

“GAP CHINA18” T-Shirt Controversy “Unintentional Blunder” or “Deliberate Act”? Interpretations from a Cultural Key Symbols’ Perspective

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Abstract

This explorative case study addresses consequences of MNCs’ controversial branding practices across national and cultural boundaries. Bi-lingual reviews of over fifty news reports in both English and Chinese, interpretations of over 1,000 microblog messages divulge the divisive issue whether the controversy of the Gap’s China 2018 t-shirt be an MNC’s “unintentional blunder,” or a “deliberate act” of unprovoked insult to indigenous consumers. Explanatory insights are gained with Sheehan’s framework of “Controversial Advertising” and Ortner’s concept of “Cultural Key Symbols.” Findings include: indigenous netizens with the onset of technological advances inhabit the new landscape of defying Gap’s social insult within 24 hours which led to Beijing’s unusual involvement; the Gap practice is deemed controversial for its misuse or creative use of the cultural key symbol as logo; and perceived insincere apology permeates distrust. In controversial branding practices, any distortional use of key cultural symbols, be it a deliberate or unintentional act, would have the power to empower, reinforce, or aggravate a collective ethnic identity. This Gap controversy has epitomized such aggravated cultural identity.

Keywords: Gap China, explorative case study, MNCs controversial branding, indigenous netizens, cultural key symbols

The first half of 2018 saw multiple controversial branding incidents involving multiple U.S. global MNCs (Multinational corporations) and an increasingly assertive Chinese consumer base. This class of consumers stridently voiced their opinions from the Chinese social network Weibo in particular, which is thought of as the Chinese-equivalent of Twitter and Instagram. *The Global Times*, an English-language Chinese newspaper under the auspices of the China’s official *People’s Daily* newspaper, has proudly called this cohort of rising consumers, “Chinese netizens.” “Netizens,” when Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben (1995) first coined the term, they profiled them as “people online who actively contribute to the development of the Net. These people understand the value of collective work and the communal aspects of public communications.” In the context of this study, the term “Chinese netizens” will be used to describe Chinese-speaking individuals who are actively involved in online communities, greatly interested in active internet engagement and use the Internet as an intellectual and social resource.

Some recent illustrative examples occurred from January to May 2018 when three major American MNCs (Delta, Marriott, and Gap) were required by the Chinese regulatory agencies to offer timely apologies via their own official websites in China to their Chinese consumers and the Chinese netizens who first raised their concerns on line via the Chinese social network, Weibo. Each MNC complied within a few days of the incidents. These were rare business cases that even the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is the counterpart of the U.S. Department of State, was actively involved. It is indeed an unprecedented pattern manifesting an increasing assertiveness from netizens of an emerging market in defiance of MNCs questionable branding efforts. Briefly, in the case of Delta Air Lines and Marriott International, Chinese authorities publicly reproached both well-established U.S. companies in China for listing Taiwan and Tibet as separate countries on their website in the Chinese language. This was an issue because the Chinese government in Beijing considers Taiwan and Tibet to be part of its territory and will actively take measures again any that would suggest the contrary. The Gap Group, on May 14th, 2018 was caught marketing its new style, 2018 China t-shirts, that portrayed a country map of China excluding the locations of Taiwan, Tibet, and the China South Sea.

While this shirt was originally was found in Canada and not in China's domestic market, the expansive outreach of social media quickly led to a feverish social media upheaval by their Chinese netizens within two days.¹ On May 15th, Gap voluntarily issued a statement on its website, Shanghai Gap, as an apology in a similar fashion as Delta did.

Dozens of Western media sources have carried the news reports with fragmented information that only presented one-side of the story since the Gap t-shirt controversy broke out on May 14 in the emerging market of China. None of those reports has done adequate investigative work on the background of the issue, nor have the Chinese media outlets in general, according to the author's bi-lingual review of inclusive news reports. It appears, based on the extensive review of reports in English and in Chinese, the Western reports and thousands of blog messages by the Chinese netizens disagreed sharply on the perceived nature of the controversy. The principle debate centers around the issue whether the controversy of the Gap's China 2018 t-shirt was an MNC's "unintentional blunder" as determined by every Western media report, or a "deliberate act" of unprovoked insult as interpreted by indigenous Chinese consumers.

The interest to study the "GAP CHINA18" T-shirt controversy is motivated by a desire to present a more holistic nature of the marketing blunder from the cultural perspective of thousands of netizens sharing information and presenting their arguments in the Chinese social media. In this explorative case study, the author draws upon her bi-lingual and bi-cultural sociolinguistic competencies and her trained ethnographic research experiences to focus on and collect information surrounding this Gap t-shirt controversy. As a result, this paper presents an explorative case study of an MNC's controversial branding experience. For transparency purpose, the author also borrows insights and reflections from fifteen years ago when she was the first who followed and analyzed four unprecedented MNCs cases that led to China's first ever ban on Western MNCs controversial branding practices by the current regime (see Li and Shooshtari, 2007, for discussion of the cases). This time, the trend of the digital grassroot Chinese netizen movement that initiated the criticism of another MNC, the Gap Group, hits the core issue again, as stated in the title of this paper.

The structure of this explorative case study flows with three sections. First, regarding the Gap incident, cutting through the clutter of numerous media and news reports, the author presents a more holistic picture of the controversy based on her thorough review of no less than fifty sources in both English and Chinese and over 1,000 microblog messages in Chinese. The author also reviewed original narratives offered by all players in the incident, including messages from the Gap Group, public comments from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and most importantly the themes conveyed through the 2,950 messages in Chinese posted by Chinese netizens on the Gap China website. The author had purposely gathered insights and patterns from the authentic communication imbedded in the Chinese social media. The second section reviews two theoretical concepts, which the author believes would shed light on the discussion of the dramatically incongruent views and perceptions of the controversy between the Gap Group and Chinese netizens at large. The third section presents an explorative insight for MNCs' practitioners and academic researchers at large. Students may benefit as well from this case which may broaden their horizons in understanding emerging markets such as China, whose consumers hold different cultural views toward Western MNCs marketing practices.

GAP's 2018 Controversial T-shirt in Retrospect

This section introduces (1) original photos and features of the controversial product; (2) the background information about the first Chinese Weibo social media blogger, currently residing in Australia, who "leaked" the photo of the controversial shirt to Chinese netizens at large and how the posting went viral within twenty-four hours; and

¹Some of the best reports from reputable sources regarding the Gap controversy 2018 are still accessible from below sites:

<http://time.com/5277501/gap-apologizes-china-t-shirt-taiwan/>

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/15/611278789/the-gap-apologizes-for-t-shirts-showing-map-of-china-without-disputed-territorie>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/15/gap-sorry-t-shirt-map-china>

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/gap-irks-china-with-map-on-shirt-quickly-apologizes-1526381148>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/15/business/gap-china-apology.html>

<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1102187.shtml>

<https://www.gapfactory.com/browse/product.do?pcid=1038092&vid=1&pid=256215011&searchText=city+t-shirt>

(3) the Gap Group's initial responses and its final two rounds of original statements of apology in Chinese to its Chinese consumers. Also included and interpreted are samples of the outraged comments in Chinese language from the Chinese netizens posted on the Gap China's website in response to the Gap's responses. The goal here is that by presenting the authentic, and non-judgmental occurrences in the Chinese language with corresponding verbatim translation of the author's, readers may obtain a more holistic picture of the issue.

GAP1969 China18 T-shirt design

On May 14, 2018, a male Chinese college student currently attending school in Niagara Falls, Canada, who wished to remain anonymous, confirmed with a staff reporter from the China *Global Times* that he personally took the photos of the questionable Gap T-shirt from a local Gap Outlet store. The reporter then immediately revisited the store in Niagara Falls but did not see the T-shirt as it had been pulled off the shelf, but the reporter did find it at the Gap Factory web site and posted a screen shot on the official Weibo website registered with China *Global Times* (huanqiu-com, 2018, May 14). The item, shown below, is no longer listed on the Gap Factory website. As shown above and below, the map of China which is the logo design is missing four territories claimed by China. They are the southern part of Tibet, the Aksai Chin [a disputed border area between China and India], Taiwan, and the South China Sea. On the same day, all media reported, in English or in Chinese that a female blogger disseminated photos of the questionable Gap T-shirt which caused an eruption of comments from Chinese netizens two days in a row on May 14th and 15th. Below is one of the first online photos that sparked the outcry from the Chinese netizens:



The Original Chinese Weibo Web Blogger

While no reports from over a dozen English-speaking sources identified the original Chinese Weibo web blogger who first “leaked” the controversy on May 14th, the Chinese *Global Times* made a mention of the blogger's nickname. The author tracked down the source and read through the blogger's profile, as well as the initial comments she made about the T-shirt in Chinese. Truth is, the blogger's public profile reveals her highly recognized status as a “Computer Game Pro and Master.” For example, her profile shows she has a quarter of a million fans, 252,307 to be exact and 733 followers. She has written 864 micro blogs as of May 30th, 2018, mostly on computer games, a typical Millennial. Given her high-profile status, it is not surprising her initial posting went viral.²

Below is a snapshot of her first posting in Chinese on May 14 after she posted several photos of the T-shirt. The author translates the message into English below. 7

² The translated information can be found on the blogger's public Weibo site in Chinese language https://weibo.com/avorange?profile_ftype=1&is_video=1.



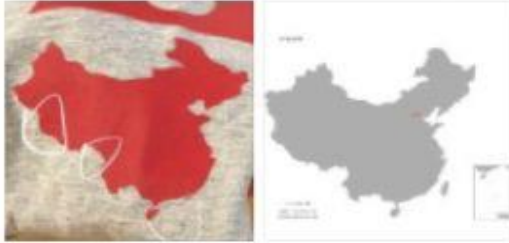
汤粉儿  

今天 08:25 已编辑

这衣服问题不是印不印台湾，说真的对于台湾大家存在两面看法，我个人看法我也不方便说。

问题大了去了的是别的属于你的没有印（而且还是反华势力一直搞事的争议地区）这才是重点啊😓

还有印个四不像出来你做尼玛的中国地图啊😓



☆ 收藏

📄 161

💬 116

👍 143

She wrote, “the problem with this piece of garment is not whether Taiwan is shown or not on the designer’s map. Truthfully, people see the issue of Taiwan with two different views and I am not in a position to reveal mine here. At issue, however, is [even] the territories that have been an integral part of yours [China] are being left out (and these **are** the territories disputed by those anti-China forces). Also, if [Gap] tries to print a map of China, do the best to be [professional] and make it right, not like this.” The blogger, in a subsequent blog, added a couple of real maps of China for comparison, and pointed out further in Chinese: “the Southern part of Tibet, the Aksai Chin [a disputed border area between China and India], Taiwan, and South China Sea are all completely removed. Even the shape of the Bohai Sea is distorted....therefore the problem is [not technical but] the source of the map provider who [deliberately] has Tibet, Taiwan, and the area adjacent to India dropped out.” To support her blog,



one netizen uploaded another T-shirt with the correct shape of the map, tag lined China – No Less. This T-shirt, posted in rebuttal, reflected the overwhelming sentiment of the Chinese netizens.

The Gap Group's original statement of apology in Chinese

On May 14th, Gap Group posted its apology statement in Chinese on its China website as shown on this snapshot which is still available:³

声 明

盖璞集团尊重中国的主权和领土完整。我们获知在个别海外市场发售的一款Gap T恤上的中国地图设计有误。我们对这一无意的失误感到万分抱歉。我们现在正在进行内部检查，以尽快纠正错误。该款产品已从中国市场撤回并全部销毁。

作为一家负责任的企业，盖璞集团严格遵守中国的法律法规。我们感谢客户、媒体、员工和政府监管机构等有关各方的关注和支持。未来，我们将致力于更加严格的审查，以防止类似失误再次发生。

盖璞集团

@Gap13159

Below is the English translation provided by the author:

Statement

The Gap Group respects China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We have learned that in a certain overseas market, a Gap brand T-shirt with a flawed design of the China map was being sold. We are terribly sorry for this unintentional blunder. We are now conducting an internal review so as to rectify the mistake as soon as possible. The T-shirt has been pulled off the Chinese market and destroyed totally. In the future, we will be committed to even more rigorous inspection so that this type of gaffe won't be repeated.

As a responsible company, Gap Group strictly abides by Chinese laws and regulations. We thank our customers, media, Gap employees, and [Chinese] governmental regulatory agencies for their concerns and their support.
Signed by The Gap Group

Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Response

On May 15th, 2018, contents of a press release by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was shared on line in Chinese as shown below.⁴ The author adds the equivalent English to it, faithful to the protocol of strategic ambiguity required of Chinese career diplomats.

Asked by a Chinese reporter:

有记者提问，GAP公司已经就某款T恤所印不完整中国地图向中方道歉。你对此有何评论？中国政府是否曾对GAP公司表达不满或者GAP仅仅是对中国消费者要求作出回应？

English translation: "The Gap company has apologized to China for its use of an incomplete map of China on its T-shirt. What is your comment on it? Did the Chinese government [previously] convey its displeasure to Gap, or [is it just] Gap responded to the demands of Chinese consumers?"

Response by Mr. Lu Kang, Spokesperson of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

陆慷表示，我注意到，据报道，GAP集团已经就此发表声明致歉，表示该集团尊重中国的主权和领土完整，正进行内部检查，将尽快纠正有关错误。声明还说，该集团严格遵守中国法律法规，以后会严格审查，防止类似失误再次发生。我们已经注意到了这个声明，我们将继续听其言，观其行。”陆慷说。(完)

English translation: "I have noticed that, according to reports, the GAP Group has issued a statement of apology, expressing its intention to respect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and is currently conducting its internal review so as to correct the mistake as soon as possible. The statement also relates that GAP strictly abides by Chinese laws and regulations and will apply rigorous inspections to avoid similar mistakes.

³Gap Group's Statement in Chinese can be assessed from

https://weibo.com/1833496740/GgDHSw8wO?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment#_rnd1527649293323

⁴This official press release can be accessed from http://news.hangzhou.com.cn/gnxw/content/2018-05/15/content_7002427_2.htm

We have taken note of this statement and we will continue paying attention to their words and actions.”It is worth noticing no netizens posted any blog comments responding to above Q&A session.

The Chinese netizens’ protest messages

Within 27 hours after the Gap Group posted its statement on its own official website in China in the Chinese language at late night on May 14th, its official statement was met with over 2,950 messages from many netizens who were not convinced. Upon close review of all the messages, a tone of collective defiance is obvious. The author reviewed and translated the very first batch of the messages as they are ranked highest by popularity and number of supporters of the messages. The author provides the actual message in Mandarin Chinese as posted and adds the equivalent English translation for each of them.⁵

Original Chinese Messages

抱歉就完了

中国地图还用设计吗

海外市场发售的，在中国市场撤回？两个问题：

1.到底在哪里卖的？2.为什么不是全球召回？

去国外吧，中国不适合你们，滚蛋，我说滚蛋

这个系列有没有其它款式，比如没有加泰罗尼亚的西班牙地图款式，没有苏格兰的英国地图款式，没有冲绳的日本地图款式，我觉得你们可以继续出新款.反正你们觉得不在当地销售就没问题

其实是故意的

这种公司你们应该大力关注

你在个别海外发售，在中国市场撤回并销毁??? 这什么逻辑，海外的不召回??

去你妈的，要不就别用中国地图，用就给我用对了，在哪发售和地图对错有关系吗？一帮美国狗逼.

海外仍然放飞自我吧

我认为这不是失误，中国地图，正常情况下又怎么不在中国销售，而是专门销售在其它国家？其它人为何又要买？很明显是在制造台独！

English Translation

Apology. That is it?

Is it necessary to ‘design’ a map of China?

[Does it make sense] marketed outside China but “pulling off from the China market?” Two issues: 1. Exactly where it is sold? 2. Why not a global recall?

Go and sell in other countries. Chinese market is not suitable for you. Get out. I mean, get out.

This style [map] has no other countries involved. [GAP] can fabricate new styles as long as [GAP] believes its innocence when they are not sold within the market of which its map is made.

It is a deliberate act.

Chinese government agencies, it is time you pay great attention to companies like this [GAP]

What logic is it that you [GAP] sold it [T-shirt] at an individual out-side China market, yet you pull it off from the China market, not from the overseas’ markets???

The hell with you, either do not use a China map, or use it as it is correctly. Are there any relevance between where the T-shirt was marketed and the right or wrong shape of the map? Overseas is the place for self-centered freedom.

I don’t believe it is an “unintended blunder,” because why the T-shirt with a map of China as its design is not marketed in China but in other countries? Why [outside China] customers would buy it? Obviously it implies supporting Independent Taiwan!

In all cases cited above, the author believes that the social media in China has promoted an increasingly assertive voice of indigenous consumers, quickly exposing in real-time MNCs off-target or offensive branding practices in this emerging market. For the purposes of this study, it is assumed that the social media responses to MNC’s possible branding miscues are legitimate, spontaneous consumer reactions, and not “orchestrated” by the Chinese government or its agencies.

Theoretical Grounding and Discussion: Controversy and Cultural Key Symbols

As shown above, the incongruent cultural views with regard to the Gap T-shirt controversy have driven a wedge between the Gap corporate brand and the thousands of Chinese netizens who refused to buy into the official apology offered by the Gap Group.

⁵ The 2,950 messages posted by Chinese netizens in Chinese language can be accessed from Gap Group’s Chinese Weibo website where its Statement in Chinese is posted.

https://weibo.com/1833496740/GgDHSw8wO?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment#_rnd1527649293323

Two concepts are selected as an explorative framework to interpret the initial inquiry posted for this study: “Is the ‘GAP 1969 CHINA 18’ T-shirt controversy an ‘unintentional blunder’ as claimed by the Gap Group and all the Western media reports reviewed? Or is it more of a ‘deliberate act’ of disrespect and an insult, as insinuated by the 2,957 blog messages the Chinese netizens posted on the Gap Shanghai blog site?”

One concept focuses on using controversial branding in the form of deploying provocative advertising, which in this case was using the uniquely designed T-shirt with a distorted image of the map of China. Another perspective around this controversy dives into the concept of cultural “key symbols” derived from the anthropology discipline by Sherry Ortner (1973). Both of these perspectives will be discussed in the following sections.

Controversial advertising as branding to “cut through the clutter”

In the context of this explorative case study, the very divergent perceptions of the Gap controversy are examined against the benchmark introduced by Professor Kim Bartel Sheehan (2014), a leading U.S. scholar on controversies in contemporary advertising. Sheehan’s framework helps shed light on why the Gap T-shirt is deemed controversial, and why its formal apology was overwhelmingly rejected by Chinese netizens.

Kim Sheehan (2014), in her “Controversies in Contemporary Advertising,” first addresses the nature and function of controversy in advertising. She examines the nature of controversial advertising from various critical viewpoints, including whether an ad is condescending towards consumers, whether products are inappropriate and/or controversial, or whether questionable values, coupled with provocative contents intended to generate shocking appeal, are being advocated by marketers.

Sheehan also supports Nicosia’s (1974) three key components in successful advertising as the most inclusive definition of contemporary advertising: “information”, “reasoning”, and “emphasis.” The element of “information” addresses the unique attributes of what is being advertised while the component of “reasoning” delves into consumers’ thinking processes such as logical reasoning, interpretation and judgment. “Emphasis” considers the part of an ad message that receives the most attention. Chinese netizens’ messages presented for discussion in this study clearly illustrated the effects of these three key components that have shaped their perceptions that Gap’s design of the distorted map of China is a deliberate act, intended as an insult.

Li and Shoostari (2007) used examples of multinational corporations’ controversial ad campaigns to illustrate some common traits or attributes of controversial advertising. They observed an increase in “boundary crossing” and marketers’ use of shock appeal. Boundary crossing is a well-known indicator for controversial advertising. Marketers’ use of shock appeal as a deliberate act, rather than an inadvertent incident, is aimed at startling the audience at the (calculated) risk of giving offense or being misunderstood (Robert Gustafson and Johan Yssel, 2004; Ramesh Venkat and Noha Abi-Hanna, 1995). As pointed out by Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda (2003) shock value is elicited through the process of norm violation, encompassing transgressions of law or custom.

While the Gap t-shirt image did not fall into the realm of being overtly sexual or disgusting, it did evoke feelings of shock and disrespect. What else has triggered Chinese netizens strong emotions in this case?

Cultural “key symbols” perspective

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1973) presented her theory at the 70th anniversary of American Anthropology Association conference. She proposed the following indicators that can be used for outsiders to identify key symbols which are indigenous and meaningful to natives:

“Most key symbols, I venture to suggest, will be signaled by more than one of these indicators: (1) the natives tell us that X is culturally important. (2) The natives seem positively or negatively aroused by X, rather than indifferent. (3) X comes up in many different contexts. These contexts may be behavioral or systematic... (4) There is greater cultural elaboration surrounding X ... (5) there are greater cultural restrictions surrounding X, either in sheer number of rules, or severity of sanctions regarding its misuse.”

The key symbol in this case is the map of China map being used for a “creative design.” This cultural “key symbol” is seen as important by the group members, appears frequently (but often in a prescribed manner), and elicits a strong, often elaborate response. This cultural “key symbol” component helps both the Gap company and the Chinese netizens understand the cultural interest as well as the patterns of behavior exhibited when such symbols are used for commercial uses, such as the design of the t-shirt.

The value of such symbols is often determined not only by the symbol's functional roles, but also by the sociolinguistic resources that natives rely on for reference or meaning making (Li and Shoostari, 2003). Symbols, in the tradition of anthropology, are considered vehicles for conceptions of social reality because they are the "tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs." (Geertz, 1973) Going further, sociolinguistics has advanced to a dyadic concept of communication, in which the competencies of both the speaker and the listener must be examined in order to comprehend the outcome. Renowned British sociolinguists Brown and Levinson argued three decades ago for a theoretical shift in the sociolinguistics field from its preoccupation with speaker-identity to a focus on dyadic patterns of verbal interaction as the expression of social relationships (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In the context of this study, the very important key symbol that is the map of China carries a heavy socio-political meaning that the Gap corporation did not take into consideration. Instead, the individualistic and creativity-driven design went awry, to say the least.

Insights and Conclusion

We gain explanatory insights from the perspectives provided by Sheehan and Ortner if we can align the multinationals' mastery of cultural key symbols' competence with native Chinese familiarity with their own cultural key symbols. Of the many social treatments of the controversial branding practices, the relationship between ethnicity, in the sense of nationalism and language, is of particular relevance to this dialogue between MNCs and indigenous netizens. The relevance is twofold: (a) the map design of "Gap 2018 China" is symbolic of an ethnicity, and (b) any distortion, whether it be deliberate or unintentional, has the power to empower, reinforce, or heighten ethnic identity. This explorative case study epitomizes such heightened ethnic identity.

For MNCs practitioners, a lesson can be learned in how to use cultural key symbols. Thus, Gap adopted a map of China as a cultural key symbol to get attention and to communicate its knowledge of the local culture. However, Gap's questionable branding efforts also carried a high degree of risk, because Gap's design could be unknowingly misused or interpreted in ways unforeseeable to those outside the culture.

The combination of evolving technology that allows us to stay connected on a global scale, and the onset of more MNCs in emerging markets presents a unique challenge to our field. It is important to continue research and discussions among practitioners, academic researchers, students and consumers in addressing the value and function of controversial branding practices, especially across cultural boundaries. While brands are now reaching consumers across the world, those consumers also connect globally, as shown in the Gap controversy here. The author ventures to say that given the increasing emergence of netizens from the increasingly assertive emerging markets, MNCs need to be extremely careful moving forward, as these consumers will be much less forgiving and much more vocal than consumers of the past.

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