

# TRAJECTORY

Political Brands

October 2020



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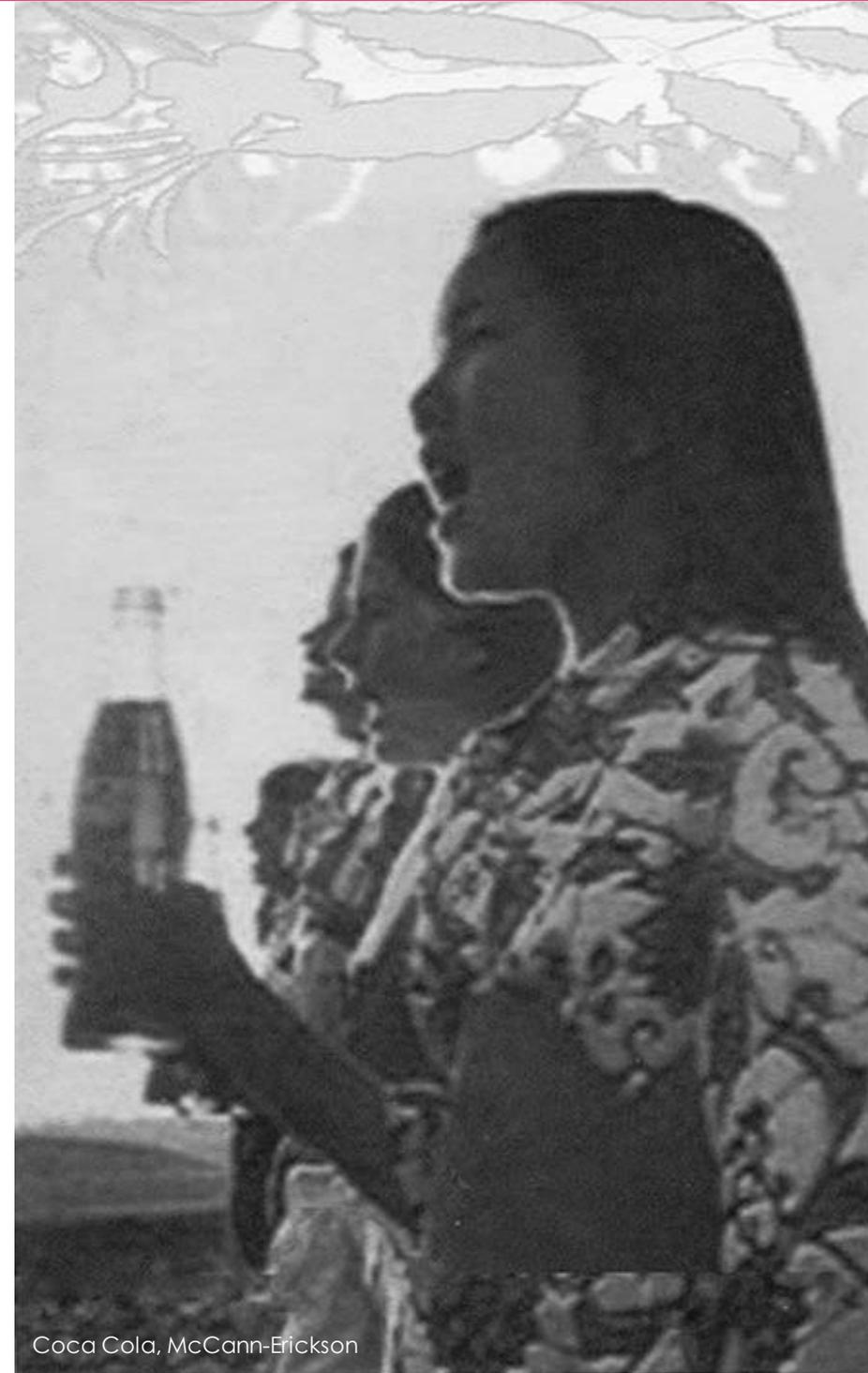
## Introduction: Becoming Political

Things have always moved quickly in the world of brands. For every success story, every "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke", there's a hundred marketing and brand choices that fail to hit the mark.

The last decade has only served to make life more complicated. As it's become harder for us all to remain passive observers in the increasingly divisive and fractious age of Trump and Brexit, it has become just as difficult – untenable even – for brands to stay out of the realm of politics. Where most brands once choose to avoid politics, it's now become a requirement for many – and for some an avenue to wider recognition.

For brands, the growing polarisation in society has denatured the centre-ground – left the once fertile grounds of inoffensive and non-political marketing a far less appealing place. At best, brands that decided not to engage in the new norms of social polarisation risked being deemed irrelevant. At worst, their lack of action or comment on social or political issues has been seen as a statement through its very absence. In branding, as in politics, being apolitical has become political.

These issues have been central to the Political Brands trend we've been monitoring for the last few years. Yet with a momentous late-2020 on the horizon, (between the US election and the end of the Brexit transition period) an update is in order.





Whilst the trend towards greater polarisation has continued, the last two years have also seen new factors come into play.

- Authenticity and consistency remain key for Western-centric brands – with rising public awareness of issues making avoiding performative action important.
- Growing public consensus on issues such as climate change and the pandemic response may have opened space for brands to be political and socially relevant without risking controversy.
- The rise of the Chinese market shines new light on the difficulties brands face in balancing global and local dynamics in a globalised world.

This report seeks to draw these threads together and bring the understanding of the brand environment right up to the present date – before exploring the implications of our findings for brands seeking to navigate this complex environment.

**There may not be one simple answer.**

## Section One – Continued Polarisation and the Polemicist Brand

An awful lot has happened in the two years since we last covered this trend in depth. And yet, in many ways, not that much might immediately appear to have changed. The central ideas we discussed in our previous works are still valid.

- Political polarisation has led to the loss of the centre-ground: not just in politics, but also in the world of political brands.
- Brands have options in how to deal with this; lean into political debate; stay out of it entirely; or try own another (less controversial) issue.
- All approaches come with their own risks.

If anything, the events of the last two years have seen these ideas become even more compelling.

Trump's presidency has continued to climb the heights of controversy, whilst Brexit has dragged on – even through an election and changes of party leadership across the British political spectrum. Meanwhile debates over cultural issues have continued or, in the case of the Black Lives Matter movement, been brought to a new level of prominence.

The last few months of 2020 promise little in the way of a reprieve from this social and political polarisation. The US election in early November might offer the possibility of a change in direction within American politics, and the end of the Brexit transition period on the 31st of December may end that particular part of the Brexit odyssey, but it seems unlikely that either will mark an immediate transition back towards more cooperative times – if at all.

For brands, this growing polarisation has resulted in the erosion of the once perennially safe, sometimes bland but often successful, middle-ground of apolitical advertising and politics-averse company policy that had long been the defining characteristic of the Western brand environment.

Research by [YouGov](#) and [MorningConsult](#) has shown that over half of consumers in both the UK and the US now actively see the political stances of brands as a driver of their purchase choices, well above figures from a decade ago. Socio-political issues have always been intrinsically linked to and intertwined with markets and the brands within them, but where it may have once been tacit and largely ignored, bar the few brands that have always relished the chance to dive headfirst into controversy, it has now become almost impossible to avoid.





### Heads in the Sand

Some brands have continued to try to avoid the discussion, maintaining a trajectory that attempts to keep them out of the sphere of socio-political issues.

Yet whilst this `business-as-usual` approach might be possible for small, locally based companies, it has left larger firms open to criticism.

- Paperchase famously saw the [sharp-edge](#) of this trend, when its continued collaboration with the Daily Mail on advertised giveaways led to heavy criticism from elements within the British Twittersphere and political Left – eventually leading to the brand ending association with the paper.
- More recently, Facebook has been the most publicly criticised of any major brand for its `head-in-the-sand` approach to socio-political issues. [Facebook](#) has finally moved to ban many of the most extreme groups and individuals active on the site, but only after months of controversy and damage to the brand itself.

Avoiding these issues does not mean they go away – instead it forces brands into reactive damage control, rather than proactive behaviour.

### The Proactive Political Brand

Not all brands have avoided the issues of the day. A significant proportion have instead decided that the best course of action is to pin their proverbial flags to the mast – in some cases basing their brand marketing around specific issues and in others proactively heading off areas in which their brand may have inadvertently strayed into the realms of politics.

This way of doing things often deliberately courts controversy or adversity from one or another group but provides both publicity and (if the choice of issue is made correctly) goodwill from other consumer groups.

Strong examples of this sort of proactive brand action include:

- Sainsbury's [recent campaign](#) around Black Lives Matter, which publicly requested racists not shop in its stores whilst also introducing race and ethnicity training for its senior leaders alongside new investment in minority-ethnic staff and a pay gap review into wage structures amongst employees.
- The American-based firm Goodyear Tires move to [ban](#) staff from wearing pro-Trump clothing when at work – whilst continuing to allow employees to wear items related to Black Lives Matter and other equality related movements.
- Fred Perry, the clothing brand, which [halted production](#) of one of its signature polo shirts after it had been adopted as the unofficial uniform of the American far-right Proud Boys movement – with the company explicitly criticising far-right politics in a linked statement.

These moves each move drew criticism from vocal right-wing groups online but had no long-term negative effect on sales. If anything, for some brands the controversy is part of the appeal – the choice of prominent right-wingers, including [Laurence Fox](#), to publicly boycott Sainsbury's in light of their support for BLM could well have been welcomed by the company. The `backlash` itself can serve to create further publicity and strengthen the brand's position.



## A Gentler Approach?

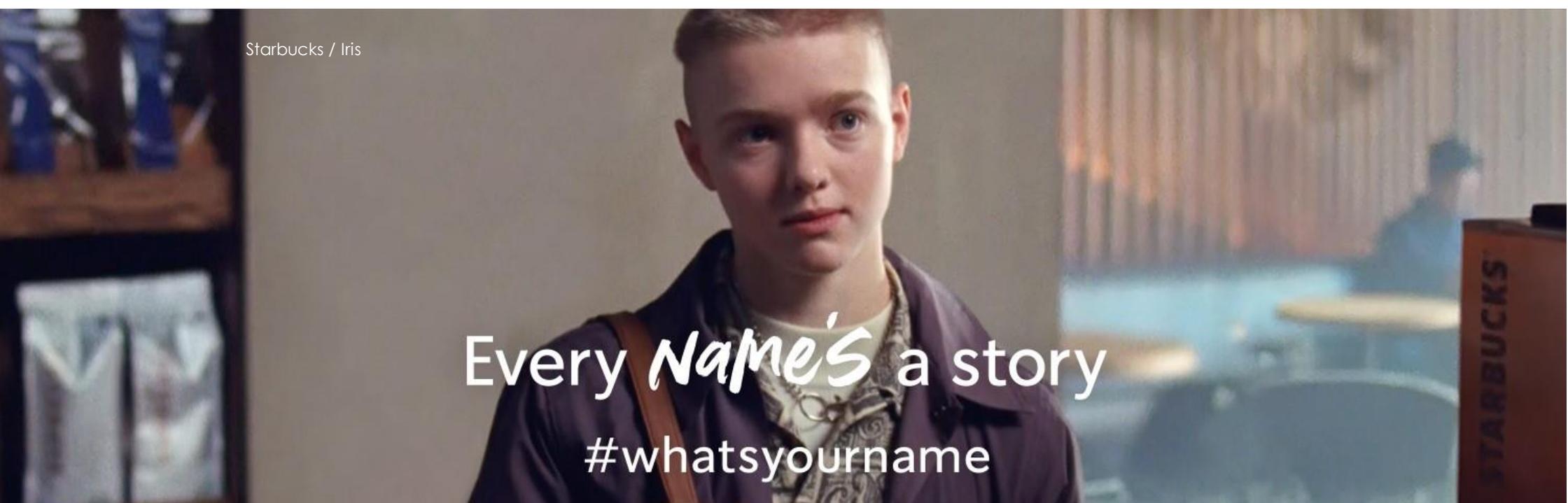
That's not to say there aren't ways to bring a softer touch to divisive issues.

Starbucks' [`Every Name's a Story`](#) campaign worked to celebrate transgender lives and the real life stories of trans individuals – bringing a genuinely tactful approach to a sometimes controversial topic. Whilst the brand was criticised by some for cases of misgendering that had occurred in its stores, its choice to highlight the trans experience and support donations to the trans youth charity Mermaids is an example of how brands can deal with divisive issues in less divisive ways.

Whether aiming for controversy, or trying to find a lighter touch, these campaigns positioned the companies as forthright supporters of prevailing social issues going into the future. What unites these success stories is the concerted unification of brand statements and marketing *with* genuine action taken by the company itself. Increasingly the risk brands face when pursuing an actively political stance lies not in courting *too much* controversy or offending the wrong consumer group but stems from a perceived lack of authenticity or consistency within a brand's actions.

Dissonance between what a brand says and what a brand *does* has, in the age of Twitter and global news, never been more obvious. This is where the danger lies for brands that make the decision to involve themselves in socio-political issues. The rewards can be high, bringing relevancy to a brand and positioning it ahead of the curve on these issues – but half-hearted, inauthentic, or performative actions can and will backfire.

Starbucks / Iris

A young trans person with short blonde hair, wearing a purple jacket over a patterned shirt, stands in a Starbucks store. The background shows a Starbucks counter and a barista. The text 'Every Name's a story' and '#whatsyourname' is overlaid on the image.

Every *Name's* a story  
#whatsyourname



### The Dangers of Brand Dissonance

Many brands experienced this in light of the outpouring of support for the Black Lives Matter movement after the death of George Floyd in May 2020 – with [L'Oréal](#), [Amazon](#), and various other major brands being heavily criticised for posting material in support of BLM despite a lack of general support for the black equality movement being present *in their wider corporate actions*.

Pepsi managed to foster similar criticism in 2017 with its painfully tone-deaf [`Live for Now`](#) advert – in which Kendall Jenner and a can of Pepsi ended police violence and peacefully resolved a protest clearly designed to evoke that year's Black Lives Matter marches.

Elsewhere a lack of consistency throughout company structures can lead to subsidiary brands being unable to distance themselves from their parent organisations – and being deemed inauthentic in their positioning on issues.

[Ben & Jerry's](#) the popular (and overtly liberal) ice-cream brand found itself being criticised from both sides of the political aisle when it condemned the UK government's immigration policy. This led to criticism for its *`virtue signalling`* on one hand, and on its ownership by the multinational Unilever on the other – a company linked to various scandals involving, but not limited to, deforestation and tax avoidance.

For all brands, the difficulty remains finding an issue that allows you to be relevant – but one that doesn't clash with the current (or historical) actions of the brand or broader company itself. With any perceived dissonance called out painfully quickly by modern consumers the temptation may remain to avoid the controversial. Being apolitical no longer holds the same advantages, but ground may be opening up for brands to be political *without courting controversy*.

## Section Two – Growing Consensus: A Safe Space for Brands?

Rising political and social polarisation might have removed much of the centre-ground for brands, but that's not to say there aren't still opportunities for brands to position themselves on issues that, whilst relevant, are not as controversial or as risky as other more divisive subjects.

Some of these have existed in the background for quite a while, but only recently reached a level of consensus and prominence that makes them worth pursuing, whilst others have been more recent arrivals to the spectrum of issues brands have seen as accessible. Yet wider appeal is not without its own dangers – these broader issues present more space in which brands can be found to be inauthentic or insincere.

The two most prominent of these `safer` issues as they stand now are on social care and support for those suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic, a newer and painfully contemporary issue, and climate change – which within the UK and Europe, if not quite yet in the US, has slowly but surely become a topic on which the overwhelming majority of individuals think something must be done.

The [British Social Attitudes Survey](#) shows that 93% of the British public now think that climate change is real, with the figure stable across all generations, and similar numbers are found across most of Western Europe. Meanwhile the shared experience of the coronavirus pandemic means that brands, where they're willing to back their statements with actions, have been a welcome helping hand for many.



## Authenticity is Key

Two strong examples of how these new areas of consensus can be utilised to help a brand do good *and* look good have been:

- eBay's `Individually brilliant, Stronger as One` campaign, in which the company provides support for its vendors whilst also shining a spotlight on the good its sellers do for their local communities. The message is clear: at a time when consumers are supporting small and independent businesses seen as disproportionately affected by the pandemic, eBay is the big guy helping out the little guy.
- IKEA's new promise to buy-back and recycle old furniture which not only provides great publicity whilst going some way to future-proof the company against criticism over its `fast-furniture` model but also clearly ties positive and tangible brand action to the issue at hand.

Both the eBay and IKEA campaigns understand the underlying requirement for that combination of authenticity and consistency, even when brands situate themselves within issues that may avoid the controversy spawned elsewhere.

For brands looking for a space in which to be active and present on a socio-political issue, whilst avoiding the more contentious grounds of overtly political subjects, there is room here to operate in a way that fulfils both aspects. There remains that ever-present need for authentic action, and the widespread appeal of these issues means any failure to meet that requirement can be more damaging for brands than it might elsewhere, but as long as the social consensus on these challenges continues there will be room for brands to operate within this safer space.



### Section Three – Further Afield, but Close to Home

Of course not all brands, or all political brands, confine themselves just to Western markets. There's quite literally a whole world out there.

Yet every layer of expansion can add another layer of difficulty for brands trying to appeal to multiple markets – especially where those markets, and the consumers active within them, may have drastically different views on social or political issues.

These `culture clashes` have happened most commonly to brands that operate within both Western and Chinese markets. We've discussed the idea of `Brands in the Age of China` before – but as China has risen in importance and belligerence in the global market, and as consumers in the West have become more attuned to any dissonance in brand actions (even on a global scale), these clashes have become a far more regular occurrence.

How these have been dealt with not only provides lessons in how international macro-brands operate across multiple markets but also provides a glimpse at how brands might be forced to perform at a geographically smaller level – if polarisation continues closer to home.



## Changing for China

The huge internal Chinese market and its rapid growth in demand for imports has left foreign brands scrambling for ways to monetise Chinese consumers – often altering their brand's presentation within that market to more closely align with consumer, and *government*, sentiments in the region.

Disney's attempts to break into the Chinese market is probably the clearest example of how brands have altered their advertising, their stances, and even their products to fit within this culturally (and politically) different region.

- Advertising material for the recent [Star Wars](#) trilogy was altered to less heavily feature it's black and minority ethnic stars within the Chinese market.
- The 2016 Marvel film, [Doctor Strange](#), saw the ethnicity of one of its main characters changed from Tibetan to Celtic (in both the Chinese and global film release) in order to appease Chinese government censors.

This sort of shift by brands, often a prerequisite of getting past Chinese import laws, let alone appealing to Chinese consumers, has been occurring in some shape or another for decades.

The Ford Motor Company's breakout into the Chinese market throughout the 90s and early 2000s was heavily tied to its willingness to refilm [adverts](#) for Chinese consumers, and its close work with the Chinese government to ensure advertising met state censorship rules – avoiding the showing of cars undertaking dangerous manoeuvres and largely only involving male, and Asian, drivers. Other firms have similarly followed suit – usually without much notice from Western consumers.

That's changed over the past few years. The growing awareness and interest consumers show in the actions of brands on political and social issues has coincided with information about those actions becoming more readily available and more readily transferable across the world, through Facebook, Twitter, and all sorts of (mostly online) avenues.





### International Awareness and Global Criticism

Jo Malone, the perfume brand, is just one example of this in action. The brand released its current Chinese advertising campaign earlier this year – altering one of its Western-aimed adverts to align with the perceived consumer preferences of the Chinese market. The original advert featured the black actor John Boyega, in a personal and self-produced homage to his life and family – but the edit for Chinese markets, almost a shot-for-shot copy, crucially [replaced Boyega with an Asian actor](#).

This removal of non-white and non-Asian actors from China-bound advertising may not be uncommon – Ford and other early entrants to the Chinese market did much the same thing back in the 90s and early 00s.

The difference this time was that the advert Jo Malone chose to copy across was one that in the West they'd lauded as a celebration of non-white culture in light of the Black Lives Matter movement. John Boyega himself weighed in on the matter, quitting his role as a brand ambassador and criticising the brand for appropriating both his own experiences and those of the wider black population. With Twitter soon up in arms over the changes, this time people noticed.

Meanwhile Disney found itself criticised in the West over its newest and most China-centric film, [Mulan](#), when it turned out the company had filmed scenes in Xinjiang Province in China – the centre of Chinese state repression against the Uyghur population – despite the company's support for liberal movements in the West.

Crucially the brands were now criticised for not maintaining their stance on socio-political issues *across the entire global market*. With consumers now globally aware, there's nowhere to hide.

Consumers are now more able than ever to see where there is dissonance in brand actions – on an increasingly global scale.

## Global vs. Local

For international brands the difficulty is now that globalisation means they not only operate at a global level but are scrutinised at a global level. With cultural and socio-political values still differing from country-to-country it may just be impossible to please everybody – but that's no relief to any brands facing criticism.

There's also implications for the future of brands operating at a smaller scale than the global market. In the same way that different consumer attitudes at an international level have led to the sort of issues experienced by Jo Malone and Disney, there could be similar implications if the sort of polarisation we've explored earlier in this Trajectory continue in Western markets.

We've already seen one such example in Netflix's threat to pull filming from the US state of [Georgia](#) if the state legislature passed its controversial anti-abortion laws – the brand preferring to take a stance on a national issue rather than continue to benefit from the state's tax rebates.

If views on social and political issues continue to move apart here in the West, even between regions within countries, then how do political brands respond? How might a campaign that takes a pro-European stance play in North London compared to Essex, or a brand taking a pro-abortion stance go down in rural Texas compared to metropolitan New York? These sorts of issues are already contentious as is, but further polarisation could make them more so still, and bring the difficulties international brands already face in dealing with multiple audiences closer to home.



## Section Four – What Does This Mean?

### A Complex Environment

There's no one silver bullet for how brands should deal with the changing brand environment – or how to navigate what's becoming an increasingly confusing world for most people: let alone most companies. What's certain though is that brands *need* to be constantly aware of the effects of their actions, or inaction, around certain issues. Brands can no longer operate in a vacuum – either in terms of their position of socio-political issues or in regard to the reactions of consumers. Growing polarisation, rising consumer awareness, and the modern internet's drive towards global connectedness have put paid to that. With the centre-ground eroded away, brands have found themselves incentivised, required even, to take a stance on social or political issues – even where that leads to controversy.

That doesn't look like it's going to change anytime soon.

### Finding an Issue

For some brands the controversy may be part of the appeal, but as the political cycle has moved on there have been opportunities for brands to be socially relevant on urgent and more widely accepted issues – such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change – without risking controversy. This still comes with its own risks though – a lack of controversy can, in the world of short attention spans and 24-hour news cycles, lead to a similar lack of publicity.

### A Gentler Way?

Some brands are showing that there could be a middle ground between these two extremes – bringing a gentler and more inclusive approach to controversial topics in a way that brings relevancy without belligerence. Achieving this though, in a polarised and rapidly shifting world, is no easy task.

### Globalised Difficulties

Meanwhile global brands have been finding themselves caught between globalised products and an information economy that can span the width of the globe in seconds on one hand, and the localised values of consumers on the other. Adjusting a brand, especially one that's taken a stand on socio-political issues, to fit into markets with drastically different consumer values leaves little room to manoeuvre.

## Going Forward

If there's one key takeaway for political brands, it's that **consistency** and **authenticity** are now *the* defining characteristics by which any brand campaign or stance on an issue is judged. Consumers are more aware, quicker to judge, and less forgiving of any dissonance between what a brand says and how a brand acts.

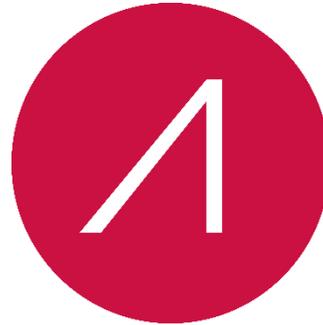
For Western-centric brands, whether pursuing a deliberately provocative stance, seeking areas of consensus, or attempting to bring a softer touch to socio-political issues, a lack of either consistency or authenticity will undermine any such campaign.

For political brands operating at an international level, in multiple markets, pursuing these two becomes far harder. They have only a few options here: refuse to compromise on their social stances, and risk limiting their reach in other markets; or take a regional approach but leave themselves open to criticism from elsewhere. Both come with their own drawbacks, and the choice of which of the two options to pursue comes down to what the brand values more – its reputation in its home market, or its market penetration elsewhere.

The concern is that as polarisation continues within Western economies, the difficulty global brands face in approaching multiple markets with acutely different cultural values might filter through to national, and even regional, markets. That could make what is currently a hard job for political brands, already being persistently judged on their authenticity and consistency, harder still.

As the decade continues, it won't be easy for brands to chart the right course between controversy and credibility, publicity and relevancy.

## But then when has it ever been?



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