

CONTROVERSIAL ADVERTISING:
HOW BRANDS CAN AVOID MINIMISE BACKLASH FROM AUDIENCES WITH
STRONG ATTITUDES

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0. INTRODUCTION:

On the 13th of January, 2019, Gillette published its new campaign “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” (Gehrig, 2019). Gillette had aimed to engage a younger audience as, since its acquisition, it had lost over 30% of its market share, and there was some evidence that “Millennials favor purpose-driven brands that impact their world in a positive way” (Dan, 2019). Moreover, Procter and Gamble’s Chief Communications Officer Damon Jones claimed that Gillette’s ad was a way to act on the company’s “responsibility and obligation to step up and improve the language and the expectation that we were setting for ourselves and for guys” (King, 2019). Nevertheless, seven days later the video had accumulated over 1 million dislikes, versus 620,000 likes, on the company’s YouTube channel (King, 2019). This evident backlash conveys that the company ultimately failed to achieve its persuasive purpose, as their message was not received by many in this well-intended way, and some even interpreted it as forwarding a “war on men” narrative (Earl, 2019, 03:23). The deep divide in the reactions of Gillette’s male audience is intriguing, especially why some men were aggravated enough to assert that they would stop buying the company’s products altogether (See Appendix 1). Ultimately, this is mainly due to the strong attitudes held by that side of the audience, and how Gillette failed to frame the ad in a way that would avoid such a significant backlash. An analysis of Social Judgement Theory, qualities of the message and qualities of the source, will help explain what could have been improved in order to obtain a more successful approach.

I. STRONG ATTITUDES: AVOIDING THE LATITUDE OF REJECTION

The main reason why some male audience members had such strong negative reactions, in contrast to other men who reacted positively to the ad, lies in what is defined as ‘strong

attitudes’. These are “buttressed by foundational beliefs and values, steeped in social knowledge, reinforced by similar others, cognitively elaborated, and readily accessible at the moment of a spontaneous argument on the topic” (Perloff, 2020, p. 103). The key takeaway from this definition is that strong attitudes are *extremely hard to change* due to various reasons: they are cemented by core values and beliefs; they are also cemented by thorough and regular reflection, which includes seeking and finding new information to confirm them; they are reinforced by like-minded others around us, and they are extremely salient, which means they are often talked about and therefore have the opportunity to be reaffirmed in the minds of those holding them. Therefore, Gillette had a serious challenge of addressing an audience that held strong attitudes against concepts and terms like “toxic masculinity” (Gehrig, 2019, 00:03).

Crucially, Social Judgement Theory is pivotal to understanding how messages can be framed in a way that avoids complete rejection from an audience with strong attitudes. It is based on the claim that “people evaluate issues based on where they stand on the topic” and not “on the merits of the arguments” (Perloff, 2020, p. 106). This means that the greatest predictor of whether people with strong attitudes will be persuaded by a message is whether they already agree with it or not. Nevertheless, a message can fall into three categories, or three latitudes, in people’s minds: acceptance (LoA), non-commitment (LoN), and rejection (LoR) (Perloff, 2020). If a message that falls into the LoA, it will be well-received, and if a message that falls into the LoR it will be almost immediately rejected. Moreover, people with strong attitudes engage in “confirmation bias” processes (Perloff, 2020, p. 115) and “contrast effect[s]” (Perloff, 2020, p. 109). The former refers to “the psychological tendency to process social information by seeking out and selectively interpreting evidence so it confirms one’s preexisting view” (Perloff, 2020,

p.115), and the latter happens when “individuals push a somewhat disagreeable message away from their attitude, assuming that it is more different than it really is” (Perloff, 2020, p. 106).

Therefore, for Gillette’s campaign to be persuasive, it should have aimed to avoid the LoR of viewers, and ideally introduce a perspective that fell into the LoN- meaning something viewers felt ambiguous about, or had not thought about before (Perloff, 2020), in order to generate interest and open-mindedness. However, Gillette was ultimately unsuccessful in avoiding the latitude of rejection. In order to understand this better, it is worth noting that in 2019, the debate around the #MeToo movement had many nuances to it, but specifically, the most relevant aspect to this analysis is the concept of a “war on masculinity”, which Piers Morgan mentioned two days after the ad was published, in the show *Good Morning Britain* (Earl, 2019, 00:20). His argument was that nowadays “we have to somehow be defensive about being male, about being masculine” (Earl, 2019, 01:27) and that “being masculine” is now deemed “harmful” by institutions like the American Psychological Association (Earl, 2019, 00:30). Morgan is quite an influential figure for many men who hold strong attitudes like his on this topic, and hence it is reasonable to think that such opinions were salient in the minds of many. Crucially, in the first five seconds of the ad, images of men about to shave appear along with a voiceover that mentions “bullying, violence, toxic masculinity” and sexual harassment, as implied by hearing a news report about “the #MeToo movement” (Gehrig, 2019, 00:02). The following question “is this the best a man can get?” (Gehrig, 2019, 00:06), is enough to catapult the message directly into the latitude of rejection of many men, who will synchronically analyse these elements to extract the conclusion that the ad is linking masculinity with the aforementioned negative traits and crime.

For those who wonder why the general message of the ad, which can be perceived as rather positive overall, was rejected by so many people, it is because those with strong attitudes who believe there is a “war on masculinity” shut down after only eight seconds, and kept watching the ad from an opposing, ‘LoR’ point of view. This resulted in confirmation bias processes, where some only selectively recalled key moments in the video that reinforced their initial negative attitude, such as the news footage about sexual harassment allegations (Gehrig, 2019, 00:43), which is exactly the example Morgan mentioned two days later (Earl, 2019, 01:53). Moreover, due to contrast effects, audience members did not appreciate the similarities that may be present between their own view and Gillette’s message of advocating for more positive male role models for young boys, as is conveyed by the angry messages on the YouTube comment section (See Appendix 2).

On that note, it is relevant to also reference the concept of “ego involvement” which basically explains that “people are ego-involved when they perceive that the issue touches on their self-concepts or core values” (Perloff, 2020, p. 110). For many men, being masculine is at the core of their self-concept, and hence portraying it in a negative light (even if it is later compensated with a more positive representation) is at best confusing and at worst will generate reactance. Alternatively, Gillette would have perhaps been more successful if they had framed masculinity in a positive way throughout, distancing sexual assault and bullying from its meaning, and framing masculinity as the starting point for men to fight these social issues. For example, the image of the father helping out a bullied boy could be the archetype of showcasing how being masculine (strong and a protector) is compatible with fighting social injustice. Clearly, strong attitudes are very difficult to change but an alternative approach like this one would probably avoid such general backlash.

II. QUALITIES OF THE MESSAGE: THE KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL (OR UNSUCCESSFUL) DELIVERY

Three days after the release of Gillette's campaign Egard Watch Company released a new commercial entitled "What is a man? A response to Gillette" (Egard Watches, 2019). This video landed directly in the LoA of the part of its male audience that would have deeply rejected Gillette's ad, as it portrays masculinity in a positive light, with the comment "*unlike gillettes commercial this ad actually inspires us men to be better versions of ourselves. Nicely done Egard!*" (See Appendix 3) having currently 32,000 likes. Crucially, its main message techniques are the use of statistical evidence and a direction of photography of gritty realism, both of which Gillette could have implemented to foster a more positive reception from an audience with strong attitudes.

Firstly, evidence "consists of factual assertions, quantitative information [...], eyewitness statements, testimonials, or opinions advanced by credible sources" (Perloff, 2020, p. 302). Although clearly, "even the most compelling evidence is unlikely to change strong attitudes" (Perloff, 2020, p. 303), if the evidence is framed in the right way, it will be beneficial for the message as "evidence appears to produce general persuasive effects that appear surprisingly stable" (Perloff, 2020, p. 302). In order to frame evidence effectively, we must take into account that it would not be useful to try and change strong attitudes with 'gender-explicit' statistics, such as that many more men are responsible for sexual harassment than women, which could again implicitly lead to the perception that men are potential sexual harassers just because they are male. Instead, there is considerable research that suggests that in many cases, the absence of a father figure (with whom children have a positive relationship) leads to a more violent and troubled child (Kim and Glasgow, 2018). This type of evidence could be carefully introduced to

reinforce the importance of fathers being present, and good role models, to their children, in order to avoid violence and other criminal tendencies.

Moreover, when portraying social issues in an advertisement, especially about controversial topics, evidence in the form of qualitative information, such as eyewitness statements or testimonials is very helpful to making the message seem realistic. On the other hand, the use of stereotypical representations and fictionalised content, will most likely generate reactance from an audience with strong attitudes. It is important to note that narrative techniques are very successful methods of persuasion, because “while transfixed by the artist’s creation of an imaginary world, individuals may be more open to questioning their ideas than when they are focusing on an ordinary persuasive message” (Perloff, 2020, p. 306). However, Gillette’s ad does not fully employ a narrative technique; instead, it presents a variety of fictionalised scenarios, which all come to some sort of positive conclusion. This multi-stranded approach does not allow the audience to generate rapport with any specific character, and instead leaves them feeling like a passive spectator. Ultimately, this does not make the audience feel “transfixed” in an “imaginary world”, where they are less focused on a “persuasive message” (Perloff, 2020, p. 306), because in fact, the persuasive message is explicitly narrated through the voiceover, and reinforced through intermittent sections portraying evidence (such as news footage (Gehrig, 2019, 00:42)). Although ostensibly, combining evidence and narrative produces a successful approach, Gillette’s ad does not do this in a skilful way, mainly because the fictional narratives are not developed enough to have an impact, the voiceover and intermittent evidence disrupts the narrative purpose, and as a result, some representations can be perceived as forceful language cues by an audience with strong attitudes.

Forceful language has two main characteristics “controlling and demeaning speech” (Perloff, 2020, p. 321); the former is not as relevant in this analysis, but the latter “degrades audience members who take an alternative position” to that of the persuader. This generates “an unpleasant emotional state” defined as “reactance” (Perloff, 2020, p. 321). Some of the fictional representations of men in a negative light, the most memorable one being in second 37, have a demeaning tone to them, although this is arguably justifiable for certain scenes. However, this particular scene portrays regular-looking men from diverse ethnic backgrounds taking part in an activity that many men enjoy: having a barbeque in their backyard (Gehrig, 2019, 00:37).

Whereas less men would feel their self-concept compromised by other depictions in the video (such as in second 21, with the singer making strange gestures and objectifying women), a wider variety of men might feel personally attacked by a representation of what could be their Sunday afternoon, being linked to the justification of violence through “excuses” (Gehrig, 2019, 00:32). Although granted, these fictional representations come to a positive resolution which portrays men also in a positive light, as previously stated, the audience segment with strong attitudes will recall selectively the instances which aroused negative feelings of reactance.

Therefore, a better approach, and one which is included to a lesser extent in Gillette’s video, is to feature eyewitness statements or testimonials. The 2015 ad by *Always* entitled “Like A Girl” (Greenfield, 2015) is very successful in portraying a social issue through realistic lens, using the statements of girls and one boy of diverse ages. Gillette features two real-life videos in which men act as positive role models: one against violence, and another empowering women (Gehrig, 2019, 1:06-1:12). However, the videos are only seen briefly, so the overall effect of the ad is not achieved. On another note, an ad can communicate seriousness and realism solely through the direction of photography in the ad, as seen in the Egard Watches commercial. Here,

the gritty realism character is dominant and bolstered by the use of close-ups, hard light and a varied colour palette (without seemingly following any particular aesthetic style). Gillette's ad, conversely, has a more cinematic look which distances it slightly from reality, even if it makes it more visually appealing. Although this is more a question of taste, presenting a real-life issue through a real-life lens can give the ad a feeling of legitimacy and authenticity. In any case, Gillette's ad could have benefitted from a completely narrative approach, or a more realistic, evidence-oriented portrayal, that still avoided the latitude of rejection through statistical evidence, testimonials and perhaps choices regarding the direction of photography.

III. QUALITIES OF THE SOURCE: CREDIBILITY AND WHY THE KNOWLEDGE BIAS FAILED

"You know its 2019 when shaving cream gets political". This was written by a user in the comment section below the YouTube video of Gillette's campaign (See Appendix 4) and effectively conveys the general advertising atmosphere we have had for the last few years. In fact, companies nowadays are more and more frequently trying to incorporate corporate social responsibility (CSR) into their ads and general public image (Digiday, 2020). Moreover, as difficult as it is to make a CSR campaign that is not perceived as cynical by the public, some companies are successful in doing so. For example, Dove's "Real Beauty Sketches" campaign (Carey, 2013), was actually received very positively, with more than 11 million views, and comments that read *"I dont care if this was all for a freaking soap commercial, this was cute af"* receiving more than 2000 likes (See Appendix 5). However, due to the backlash that the video received, this particular campaign by Gillette cannot be said to be one of them. Although strong attitudes and message factors explain some of the main reasons why there were so many negative

reactions, it is interesting to also analyse how Gillette's credibility and knowledge bias may have also contributed in different ways.

Credibility can be defined from the perspective of the persuader as “a perception of us that lies inside of the people to whom we talk” (Hart, Friedrich, & Brummett, 1983, as cited in Perloff, 2020, p. 270), meaning that it is not a personal characteristic, but rather a dynamic perception between the audience and the communicator. This is quite “democratic” in a sense as communicators “must earn an audience's respect and win its credibility” (Perloff, 2020, p. 270). It is therefore important to be aware of all three components of credibility: “expertise, trustworthiness” and “goodwill” (Perloff, 2020, p. 274). An analysis of these three aspects reveals that Gillette may have been unprepared to engage in such a sudden change in discourse. Regarding trustworthiness, which is essentially integrity of one's character, comments below the advert on YouTube were quick to call out Gillette for hypocritically “*fighting the patriarchy*” whilst charging “*double for pink razors*” (See Appendix 6), referring to the debate around the pink tax. This portrays how Gillette may have sent out their message too soon, before addressing its own issues regarding the gender-equality debate, which is the core of the #MeToo movement discussion. Moreover, portraying ‘goodwill’ through CSR advertising is usually a source of struggle, as it is unrealistic to think that brands are acting fully altruistically, without considering the obvious monetary benefits that advertising has. In addition, the more controversial the topic is, the quicker critics will paint the brand as a hypocrite, claiming the company is trying to take advantage of a social issue to attract more consumers. This is reflected by comments below the advert on YouTube that read “*I love it when billion dollar corporations lecture me on how I should feel.*” (See Appendix 7), which received more than 3000 likes. The best route for companies to take here is to try and promote as much as possible how the company is taking

action (by donating to NGOs, for example) and hope that in a couple of years, it will develop a reputation for its goodwill with regards to a particular issue. Dove is a great example of a company that has successfully developed a reputation for being genuinely concerned about harmful beauty standards, but this has taken place over the course of the last 10 years.

This takes us directly to the question of expertise, which is linked to the notion of knowledge bias. Gillette's previous campaigns did not introduce any concept related to 'toxic masculinity', and in fact followed the traditional gender conventions of featuring women as 'trophies' or complements to men, such as in the 1999 "Gillette Mach 3" commercial (Archiveman, 2013, 00:27). This can be seen both as a strength and a weakness for Gillette in terms of credibility, as on the one hand, it conveys that the brand does not have any expertise in fighting toxic masculinity and is not a legitimate voice for presenting positive role models, whilst on the other hand, it disproves its knowledge bias. Knowledge bias is defined as "the presumption that a communicator has a biased view of an issue" because "the speaker's background [...] has prevented him or her from looking objectively at the various sides of the issue" (Perloff, 2020, p. 277). Theoretically, "as a general rule, when communicators are perceived to violate the knowledge bias, they gain in credibility" (Perloff, 2020, p. 277). In this case, some did receive this positively, and saw the ad as "a recognition [...] that the new generation is reworking that concept of masculinity, and it is no longer the cliché it once was." (Borkowski, as quoted in Topping et al., 2019). Nevertheless, many others felt betrayed by a brand that had perhaps been too sudden in its change of discourse; this is portrayed by comments that express some users' previous, lifelong loyalty to the brand which was now going to be interrupted because "*@Gillette has made it clear they do not want the business of masculine men*" (See Appendix 8).

Overall, it is reasonable to consider that the part of the audience who would react negatively to the ad due to their previously-held strong attitudes, would also not be persuaded by Gillette disproving its knowledge bias, and would rather feel betrayed. Other audience members, not necessarily having strong attitudes about the issue, but having a generally critical nature, would not be persuaded by the CSR approach to advertising, both due to a lack of trustworthiness, verifiable goodwill and expertise. Nevertheless, a third group of audience members have received the ad more positively, expressing that Gillette disproving its knowledge bias is a positive sign of credibility and the company's motivation to foster positive change, which links directly to trustworthiness and goodwill. It is also reasonable to consider that this third group will probably have a sympathising attitude towards the issue portrayed in the ad, which contributed to their overall positive reaction (as if this were not the case, such audience members would not be happy to think that society needs different portrayals of masculinity that are not "toxic"). Therefore, the question of credibility and knowledge bias portrays that, although Gillette has some control over how to make its brand more credible when portraying itself as a prominent voice in favour of the #MeToo movement, it is clear that time is very much necessary for gradually building this reputation. In this case, there is not much Gillette can improve to foster a more positive reaction from audience members with strong attitudes.

IV. CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, Gillette's campaign *We Believe: The Best Men Can Be* was not successful in targeting audience members with strong attitudes due to various reasons involving Social Judgement Theory, qualities of the message and some qualities of the source. Essentially, the company failed to avoid the latitude of rejection of viewers with strong attitudes, and underestimated the power of ego-involvement, which resulted in perceptual distortions such as

confirmation bias and contrast effects. These, in turn, prevented the overall message of the ad from being perceived and understood by this section of the audience. Moreover, the advertisement had a confusing and disruptive combination between evidence and narrative elements, which detracted from the benefits of its narrative technique that was also ineffective on its own due to its multi-stranded approach. A better path would have been to focus on either technique separately, as this is such a short ad. In terms of evidence techniques, the ad could have also been framed through a more realistic lens, constructed through statistics, testimonies and bolstering its own use of real-life videos, as well as perhaps considering a different approach to the direction of photography. Finally, it is worth noting that this was Gillette's first campaign that took a completely different approach, and hence the company had not had enough time to build credibility. With regards to disproving its knowledge bias, this approach was successfully received by audience members that sympathised with the ad's overall message, and negatively received by audience members with strong attitudes, which is both reasonable and inevitable. Overall, I believe it is crucial for brands nowadays to be aware of the importance of addressing their messages carefully, as it is essential to incorporate audiences with strong attitudes into the conversations about social issues that need to be had today.

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APPENDIX 1: *Customers vouching to not buy Gillette's products (or having stopped already).*



@gtech7698 8 months ago

I switched to a safety razor, avoiding Gillette/P&G blades and am finally getting great shaves for the first time in my life.



1.3K



Reply

✓ 19 replies



@richardgugulaii362 3 weeks ago

I had forgotten why I stopped buying Gillette. Seeing this has reinvigorated me for at least another 4 years



121



Reply

✓ 6 replies



@sammygoodnight 1 month ago

4 years later and still living completely free of all Gillette products. Wife and daughters too.



302



Reply

✓ 12 replies

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYaY2Kb_PKI

APPENDIX 2: *Lack of comprehension of Gillette's overall message.*



@brian-ve3jv 10 months ago

I love having my moral compass guided by a multi national company, never realised how bad I am and how much I need to apologise for being born male.



395



Reply

✓ 15 replies



@jackfennell4207 4 months ago (edited)

"Wow this commercial made me realize that I'm a misogynist! I'm going to buy more Gillette!" Said no sane person ever lol



775



Reply

✓ 5 replies



@navylaks2 6 months ago

This is the only channel that actually still shows this commercial, it's like Gillette has completely erased it from history. Gillette, the Brand that we Forget



2K



Reply

✓ 31 replies

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYaY2Kb_PKI

APPENDIX 3: *Response to Gillette, the effect of portraying masculinity in a positive light.*



Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_HL0wiK4Zc

APPENDIX 4: *Context: 2019 and CSR advertising.*




Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYaY2Kb_PKI

APPENDIX 5: *Good example of credibility in CSR advertising.*



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=litXW91UauE>


APPENDIX 6: *Trustworthiness and CSR advertising.*

 **@ignaciolarat1391** 1 year ago
While Gillette charges double for pink razors...

Hypocrites

 1.8K  **Reply**

✓ **22 replies**

 **@xenon7522** 4 years ago
Gillette, if you believe so strongly in fighting the patriarchy, why do you still charge more for women's razors than men's?

 1.4K  **Reply**

✓ **47 replies**

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYaY2Kb_PKI

APPENDIX 7: *Goodwill and CSR advertising.*

 **@justjack4030** 1 year ago
I love it when billion dollar corporations lecture me on how I should feel.

 3.1K  **Reply**

✓ **60 replies**

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYaY2Kb_PKI

APPENDIX 8: *Feeling of betrayal by Gillette- Knowledge Bias.*



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