

## Urban Outfitters Bloody Mess

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### Introduction

“Urban Outfitters are you serious w/that Kent State sweatshirt? It is appalling to think that someone at your company thought that was cool” (Broder Van Dyke, 2014).

Messages such as this tweet (see above) from Monica C Birakos (@monicabirakos) demonstrated the outrage felt by many consumers. With the internet buzzing, and the national media picking up the story, the outrage was quickly going viral. Marketing executives at Urban Outfitters had to decide quickly whether to respond. And, if so, how to respond.

### The Sweatshirt

On September 14, 2014, Urban Outfitters offered a \$129 sweatshirt with the Kent State University name and logo through its company webpage. The item was part of the company’s “Vintage Finds” collection, in which “each piece is unique,” so the company only offered one item for sale. The website described the item as being “washed soft and perfectly broken in, this vintage Kent State sweatshirt is cut in a loose, slouchy fit. Excellent vintage condition.” The picture, however, displayed red spots similar in appearance to blood splatter, which consumers associated with a horrific massacre at Kent State from decades earlier (Boder Van Dyke).

### Kent State 1970

On Friday, May 1, 1970, Kent State University students protested US involvement in the Vietnam War. National Guard troops deployed tear gas on a large assembly of hostile student demonstrators on the University campus. When that failed to disperse the volatile crowd of protestors, the troops ultimately opened fire on the students on Monday, May 4. Ten students were left wounded. Four were killed (Rothman, 2014).

### **Urban Outfitters Company**

Although the Urban Outfitters company offered different brands to a variety of markets, the company was most associated with the brand that shared the same name as the company. The company had focused the specific Urban Outfitters brand to connect deeply with its target 18-28 year old market segment, particularly those who aligned themselves with the “hipster” core values. Hipster had become synonymous with a group of young adult consumers who were very fashion conscious but more counter-culture than mainstream (McDuling, 2014). As part of the Millennial Generation, this target market also highly valued social causes and became offended by organizations that treated human suffering lightly (Cooper, 2012).

Urban Outfitters’ website described its desires to use innovation to connect emotionally with consumers. Excerpts from the company’s profile as presented on its website included:

Urban Outfitters, Inc. is an innovative specialty retail company which offers a variety of lifestyle merchandise to highly defined customer niches. We have an established ability to understand our customers and connect with them on an emotional level. .... Each brand chooses a particular customer segment, and once chosen, sets out to create sustainable points of distinction with that segment. ... The emphasis is on creativity. Our goal is to offer a product assortment and an environment so compelling and distinctive that the customer feels an empathetic connection to the brand and is persuaded to buy.

### **Urban Outfitters Controversies**

Offering products that ignited strong emotions, particularly if associated with controversy, allowed a company to generate significant attention to the company and/or to the brand. Urban Outfitters had apparently utilized this approach with previous product lines.

- In 2011, the Urban Outfitters “Navajo” line of clothing and accessories offended some Native Americans who found the items to be inauthentic, cheap, and inappropriate. One upset customer stated in a letter to the company that the “Navajo” products “make a mockery of our identity and unique culture” (Ng, 2011).
- In 2012, the company hit on stereotypes of Irish people as heavy drinkers with slogans on green Saint Patrick’s Day t-shirts such as “Irish I Were Drunk” or “Kiss Me I’m Irish. Or Drunk. Or Whatever.” It concurrently offered a hat that depicted a stick-figure person on his/hers knees vomiting with the accompanying caption: “Irish Yoga” (Ng, 2012).
- Also in 2012, Urban Outfitters marketed a \$100 t-shirt that depicted the yellow Star of David symbol that the Nazis had forced Jewish people to wear during the Holocaust, particularly in concentration camps (Huffington Post, 2012).

### Public Reaction to the Sweatshirt

Reactions to the Urban Outfitters Kent State sweatshirt began immediately – and were universally negative. A sampling of Twitter responses posted in the early hours of September 15 included the following (Broder Van Dyke, 2014; Washington Post 2014):

**Dana DeArmond** <sup>TM</sup> @danadearmond

“Yet another reason to boycott @UrbanOutfitters ...”

**Becca Laurie, PI**@imbeccable

“urban outfitters is pure garbage: selling a kent state sweatshirt w/ blood spatter”

**cory zanoni** @cjzanoni

“... Nothing says “hip” like murder”

**Shae** @ShaeFit

“whats wrong with companies,since when does death & suffering.bcome fashion!!”

Clearly, Urban Outfitters struck an emotional chord with yet another controversy. But, could this controversy be considered a net positive or a net negative for the company? Had Urban Outfitters now gone too far? Should the company take action, or had this product met its mission? Urban Outfitters had to decide if – and how – to respond.

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