

Starbucks Holiday Cup Controversy (2015)

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I. INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

A. Starbucks is facing a public relations challenge. The year is 2015, and the company has just released its annual holiday cup, a seasonal tradition anticipated by loyal customers worldwide. Unlike previous designs featuring winter and Christmas-themed illustrations such as snowflakes, ornaments, and reindeer, the 2015 cup is a minimalist red ombre design with no holiday imagery. Shortly after its release, critics accuse Starbucks of intentionally removing Christmas symbols, sparking debate across social media and national news. *A carefully developed PR approach is needed to clarify the brand's intent, manage public sentiment, and reinforce Starbucks' identity as an inclusive and community-centered company.*

II. SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

A. Starbucks was founded in Seattle, Washington, in 1971 as a single coffee bean and equipment store. Over the decades, the company evolved into the globally recognized coffeehouse brand it is today, known not only for its beverages but for creating what it calls the “third place”, a welcoming environment between home and work. As the brand expanded into international markets throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, Starbucks built a strong identity rooted in community, consistency, and premium café culture. Seasonal promotions, including limited-edition beverages and merchandise, became a core component of the brand experience.

One of Starbucks' most recognizable seasonal traditions began in 1997 with the introduction of its first holiday cup. Each year, the design changed and typically featured winter or Christmas-inspired imagery such as ornaments, snowflakes, wreaths, reindeer, and script phrases. Over time, the release of the holiday cup became a highly anticipated cultural moment, signaling the start of the holiday season for many consumers. The cup

series also developed a connection to nostalgia and ritual, making it more than packaging, it became a symbolic experience tied to emotion, identity, and tradition.

By 2015, Starbucks had grown to more than 20,000 locations worldwide and served a diverse customer base spanning numerous cultures, religions, and belief systems. As part of an evolving global identity, the company's creative and design leadership chose that year to simplify the holiday cup. Instead of the familiar seasonal symbols, the design featured a clean red ombré background with the green Starbucks siren logo. When the cup launched publicly in November 2015, some consumers reacted strongly. A viral video posted by internet personality Joshua Feuerstein accused Starbucks of intentionally removing Christmas from the design, framing the change as a broader cultural statement. The message resonated with some viewers and quickly spread through Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

The controversy escalated rapidly, amplified by mainstream media outlets, online political commentators, and public figures who joined the discussion. Hashtags such as #MerryChristmasStarbucks and #WarOnChristmas circulated widely, while others responded with #ItsJustACup in defense of the brand. Despite Starbucks clarifying that the intention was inclusivity and design simplicity, public perception had already shifted, and the narrative became larger than the product itself. What began as a routine seasonal release evolved into a national conversation about culture, branding, and identity.

A comprehensive public relations response is necessary to regain control of the narrative, address public concerns, and restore alignment between Starbucks' values and consumer expectations.

III. RESEARCH

- A. Starbucks relied on internal brand insights, past seasonal campaign performance, and cultural trend analysis rather than publicly disclosed large-scale testing before releasing the 2015 holiday cup.
 - i. Internal trend and design research indicated that minimalist aesthetics were increasing in popularity among global brands, aligning with broader cultural shifts toward simplicity and personalization.
 - ii. Brand sentiment research from previous holiday seasons demonstrated that customers associated Starbucks' holiday offerings with emotional cues such as comfort, nostalgia, and tradition, reinforcing the importance of the holiday cup as a symbolic brand touchpoint.
 - iii. Starbucks' global consumer insights teams recognized the brand served a diverse customer base of varying religious identities and cultural backgrounds, contributing to a creative direction focused on inclusivity rather than explicit seasonal or religious imagery.
 - iv. *NOTE: Starbucks did not perform predictive public reaction testing related to removing holiday symbols from the cup, leading to an oversight in anticipating backlash tied to perceived cultural implications rather than product design.*

IV. GOAL

- A. For Starbucks to be a positively perceived and culturally inclusive global brand.

V. FOCAL POINTS

- A. Traditional Holiday Consumers
 - i. Traits: This section of people strongly identify Christmas with cultural or religious expression. They often expect holiday-themed commercial experiences to visually reflect traditional seasonal symbols such as ornaments, nativity elements, trees, or religious messaging.

- ii. Why: They became the leading voice in the public backlash and generated significant conversation on social media platforms. Their perception shaped the public narrative, making them essential to resolving misunderstanding and restoring brand sentiment.
- iii. What: Starbucks desired this group to understand the intended message of inclusivity, accept the design change, and ideally return to participating in the holiday experience with the brand without negative sentiment.

B. Moderate-to-Casual Consumers

- i. Traits: This section includes frequent or occasional Starbucks customers who enjoy the holiday launch but do not necessarily assign strong emotional meaning to the cup design itself. They may participate in seasonal product purchasing habits but are less likely to attach symbolic interpretation to packaging.
- ii. Why: They represent the majority of Starbucks' customer base. Their behavior during the controversy helped determine whether the issue would materially affect holiday sales, brand loyalty, or ongoing consumer participation.
- iii. What: Starbucks desired this group to remain engaged, continue purchasing holiday beverages, and ideally become positive voices online or in conversations to normalize the design change and shift sentiment away from controversy.

C. Mass Media Outlets

- i. Traits: This section includes journalists, news organizations, talk show hosts, political commentators, and online content creators. These individuals and outlets rapidly amplified the storyline and were central in transforming the conversation from a niche social media conversation into a national debate.
- ii. Why: They influenced both Target Public A and B, as well as the broader general public. Many media narratives framed the controversy as part of a cultural conversation about inclusivity, religion, and corporate identity, rather than simply a product design change.
- iii. What: Starbucks wanted this group to provide balanced coverage, accurately communicate the brand's intent behind the design, and help shift public understanding from controversy to inclusion and creativity.

VI. OBJECTIVES

- A. Objective 1: To reassure traditional holiday consumers, resulting in restored trust and decreased negative sentiment toward Starbucks.
- B. Objective 2: To inspire traditional holiday consumers, resulting in acceptance of the new holiday cup design and continued loyal purchasing behavior.
- C. Objective 3: To persuade moderate-to-casual Starbucks consumers, resulting in continued participation in seasonal beverage purchasing and engagement with the holiday campaign.
- D. Objective 4: To influence mass media outlets, resulting in accurate communication of Starbucks' intent and a shift in public narrative from controversy to inclusivity.

VII. STRATEGIES

A. Guiding Principles

Belonging: Starbucks will communicate in a way that reflects its commitment to creating a welcoming environment for all customers, reinforcing the brand as an inclusive and community-focused space.

Creativity: Messaging will highlight the holiday cup as a canvas for personal expression, encouraging customers to make the design their own through art, meaning, and celebration.

Warmth: Tone and visual presentation will be friendly, inviting, and celebratory to reinforce emotional connection and positive seasonal sentiment

Authenticity: Starbucks will respond with honesty, empathy, and clarity, ensuring messaging feels human, genuine, and aligned with long-standing brand values.

Confidence: Starbucks will present the design choice with assurance and pride, positioning the cup not as an omission, but as an intentional and thoughtful evolution of tradition.

B. Using Framing Theory, Starbucks will work to reposition how the public interprets the holiday cup by carefully shaping language, tone, and visuals in all communication efforts. Rather than allowing the narrative to center on "removing Christmas," Starbucks will frame the design as an opportunity for personal expression and inclusivity. Through

strategic messaging in interviews, press releases, and social media statements, Starbucks will emphasize themes of creativity and universal celebration. By consistently reinforcing this reframed meaning, Starbucks aims to shift public perception toward understanding the cup as a flexible holiday experience rather than a fixed symbol.

C. Applying Social Identity Theory, Starbucks will engage influential customer groups, such as artists, baristas, and brand advocates, who already identify strongly with Starbucks culture. These individuals shape trends and behaviors within the Starbucks community. Starbucks will encourage this group to publicly personalize the cup through drawings, messages, and creative expression. By showcasing this participation across digital platforms, Starbucks will create a sense of belonging tied to creativity rather than controversy. As members of the broader customer base observe these behaviors, they may adopt similar actions to maintain group affiliation, ultimately reinforcing acceptance of the cup design through social influence.

VIII. TACTICS

A. To implement the holiday campaign strategy, Starbucks will execute the following tactic:

- i. Starbucks Holiday Campaign Activation: Beginning in mid-November 2015 and continuing throughout the holiday season, Starbucks will launch a coordinated holiday campaign activation across select United States flagship stores and online platforms. The activation will begin with an official message delivered by a designated Starbucks spokesperson. This announcement will reinforce the intended meaning behind the 2015 holiday cup, using strategic message framing to communicate themes of belonging, creativity, and inclusivity. Following the announcement, flagship stores located in major markets such as Seattle, New York City, and Chicago will host in-store “personalization stations.” These areas will provide customers with tools such as markers, stamps, and stickers to decorate their cups. This portion of the tactic is designed to encourage early adopters and brand enthusiasts to participate publicly, supporting Social Identity Theory by allowing influential customer groups—such as artists, community members, and loyal Starbucks customers—to model desired behavior.

To extend participation beyond physical stores, customers will be invited to share photos or videos of their personalized cups on social media using a unified campaign hashtag. Starbucks will then feature selected user-generated designs across its official digital channels to reinforce authenticity and community belonging. Throughout the holiday season, all campaign materials—including in-store signage, social media messaging, and video content—will reflect Starbucks' guiding principles of warmth, confidence, and creativity to maintain tone consistency and support positive public engagement.

IX. EVALUATION

- A. Performance of Outputs: Starbucks successfully implemented the holiday campaign activation as designed. The spokesperson announcement was released, personalization stations were established in flagship stores, and the branded hashtag was utilized across social media channels. User-generated content was published through official Starbucks digital platforms, and messaging remained visually and tonally consistent across campaign materials. Execution timelines were met, and all activation components were delivered as planned.
- B. Effectiveness of Outcomes: Results show that the implementation of Starbucks' campaign was a success; however, it did not fully remove public criticism.
 - i. Objective 1: *To reassure traditional holiday consumers, resulting in restored trust and decreased negative sentiment toward Starbucks.*
This objective was measured using sentiment analysis tools across platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and online comment forums. Metrics included decreases in negative mentions and increases in neutral or positive discourse. Results showed a moderate shift away from negative sentiment over time, indicating partial effectiveness.
 - ii. Objective 2: *To inspire traditional holiday consumers, resulting in acceptance of the new holiday cup design and continued loyal purchasing behavior.*
Measurement included sales data during the campaign period and participation in personalization activities. Continued beverage purchases among returning

customers indicated partial adoption. Engagement in personalization stations and campaign hashtag usage suggested growing acceptance, demonstrating moderate performance.

- iii. Objective 3: *To persuade moderate-to-casual Starbucks consumers, resulting in continued participation in seasonal beverage purchasing and engagement with the holiday campaign.*
Sales reports and in-store traffic counts were used to evaluate this objective. Seasonal beverage sales and participation levels remained consistent with previous holiday seasons, demonstrating strong effectiveness and successful maintenance of consumer engagement.
- iv. Objective 4: *To influence mass media outlets, resulting in accurate communication of Starbucks' intent and a shift in public narrative from controversy to inclusivity.*
Media coverage tone was analyzed using monitoring software and content review. Over time, reporting accuracy increased and stories reflected Starbucks' intended message regarding inclusivity and creativity. This demonstrated gradual narrative shift and moderate outcome success.

X. ANALYSIS

- A. Good: From a public relations perspective, Starbucks demonstrated strong execution in message consistency and campaign alignment. The company successfully used user-generated content to encourage participation and shift the narrative toward creativity, which supported the strategy based on Social Identity Theory. The campaign maintained brand tone and visual identity, reinforcing Starbucks' core values of inclusivity, belonging, and warmth. Additionally, Starbucks effectively leveraged digital platforms to engage audiences and showcase customer involvement, helping redirect attention from controversy to expression.
- B. Bad: While the campaign was implemented smoothly, Starbucks did not anticipate the emotional response tied to the cup's cultural symbolism prior to launch. The company did not conduct proactive testing or message forecasting to identify potentially controversial

interpretations of the design change. Initial responses were slower and more reactive, allowing negative narratives to form before a clear brand explanation was communicated. Earlier strategic messaging and scenario planning may have helped reduce confusion and prevent the controversy from gaining traction.

C. Insights: Starbucks could have strengthened the campaign by integrating pre-launch sentiment monitoring, focus groups, or message testing to predict and prepare for public reactions. Had Starbucks introduced the creative-expression messaging *before* launching the cup, it may have framed public understanding more effectively and eliminated the perception gap that led to backlash. Moving forward, incorporating early communication framing, proactive messaging, and ongoing audience research may help prevent similar misunderstandings and support more seamless adoption of future design or messaging changes.

XI. REFERENCES

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