maklan, 2016](#); $\alpha = 0.91$), attitudes towards the ad ([Capella et al., 2010](#); $\alpha = 0.91$), negative emotions towards the brand (brand hate scale by [Zarantonello et al., 2016](#); $\alpha = 0.97$) and behavioural intentions related to the brand (brand avoidance by [Grégoire et al., 2009](#); $\alpha = 0.97$, negative WOM [$\alpha = 0.90$] and protest behaviours by [Grappi et al., 2013](#); $\alpha = 0.92$). For an overview of all scale items, see the [Appendix](#).

Finally, demographic data such as gender, age, education and employment status were collected. To ensure data quality, attention checks in the form of directed queries were interspersed throughout the questionnaire ([Viglia et al., 2021](#)).

Study 3: results. In total, 110 participants participated in Study 3 ($M_{\text{age}} = 29.8$; male = 52.7%). The conceptual model posited that individuals exposed to negative comments associated with a brand transgression in advertising would exhibit increased sympathy towards those offended by the ad (*H1*). This heightened sympathy was predicted to result in a less favourable attitude towards the ad (*H2*), subsequently leading to brand hate (*H3*) and precipitating behaviours against the brand, including negative e-WOM (*H4a*), brand avoidance (*H4b*) and protest behaviours (*H4c*). A serial mediation analysis of the variable indirect effects was conducted to test these relationships.

The analysis used a bias-corrected bootstrap procedure (Hayes, Model 6) with $n = 10,000$ iterations, as recommended by [Hayes and Preacher \(2014\)](#). The valence of comments (neutral vs negative) served as the independent variable; sympathy (Mediator 1), attitude towards the ad (Mediator 2) and brand hate (Mediator 3) functioned as sequential

mediators; and consumer reactions against the brand (negative e-WOM, brand avoidance, protest behaviours) served as the dependent variables.

A comparison between the presence of negative comments condition and the presence of neutral comments condition yielded significant serial indirect effects of comments on consumer reactions towards the brand through sympathy, attitude towards the ad and brand hate (indirect effect $b_{\text{negativeWOM}} = 0.101$; 95% CI [0.0046, 0.2131]; $b_{\text{avoidance}} = 0.0645$; 95% CI [0.0024, 0.1594]; $b_{\text{protest}} = 0.1076$; 95% CI [0.0066, 0.2347]). In alignment with *H1*, the participants in the negative comments condition (compared to those in the neutral comment condition) reported greater sympathy towards individuals offended by the ad (Mediator 1) ($b = 0.59$, $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the analysis indicated that sympathy led to a less favourable attitude towards the ad (Mediator 2) ($b = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$), supporting *H2*. Subsequently, a more negative attitude towards the ad increased brand hate (Mediator 3) ($b = -0.52$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, *H3* is also substantiated. Finally, individuals experiencing greater brand hate were more inclined to engage in spreading negative e-WOM ($b = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$), avoiding the brand ($b = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$) and adopting protest behaviours against the brand ($b = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$), affirming *H4*. [Table 2](#) summarizes the results, displaying the coefficients of regression for the serial mediation analysis.

Study 3: discussion. The results of Study 3 elucidated the intricate dynamics between negative e-WOM, consumer sympathy, attitudes towards the ad, brand hate and subsequent behavioural intentions related to the brand in the context of brand transgressions in advertising related to diversity, equity and inclusion.

The study reveals that negative e-WOM, expressed through social media comments, significantly amplifies the levels of sympathy among consumers towards those offended by the ad. This aligns with the idea that witnessing negative emotions expressed by others in response to a brand transgression fosters feelings of concern and sorrow among observers ([Antonetti and Maklan, 2018](#)).

Heightened sympathy, in turn, contributes to more negative attitudes towards the ad. The emotional response triggered by negative e-WOM influences cognitive evaluations, resulting in a less favourable perception of the advertised content. This

Table 2 Study 3 results

Mediation path	Coefficient (b)	p-value
Comments valence → Sympathy (H1)	0.59	< 0.05
Sympathy → Attitude towards the ad (H2)	−0.48	< 0.001
Attitude towards the ad → Brand hate (H3)	−0.52	< 0.001
Brand hate → Negative e-WOM (H4a)	0.68	< 0.001
Brand hate → Brand avoidance (H4b)	0.43	< 0.001
Brand hate → Protest behaviours (H4c)	0.72	< 0.001

Source: Authors' elaboration

finding is consistent with the understanding that sympathy plays a pivotal role in shaping cognitive consumer reactions to brand transgressions (Antonetti and Maklan, 2018).

The study establishes a link between negative attitudes towards the ad and the development of brand hate. The negative evaluative judgements formed towards the ad contribute to an overall negative disposition towards the brand. This aligns with the broader literature suggesting that moral misconduct, deceptive communication, or inconsistencies in values can lead to negative feelings towards a brand (Hegner *et al.*, 2017).

Elevated levels of brand hate, because of negative e-WOM and amplified by sympathy and negative attitudes towards the ad, translate into specific behavioural intentions related to the brand. Consumers are more likely to engage in negative e-WOM, express brand avoidance and participate in protest behaviours. This reaffirms the notion that brand hate serves as a catalyst for various adverse consumer reactions and behaviours (Hegner *et al.*, 2017; Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016). This has broader implications for the understanding of online firestorms and the role of empathy, sympathy and brand hate in driving consumer–brand relationship dynamics.

Theoretical contributions

First, this paper significantly contributes to the body of literature on brand transgressions, specifically focusing on a distinct form of moral transgression rooted in the content of advertisements. In response to evolving societal challenges spurred by the discourse on diversity and inclusion, brands are actively adjusting their strategies. Advertisements that fall short of reflecting values associated with diversity, equity and inclusion, coupled with consumer sensitivity towards these values, possess the potential to undermine consumer–brand relationships. With the overarching objective of delving into the consumer–brand repercussions of brand transgressions in advertising related to diversity, equity and inclusion, this paper explores the primary factors that define such transgressions. The study systematically addresses both the direct implications (as explored in Studies 1 and 2) and the indirect consequences (examined in Study 3) of these transgressions on consumer–brand relationships.

Brand transgressions in advertising, as explored in this research, typically involve the use of offensive stereotypes and may include elements of racism, discrimination or violence, contradicting principles of diversity, equity and inclusion. While previous studies have addressed these issues, they have primarily approached them conceptually (e.g. Taylor, 2014) or by examining specific aspects such as sexual appeal, violence,

racism or offensive gender stereotypes (e.g. Capella *et al.*, 2010). This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the broader phenomenon of brand transgressions in advertising.

Although Studies 2 and 3 concentrate on discrimination as an example of violating diversity, equity and inclusion values, Study 1 suggests that similar consequences can arise from other issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Therefore, this research illuminates the extensive implications of brand transgressions for consumer–brand relationships.

Second, this paper makes a noteworthy contribution to the literature on diversity, equity, and inclusion in branding and communication. It elucidates the affective and behavioural responses associated with social media advertisements that run counter to these principles, classifying them as brand transgressions in advertising. Brand transgressions, as explored in this research, serve as catalysts for online firestorms, sparking the dissemination of negative e-WOM. A gamut of emotions, including contempt, disgust and anger towards brands, intertwined with sentiments of disappointment, shame, dehumanization and fear, emerges as the primary affective reactions to brand transgressions in advertising. These emotional responses align with broader literature on brand transgressions (e.g. Antonetti and Maklan, 2018; Grappi *et al.*, 2013).

This study positions brand transgressions in advertising as precursors to brand hate (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016). The behavioural ramifications of brand transgressions manifest in negative e-WOM, brand avoidance and intentions to boycott. These findings corroborate and extend the insights gleaned from previous studies on brand transgressions, corporate misconduct (Grappi *et al.*, 2013) and brand hate (Hegner *et al.*, 2017; Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016). The empirical evidence presented in this paper underlines the enduring impact of brand transgressions in shaping consumer behaviour and attitudes, particularly in the context of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Finally, this research significantly contributes to the literature on the impact of negative e-WOM and online firestorms by examining how user comments, as a form of social interaction, shape perceptions of advertisements and brands (e.g. Hudson *et al.*, 2016). Within the realm of brand transgressions in advertising, the role of sympathy towards individuals who are offended by an advertisement emerges as pivotal in the intricate interplay between negative e-WOM and consumer responses to the brand. Sympathy towards offended individuals becomes a driving force propelling participation in online firestorms, fostering the dissemination of additional

negative e-WOM. Understanding emotional states, as conveyed through negative e-WOM blamed by brand transgression in advertising, exerts a pronounced influence on attitudes towards the ad and the development of brand hate. Subsequently, this cascade of emotions precipitates robust behavioural reactions, including negative WOM, brand avoidance and protest behaviours.

This research affirms the contagion-like nature of e-WOM, in which recipients grasp the emotions of others through social transmission (Herhausen *et al.*, 2019). These dynamics unfold through the psychological mechanism of sympathy, elucidating the nuanced ways in which brands are entwined in the social fabric of consumer reactions to brand transgressions in advertising.

Practical implications

Brands seeking to mount a counterprotest in the aftermath of a brand transgression in advertising, particularly one conflicting with diversity, equity and inclusion values, can derive valuable insights from this research. Emotional backlash from brand transgressions poses a potential threat to the short- and long-term value of the consumer–brand relationship. For brands disseminating advertisements on social media, it is imperative to formulate a crisis recovery plan pre-emptively, given the immediate implications of transgressive ads. The plan should encompass key decisions, such as when to respond to comments (e.g. on the same day negative e-WOM is spreading, after a while; never), how to respond to users (e.g. one public statement; many individual responses; nonresponses), what type of responses to provide (e.g. standard answers, customized answers) and the content strategy for the response (e.g. cognitive content, emotional content).

Our studies underscore the rapid dissemination of negative e-WOM within the initial two weeks following a brand transgression in advertising. Brand managers are advised to establish guidelines for crisis management, addressing factors such as response timing, response approach and content strategy. The research suggests an active response strategy, engaging in the emerging dialogue surrounding the transgression rather than adopting a nonresponse approach. Recent research on online firestorms supports this proactive brand management stance (Herhausen *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, this study reinforces the understanding of negative e-WOM as an emotional reaction to brand transgressions in advertising. Considering the emotional content inherent in negative e-WOM, this research emphasizes the pivotal role of sympathy for individuals offended by transgressions in fuelling online firestorms and exerting adverse effects on the consumer–brand relationship. Social media managers are advised to address complaints not only to appease the offended party but also to consider the broader community. Through sympathy, negative sentiments and behaviours towards the brand can extend beyond directly offended individuals. Effective brand responses should incorporate emotionally resonant content that has the potential to go viral, thereby mitigating the impact of the transgression. This approach leverages sympathy, which can also be activated among users reading brand responses to a brand transgression in advertising.

Limitations and future research

This study presents several limitations, which pave the way for future research. Firstly, the use of scenario-based experiments with fictitious brands and advertisements may not fully reflect real-world reactions. Subsequent research should explore responses to actual brands that neglect diversity, equity and inclusion values in their social media campaigns, while considering existing relationships such as brand attachment, trust or engagement.

Secondly, the measurement of negative emotions in this study relied solely on language-based methods. Future research could enhance validity and generalizability by incorporating diverse emotion measurement techniques such as fMRI or facial expressions.

Thirdly, because this study focused on social media advertising, exploring additional outcome variables such as social media brand-related activities or consumer online brand-related activities could be beneficial.

Fourthly, while this study offers insights into discrimination within the realm of social media advertising, it is essential to address other issues related to the infringement of diversity, equity and inclusion values. Further examination could involve testing the model's effectiveness in addressing advertisements related to violence or sexism.

Lastly, investigating the impact of brand responses following a transgression in advertising could contribute to crisis management literature, providing valuable insights for managers and advertisers. This would shed light on the effectiveness of different response strategies in mitigating fallout from such transgressions.

Note

- 1 Stimuli are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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Appendix

Study 3: Pretest design and findings

The pilot study proved valuable in selecting the brand transgression in advertising and the comments to use as stimuli for Study 3. Initially, six simulated advertisements inspired by real cases were evaluated concerning the breach of diversity, equality and inclusion principles. Specifically, we focused on the following ethical principles: discrimination (Mark and Nesdale, 2001; $\alpha = 0.92$) for ads #1 and #2, sexism (Lavine et al., 1999; $\alpha = 0.77$) for ads #3, #4, and #5 and violence (Gunter et al., 2005; $\alpha = 0.96$) for ad #6. Comments were chosen and modified from authentic comments gathered on Facebook. The primary aim of this pilot study was to select the advertisement that elicited stronger reactions among consumers (i.e. higher perception of violation of ethical principles) and exhibited greater credibility (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989; $\alpha = 0.83$). Similarly, this study was instrumental in gauging if comments accompanying the ad were perceived as credible (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989; $\alpha = 0.85$). The six advertisements of fictional brands spanned various industries (e.g. cosmetics, coffee, men’s watches, business suits and jewellery).

Table A1 Study 1: interviewees sample

Participants	Interview duration	Age	Gender	BTA recalled (brief description)	Category of the BTA recalled
1	25–30 min	30	Male	A printed ad with a black guy wearing a sweatshirt reporting this text: “The coolest monkey on the jungle”	Racial discrimination
2	30–35 min	32	Female	Fashion brand ad presenting a woman sat with her legs open and a man sat in front of her who tried to peel her skirt off	Violence
3	25–30 min	34	Female	A video ad of a detergent brand presenting a sequence of three women (black, white and Asian) who sequentially change their shirts from black to white	Racial discrimination
4	30–35 min	24	Male	A printed ad with a black guy wearing a sweatshirt reporting this text: “The coolest monkey on the jungle”	Racial discrimination
5	40–45 min	25	Male	A video ad with three women talking about the size of the new book format of the brand claiming: “The size matter!”	Offensive stereotypes
6	35–40 min	24	Male	A printed ad of a jewels brand claiming: “An iron, a pyjama, a pinny or a [X] bracelet. In your opinion, what does it make her happy?”	Offensive stereotypes
7	20–25 min	25	Male	A printed ad with a black guy wearing a sweatshirt reporting this text: “The coolest monkey on the jungle”	Racial discrimination
8	20–25 min	22	Female	A video ad showing a family at breakfast time. The ad ends with the mother killed by an asteroid	Disrespectful because of the irony on death
9	45–50 min	29	Male	A video ad of a detergent brand presenting a sequence of three women (black, white and Asian) who sequentially change their shirts from black to white	Racial discrimination
10	30–35 min	31	Female	A printed ad of a jewels brand claiming: “An iron, a pyjama, a pinny or a [X] bracelet. In your opinion, what does it make her happy?”	Offensive stereotypes
11	25–30 min	26	Male	A video ad presenting the Christian Holy Family tidying up the new flat. Joseph is looking at his smartphone doing a selfie with his family and posting this picture on social media	Disrespectful towards religious people
12	Above 60 min	33	Female	A famous fashion brand ad showing a sexy model wearing a pair of shoes with a short red dress. Men around her stare at her and catcall her	Sexism

Source: Authors' elaboration

Table A2 Study 3: scales items and reliability

Construct	Items	Source	Reliability (Cronbach's α)
Perceived racial discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The advertisement tease or insult black people The advertisement threat or attack black people 	Mark and Nesdale (2001)	0.94
Sympathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I feel very sympathetic towards the people offended by the ad I feel very sorry for the people offended by the ad I feel sympathy for the people offended by the ad 	Antonetti and Maklan (2016)	0.91
Attitude towards the ad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I dislike the ad (r) The ad is appealing to me The ad is attractive to me The ad is interesting to me I think the ad is bad (r) 	Capella <i>et al.</i> (2010)	0.91
Brand hate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Angry Enraged Furious Disgusted Feeling of revulsion Feeling of contempt Feeling of loathing Anxious Fearful Threatened Worried Disappointed Displeased Disenchanted Ashamed Embarrassed Dehumanized Depersonalized 	Zarantonello <i>et al.</i> (2016)	0.97
Negative e-WOM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I intend to say negative things about this brand to friends, relatives and other people I intend to recommend to my friends, relatives and other people that they not buy products of this brand I intend to discredit the brand with my friends, relatives or other people 	Grappi <i>et al.</i> (2013)	0.90
Brand avoidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I intend to keep as much distance as possible between the brand and me I intend to avoid frequenting the brand I intend to cut off the relationship with the brand I intend to withdraw my business from the brand 	Grégoire <i>et al.</i> (2009)	0.97
Protest behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I intend to participate in boycotting the brand I intend to blog against the brand I intend to participate in picketing the brand I intend to participate in actions of resistance against the brand I intend to support legal actions against the brand I intend to complain to the brand 	Grappi <i>et al.</i> (2013)	0.92

Source: Authors' elaboration

In total, 116 respondents were recruited on Prolific Academic (ProA) (Peer *et al.*, 2017), completing a questionnaire created on Qualtrics. Data screening mechanisms were implemented to ensure data quality (age: 18–44, European countries, attention checks). The final data set comprised 104 participants ($M_{age} = 27$; 56% males).

The findings indicate that ads #1 and #2 (related to racism) and ad #6 (related to violence) demonstrated the highest means in terms of violation of ethical principles ($M_{\#1BTA} = 5.44$, $M_{\#2BTA} = 5.23$, $M_{\#6BTA} = 6.14$), displaying a significant difference from the other ads (i.e. #3, #4 and #5). Regarding ad credibility, ad #2 (related to racism) achieved the highest score ($M_{\#2BTA} = 2.71$) compared to ads #1 and #6. Regarding comment credibility, no significant differences among the ads were identified. Comments accompanying ad #2 attained a credibility score of 3.77, significantly different from the cut-off value of 3. Consequently, ad #2 with its comments was selected as the brand transgression in advertising for Study 3.

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