



**PULSAR** 

**3 Ways Global Brands Embraced  
Politics to Engage Audiences**



# Fashion Shift

Consumers are becoming more politically aware - and fashion brands are responding to this trend.

It has been predicted that the 2010s would be characterized by a new, distinct kind of lifestyle brand – the political brand<sup>1</sup>.

This claim rings particularly true in 2017, the year when the debate about the effects of Beyoncé's feminist stance are still ongoing and brands such as [Tory Burch are being accused of cultural appropriation](#) in their shoots.

To stay in touch with their audiences, brands are expected to react to these cultural and political shifts.

A few brands are leading this change. For example, outdoor brand [North Face has donated 408,000 hectares of land](#) they'd previously bought in Chile to the local government to turn into national parks, boosting the brand's reputation as socially conscious.

Another outdoor brand, Patagonia, consistently gains media coverage thanks to their exemplary policies on

maternity leave and childcare, which include an on-site nursery, as well as sustainable manufacturing practices, with a part of their clothing line being made entirely from recycled materials.

These practices adopted by the North Face and Patagonia are fully aligned with values one might expect from an outdoor, nature-loving brand.

However, navigating the shift towards the political and socially conscious is not always an easy transition for clothing brands.

This study will explore the way retail brands are navigating these changes and dealing with controversies along the way using three global brands as case studies: American Apparel, H&M and Nike.

<sup>1</sup> S. Banet-Weiser 'Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture', 2012



# Engaging the audience

Brands need to be on their best behavior all the time, if they want to be seen as authentic.

Douglas B. Holt<sup>1</sup> talks about organizational populism, where the company culture and practices align with those of their brand message, opposed to staged populism, where the message and company practices differ.

All three brands in question have made attempts to engage with wider social and political causes in their messages in order to attract conscious consumers.

As a result, all three of them also have had to manoeuvre social and political controversies, related to their organizational practices.

Brian Steinberg has suggested that consumers were developing immunity to brand messages due to over-saturation of information and shorter attention spans, caused in part by the use of multiple devices simultaneously<sup>2</sup>.

This was back in 2007, and the number of brand messages we see on the daily basis has only increased since then.

Additionally, social media enables (if not demands) for all aspects of the brand to be more visible. This includes more visibility on organizational issues and greater knowledge about key individuals behind the brands.

Nowadays, with consumers being increasingly critical and socially aware, should brands' organizational practices align with their campaigns in order to be seen as authentic?

And is authenticity actually still a vital measure of a brand's success?

Using Pulsar, we explored the impact of American Apparel, H&M and Nike's political campaigns and organizational controversies.

<sup>1</sup>D. B. Holt, 'How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding', 2004

<sup>2</sup>B. Steinberg, 'Ads Keep Spreading, but Are Consumers Immune?' [click here to read full story](#)



# American Apparel

## Activism and social responsibly versus a disgraced CEO

American Apparel, an iconic brand in the noughties which produced uniforms for cool kids, has ceased all of its operations and sold intellectual property rights to little-known Canadian brand Gildan, which does not intend to continue manufacturing American Apparel clothes in LA. In other words: American Apparel is no more.

Elsewhere, wider cultural and aesthetic shifts have been proposed as reasons for American Apparel's demise - i.e. the fall of the 2000s obsession with irony and provocative sexuality, portrayed through the male gaze of photographer Terry Richardson, who shot many of American Apparel's campaigns<sup>1</sup>.

However, there is another, even more tangible reason for American Apparel's damaged credibility: long-standing accusations of sexual harassment, homophobia and racism aimed at the company's founder and CEO, Dov Charney, which resulted in him being fired in December 2014.

This put a spotlight on a stark contrast with the key company values: produced in downtown LA and not sweatshops, supporting the rights of workers, immigrants and the LGBTQ community.

<sup>1</sup> E. Wiseman, The Guardian [click here to read full story](#)



## Thigh-Highs

**That's American Apparel®**

Our signature thigh-highs come in sporty stripes and colorful solids. Each pair is made in a Sweatshop-Free environment, by a fairly compensated worker who pays US taxes. Keep your legs warm and show off your best assets, shop our extensive collection of socks and hosiery at any of our stores all over the world.

**Made in USA  
Sweatshop Free**

American Apparel has integrated manufacturing, distribution and retail as no one has done it before. With virtually every aspect of the process executed in downtown LA, we do not rely on outsourcing. The 7,500 American industrial, apparel, textile and sewing employees at our LA headquarters earn fair wages and pay US taxes. We employ nearly 6,000 retail workers worldwide.

We have not only had a positive impact on the economy, but also our community in LA and worldwide, offering support for local initiatives and most prominently immigrants' and Gay Rights. We believe that business can be used to bring about social change. American Apparel leverages art, design and technology to advance the business process, while continuing to pioneer industry standards of social and environmental responsibility in the clothing industry.

**Retail Locations:**

Washington, D.C. — Georgetown  
Washington, D.C. — Lincoln Square  
Annapolis — Annapolis Mall  
Baltimore — Federal Hill  
Bethesda — Montgomery Mall  
Richmond — Carytown  
Silver Spring — Colesville Road

Text AASTORE + zip code to 23000 to find American Apparel locations nearest you.



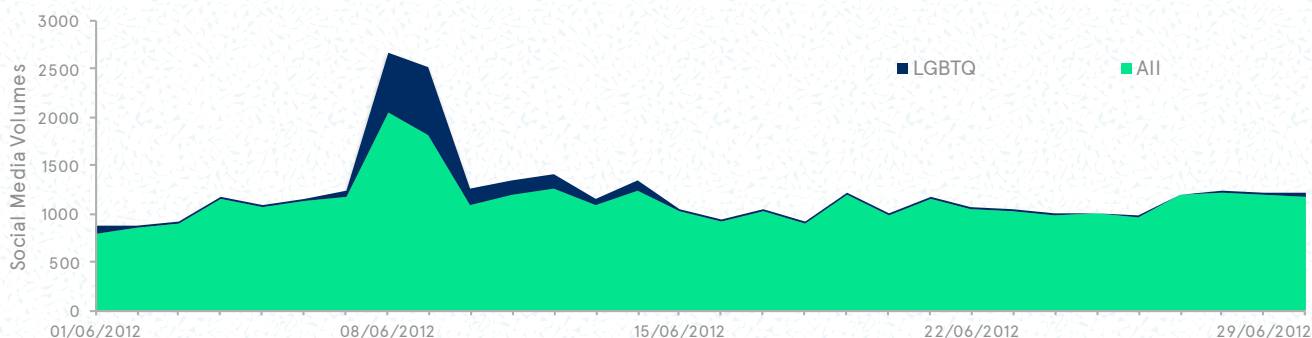
**Buy any Legalize Gay product and receive a second free for a friend or partner!\***

\*While supplies last. Valid through November 2010. Offer may not be used in conjunction with any additional promo/discount. Free gift must be of equal or lesser value. No minimum purchase required.

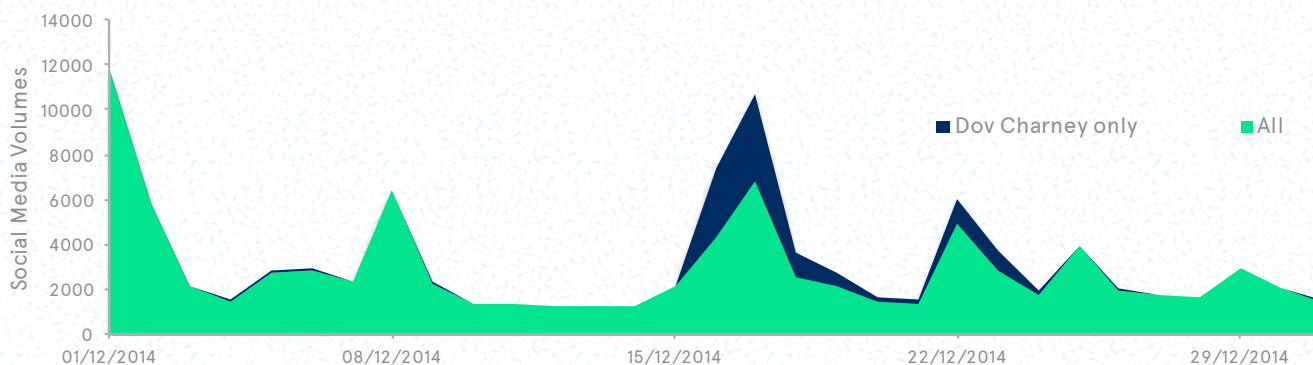
Using Pulsar's historic data feature, we looked at mentions of American Apparel during one of its key LGBTQ campaigns in cooperation with GLAAD, and compared them to the levels of social buzz at the time of Dov Charney's termination.

As we can see, the latter generated a significantly larger spike in conversation, with a longer lifespan.

### LGBTQ campaign (1,131 posts per day)



### Charney's termination (2,995 posts per day)



## Conscious vs. emotive?

American Apparel went a long way to project an image of a socially and politically conscious brand, promoting their non-sweatshop, 'made in America' policies and supporting LBGQT activism.

However, it was the brand values of sexy and cool that appeared to consistently overshadow American Apparel's activism.

The company has put a lot of effort into maintaining these brand values. The company's leaked 'grooming standards' reveal just how much women were advised, among other things, against having bangs, as 'this was not a part of the direction' the company was going in.

It is not unreasonable to assume that a CEO being accused of sexual misconduct would seriously damage the brand's credentials of sexy and cool, as past campaigns suddenly are seen in a different light.

American Apparel does not appear to have succeeded in emotionally engaging their audience with their activist work, preferring to approach even their activist messages with an air of irony that keeps with the brand's overall provocative aesthetic.

This may have left the brand with no leg to stand on, with cool and sexy appeal evaporating as quickly as the credibility of their ex-CEO.





# H&M

## 'Ladylike' campaign focuses on diversity and inclusivity

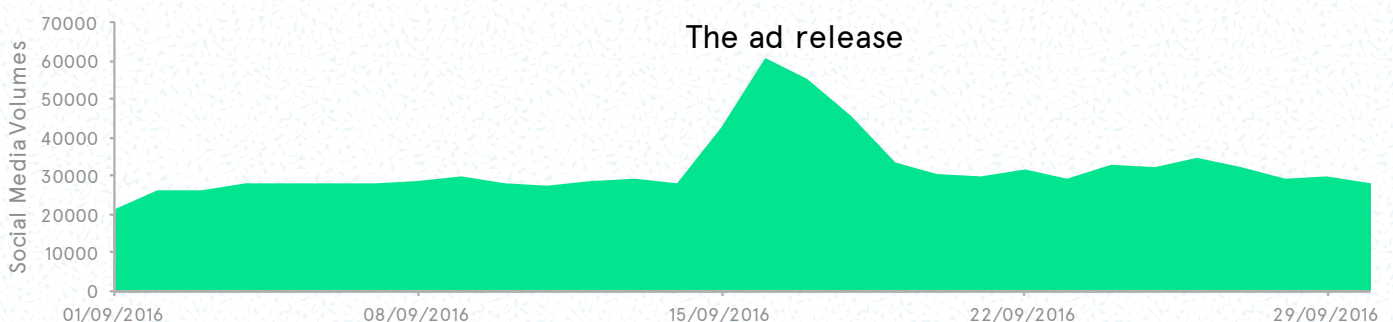
H&M is another brand which sparked political conversation with their September 2016 'She's a Lady' ad. The spot, set to a cover version of the song, features a diverse range of models, including women of color and trans, plus size and mature models.

All of these women appear confident and unbothered by stereotypes about being a 'lady', sitting confidently in public transport or eating with obvious enjoyment.

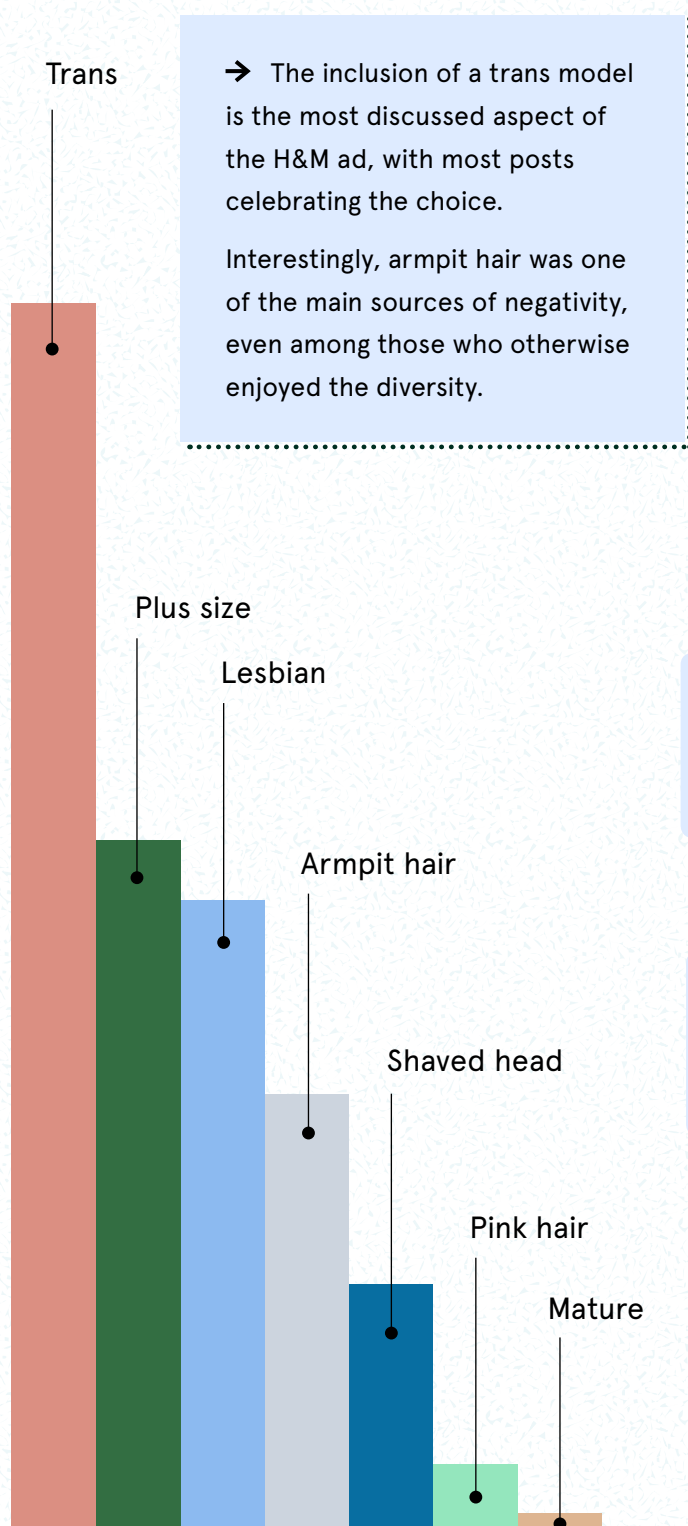
The aim of the campaign, according to the brand, is to challenge the perception of what it means to be 'ladylike', steering away from the prevalent narrow beauty standard of young, slim and hairless.

The ad has generated significant social buzz, with many media outlets hailing it as a bold feminist statement, which had resonance amongst consumers.

[\\*Click here to watch video](#)



# H&M: inclusion of trans model most discussed, armpit hair least appreciated



→ The inclusion of a trans model is the most discussed aspect of the H&M ad, with most posts celebrating the choice.

Interestingly, armpit hair was one of the main sources of negativity, even among those who otherwise enjoyed the diversity.

“H&M killed it w their Autumn ad. Girls of all sizes, women of colour, non cis girls and queer girls. Living for it.”

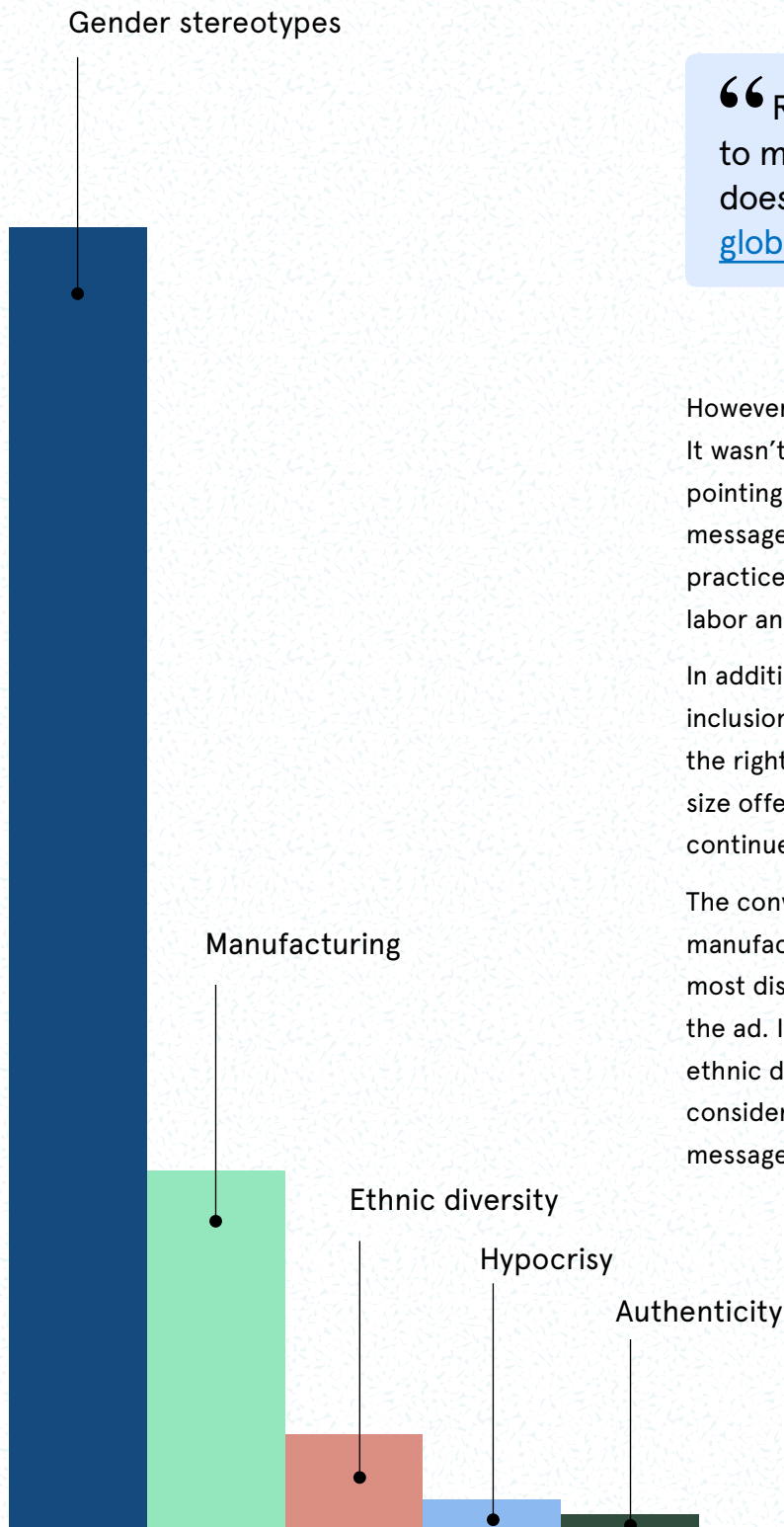
@Mountainea

“Loving the new H&M advert with real size women... but they could leave out the hairy armpits #hairyarmpits”

@neonfiona

Twitter, News Forums and Blog mentions of H&M globally in September 2016 (source: Pulsar)

# The conversation around the company's manufacturing processes is the second most discussed topic



“RE: @hm / You can hire a fancy agency to make a kick-ass add, but if core culture doesn't support the message, well: [globalhobo.com.au/hm-campaign/](http://globalhobo.com.au/hm-campaign/)”

@NatashaJarmick

However, the celebration wasn't unanimous. It wasn't long before consumers started pointing out the discrepancy between H&M's message and the company's manufacturing practices, which allegedly include sweatshop labor and disregard for workers' rights.

In addition, some pointed out that while the inclusion of a plus size model is a step in the right direction, in practice H&M's plus size offering is rather poor and the designs continue stereotyping plus size women.

The conversation around the company's manufacturing processes is the second most discussed topic of conversation about the ad. It is discussed more often than ethnic diversity – a worrying sign for H&M, considering that the latter was one of the key messages within the campaign.

Twitter, News Forums and Blog mentions of H&M globally in September 2016 (Source: Pulsar)

# “This can both mean more opportunities for brands to inspire consumer loyalty as well as a greater danger of potential consumer resistance”

Postmodern advertising is defined, among other aspects, by the focus on intertextuality, symbolic meaning and consumer dialogue. For Morris' this means that postmodern advertising, therefore, relies on the cultural competence of audiences and their ability to interpret messages. According to him, this can both mean more opportunities for brands to inspire consumer loyalty as well as a greater danger of potential consumer resistance.

In case of H&M, the ad is targeted towards those likely to have at least some awareness of the feminist debate. As such, they are also more likely to be aware of issues related to global inequalities and workplace exploitation of women in non-Western countries.

As a result, many consumers talking about the ad express complex attitudes towards it, acknowledging the message as positive, but expressing concern about the company's practices. A search for keywords such as 'unsure', 'unconvinced', 'don't trust' and other ambivalence markers reveals a high level of uncertainty among women informed by feminist ideas.

In the meantime, we see other consumers flat-out reject what they see in the ad due to aesthetics or the very fact that the brand 'went political'.

This prompts the question: have H&M misjudged their audience? With the ad leaving many of the critical feminist consumers feeling ambivalent, and others being alienated due to their more conservative values not aligning with the campaign, this is very likely.

'M. Morris, 'Interpretability and social power, or, why postmodern advertising works', Media Culture Society 2005 27: 697



“ 1/2 @hm your ad celebrating women is great, but empty. If you want to celebrate women, change your practices. Stop firing pregnant #women.”

🐦 @JacquiHoward

“ I'm a long time shopper with @hm but that new advert has really put me right off. Keep bias and social agendas out of retail.”

🐦 @Jamie\_ORourke



## Nike

‘Just do it’? Or ‘just shut up and do it’?

The last brand with political ambitions we examined is Nike. Following a surge in political engagement among brands, Nike tried to take a different approach in December 2016.

It called the audience to stop spending time on opinions and to go for a run instead, a part of brand’s wider #AreWeRunningToday campaign.

While it resonated with some, it was met with outrage by many of those who believed people needed to be encouraged to think critically now more than ever.

## Are we spending time on opinions or #AreWeRunningToday?

“@Nike sorry, I will actually run and ‘opinion’ today. This is a horrible ad. ”

 @saldrake

**OPINIONS**



**POLITICS.**

**YOU JUST WON BACK 30 MINUTES TO RUN.**

# “Nike’s tone changed drastically in February 2017 with the launch of their #Equality campaign”

[\\*Click here to watch video](#)



It’s not clear how much, if at all, Nike’s campaign planning was informed by the backlash against their ‘opinions’ video.

However, interestingly, Nike’s tone changed drastically in February 2017 with the launch of their #Equality campaign, which was seen by many as a jab at Trump and a response to the January travel ban.

The new campaign was released following Under Armour’s CEO coming under fire for praising Donald Trump.

In a nutshell, the ad is an emotional celebration of equality in and outside of sports, narrated by LeBron James and featuring Serena Williams.

“Equality, best commercial by Nike yet! Gave me chills”

 @saldrake

“ Nike Just taught Trump A HUGE Lesson With This Grammy’s Ad ”

 @SocialPowerOne1

“ The same Nike with factories in countries where they’re paying child workers pennies to make their shoes...  
    ”

 @BkSherm1

Similar to H&M, the ad wasn’t universally celebrated, with consumers juxtaposing the promise of equality within the ad with Nike’s allegedly questionable production practices.

One of the most recent accusations of Nike using sweatshop labor comes from a UN delegate who herself used to work in garment factories in Cambodia.<sup>1</sup>

Manufacturing practices have become one of the key topics of negative discussion around the ad, with some consumers outright condemning the company for being hypocritical.

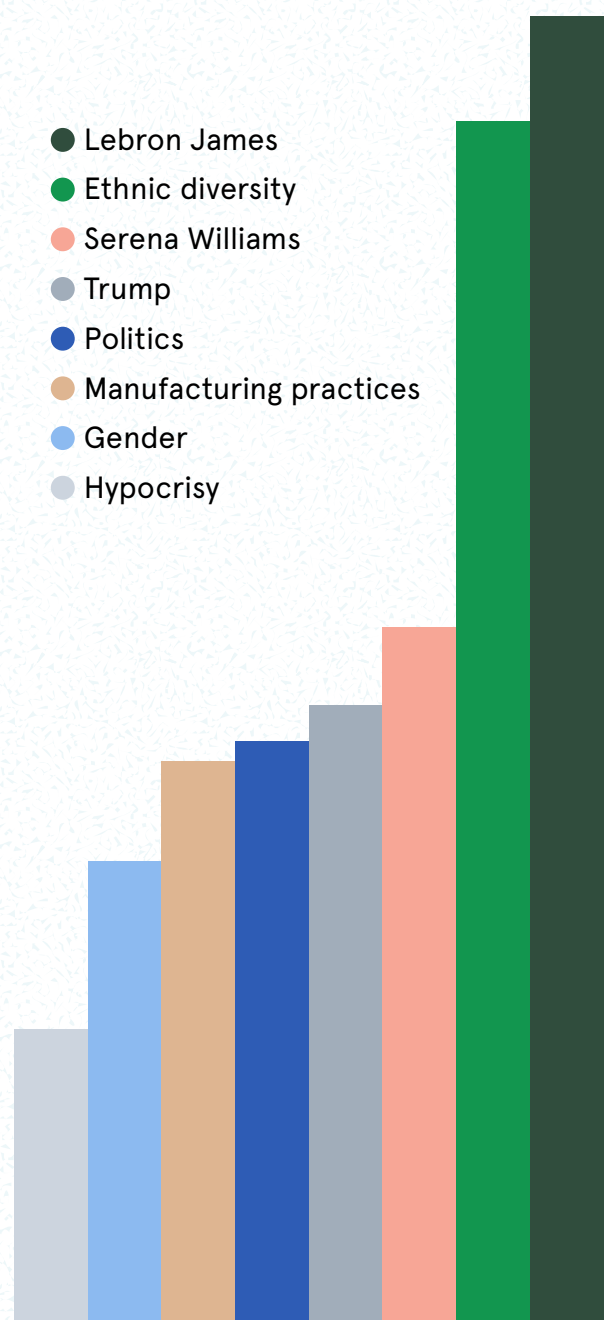
Still, main topics of conversation focus on celebrities featured in the ad as well as ethnic diversity.

Trump also makes it into this discussion (as well as pretty much any other online discussion around social responsibility in 2017).

Overall, Nike’s ad is celebrated as a powerful triumph of equality.

So what makes NIKE and H&M ads different?

<sup>1</sup>The Cornell Daily Sun, [click here to read full story](#)



Twitter, News Forums and Blog mentions of Nike globally in February 2017 (Source: Pulsar)



# The emotional response still counts

A carefully balanced narrative can make all the difference in advertising.

The H&M and Nike ads are very similar in terms of messages they are trying to convey, both tapping into politics and celebration of diversity.

However, there is a key difference: emotional dimension. A look at consumer conversation clusters related to emotions and feelings, such as love, inspiration, empowerment and even a physical response (tears and chills) reveals Nike's edge within the emotional dimension.

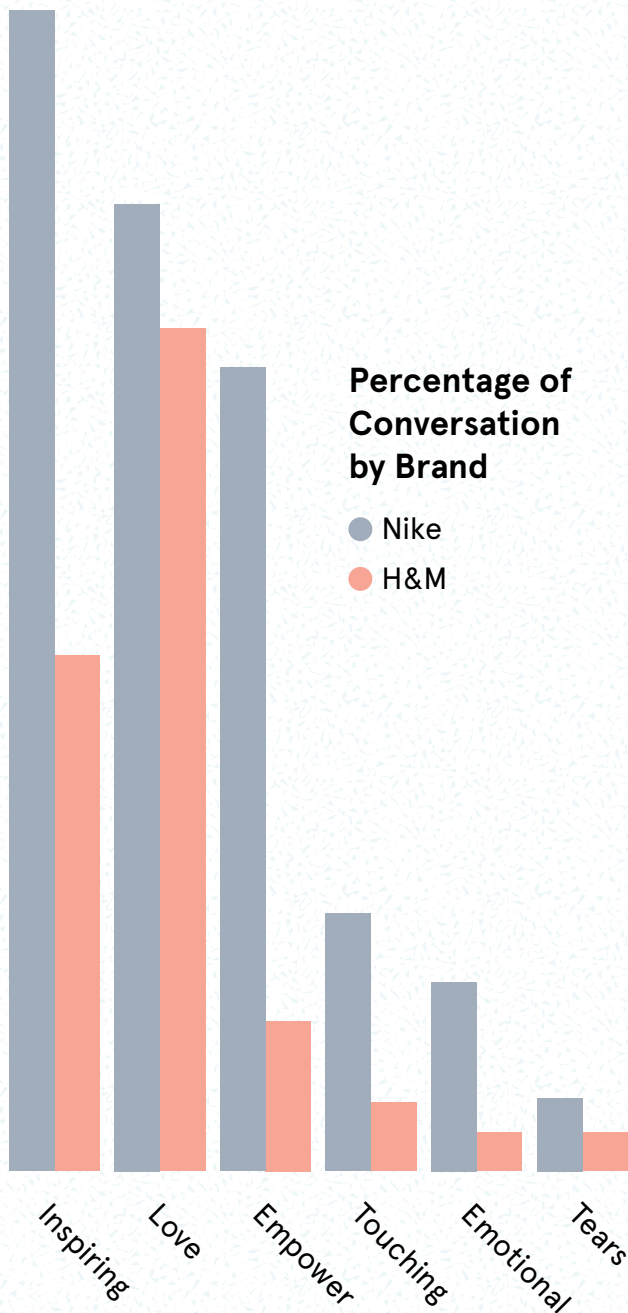
H&M reaches beyond American Apparel's activist messages, which tended to be factual or playful and provocative, but never emotionally charged. The H&M

ad encourages women to always feel comfortable with themselves, not in spite of, but because of who they are.

And while many consumers called the ad beautiful, it was not enough to illicit stronger emotional response.

The use of emotional dimension is one of the aspects in which H&M and Nike ads differ. Nike uses a range of impact devices: black and white contrast, aerial shots and poetic narration.

# “Using controversial and/or political images while making consumers believe the meaning behind them is obvious and universal”



The narration aspect specifically is an interesting point of difference. Morris<sup>1</sup> suggests that using controversial and/or political images while making consumers believe the meaning behind them is obvious and universal, a tactic often seen in postmodern retail advertising.

H&M may entrust its consumers the task of knowing that diversity on screen means empowerment for every lady regardless of who they are and how they present themselves. However, the reworked version of a classic “She’s a Lady” may not be a sufficient form of narration, paired with manufacturing controversies surrounding the brand.

The lack of narration enables ambivalence, grounding consumer perception in the plane of logic, rather than emotion. A plane where concerns about the company’s organizational authenticity are likely to matter to consumers more.

<sup>1</sup>M. Morris, ‘Interpretability and social power, or, why postmodern advertising works’, Media Culture Society 2005 27: 697

Twitter, News Forums and Blog mentions of H&M and Nike globally in September 2016 –February 2017 respectively (source: Pulsar)

“Equality should have no boundaries. The bond between players should exist between people. Opportunity should be indiscriminate. Worth should outshine color. The ball should bounce the same for everyone.”

- LeBron James, Nike Equality ad



In contrast, the Nike ad strikes a perfect balance within its narration. It clearly points the consumer towards thoughts about equality, but the vagueness of the words still allows consumers to interpret the equality message in the way most meaningful to them.

This creates a higher likelihood of emotional response, which may just win over ethical concerns.



# What we found

We have examined how three brands navigated the move towards political and battled organizational controversies along the way.

→ **American Apparel: conscious**

While American Apparel put the activism and social concerns at the core of the brand, there was a clear misalignment of the companies perceived values and organizational practices, starting with the disgraced CEO. American Apparel's messages lacked emotional appeal, and the brand may have been socially conscious, but was hardly inspiring.

→ **H&M: feel good**

Unlike American Apparel, H&M's first attempt at going in a political direction provided a more vocal celebration of diversity, which leveraged cultural shifts in perception of diversity and served to solidify women's

confidence. It partially reached women on an emotional level. However, it fell short of being inspiring as well, with many women within the target audience left feeling ambivalent.

→ **Nike: inspiring**

Nike, the brand whose political ad is celebrated the most despite controversies, is the only brand, whose message inspired and empowered consumers on a deep emotional level.



## Conclusion

Authenticity comes first – but the importance of a well-executed message cannot be underestimated.

The study highlights that consumers are becoming increasingly savvy with regards to distinguishing between staged and organizational populism and critically assessing misalignments between what brands say, and what they do.

This misalignment may have been the ultimate irony behind the ever-so-ironic American Apparel, leading, at least in part, to the brand's demise.

H&M's ad demonstrates the danger of leaving the consumer feeling ambivalent: in a world saturated with information, confronting the audience with this type of complexity may lead to losing their attention, or even prompt critical audiences to speak up against the brand.

If we are indeed facing the future of political brands, the transition will have to entail brand messages extending to brand practices, with the organizational structure and brand messages being truly aligned.

In the aspiration to contribute to the social good, as is the case with outdoor brands North Face and Patagonia,

a brand will never be left searching for the next impactful message. The brand, in these cases, is the message.

However, even critical consumers are still privy to a well-executed emotional message, such as Nike's Equality campaign. Here the emotional appeal may have temporarily mitigated the effects of otherwise problematic organizational practices.

Still, social media has the power to shed the light on brand practices and amplify the voices of those who see past the emotional appeal. Either way, understanding your audience and knowing how far you can take it with a politically infused message can be helpful in everything from avoiding PR disasters to creating better campaigns.

Kenneth Goldsmith<sup>1</sup> controversially disputes the concept of authenticity, claiming that "the moment you stand up in front of people, you are no longer authentic". Yet, messages backed up by actions may just be more believable than others.

<sup>1</sup> Goldsmith, K. 'Theory', 2015



# Contact Pulsar

Next generation audience intelligence platform Pulsar takes social data insights to a whole new level. Pulsar goes beyond keyword tracking and text mining, allowing you to map brand audiences and track how content spreads. Pulsar uses cutting-edge data science, image analysis and premium data sources to help organizations in all industries improve their marketing. Our clients include: Havas, MEC, BBDO, Publicis, Spotify, Samsung, Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr.

Are you interested in finding out more about the people you're trying to reach and the way they behave? Get in touch if you'd like to find out how we can help you.



**Giuseppe Polimeno**

Head of Research

giuseppe.polimeno@pulsarplatform.com



**James Cuthbertson**

Global Commerce Director

james.cuthbertson@pulsarplatform.com

## → About the author:

Anna Rudkevych is an Analyst at Pulsar, working across a variety of sectors, from education to beauty. With her BA in Sociology and MA in Cultural and Creative Industries, she has always been curious about the intricate interplay between brand positioning cues and audience interpretations of brands. This, paired with an interest in ethical fashion, led her to explore retail brands and their political messages for this report.

UK: +44 (0)20 7874 6577 | US: +1 646-902-9394 | [www.pulsarplatform.com](http://www.pulsarplatform.com)