

Using controversial values in CSR communication – analysing the Coca-Cola #loveislove campaign

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### **Abstract**

Nowadays we can witness a radical change in CSR communication: Brands are much more willing to take on controversial roles besides traditional, positive social values (like environmental protection, fight against poverty, etc.). Our study analysis this new CSR communication phenomenon through the assessment of Coca-Cola's #loveislove campaign that took a stand for homosexual relationship. The campaign took place in Hungary in August 2019. Netnographic research was conducted among the Hungarian followers of the Coca-Cola's official Facebook page. Posts, reactions and comments were analysed. Studying the comments, we observed a rather negative response, however the simple emoji reactions were dominantly positive, and the positive comments also received more likes than the negative ones. We can assume that controversial CSR results in really high publicity and also motivates large number of supporters, however it can backfire to the brand image also.

*Key words: CSR communication, Coca-Cola, #loveislove*

## **1. Introduction**

CSR was traditionally about the firm committing to the ideas of sustainability and using it in its communication and PR activities. However, this practice has changed today: now not only the generally accepted “good boy” elements (environmental protection, fight against poverty, etc.) are involved in corporate communication, but global brands also express much more controversial social values (e.g. the rights of Afro-Americans; extreme masculinity). Moreover, they make a statement in current political issues (e.g. Facebook and AirBnB stand for immigration). It seems that traditional CSR communication was discredited by greenwashing. While new CSR communication is not afraid of standing up for controversial social values and causing a scandal, even turning loyal consumers against the brand, while making earlier passive consumers into enthusiastic fans.

It is practical to differentiate corporate CSR activities from corporate CSR communication. While the former is essentially a question of management and often of logistics, whose aim is actually to be active in a socially responsible way, the latter – CSR communication – is explicitly a marketing task, a special way of corporate image building towards consumers and PR activities.

Corporate social responsibility, i.e. CSR in general terms is actually a state or corporate instrument which helps organisations to achieve their goals while considering and supporting social objectives (as well) (Jones, 1995). However, research shows that regarding social responsibility the most active companies are the ones which are also the most attacked, while those who do almost nothing hardly ever receive negative criticism (Morsing, Schultz, and Nielsen, 2008).

Companies nevertheless need to be careful what and how they communicate, as it has been proven that these messages can often generate a negative response in the case of certain groups, which can also have a negative effect on the assessment of the company (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Furthermore, stakeholders’ expectations continuously change, thus CSR communication needs to be dynamic to adapt them (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). This objective can be to achieve a better financial result and increase social welfare simultaneously (Porter & Kramer, 2006), develop a better reputation about the company through social engagement (Mutch & Aitken, 2009), or combating poverty, unemployment and the lack of education by taking use of corporate influence (Crane, Matten, and Moon, 2008). According to Schultz et al. (2013) we can look at it as an instrument which can help companies to achieve their goals, or as a political norm which conveys the ethical social or even political statement of the company. It is very important how and to whom the company communicates. Seele and Lock (2014)

differentiate 4 groups of CSR communication depending on 2 dimensions, whether the communication is internal or external and whether it is published or non-published. Furthermore, consistency and transparency are essential for effective CSR communication because these factors contribute to developing trust in stakeholders towards the company and making messages credible (Kim & Fergusson, 2018).

Nevertheless, it also needs to be considered that CSR communication carried out for the sole purpose of publicity has a negative effect on consumer trust, thus on the company's reputation (Kim, 2019). It is supported by Kim and Ferguson's (2014) research, in which they found that people are more interested in who is benefiting and how from the company's CSR activities than in other information (e.g. official declaration, spokesperson's statement).

## **2. Novel Responsibility of Brands**

It is no longer sufficient for companies to talk about merely the technical parameters of their product or service, they also need to express themselves clearly and authentically about the system of values they pursue, thereby the system of values their brand represents. The attribute of "high-quality" was eroded in the era of mass production and necessitated a more sophisticated positioning of brands, and there is also a similar phenomenon in the area of CSR communication. It is no longer enough to communicate for the consumer that the company behaves responsibly and pays attention to social and environmental aspects. It has become a basic requirement. The distinctive element may be what specific system of values a particular company advocates, and thus what values it necessarily objects to. The key objective of the paper is to present how this new, special approach has appeared in CSR communication, which, instead of the generally accepted, positive, "good boy" values (environmental protection, charity, etc.) puts forward values considered controversial within society. As a result, CSR communication brings about not only supportive but also opposing responses and groups in the environment of the brand.

## **3. Presenting the Background and Methodology of Own Research**

The key question of our research is what reaction it provokes among the followers of a brand within social media if a big brand conducts controversial CSR communication, i.e. making a stand for a value which is not evident for the entire society. The research was inspired by a CSR campaign in Hungary. In August 2019, Coca-Cola launched its "#loveislove" campaign, whose slogan "Zero Sugar, Zero Prejudice" clearly advocates love and relationship between homosexuals and every other gender identity. The campaign was timed in this period because the largest domestic festival, the Sziget Festival was organised in the same period, whose theme in 2019 was "Love Revolution", which emphasised the same

values as the Coke campaign. The first reactions were controversial as for example the MP of the governing party called on people for an open boycott in his social media profile and asked them not to drink Coca-Cola until the posters featuring homosexual couples disappeared from the streets. The indignant consumers started petitions to this end. Therefore, the posters featuring homosexual couples were replaced by posters about the product, but its rainbow-coloured label and background remained (as a symbol of diversity) (Vaskor, 2019). Although it was not the first such campaign of Coca-Cola globally, as it has stood by the LMBTQ community, the Pride, and homosexual marriage several times in other countries, in Hungary it was their first such movement. The campaign has received a great deal of attention in the online space, several articles and social media posts have discussed the topic not only nationally but also abroad.

In the research, we examined the posts related to #loveislove campaign featured on Coca-Cola's official Facebook page, as well as the reactions and comments on them with the methodology of netnography. In this connection, the comments and reactions under the posts were analysed from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. In certain cases, we compared them to posts published prior to the campaign.

In the course of our research, we examined only the followers of the page who we assumed to follow Coca-Cola's social media page because they support or have supported the brand up until this point.

#### **4. The Results of the Netnography Research**

In the campaign period, Coca-Cola published on its page in total five Facebook posts which promoted a sexual relationship and love between any genders and ran under the slogan #loveislove. Each of these five posts was published between 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> August 2019 on Facebook. Apart from these posts, the company already published a post under #loveislove on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2019, on the day of the Budapest Pride, in which it indicated for the consumer that it advocates diversity.

We examined if the posts containing a controversial message generate more or less reactions among the followers of the page compared to other general posts. For its examination we compared the 5 posts published in the campaign plus the posts on 6<sup>th</sup> July to general posts. In the case of the latter, we considered all the posts not about #loveislove published between 1<sup>st</sup> May and 4<sup>th</sup> August. They were mostly about cap-code prize-winning games related to the festival season, barbeque season and new products (vanilla flavoured Cola and Cola energy drink). The results of the analysis are included in Table 1.

Post	Interaction	Indicator		
		mean	median	std. deviation
General posts	reaction	283,4	159	362,4
	comment	54,5	17	80,7
	share	17,2	7	45,7
#loveislove campaign posts	reaction	212,2	157	193,6
	comment	42,9	16	62,3
	share	9,2	6	9,3
General posts	reaction	7822,7	4150	7211,4
	comment	1378,0	897,5	1156,0
	share	594,5	62	998,7
##loveislove campaign posts in august	reaction	9280,0	4200	7047,1
	comment	1637,6	998	1095,0
	share	708,0	83	1058,1

Table 1 The characteristics of the reactions, comments and shares on the posts on the Coca-Cola's Facebook page

To understand the table, it is important to clarify that the indexes were calculated twice (mean, median, and standard deviation) in the case of both the general posts and the campaign posts. It was needed because in the case of general posts there were two posts which triggered much greater interest than the other general posts, thus biased the index values. One of the posts was about environmental protection, while the other was related to the launch of the new, vanilla flavoured coke. The former got 1800 reactions and 292 shares, while the latter got 1400 reactions and 354 comments. In the case of the #loveislove campaign, we calculated the indexes in more than one way because the post of 6<sup>th</sup> July which was published at the time of the Budapest Pride with #loveislove caption was out of the period of the August campaign, and it also generated much less activity, thus it biased the index values.

The indexes of the #loveislove campaign posts show a much higher value in each case meaning that these posts triggered much higher activity among the followers of the page compared to the posts with a general message.

We also calculated the reactions (likes) to these posts. Reactions here refer to the number of likes to a post, which we call reaction because users can now choose from 6 options when they like something. Based on this, users can react with a simple like, heart, laughing face, surprised face, crying face and angry face to a post. The table clearly shows that examining the average number of reactions (even if we consider the higher average for the general posts and the lower average for the campaign), on average 27.5 times more reactions were given to the campaign posts. I.e. this is the smallest difference between the

average numbers of reactions examining the two groups of posts. Among the campaign posts, the Coca-Cola's profile picture on 7<sup>th</sup> August, featuring a Cola with a rainbow-coloured label, got the most reactions, 21900 pc in total. Of the campaign posts in August, even the one with the lowest number of reactions got 4100 pc. On the other hand, for general posts the highest number of reactions was 1800 pc. It all clearly proves that the campaign posts in fact generated more reactions among followers.

We can examine the number of comments on the posts in the same way. The table indicates that the average number of comments on campaign posts, considering the smallest difference, is 25.3 times the average number of comments on general posts. We have also examined if controversial posts are better than more general posts in terms of publicity. While general posts are shared on average 6-7 times, for #loveislove posts the number of shares is on average 62 and 83 respectively (depending on which calculation we consider). It means a difference of minimum 34.5 times. *We can conclude that posts with a controversial message generate more activity and higher publicity among the followers of the page than other posts with a more general message.*

In the next step we took a more in-depth investigation by analysing whether the reactions on the campaign posts were positive or negative. In the research, we considered the simple like and heart to be a positive reaction, the sad and angry face to be a negative reaction, while the surprised and laughing face to be a neutral reaction as in their cases it cannot be clearly defined if the user has a positive or negative attitude toward the content. Based on this, we determined the proportion of each categories (positive, negative, neutral) and we calculated an average (Table 2). We found that on average 81.1 per cent of the reactions on the posts were positive, 16.5 per cent were negative, while 2.4 per cent were neutral. If we consider only heart reactions (and not likes) to be positive, their number is still higher in the case of each post compared to the total of angry and crying reactions.

<b>Date of share</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Neutral</b>
06/07/2019	89,9	9,7	0,4
04/08/2019	82,5	15,7	1,8
07/08/2019	80,5	15,0	4,5
07/08/2019	76,6	20,5	2,8
07/08/2019	78,7	19,4	1,8
09/08/2019	78,4	18,8	2,8
<b>Mean</b>	81,1	16,5	2,3

Table 2 Distribution of comments on the posts of #loveislove campaign based on attitude, %

In the next step we took a more qualitative approach by analysing the expressed positive or negative attitude of the comments on the first post of the campaign period. We chose it because it was the first post during the campaign, and it contained the photos featuring homosexual couples, thereby causing deeper indignation within society. The number of comments on the posts and the response comments was in total 3200 pc, out of which the number of primary comments was in total 1241 pc. We analysed the 500 most relevant ones because it was the amount Facebook allowed to display. Out of 500 examined comments, 315 comments could be specifically categorised based on its positive or negative tone. The remaining 185 comments contained irrelevant contribution in terms of the campaign, occasionally tagging a friend under the post, or it was impossible to decide if it has a positive or negative tone due to irony, thus we ignored them in the analysis. The examination revealed that 64.4 per cent of the 315 comments were negative, while only 35.6 per cent were positive.

Nevertheless, it could be worth examining whether these comments were formulated about the represented cause (homosexuality) of about the brand or possibly both. We found that most of the negative comments were evidently against the brand and not specifically against the values formulated in the message. 47.3 per cent of the 203 negative comments contained specific content about rejecting and boycotting the brand, 30 per cent could not identify with the communicated values, while 22.7 per cent included disagreement with both the brand and the values. It shows that 70 per cent of the comments contained an attitude against the brand, while 52.7 per cent against the system of values. Many comments included the boycott of Coca-Cola and that they would rather consume the product of the rival brand, Pepsi from then on. We can conclude that the negative comments were directed against Coca-Cola as a brand, rather than against the represented cause.

On the contrary, in examining positive comments we found that 58 per cent agreed specifically with the communicated values and message, 15.2 per cent explicitly advocated the brand, while the remaining 26.8 per cent mentioned both in the comment. It shows that 84.8 per cent of the positive comments included the represented cause, while only 42 per cent included the support of the brand. It clearly suggests that in the case of positive comments the followers of the brand agree with the message communicated by the brand, rather than support the brand.

Furthermore, we examined the amount of reactions generated by positive and negative comments from the other followers of the page and how many response comments were given. We examined this first by defining the positive or negative tone of a comment and then looking at the number of reactions and response comments on it, and finally adding up their

numbers in the case of both negative and positive comments. The results are summarised by Table 3.

Type of the comments	Number of reactions, pc	Average number of reactions, pc	Number of comments, pc	Average number of comments, pc
Positive	6822	60,9	591	5,3
Negative	3881	19,1	379	1,9
Total	10703	34,0	970	3,1

Table 3 Number of reactions and response comments made on the comments based on the type of the comment

Regarding the number of reactions, we found that positive comments overall received much more reactions than the negative ones. In many cases, a positive comment got hundreds of reactions from other followers. Examining the reactions qualitatively, it can be generally established that at least 80 per cent of them were positive in each case, i.e. the supporters of the comment were more likely to give a reaction. The number of reactions on the negative comments is overall lower than on the positive ones. In addition, it should be noted that the “*I feel I’d rather have Pepsi...*” comment generated 1900 reactions from other users, which is almost half of the negative reactions. This comment received the most reactions out of all the examined comments. It all indicates that the positive comments generated more reactions and, furthermore, if we look at the number of reactions per positive and negative comments respectively, we find that the average number of reactions on positive comments is more than three times higher than on the negative comments.

## 5. Conclusions

Our paper aimed to highlight a very interesting current phenomenon, which transforms CSR communication. Traditionally, this activity was communication serving PR purposes and providing an attractive and likeable image of the company (or brand), in which the main objective was to protect the environment and solve social problems. Then the credibility damaged by green washing and audience disinterested in one-dimensional messages due to unified, large-scale CSR communication have made this field of marketing start to find new ways in the past years. We can see the first signs of this process when well-known brands of global companies venture into a so-far almost unfamiliar communication area and formulate messages reflecting a profound system of values, far from being conventional.

We found that the posts of the controversial campaign generated a much higher level of activity among the Coca-Cola followers in the social media. Examining the reactions, the comments and the shares, the level of activity for a campaign post was multiple compared to general posts. Consequently, we found a higher degree of activity, interaction and publicity.

We established that the reactions on #loveislove posts are predominantly positive, representing eighty per cent or a higher proportion within likes. However, nearly two thirds of the analysed comments had a negative tone, i.e. in this respect the campaign generated predominantly negative responses from the followers. It should also be noted that both the positive and the negative comments received supportive reactions, but in a much higher number for the comments having a positive tone. It indicates that although it is true that the negative comments are predominant, the positive ones got much more support, so it is possible that those who have a positive attitude toward Coca-Cola and the message it communicates are less willing to write a further comment and more likely to support the earlier contributions with reactions (likes). It also should be emphasised that most of the negative comments disparaged the brand, and not the social value. While the positive comments mostly supported the social cause and not the brand itself.

We can conclude that controversial communication generates a very wide but low-key (limited only to reactions – likes) positive response among the supporters of the represented cause. At the same time, it encourages the opponents of the represented cause to formulate a loud counter-opinion (manifested in comments). Based on this, we cannot make a clear decision about whether the campaign had an overall positive or negative effect on the brand and its sales. It remains questionable whether expressing controversial opinions actually means that companies now establish and openly advocate an authentic credo, or they emphasise a profound value simply for business purposes, considering it merely for its marketing communication potential.

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