

“Consumer sentiment toward international activist advertising”

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CONSUMER SENTIMENT TOWARD INTERNATIONAL ACTIVIST ADVERTISING

Abstract

Companies have been increasingly conveying activist advertising messages to international audiences in response to persisting social ills and unsustainable business practices. Given the ambiguity surrounding the effects of international advertising, this study aims to compare the response of local consumers to a multinational brand's standardized activist advertising strategy with creative executions adapted to the national contexts of Greece and the USA. The selected brand originates from the USA. The paper used a systematic qualitative approach and sentiment analysis using Microsoft Excel and Azure Machine Learning add-in. Analysis conducted on 1,051 user comments in January 2023 regarding two publicly accessible social media posts of a multinational haircare brand showed both similarities and differences in consumer responses. 662 comments were in English and 389 comments were in Greek. The study's dataset was anonymized entirely and de-identified. The results indicate that consumer sentiment was largely negative in both countries. Although the relative share of negative comments was significantly higher in the USA (96.7%) than in Greece (59.4%), both groups of consumers placed their emphasis on the same themes (e.g., children and products). Therefore, they have perceived the main message similarly, irrespective of the execution differences. Overall, the findings can be attributed to strategic and tactical issues of the activist advertising campaign, as well as to sociocultural particularities of the national context. In the case of international advertising, attempts to incorporate the brand's stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue into its advertising strategy pose significant risks to business organizations.

Keywords

brand activism, multinational brand, local consumers,
sentiment analysis, social media, Greece, USA

JEL Classification

M16, M31, M37

INTRODUCTION

The traditional marketing philosophy suggests that brands ought to be market-oriented and adjust their marketing strategies and tactics to their target segments' characteristics and preferences. However, this market-driven philosophy is challenged by persisting global issues, such as climate change and socioeconomic injustice (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021). In response to social ills and unsustainable production and consumption models, Sheth and Parvatiyar (2021) have advocated the adoption of a market-driving philosophy, which guides the introduction of pro-social engineering interventions (Kennedy & Parsons, 2012). In this context, and considering existing sociopolitical turbulence, companies have increasingly engaged in various forms of brand activism (Moorman, 2020). Although brand activism is not limited to marketing communications, brands frequently incorporate aspects of their stance on social issues into their advertising strategy (Livas, 2021). These societal or activist advertising messages have generated mixed consumer responses, and their effectiveness in promoting organizational objectives and positive social change is uncertain (Livas, 2021).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the 1960s, a substantial part of international advertising literature has concentrated on the advertising standardization vs. adaptation dispute. Decisions such as whether, to what extent, when, and how advertising should adapt to different countries have emerged as primary considerations for academics and practitioners. Factors such as increasing similarities in living conditions, consumer homogenization, and market globalization (Elinder, 1965; Levitt, 1983) were initially viewed as the main drivers of advertising standardization across international markets. Standardization of advertising output has been associated with potential cost advantages for business organizations (Moriarty & Duncan, 1991) and an increased ability to shape a consistent brand image across national borders (Duncan & Ramaprasad, 1995). Although complete standardization of advertising has been viewed as a rather rare marketing strategy (Harris, 1994), it is believed to be effective in socioeconomically and culturally similar national contexts (Sriram & Gopalakrishna, 1991). This approach is seemingly compatible with integrated marketing communications, which dictates that the marketing message delivered through diverse channels and marketing communication types should be consistent (Finne & Grönroos, 2009). Given the advertising standardization approach, the need to convey uniform messages extends to the international setting.

A second school of thought posits that advertisers ought to consider several significant barriers to advertising standardization (Douglas & Wind, 1987; Miracle et al., 1992), which are largely related to existing and sometimes widening consumer differences (De Mooij, 2003; Onkvisit & Shaw, 1999; Penz & Stöttinger, 2015). Such differences in consumer characteristics are thought to be evinced by the variation in the use of advertising elements and the adoption of diverse message strategies among numerous countries with seemingly similar cultures (Caillat & Mueller, 1996). Consequently, this literature stream suggests that advertising messages should be adapted to the national context within which they are displayed. In this way, brands can reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation, leading to significant marketing

mistakes (Kale, 1991). Overall, the adaptation perspective emphasizes the need to relate to local customer characteristics, needs, desires, and customs and is particularly effective in societies with low openness to foreign markets (Rajabi et al., 2017).

A slight deviation from these positions posits that the distance between standardization and adaptation should be viewed as a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Moriarty & Duncan, 1991; Papavassiliou & Stathakopoulos, 1997; Vrontis & Thrassou, 2007). These contingency perspectives suggest that there should be a distinction between advertising strategy and execution in terms of advertising standardization (James & Hill, 1991; Moriarty & Duncan, 1991; Taylor & Johnson, 2002) and that international advertising adaptation depends on situational factors such as demographics, level of economic development, language, and heritage (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1999). Instead of absolute adherence to one of the two extremes, most multinational brands adopt an approach in which the advertising strategy is standardized, but the advertising execution is localized (Taylor & Johnson, 2002). With some exceptions (Hatzithomas et al., 2016), most international advertisers follow a standardized strategy with modified executions in which brand positioning, main message appeals, and unique selling propositions remain the same (Moriarty & Duncan, 1991; Zandpour & Harich, 1996). However, decisions related to the method of message presentation are adapted to match the particularities of the local markets. For instance, multinational brands, which acknowledge that national markets in the European Union are converging, are more likely to increase advertising standardization of certain strategic elements to create a consistent brand image, target cross-market segments, and achieve cost advantages (Okazaki et al., 2007). In contrast, some tactical message elements, such as the language used in the advertisements, may be dubbed or subtitled (Pagani et al., 2015). Irrespective of the actual international marketing philosophy being employed, to achieve superior performance, the marketing or advertising strategy should match the external circumstances faced by the brand (Theodosiou & Leonidou, 2003) and thus achieve a fit between strategy and context (Schmid & Kotulla, 2011).

To date, advertising literature has predominately focused on the standardization and/or adaptation of typical international advertising, which usually delivers commercial messages about companies and product offerings. Nevertheless, because several contemporary brands consistently incorporate their views on controversial sociopolitical issues into their advertising campaigns (Moorman, 2020), their sociopolitical stance becomes a strategic aspect of their marketing and advertising strategy. Thus, standardization of international advertising strategies may often involve associating the brand with the same or similar sociopolitical issues across different national contexts with potentially diverse social value systems.

The broader advertising literature has a similar debate over the standardization vs. adaptation dispute. Although advertising has been acknowledged to relate to sociocultural values, the direction of this relationship has yet to be universally agreed upon. For instance, Pollay (1983, 1986) and Pollay and Gallagher (1990) have argued that advertising can shape social values. Pollay and Gallagher (1990) often accused it of perpetuating several social ills, such as excessive consumption, materialism, and sexism. From this perspective, Mueller's (1986) concerns about the potential creation of universal consumers, assisted by the extensive use of standardized advertising practices, also attribute substantial sociocultural power to global advertising. If advertising message standardization is associated with deliberately overlooking existing sociocultural differences among national markets, it assumes at least partial control over the social value system.

In contrast, other academics and advertising practitioners have posited that marketing messages merely reflect social values and mores, as they lack the power to influence them (Holbrook, 1987; Ogilvy, 1985). Following this perspective, for advertising to persevere, it filters conflicting incoming values from abroad to preserve societal harmony (Petit & Zakon, 1962). Because fundamental marketing principles dictate that marketing ought to acknowledge and adapt to market differences, the effectiveness of marketing communication often depends on the design and delivery of diverse advertising messages (Holbrook, 1987). Consequently, proponents of international ad-

vertising adaptation presuppose that advertising lacks control over the existing social value system, which it must adjust.

Analogous to the standardization vs. adaptation dispute and the emergence of contingency perspectives, it is possible to identify a range of viewpoints between the value manipulation vs. reflection dichotomy. For instance, Mueller (1986) argued that advertising reflects specific social values deemed commercially profitable but lacks the power to manipulate them, as it operates in parallel with other influential and value-shaping institutions (Aaker & Myers, 1975). However, although advertising may not have the power to alter existing social values directly or to a great extent, it has control over which values to emphasize from the preexisting system to be both relevant and profitable (Livas, 2021). Despite the observed similarities between the standardization vs. adaptation and manipulation vs. reflection dichotomies, activist advertising poses certain peculiarities. Associating the brand with sociopolitical issues is a strategic decision. When it is done at a global level and in order to be effective, it presupposes: (1) that the majority of (target) consumers across different national and sociocultural contexts are in agreement with the brand's stance on controversial sociopolitical issues, or (2) that the brand can exert substantial influence on consumers who originally adopted a different stance.

Previous literature notes the ambiguity surrounding international advertising, which is often assumed to depend on multinational brands' unique circumstances (Theodosiou & Leonidou, 2003), and the contemporary notion of brand activism. Thus, this study seeks to provide primarily qualitative empirical evidence regarding local consumers' sentiment toward a contemporary international activist campaign characterized by standardized advertising strategy and creative executions adapted to the national contexts of Greece and the USA. Overall, this analysis is driven by the scarcity of empirical evidence on the impact of activist advertising on consumer sentiment in both national and international settings.

Following the literature review, the purpose of this study is to investigate the response of local consumers to a multinational brand's standard-

ized activist advertising strategy with adapted (i.e., localized) creative executions. The focus on the relationship between the national context and brand activism is expected to reveal the readiness of consumers across international markets to support the promotion and association of the exact social cause with the brand.

2. METHODS

The study employed a systematic qualitative approach to examine consumer sentiment toward international brand activism. More specifically, sentiment analysis was performed to investigate how consumers responded to two activist advertising messages using Microsoft Excel and Azure Machine Learning add-in. From a procedural point of view, the textual data obtained (i.e., social media users' comments) were initially automatically categorized as positive or negative using the machine learning tool. Apart from classifying user comments, the machine learning tool produced a score, with values closer to zero indicating a negative sentiment and values closer to one indicating a positive sentiment. Given that the automated classification may misinterpret textual data in certain circumstances (e.g., use of irony and/or jargon), the resulting categorizations were evaluated and corrected where necessary. In these situations, the original score automatically produced by the add-in was deleted because it was meaningless (i.e., the original classification was altered).

The two countries selected for this study were the USA and Greece. At this point, the selected brand originates from the USA. Thus, including the brand's activist advertising message in its home country (the USA) was a benchmark for its overseas activist advertising campaign (Greece). Furthermore, the contribution of the USA to marketing science is arguably evinced by the constant and frequent dissemination of marketing and advertising practices from the USA to other regions of the world, including Europe. Greece was selected as an overseas European market, in which the American brand used practically the same international advertising strategy but with a localized execution. Apart from allowing comparisons with the USA, Greece represents a unique sociocultural context that combines aspects of Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the

Middle East. The Greek civilization formed a legacy with unparalleled influence on Western civilization. Therefore, the USA and Greece serve the attempted comparison in consumer sentiment as they are two diverse sociocultural countries, but historically with significant political interaction and reciprocal social and cultural influences. Nowadays, despite their differences and similarities, Greece is on the receiving end of sociocultural trends and advertising practices from the USA.

Apart from social networks, activist advertising messages were also delivered through mass media in Greece and the USA and employed the same strategy that focused on associating the brand with LGBTQI+ empowerment and visibility enhancement. In line with common advertising practices across international markets (Taylor & Johnson, 2002), advertising execution was slightly different. Apart from using the Greek language, the activist message of the campaign launched in early 2022 in Greece portrayed stories of characters belonging to the LGBTQI+ community and attempted to establish an association with the brand's products. The activist campaign launched in early 2021 in the USA was delivered in English language and focused on the story of an LGBTQI+ household. This message also connected individuals' identities and the brand's products.

Given the comparative approach of this study, prior literature has indicated specific cultural differences between Greece and the USA. For instance, Greek society has been found to emphasize sincerity, responsibility, patriotism/ethnic pride, and spirituality, while Americans focus primarily on self-worth, individuality, and compassion (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2002). Rodman (1967) found that Greek families tend to be more patriarchal than American families, which are viewed as being more egalitarian. Thus, although both countries belong to the Western world, consumers in the two nations are likely to be culturally diverse and therefore differ in their responses to activist advertising messages.

The study sample consisted of 1,051 social media comments on two posts of a multinational brand competing in the haircare industry publicly accessible (i.e., the two posts did not require registration to the network's services to be accessed). Each post was displayed on the multinational brand's official and publicly accessible social network pages for social

media users in Greece and the USA and contained a short video advertisement (one in Greek and one in English). Of the total comments obtained (1,051), 662 were in English. They referred to the American (the USA) social media post, while the remaining 389 comments were in Greek and had to be translated before data analysis. User comments were collected manually because the social network's terms and conditions do not allow data collection using automatic means (e.g., data scraping). The manual approach ensured that the study obtained only textual data and excluded personal information (e.g., usernames, names, and surnames). Thus, the study's dataset was completely anonymized and de-identified. Overall, to ensure adherence to the GDPR regulations (i.e., Regulation (EU) 2016/679), compliance with the social networking medium's terms, and protection of the rights and well-being of social media users, this study introduced the following measures:

1. Strictly textual data were manually retrieved from the comment section of the two posts. Thus, the resulting dataset included the text of the social media users' comments, the number of likes and responses to each comment at the time of data collection (i.e., January 2023), the national context of the brand's post (i.e., the USA or Greece), the type of sentiment (i.e., positive or negative), and the sentiment score attributed to each comment (i.e., ranging from zero to one). Although manual extraction of comments was time-consuming, ensuring compliance with data scraping restrictions was necessary. Furthermore, the collection of textual data resulted in a wholly anonymous and de-identified dataset, which formed the basis for all subsequent analyses.
2. The two posts selected for comment extraction were publicly available to internet users. Thus, given that accessing the posts did not require prior registration to the social network and were not private, it was assumed that social media users were cognizant that their comments were accessible to the broader Internet community.

Lastly, the brand and social network were not identified throughout this study to minimize the risk of reverse identification (or reidentification) of individual users based on the text of their comments.

For the same purpose, none of the phrases or sentences used in the comments were reported, and the study included aggregate statistics, sentiment analysis (positive vs. negative), and identifying the most frequently occurring words in positive and negative comments. Although it is expected that the research design and protective measures introduced hinder the replicability of this analysis, they were established to meet existing regulations and ethical standards to protect the rights, privacy, and well-being of individuals.

3. RESULTS

The examination of the relationship between the national context of the activism campaign and the type of consumer sentiment it elicited (Table 1) suggests the existence of a statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 240.099$, $p < 0.001$) and substantial association (Cramer's $V = 0.478$, $p < 0.001$). 40.6% of social media users' comments about the brand activism campaign launched in Greece were positive, and 59.4% were negative. For the brand activism campaign launched in the USA, only 3.3% of the comments were positive, while 96.7% were negative. Although most comments conveyed negative sentiments in both countries, the relative share of negative comments was significantly higher in the USA.

Table 1. Activism campaign and type of sentiment

	Country	Sentiment		Total
		Negative	Positive	
Greece	Count	231	158	389
	% within Country	59.4%	40.6%	100.0%
	% within Sentiment	26.5%	87.8%	37.0%
The USA	Count	640	22	662
	% within Country	96.7%	3.3%	100.0%
	% within Sentiment	73.5%	12.2%	63.0%
Total Sample	Count	871	180	1051
	% within Country	82.9%	17.1%	100.0%
	% within Sentiment	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	82.9%	17.1%	100.0%

Note: $\chi^2 = 240.099$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.478$, $p < 0.001$; 0 cells (0%) have an expected count of less than 5; The minimum expected count is 66.62.

The bivariate relationships among the metric variables (Table 2) suggested that in both national contexts, the number of likes was significantly and posi-

Table 2. Bivariate correlations (Spearman’s Rho)

Variables		Number of likes	Number of responses	Sentiment score
Number of likes	Rho	1.000		
	p-value	n/a		
Number of responses	Rho	0.599*	1.000	
	p-value	0.000*	n/a	
Sentiment score	Rho	0.312*	0.065	1.000
	p-value	0.000*	0.145	n/a

Note: * Statistically significant correlations.

tively associated with the number of responses (Rho = 0.599, $p < 0.001$). Thus, social media comments with more likes were more likely to elicit more responses, and vice versa. Furthermore, the comments’ sentiment scores were significantly and positively associated with the number of likes (Rho = 0.312, $p < 0.001$). In other words, higher sentiment scores (i.e., more positive comments) were more likely to attract more likes from other users. Lastly, a sentiment score and a number of responses were not associated (Rho = 0.065, $p = 0.145$), indicating that neither type of sentiment (i.e., positive or negative) expressed in the comments was related to a substantially different (i.e., greater or smaller) number of responses.

The effects of national context on the metric variables of the study were examined using a series of independent sample t-tests (Table 3). The results indicated that the mean number of likes (18.61 vs. 9.98) and sentiment score (0.62 vs. 0.25) per social media user comment was statistically significantly greater for Greece than the USA.

This study generated simple word clouds to identify the most prevalent negative and positive sentiments in the social media user comments. The word clouds were prepared for each brand activism campaign separately (i.e., two for Greece and two for the USA) based on the frequency of words in the positive and negative subsamples of comments. The larger the word in each word cloud, the more frequently it appeared in the obtained textual data.

For the brand activism campaign launched in Greece (Figure 1), the most frequently occurring words in the negative subsample were “children, shame, disgrace, never, again, buy, and products.” The negative comments of the Greek subsample accused the brand of subjecting the children to content the respective online users deemed shameful. These negatively predisposed social media users also appeared to protest the campaign by threatening to withdraw from commercial or social relationships with the brand. Regarding the positive comments, the words most frequently mentioned were “well, done, congratulations, children, ad, wonderful, perfect, homophobes, and conservatives.” Thus, such users were receptive to the brand’s message and encouraged the brand for its initiative. At the same time, positive comments appear to have made frequent accusatory references to opposing individuals by associating them with prejudice (i.e., homophobia and conservatism).

For the brand activism campaign launched in the USA (Figure 2), the most frequently occurring words in the negative subsample were “child, abuse, never, products, again, buy, and disgusting.” Thus, the negative comments of the American subsample accused the brand of depicting a situation that was abusive to children. Like the Greek subsample, the negatively predisposed American social media users threatened to abstain from buying the brand’s products to express their disagreement with the message being communicated. Regarding the positive comments, the words most frequently mentioned were “beauti-

Table 3. Independent samples t-tests

Variables	Country	N	Mean	t-test	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
Number of likes	Greece	389	18.61	$t = 3.81$	37.213	1.887
	USA	662	9.98	$p < 0.001$	32.130	1.249
Number of responses	Greece	389	2.39	$t = 1.28$	5.313	0.269
	USA	662	1.71	$p = 0.200$	9.615	0.374
Sentiment score	Greece	205	0.62	$t = 15.19$	0.31	2.16%
	USA	304	0.25	$p < 0.001$	0.20	1.15%



Figure 1. Negative and positive word cloud for the campaign launched in Greece

ful, thank, love, people, message, see, and representation.” Hence, positively predisposed American users praised the brand’s message and efforts to increase the visibility of gender minorities. Furthermore, positive comments appeared to emphasize positive emotions and inclusivity.

4. DISCUSSION

Similarities and differences characterize consumer sentiment toward activist advertising messages in Greece and the USA. Because of the divisive nature of sociopolitical issues, social media users were more likely to reward positive than negative comments. They found the former to be more engaging than the latter. In other words, comments supporting the activist advertising message and, consequently, the company’s stance on the social issue attracted more

likes. This finding may be partly explained by the fact that positive comments have been found to enhance the value of brand posts and create empathy among brand fans (De Vries et al., 2012).

The second similarity observed in consumer responses to activist advertising across both countries was that most social media user comments expressed negative sentiment. Consumers in both countries may likely have opposed the social cause or idea associated with the brand and, therefore, the standardized advertising strategy being employed (Livias, 2021). The initial word frequency analysis indicates that negative comments in Greece and the USA centered their concerns around children. Thus, they perceived the main message similarly, irrespective of execution differences. Following this approach, the brand’s advertising strategy appears ineffective, as it contradicts the preferences and opinions held by

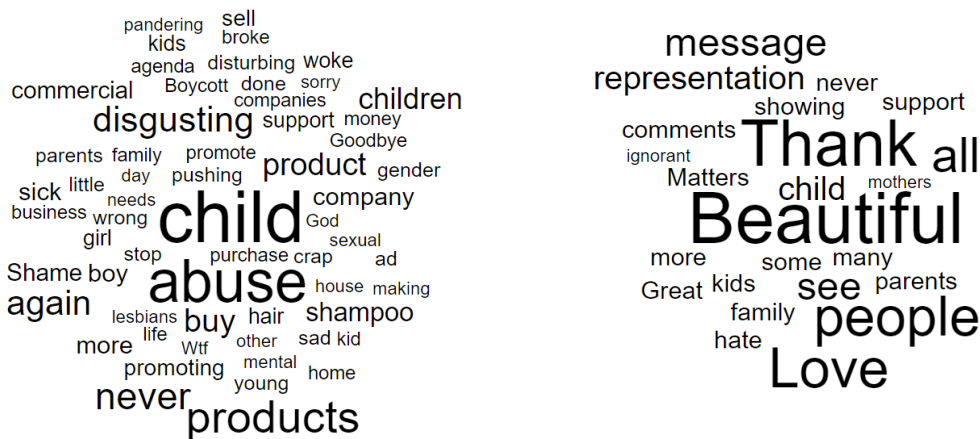


Figure 2. Negative and positive word cloud for the campaign launched in the USA

its international audience. Although marketers have been advised to drive individuals to adopt sustainable consumption practices (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021) and/or espouse their social causes (Moorman, 2020), activist brands are in danger of facing substantial consumer resistance and denial. Such resistance and denial may severely impact brands' performance and, subsequently, their ability to advance the practices or causes with which they have aligned (Livas, 2021).

Although most comments in both countries were negative, the relative share of negative comments was significantly higher in the USA than in Greece. The sheer volume of adverse reactions from the American audience may also explain the lower average sentiment score and likes per social media user comment. Considering that the activist advertising strategy of the multinational brand examined in this study was standardized while the executions were localized, this finding is subject to multiple interpretations. From one point of view, the message execution used in the American version of the campaign may have incorporated inappropriate communication tactics for local consumers (Kanso & Nelson, 2002). Alternatively, given the cultural differences between the two countries (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2002), American consumers may have been more negatively predisposed to the social cause incorporated in the activist advertising message. In this case, contrary to common international marketing practices (Taylor & Johnson, 2002), the brand's advertising strategy should have been localized to produce more favorable consumer responses (Kanso & Nelson, 2002).

When multinational companies consistently associate their brands with a social cause, they should carefully design their advertising execution(s) to

avoid misunderstanding their message and triggering negative consumer responses. To achieve this, multinational companies should identify reliable local partners, such as local advertising and marketing research agencies, which can enrich the design and implementation of activist advertising campaigns with local consumer insights. Furthermore, because consumer attitudes toward social issues may vary between diverse national contexts and consistently associating the brand with a social cause is a strategic aspect of marketing communications, a market-driving philosophy may pose considerable risks in international settings. A company's stance toward a social issue is not just a matter of strategic positioning, with which consumers may or may not relate. Since social values indicate the worldviews of individuals, companies, and institutions, consumers who oppose the company's point of view may react negatively in ways that go beyond changing their product preferences (e.g., negative word of mouth, public protests, reporting companies to consumer associations and even taking legal action against business organizations).

Although this study presents new insights into consumer response to international activist advertising, it has several limitations that offer fruitful avenues for further research. Because brand activism encompasses – but is not limited to – advertising, future studies could examine consumer sentiment toward other forms of brand activism (e.g., introduction of targeted organizational policies, partnerships, sponsorships, and product modifications). Future research should include multiple national contexts, diverse brands, and other business sectors to better understand international consumers and the impact of brand activism.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to compare consumer reactions toward a multinational brand's advertising strategy in the USA and Greece. The results show that advertising adaptation to international markets may extend to both strategic and tactical elements of advertising messages. The investigation of consumers' sentiment toward international activist advertising in the USA and Greece indicated that social media users developed similar perceptions and were generally negatively predisposed toward the communicated advertising messages. Only 3.3% of the comments were positive in the USA and 40.6% in Greece. Even though the relative share of negative comments was significantly higher in the USA than in Greece, the similarity of consumers' perceptions in both countries was evinced by the emphasis on social media user comments on the same topics. Results of a series of independent sample t-tests indicated that the mean number of likes (18.61 vs. 9.98) and sentiment score (0.62 vs. 0.25) per social media user comment was

statistically significantly greater for Greece than the USA. Thus, given the study's results and considering the characteristics of the international activist advertising campaign being examined (i.e., standardized advertising strategy with adapted creative execution), multinational companies are advised to focus on the contextual conditions of the national markets they serve and decide about message appropriateness, timing, and degree of advertising message adaptation required. The task of multinational brands is much more complex than that of their local competitors, as they are not only required to examine the adaptation of their message strategy and execution to the unique market conditions of a single country but also to continuously monitor the changing consumer values in multiple regions of the world.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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