

The Impact of Brand Hate and Love: A Thematic Analysis of Online Emotions in Response to Disney's Corporate Activism

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Abstract : Companies have recently embraced political activism as an alleged responsibility toward the communities they operate in. As a result of its recency, there is little understanding of the impact of corporate activism on consumers. In addition, embracing corporate activism engenders polarizing opinions, potentially leading to a crisis of morality shown in past literature to flourish in online settings. The present study contributes to the literature on communication management, which currently lacks research on stakeholder perceptions toward corporate activism in general and from the perspective of the stakeholders' emotions of brand hate versus a love that they display before a specific corporate act of activism. For this purpose, the study analyzed online reactions on Twitter following Disney's stance against Florida's House Bill 1577 enacted in April 2022. Dubbed the "Don't Say Gay Bill" by the left wing and the "Parental Rights Bill" by the conservative movement, the legislation triggered polarizing opinions in society and among Disney's stakeholders, as the company announce it was taking action against it. Given the scarcity of research on corporate political activism and crises of morality, the current study enacted the case study methodology. Consequently, it answered to the research questions of how online stakeholders responded to Disney's stance as well as why they formed such an opinion. The data were collected from Twitter over a seven-day period of analysis, namely from March 28- April 3, 2022. The period of analysis started on the day Disney announced its stance (March 28, 2022) until the reactions to its announcement petered out significantly (April 3, 2022). The final sample of analysis consisted of N=1,344 and represented Twitter comments in response to the company's political announcement. The data were analyzed using the grounded theory methodology, which implied multiple exposures to the text and the undertaking of an inductive-deductive approach that led to the emergence of several recurrent themes. The findings revealed that the stakeholders' prior emotions toward the company (brand hate versus brand love) did not play a greater role in their (dis)agreement with the latter's activism than the users' political stances. Specifically, whether they despised or hated Disney prior to this incident was less significant than their personal political stances. Above all, users were more inclined to transition from brand love to brand hate and vice versa based on the political side they viewed Disney to fall under.

Keywords : corporate political advocacy, crisis management, brand hate, brand love

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