The Elaboration of Ethical Brand Crises on Social Media

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Through a qualitative content analysis, we investigate the reaction of the social media audience to an ethical brand crisis. The emerging findings suggest that consumers engage in a consumer identity work adopting different strategies: they sublimate or minimize the crisis (defense) or show the ideological structure of marketing (criticism).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A crisis is a severe occurrence in the life of an organization threatening its own existence (Coombs 2007). Crises that breach the ethical values of a brand can impair the root values of the company. Marketplace resources — including brands — can be highly contested by opposing views of society (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2012). Disadvantaged or stigmatized segments of society adopt marketplace resources as an intermediate step to affirm their legitimacy before a wider legitimacy is reached in other sectors of the society.

Most of the extant literature on consumer identity politics (Sandikci and Ger 2010; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Thompson 2013; Üstünler and Holt 2010) focuses on situation of normal market practices. In these situations, consumers affirm their identity rights by using (or boycotting) products and brands, and by adopting consumption practices as identity markers. Yet, the marketplace inertia tends to weaken and postpone the effects of the consumer identity political change. A brand crisis brings instead a sudden and serious break in the normal life of a brand and thus opens the opportunity for a radical change in the brand meanings and it may represent an occasion for the stigmatized segments to prove their discrimination and assert a change in society.

Conventional crisis communication adopts a Public Relations approach (Coombs 2007). This top-down managerial approach is effective and consolidated. However, social media publics ask for a renewed mindset that would take into account the power of the audience. Social media require companies to adopt a stakeholder theory (Xu and Li 2013) to approach crisis communication, so that what the audience say about the crisis is as relevant as what the organization says. The research question is how consumers debate online around the apology by the company after an ethical brand crisis.

In 2013, during an interview, the president of the Barilla group expressed a view that triggered intense protests. According to his declaration, the advertising by Barilla will never feature a family of gay persons, because the brand Barilla — though it respects gays — would represent the traditional idea of family. After the interview, Guido Barilla released a video where he apologized and reassured that he and the company have the utmost respect for gays.

Through a qualitative content analysis (Spiggle 1994; Strauss and Corbin 1990), using Atlas.ti, we analyzed the Facebook comments published for a period of three months under the video of apologies by Barilla. The corpus of data is made of 41,000 words. We complemented the content analysis with an examination — inspired by netnography (Kozinets 2015) — of the online material generated around the crisis.

A good part of the comments obviously concerns in a direct way the issue of civil rights. Other comments take a different approach in their defense or criticism of the brand. Comments expressing agreement with the Barilla position adopt two major discursive strategies: sublimation and minimization of the crisis. In the first strategy (sublimation), commenters defend the right of the brand representative to express any opinion, even unpopular and questionable ones. Minimization consists in considering the statement by Barilla simply as a marketing strategy that would be neutral in terms of ethics, reducing the crisis to a simple marketing affair without a real infringement of ethics. The critics combine and reverse the sublimation and reduction strategies employed by the brand defenders. In this critical position, marketing is not a simple company function detached from ethics; marketing is instead a powerful ideology (Firat 2012), that has to be updated and cleaned from biases. The two sides of sublimation and minimization are tied together by critics to affirm a holistic vision of marketing, which should express the higher values of civil rights through its tools and techniques.

The online audience here analyzed does not show the dynamic of change in their rhetorical positions, differently from professional stakeholders directly touched by a crisis (Vallaster and von Wallpach 2013). The online interaction is often limited to reiteration of one’s own opinion and a series of attacks and counter-attacks with no further articulation. There is no synthesis, but rather a positional battle of opposing ideas. This structure of the conversation may be due to the structure of the social network analyzed. On social networks, in occasion of a crisis, it may happen that comments add to each other, without a real interaction and there is a risk of polarization (Yardi and boyd 2010), preventing the formation of a discussion generating new ideas that synthesize opposite views.

The emerging findings may provide some contributions. First, in most extant studies, the subjects affirm their identity politics via a personal use of products (Sandikci and Ger 2010; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Thompson 2013; Üstünler and Holt 2010). In the case examined, the subjects are not necessarily consumers of the brand; they are interested in the ethical issues raised during the crisis. In addition, the product (pasta) is a fast-moving consumer good, which is not able per se to signal the identity project of the individual. In this situation, the subjects focus more on the ethical discussion and less on product-related issues. Differently from other more complex products, fast-moving consumer good may have less intense ethical or political underpinnings. The crisis gives the opportunity to reassess that a product is just a product (the reduction strategy of the brand defenders) or, on the contrary, to discover that fast-moving consumer goods can be useful to a project of consumer identity politics. The unfolding discussion can be a rich elaboration of different positions. Second, to affirm their legitimate identity, consumers normally build a whole lifestyle through many brands. In the case of the brand crises, consumers pick one single brand and a specific crisis and scale it up to a wider discussion. Consumption in a normal setting seems to need an aggregation of different brands to state an identity position, while a brand crisis allows for a sharper focus on a single brand, used to state a wide identity politics strategy.

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