



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## Zara removes campaign after critics call it insensitive to Israel-Hamas war

Olanrewaju Oluremi Egunlae <sup>1,\*</sup>, Jude Shagan Azai <sup>1</sup> and Katayoon Faraji <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Supply Chain Management & Marketing, Whitman School of Management, Syracuse University, Syracuse, USA.

<sup>2</sup> Business Administration, Whitman School of Management, Syracuse University, Syracuse, USA.

International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2024, 13(01), 234–238

Publication history: Received on 21 July 2024; revised on 02 September 2024; accepted on 05 September 2024

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2024.13.1.1618>

### Abstract

The Zara ad campaign, "The Jacket" is a case study that illustrates the complex challenges in modern marketing. Despite Zara's assertion that the campaign was conceived before the war, the public's perception of insensitivity toward the Israel-Hamas conflict led to significant consequences. This incident illuminates the pivotal role of marketing managers in navigating societal complexities and anticipating diverse interpretations. It prompts reflection on the delicate equilibrium between artistic expression and societal sensibilities within marketing strategies. The Zara case underscores the necessity for astute strategic foresight and proactive measures to navigate intricate socio-political landscapes. It emphasizes the profound impact of marketing campaigns and advocates for a nuanced, inclusive approach that upholds diverse perspectives while advancing brand narratives.

**Keywords:** Social Sensitivity; Digital Marketing; Public Backlash; Zara; Israel-Hamas Conflict

### 1 Introduction

In the dynamic realm of contemporary marketing, the intersection between brand promotion and societal sensitivities often presents a challenging landscape for companies. The recent controversy surrounding Zara's ad campaign, "The Jacket," exemplifies this intricate interplay. Despite assertions of the campaign's creation preceding the Israel-Hamas conflict, public outcry over perceived insensitivity thrust the campaign into a maelstrom of criticism. This incident serves as a compelling case study highlighting the complex nature of marketing strategies in today's interconnected world, especially on digital platforms. The following discussion delves into the nuances of this controversy, emphasizing the role of marketing managers, the intricacies of societal interpretation, and the broader implications for brand narratives in an increasingly socially conscious consumer environment.

### 2 A Paper on Brand Promotion (Digital & Social Media Marketing)

The ad campaign, which was called "The Jacket," reminded some users of Palestinians in the rubble of Gaza. Zara said it shot the campaign before the war began (Fadulu, 2023). When it comes to marketing, promotion is often times a critical and vital component of the marketing strategy (Marshall and Johnston, 2023). Because products and services are often at various stages of their life cycle at different times, different promotional strategies may be deployed to advertising – usually a mix of the ones with the best payoff. Marshall and Johnston (2023) defined promotion as the intelligent "communication with customers or potential customers designed to inform, persuade, or remind." However, depending on industry, category, product, and target customers promotional efforts designed by brand managers could include the following:

- Digital and social media marketing

\* Corresponding author: Olanrewaju Oluremi Egunlae

- Advertising
- Sales promotion
- Public relations
- Personal selling

It is on this note that we would like to introduce the article by Lola Fadulu published in the New York Times on Tuesday, December 12, 2023, titled “Zara removes campaign after critics call it insensitive to Israel-Hamas war.” Lola wrote a compelling article on what recently transpired with the online ad run by Zara.

Zara is a Spanish fast-fashion retail giant whose net worth, according to the Statista report in 2022 is about 13 billion USD and around 16.5 billion USD in 2023 (Statista, 2023).

Below is a snippet of the Zara atelier ad campaign called “The Jacket.”



**Figure 1** Critics of a recent Zara campaign said it recalled imagery from the Israel-Hamas war. The retailer removed the images, but said it had shot the campaign before the war began. (Source: Zara website)

It portrays a workshop/art studio model with a mannequin wrapped in white clothing material which seems to look like that of a deceased individual. To put this in context, take a look at this recent photograph of a Palestinian mother carrying her 5-year-old niece who was a victim of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war below:



**Figure 2** Inas Abu Maamar, 36, embraces the body of her 5-year-old niece Saly, who was killed in an Israeli strike, at Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis in southern Gaza, in October. (Source: Reuters)

In one particularly poignant photo, taken by Mohammed Salem for Reuters, a Palestinian woman named Inas Abu Maamar, 36, holds the body of her 5-year-old niece, Saly, who was killed in an Israeli strike.

It appears that some individuals have interpreted the ad as a form of disregard and disrespect to the victims of the war, a lack of decency towards victims of this war, and brazen insensitivity to the plight of those suffering the impact of the war. On Instagram alone, Zara has 61.4 million followers on its main official page @Zara, then 1.1 million followers on @Zaraman and 1.9 million followers on @Zarakids. On Facebook, however, Zara has slightly over thirty-one million followers on its page. That is a total of 95.4 million followers, as of today, who were potentially exposed to the ad on Facebook and Instagram. Because online content can easily be shared, the reach of the ad became global in a few hours, with many asking for a boycott of Zara products. The company needed to take a public relations approach to appeal to those who perceived the ad as being “offensive” by tendering a public apology. Below is the exact message put out by Zara on their online platforms, and it reads:

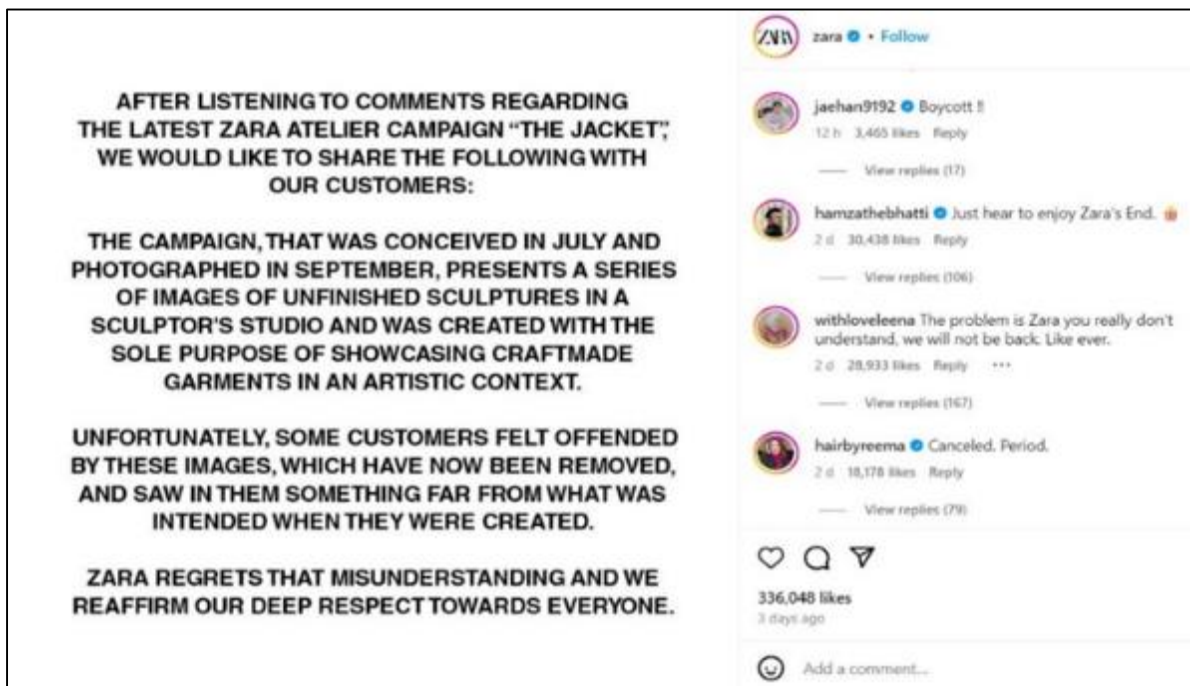
“After listening to comments regarding the latest Zara atelier campaign ‘The Jacket,’ we would like to share the following with our customers:

“The campaign, which was conceived in July and photographed in September, presents a series of images of unfinished sculptures in a sculptor's studio and was created with the sole purpose of showcasing craft made garments in an artistic context.”

“Unfortunately, some customers felt offended by these images, which have now been removed, and saw in them something far from what was intended when they were created.”

“Zara regrets that misunderstanding and we reaffirm our deep respect towards everyone.”

Find attached an image of this statement with a few comments as directly captured on Zara’s Instagram page below:



**Figure 3** ZARA’s reaction on Instagram after reviewing customers' comments

Unfortunately, even with the public apology, there are many customers who think that it is not enough and are still calling for a boycott of Zara, Zaramen and Zarakids.

### 3 The Role of Marketing Managers in Times Like This

As tutored in class and explicitly explained by Marshall and Johnston (2023), the elements of the Marketing Manager's role in promotional strategy involve the following:

- The identification of targets for the promotion.
- Establishment of goals to be achieved by the promotion.
- Selection of the promotion mix.
- Developing the message.
- Selecting the media to be used for the promotion.
- Preparation of budget for the promotion.
- Establish a measure of results.

One would have imagined that for a 16.5 billion Dollar company like Zara, the basics of promotional strategy would have been done by some of the best marketing minds in the industry. So, what could possibly have gone wrong? Because Zara stated in its message that it had conceived the idea long before the Israel-Hamas war broke out and had also gone ahead to produce it with no possible links to what was happening in the Middle East. The possible answer could be that the marketing team never truly thought it would be "taken out of context." The timing of promoting the ad might have also been a challenge. Had this ad been released before or long after the conflict, would it have generated this level of poor reviews for the Zara brand to the point where a total boycott of the company is being requested online by some of its ardent followers and customers? This is a question that remains to be answered.

---

### 4 Way Forward for Zara

Because digital marketing has placed immense "power" in the hands of the customer because it presents earned media through the "likes," "shares," "comments," "retweets," and forwarding of marketing communication, the ad placed by Zara on its digital platforms such as Instagram and Facebook had a massive reach within few hours, making the "outcry" so loud from its followers and customers that it forced the company to issue a public apology statement. Zara must act even more decisively in order to win back its customers even though there are no guarantees that all will be back. It, however, must try to repeatedly take the right steps till it puts out the negative reaction their initial ad had caused the company. While it may take a few weeks to months for us to know the impact of this customer reaction to the Zara brand in sales and market share, the company need not wait to count the cost. The following immediate and long-term steps will be useful in halting this negative viral effect of digital marketing on Zara, and they include:

- Take immediate action to take down the ad, apologize to its teeming customers, and then rethink its future promotional strategy to scan the environment and gauge it with its intended promotion before releasing it for public consumption. These steps need to be honest; frank and the customers need to be aware. The company has made the first two recommendations – a great start.
  - Rebuild the trust of its customers through active engagement with social media influencers, individuals, and organizations with profound influence on its customers to re-emphasize its core values. This should be carried out on all social media platforms and other platforms such as TV, radio, and billboards to ensure massive reach.
  - Engage in restoring the brand image through targeted PR campaigns to its audience and customers and an improved customer experience of the Zara brand.
  - Long-term strategy of having diversity, equity, and inclusion training with all staff to help them appreciate the biases of their different customers worldwide. Another long term may include hiring fresh staff who may have been affected by the Israel-Hamas war and improving its supply chain to have a greater impact on the victims of the war.
- 

### 5 Conclusion

The Zara ad campaign, "The Jacket," underscores the intricate challenges faced in modern marketing. Despite Zara's claims of the campaign's pre-war creation, the public's perception of insensitivity towards the Israel-Hamas conflict triggered a significant backlash. The incident accentuates the critical role of marketing managers in understanding societal nuances and anticipating potential interpretations. It raises pertinent questions about the balance between artistic expression and social sensitivity in marketing, emphasizing the need for astute strategy and proactive measures to navigate complex socio-political landscapes. The Zara case serves as a poignant reminder of the far-reaching impact of marketing campaigns and the necessity for a nuanced approach that respects diverse perspectives while promoting brand narratives.

## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

---

## References

- (1) Lolù Fadulu (2023), Zara removes campaign after critics call it insensitive to Israel-Hamas war. New York Times article written by Lola Fadulu - published December 12, 2023. Link to article:<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/12/business/zara-campaign-israel-gaza-war.html?searchResultPosition=4>
- (2) Greg W. Marshall and Mark Johnston (2023), Marketing Management, 4th Edition, McGraw-Hill.
- (3) Zara's net worth (Statista) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/980126/brand-value-of-zara-worldwide/#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20the%20Zara%20brand,billion%20U.S.%20dollars%20in%202019.>