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STARBUCKS: BATTLING THE RACISM ALLEGATIONS[[1]](#endnote-1)

Parul Gupta and Shikha Bhardwaj wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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On April 12, 2018, Starbucks Corporation (Starbucks) faced fierce criticism after a manager at one of its Philadelphia stores called the police to arrest two black men because they were sitting at a table but had not yet placed an order. The incident was especially embarrassing for a coffee conglomerate that had long touted its “social impact” agenda and progressive values. Responding to allegations of racism against the company, Starbucks chief executive officer (CEO) Kevin Johnson called the incident “reprehensible.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Within days, an anti-Starbucks social media conversation was spreading online, with criticism for the racially charged behaviour of one of its store managers.[[3]](#endnote-3) The weekend following the incident, a mass protest against the coffee icon was staged outside the downtown Philadelphia Starbucks store,[[4]](#endnote-4) with protestors chanting anti-Starbucks slogans. To defuse the unpleasant situation, Johnson issued a public apology and offered to apologize in person to the two men. The company soon after announced that a half-day anti-racism training session would be held for all its employees on May 29, 2018.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Despite the brand’s historical claim that it supported racial equity, diversity, and inclusion, the incident at the Philadelphia store raised several questions. Did Starbucks truly represent the values that it promoted?[[6]](#endnote-6) Were Starbucks employees serving their customers equally? Would a half-day anti-racism training session effectively address the issue of racial bias, especially for front-line workers?

ABOUT STARBUCKS

In 1971, Starbucks was launched with a single store in Pike Place Market, in downtown Seattle, Washington. The store was a roaster and retailer of whole bean and ground coffee, tea, and spices. By 2017, the business had flourished. With stores in 76 countries, Starbucks was named one of the three most powerful public companies in the world, after McDonald’s and Burger King, based on a composite score of revenue, profit, assets, and market value.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Since its inception, Starbucks promoted itself as a different kind of company, committed to inspiring and nurturing the human spirit “one person, one cup and one neighbourhood at a time.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Various internationally- renowned forums had recognized the company’s efforts. For example, Starbucks was awarded a “100% Rating on the Disability Equality Index” by Disability:IN and a “100% Rating on the Corporate Equality Index” for 2015–2017 by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation,[[9]](#endnote-9) which also recognized it as one of the best places to work for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer employees.[[10]](#endnote-10) Starbucks’s commitment to serving the finest coffee, creating an exceptional customer experience, and offering a great place to work also earned the company a place on *Fortune*’s list of the “World’s Most Admired Companies” for 2009–2017, while Ethisphere commended Starbucks for its active role and efforts in driving positive change in communities and the business world by including it among its list of the “World’s Most Ethical Companies” for 2007–2017.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

RACIAL EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION AT STARBUCKS

Starbucks Brand: Positioned around a Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

Starbucks positioned itself as a progressive corporate leader, touting the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion.[[12]](#endnote-12) Its formational identity was driven by a desire to create a “third place” (after the home and workplace), where everyone was welcome. According to its own mission, this place would engage the contemporary struggle of African Americans for dignity in the public space.[[13]](#endnote-13) Bolstering its commitment to diversity and inclusion, Starbucks’s official website stated, “Embracing diversity not only enhances our work culture, it also drives our business success.”[[14]](#endnote-14) The company claimed to embrace diversity—not only among its employees, but also among its customers—which was consistent with its corporate values and culture.[[15]](#endnote-15) Starbucks believed that its frontline employees were the real heroes of its success.[[16]](#endnote-16) They were exceptionally well-trained baristas who embodied the Starbucks culture, “where inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility are valued and respected.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Conforming to this belief, Starbucks claimed to invest extensively in training its frontline employees to create exceptional experiences that promoted the corporate culture of equity, diversity, and inclusion.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Anti-Racism and Diversity Initiatives

Starbucks had adopted several measures in previous years to ensure that its efforts to diversify and broaden its customer base succeeded. One major step in this direction was the opening of 42 Starbucks stores in ethnically diverse and underserved urban areas.[[19]](#endnote-19) In 2016, the company launched a campaign called “Race Together” to encourage the free flow of conversations about race among customers, partners, and competitors.[[20]](#endnote-20) The campaign invited baristas to write “Race Together” on coffee cups and generate genuine conversations about race throughout the community. Despite the initiative’s apparent good intentions, however, the company’s brand was a target of ridicule and negative reaction on social media from both employees and customers who felt the campaign was naïve and insincere.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Continuing to promote diversity, Starbucks issued a statement noting that a company that aimed to be a racially equitable institution had to ensure racial and ethnic diversity, particularly in decision-making positions. To collect the kinds of input and perspectives that were needed, the company felt that diversity had to be maintained at all employee levels.[[22]](#endnote-22) Therefore, delivering on its commitment to diversity, the company appointed Rosalind Brewer to the role of group president and CEO of the company on September 6, 2017. Brewer was both the first African American and the first woman to hold such a powerful decision-making position at Starbucks. In a press release, Starbucks CEO Johnson stated that Brewer reflected the “strength and diversity” of the organization.[[23]](#endnote-23) Interestingly, however, unlike some of its global peers, such as Google LLC,[[24]](#endnote-24) Starbucks did not disclose comprehensive workforce data or results from its diversity initiatives.[[25]](#endnote-25) According to the 2016 *When Women Thrive* report by the marketing research company Mercer, only about 39 per cent of middle management and 38 per cent of male employees were engaged in the company’s diversity initiatives.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Taking another step toward diversity and inclusion, Starbucks Canada announced in February 2018 that it would be hiring at least 1,000 refugees over the next five years. This announcement followed a promise made a month earlier by the executive chairman of Starbucks, Howard Schultz. Rossann Williams, the president of Starbucks Canada, stated that “Given the critical role Canada plays in welcoming refugees, we are resolute in our commitment to provide opportunities for employment so that these newcomers can successfully integrate and create a better future for themselves and their families.”[[27]](#endnote-27)

THE PHILADELPHIA FIASCO

Racial Bias at a Starbucks Store

On April 12, 2018, Rashon Nelson and Donte Robinson (two black men) were seated at a table in a Philadelphia Starbucks store when an employee approached them to ask if they needed help. The two men, who were budding entrepreneurs, explained that they were waiting for a business meeting to start. Nelson and Robinson had scheduled a meeting with a third entrepreneur, Andrew Yaffe. The three men had met at this Starbucks location various times before to discuss a potential real estate opportunity. Nelson and Robinson arrived early for their meeting and had not yet ordered anything when the Starbucks employee approached them. [[28]](#endnote-28)

The Starbucks employee informed Nelson and Robinson that they were required to either order something or leave the store, which they ignored. The manager of the Starbucks store then proceeded to call the police. Three police officers arrived a short time later and arrested Nelson and Robinson,[[29]](#endnote-29) who were confused by the unusual turn of events but did not resist. The two men were denied their right to contact a person of their choice and became deeply skeptical about their safety. The district attorney refused to prosecute Nelson and Robinson for trespassing, so the two men were released after midnight. Although they were never charged with a crime, they were forced to spend over eight hours in jail.[[30]](#endnote-30)

The store manager’s actions were seen publicly as racially-charged behaviour. The incident immediately raised doubts about whether Starbucks was properly training its front-line employees to serve customers equally and fairly. The incident also clashed with the company’s long-standing claim of being committed to creating an environment that supports equity, diversity, and inclusion.[[31]](#endnote-31) Heather McGhee, the president of a public policy organization, stated, “It’s not an accident that this phenomenon happens in society, and it’s an American problem, not just a Starbucks problem.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Starbucks was not alone in being accused of racial bias and a glaring lack of racial equity, diversity, and inclusion. Similar unpleasant, racially-charged incidents had taken place in various other food service establishments including the International House of Pancakes (commonly known as IHOP) and Applebee’s Neighborhood Grill + Bar, as well as in retail outlets including a Chanel boutique.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Online Reaction and Backlash

Video of the Philadelphia Incident

The backlash from social media users was swift. In the days following the Philadelphia Starbucks incident, a video recorded by at least two Starbucks customers who witnessed the event went viral and galvanized people around the United States and outside the country. Viewers saw the incident as an example of racist behaviour. Nelson and Robinson were completely unaware that a video of their arrest was circulating on the Internet.[[34]](#endnote-34) Negative attention and public outrage continued to grow as social media users flooded popular online platforms with negative comments directed at Starbucks. The popular video generated protest and a national boycott of the Starbucks store the following Monday.[[35]](#endnote-35) Demonstrators marched through the downtown Philadelphia Starbucks store chanting anti-racism slogans, including statements such as “Starbucks coffee is anti-black.” The protestors called for the firing of the store manager responsible for calling the police to arrest Nelson and Robinson.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Video of Another Incident

The incident was exacerbated three days later, with the emergence of a video showing what appeared to be another racially biased incident which had occurred several months earlier, in January 2018, at a Starbucks store in Torrance, California. The second video was recorded by a man (who was black) who claimed he was denied access to the washroom by Starbucks’s employees on the grounds that he had not purchased anything.[[37]](#endnote-37) However, the video seemed to show that another Starbucks’s customer (who was white) was apparently given access to the washroom without buying anything from the store.[[38]](#endnote-38) The video continued to show the man being asked to leave the store after approaching the manager to address the discrepancy. The man is heard asking the Starbucks’s store manager, “Is it my skin colour?”[[39]](#endnote-39)

#BoycottStarbucks—Detrimental to the Starbucks Brand

After videos of the two separate incidents were circulated and shared extensively online, discussions on Twitter and other social media platforms quickly grew in volume using topics and online hashtags such as #BoycottStarbucks, #RacistStarbucks, #blacklivesmatter, and #starbuckswhileblack.[[40]](#endnote-40) The conversation on Twitter reflected a steep drop in customer sentiment regarding the Starbucks brand. Of 2,494 Twitter posts (or tweets), 40 per cent expressed negative feelings about the brand (see Exhibit 1).[[41]](#endnote-41) Joining the dialogue on social media, celebrity Kevin Hart tweeted to criticize Johnson’s public apology for not calling the incident what it was: “racial profiling/discrimination by the on-duty manager.”[[42]](#endnote-42) Stefania Pomponi, the founder of the influencer marketing agency Clever, stated, “Starbucks should be very worried about financial repercussion as a result of this. . . . Customers of color now have incredible influence over where and how they choose to spend their money. Brands—like Starbucks—will ignore this powerful demographic at their peril.”[[43]](#endnote-43)

STARBUCKS’s BOLD ADDRESS

Public Apology by Leaders at the Top

On the day of the incident, Johnson quickly responded to the public outcry resulting from the arrests. In his first quick but general public statement, he acknowledged the incident and promised to review the company policy (see Exhibit 2). After Johnson’s statement was criticized for being too general, he issued a more specific message later that same day, in which he publicly apologized and called the incident “reprehensible.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Johnson elaborated, “I know it’s easy for me to say and point blame to one person in this incident [but] my responsibility is to look more broadly . . . to ensure this never happens again.”[[45]](#endnote-45)

Regretful and admitting that practices and training at Starbucks had led to negative outcomes, Johnson accepted in his public apology that there was no basis for the call that was made to the Philadelphia police. However, he also tried to defend his employees by stating, “Our store manager never intended for these men to be arrested, and this should never have escalated as it did.”[[46]](#endnote-46) Johnson extended a personal apology to Nelson and Robinson and offered to meet the two men to initiate a conversation about how the company could improve in the future (see Exhibit 2).[[47]](#endnote-47) Two days after Johnson made his public apology, Brewer shared the company’s plan to improve. She stated, “It would be easy for us to say that this was a one-employee situation, but I have to tell you, it’s time for us to, myself included, take personal responsibility here and do the best that we can to make sure we do everything we can.”[[48]](#endnote-48)

Anti-Racial Bias Training for the Company’s Brand Ambassadors

As part of its ongoing efforts to resolve the issue, Starbucks announced that it would be closing its 8,000 stores in the United States for several hours on May 29, 2018 to conduct half-day anti-racial bias training. The training session was intended to educate approximately 175,000 Starbucks’s employees about racial bias.[[49]](#endnote-49) Rachel Godsil held a key position at the institution that helped Starbucks craft the training curriculum. Godsil clarified in a statement to the media that the anti-racial bias training was the first, but not the only, measure that Starbucks would be taking in response to the Philadelphia incident. The training program was part of the company’s broader endeavour to overhaul its policies, and the company planned to host a summit to collect data on what had been learned in the organization.[[50]](#endnote-50) Taking further action, in a letter written in May 2018 to all employees, Starbucks conveyed that it would treat all the people in its cafés as customers, regardless of whether they were making a purchase or not. The company’s updated policies also directed its employees to behave in a manner that maintained a “warm and welcoming environment.”[[51]](#endnote-51)

This was not the first time that Starbucks had announced a mass employee training program. In fact, it was a common practice at the company. For example, in 2008, Starbucks held an experiment in enterprise learning where all of its stores in the United States were shut down for several hours at the same time to train 135,000 employees. The training session was designed to re-energize the company’s focus on the things that had made it the leading roaster and retailer of specialty coffee. Starbucks’s employees were provided the necessary skills to prepare a dream drink for the customer while also responding appropriately and positively in difficult situations. According to the observer blog Starbucks Gossips, the training seemed to be well-received (see Exhibit 3). The company felt that this commitment created employees who were not just focused on drinks but on customers as well.[[52]](#endnote-52)

ANTI-RACISM TRAINING—Apparent OR REAL INCLUSIVITY?

Amid outrage over the Philadelphia arrests and resulting online backlash, Starbucks’ announcement of mass anti-racism training was praised as one of the most vigorous responses to a scandal seen in recent past. The company was trying to do as it always claimed it would. However, some observers were skeptical about the proposed training program’s expected accomplishments. The training was seen by some as only an appearance of inclusivity, merely a first step to sensitize Starbucks’s employees to issues regarding racism.[[53]](#endnote-53) The training curriculum, which was posted online, emphasized encouraging employees to become “color brave” instead of “color blind.” It reiterated the company’s responsibility as the “third place” for some members of the community. There was some debate regarding the success of Starbucks’s efforts bid to address racial bias issues. Critics argued that it was laughable to think that racial bias could be eliminated in a four-hour training session.[[54]](#endnote-54) Could Starbucks’s efforts prove successful?

Exhibit 1: Selected Twitter Tweets Using the Hashtag #BoycottStarbucks

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| From Stephanie‏ @StephCurlyGurl, April 14, 2018:  Not enogh, @Starbucks. If I don't see swift and serious action on this matter, you will lose my business forever. I will not tolerate racism in America! #RacistStarbucks#BoycttStarbucks  From Siddhant Desai‏ @Sid\_numero\_uno, April 14, 2018:  @Starbucks I was a gold member but after seeing this incident, I am regretting ever stepping into one of your stores. #boycottstarbucks#racialprofiling#raciststarbucks#starbucksincident#disgusting  From Andray‏Verified account @andraydomise, April 14, 2018:  According to what's being reported, those men were arrested on Thursday and got out this morning. A couple of Black men spent two days in jail for the crime of waiting for a friend at one of your coffee shops. This is why your #RaceTogether idea was utter trash.  From Jose Antonio Vargas‏Verified account @joseiswriting, April 14, 2018:  Dear @Starbucks, This apology is grossly insufficient. Address this head-on. Execute a plan of action. Engage your communities. Otherwise, you just lost yet another customer, and I've been a loyal customer for decades. #BoycottStarbucks#RaceTogether  From Ana Paula D Muller‏ @Apmuller1, April 15, 2018:  Replying to @Starbucks  Starbucks is a disgrace of a company. No one should have to go through that. One thing is for the cops to come in and talk, and ask them to leave which I don’t agree with the cops showing up, but arrest these two men is ridiculous. We all should boycott #RacistStarbucks.  From M. Asif Hossain‏ @AsifSiam, April 16, 2018:  They do have a policy that if you aren't buying you can't stay. Perhaps the manager at this particular Starbucks was prejudice because that policy is randomly enforced. The cops are the ones who took it too far. #USA#RACISTSTARBUCKS#BoycottStarbucks  From Brittany Labrador‏ @x3rit3x, April 16, 2018:  This is disgraceful. #BoycotStarbucks#Racism#RacistStarbucks#Overpricedcoffee@Starbucks is a perfect example of racism in America. |

Source: Stephanie‏ (@StephCurlyGurl), “Not enogh, @Starbucks,” Twitter, April 14, 2018, accessed December 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/StephCurlyGurl/status/985273075477266432; Siddhant Desai‏ (@Sid\_numero\_uno), “@Starbucks I was a gold member,” Twitter, April 14, 2018, accessed December 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/Sid\_numero\_uno/status/985277181126414345; Andray (@andraydomise), “According to what's being reported,” Twitter, April 14, 2018, accessed December 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/andraydomise/status/985228428122062848; Jose Antonio Vargas‏ (@joseiswriting), “Dear @Starbucks, This apology is grossly insufficient,” Twitter , April 14, 2018, accessed December 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/joseiswriting/status/985283781279043584; Ana Paula D Muller‏ @Apmuller1), “Starbucks is a disgrace of a company,” Twitter, April 15, 2018, accessed December 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/Apmuller1/status/985595791573123073; M. Asif Hossain‏ (@AsifSiam), “They do have a policy,” Twitter, April 16, 2018, accessed December 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/AsifSiam/status/986081319850467329; Brittany Labrador‏ (@x3rit3x), “This is disgraceful,” Twitter, April 16, 2018, accessed December 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/x3rit3x/status/985924631298265089.

Exhibit 2: Statements Made by Kevin Johnson, Starbucks’s Chief Executive Officer

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| First Statement  We apologize to the two individuals and our customers and are disappointed this led to an arrest. We take these matters seriously and clearly have more work to do when it comes to how we handle incidents in our stores. We are reviewing our policies and will continue to engage with the community and the police department to try to ensure these types of situations never happen in any of our stores.  Second Statement  Dear Starbucks Partners and Customers:  By now, you may be aware of a disheartening situation in one of our Philadelphia-area stores this past Thursday, that led to a reprehensible outcome.  I’m writing this evening to convey three things:  First, to once again express our deepest apologies to the two men who were arrested with a goal of doing whatever we can to make things right. Second, to let you know of our plans to investigate the pertinent facts and make any necessary changes to our practices that would help prevent such an occurrence from ever happening again. And third, to reassure you that Starbucks stands firmly against discrimination or racial profiling.  In the coming days, I will be joining our regional vice president, Camille Hymes—who is on the ground in Philadelphia—to speak with partners, customers and community leaders as well as law enforcement. Most importantly, I hope to meet personally with the two men who were arrested to offer a face-to-face apology.  We have immediately begun a thorough investigation of our practices. In addition to our own review, we will work with outside experts and community leaders to understand and adopt best practices. The video shot by customers is very hard to watch and the actions in it are not representative of our Starbucks Mission and Values. Creating an environment that is both safe and welcoming for everyone is paramount for every store. Regretfully, our practices and training led to a bad outcome—the basis for the call to the Philadelphia police department was wrong. Our store manager never intended for these men to be arrested and this should never have escalated as it did.  We also will further train our partners to better know when police assistance is warranted. Additionally, we will host a company-wide meeting next week to share our learnings, discuss some immediate next steps and underscore our long-standing commitment to treating one another with respect and dignity. I know our store managers and partners work hard to exceed our customers’ expectations every day—which makes this very poor reflection on our company all the more painful.  Finally, to our partners who proudly wear the green apron and to customers who come to us for a sense of community every day: You can and should expect more from us. We will learn from this and be better.  Respectfully,  Kevin Johnson  ceo |

Source: Chris Matyszczyk, “How Starbucks Went from PR Management to PR Disaster over the Philadelphia Arrest Video,” Inc., accessed December 1, 2018, www.inc.com/chris-matyszczyk/how-starbucks-went-from-pr-management-to-pr-disaster-over-philadelphia-arrest-video.html; “Starbucks CEO: Reprehensible Outcome in Philadelphia Incident,” Starbucks Stories & News, April 15, 2018, accessed August 19, 2019, https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2018/starbucks-ceo-reprehensible-outcome-in-philadelphia-incident.

Exhibit 3: Comments from Starbucks’s Employees after attending a Mass Training Session in February 2008

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| A Starbucks Employee:  I've just returned home from my stores espresso excellence training and I feel that as a whole we are re-energized and more passionate mostly about customer care. I really like the team commitments at the end for us to hold one another accountable and this as much better then other store meetings because we got to move around the store as groups and we had fun! It's snowing like crazy here to only about 10 customers even came to our door. Our manager went over to each one and explained what was going on and gave then service recovery coupons to use later.  A Starbucks Manager:  *Anonymous makes a great point here. They don't shut down McDonalds for training, or even, it seems Dunkin' Donuts. Training is done, you know, when you first start and then continously onwards*  Usually, it is. I think part of the point of this is to just say*stop! time out* and get everyone on the same page. In the time after Howard left and Jim took over, we were expanding at a crazy pace. People hired in the last two years or so might not have recived the full training that they should have because growth and speed were being put ahead of service and training and skills.  Many of us already knew everything that was covered in tonight's training. But sometimes, you slip through the cracks if you work in a high volume store and they're understaffed on the day you come in to train. So tonight, we are just checking in the everyone, re-iterating things, sharpening the saw and if you will.  A Starbucks Barista:  Soo, I just got back from my meeting.  It was amazing. I feel in every way.  I hope other Baristas feel the same.  Just got back from my meeting and I have to tell you, it was great. We went over what we needed to: expresso quality, milk quality, and custmomer care. |

Source: “Post your comments about the training session (and how customers reacted when they realized the store was closed),” Starbucks Gossip, blog, accessed August 19, 2019, https://starbucksgossip.typepad.com/\_/2008/02/post-your-comme.html.

Endnotes

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